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October

Trick Of Silver



Jamie Craig

TRICK OF SILVER

...The patio had a polished stone floor, with a low matching wall circling its perimeter and statuary towering like watchdogs. Voices murmured in the darkness, too low to be discernible, but otherwise the area was deserted. Darren chose a spot in a corner by the double doors, one that would allow him to keep an eye on every available exit. After a moment, he sat down and crossed his legs. No reason he couldn't rest his feet while he waited.

"So which part is supposed to be your costume?" The deep silken voice came from just behind him, close enough to his ear that Darren felt the hot breath. "The tail or the dress itself?"

"The tail, of course," Darren said, resisting the temptation to turn around and confirm the speaker's identity.

He felt a slight tug at the back of his skirt, and a broad hand appeared in front of him as the man flicked the tail across the top of Darren's thighs. "Don't worry, I won't tell. I'm very good at keeping secrets." Something hard and broad pressed slightly against Darren's shoulders. The stranger must have leaned forward. "Especially for someone as delicious as you."

"Well, that's very considerate of you." Darren risked tilting his head back and to the side, which allowed him to have a view of Aden's profile. He was even more gorgeous this close. Darren tried to dismiss that thought, but he wasn't

blind. He couldn't deny his own eyes. "I wondered if you noticed me inside."

"Wasn't I supposed to?" The tail dropped lightly against his leg. So did Aden's fingers...

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CALENDAR BOYS
OCTOBER:
TRICK OF SILVER

BY
JAMIE CRAIG

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CHAPTER 1

Darren Sumner knew there was only one reason he drew the Halloween assignment—he looked damned good in a dress. Better than anybody else, including the female agents. Once he got over the initial shock of seeing himself in the mirror, he didn't even mind that he was given one of the most stressful assignments of the entire year based on how great his legs looked in a leather mini and a pair of heels. He could have done without the bra, but Jasmine insisted he needed to have a bust, or it wouldn't matter how much he showed off his gams. They were trying to make him look as authentic as possible, after all.

The tight blouse, leather mini, high heels, and realistic

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breasts weren't just for a laugh. It was imperative as few people as possible recognized Darren, and nobody could recognize him as an operative. Theoretically, a man working a dangerous, life or death situation, would not be dressed to kill in a highly-cut yet coy skirt. As his commanding officer, Jasmine was horrified at the logic when they first brainstormed the idea. She had been even more put out when she learned that they couldn't just send one of the female agents in to do the job. It needed to be Darren, and he needed to look like a young woman.

At least half the people at the party knew Darren, but they had been fooled when he walked in the door. Nobody looked at him with even a glimmer of recognition. He had quietly passed his invitation to the doorman, who gave him a narrow-eyed, curious once-over before nodding him into the mansion. The massive house was lit up brighter than a Christmas tree, and the floors and walls throbbed with the combined force of hundreds of hidden speakers. Normally on an assignment, Darren would spend the first thirty minutes sniffing around, getting the lay of the land. But he knew the mansion well. Almost as well as he knew his own house. Which left him to keep an eye out for the man he had come for.

He had a little under eight hours to locate and neutralize his target. Darren thought that would be a neat trick, since he was only armed with one gun and a small knife, he had no back-up at the party, and his profile of the target was incomplete at best. He had a physical description, a name, and a list of known associates, but it was a Halloween party. The

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target would be wearing a disguise, and whether it was a simple Halloween costume or an elaborate ruse to keep an operative like Darren from finding him, the effect would be the same.

Each step he took clicked sharply against the marble floor. There was a reason Jasmine never wore heels, and it had nothing to do with how uncomfortable they were. She couldn't very well sneak up on somebody when every step was broadcast. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to do too much lurking. Or running. He walked comfortably enough, but running was out of the question. So many things were out of the question when dressed in women's clothing. The more time he spent in his costume, the more his respect for Jasmine grew.

He staked out a corner of the main foyer, holding a drink like a shield in front of his face, and watching the steady stream of people in and out of the front and side doors. Later, he would find a new spot out in the garden, but he couldn't find fault with the corner he had claimed as his own. It afforded him a view of most of the guests and the main exits.

If things had been different, Darren wouldn't have been there, invitation be damned. He spent his Halloweens with a group of college buddies who always knew how to put on a party. By this time of the evening, they'd already be drunk. On real alcohol. Not the light frou-frou drinks currently being circulated by strikingly dignified young men in black suits. On the other hand, his buddies never dressed up for Halloween. Especially not in such elaborate and clearly expensive

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costumes. There wasn't a drop of fake blood in the room, but what the guests lacked in gore, they made up in pure style.

He felt stupid in his cat ears. Jasmine had assured him that the Catwoman look was common for women from every walk of life, but clearly he should have been wearing a ball gown from the nineteenth century, or some slinky designer number. Or a school girl costume. That had been one of his options, but he had drawn the line there. It just seemed too...kinky. But stupid cat ears and a stupid felt tail hadn't seemed too bad, and he'd thought the black makeup on his nose and the drawn-on whiskers near his mouth were quite fetching. Now he thought he just looked cheap. If he could toss away the "costume" and just be himself in drag, he'd impress far more people.

And blow his cover. Which would be a bad thing because open shots at Aden Richter did not happen every day. In fact, they didn't happen at all. Darren almost couldn't believe this was happening now. Not until the man in question walked through the front door.

Correction. Strutted.

Aden Richter's costume wasn't nearly as elaborate as other guests', though the black leather pants riding low on his hips had probably cost a small fortune. The glossy material looked painted on, molding over long legs and powerful thighs. Darren gulped at his drink when he saw the obvious bulge and skipped his gaze farther up, over the bare torso. The only thing Aden wore above his waist was a knot of four gold and black necklaces and a guitar slung over his back. Every chiseled muscle was there for the world to see and appreciate. And

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there were a lot of them.

He didn't look like any book dealer Darren had ever seen before, though he did look more than dangerous. The gleam in his clear blue eyes as they swept over the room probably sent more than one pulse racing, not just Darren's. The man had even refrained from shaving. Nothing oozed sex more than the promise of stubble burn, and while it might have been part of the rock star costume, he had the distinct feeling it was part of the real package.

Darren suddenly wished he had more intel on the guy. It wasn't enough to know the man found and sold rare books for a living, or that his rich friends had pulled his ass out of the political fire on two separate occasions, burying crimes that should have been splashed across the headlines for the world to be warned. It wasn't enough to know he owned a large reserve outside of town with more electronic surveillance and security than the president got. It wasn't even enough to know the man was a werewolf. Now that he saw Aden Richter in the flesh, Darren's gut screamed it was going to take more finesse to get this particular job done, finesse that required a few more intimate details.

He only had tonight. If Aden Richter still breathed at sunrise, things were going to get a hell of a lot worse.

It was a good thing he was supposed to shadow Aden, because he couldn't stop staring. But he had to do a lot more than simply gawk at the target. He needed to lure Aden away from the crowd. He wasn't sure what Aden found attractive, but that didn't matter. He was a werewolf, oversexed and lust-

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crazed by nature. An alluring, willing morsel would be too good to pass up. The pheromones Jasmine had provided would be enough to mask his masculine scent, or at least disguise it until it was too late for Aden to do something about it.

“Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me.” Darren tested his tone and vocal inflection, trying to find the right register without sounding too obviously fake. He couldn’t help but think he had come this far just to be ruined by his deep voice.

The party’s host, a city official by the name of Giessen, stopped Aden from joining the full throng in the main room. Laughing, Giessen made him turn around in order to show off the guitar, which positioned Aden to face Darren’s corner directly. Darren stood too far away to hear what was being said, but it was just as well because his blood roared in his ears. He wasn’t ready to be noticed. He needed more time. Every second that ticked by, he expected it to happen. He was in the man’s line of sight, for Christ’s sake. But apparently Aden was too distracted by Giessen’s comments to focus farther away than his host, and he angled sideways as soon as Giessen’s inspection was done.

Silently, Darren exhaled. The moment he did, Aden’s smile faded, and his head turned back in Darren’s direction.

This time, Aden’s gaze honed right in on him.

His pulse doubled, and he knew Aden would hear it. That wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. A racing heart, a spike of adrenaline in the blood, the dilation of his pupils, all would send clear signals to Aden’s heightened senses. Any other night, he would not reveal himself as prey. But now he

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nervously petted the hair hanging down over his ears, and his eyes darted from Aden's face and back again. Now he just hoped the werewolf liked easy prey when he saw it.

His hopes plummeted when Aden followed Giessen through the double doors leading to the dining room and the bar. At least it gave him a few more minutes to practice on his voice.

Slipping around the edge of the foyer, Darren downed the rest of his drink so he'd have an excuse to approach the bar. When he stepped into the dining room, however, panic drew him to a halt. Aden was nowhere in sight. Neither was Giessen. The patio doors were splayed wide where the party spilled into the gardens, and a single door at the rear of the room led to what was likely the kitchen. Aden could have gone through either of them. If Darren chose incorrectly, he might lose the target altogether.

Damn it. He couldn't get this close only to lose him now.

Darren forced himself to walk toward the bar calmly, trying to stay alert to everybody entering and exiting the room. If he could move more freely through the house, or if he had back-up, it'd be another story. He could track a werewolf, any werewolf, through running water, if he had to. But not while he was pretending to be a normal girl.

"Club soda with a lime, please," Darren said, once he got to the bar.

The bartender paused and dragged his gaze over Darren's face. Darren caught his breath and flashed what he hoped was a flirting smile.

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“Designated driver tonight?”

“Yep. That’s me.”

He nodded and poured the drink. “Well, have a good time tonight anyway.”

“I plan to.”

Stalling for time hadn’t drawn Aden back into the room. He very much doubted there would be any reason for Giessen to take his guest into the kitchen, which left only the gardens as an option. If he stood just outside the patio doors, he could still maintain surveillance on the dining room’s other exits.

The night was cool, the shadows long as Darren stepped outside. The patio had a polished stone floor, with a low matching wall circling its perimeter and statuary towering like watchdogs. Voices murmured in the darkness, too low to be discernible, but otherwise the area was deserted. Darren chose a spot in a corner by the double doors, one that would allow him to keep an eye on every available exit. After a moment, he sat down and crossed his legs. No reason he couldn’t rest his feet while he waited.

“So which part is supposed to be your costume?” The deep silken voice came from just behind him, close enough to his ear that Darren felt the hot breath. “The tail or the dress itself?”

“The tail, of course,” Darren said, resisting the temptation to turn around and confirm the speaker’s identity.

He felt a slight tug at the back of his skirt, and a broad hand appeared in front of him as the man flicked the tail across the top of Darren’s thighs. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell.

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I'm very good at keeping secrets." Something hard and broad pressed slightly against Darren's shoulders. The stranger must have leaned forward. "Especially for someone as delicious as you."

"Well, that's very considerate of you." Darren risked tilting his head back and to the side, which allowed him to have a view of Aden's profile. He was even more gorgeous this close. Darren tried to dismiss that thought, but he wasn't blind. He couldn't deny his own eyes. "I wondered if you noticed me inside."

"Wasn't I supposed to?" The tail dropped lightly against his leg. So did Aden's fingers. He caressed back and forth along the inside of Darren's knee. "Any time an Argenti agent shows up in the same place I am, it's not an accident."

"Argenti?" Darren licked his lips and almost winced at the unfamiliar taste of lipstick. "Maybe you have me confused with somebody else?"

"I don't think so." The hand on his leg moved in a blur. Darren never even felt him pull the knife from the sheath strapped to his thigh. The silver blade glittered for a moment before Aden tossed it into the darkness. "Who else would come armed to one of Giessen's Halloween parties?"

Fuckity fuck. Losing the knife wasn't the end of the world, but it sure made life more difficult. "A girl who's been to one of Giessen's parties before, I'd imagine. Or maybe somebody who thinks she might get groped in the dark by a stranger."

"So scream. Call for help. Or walk away. If you don't want my attention, that's all you have to do." Aden pulled the edge

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of Darren's wig away from his shoulder and tipped his head downward. The tip of his tongue traced along the exposed skin. "I'm not interested in anyone who doesn't want me."

Even without the knife, Darren wasn't helpless. He could slam his fist into Aden's face, send him toppling him backward, and then pin him to the ground. He was certainly strong enough to do that. If he wanted to. And he did. He absolutely wanted to complete this mission and go home with as little fuss as possible. Just as soon as Aden finished licking his shoulder.

"It so happens that this once, I don't mind being groped by strangers in the dark."

Aden's chuckle rumbled through Darren. "Of course, you don't. Because then your mission would fail." He tattooed every word into Darren's skin, his lips refusing to abandon the contact. "But I think you'll find I don't go silently into the night, gorgeous."

Darren coughed, trying to clear the tickle in his throat. The altogether ridiculous tickle in his throat. "Oh, I wouldn't expect you to. What fun would that be?"

"Is that what this is?" His hand was back on Darren's thigh. It shouldn't have felt so hot through the net stockings, but each almost gentle sweep scorched a brand new path. "Fun?"

"Of course. It's a party, after all."

Darren closed his hands in his fists, not because he planned to punch Aden, but because he wanted to touch Aden with the same sort of slow, intimate caresses. It was werewolf magic. It

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had to be. He wasn't aware of any such thing as werewolf magic, and there were no recorded reports of werewolves putting their victims in a trance, but how else could he explain what Aden was doing to him?

"Aren't you having fun?"

Another reverberating chuckle, this one somehow deeper than before. "I imagine my sort of fun and your sort of fun might not necessarily be the same."

The pressure against his back changed, shifting to the side. He didn't need to turn his head to know Aden had sat next to him, his back facing the patio, his legs still lost under the blanket of darkness. The guitar was gone, so now not even a strap disrupted the hard ripple of his chest. But Aden's hands kept moving, distracting Darren from the temptation of his body. The one on his leg crept higher and higher, while its mate slipped along the back of Darren's neck.

"So what's Plan B?" Aden asked softly. "You can't stab me now, so...how do you intend to take me down?"

"I guess I'll just have to bide my time...strike when you least expect it." Balling his hands into fists wasn't working anymore. His fingers crept over Aden's hip, his pinky brushing across the ridges of his abdomen. He covered Aden's hand with his free fingers, stopping him from continuing the journey up Darren's thigh. "When you're otherwise distracted."

"Or I could kill you here and now." The threat came in the same seductive tone as his earlier compliments. "That might be fun, too."

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“You could try, sunshine. But if you know I work for Argenti, then you know it’s not as simple as that.”

His teeth flashed white as he smiled. “Which is why it would be fun.”

Darren moved his hand over Aden’s thigh. Aden’s strong, muscled thigh. His fingertips brushed against his undeniable erection, and a thrill went up his arm. He had intended to search for weapons, but now he was far too distracted by the line of his thick cock. “Well, that’s a pity, because it seems like this would be more fun.”

“Yes,” came the murmured response. “I think it would be.”

Before Darren had time to react, Aden closed the distance between them and took his mouth in lingering caress. He tightened his grip on the back of Darren’s neck, making it impossible to break away from the kiss, but the firm probe of Aden’s tongue was even more difficult to deny.

Kissing Aden Richter like he wanted to eat his face was not part of his mission. In fact, if Jasmine caught him necking with a target, he’d be summarily dismissed, and possibly put on trial, depending on just how much necking had happened. But Jasmine wasn’t there, and Aden’s mouth was nothing less than intoxicating. From the way Aden’s cock pushed against his tight leather pants, Darren had to believe the kiss was affecting him the same way. That maybe, for a moment, physical desire was paramount.

Aden growled in the back of his throat, a low, feral sound that made the hair stand up on Darren’s arms. Letting go of Darren’s thigh, he gripped his hip instead, hauling him closer.

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It practically pulled Darren onto his lap, his erection hard against his ass, but as Darren shifted in order to increase the contact with all that hot skin, Aden's hand went back between his legs.

The moment his powerful fingers skimmed over Darren's cock, strapped tight into his body even though it killed him as he got hard, both of them froze.

Aden hissed. His hold on Darren became unbreakable. "Well, this just got a hell of a lot more interesting."

Darren struggled, but that didn't help the situation. It made it worse. Aden's arm tightened around him, and he ground against his still-present erection. Darren's ass clenched in response, and anger flared inside of him. He had just totally fucked up, exposed his disguise, and put his life in even more danger, and he still wanted Aden's cock.

"A bit, yeah."

Those clear blue eyes fixed on Darren's mouth. "Argenti's never sent a man before. Did somebody finally get smart, or is this just my lucky day?"

"Honestly? Nobody else had an invitation to this extremely exclusive and impossible to infiltrate party. So I guess we both got lucky."

"That explains the dress then. If somebody had been smart, you would've been in a leash and collar and nothing else." His nose twitched, and he leaned forward to nuzzle Darren's throat, audibly inhaling. "Oh, yeah, there it is."

"So now that you know my secret, does that make you more or less inclined to go with the option of trying to kill

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each other?" It didn't matter, but Darren truly wanted to know. He hadn't expected Aden's erection to remain, or for the werewolf to begin sniffing and licking him.

He cried out when Aden sucked hard on a fresh patch of skin, arching into the man's body in an instinctive attempt for more. The sensations were sharp and sudden, filling his head with a fog that threatened to erase every single one of his intentions, but it was the throb of that thick length against his ass that made it even worse.

Abruptly, Aden stopped. He didn't just stop; he let Darren go so fast he tumbled from the wall. Darren scrambled to his feet, nearly twisting his ankle on the damn heel, but by the time his head snapped in Aden's direction, the man was already melting into the shadows.

"Just because I don't want to, doesn't mean I won't," Aden said. "Don't give me a reason."

