



ON THE RAGGED EDGE OF THE WORLD

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Darren shivered at the promise. Before meeting Aden, he hadn't been interested in anybody teaching him certain lessons. "Honestly? I probably will be. But I think you knew that when you met me."

His low chuckle reverberated right through Darren, shooting straight to his cock. "Sometimes I think that's exactly why I chose you."

Darren turned his head, pressing his lips to Aden's jaw. His skin wasn't smooth. Light stubble brushed against his mouth. "You do enjoy a challenge. I've noticed that about you."

Slowly, Aden rubbed his thumb in small, hypnotic circles at the base of Darren's ear. His breath was already quicker, and when he shifted slightly to pull Darren closer into his body, his cock was hard against Darren's hip. "How am I supposed to sit through my meeting with you on the other side of the room?" Aden licked along the outer curve of his lobe, catching the fleshy bit between his teeth. "I'm not going to be able to give Mr. Oakes my undivided attention."

"That is unfortunate." Darren tilted his head, trying to encourage Aden to move down his neck. There was a spot just

below his ear that made everything inside Darren flare to life. Especially when Aden used his teeth. “Would it be easier to concentrate if I finish my lunch somewhere else?”

“No, because then I’ll spend all my time wondering what you’re doing, and why you’re not under the table distracting me even more...”

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BY

JAMIE CRAIG

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ON THE RAGGED EDGE OF THE WORLD
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CHAPTER 1

Darren Sumner tried not to fidget with his napkin, but his nervous fingers wouldn't be stilled. He switched his attention from the heavy cloth to his fork, lightly tapping it against the plate in a syncopated rhythm. He had been ten minutes early, but August was nearly fifteen minutes late now, and he couldn't shake the suspicion that she didn't plan to meet him at all. Not that he would necessarily blame her if she completely blew him off. It had only been three weeks since Darren quit Argenti. Only three weeks since Jasmine informed him he was guilty of traitorous behavior, including attempted murder and fraternizing with the enemy, and that any attempted return to the organization would result in his swift death.

When August contacted him to initiate this meeting, he had

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been suspicious at first. After a long internal debate, he chose not to tell Aden. He didn't enjoy lying to his lover, but Aden would immediately suspect that any correspondence from Argenti would indicate a trap. And Aden would have good reason to think that. Werewolves had every reason to suspect any Argenti agent of a double-cross. But fucking a werewolf didn't make Darren a werewolf, and August had been his friend for years. She wouldn't lure him into a public place just so she could slaughter him in front of a huge room of witnesses. Trustworthy or not, Argenti agents were far more subtle than that.

Despite that reassurance, Darren still fidgeted. If she didn't want to kill him, why did she request to see him? The meeting put both of them at risk. Jasmine would not tolerate disloyalty—despite her own lack of fidelity—and meeting with the traitor, the outcast, wouldn't endear August to anybody. Maybe she was carrying a warning. Maybe she knew of plans to eliminate Darren, Aden, and Aden's entire pack. As soon as the thought occurred to him, it seemed horrifically plausible. Or maybe August just wanted to see the crazy man with her own two eyes. She was a scientist by nature and by training. Perhaps she couldn't accept Jasmine's explanation without searching for the evidence.

Thirty minutes after Darren arrived, August swept into the restaurant, all apologetic smiles and swirling blonde hair. She wore it long, down to her thighs, despite the inconvenience. It was her only impractical indulgence. In all other respects, she was calculating and almost coldly logical. She had a sunny smile and a smooth face that obscured her age—she always looked like she couldn't be older than nineteen, even though Darren knew for a fact she was almost thirty-two. The only thing marring her beauty was a long scar running from her left ear to her shoulder. An old

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injury, courtesy of the first werewolf she'd ever killed. She wore the scar with pride, never trying to hide it.

Darren rose to meet her, automatically scanning her clothes for any areas likely to conceal a weapon. "I was worried I'd be eating alone," he greeted.