"It's too late for that." Darren didn't raise his voice to address Aden. The man's sharp ears would pick up the words. "Because you already gave me a reason to be here."

"And I'm sure you believe that." He was almost completely gone now, only the flash of his teeth every once in a while giving away his location. "Just remember who the hunter is here, gorgeous."

"And I'll just warn you not to underestimate me, sunshine."

Another flash. Darren could have sworn he was smiling.

Then it was gone.

Darren leaned against the wall. His warning must have

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sounded real scary after he had turned into a massive slut for a handsome face, a few low words, and a coaxing mouth. There couldn't be a repeat performance, and the thought twisted at him a little bit. It was a little cruel, to get that close to what promised to be mind-blowing pleasure, only to be reminded that he had a task.

He couldn't leave the party until Aden Richter was dead.

CHAPTER 2

When it came to parties, too proper Halloween bashes with city officials weren't exactly Aden's cup of tea. He had to go; there wasn't any way around it. But hell if he was going to show up in one of those sissy and far too expensive costumes the rest would be wearing. He deliberately chose something provocative. It wasn't just to get a good laugh out of Giessen at the get-up, but this way, too, whoever was setting him up would know he was there. The leather pants and guitar were one big target of *I dare you to come fuck with me*. His biggest hope was that the bastard tried. Aden was going to get far too much pleasure ripping his throat out.

The costume had had an unexpected side effect, but

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discovering there was at least one Argenti agent on the premises only heightened Aden's alertness. The Catwoman costume was more than cheap, but the agent had the best legs Aden had ever seen, with the sexiest mouth he'd ever kissed. Indulging in flirting to throw the agent off had been fun. Finding out the agent was really male had been even more so. When it came to sex, Aden was an equal opportunity kind of guy. All he cared about was chemistry. But pinned to the wall, forced to make a choice, a hard cock and a tighter ass would win, every single time.

He was going to have to be careful with this one. This agent—whoever he was—was a distraction. Because Aden was still hard, twenty minutes after leaving the guy in the garden.

Distractions could get him killed. If it wasn't whoever was setting him up, it was the Argenti agent. Aden had no plans on losing his skin any time soon. He'd kill whoever got in his way, even if it meant seeing pretty boy lying in his own blood.

Aden prowled through the deserted upstairs corridors, his nostrils flaring as he tracked the scent. The rituals framing him had all held distinctive odors. He had spent the past two weeks arriving at crime scenes just a little too late; the pungent gingery smell characterizing each was already dissipating. Humans wouldn't have detected it. Other wolves might not have, either. Every single death had been drenched in blood, and even Aden had a difficult time separating the smells.

When he had shown up at Giessen's office to deliver his most recent acquisition, however, the first thing that had

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struck him was the same scent. It wasn't on Giessen, but rather, hung in the air around him, in his office, even at his secretary's desk, like whoever carried it had been through, and recently. He'd accepted the invitation to Halloween without pause. There was a connection. There had to be. And with the full moon on Halloween, too, Aden feared the rituals would come to a head. He didn't think Giessen was guilty, but the more Aden dug around, the more he didn't like what he found. Giessen was involved. Which meant Aden was going to stick to him like glue until he found out who was trying to set him up.

Searching through the deserted area couldn't wait. He had no doubt that once the party really got going, they would start filtering upstairs in pairs and threesomes, seeking quiet rooms, or at least, quiet corners. His vision was sharp enough to see without turning on the lights, even when he wasn't in wolf form. But he needed to rely on his nose more than his eyes, and that led him further away from the party and deeper into the maze-like corridors.

He listened for any sign that he wasn't alone, but after the din of the party, the second floor was entirely still. He didn't make a sound as he walked, his tread so light he might as well have been stepping on air.

The house smelled like its own living creature. Most houses did. They absorbed the scents of the people they protected, and mixed to create something new, something different. Sometimes they were benevolent, sometimes not. The Giessen house bordered on malevolent. Giessen himself

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was not a bad man, but Aden knew evil when he encountered it. If he had any doubts the rituals all led back here, they were gone.

He paused outside a closed door. The trail continued, but a new scent had joined the elixir, drifting from behind him to cloud his path. Turning sideways, he pressed against the wall to try and disappear. It was the first time that night he regretted his costume choice. He should have found a black shirt to wear, too.

As soon as he caught the outline of the Argenti agent, his cock jumped. It wasn't exactly the response he needed right now.

Aden kept against the wall as the outline sharpened. Despite the words exchanged earlier, he knew Argenti agents were dangerous. And single-minded. Once they had a mission, they were on that mission regardless of the costs or the consequences. Having one tracking him now was a hassle he didn't want and couldn't afford. Especially if the agent got in the way of his own investigation.

Aden looked away for a moment, and when he focused on the place the agent had been standing, it was empty. Though that delicious scent still lingered in the air.

He didn't move. Without knowing where the agent was, he risked exposure. He had little doubt the agent was armed. One little blade was hardly up to their usual standards. Giving away his location would create more trouble than it was worth.

So he waited. One minute ticked by. Two. Not a sound disturbed the empty hallway, except for the echoes from the

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party downstairs. If the agent moved, Aden didn't hear it, which only made him more nervous. That testified to the agent's skill. He would have much preferred having an idiot to deal with than someone who could get from one place to another as quietly as Aden could.

His thoughts stopped. If the agent was moving that quietly, he had to have taken off the high heeled shoes. Which might mean...

He ducked the split second before he heard the air whisper its approach. Plaster rained down on top of his head as something embedded in the wall, right where his head used to be.

Aden glanced up and growled in the back of his throat. He'd been right. One of the shoes was stuck in the wall.

"I don't have time for this," he said, just loud enough for the agent to hear him. "You do realize it's a full moon, right? Run along home before I decide to stop playing nice and shift, just for you, gorgeous."

"Do you think I care if you shift?" His voice came from the right, and Aden turned toward it. A few seconds later, words drifted from the opposite direction. "I'm trained to fight werewolves, sunshine. It'll be like putting down a wild animal."

"And how many have you actually killed?" Aden crouched down and crept along, focusing in on the scent rather than the voice. "You're not even old enough to shave. Not that I mind that. Especially if you're nice and smooth all over."

"Been an operative for three years. Maybe you should do

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the math.”

The agent’s scent intensified, and Aden quickened his pace, already drooling. He rounded the corner, but instead of finding the agent’s tight little body, he only found a shirt tossed to the floor.

It was barely a scrap of a thing, but Aden brought it up to his nose and inhaled deeply. His mouth watered, and for a moment, his head filled with images of riding the agent’s ass until they both passed out. It took too much effort to shake them away. After his response to the agent downstairs, of course the other man would use his sexuality to distract him.

“Tell me you lost the padded bra, too, and we’ll have the beginnings of a perfect party,” Aden taunted. “How exactly do you plan on getting out of the house now without half your clothes?”

“The back door. The real problem is going to be getting your body out of the house.”

“Maybe you should have planned for that in advance.”

“Oh, it’s under control. Don’t worry about that. This isn’t my first time at the rodeo, after all.”

Aden had a feeling he could do this all night. The last agent he’d tangled with had been a bore, but this one kept along just fine. The only problem was, he didn’t have all night.

From the sounds of the party, the stairs were in the same direction as his new friend, which made returning to the festivities an impossibility. There was a third floor, but Aden hadn’t bothered learning the floor plan of the house. His plan

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had been to follow his nose. This agent was now getting in the way of that.

"It might not be your first, but I can pretty much guarantee it'll be your last if you don't let me go," Aden tried. "And really, you're too pretty to end up in pieces. Even if they'd be very pretty pieces."

"Come on, now. Do you really think I can just walk out of here and leave you? What do you think is going to happen to me if I go back to Argenti without your head?"

"Offer to blow your boss to make up for it. That would work for me."

"I don't think she'd be interested."

"Well, that's a shame. I'd say you could offer something else, but something tells me I'm more to your taste than she might be."

"I'd say the real shame is that you're a remorseless killer. We could've had a good time if it wasn't for that little issue."

Aden chuckled. "Now who said I was remorseless?"

"Do thoughts of all your victims keep you up at night?"

"No, pretty boys like you do."

"You're a charmer. So what are you doing up here? There's no prey to stalk, near as I can tell."

"What's that? A rational Argenti agent?" Aden clicked his tongue, creeping along the wall. Maybe if he got close enough to the man to grab him, he could end this once and for all. "Even if I told you the truth, you wouldn't believe me, so why should I even bother?"

"Now you've piqued my curiosity. Indulge me."

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“No, I haven’t. You’re stalling for time.” But the request made him pause, weighing his options. It couldn’t hurt to tell the agent what was going on. It wouldn’t stop him from going after Aden, but it might get him thinking outside of his red tape box. “You think I killed all those people, don’t you?”

“I think the evidence points to only one werewolf in the area. A werewolf interested in stockpiling power. A werewolf with friends in high places to keep him out of the reach of the law. A werewolf who can shift at will.”

“And you think I’m dumb enough to leave such a blatant trail? I do have friends, gorgeous, but they draw the line at publicity like that.”

“It’s not about being dumb. After tonight, it won’t matter what your friends think. You’ll be powerful enough without them.”

So they knew about the rituals. Or at least enough to understand that it was all about power. Too bad they were foolish enough to think he’d be as obvious as that.

“Or maybe not. Whatever it looks like, I didn’t do this.”

“Oh, you’re innocent? Why didn’t you just say so earlier?”

Aden gritted his teeth. He knew it sounded ridiculous. He should have known someone as narrow-minded as an Argenti agent would scoff at the possibility.

“Why would I want more power?” he tried instead. “I’m already one of the strongest wolves in the region. I’m in control of my shifting. I don’t need to worry about lunar cycles. What do I possibly have to gain from any of this except to draw unwanted attention to myself?”

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“I don’t know. Maybe you’re greedy. Maybe you’re stupid. Maybe you’re just bloodthirsty. But I haven’t seen any evidence that you’re innocent.”

He was close enough that he saw the man’s outline again. Something glinted in his hand. Something metallic. From the way his fingers were positioned, it could only be a gun.

With silver bullets. Argenti agents always had silver bullets. Aden had a scar along his arm where he’d been grazed by one the first time he’d met an Argenti agent. Five years ago.

“Sniff it out,” Aden said. “It’s here. In this house. It was at every single one of the rituals, and it’s somewhere in here. Go ahead, gorgeous. Use that nose of yours. Your mouth can’t be the only talented part of your body.”

“How do I know this isn’t a trick to distract me while you’re finishing the ritual yourself?”

“I could volunteer a place on my lap while you take a sniff. You’ll know exactly where I am then.”

“Take a sniff at what? What, exactly, should I smell?”

For the first time, he thought he detected a note of interest in what Aden might be claiming. “Like ginger,” he said. “Like magic gone sour.”

“Like magic gone sour,” he repeated. His silhouette turned to face Aden, and the gun glinted in his hand again. “Fine. But if you do anything...anything...I don’t like, I’m going to put a bullet between your eyes.”

Aden saw more than the gun. He saw glimpses of the man’s torso, tightly muscled with a thin trail of hair

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disappearing into his skirt. He saw a nervous swipe of the man's tongue over his lower lip and, better, remembered exactly what the ripe swell of flesh felt like between his teeth.

"You liked it when I did this, though." Slowly, carefully, his gaze unwavering from the gun in case he misjudged the man, Aden reached out and ran the back of his fingers along the agent's forearm. Heat immediately erupted from the man's skin, pungent and prickly. "I'm guessing you still like it."

His lips parted and he caught his breath. "No touching, sunshine. Not until we find the proof you insist exists."

Just as slowly as he'd reached out, Aden withdrew, a smile curving his mouth. "Deal."

CHAPTER 3

Aden ripping him in two was not the worst thing that could happen to Darren. The absolute worst thing would be Jasmine finding out Darren had the open shot and never took it. Twice. He'd had an open shot *twice*. His finger had been heavy against the trigger, and all he had to do was apply a tiny amount of pressure. Twice. But the first time, Aden had called him a pretty boy. And the second time, Aden was touching him. How could he shoot the werewolf in that situation?

It was wrong to give Aden the benefit of the doubt. Wrong and stupid. And punishable by...Darren didn't want to think about the punishment he was courting. Even if Aden was telling the God's honest truth and there was another, unknown

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werewolf in the area, that might not be enough to pull Darren's ass out of the fire. But he had a priority greater than eliminating a target. He had a priority greater than getting his hands and mouth on Aden's body. He wanted to stop a killer.

He knew what bad magic smelled like. As soon as Aden mentioned the smell of ginger, Darren understood. Most people wouldn't notice it. Werewolves always would. So would anybody trained to keep all five senses open to any sign of paranormal activity. That ginger smell would linger on skin, compounding and growing more pungent with each use. Like cigarette smoke.

Aden hadn't smelled like ginger.

It was a detail he could confirm again, because though Aden had taken Darren's warning about touching to heart, he had also stolen what little personal space he had left. Aden now stood as close as he possibly could without contact, and the occasional flare of his nostrils as he regarded Darren with those intense blue eyes sent more than one shiver through his body.

"Can I ask one little favor before you put your nose to the trail?" Aden murmured. "Take off the wig."

Darren had forgotten he was even wearing the wig, especially since he had long since shed the shoes and the bra. He took it by the side and pulled it off the side of his head, wishing that Aden wasn't watching each small motion—wishing that he wasn't noticing the intensity from his dark eyes.

"Better?"

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The stubble made it hard to tell but it looked like Aden actually smiled. “Much. Now what about a name? Or I can keep calling you gorgeous. That works for me, too.”

He considered lying, but it wouldn’t serve any purpose. If Aden was innocent, he wouldn’t use Darren’s name against him. If he was guilty, then he would be dead before morning. “Darren.”

“Darren.”

It sounded different in that deep voice, drawn out into a sound that was almost a growl. It shouldn’t have been sexy. Not at all. It shouldn’t have turned him on, either, but Darren had long ago stopped keeping track of all the things Aden shouldn’t have done to him.

“Ever tracked bad magic before, Darren?” Aden leaned a shoulder against the wall, blocking the way to the hall behind him. “Or do you just go after big bad wolves and hope to get caught?”

“I can track anything you can. My targets aren’t usually so conveniently placed in a high-profile party.”

“Too bad you didn’t know about the real target. You could have saved us both a lot of work by nosing him out instead of waiting for me to show up.”

“You don’t know who he is, either. This guy went to a lot of work to make sure you looked like the baddie.”

“Yes, he did.” The flirtatious tone was gone from his voice. Now each word sounded chipped out of the air itself. “He’s going to pay for that.”

“Do you think he’s here at the party?”

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“Yes.” Aden tilted his head back, exposing his long neck. His eyes closed, and his nostrils flared as he breathed in deeply. “I think he’s a frequent guest here, actually. Someone who would visit Giessen at work.”

“Could be family. There are private suites on the third floor.” Darren grinned wryly. “That’s not an invitation. But if he is a family member, he might have a room here.”

But Aden wasn’t responding to his denial. He still held his head back, lines etching between his heavy brows, and the arm that hung at his side tensed. It gave Darren the opportunity to look and appreciate the man without fear of being caught, but something about the way Aden stood made him nervous. Like he was waiting for something. Or someone—

He flat-handed Darren in the chest, sending him flying back down the hall. Before Darren landed, Aden kicked the door opposite where they had stood, splintering it from its hinges. With a snarl, he disappeared inside.

Darren didn’t hesitate to follow Aden into the dark room, his gun at the ready. He was almost immediately at a disadvantage in the dim light, but that didn’t worry him. He stood perfectly still, stretching his ears into the blackness, trying to sense where Aden went. The silence was perfect for the space of a heartbeat, and then he heard a growl to his left. Darren’s mouth ran dry at the sound. Just because he could hold his own with werewolves—and taken out a fair few—didn’t mean that the primal warning of a deep, hungry growl didn’t affect him.

Air rushed along his cheek as something leapt past him. He

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even felt the beast's hair tickle across his skin. Was it Aden? It shouldn't matter. By all rights, he should shoot both of them. They were both killers; the world would be better off without them.

But Darren knew he wouldn't take the shot. Regardless of everything else, he had made a deal with Aden. He wouldn't go back on his word unless the deal was broken.

A loud thump reverberated through the floor as two heavy bodies collided. In the murk, he barely made out the two bodies, one furred, one not. Silver eyes flashed as both wolves snarled, and it took him a moment to realize that the set he caught were human. Aden's. The glimpse was gone as the pair rolled over the floor, colliding with a heavy dresser. Darren tried to follow them with his gun, but he couldn't get a clear shot. Every time he thought he had the wolf in his sights, Aden went on top again.

Aden pinned the wolf to the floor with a loud snarl, but the beast managed to get his feet under Aden's body and kicked him directly in the chest. Aden went flying, and the wolf jumped to his feet. Its body was sleek and predatory, and it moved through the shadows like oil. Darren flicked the safety off the gun, prepared to take the shot, but he wasn't expecting the wolf to lunge at him. Its roar was almost deafening in the small space before it leapt into the air and toward Darren.

He had never seen anything move so fast.

Not the werewolf.

Aden.

Aden took only a moment to recover before his eyes

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locked with Darren's. They were bright and feral, the only evidence he would ever need that Aden was a threat, no matter what shape he took. It didn't last. He sprung at the wolf in a blur of perfect flesh, leaping across yards as effortlessly as it took to breathe. His arms wrapped around the werewolf's midsection to drag them both down to the ground, at the same time his features began to ripple, his jaw elongating slightly along with his teeth.

By the time the two landed, Aden had buried his teeth in the wolf's neck, the blood splattering onto his face and chest at the very first bite.