She leaned forward and brushed an air kiss across his cheek. "Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss the chance to have lunch here when I can expense it." Casting a look around at the various business types who had already settled in on their noon meals, she eased into her chair with a casual flip of her hair. "I'm so sorry I'm late. I got caught on a conference call from hell."

Darren furrowed his brow. "You're going to expense this lunch? Are you just not going to mention who you're having lunch with?"

"Oh, you're a potential new informant on the Baeza pack." She said it as nonchalantly as she reached for the menu at the side of her plate. "Jasmine will never know or care about the difference."

"Hopefully. You're taking quite the risk here. I hope whatever you had to tell me is important."

Her light laugh was a welcome memory brought to life. "Let me worry about that, okay? Have you ordered yet?"

"No, I..." He had been so wrapped up in his questions that he completely forgot about food. He didn't care about it now, either. Why was August acting like this was just one of their common lunch meetings? "I was waiting for you. The salmon here is nice. And the chicken salad."

"Ooo, the salmon does look good. I'll have that." Though she still smiled when she set aside her menu, there was a guardedness in her eyes that hadn't been there before. "How are you, by the way? We didn't really talk when I set this up."

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“Considering the fact that I’ve lost my job, my friends, and my family, and I’m living with a pack of werewolves that want to kill me, about as good as can be expected.” That was only half the story. The other half involved one of the sexiest, most amazing men Darren had ever met, which more than made up for all the bad stuff. But August didn’t need the details of his personal life. She would probably be appalled if he casually mentioned how hard he was falling for a werewolf.

“You look good, if that means anything. I was a little worried you’d look like a chew toy left under the couch for weeks, but you don’t look like they’ve laid a finger on you.”

“They haven’t.”

They wanted to. God knew they did. They didn’t understand why their alpha brought a regular man into their home. And they felt more than a little betrayed that Darren wasn’t just some guy off the street. As a former Argenti agent, he had killed their kind for years. Darren wouldn’t be surprised if he had killed their friends and family. He didn’t hunt werewolves indiscriminately. Argenti was dedicated to only removing the truly dangerous wolves. The ones who couldn’t be trusted to control themselves. The ones who were already guilty. But what did that mean to them? Darren was still a killer. Still the enemy living in their ranks.

“Aden wouldn’t let any of his pack hurt me.” Or any of Jasmine’s agents, for that matter. “It’s not so bad having the strongest wolf in the city watching your back.”

The waiter showed up before she could respond, taking their orders and hustling back to the kitchen to place them. August toyed with the stem of her water glass, her intelligent eyes unwavering from Darren.

“Nobody really understands what’s going on, you know.

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Jasmine has eradicated most of your files, and we all have strict orders that fraternization will not be tolerated. There's also a standing order that if you show up at Argenti without express prior clearance from Jasmine, you're to be shot on sight. Did you know about that?"

"Yes. She left me a note saying as much. But she didn't tell you why I'm living with Aden? Did she tell you anything about Halloween?"

"We know that Aden Richter killed Ray Giessen, because Ray was trying to set him up to take the fall for the ritual murders. And we know you're the one who gave the information to Aden, rather than turning it over to Argenti. What we don't know is why."

"Well...that's...an interesting interpretation of what happened. Not correct, mind you, or surprising, but interesting. Aden did kill Ray Giessen, but that was after Ray broke into Aden's home and attempted to kill him. As for why I would help Aden over Argenti...Jasmine and Ray were behind the ritual murders. They were trying to create a human with all the strength and abilities of a wolf. In order for the magic to work, they needed to sacrifice somebody immune to a werewolf's bite."

August frowned. "But nobody's..." Her voice trailed off as his meaning sank in. Argenti recruited the vast majority of its agents based on genetics. A rare disorder, found only in a sliver of the population, elevated the levels of silver in their blood, which in turn made them poisonous to werewolves. It also made it impossible to be turned. Darren was the only agent they had ever had who had the same immunity without the disorder. His came naturally, though family lore had never been clear whether his great-great-great-great-grandmother was a wolf or just involved with one. Either way, he'd always been faster, stronger, better than

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the other agents, which worked to his benefit since his blood didn't have the same lethal effects.