The blood was black, painting Aden and the unknown wolf, flowing into the carpet. It splashed across Darren's chest and face in tiny, hot drops. The attempted attack was enough to prompt Darren's flight-or-fight instinct, but his pride wouldn't let him run, and his sense of self-preservation wouldn't let him get in the middle of the struggle. The struggle that didn't show any signs of ending, despite the blood that flowed freely from both wolves.

They rolled toward him, and Darren caught a glimpse of wicked looking claws poised over Aden's back. They were long enough and strong enough they could deliver the final, killing blow. But there was no missing at this distance, and Darren didn't need to think about what he should do. He didn't weigh his options or consider letting the wolves kill each other. There was only one real choice.

He put a bullet in the wolf's head, between his eye and his ear. It immediately stilled beneath Aden's large frame.

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Time slammed to a halt. Nobody moved, not Darren, not Aden, and definitely not the dead wolf. A slight tremor had taken up residence in his trigger finger, and he ground his teeth together in order to get rid of it. He was a professional. This was what he did. He managed to keep the gun steady as Aden finally began to move, but Aden only lifted his head, like it weighed far more than a few pounds.

Silver eyes glittered at him through the darkness. Black blood stained his mouth—his very human mouth—and collected in the dark hair shadowing his jaw. Aden licked his lips.

Darren's stomach churned.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Darren took a step forward. The first day of his training, the very first thing he had learned, was never to approach a wolf once it got the taste for blood. "What about you?"

His sensual mouth curled into what he probably meant to be a smile. "Couldn't be better. Kills on the full moon are always good. Even if they're not mine."

"Sorry for ruining your fun, but he was about to..." Darren stopped. His job wasn't to defend wolves against each other. "Any idea who he is?"

Aden didn't even bother looking down. He seemed too intent on fixating on Darren. "Not the one we're looking for. My guess is he's a guard."

Darren wanted to tell the other man to stop staring at him. He took another step forward, the hair on the back of his arms

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and neck standing on end. “Thanks. For stopping him before he tore my head off.”

“Well, I couldn’t let that happen.” His gaze slid downward, locking on his hips. “I like your head.”

Darren wished his cock wasn’t still strapped up, because it was more than a little painful. In fact, his whole body throbbed in sympathy, and the only thing stronger than his arousal was the sharp sense of disgust—at himself. Seeing Aden covered in another wolf’s blood, fresh bruises blooming over his face and chest, shoulders still rising and falling rapidly, shouldn’t have sent new waves of desire through him, but he couldn’t help it.

“Maybe you should find a bathroom and get cleaned up.”

He nearly jumped back when Aden peeled away from the body, fresh smears staining his chest. He tracked every inch Aden straightened, wondering if he’d known all along just how much bigger the other man was. But he couldn’t move at all when Aden slowly reached out and curled his hand around the gun.

“Aren’t you going to kill me?” came the soft query. He forced Darren’s arm upward until the muzzle pressed into Aden’s sternum, the blood oozing around the metal rim as he forced the contact even greater. “This is your chance.”

Darren swallowed. “You had your chance to be rid of me forever. Why did you stop him?”

“Because you’re not his to kill.”

The straightforward answer was enough to steal Darren’s breath. But something had stationed the werewolf on that floor

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with orders to kill. Had Aden been the specific target? Or was there something in that house so precious that the orders were to kill first and ask questions later?

“I’m not going to kill you until I have some answers. Like who this wolf was working for, and what he was guarding.”

“But I’m not the one who has those answers for you.” His voice had dropped to dangerous levels, caressing each word before releasing it for Darren’s ears. “I can’t even say right now I care too much about finding them just yet.” Without letting go of the gun, Aden reached out with his other hand and dragged his nails across Darren’s stomach. “Just a word of warning. I’m about to break your no touching rule.”

Darren’s muscles clenched, the simple contact intensifying the throbbing in his groin and thighs. Darren knew he wasn’t attracted to the wolf, but his disgust and fear of the wolf twisted around the growing lust for the man, sharpening his hunger rather than diminishing it.

“Thanks for that warning.” He touched Aden with his free hand, running his fingers over the twisted scar on his arm.

The caress elicited a low growl, one that did more than raise the hair on the back of Darren’s neck. Aden hooked his fingers into the waistband of the skirt, and with a sharp yank, tore it from his body. It fluttered to the ground. It settled over Darren’s feet, but he didn’t have the strength to kick it away. Everything in him was focused on Aden, on the broad hand reaching between his legs to palm his strapped-in cock, on the glittering eyes devouring Darren’s body.

“I can’t remember the last time I wanted to fuck someone

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so bad,” Aden murmured, so low Darren wondered if he even meant for the words to be heard.

Darren’s knees were weak and his vision blurred a little. Knowing that Aden wanted him as much, maybe more, made things worse, somehow. There was no walking away from Aden, and the gun might as well have been empty for all the use Darren was going to get out of it. Lust made every nerve in his body burn.

“Do it.”

Permission snapped Aden’s head up. For a single, shattering moment, he went completely still—his head, his chest, even the hand that had been stroking Darren’s cock. The familiar pose should have driven Darren away. He’d seen it often enough. It came in that second before a wolf struck, though he had never witnessed it on a wolf in human form before.

It didn’t. It mesmerized him. It made his heart pump extra blood to all his extremities, as if anticipating needing it elsewhere.

Then the moment was gone. Aden tightened his grip on the gun and took it effortlessly from Darren’s grip, his other hand clawing at the hosiery barring their skin from direct contact. He tossed the gun away, and just when his deft fingers found the straps holding Darren’s cock back, Aden hooked his free hand around Darren’s neck and slammed their mouths together.

Darren let the last of his doubts and hesitation go. He wasn’t going to walk away, and he wasn’t going to stop Aden,

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so there was no reason not to respond to the kiss with all the hunger he felt. Aden tasted of dark copper, blood still clinging to his lips and tongue, but Darren didn't care. He skimmed his palm over Aden's chest, smearing the fluid still on his skin, and his other hand went to Aden's hip. The harder he gripped Aden, the more demanding his mouth became.

Without breaking the seal of their mouths, Aden released Darren's cock and immediately fisted his length. His grip was brutal, tighter than anything Darren had ever felt before, but when he gasped into the kisses, Aden only held him closer. The thick line of his arousal rubbed against Darren's hip. His ass clenched at the memory of what it had felt like sitting on Aden's lap. He wanted back there, wanted to ride him until they were both drained. When Aden hauled him to the edge of the nearby bed, he knew without a shadow of a doubt Aden wanted it, too.

Darren tugged at Aden's fly, ripping the tight pants open. He forced them down Aden's hips, and he closed his fingers around the other man's shaft. Aden's thick cock was already slick with pre-come, and Darren knew it would split him in two. He tensed, whimpering against Aden's mouth at the thought.

Aden finally let his mouth go, panting heavily as he perched on the bed. "You wanted to sit in my lap, right?" He whirled Darren around, hauling him back until his shoulders pressed to Aden's bloody chest. It trapped Aden's cock between their bodies, but Darren was too lost in the way Aden began tugging at his balls to argue right then. "You're going to

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ride me this time, gorgeous. Because if I bend you over to fuck you that way, you'll be useless when we're done to help me stop this son of a bitch."

Darren tilted his head and found Aden's mouth again, his hand curling back to grip his neck. Their tongues wound together, and Aden's fingers tightened on Darren's sac. His grip was almost tight enough to hurt—everything was almost just enough to hurt. But the shocks of pain only made him crave more.

"You can bend me over after we stop him."

Another growl. Another squeeze. Everything about Aden felt on the cusp of the wolf. Darren almost expected to feel razor-sharp canines tearing into his lips.

Aden abandoned his balls to slide between their bodies, tracing along his crack until he found the tight ring of his hole. His fingers were slick with pre-come, but that was the only lubricant as he mercilessly buried two of them inside Darren's passage. He twisted his wrist, each grind against Darren's skin igniting it even more. The addition of a third finger only made him burn hotter.

Darren couldn't bite back his shout, even though he knew anyone could come investigate at any time. Hell, anyone walking down the hall would see the two of them on the bed, Darren writhing and twisting against Aden's body, moaning and shouting for more. He didn't care. He didn't care about anything except feeling Aden's glorious cock stretching his ass. Logical thought and higher brain functions would be welcome to return as soon as Aden was spent with his come

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coating Darren's body.

"I'm guessing you've never been fucked by a wolf before." Aden licked the sweat off Darren's shoulder, up and up until he reached Darren's ear. His hot breath prickled everywhere it touched. "You'll probably have to shoot me when we're done."

"Why? You going to deserve it?"

"Because if we both walk away from this, I'm going to want more. And I won't take no for an answer."

Darren did not need a wolf stalking him, making demands on him, getting in the middle of his life. If they both walked away from this, he would have enough problems with his superiors. But the dark promise just made him ache, especially when he thought of what Aden would do if Darren tried to deny him.

"I'll take my chances."

The concession sent a ripple through Aden's already tense body. His mouth clamped over the tight sinew of Darren's neck, sucking hard at the muscle. It was hard enough to hint at sucking his balls straight through his body, and Darren dug his nails into Aden's hip to keep from begging for more. He closed his eyes, desperate to stave off the dizziness threatening to overwhelm him. There was a brief respite when Aden's fingers pulled free of his ass, but when the other man clamped his arm around Darren's waist and lifted him up, those sensations returned.

"I wanted this even when you wore that awful wig," Aden said. The blunt tip of his cock nudged at Darren's hole. "It's

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better without.” And with that, he yanked Darren back down, sheathing his length in one deep, single stroke.

Despite Aden’s attempt to stretch him, a cry ripped from Darren’s throat and the back of his eyes stung. He would have liked a chance to adjust to Aden’s width, but Aden started moving almost immediately. Darren pressed his teeth together, trying to ward off more shouts, but Aden was just too overwhelming. The only thing that could smother the sound was Aden’s mouth, slamming into his.

Hungrily, Darren took the kisses. It eased the burn scorching through his flesh, made it possible to breathe when he was fairly sure his lungs had forgotten how. It dawned on him the mattress probably softened Aden’s strokes, for which he was grateful. Without it, he suspected the blood on Aden’s chest wouldn’t be the only blood smeared across his body.

Aden’s hand moved to his cock. One hard pull was enough to make his head spin. Their tongues battled and Aden’s teeth cut against his lips, a harsh promise that he wasn’t going to hesitate to use the sharp points on Darren’s body. Each punishing thrust was as surprising as the first one, his body never becoming accustomed to the size of Aden’s cock, to the speed, to the raw desire.

Sweat trickled down his chest and back, combining with the blood already coating his skin to make the glide of their bodies even smoother. Aden tore his mouth free to lick away some of the shine on Darren’s shoulder, punctuating each swipe of his tongue with a sharp bite. He hadn’t shifted, but the silver glowing in his eyes was enough to show how close

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the beast was to the surface. If the blood had been Darren's, he sincerely believed Aden wouldn't be able to hold himself back from taking his true form.

Somehow, that thought curled around the lust already surging through his veins and stoked it into a frenzy.

Darren's head dropped forward, exposing the nape of his neck in a silent, unconscious invitation to Aden to continue his exploration. Each swipe of his tongue, each dangerous prick of his teeth, each fast stroke, sent Darren closer to falling over the edge he had been walking since he first saw Aden enter the house. Aden's grip was almost bruising, and his wrist kept time with his hips, stripping Darren's cock until his balls started to tighten.

Darren shouted again as the pleasure and pain burned through his body. That was the only warning before he erupted, his come shooting on his stomach and Aden's fingers. Aden didn't stop stroking his shaft, forcing every drop of the salty fluid from him.

Not even the scent of come seemed enough to drive Aden to orgasm. His thrusts remained brutal, his hand now coated as it continued to slick over Darren's increasingly sensitive cock. His mouth returned to Darren's ear, and the labored breaths electrified the last of his nerve endings.

"I hope you didn't think that was going to be enough for me," he rasped. "A sweet morsel like you...I only wish it wasn't Halloween so I could spend the whole night fucking you."

Darren couldn't answer. Words were so far beyond his

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grasp that he might as well have been a mute. His cock was already half-erect, and each time Aden jerked his wrist, the sensation blurred closer to the line of pain. He couldn't take it. His body simply wasn't designed to withstand this endless assault, but he wouldn't dream of stopping it.

"That's it, gorgeous. Let's ride."

Somewhere in the back of his thoughts, Darren wondered why Aden had bothered to ask for his name if he was never going to use it. Because the words didn't stop there. They tumbled into harsh endearments of what exactly Aden wanted to do to him, promises of places they could fuck, positions they would hold. Hearing the man growl about how badly he wanted to shove his cock past Darren's pretty lips shouldn't have been half as arousing as it was, but it helped finish what Aden's relentless touching started.

"When you come this time, I'm going to lick up every last drop," Aden swore. "Or maybe I should make you do it. Which shall it be?"

Darren didn't know what prompted the words from him, but he didn't wish he could call them back. "Make me."

Aden's arms jerked, as if Darren's bold declaration electrified him. Given fresh purpose, his hand tightened on Darren's cock, while the other reached down to grasp his balls. The first tug on his sac made Darren slam his head back onto Aden's shoulders, the fire shooting through his legs.

With his head back, he could see Aden's neck and jaw, the skin glistening and too alluring to ignore. He lapped at it, gathering the salty sweat and getting an occasional taste of

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copper. Aden moaned, and the sound moved through Darren's body. He closed his teeth on the nearest muscle and bit into the rigid flesh.

"Fuck!" The arms around Darren tightened to the point of pain, and for a moment, Aden's pounding rhythm faltered. His harsh breathing filled Darren's ears, the muscles working in his throat as he swallowed again and again.

"Fuck," he repeated, this time lower. His drives into Darren's ass resumed, harder than before. Each thrust slapped Darren's skin against the soft leather bunched around Aden's thighs, pushing him even closer to coming again.

Darren moaned in encouragement, but he didn't release Aden's skin. His jaw ached from the pressure, but he didn't want to risk losing the faster rhythm. He clenched around Aden's cock, squeezing him with each full thrust. He knew the moment it all became too much for Aden. He tensed, his body turning to stone as his cock jerked against Darren's raw walls. His come flooded Darren's ass, hot against the sore muscles. He flashed to an image of Aden's cock erupting over his mouth, and the thought sent him spiraling into his second orgasm and painting Aden's hand.

Aden rumbled with satisfaction, tearing his neck away from Darren's bite. He forced Darren to look forward again, just in time for him to push two come-coated fingers past his lips. Darren sucked at them eagerly, shuddering as Aden took his turn to sink his teeth into Darren's neck.

But the bite didn't last. Aden licked along his jaw, following the hollow of his cheek as he continued to suck

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away.

“Next time, that’ll be mine,” he promised.

Darren sighed. There was no point in saying there wouldn’t be a next time, because they both knew that was a lie. As soon as Aden pulled his fingers away, Darren licked his lips and took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Okay, but not until we find the wolf we’re looking for. I won’t be able to function after another round like this.”

He felt Aden’s smile against his skin. “If we’d had the luxury to do it right, you wouldn’t have been able to function after this time.”

“I’ve got to find some clothes.”

It took everything Darren had to push himself off Aden’s lap and let his cock slip out, but they didn’t have time to linger. Walking hurt a bit, but it wasn’t anything he couldn’t live with. Besides, it was worth it. Even now, with all his blood flowing back to his head and the desire sapped from his body, Darren had to admit that he didn’t regret it.

CHAPTER 4

As he leaned the broken door up against the opening to get some privacy, Aden watched Darren out of the corner of his eye. It had been a very long time since he'd found such a willing partner. How ironic it was an Argenti agent who'd drive him so insane. Especially now.

Darren's lean body was tightly muscled, and his flawless skin glistened from the smears of blood and come streaked across his back and legs. There were scratches on the lower curves of his ass as well as the back of his thighs, and he stepped carefully to the closet, every movement obviously uncomfortable.

Aden was still mostly hard. Right then, he wanted nothing

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more than to fuck him again, to tear into that tight hole and listen to him beg for more. Darren would, he knew. The agent was practically a bitch in heat around him. Of course, Aden recognized he wasn't any better, and it was with regret he tucked himself back into his pants.

The room they'd stumbled in on was a bedroom, somebody male from the masculine touches. Aden didn't recognize the dead werewolf, but piled in the corner were heavy restraints, including leather straps that had clearly been gnawed through. Darren was too busy looking for clothes to notice. Aden suspected that for all his posing, he wouldn't be as comfortable inspecting the body of a dead werewolf anyway.

"I think I might have been wrong about this guy guarding something." Aden crouched next to the body and picked up a front paw. Patches of fur were rubbed away where the leather had cut into his flesh. "He was being held in here against his will. He was just trying to get out."

"So we killed an innocent person? That's great."

Aden arched a brow. "Since when do you consider werewolves innocent?"

"I don't indiscriminately kill wolves. My targets need to be put down."

"This one attacked us. Call it self-defense if it'll make you feel better."

"It was probably just scared." Darren stepped out of the closet in a pair of baggy sweats and an old T-shirt. He was completely engulfed by the material. "So, besides the obvious

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reason, why would somebody keep a werewolf chained up in their bedroom?"

"I have no clue." There was nothing more on the dead wolf, and Aden had enough blood on him already. Straightening, he looked around for something to wipe off his chest. "We make lousy pets."

"Yeah, I can imagine." Darren moved a bit stiffly, squatting to examine the body, a frown creasing his face. After a moment, he straightened again and moved over to the dresser. "Well, let's see what else we can find in here."