"You don't really expect me to believe Jasmine would orchestrate something as cold-blooded as that, do you? At least, not without proof." The way she posed the last statement made it clear she hoped Darren would provide some.

"I didn't believe it, either. I think maybe a part of me still doesn't. But I got over my skepticism when she started chasing me with a knife." Darren leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I don't want any sort of war with Jasmine. She knows that, and I think she agrees that it's best to avoid a conflict. As far as I'm concerned, we're all going to live and let live."

"Ha. Easier said than done, I think."

"Why do you say that?"

She still seemed wary, but damn it, she was the one who wanted to see him, not the other way around. He'd been fully prepared to stand by the agreement he'd made with Jasmine. He was still prepared, but he was getting pretty sick and tired of people keeping secrets from him.

"Anything I say to you goes no further than this table," August said. "You don't tell the wolves, I won't tell Argenti."

"I don't exactly confide in the pack." Darren didn't exactly *talk* to the pack. When he was forced to be in the same general area as Aden's wolves, he kept to himself. He couldn't imagine living like that for the rest of his life, but it was better than the alternative, which was living without Aden completely. "It'll stay between us."

August took a long swallow of her water before pushing the glasses out of her way so she could lean forward and create the semblance of privacy for them. All humor was gone from her face, her thin mouth a firm line. "There are rumblings about an

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upcoming power struggle between the packs,” she said, her lips barely moving as she spoke. “I don’t have a lot of specifics, but the one thing that seems to be agreed on across the board is that the Richter pack is going to be right smack at the center of it.”

Darren’s mouth ran dry. He sipped from his glass, but that did nothing to help. If he had still been a member of Argenti, he would be investigating the rumors, searching for the sources, and preparing to track down and kill any wolf that allowed a blood vendetta to spill over into the regular population. But generally, Argenti didn’t get involved in pack politics. If August was hearing the rumblings, and if she thought it was worth sharing with him, it could only mean they were bracing for a huge fight.

“Are you warning me to stay out of their way, or are you trying to recruit me?”

“I’m trying to make sure you don’t get killed.” She said it without blinking. “If Jasmine knew I was doing this, she’d ship me to Buttfuck, Egypt, to punish me for interfering.”

Darren nodded. Jasmine would do worse than that to August if she suspected August was doing anything to help Darren. “Thank you. I promise, you’re not wasting your time here. I’m not going to let myself get killed.”

She sighed and sat back. “You know what’s sad? I think you even believe that.”

“I’m in no more danger than when I was with Argenti.” In a way, he was in less danger. At least he knew the wolves wanted him dead. They were honest about it. Unlike Jasmine. “And I already told you. Aden is...” Darren paused, his eyes widening. “Walking into the restaurant right now.”

She turned her head to follow his gaze. When he heard her audible intake of breath, he knew she’d seen him, too.

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Aden Richter was, without a shadow of a doubt, the most mouthwatering male Darren had ever seen, whether human or werewolf. At six-four and two hundred pounds of solid muscle, he commanded a room just by being in it, whether wearing leather pants and nothing else as part of a Halloween costume, or the custom tailored, slate-gray suit he currently wore. Nothing could hide his long legs and powerful thighs, and in the perfectly fitted suit, his shoulders seemed even broader, the hint at the muscles beneath more intoxicating than seeing them in all their rippling glory. His thin-rimmed glasses made his blue eyes glitter even more brightly, while his sensual lips were turned into an amused smile at something the companion at his side was saying.

A smile that faded when his gaze swept over the crowded restaurant and immediately landed on Darren.

“Jesus,” August muttered. “I heard he was good-looking, but that’s just a little ridiculous.”

“I know, right? And you should see him when he...” Darren paused and cleared his throat. “If he comes over here, let me do the talking.”

Her head whipped around. “Do you realize who’s with him?”

Domingo shadowed Aden, as he always did, but that was the only person he recognized. “Should I?”