Aden let him rummage for a moment while he took a minute to clean off the worst of the blood. It let him sweep his gaze over the man's strong shoulders, the lean line of his slim hips. The clothes hid the best parts from view, but Aden still remembered what they had felt like against him, how well they had molded together with little need to prompt Darren to shift. Discreetly, he adjusted his cock. He'd never fucked an Argenti agent before. He was pretty sure Darren had never done it with a werewolf, either.

"When we get done with this, I want to see you again," he announced.

"You know that won't exactly be easy."

Aden smiled. "That just makes it more worthwhile."

"You have a thing for forbidden fruit, huh?" Darren yanked a stack of papers out of the drawer. "I think I might have found something here."

He knew they were supposed to be looking for information on the rituals, but it still took all his will to tear his attention

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away from Darren's ass and come up to his side. "What is it?"

"Receipts." Darren flipped through the stack with an impassive face. He almost looked like a different person from the man who had just been riding Aden's cock, with all his passion and need blazing in his eyes. "Invoices from Argenti. All signed by Ray Giessen and Jasmine Delgado."

"Ray...that's Giessen's son." The other name sounded familiar, too, but Aden couldn't put his finger on why. "So what are you saying? Ray hired Argenti? Why would he do that?"

"See that code there?" Darren pointed to an almost random string of numbers and letters. "That's a no-kill code. Ray can't go out and bag himself a werewolf, but he can hire professional wolf hunters to do it. Or rather, he can hire the best hunter in the country. Jasmine."

Aden glanced back at the dead wolf in the corner. "Except he already had one on ice. And you were sent here to go after me." None of this made sense. "I don't suppose it says specifically on there what he hired Jasmine to do."

"It looks like she's catching them and bringing them back here." He flipped through the receipts again. "Eight of them. So either he's got eight wolves tied up somewhere in the mansion, or...it's that magic you sensed."

Something clicked into place. "The ritual deaths. That's why magic was involved. The bodies the police found weren't wholly human. They were wolves in human form."

"Maybe Jasmine doesn't know why Ray wants them," Darren muttered.

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“So why did she give you orders to kill me instead of trapping me like the others?” Aden pressed.

“That’s exactly it. She doesn’t know what Ray is doing. He’s setting you up and she bought it.”

“Or they both know I won’t take getting manipulated like this and sent the one thing guaranteed to distract me from stopping them.”

“But Jasmine’s not...” He dropped the papers and turned to sit on the edge of the bed. “Do you know what you’re suggesting here? You’re suggesting that Jasmine kidnapped innocent people knowing they would die, and then sent me in here as *bait* so you couldn’t stop them. That’s insane.”

“Is it any more insane than sending in a male agent in skimpy drag and next to nowhere to hide a weapon? Argenti’s smarter than that.”

“Fuck this.” Darren jumped to his feet. “Fuck this. You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. You don’t know anything about Argenti and you don’t know Jasmine.”

Aden blocked the path to the door, standing as straight as he could and folding his arms over his chest in order to look as big as possible. He was very glad he’d taken the gun away from Darren. Nobody took betrayal well.

“In Jasmine’s eyes, they were never innocent. They were wolves. A threat. She probably thought she was doing the world a favor.”

“But that’s not...fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” He formed a fist and Aden thought he would take a swing at him. But he took a step back. “So what do we do now? Go find Ray?”

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“Not while you’re this agitated. Breathe. Calm down. You go out there like this, and you’re dead.”

“I’m not agitated. I’m pissed off. There’s a difference.”

“You also smell like prey. If Ray’s got other wolves around, they’re going to come crawling out of the woodwork to get to you.”

“I smell like blood and come. That won’t change no matter how long I stay in here.”

Aden’s mouth twitched. Darren practically vibrated with emotion. Aden itched to grab him again. “Do you even know what Ray Giessen looks like?” he asked, attempting a different approach.

“He’s the host’s son. I’m sure somebody at the party will be able to point him out. Or at least tell me if he’s here tonight.” Darren ran his hand through his hair. “Of course, I might have to explain why I’m wearing his clothes. The Ray Giessen costume probably isn’t popular this year.”

This time, Aden laughed. He liked this one. Contrary to what Darren thought, they were definitely following up after this fiasco was all over. “You don’t need to look for him at all. Now that I know who I’m looking for, I can find him in five minutes if I shift.”

“And manage to attract a huge amount of attention to yourself and probably create a panic at the same time.”

“You have to admit, it would get all the innocent people out of the house faster.”

“And you’re deeply concerned about all the innocent people?”

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Aden shrugged. "Not really. But you are."

"If you're not careful, I'm going to start thinking you might be a decent guy."

"Nah. If it looks like that's going to happen, I'll just string you up and fuck you 'til you remember I'm not." He hooked his thumb through a belt loop, all too aware of the flicker of Darren's gaze. "So are we going to try it my way and get this over, or do you want to pussyfoot around and risk losing him?"

"I don't think we're going to lose him. He's going to be back here sooner or later for his pet wolf." Darren shrugged. "But I don't want to spend all night here waiting. So let's do it your way."

Aden hadn't really expected him to go for it. Regardless of the sex, Darren was still Argenti-trained. He was conditioned to destroy werewolves, especially in their animal form. Aden had thought shifting would make Darren too nervous, or remind him he'd just had sex with a monster, and everything would go up in smoke.

Everything could still go up in smoke. Aden was putting an awful lot of trust in this guy not to do something stupid while Aden was shifted.

Without a word, he closed the distance between them and cupped the back of Darren's neck. Darren's brown eyes widened, but Aden didn't give him a chance to pull away before sealing their mouths together in a firm, but slow kiss.

He gripped Aden's upper arms, holding himself against Aden's chest as he opened to him. His response had been

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immediate, like he had only been waiting for Aden to stop talking and just kiss him. Aden almost wanted to forget they had to leave the room at all. It would be so much easier to push Darren back to the bed. Instead, he wrapped his other arm around Darren and crushed the slighter man against him.

“Can I just ask one thing?” Darren said against his lips.

Aden almost commented that Darren shouldn’t be able to do anything but beg for more if he’d kissed him the way he wanted to, but he held back, saying instead, “Name it.”

“Don’t do anything to make me regret not pulling the trigger when I had the chance.”

Grinning, Aden dropped one more lingering kiss on that sensual mouth and let him go. “And risk not getting more of those? Not on your life.”

Perching on the edge of the bed, he pulled off his shoes, followed quickly by his socks. Darren watched with a frown, though that melted into hunger as Aden stripped out of his pants and tossed them at him.

“Find something to keep these in for when I shift back.”

“I didn’t sign on to be your valet,” Darren muttered, but he returned to the closet and emerged with a small duffle bag. He stuffed Aden’s clothes into it, and the scraps of his own, plus the receipts and the gun that had been forgotten on the floor. “Will I be able to keep up with you?”

“Only one way to find out.”

He didn’t know if Darren had ever witnessed a werewolf shift before. He didn’t really care. He had felt the draw of the moon all night, and combined with the inherent power of

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Halloween, it had taken much of his control to keep from shifting before now. It was a relief to let it go, to tilt his head back and embrace the moon he could only feel. The power accelerated through his veins, hungry for release, and he opened his mind to the sanctuary of his true form.

The hair springing from his body was like prickles of heat erupting in sharp jabs all at once. Bones crunched as they reformed, his fingers folding into paws, his jaw and nose lengthening into a snout. Many wolves complained about the aches of shifting, but Aden embraced them. Pain made him stronger. It reminded him he was alive. In wolf form, he took that pain and focused it into something else, something more powerful. By the time he turned his gaze toward Darren, his entire being hummed in readiness.

“Aden...”

His powerful nose picked up on the fear easily, but it wasn't overpowering. It wasn't even the most dominant scent. It seemed more of an automatic, natural reaction than anything akin to terror. Darren stood motionless, frozen, for several beats before shuffling forward. He put his hand out slowly, his fingers skimming over the tips of the fur below his eye.

In wolf form, Aden didn't like being touched. There was something too intimate about it, something that made him feel vulnerable, that always had him shy away from anything but the most brutal contact. Now, though, he stood utterly still, as relaxed as he could get in the presence of all those delicious scents, and let Darren explore. He bent his head when Darren stroked the skin behind his ears, and thumped his tail when he

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found a particularly sensitive spot to scratch. The urge to knock Darren down and do what he would consider unspeakable things to him in this form was almost too great to ignore. Aden had to focus on the man's bare feet in an attempt not to devour him elsewhere.

"I've never..." Darren didn't need to finish the sentence. His voice was swallowed by the quickening of his breath. He ran his fingertips down Aden's muzzle, getting close to his delicate snout and mouth. One quick snap of his jaws, and Darren's fingers would be gone. "I don't understand this at all."

Slowly, though he knew it was dangerous for both of them, Aden turned his head and licked along the same fingers stroking his fur. When he caught a drop of drying blood, his senses overloaded, and he had to back away, beyond Darren's reach before temptation won.

"Yeah..." Darren took a deep breath and wiped his hand on his thigh. "Yeah. We better head downstairs and get this shit taken care of. The sooner we do, the sooner we can...worry about other things."

Aden was all too aware of what Darren was worried about. Catching Ray before the ritual probably wasn't their biggest concern.

Trying to figure out how to resolve any kind of relationship, even one purely physical, between an Argenti agent and a werewolf just might prove to be one of the most dangerous things Aden had ever done.

CHAPTER 5

Darren knew if he couldn't get his thoughts under control, he was going to be a danger to himself, to Aden, and to any innocent person at the party. But he couldn't just calmly walk out of the bedroom as though everything was fine. As though he wasn't still sore from fucking Aden. As though he hadn't killed a werewolf in what amounted to cold blood. As though he wasn't steps and minutes away from confirming everything he had worked for in his life had been betrayed.

Maybe.

How could he believe Aden? How could he let a werewolf—a killer—poison his mind against Jasmine? A quick fuck was one thing. Not the greatest idea in the world,

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but not the biggest mistake he could make. But a quick fuck didn't mean Aden was suddenly trustworthy. Or right. Why should Darren believe him or give him the benefit of the doubt? He was talking about betrayal and murder. About Jasmine participating in some of the darkest magic...blood sacrifices. What right did Aden have to level those accusations at the woman Darren respected and even loved?

But Darren had seen the evidence. He didn't need Aden to tell him what he saw and what the implications were. He didn't need Aden to point out the strangeness of sending an agent into a new, unknown area with the distinct disadvantage of a skirt, heels, and only two small weapons. Aden assumed Jasmine meant Darren to be a distraction. Darren had an unsettling suspicion there was something else going on. He just didn't know what.

Dealing with Jasmine's likely betrayal took a lot of his energy and would have been overwhelming on its own. Calmly trailing after a werewolf compounded that stress. He shouldn't let Aden lead him from the room and toward the stairs. Darren still had bullets in his gun. One bullet between the ears would probably be the right thing to do. Aden might not have been guilty of the crimes he had initially been accused of, but that didn't mean he was innocent. One bullet, and things would make a lot more sense. One bullet, and Darren would be able to think clearly again.

Darren had never hesitated to shoot before, but he couldn't bring himself to do it now.

He had never touched a living werewolf before. Aden's fur

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was much softer than he had expected. Luxuriant. He wanted to bury both hands in the thick pelt. He wanted to look into the wolf's eyes and see if he could still recognize Aden in there. When Aden licked him, Darren hadn't even felt a twinge of disgust. He didn't know what he felt. It wasn't quite arousal. It was stronger than excitement. Desire was there, but for what? What did he really want with Aden? From Aden?

Why did he feel like he understood Aden?

Questions would have to wait. Right now, he had to figure out how to stay focused as he trailed after Aden. Aden was a big guy in human form, but as wolf, he was enormous. He filled the hallway as he trotted silently along, his nose to the carpet as he followed the scent. Darren didn't know if it was Ray's or the magic, though he sincerely hoped it was the former. A human being he could deal with. Magic rituals in progress were something else entirely.

Aden reached the top of the stairs, but instead of going down to the thick of the party, his ears pricked, and he turned his head off to the left. Darren followed his gaze, but he saw nothing except the open landing overlooking the front foyer. A door at the opposite end led to an unexplored section of the house, though Darren knew from his studies before arriving at the party that Giessen's office was in that direction, as well as servants' quarters. It didn't surprise him when Aden slunk along the wall toward the far door, out of direct view of the guests downstairs. Darren did everything he could to stay out of sight, too. Explanations would be too hard for everyone if he was spotted.

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The door opened to another flight of these stairs, leading up into darkness. They had to be the service stairs, especially given the proximity to the servants' quarters, but shouldn't service stairs go down as well as up? Darren barely had a chance to consider that question before Aden's toenails clicked on the bottom riser. Darren closed the door behind them, but couldn't quite bring himself to shut it all the way. The strap of silvery light against the wall did little to alleviate his anxiety about being in a closed, dark space with a very large werewolf.

Aden slouched up the stairs, his claws on his hind feet clicking with each step. The sound traveled down Darren's spine and settled in his stomach. If Aden turned on him in the narrow space, that would be it. He wouldn't have any real chance of escaping or fighting the larger creature off. As a werewolf, Aden probably had at least one hundred pounds on him.

It could even look like an accident. One swipe of a very large paw, and Darren could tumble down the stairs and break his neck. Nobody would be the wiser.

The gun grew slick against his sweaty palm. He should shoot. That would be the smart thing. That was his job. Hunter. Werewolf. Their relationship was actually quite simple.

But Aden reached the top of the stairs unhindered. He held still for long moments, his head cocked as he listened for whatever was on the other side of the door. Darren couldn't hear a thing except his own heartbeat. Just when he thought he

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was going to go crazy from the waiting, though, something tickled at his nose.

Something like ginger.

He stiffened. Aden's hackles were already up, and when he swung his head back to gaze down at Darren with those eerily human eyes, his lip was curled back into a silent snarl.

Darren didn't need Aden to speak to know whatever waited on the other side would not be friendly.

Ray was killing werewolves, not humans. And since he was clearly working with Jasmine, he might hesitate before harming an Argenti agent. It would make more sense for Darren to open the door, but he didn't try to shoulder his way to the lead position. Aden didn't need his protection. Especially since the wolf gave no indication that he would let Darren take the lead.

He broke the door down with the same strength he used on the other one before leaping into the room with flashing eyes and teeth.

The room they entered was far more vast than the bedroom. Under the light of day, it served as a mini-gym, with various exercise equipment all lined up against one mirrored wall, TVs mounted from the ceiling, and mats padding a far corner. Windows at the opposite end let moonbeams shine in and reflect off the mirrors, scattering into a thousand directions to paint the room in speckles of silver. More illumination came in the form of candles, positioned on the floor at varying intervals. It took Darren a moment to recognize the hexagonal pattern.

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Aden ignored all of it to charge for the man in front of the window. His back was to the room, and he knelt at the side of a long, low bench. Manacles hung unused at both ends and in the middle. It didn't take a genius to realize they were to restrain whatever creature he lashed to its surface.

What puzzled Darren was the matching bench next to it. The scene was set for two victims.

Aden took a swipe at the man as soon as he was in touching distance. One hit with those powerful claws would have been enough to sever the man's spinal column. Except, Aden didn't actually touch him. Darren wasn't sure how it happened, or how it was even possible, but the man reached up and caught Aden's paw before jumping to his feet and spinning around to face the wolf.

A growl rumbled through Aden, a sound more hair-raising than seeing him attack the wolf downstairs. He snapped at the wrist holding him still, but even that didn't make contact. The man shoved him away, throwing him against the mats like Aden wasn't three hundred pounds of pure muscle.

Darren didn't allow himself to be shocked. He raised the gun and cocked the hammer back. He had never shot another human before, and he didn't think he could start now. But the man didn't know that, and sane people would at least pause with a gun trained directly at them.

"Stop! Stop right there or I'll shoot."

The man didn't even look in his direction. He kept his eyes on Aden and simply held up a hand as if to warn Darren to halt.

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“You did your job, agent. Stand down.”

Darren didn't move. “I don't take my orders from you.”

“No, you take them from Jasmine, who ordered you to deal with Richter. I can take it from here.”

Aden rose to his feet, his head low. Saliva dripped from his bared teeth as he slowly crept toward the man.

Darren didn't move, even though hearing Jasmine's name shook him slightly. “You were keeping a werewolf captive in this house. That's not only dangerous, it's illegal. What were you doing with him?”

For the first time, the man glanced in his direction. “Tell me you didn't let him go. He was dangerous. As much of a threat as Richter here. I was just waiting for the moon to come out and for him to change before killing him.”

One of the candles fell over, startling both of them. Aden stood on the periphery of the hexagon, his paw ready to knock over another.

The man's attention snapped back. “You knew this night was coming, Richter. Your time is up.”

“He's dead,” Darren said quickly. “The wolf downstairs. I killed him. What about this one?” He redirected his aim to Aden. “I should finish my assignment before I go home for the night.”

“No!” The response came too fast, too sharp. The man scrambled forward to stand between Darren and Aden, blocking the shot. “I mean, you can't shoot him. Didn't Jasmine tell you anything? Richter's too strong to go down with silver. He needs to be dismembered and burned.”

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A harsh bark cut the man off. Aden hunched on the floor, legs tense and ready to pounce. With the moonlight streaming in behind him, he appeared even larger than before, and for a moment, even the man hesitated.

“Wow, you must really think I’m stupid.”

Aden lunged with his powerful back legs, springing forward to wrap his forelegs around the other man. He tried to fight, kicking against Aden’s legs and struggling as hard as he could. It was almost enough to break the iron band of Aden’s grip. Almost. He spun around to the window and his huge form blocked the silver moonlight and cast a deep shadow over Darren. The next moment the room was filled with the high pitched sound of breaking glass.