“That’s Terence Oakes standing next to him. He’s Senator Barber’s chief of staff. The one who made the fraud charges disappear without ever going to trial.”

Darren shrugged nonchalantly, though he felt anything but. He couldn’t be nonchalant about Aden’s lifestyle. It was still more than a little overwhelming, though he didn’t want August to know that. “Aden has an obvious interest in local politics.”

“Is that what you tell yourself so you can sleep at night?”

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“Honest, August, I don’t...” He was going to explain that he had no trouble sleeping in Aden’s bed, but the man himself shifted direction and approached their table. Over his shoulder, Domingo shot daggers at Darren. Darren smirked back at him before smiling at Aden. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Aden didn’t return the smile. “I didn’t realize you had a date.” He turned to August and held out his hand. “Aden Richter.”

“August Hogue.” She glanced at his offered hand twice before finally lifting hers to accept his greeting. Aden immediately bent over it and skimmed his lips across her knuckles, though at the very first contact, she snatched it back.

Aden straightened, unflustered by her abrupt withdrawal. “Have you ordered yet? I strongly suggest the salmon. You won’t find anything better to melt in your mouth.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “Unless you ask me, of course.”

Darren wanted to slip from his chair and crawl up Aden’s body. If they were at home, he would. But the middle of a very busy restaurant—one Aden apparently frequented—was not appropriate.

“We were just discussing how good the salmon is here.” He glanced around Aden’s body. “Are you here on business?”

“Yes. I’m curious as to why you’re here, though. I don’t remember you telling me you had plans today.”

Darren’s lips thinned slightly. Aden didn’t take the time to fill Darren in on his daily schedule, and Darren didn’t see any reason why he should clear his plans with Aden. “Actually, it was rather last minute. August called me this morning and asked if we could meet to catch up.”

Though Aden nodded, Darren knew he wasn’t completely pleased with the response. Aden turned an apologetic smile back to August.

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“Do you mind if I borrow Darren for a moment? There’s something I’d like to discuss with him. I promise, I’ll bring him back in one piece.”

Behind him, Domingo stiffened. “Aden—”

“Let Mr. Oakes know I’ll join him momentarily.” Aden didn’t even glance back at him, too intent on August. “You don’t mind, do you, Ms. Hogue?”

“No. Go ahead.”

Darren stood, smiling apologetically. “We won’t be long, I’m sure.”

Though August was smiling, the look in her eye demanded to know what the hell was going on. Darren strongly suspected, but he couldn’t do anything but offer a small shrug as Aden turned his back to the table. Darren followed Aden’s broad shoulders and perfect ass as he wound his way through the dining room to the restrooms in the back. Nobody paid any attention to them as they slipped into the bathroom.

“Are you sure you can spare a few minutes away from your meeting?” Darren asked, the door swishing shut behind him. “Domingo seemed quite alarmed.”

Part of him had expected Aden to immediately shove him into the wall and pin him there. It wouldn’t have been the first time it had happened, after all. So when Aden folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the edge of the marble vanity to fix an icy hot stare on Darren, he was mildly disappointed.

“We had a deal.”

“I know,” Darren said carefully. “But she said she needed to talk to me. I figured she wouldn’t suggest a place like this if she planned to do any of Jasmine’s dirty work.”

“She’s still Argenti.”

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“She was once a friend. And she had information that she thought was helpful.”

“And again, I’ll say, she’s *Argenti*, gorgeous. Remember them? They’re the ones who want you dead and dismembered.”

“I remember, sunshine, but I gotta say, I would rather take my chances with August here than sit around the house by myself, or wait for Nick or Enzo to finally snap and pick a fight with me.”

“Only problem with that is you didn’t tell me what you were doing. Makes it a little hard to keep my promise.”

Darren moved to Aden’s side and smoothed his fingers down Aden’s jacket. “It’s not going to happen again. I doubt anybody else will want to speak to me, and I don’t want to talk to them.”

Aden’s nostrils flared, but he otherwise didn’t move. “What did she want that was so important?”

Darren hesitated, remembering his promise to August not to repeat her words. If she was right, chances were good Aden already knew. Nobody in his pack could even buy new clothes without Aden somehow being aware of it. “What Jasmine was telling everybody in *Argenti*. About me. The order to shoot on sight if I ever show my face again. What a traitor I am. Things like that.”

“And she’s telling you these things out of the goodness of her heart, or does she have some other motivation?”

“August is smart. Smart enough not to believe a story like Jasmine’s without some sort of evidence. I think she wanted to hear my side. Or maybe she just wanted to make sure I didn’t look like a...I believe she said a chew toy left under the couch.”

For the first time since entering the bathroom, Aden’s mouth relaxed. It wasn’t quite a smile, but there was enough humor there for Darren to comfortably exhale.

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“Obviously, she just didn’t know where to look.” His hand slipped out from within his armpit to dust away invisible lint from Darren’s shirtfront. “You should have told me you were meeting an Argenti agent, though. I would expect anyone in my pack to tell me about potential danger, and whether she’s your friend or not, she’s still dangerous.”

“I know what she’s capable of.” And furthermore, Darren knew what *he* was capable of. Despite Aden’s warning, Darren wasn’t exactly a weakling. He had been trained for nearly his entire life to fight and kill werewolves. August didn’t have any moves that Darren couldn’t predict. “If any of them ever contact me again, you’ll be the first to know.”

“I better be.” His gaze dropped to Darren’s mouth, heavy-lidded and hungry. “I didn’t choose you just to lose you this soon.”

Darren’s earlier annoyance dissipated, like it always did when Aden looked at him that way. He stepped closer, inhaling the soft, familiar scent of Aden’s cologne. He liked the spicy scent that couldn’t quite hide Aden’s natural musk, and Darren didn’t want anything more than to nuzzle against Aden’s cheek and neck. As near as he could tell, Aden radiated some sort of pheromone or hormone. Something that clouded Darren’s mind and made him forget everything except being as close as humanly possible.

“You’re not going to lose me any time soon. I think you might be stuck with me for awhile.”

A large hand came up to cup the back of Darren’s head. Aden’s strength was implacable, though the last thing Darren wanted was to pull away. He remained motionless as Aden bent his head to drag his tongue along the sharp line of Darren’s jaw. It was slow and deliberate, and left his heart racing, anxious for all the promise that sensual mouth held.

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“Are you always going to be this much trouble?” came the silken query. “Because I might have to start thinking of new ways to teach you some lessons if that’s the case.”

Darren shivered at the promise. Before meeting Aden, he hadn’t been interested in anybody teaching him certain lessons. “Honestly? I probably will be. But I think you knew that when you met me.”

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“That is unfortunate.” Darren tilted his head, trying to encourage Aden to move down his neck. There was a spot just below his ear that made everything inside Darren flare to life. Especially when Aden used his teeth. “Would it be easier to concentrate if I finish my lunch somewhere else?”

“No, because then I’ll spend all my time wondering what you’re doing, and why you’re not under the table distracting me even more.”

“This is a conundrum.” He dragged his hand up Aden’s thigh

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and brushed his fingers over Aden's erection. "I suppose I could join you. Would Mr. Oakes mind?"

Aden tightened his grip to pull Darren's head back. Behind his glasses, Aden's desire-darkened eyes regarded him intently. "What about your Argenti friend?"

It would be unbelievably rude to excuse himself from August so he could dine with Aden. But he'd already made his choice. On Halloween. "I'm with you now."

His simple declaration drew Aden's gaze back to his mouth, this time accompanied by a flare of his nostrils. Aden guided him forward, forcing Darren to come to him, and tilted his head at the last moment to seal their lips together. Darren clutched at Aden's hip, trying to get closer, but Aden kept the kiss as slow as his earlier touches and licking.

Aden had last kissed him earlier that morning, but Darren's body responded like he had been waiting much longer than that. He parted his lips, letting the tip of Aden's tongue flick into his mouth. He traced Darren's lips and teased his tongue, sampling the soft skin for long moments before finally deepening the kiss. Darren moaned his approval as Aden's tongue slid over his, and he forgot they were in a restroom. He forgot they were even in a restaurant.