Darren ducked to avoid the flying shards. The man’s scream pierced the night, and for a second, it looked like Aden was going to leap through the broken window to go after him. He didn’t. He stood amidst the broken glass with his paws up on the sill, leaning over in order to peer outside.

Darren tried to avoid the broken glass, but a sliver embedded itself in his toe. He ignored it as he looked around Aden’s thick shoulder, trying to get a glimpse of the body on the ground beneath. Only, it wasn’t a body. Despite the gathering crowd, Darren could see he was still moving.

“That should have killed him.”

Aden pulled away from the window, withdrawing from the broken glass. Within two steps, he was back in his human form, brushing glass dust from his palms.

“He shouldn’t have been able to swat me like a puppy,

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either. Whatever power he's been leeching from the rituals, it looks like Ray's been saving it up for personal use."

"We should get out of here."

"Just a second." Ignoring his nudity, Aden moved around the room, kicking over the candles so they rolled over and went out. He stopped at the benches, crouching down to look them over. One test of the manacles said they would have held even Aden in place if it had come to that. "What I don't get is why he bothered chaining the other wolf downstairs when he had this one up here that's even stronger. That doesn't make sense."

"None of this makes any sense to me. Maybe he didn't want a wolf in here until he had the ritual ready to start."

Aden turned quizzical blue eyes up to him. "And I thought you had orders to kill me."

"Yeah. Judging from Ray's reaction, somebody was pretty certain I wouldn't succeed."

Straightening, Aden took the duffle from Darren's shoulders and pulled out his pants. "This isn't over, you know," he said as he slipped them on. "We need to figure out where to go from here."

Darren winced. "Getting the glass out of my feet would be a good starting place." He licked his lips. "Could we go to your house to regroup and figure out what the fuck is going on?"

Aden cocked a brow. "My house? You really think I'd let an Argenti agent through my front door?"

"I don't know if I'm still an Argenti agent, technically."

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“But I’m still a werewolf.”

“Yeah, you are.” It made the most sense to go to Aden’s house, but Darren wasn’t going try to wheedle his way through the front door. He wouldn’t want to invite a werewolf into his home, after all. “We have to get out of here before Ray comes back with weapons or back-up.”

Something metallic arced through the air between them. Darren caught it on reflex, only realizing after his fingers had curled around it that it was a car key.

“My car’s the black Viper parked at the corner,” Aden said. “Meet me at the stop sign at Wallace and Elm. We’ll figure out where to go from there.”

Darren’s lips twitched. “A Viper? I thought the only guys who drove those had something to compensate for.”

Aden grinned. “You think I have to compensate for anything?”

“That’s why I said thought, past tense. Clearly it was an unfounded assumption.”

“So it looks like you’re clearing up a lot of those tonight.” He jerked his head toward the broken-in door. “Go. They’re going to be up here any minute.”

“Right.”

Darren moved as fast as he could while favoring his foot. He had hoped finding Ray would help clarify things. Now he was only more confused and frightened. Who was the second set of chains for? And why was Jasmine apparently willing to sacrifice an agent to Aden Richter? When had he become nothing more than fodder?

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Darren cut through the back of the house and slipped out the service door, keeping to the shadows as much as he could. He wasn't going to let everything spin out into chaos. By dawn, he'd have his life under control again. One way or the other.

CHAPTER 6

It had never occurred to Aden that Darren might steal his car. The young man was too shaken by what had happened to do much of anything but take orders. If they hadn't had to get out of the house as soon as possible, Aden might have tried snapping him out of it with a good fuck, but time was not on their side. For some inexplicable reason, Ray Giessen had survived the fall. From what Aden had seen, he probably hadn't even broken a bone, and he was most definitely still conscious. There was no telling what kind of stories he was going to concoct.

Going to his house was dangerous, taking Darren there even more so. For all his argument at the Giessen house, Aden

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knew there was no other alternative. Darren was as much a victim in this as he was, and no other place would be safer. Better to keep an eye on him and ensure his personal longevity, than to drop him off and have him run off to the bitch who'd set him up in the first place.

To be safe, however, Aden made a last minute change in his plans. He steered the car out of town and called Domingo, his personal assistant, to have the house on the reserve unlocked by the time he got there.

"Just in case," he said when Darren questioned him upon disconnecting. "Plus, better security."

"You're still letting an Argenti agent into your home. Decide you can trust me?"

"No." He smiled. "But I can beat you, if it comes down to a fight."

"Yeah. Well, I don't intend to start a fight. I hope you aren't planning on one."

"Not with you," Aden promised. Though when not even that drew a positive response from Darren, he added, "You're worrying about this too much. We stopped the ritual. That was the hard part."

"That was the hard part for you. I don't think the hard part for me has started yet."

"You're alive, aren't you? And you know you can't trust that Jasmine. What else is so hard to face?"

"Jasmine isn't just my superior. She's my mentor and my friend. Now I have to face...never mind. You're right. Everything's great."

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“No, not never mind.” Aden reached across the distance between them to shove at Darren’s shoulder, as if the physical jolt would snap him out of this mood. “You have to face what?”

“Being an Argenti agent isn’t something you do in your spare time. It’s twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It’s my life. The other agents are my family. And now...look, the alpha just kicked me out of the pack, okay? I don’t *have* anything else.”

The analogy worked for him. He hadn’t even considered how much Darren might be losing, the possibility it could be more than a job. He knew Argenti agents were devoted, the best trained operatives out there. That’s what made them so dangerous. But he hadn’t considered just how insular they really were. And with Darren cut off...

“Maybe I’m wrong then,” he tried. “You don’t have any proof Jasmine meant you harm.”

“Are you trying to make me feel better?”

“That depends. Is it working?”

“Strangely, the fact that you’d even try makes me feel better.”

The city whispered behind them, the open country a dark blanket shrouding the world in front. Aden smiled, though he wasn’t sure whether Darren saw it or not.

“I told you, you were a distraction. You’re making me forget I’m supposed to kill you before you kill me.”

“But how could they have known that I, out of all the agents, would work as a distraction? That relies too much on

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chance. Maybe it has something to do with...something unique to me. You know how they recruit Argenti agents?"

"I'm guessing they don't take polls at area high schools to find out who hates werewolves the most."

"No, not usually. They look for a rare blood disorder. Basically, elevated levels of silver. It makes a bite fatal to werewolves and keeps the person with the disorder from becoming a werewolf. Only, I don't have that disorder."

"So you're getting kicked out of the club for not being dangerous enough?"

"It's not that I'm not dangerous. I don't need elevated levels of silver in my blood because... on a genetic level... well, I'm not a werewolf, but I do share a bit of genetic code with them."

Aden stared at Darren with newfound interest. He sniffed pointedly at the air, but all he sensed was the same blood, sweat, and come that had coated the man's skin for the past hour. There was no trace of wolf anywhere in his pores.

"So what would happen if I bit you?"

"It would probably hurt. And you wouldn't turn me into a werewolf."

"And no poison?"

"No poison. You wouldn't die."

"Huh." He'd never heard of such a thing before. "How is that even possible? You're descended from a werewolf?"

"I don't really know for sure, honestly. There's family folklore and history that indicates my great-great-great-great-grandmother was either a wolf or involved with one. Honestly,

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it's not something anybody was eager to discuss. So the details are sketchy."

"So how do they know you can't be turned into a wolf? Did you get bitten?"

"Yes."

His reluctance to share any more information was a tangible thing between them, strong enough that Aden had the urge to reach across and shake the whole story from him. The more he learned about this man, the more intrigued he became. Wanting amazing sex from him now seemed paltry in comparison to what else they could have.

They pulled into the long, narrow road that led to the cabin on the reserve. The lights were out on the main gate, which meant Domingo had deactivated it for his arrival. He had to remember to turn the alarms back on once they reached the house.

"Do you think you're in danger from them?" Aden asked. The answer seemed important. "How far do you think they're going to go?"

"I don't know. If I knew why Jasmine was targeting me, I'd have a better idea. If it's because she thinks I'm no better than a werewolf, then I'm in serious danger. If it's something else...I just don't know."

Aden bristled at his *no better than a werewolf*, but then again, he was Argenti. He had been conditioned to believe the worst of them. "If you're in serious danger, you'll need protection. I could give that to you." It was too hard not to keep some of the annoyance out of his voice. "Even if I am a

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werewolf.”

“You’d do that? You’d protect me?” For the first time, Darren looked away from the window and turned toward Aden. “Even though I’m an agent...well, was an agent?”

“It would mean certain concessions from you, but yeah, I’d do it.” He grinned. “Besides, it would make it easier to keep you in my bed that way, too.”

“What sort of concessions?”

“An amnesty.” He coasted to a stop in front of the cabin and killed the lights, shifting in his seat in order to better address the other man. “You promise no harm to any of mine, and I’ll do the same for you. My pack is very small but I would kill for any one of them. If we do this, you agree to treat them as equals, not prey.”

“Just your pack? And they won’t give me any reason to fight them?”

“Just my pack,” Aden promised. “I don’t care about anybody else. They’ll be told you’re one of us, and they’ll respect that. As long as you do the same.”

“One of you...” Darren lapsed into silence and Aden could almost see the wheels turning in his head. He could probably think of plenty of reasons to turn down the offer, but Aden hoped he wouldn’t. “I’ll honor that. I told you, I don’t kill werewolves indiscriminately. If they’re willing to respect me, I’ll do the same. And...thank you.”

“Don’t give me reason to regret it.” With that settled, Aden got out of the car and went to the front door, the keys jingling in his hand. “Though I’ll admit, I’m glad you said yes.”

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“Why?”

Aden unlocked the cabin and pushed the door open, the front light automatically turning itself on before answering. “Because now I don’t have to chase you down to get more of you.”

“I thought you liked the chase. Besides...” Darren grinned. “I wouldn’t have run very fast.”

Grabbing Darren’s wrist, Aden hauled him inside, kicking the door shut behind him. “We’ll save that for later.”

Darren didn’t protest as Aden dragged him through the house, leading him past the huge modern kitchen. Since nobody ever stayed here but Aden, there were only four rooms in the house, but all were abnormally large, including the bathroom off the main bedroom. He’d had a whirlpool tub installed, big enough for him to stretch out completely in without touching any of the sides. There was a shower stall in the corner, but it only got used when he was in a rush.

He let Darren go once they were in the bathroom, in order to get the tub filled as soon as possible. “I keep emergency things here for pack members. You’re about the same size as Domingo. You should be able to find something to wear after we get cleaned up.”

“That’s a relief.” He peeled the T-shirt over his head. “Do we really have time to take a bath?”

Aden straightened and undid his pants. “You’re welcome to use the shower if you want. But I’m getting in the tub. If anything happens, it won’t be for hours yet.”

Darren watched at Aden with a now familiar hunger. “No,

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I think I'd rather get in the tub with you."

By the time Aden tossed his clothes over a rack in the corner, his cock was fully hard. He ignored the slide of Darren's gaze as he climbed into the steaming water, sighing out loud at the heat. He stretched out, his arms along the edge.

"Protecting you is going to be easier if you're living with me," he said, deliberately ignoring his rising desires. "My place in the city isn't quite as spacious as this, but it's a pretty good life, if I do say so myself."

Darren stepped over the edge of the tub and lowered himself to his knees, straddling Aden's legs. His cock pressed against Darren's hip, and the tip of Darren's erection brushed against Aden's stomach.

"You move fast, don't you?"

Aden itched to reach out and touch him, but it was more fun at the moment to focus on how Darren was rocking with the force of the water, small vibrations back and forth that only made Aden harder. "I'm not a fan of delayed gratification, no. I don't see the point of pretending you don't want something. But I'm not going to force you, gorgeous. If you'd rather risk living on your own, outside of my immediate help, you're welcome to."

Darren smoothed his hands over Aden's shoulders, his fingers molding over the firm muscles. Without looking from Aden's face, he leaned forward to lick a drop of water from his skin.

"I'm still trying to adjust to the fact that a wolf cares whether *I* live or die."

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Aden caught his chin and forced his head up, his hand sliding in until his thumb and forefinger aligned with Darren's jaw. His other arm reached around the man's back, pinning him more firmly in place. Though some of the makeup still smeared across his cheeks, more and more of Darren peeked through. He really was a beautiful creature, and the prospect that he was going to be Aden's was enough to make him ache.

"One thing you're going to have to learn. There's more to me than just the wolf."

"I'll need a little bit of time. But I'm going to do my best. Since you're willing to see there's more to me than Argentii."

Keeping his hold, Aden pulled his head closer, until their noses touched and he could lick along the full lower lip that had been teasing him for the past hour. "There's a lot more to you," he murmured. "And I only got a taste of that back at the party."

Darren gripped Aden's shoulders, his fingernails biting the flesh. "You can have a lot more than a taste now." He pulled himself closer, pressing hard into Aden's chest. "And remind me of all the reasons I'd want to stay in your bed."

Aden inhaled his hot breath, the smell of desire seeping from Darren's pores. He had little doubt Darren agreed to the protection because of the chemistry between them; it was half the reason Aden had offered it in the first place. But they both wanted this, wanted to lose themselves in the sanctuary of the other's flesh, and he stole the last few centimeters to seal their mouths together in a slow, searing kiss.

Darren moaned softly and parted his lips, the tip of his

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tongue dancing across Aden's. Aden skimmed his palm down Darren's back, and the muscles tensed and twitched beneath his touch. The water was hot, but Darren's body was hotter, the lines of his slighter form fitting perfectly against Aden's. Darren's fingers traveled down his ribs to rest on Aden's hip, his tongue becoming more and more bold.

They wouldn't need lube in the tub, but Aden thought Darren was the kind of bottom who might not miss it, even when they weren't submerged in water. He had been eager at the Giessen house, and as the seconds passed, grew hungrier here. Part of Aden wanted to not bother with foreplay and flip him over so he could fuck him raw now, but the weight of the body molding atop his own was too delicious to give up just yet.

Aden slipped his hand from Darren's jaw to grip his nape. Using the hold he already had on Darren's lower back, he tore away from the questing tongue to lick and nibble down the salty neck, along the top of his shoulder, rocking Darren upward so that he was the one to meet Aden's mouth rather than the other way around. He stopped when he faced a dusky flat nipple, but rather than tease it with his tongue, Aden caught it firmly between his teeth.

Darren gasped, but he didn't try to pull away. He arched his back, pushing hard against Aden's mouth. The gasp turned into a long moan as Aden applied more pressure, and the impulse to simply bite until blood filled his mouth was almost too overwhelming to ignore. Darren pushed his fingers through Aden's hair, clutching at the strands with enough

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pressure to make his scalp tingle.

Rather than succumb to the urge, Aden raked his teeth across Darren's chest to seek out the opposite nipple, biting into that one as well until Darren cried out. He soothed over the small marks he left by dragging the flat of his tongue over the taut skin, but just as Darren's breathing started to even out again, Aden chose a fresh spot to bite into.

He repeated the process until shallow bite marks covered Darren's chest and his upper arms. Each time Aden closed his teeth over his skin, Darren twitched and gasped, as though he hadn't expected it. His fingers wound tighter and tighter in Aden's hair. When Aden lifted his head to see the pleasure on Darren's face, the other man slammed their mouths together in a hard kiss.

Grasping Darren's ass, Aden shifted their weight, letting the momentum of the water buoy Darren off so that they could reverse positions. Darren clung to his shoulders, but when he was floating beneath Aden in the water, Aden used his strength to pull free.

"I think you need more reasons on why you should stay," he rasped. He slithered back, down the slick skin, as his fingers traced up and down between the cheeks of Darren's ass. When he was level with the man's waist, he took a deep breath and sank below the water's surface, catching Darren's cock in his mouth and taking it all the way in.

"Oh, my God." The water muffled Darren's exclamation, but Aden heard it clearly—clear enough to catch both the pleasure and the surprise in his voice. Aden gripped his hips,

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holding him still as he swallowed around Darren's head, letting his throat muscles constrict around and massage the sensitive flesh. "Oh, fuck, Aden."

His fingers continued to glide up and down, over Darren's hole, but he didn't press inside even after he slid back up in order to grab some air. His hair dripped down into his eyes, and as he caught his breath, he ran his tongue back and forth over his lower lip.

"I think that reason just might be for me. You taste even better than you look, gorgeous."

"I'm almost convinced. You feel better than I thought was possible, sunshine."

Aden's mouth slanted. Keeping his eyes on Darren as long as he could, he caught another lungful of air and went back down.

Darren bucked once before Aden caught his balls and yanked, forcing the young man to still. With the twitching cock firmly embedded in his throat, he sought out his hole, carefully twisting three fingers into the tight channel. The muscles gripped his knuckles, sucking him deeper, and he groaned around the length in his mouth as he thought about how good it felt when it was his cock in Darren's ass instead.

"Oh...I..." The words stopped as soon as Aden yanked on his balls again. He trembled against Aden, his muscles clenching and twitching. Aden pumped his wrist, pushing his fingers deep and hard with each thrust. When he finally lifted his head to gulp for air, Darren was looking at him with wide, dark eyes, his nostrils flaring with each breath. "Please say

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you're going to fuck me soon."

"Soon." He deliberately scraped his fingernails over Darren's prostate the next time he drove his hand inside. "Not now."

Darren's cry was lost as Aden swallowed him again. He didn't bother holding Darren in his throat this time. He bobbed up and down, letting his teeth catch the velvety skin more than once. The next time he did this, he was going to make sure he got his mouth on Darren's balls, too. They responded to everything Aden did. To feel them contract against his tongue, maybe as he jerked Darren to orgasm, would be heaven.

"Aden...God..." Darren put his hands against the bottom of the tub, pushing himself up to meet Aden's mouth. Water splashed around them as Aden moved faster, keeping his eyes open to watch each expression on Darren's face. His color crawled higher and higher, and his perfect little mouth hung open, like it needed something to fill it. His cries told Aden exactly how much he was enjoying the attention. "Fuck...don't stop. I'm almost..."

Aden had no intention of stopping. He'd wring every orgasm out of Darren he could, and then take a few more when the man wasn't expecting it. He had no doubt Darren could take it, and if he couldn't, well...Aden would train that right out of him.

He didn't taste the water anymore when he engulfed Darren's cock. Pre-come collected at the slit no matter how many times Aden licked it away. When Darren came, it was going to be an explosion, regardless of the fact he'd already

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come twice that night. Aden suspected he was the sort who always shot a lot, which meant Aden was even luckier for having found him.

The tremors warned him of the impending eruption. Aden grabbed Darren's balls and twisted, swallowing around the head at the same time just to be sure. A sound between a scream and a shout split the air, and hot sticky fluid blasted the back of his mouth. He drank it all, slipping halfway up the shaft in order to get the full effect of its taste, and tightened the suction in order to get as much of the delicious come as possible.

Water splashed over the sides of the tub as Darren rode out his orgasm, and he cupped the sides of Aden's head, holding him down as his cock jerked against Aden's tongue. He didn't let a single drop get away from him, and he even dug his tongue into the slit to collect the last of the fluid.

"Fuck...fuck..." Darren gasped for breath and the tension melted from his body. "Nobody else gets to me like you do."

Aden crawled back up the length of Darren's body, fusing their mouths together to take what little breath Darren had gained. Darren opened to him automatically, twisting their tongues together to share the lingering droplets of come, but Aden didn't let the kiss last long. He had other things on his mind.

"That's good." Aden rose out of the water, planting his feet on either side of Darren's hips, and leaned forward to tilt his cock toward Darren's mouth. Holding it at the base, he ran it along the lower lip, smearing pre-come across the rosy skin.

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“Because I think I’d have to kill anybody else you let touch you.”

Darren swiped his tongue across the tip, teasing Aden with the heat of his mouth. “I have the feeling that’s not just a figure of speech.”

“Not even close.” Aden shuddered when Darren grasped his hip. He had to give the other man credit, though. He didn’t try to take control and pull Aden into his mouth. “I haven’t had a lover as part of my pack in over five years.”

Darren circled the crown with his tongue, then skimmed his lips over the velvety skin, collecting more come and drops of warm water. “Why?”

“Because I don’t usually want them that close. It’s easier to let them go then.” He was tired of waiting. It felt like he’d been holding back for hours. “Open, gorgeous. Let me fuck that pretty mouth of yours.”

Darren obediently dropped his jaw, his grip tightening on Aden’s hip, though he still didn’t try to pull him forward. He didn’t need to. Aden pushed his cock past his lips, along the rough length of his tongue, and to the back of his throat. He kept pushing until Darren’s nose was buried in the hair at the base of his cock, and his balls brushed against Darren’s chin.

Pure pleasure rippled through Aden. Cupping Darren’s head, he held there, motionless, savoring each constriction around his length. It was hotter than Darren’s ass had been, each swallow another jolt through his veins. Even better, he could see those wide open eyes, gazing up at him in expectation. Hungry. Wanting more. Subservient to whatever

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Aden wanted.

Aden wanted more, too.

He took his time sliding out. He wanted to feel that hot tongue against every inch of his cock. When he felt the crown catch on the back of Darren's teeth, he plunged forward again, barely giving him time to catch a breath before filling his throat.

Darren's moan might have been one of satisfaction or approval. Either way, it spurred Aden to ease out and thrust forward again. Each time he hit Darren's throat, another moan vibrated down Aden's length and into his groin, making his balls ache and his thighs tight. Darren didn't move. He kept a firm grip on Aden and let his head tilt back, passive—receptive to anything Aden wanted to do.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a partner like this. There were more reasons why he didn't let lovers into the pack, but he didn't think Darren needed to hear those yet. It still shocked Aden more than a little bit that he knew so assuredly that this was the right thing to do. If Darren had passed on his offer of protection, Aden knew he would have found some way around it. He had known from that first kiss on the patio that he wanted this man for more. Now he was finally going to get it.

His strokes quickened, his balls slapping harder and harder against Darren's chin every time he buried his cock. When his orgasm started rolling closer, he couldn't tell if it was the heat of Darren's throat, the vibrations going through his cock, or the sheer hunger in the man's eyes that got to him the most.

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Maybe it was a combination of all of it. All Aden knew when he exploded was that he wouldn't be done with Darren for a very long time.

Darren's throat worked as he swallowed each spurt of come, which had the additional effect of coaxing more of the salty fluid from his cock. Once his shaft stopped jerking, Darren pulled his head back. He didn't abandon Aden's cock, though. He ran his tongue across Aden's heavy balls, and then up his length, lapping softly at the skin. Each flick of his tongue made him shiver, and Darren didn't seem interested in stopping any time soon.

"This wasn't exactly the cleaning up I had in mind." Aden caressed Darren's cheek, an odd sense of peace flooding through him. "Though I'm not complaining."

Darren shifted his attention to Aden's thighs and anywhere else he could reach from his position. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to scrub the blood and makeup off."

"Probably not." But neither one of them made a move to do so. Aden continued to graze his fingertips along Darren's sharp cheekbone even when Darren nuzzled into his sac. "I'm guessing we're clear on the reasons you should stay?"

"Crystal. Even though it sounds like you're scary possessive."

"Only with what matters."

"I'll keep that in mind." He sat up and pulled Aden down at the same time, straining to reach his lips. Darren still tasted of come, and his mouth was still hungry, still enthusiastic to plunder Aden's.

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Water splashed around them, cooler than it had been, but a welcome respite to the heat permeating his flesh. Aden wrapped his arms around Darren and pulled him flush against his body. Already, the other man's cock was stirring. It wouldn't be long before he was begging for release again.

They had all night. With the ritual stopped, all Aden needed to focus on was how to ensure Darren didn't leave his bed for a long time to come.

CHAPTER 7

Darren didn't think he would actually fall asleep, no matter how physically exhausted he was. How could he sleep in a werewolf's bed? Everything inside of him rebelled against the idea. Every second of training tried to stop him. Jasmine's voice, unwelcome and unnerving, warned him that he wouldn't wake up again if he closed his eyes. But he trusted Aden. It didn't seem like a contradiction to him to trust and fear Aden at the same time.

He couldn't let on that he was uneasy, though Aden probably sensed some of that. He wished he could set aside everything about his life and see Aden as only a man, but that was simply impossible. Despite what Aden said, so much of

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who he was and his personality was directly related to being a wolf. And so much of who Darren was stood in opposition to werewolves. So how could he sleep with one?

Except once he was in Aden's bed, with the man's chest pressed to his back, and his strong arms wrapped around him, he forgot his concerns. He was so tired. And confused. And emotionally drained. And Aden was offering so much. Darren didn't actually believe that Aden's pack would be willing to accept him. He didn't know if Jasmine really intended to kill him. And he thought Aden would probably get bored with him quickly. But as he drifted to sleep, he decided he'd deal with all those problems later. Maybe even much later.

As soon as he closed his eyes, Aden stiffened and jumped off the bed, startling him awake. At least, that's how it felt. But a glance at the clock told him that he had been asleep for nearly two hours.

Darren pushed himself up into a seated position. "What's going on?"

Aden didn't bother with a light. He strode across the room, but only made it halfway before he froze. His entire body poised in readiness. Darren just wished he knew why.

"Where's your gun?" he said in a voice Darren could barely hear.

Darren leaned over the side of the bed and snagged the duffle bag. Instead of answering and risk making noise, he held it up so it caught the light from the full moon. The fog was gone from his head, and adrenaline pumped through his bloodstream.

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“Someone’s in the house. Stay here while I take care of it.”

Darren could just imagine how Aden intended to take care of it, but he didn’t offer any protest. As far as he was concerned, breaking into a werewolf’s home on the night of a full moon was pretty much asking to be torn apart and dismembered. So he just nodded his agreement.

The floorboards didn’t even creak as Aden went to the door. He tilted his head, listening for whatever it was Darren couldn’t hear, and rested his hand on the doorknob. Darren didn’t hear that turn, either. It just did, and Aden slipped out of the room, the door closing silently behind him.

A gunshot split the air. Glass shattered, and the walls vibrated.

Darren flicked the safety off and ran for the door, forgetting Aden’s instructions to stay put. He wished he had more ammunition. He wished he had his regular gun. He wished he wasn’t running blind out into the cabin. Most of all, he hoped whoever had fired was a lousy shot. He opened the door slowly, gun at the ready.

Glass fragmented on the floor in front of the nearest display cabinet, and one of the heavy couches had been overturned, clearing a path to the open cabin door. Droplets of blood splattered like black ink along the carpet, but otherwise, the living room was empty. Darren ignored his nudity and bare feet to race across the room. Only the night greeted him.

* * *

Aden admonished himself with every pounding footstep.

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In focusing on Darren, he had completely forgotten to reset the security at the front gate. He should have been warned long before Ray Giessen was on his front step that he had an intruder. He should have been prepared. Instead, he was wrapped around the biggest distraction he'd had in years, sleeping like he didn't have a care in the world.

He was going to have to be very careful about that in the future. He couldn't afford to be so sloppy.

Of course, the easiest solution to that was to rescind his offer of protection. If Darren wasn't around, Aden wouldn't be so lax. But Aden knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he wouldn't do that. For one thing, if something happened to Darren, he wouldn't forgive himself. For another—and to be honest, it was more pressing than Darren's safety—he didn't want to give Darren up. This was a man who would make the world interesting again. Aden was too excited about seeing where exactly this could go.

It simply made him push himself even harder to catch the bastard who'd dared to break into his home.

As soon as he'd seen the gun, Aden had shifted and lunged. That was why the shot went wide. Ray had seen him approach, and for all his bravado, turned tail. When Aden had broken into the clear moonlight, Ray had been moving faster than any human should, sleek and nimble in ways that only animals could be. If he'd needed any proof that the rituals had been for Ray's personal benefit, there it was.

Aden snarled when he saw where Ray headed. The path he'd chosen led back to the main road, but there was no telling

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what kind of back-up he had for himself out there. Aden angled his trajectory to cut him off, forcing Ray deeper into the reserve instead. This was his territory. Nobody knew it like he did.

If Ray wanted to play a little game of tag before Aden tore him apart, then so be it.

* * *

It was a long shot, but Darren rummaged through Aden's bedroom searching for bullets. He didn't expect to find silver ammunition, but then, he didn't expect to be shooting at werewolves. He did find some, but they weren't the right size for his gun. With a growl of frustration, he moved to the kitchen. Aden would have knives, at least. Which wasn't ideal, but it was better than nothing. He wasn't going to be a sitting duck, waiting for Ray or...

"Darren? Are you here?"

Jasmine.

His first thought was one of relief. Jasmine always knew what to do. She always made everything look so easy. She had a quick mind and quicker reflexes. Her presence meant nothing could get fucked up. It meant everything was under control. He didn't know her real age, and he doubted Jasmine was her real name, but he did know she had been leading Argenti for at least a decade and she had more kills than any other agent in the history of the organization.

Darren slipped a small knife into the pocket of his baggy jeans. He didn't know if he had found Domingo's clothes or

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somebody else's, but they didn't fit properly. He should have insisted Aden went to his house first.

"I know you're here. Come out."

The last was said with an air of authority that Darren couldn't ignore. Even if he had known he was walking out to certain death, he still would have felt a strong urge to do exactly what she said.

"I'm disappointed in you, Darren." She stood by the door, her arms folded, her face obscured in the shadows. A thrill of fear went down his spine.

"Why?"

"I never thought I'd find you in here. A monster's lair."

"Maybe you thought you'd find me dead at the party?"

"That's not fair, Darren."

"I'm wrong?"

"I knew Aden wouldn't kill you. I was counting on that, in fact."

"Look, Jasmine, I just need to know what's going on here. Why were you capturing wolves for Ray? Did you know he was killing them?"

"I guess you do deserve to know. I wanted to tell you sooner." She took a step forward and light from the moon fell across her face. Her eyes glittered in the silver light, but she looked normal. "Darren, we're going to change the future of Argenti, and you're going to help us."

"What are you talking about?"

"We're not on an even playing field. The wolves are stronger, faster, and have better senses. But you can keep up

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with them. Because you're special. So I got to thinking, what if we could make more agents like you?"

Darren swallowed. His tongue felt like sand paper. "Like me?"

"Human but with the strength and abilities of werewolves." The corner of Jasmine's mouth lifted. "I'd be unstoppable."

"But what does that have to do with me? Why were you trying to kill me?"

She actually looked appalled at the question. "I wasn't trying to kill you. I need you. Unfortunately, you'll still die. But isn't it worth it, Darren? To know that one day soon werewolves will be wiped out and we'll be free of that horror?"

"Not like this. You shouldn't do it like this. Look, we can talk this over and..."

"The time for talking is over." She pulled a long knife from the sheath on her hip. "Don't make this hard, Darren."

Darren didn't need a second invitation to flee.

* * *

The full moon did more than make it easier to shift. It made a wolf stronger. It gave power denied to him when the moon hid her face, allowed him to conserve energies for other, more fruitful tasks.

Aden's feet barely touched the cold, damp grass as he sailed over the reserve. His body had been screaming for this all night. Though he was strong enough to control his shifting

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at will, it was better when he didn't have to fight his own nature. The moon called to him. It was a relief to finally answer her.

Ray's scent carried easily on the slight breeze. Aden chased him into a small copse, but when the trail began to fade, he skidded to a halt. His head swiveled back. Somehow, he'd passed his prey. It was possible Ray had swerved upon reaching the trees; Aden had been running very fast. But there was another possibility, one that drew his gaze upward, that prompted Aden to drop to the ground.

Slowly, he crawled over the wet grass, his belly growing damp with each foot. The scent returned, stronger than before, and he tracked it to the base of a thick maple tree. Aden examined it more closely. Knotty bark made it easy to climb, and a low-hanging branch offered a foothold to go even higher. If Aden wanted to follow, he would have to shift back into human form.

The only thing that made him pause was the gun. Aden hadn't seen it after Ray had taken flight, but to assume he no longer had it would be foolish. It would only take one lucky bullet to kill Aden. Considering the way his luck had been all night, he wasn't sure it was worth pursuing.

Except Ray had come onto his land. Ray had been plotting to kill him all along. And if Aden's assumptions were right, the second sacrificial bed at the Giessen house had been meant for Darren.

Ray had to die.

He started climbing before the shift was complete. The

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night grew colder without his pelt, but Aden focused on his grip, on digging his fingers into the thick bark, using his toes to help stay balanced. He kept to the shadowed side of the trunk, too aware of the pale moonlight filtering through the leaves overhead. All the while, he focused on the scent, letting it fill his head as he inched closer.

Branches rustled. Something dropped by Aden's ear, and he had to let go of one of his grips in order for it not to hit his shoulder. He looked down in time to see the silver shot fall harmlessly to the ground, but before he could regain his hold on the tree, a solid foot connected with the side of his head and sent him crashing to the earth.

* * *

Darren had to concentrate to extend all of his senses. The full moon helped in navigation, but it also minimized the shadows and places to hide. He knew he wouldn't be able to hear Jasmine behind him, unless she made uncharacteristic mistakes. She was too light on her feet. But she wasn't the only one with a few tricks up her sleeve, and Darren had been a good student when she trained him.

He wished he had thought to ask Aden for a map, or at least a description, of the reserve. Darren hated being unprepared and out of control, and it felt like he had been nothing but since the night began. Any other time, it might have knocked him off-balance, but now it just made him angry, and that anger kept him focused. He wasn't going to let Jasmine harm him—or kill him—in her insane pursuit. He

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wasn't going to let her kill anybody else. He still cared about her too much to allow her to completely cross those lines.

Though even Darren could acknowledge that she might already be beyond saving.

The moon kept his sense of direction intact, and he zigzagged east and north, leading her farther away from Aden's cabin. He hoped she would become disoriented and he would be able to stop her before Aden found them. He had no doubt that if Aden fell upon her first, that would be the end, and there would be no chance for mercy.

"Darren."

Her voice might have carried through the still night, but it was far too close. He heard something slice through the air, but he barely had time to dodge before a blade caught his shoulder. It didn't embed itself in his flesh deep enough to seriously harm him, but it still hurt like a motherfucker when he pulled it out. He felt the blood crawling down his back and pooling in his waistband, sticky and hot.

He veered to the left and dove into a hollow beneath a tree. He couldn't stay there all night, but he needed to stop the bleeding. If she had hit his arm, he could have used his shirt as a tourniquet, but the wound was too high for that. The ground was damp enough to form in a ball, but it wasn't quite mud. With a wince, he spit into his palm and made the soil more pliable before reaching under his shirt and packing the mud against the wound.

Darren forced himself to inhale and exhale slowly, trying to calm his rapid breathing and even faster heart. He couldn't

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hear Jasmine, but he saw her shadow as she slowed and surveyed the area.

"I know you're hurt, Darren. It'll be easier for you if you just come out now."

"Okay. I'll surrender."

She spun in the direction of his voice and Darren could see her hands were empty. "I'm sorry I threw a knife at you. But I needed you to stop."

"I'm sorry you threw a knife at me, too." Darren pulled himself out of the hollow, hands over his head. She never took her eyes from him as he straightened. "I'm getting blood everywhere."

"I am sorry about that." Jasmine approached him, and the hand she put on his back was almost friendly.

Darren smiled. "No, you don't understand. I'm getting blood everywhere. Including you."

"I know, and I said I only wanted to stop you..."

"You can explain that to Aden when he finds you." Darren slammed his head forward with enough power to knock her on her ass. As soon as she lost her footing, Darren took off again, feeling oddly rejuvenated, as though all he'd needed was a short rest.

But now he knew exactly where he was going. He had heard a crash and a howl that could only be Aden. He ran toward that sound, tracking the wolf with the same inerrant determination he had for the hunt.

* * *

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As soon as he lost his grip on the tree, Aden did the only thing he could. He snatched at the foot that hit him and caught the man's ankle.

Ray's scream followed Aden's howl as they both plummeted to the ground. For all his added powers, he'd already had one fall from a great height that night. It was probably why he'd gone for a strategic move in hiding in the tree rather than a full-on assault. But Aden didn't care about playing nice anymore. Ray had attacked him in his home. He'd tried to set Aden up. It was time to pay for every mistake he'd made.

Aden started the shift back into wolf seconds before hitting the earth. Bones stretched, and muscles tore. It cushioned his landing, his leaner mass twisting at the last moment so it was more like dropping to his feet than landing on his head.

It still hurt like a son of a bitch, though. White-hot pain shot through his shoulder, making him see stars those first few seconds.

Ray landed far less gracefully. The rich scent of fresh blood filled the air, igniting Aden's lust, and a long bone distinctly cracked. Aden thought it was probably a leg or an arm. Femurs and ulnas had their own unique sounds when they broke, like thick twigs snapping in a forest. They usually meant victory, because crippled prey was far easier to catch. It might not be as challenging, but at that moment, challenging was the last thing Aden was thinking about.

He sprang immediately. Ray tried to roll out of the way, but his injuries slowed him down. Aden landed on his legs and

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promptly threw his weight into Ray's back to pin him down.

His paw slipped in blood. Ray hadn't only broken bones when he fell; he'd scraped the hell out of his side. Rather than slow Aden down, though, it fuelled his fury even more. He snapped at the fingers trying to scramble for a grip on the ground, effectively catching two of them at the knuckle.

With one yank of his jaws, Aden tore the fingers off the hand.

If Aden had been in human form, Ray's bloodcurdling scream would have made him smile.

* * *

Darren skidded to a halt as the two figures came into view. He didn't even care if Jasmine stopped right behind him. He was pretty sure the sight before them would still her hand if she was armed with another knife. Two shapes that could have been twigs, but Darren knew without a doubt were fingers, were on the ground, and blood gushed from the fresh stumps on Ray's hand.

Aden didn't look like he intended to stop at Ray's fingers. He was just an oil-black shadow against the pale moonlight, deceptively silent. Darren recognized that silence. It was the calm right before an attack—the silence that happened after the final warning. Every instinct screamed at Darren to reach for his gun, to stop Aden before things could go further. But he stood, frozen, as Aden jumped toward his prey.

Frozen moonlight caught the gleam of glistening fangs. Then, even that disappeared as they sank into pliant flesh,

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Aden's powerful jaw locked around Ray's shoulder. He had clearly been going for the death blow at the back of the neck, but at the last moment, Ray had twisted, and now he was pinned by Aden's bulk, melting into the ground in a thrash of limbs as Aden overwhelmed him. His unmaimed hand balled into a fist and pounded at Aden's heavy muscles.

On the second strike, Aden broke away with a howl of pain. Before he started to roll on the ground, as if putting out a fire, Darren caught glitters of silver in the black fur.

Darren wasn't so enraptured by the fight that he didn't hear Jasmine's approach. He dragged his attention from Aden, and resisted the strong impulse to rush to the wolf's side. The best way to help Aden was by stopping Jasmine from joining the fray. She was fearless enough to jump right into the center of it and plunge a knife in Aden's throat.

He spun on his heel and raced toward Jasmine. His fist connected with her midsection, and he winced as she doubled over and groaned. He brought his knee up into her face with more force than he wanted to use.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ray try to make a run for it. Aden's enraged snarl brought goose bumps to Darren's exposed skin, but he only caught a glimpse of Aden's leap onto Ray's back before Jasmine swept his feet out from under him.

Darren rolled over and aimed for her ribs, distracting her long enough for him to pin her to the ground. He didn't weigh more than she did, and she was strong, but he still managed to keep her against the dirt.

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“Stay down,” Darren hissed. Jasmine continued to struggle. He punched her in her bloody mouth and repeated his words. “If you don’t want Aden to kill you, stay down.”

“I’m not scared of him.”

Darren forced her to turn her head, pressing her cheek into the dirt. “What about now?”

Ray’s screams had become wet gurgles. Aden hadn’t killed him, not yet at least. One paw pinned the man’s head, while his powerful hind legs straddled Ray’s hips. His muzzle gleamed under the moonlight, and every time he tore a chunk out of Ray’s throat, blood splattered through the air. Whatever bites he was taking had to be shallow, though. Ray still had the capacity to wriggle like a worm on a hook, his feet flailing, his hands beating uselessly against Aden’s fur.

Smoke rose from Aden’s body with each blow, but Aden ignored whatever pain he was in. His attack only grew more fervent.

Darren put his mouth close to Jasmine’s ear. “You smell like my blood. It’s all over you now. If you move, he’s going to tear you apart.”

“What about you? You’re just as dead.”

Ray continued to squirm and scream, though both the movements and the sounds were becoming weaker by the second. Aden had a strong taste for blood now, and there was a good possibility Aden would turn on them both in his fury. But he trusted Aden—more than that, he *needed* to trust Aden, because he had nothing else to believe in.

“No, I’m not. And if you listen to me, he won’t eat you

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alive next.”

Screams settled into whimpers. Whimpers dropped to moans. Moans faded to silence, where the only sound was the wet suction of flesh being torn from sinew and bone.

When Ray stopped thrashing, Darren prayed he was dead. For his sake. Because Aden was still feasting, his body resting flush against the man’s. Every once in a while, his long tongue licked at the blood matting his muzzle, but it was several minutes before he lifted his head in surcease.

Slowly, he turned to gaze directly at Darren and Jasmine. The silver glow of his eyes matched that of the moonlight.

“Don’t move,” Darren said one more time before pushing himself to his feet. There was more than a lump of fear in his throat, because the wolf in front of him seemed much more animal than man. But he tried to talk as though everything was normal and he didn’t feel that heaviness in his chest. “Are you okay? Your back is burnt.”

Aden remained motionless as Darren approached, his focus still on Jasmine. Only when Darren was within a few feet did his gaze shift. It settled on Darren, forcing him to a halt. It was too late to run away. He was too close to do anything but wait. He didn’t even dare do anything as innocent as wet his lips.

Wait.

After several, heart pumping seconds, Aden eased off Ray’s inert form. He padded to Darren’s side, stopped, and sank to his belly, his chin resting on the ground.

Aden was only allowing Darren a chance to examine his

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back, but the submissive position was like a fist to his sternum. After an entire night of experiencing sensations and reactions he didn't understand, this was the most overwhelming.

"Okay. I'm going to check your back." He lowered himself to his knees and the smell of burning flesh and fur was stronger. Darren gently pulled the fur back, exposing small glints of silver. Darren delicately picked the pieces out of Aden's fur and flesh, building a small pile of silver slivers on the ground by his leg.

"Please don't go after Jasmine," Darren said in a low voice. "I don't want her to be hurt right now."

A low growl caused the muscles beneath his fingertips to vibrate. When Darren glanced up at his face, Aden still glared at her dark shadow in the distance.

"I know." Aden's skin was blistered and the sight made his stomach twist. "But she's lying still like that because she's scared of you. I think we can...make sure she leaves us alone from now on."

Aden snorted. Blood that had yet to dry sprayed across the grass in front of him.

"I think I got all the silver." He ran his fingers down Aden's back, searching for sharp metal, and doing his best not to aggravate the burns. Without thinking, he leaned over and pressed his mouth to the back of Aden's head. The fur tickled his nose. The contact was brief, and he just hoped Aden didn't mind it. "Come on. If she doesn't want to cooperate...well, I tried."

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He stood before Aden did and waited for him to rise. It was a slow, terrifying process to watch, one that highlighted every sinuous stretch of Aden's muscles. When he was firmly on all four paws, Aden bent his head back and bayed at the moon. The sound echoed into the night, horrific and mournful all at the same time. Every hair stood up on the back of Darren's neck, and he had to ball his hand into a fist in order to quell the instinct to strike out.

As the sound faded away, he took a step toward Jasmine, only to realize she was no longer there.

Aden tensed, like he intended to give chase, but Darren put a gentle hand on the top of his head. "Let her go. I think she's going to think twice before she comes back here."

Beneath his fingers, the texture of the fur changed. It took only seconds for Aden to shift back into human form, but they were still seconds too long.

"If you want to go, I'll understand." Shifting hadn't rid the blood from Aden's skin. It stained his face and smeared along his neck, nearly as livid as the burns down his back and side. "I give you my word I won't go after her."

"Go? You mean, go home and put this whole night very firmly behind me?"

The twist of Aden's mouth was almost sad. "It's one thing for an Argenti to say to hell with everything he knows for some fucking fantastic sex. It's something else entirely to watch a lover rip someone else to shreds with his teeth. This is your out. I'm only going to offer it to you once."

Darren felt like all the moisture had been sucked from his

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mouth and skin. Watching Aden tear another man apart was hard. Seeing the blood on his mouth and chest was almost repulsive. Almost. It should have been repulsive. But he wasn't disgusted. And while he had never eaten a wolf alive, he had destroyed a fair number, including slicing one's throat with enough force to almost decapitate him.

His hands weren't clean.

"I don't want an out."

Aden's soft exhalation was the only indication that he'd been holding his breath while he waited for Darren's response. "Good. I would've been really pissed if you'd taken it."

"Yeah, I would have expected that. Come on. Let's get back to the house so I can help you with those burns."

They fell into step, side by side, not touching, though he was far too aware of Aden's nearness. "So...is it over with you and Argenti?" Aden asked quietly.

"Yes. Jasmine told me what this was all about. She wanted to make more agents like me, except better. Werewolf strength, speed, and senses. That's what the ritual was about...and apparently, I was needed for the final ritual." Darren frowned. "But there were two sets of chains, weren't there? So I guess we were both needed for the final ritual. But the thing is...even if she didn't want to use me in black magic, I could never support anything like that."

"Which? Making monsters, or using one for the process?"

"Both. The whole reason Argenti exists is to protect humans from wolves who've crossed a line. Who is going to protect normal people when Argenti starts to cross lines? And

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I do believe that power corrupts. Even if Jasmine's motives were entirely pure, it'd just be too easy, too tempting, to use that strength she bought at the price of ten lives."

Aden simply nodded. Darren wasn't entirely sure he really understood, but it didn't matter. He wasn't protesting or attempting to sway Darren's beliefs. By not saying a word, he reinforced his earlier declaration. It wasn't just his pack who would offer Darren respect. Aden would, too. And did.

CHAPTER 8

When Darren returned to his small, efficiency apartment, he found a plain white envelope on the floor at the door. He didn't need to open it to know what it said. He left it on the table and peeled the borrowed clothes from his body, dropping the garments behind him as he went to shower. After he showered, he changed to his own clothes, delighting in everything from the worn feel of the material to the smell of his preferred laundry detergent. He packed two large bags with clothes and essential items that he didn't want to live without, including his favorite weapons, then made himself two hamburgers and a big pot of rice. He chased his meal with two beers, then put on his most comfortable pair of shoes. He

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ignored the white envelope until it was time to walk out the door again.

Darren,

You are guilty of fraternizing with the enemy. You know that this is considered traitorous. If you return to Argenti, you will be shot on sight. Should you begin killing with the werewolf, you will not be turned over to the authorities. You will be hunted like the animal you have become.

Jasmine

He folded the letter and put it in his pocket. Instead of slipping an envelope under his door, she could have been waiting for him in his bedroom, armed to the teeth and prepared to finish what she started at Aden's. The importance of the note wasn't in the words, but in the message. Argenti wouldn't target him if he didn't give them a reason to. Considering that he stopped Aden from killing her in the most painful and horrific way imaginable, he thought Jasmine would keep her word.

Aden had given him instructions to meet him at the bookstore. He had driven by it countless times, including once as recon for the Halloween mission, but he had never been inside. He didn't quite know what to expect from a used bookstore run by one of the most powerful wolves in the city, but it wasn't the merry little bell that chimed overhead. Or the clean and welcoming interior that smelled of old leather and

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coffee.

He certainly didn't expect to find Aden standing behind the counter in a pair of thin-rimmed glasses, calmly talking to an older gentleman while delicately cradling a massive book like it was a child.

Aden glanced up when he entered, but after a brief nod, he returned to his conversation with his customer, his deep voice oddly soothing in the warm shop. It left Darren time to wander around and absorb the details. The books were meticulously arranged, and there wasn't a speck of dust in sight. There was even a pair of young women tucked into a corner, poring over a worn copy of what looked like Sylvia Plath.

The bell chimed behind him. Before Darren had time to navigate back to the front, Aden appeared around the corner of the stacks, his hands tucked inside the pockets of his loose trousers.

"You're early," he said. "For some reason, I wasn't expecting you until later."

"I didn't see any need to linger at my place. But I can keep myself occupied if you're busy."

"No, I've got time. Mr. Gilbert's gone, and Hannah and Dani won't be budging from that table until I kick them out." Turning sideways, he nodded toward the back of the store, clearly intending for Darren to follow. "Come on. I'll show you where to put your stuff."

Darren fell in step behind him, feeling more than a little off-center. Aden seemed just as comfortable in the store as he had stalking through the reserve. And he was also super hot.

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He looked even better than he did in his Halloween costume, which Darren didn't quite believe was technically possible.

"I got a note from Jasmine."

"Oh?" A small frown pulled his brows together as he paused in pushing open a door. "She's not trying to tell you everything was one big misunderstanding, is she?"

"No. I don't think she'd be that shameless. Here." He pressed the envelope into Aden's palm. "It's not exactly the friendliest letter in the world, but I think it means she'll leave me alone."

Aden scanned it over quickly, not saying a word. Darren couldn't stop staring at the glasses and how Aden's clear eyes looked brighter behind the lenses. He was undeniably gorgeous in them, but the question of whether the wolf was farsighted, too, fed Darren's curiosity. He almost blurted the query out loud when Aden passed the envelope back.

"At least you know where we stand with her now." He turned his back on Darren and led him up the stairs. "No offense, but you're better off without her."

"I thought she was a good friend. Right up until she tried to kill me." His shoulder ached from the weight of the bags, and he couldn't wait to set them down. "But I guess now that I'm officially unemployed, I can get accustomed to being your kept boy."

Aden smiled back at him. "Who said you're unemployed? I'm putting you to work. I can always use another set of eyes at estate sales."

"I don't know how much good I'll be to you unless you

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need me to infiltrate estate sales and eliminate the competition.”

“Considering this business? You just might have to.”

They reached the top of the stairs, and Aden pushed open the door. It hadn’t been locked. Clearly, he wasn’t as worried about security here as he was at the reserve. They stepped into another room that took Darren by surprise, a studio apartment that matched the size of the store below. Vaulted ceilings and hardwood floors made it seem even more spacious. Sleek leather furniture marked one corner, stainless steel appliances and an island mapped out the kitchen, while a circular staircase led up to a loft bedroom.

“It’s pretty cut and dried.” Aden stood back to let Darren get a lay of the land. “You’re welcome to settle in wherever you want. Nothing’s off-limits, if you were worried about that.”

Darren dropped the duffle bags with a sigh of relief. “Thanks. Have you...lived with anybody like this before?”

“Here? No. But I did before I bought the store.” He smiled. “You’re not worried I’m not going to know how to share nicely, are you?”

“No, it’s not that. I guess I’m just a little nervous.” He hooked his fingers in his pockets and kicked the tip of his shoe against the smooth floor. “I’ve never tried living with anybody before.”

Aden remained motionless, though Darren didn’t think for a moment he wasn’t utterly prepared to pounce if he had to. “You’ve had a lot of change thrown at you in a very short

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period of time. Take the evening to get acclimated to the place. I'll close up early and if you're still not comfortable, maybe we can go out."

It would have been simple enough to nod and let Aden get back to his shop. But Darren didn't want him to leave. Especially not when he looked like that. All Darren wanted to do was run his hands over Aden's body. He felt ridiculous, standing there awkward and unsure, like he was talking about moving in with a stranger. Especially after everything they'd experienced.

"How's your back?"

"Still a little sore. I don't think I'll be going shirtless again to any parties any time soon." He crooked two fingers at him, gesturing for him to approach. "Come here."

That was enough to unlock the paralysis on Darren's legs, and he closed the space between them without hesitation. Up close, Aden smelled differently than Darren expected. Like he was using a different soap, or a citrusy aftershave. Just being that close to the other man made Darren's cock twitch.

"Yes?"

Aden cupped the back of Darren's neck and held him still. The grip didn't pull them closer together, and Aden didn't lean in, but it gave Darren strength just the same.

"You're here because we both want you to be here." Aden's low voice flowed over him, a balm to his jittery nerves. "This isn't about doing you a favor. We both know that. This is about this thing between us, and about how far it's going to go. I gave you my promise last night, so there is

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nothing, and I mean nothing, you have to be afraid of while you're here. Understand?"

Darren answered by swaying forward and pressing his lips to Aden's. It wasn't a hard caress or a hungry kiss, but he thought it would be more effective than a simple nod or *yes*. As soon as their mouths touched, he forgot the remnants of his hesitation and gripped Aden's arms, holding him tightly as his tongue traced the curve of Aden's bottom lip.

Aden opened to him immediately, though he didn't take over, giving Darren the space he needed to control the contact. His fingers massaged Darren's nape, relaxing him even further, while the hard line of his erection nudged against Darren's stomach. The familiarity of the embrace loosened the remaining knots inside him, even when Aden pulled back and gazed down at him.

"Give me an hour to close the store." His husky tone was even further proof of how the kiss had affected him. "You unpack, do whatever you want, and I'll be back as soon as I can so we can continue this."

Darren nodded, grudgingly releasing Aden. It would be fun to explore the space and figure out how he fit, but now that he had the taste of Aden on his lips, he wanted more. He promised himself that he wouldn't let Aden out of his sight—or touching distance—once he returned from the store.

The hour Aden had given him proved to be much less.

He heard the door open when he was in the loft, putting away the clothes in drawers Aden had already emptied for him. When he glanced at the clock on the nightstand, he was

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surprised to see only twenty minutes had passed, but there was no time for questioning why before Aden was at the top of the staircase and marching straight for him.

"I'll do the books later," Aden muttered in the split second before he pressed Darren to the dresser and sealed their mouths together.

Darren had no choice but to return the kiss—not that he would have wanted to do anything else. This kiss was much harder than the earlier one, and Aden demanded more from Darren. He was careful where he put his hands, wary of aggravating Aden's burns, but even those sorts of considerations fled his mind as Aden prolonged the contact.

Aden wasn't nearly as careful. Fingers dug into Darren's side, while his other hand slipped behind to cup Darren's ass. He squeezed, eliciting a gasp from his throat, but before Darren could catch his breath, Aden's lips were back, his tongue hot and hungry as it sought every corner of Darren's mouth.

Darren gripped Aden's hips, holding him as he ground his erection against Aden's thigh. Aden responded by flexing his fingers. He was already working Darren up into a bit of a frenzy—his blood rushed in his ears and his skin felt raw everywhere his clothes touched.

They were both panting when Aden finally lifted his head.

"Sometimes I think you must not have had sex for a decade to be as eager as you are."

Darren smiled. "No, it's not that. It's just you, I guess."

"Considering how many times you came last night? I'm

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going to take that as a compliment then.” Aden backed off a few inches, though his grip on Darren held. “How do you feel about restraints?”

Darren stopped himself from recoiling at the thought of being tied and bound by a wolf. There was always going to be an element of horror at his situation, and Darren honestly didn’t think anything could be done about that. But after he had the chance to register Aden’s words, the horror fled. He wasn’t some random werewolf, after all.

“I feel fine about restraints.”

Desire glittered in his eyes. “Strip and get on the bed then. Hands and knees. I’ll be right back.”

Aden didn’t give him a chance to argue, which meant that the time to voice protests had come and gone. As Aden left his side, Darren focused on getting his clothes off—even though his fingers trembled slightly with anticipation—and settling on the bed. The mattress was surprisingly soft, and the blanket beneath him was thick. He curled his fingers in it as his cock dangled between his thighs. He tried not to fidget, but he felt extremely exposed.

With each ticking second, the urge to look over his shoulder grew stronger. What was Aden doing? Getting restraints, obviously. Why was he taking so long? To drive Darren crazy, even more obviously.

Sweat trickled down his balls. Darren clenched his ass to try and relieve the effect without touching himself, but all that did was remind him that Aden wasn’t back yet.

“Oh, now that’s a pretty picture.” Aden’s voice was too

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close for him not to be in the loft. Darren hadn't even heard him come up the staircase. "You squeeze like that because you're thinking of me, gorgeous?"

"Of course, sunshine." Darren looked over his shoulder. "You don't expect me to call you *sir*, do you?"

Aden snorted. "Please. Like I need a title to top you." When he came around the side of the bed, Darren got the first good look at what he held. Leather. Lots of it. Except for the length of chain link that looked strangely like a leash. "Grab the headboard. I'm going to cuff you to it."

Darren obeyed, holding one of the bars between his palms and locking his fingers together. He didn't even twitch as Aden buckled one leather cuff around his wrist, and then secured that to his other hand. The restraint was tight enough to feel it, but not uncomfortable. "I never, ever would have imagined myself doing this."

"Which?" Aden's strong fingers grasped Darren's chin to tilt his head upward. Another piece of leather slipped around his neck. "Being in a wolf's bed, or letting the wolf strap you to it?"

He swallowed against the leather. It felt strange on his skin, but not unpleasant. "The latter. Not that I imagined the former was all that likely, but this is...really out there."

Aden smoothed a hand down Darren's side, then came back up to let his fingertips graze over the bandaged injury from Jasmine's knife. "It's not. Not really. You agreed to be a member of my pack. That requires submission."

The thought made him twist on the inside again. He didn't

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necessarily *want* to submit to anybody. Not if it meant changing who he was, or worse, losing who he was. Not if it meant he had to back down and defer to Aden's judgment in all things. He shook the thought. Aden wouldn't want some cowering...well, puppy to kick around. He could get that from anybody.

And it wasn't such a bad thing to submit to Aden.

The collar got heavier when Aden attached the chain leash. "This changes nothing between us, though, you know that, don't you?" Aden continued to stroke Darren's enflamed flesh, down to his hip again before climbing onto the bed between Darren's legs. "There are pretty boys everywhere, but I don't invite them to my home." His fingers traced up and down between the cheeks of Darren's ass. "I chose you. Just like I think you chose me, right?"

Darren nodded, but quickly realized that might not be the best way to communicate. Of course, Aden's light fingers didn't make talking any easier. Especially when the tips brushed against his sac, as if in promise of what was yet to come. Darren wished he knew why Aden, of all men, could reduce him into such hunger with the lightest of caresses.

"Yes, I did choose you."

Aden dragged the chain to lay it down the length of Darren's spine and between his cheeks, the cold links drawing fresh shivers to Darren's flesh. "Don't forget that." He wound the chains farther up, looping around Darren's cock before pulling back so that the wet tip dragged over the soft blanket. "Even when you think I'm being a bastard—because I can be,

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trust me—don't forget it.”

“I won't,” Darren promised quickly. He barely got the word out before the chain tightened around his shaft. The links were warming against his heated flesh, and the chain would feel like an extension of his own body. “And I can handle a bit of bastardry.”

The flick of Aden's tongue over his ass made Darren jump, but the leash settled him back down almost immediately. “And working for me at the store?” Hot breath washed over his balls. Aden used the chain to pull Darren's cock even further away from his body. “It's not as boring as it looks, you know. Sometimes I have to play very dirty to get the books I want.”

Darren hoped Aden didn't try to ask for anything really difficult, because he didn't feel like he was in the position to deny Aden anything. Even if he thought working in a bookstore sounded dead boring. “I'll work in your store but... you know that's not going to keep me entirely...satisfied.”

“I know.”

His mouth closed around Darren's sac, sudden and sharp as he sucked it hard against the roof of his mouth. Darren cried out, arching away from the restraints, but somehow, it only served to tighten the chain, each hot link digging into his shaft. Aden soothed the sting with his free hand, caressing alongside the leash, and his suction softened, his tongue stroking back and forth until he released the balls completely.

“How do you think you'll need to satisfy your need to hunt?” Aden asked. Though his voice was soft, the words sank into Darren's sensitized skin and ravaged him even more.

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“You won’t have Argenti to back you up anymore, and I’m not sure I like the idea of you being vulnerable to other wolves.”

“Argenti uses certain sources for intelligence...” Darren dropped his head and gasped for breath as Aden dragged his tongue across Darren’s balls. “Sources that I’ve got relationships with. I might...scoop the agency.”

Aden licked along the chain back up to Darren’s hole. “And Jasmine won’t consider that a threat?”

“I’ll have to keep it quiet. Besides, Argenti might be the most well-known game around, but they aren’t the only hunters...you know there are plenty of independent operatives out there.”

“I’m only concerned with the ones who want you dead.” Aden used his hold on the leash to pull sideways, spreading Darren’s cheeks just enough to expose his opening. The tip of his tongue traced the tight muscle in feathery circles that made Darren squirm. “I promised you protection. I’m not going to renege on that.”

Darren’s stomach clenched. He didn’t think Aden would take back his word, but the reminder of the promise still had a powerful effect on him. “I’m going to be careful. I won’t make your job any harder.”

Aden chuckled. “Well, not my job, anyway.”

Darren smiled but he was distracted from his amusement by Aden’s tongue. The tip circled his hole again and then probed at the opening, sending red hot shocks down his thighs and up his back. He wanted to turn his head to watch Aden,

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but he was immobilized by the leather and the sharp pleasure.

Aden seemed to be done talking, at least for now. He was too busy working at Darren's hole, circling it, dragging the flat of his tongue across it, every once in a while slipping his tongue inside. When that happened, Darren pushed back, whimpering for more, but every time, Aden retreated, taunting him with what he couldn't have.

His free hand reached between Darren's legs and squeezed his cock. He didn't stroke it; for the moment, he was content to merely mirror the attention of his mouth with the pressure on Darren's shaft. Only when he drove his tongue inside the channel did he sweep up to the head, forcing his rough palm across the sensitive crown.

When Darren tried to rock back, Aden tightened his hold on Darren's cock, but not in a pleasant way. In fact, it hurt enough to make him cry out in protest. But the sudden pain only lasted for a second before Aden's fingers relaxed and the bright flare settled into something dull. Still, Darren understood. He would move when Aden wanted him to.

The longer Aden worked at his hole, the more Darren's thighs trembled. He'd never had to hold himself so still before, never been victim to such a relentless onslaught. Every time he thought he was going to lose it, Aden would ease back, allowing Darren's muscles to relax. Then he would start again, harder, more diligently, and the shaking would start anew.

Sweat rolled down his brow and into his eyes, making his eyes burn. Darren didn't know what he could do to end the torment. He didn't know if he should do anything at all. He

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suspected that Aden would continue for as long as he wanted, regardless of how much Darren whimpered, moaned, or begged. And each stroke of Aden's tongue brought him closer to begging, made him clench, made him ache for Aden's cock.

But he didn't get Aden's cock.

He got his fingers.

Long, strong, determined, they replaced Aden's tongue at Darren's opening, pushing farther and deeper without bothering with mercy. Aden's hair tickled across the back of Darren's damp thighs. Everything in Darren slammed into his throat when Aden sucked his balls back into his mouth, sucking at the same rhythm he pumped in and out of Darren's ass.

"Fuck... oh fuck... Aden... yes..." The words were weak and more than a little desperate. He'd scream later, when Aden wasn't working him over with a hot mouth and rough fingers. The occasional thrust brought Aden's fingertips against his prostate, making stars erupt in front of his eyes.

His shoulders ached from the tension of holding himself still, and his cock throbbed against the chain. Aden abandoned the sac to run his teeth along the base of Darren's shaft, but that only made it worse. The promise was there, right there, and all Aden had to do was move a little bit farther. Darren remembered all too well what it had felt like when Aden had swallowed his cock down in the tub. He wanted that again. He wanted it all again.

"How much more of this can you take?" Aden said. His fingers unceasing strokes twisted inside Darren's ass. "Should

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I just leave you like this for a few more hours?"

"Please...please no. I can't..."

"See, I think you can." Hardened knuckles scraped over his skin, skin he feared grew increasingly raw by the second. "I think you can take a lot more, actually."

"No, I..." Darren groaned, in frustration as well as understanding. Aden wasn't asking. Aden didn't want Darren's opinion on the matter or estimation of just how long he could tolerate the torment. "Maybe."

Aden bit at the fleshy part of Darren's ass, before sitting back and pulling his hand away. It immediately left Darren feeling empty, and he twisted around, ready to beg Aden to come back, when the silvered glints in Aden's eyes stopped him.

Neither said a word as Aden rose from the bed. He stripped in silence, carefully draping his clothes over the back of the nearby chair. Darren got his first good look at the burns peppering Aden's back, and winced in sympathy, but that only lasted as long as it took for Aden to step out of his pants and expose the thick jut of his erection.

Darren licked his lips and his throat felt tight. If his hands were free, he would reach for Aden and draw him near enough to close his lips around his glistening crown. He'd scrape his teeth against Aden's firm stomach and the line of his hip. He'd bury his nose in the hair at the base of his cock and take a deep breath. The fact that he couldn't do any of those things made his hands and the bottom of his feet tingle with irritation.

"Stretched enough?" Aden asked softly. "Because I can't

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look at you like this without wanting to pound into you.”

Darren nodded mutely. He trusted Aden to say exactly what he meant. But he felt he was more than ready for Aden to pound into him—and do whatever else he wanted. And that assessment didn’t change as Aden knelt behind him, or wrapped his hand around the chain, forcing Darren’s head up and back. He didn’t resist the chain or try to pull away from Aden.

Aden dragged the tip of his cock alongside the chain, pushing it out of his way when he reached the opening. He stopped and bent over, his mouth going straight to Darren’s ear. “Getting set-up by Ray was worth it. Just so we’re clear.”

As Aden pressed forward, all the air rushed from Darren’s lungs, making it impossible to respond. He was too focused on the thick length slowly sinking into his ass. Aden might not be tearing into him, but he wasn’t giving Darren any time to adjust either, each inch harder than the one before. He didn’t stop until he’d bottomed out, and even then, he tightened his body against Darren’s, as if he wanted to push even deeper.

Darren didn’t know how to express it—or even if he should—but letting Aden fill him and hold him just felt *right*. His senses, so accustomed to hunting werewolves, were completely attuned to Aden now. Darren didn’t miss a single breath, or twitch of his cock, or flex of his muscles. It seemed like he had forever to create a mental map of Aden’s body, because the other man simply wasn’t moving. He didn’t begin to slide out of Darren’s body until Darren quivered with need and each breath was accompanied with a small, hungry sound.

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Aden found a bare patch of skin along the top of his collar and licked along it, tickling until he reached the front of Darren's throat. It bent Darren's head back at an impossible angle, but the first sink of teeth into the tender flesh made him cry out, the sound sucked back into his body when Aden slammed his cock forward again.

Aden didn't break his rhythm or release Darren's throat. His ass and thighs burned from the onslaught, and each strong thrust forward made him hungry for more. Aden's teeth in his throat created a different sensation. It was sharper, more painful, and Darren felt it in the pit of his gut. If Aden moved his head just an inch, or bit with as much strength as Darren knew he had in those powerful jaws, then that would be the end of him. But he didn't feel a trace of fear at the possibility, just heady and flushed.

His head swam. He knew now why Aden had insisted on the restraints. Without the cuffs, Darren was pretty sure he would have collapsed under the assault. Without the bite of the leash, he would have been lost in the burn. The toys Aden had claimed were for submission actually had other purposes, giving strength when Darren needed it most.

He wondered if Aden realized. The second after the question arose, he answered it with a yes. He didn't think Aden did anything without understanding the full ramifications of his actions.

The leather wore against his slick wrists and his fingers tingled. Aden's chest was hot against his back, his skin sticking to Darren's. When he closed his eyes, the room

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seemed to tilt even more around him, like the bed was bucking and twisting each time Aden thrust forward. He took deep, shuddering breaths, but that didn't help. Neither did turning the breath into pleas.

When Aden let go of the leash, easing the tension on Darren's neck, Darren almost exhaled in relief. His respite was short-lived, however. The hand that had coiled around the chain went straight for Darren's cock, stripping it at the same ruthless tempo he ploughed into Darren's ass.

"Aden...God...I'm..." He wanted to say *so close*, but Aden tightened his fingers and that subtle change in pressure was just enough to push him right into his orgasm. He pushed his hips forward, thrusting into Aden's hand with each jerk of his cock. His thighs and arms trembled, but Aden didn't slow his tempo or give Darren a chance to recover. When Aden pushed his fingers in front of Darren's mouth, he didn't hesitate to suck them between his lips and lick the sticky come from his rough skin.

Aden's breath was hot against his ear, and his strokes grew erratic, searing raw flesh with each new drive. Darren could only keep from flying apart even more than he was by sinking his teeth into the fleshy part of Aden's palm, but the first tense of sinew against his lips came with a howl from Aden, his hips slamming into Darren's clenching channel one last time as he erupted.

Darren wanted to collapse against the bed. His shoulders burned from the strain of remaining upright, but Aden's arm sneaking around his waist helped relieve some of the pressure.

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“Well, if I had any second thoughts, they’re gone now,” Darren murmured.

Aden’s chuckle vibrated through both of them. “I guess fucking the anxiety out of you works, too.” He glided a hand upward to undo the cuffs. “Definitely worth closing early for.”

Darren fell to the mattress, and Aden still didn’t release him. “I’ll try not to make it a habit of luring you from your store.”

Easing out of Darren’s ass, Aden rolled to the side, taking Darren with him. His mouth returned to Darren’s neck, more gently now, kissing and licking over the red splotches where the leather chafed. “You could probably do it once in a while. You could even wear that little dress and heels if you wanted.”

Darren grinned. “I think that particular skirt is ruined, but you might be able to talk me into finding another.”

For a moment, the arms around Darren tightened, blocking air, blocking movement, blocking everything that wasn’t Aden. Aden even stopped his licking, choosing instead to bury his face in Darren’s neck. He held like that for time passing into minutes, only easing back when he exhaled slowly.

“Welcome to my pack,” Aden murmured.

Instead of bristling at the words, Darren closed his eyes and curled into Aden’s body. It was still strange to think of himself as part of a pack, but it was good, too. The sting of Jasmine’s betrayal had already started to fade. If only because the betrayal had been worth it.

The skirt had been worth it, too.

JAMIE CRAIG

Jamie Craig is the collaborative efforts of Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Both successful authors on their own, they began working together in early 2006. Pepper lives with her husband and cats in Utah, where she attends graduate school, and Vivien resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

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