Half the time when Aden touched him, he forgot his own name.

Aden fit him between his legs, sliding his free hand down Darren's spine to mold a palm over his ass. Darren wanted nothing more than for all their clothing to be out of the way, to feel hot skin against hot skin, but Aden seemed all too content to simply knead the taut flesh, to sear his mouth with hungry sweeps of his tongue.

"Is there any chance of just blowing off lunch?" Darren murmured.

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Aden licked along his lower lip one last time before sighing and letting Darren go. “No, unfortunately. I’ve been trying to meet with Oakes for ten days. If I cancel now, he’ll make me wait even longer to set another date.”

“Yeah, I guess that wouldn’t be acceptable. What about after lunch? Any other important meetings this afternoon?”

With a smile, Aden straightened, turned to face the mirror, and adjusted the tie that didn’t look like it needed to be fixed. “I do have a store to run, you know. Or are you bound and determined to disrupt every aspect of my life, gorgeous?”

“Why shouldn’t I be? You’ve found a way to disrupt just about everything in my life.”

“I think that would be an argument of semantics.” His twinkling eyes caught Darren’s in their reflections. “But you can make yourself useful this afternoon with Mr. Oakes, if you want to make it up to me.”

Darren grinned. “Who says I want to make it up to you?”

“You do. Because then I’ll need to show my gratitude when we get home.”

Darren nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, that’s an excellent point. What can I do to make myself useful?”

“Be your usual honest, insightful self. Listen to everything that gets said and offer your opinion when asked. Whether I ask or Oakes does.”

“Okay, but you should know that I don’t follow politics at all. So if the conversation drifts that way, I’m just going to have to smile and look pretty.”

Done with his tie, Aden faced Darren and brushed his thumb across his mouth again. “Because you’re just so good at it.” His voice was husky with affection, but reluctantly, he dropped his

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hand and stepped away. “I’ll have the waiter make room for you at my table. How are you going to get rid of your Argenti friend?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I’ll just tell her that you need me for the meeting.” He could already hear her scoffing at him for being at Aden’s beck and call. But it was just as well. Aden wouldn’t have been the only distracted one if they were sitting at opposite ends of the restaurant from each other.

“Whatever it takes.” With a final smile, Aden left him alone.

His foggy brain didn’t begin to clear just because Aden left the room. When they had first met, Darren thought Aden worked some strange werewolf magic over him. He didn’t know how else to explain the reaction he had to the other man. Especially since Aden had been his target when their paths first crossed. Now, a part of him wished Aden did have a weird sort of magical hold over him.

That would be a hell of a lot easier to explain than falling for a wolf.

CHAPTER 2

Barcello's was Aden's favorite place for lunch meetings. The food was exquisite, the tables private, and the service top-notch. When he scheduled appointments here, he lingered over the meal, often going through several bottles of wine before finally managing to leave.

Today, he wanted to leave as soon as he emerged from the bathroom. He needed to get Darren home, and not just because he was hard as a rock and the pretty young thing drove him insane. No, his gaze honed in on the baby-faced Argenti agent waiting for her ex-colleague, pretending not to watch him in turn. He needed to get Darren as far from her as possible, Darren's assertions that he was safe notwithstanding. Just because his ex-boss had called a détente didn't mean she was going to honor it. Any pack leader

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that could turn unprovoked once on a member could do it twice. Would probably do it until said member was taken down.

Aden would be ready for her when she came again. Because Darren was his now. Not hers. His.

He took his seat next to Domingo and smiled across the table at Oakes. “My apologies. I hope you don’t mind, but my colleague will be joining us momentarily.”

At his side, Domingo stiffened, though to his credit, he didn’t speak. Oakes frowned, the heavy lines in his forehead furrowing into thick folds. He was not a small man, but his corpulent façade hid one of the shrewdest minds Aden had ever encountered. More than one of Oakes’ opponents had mistaken the soft exterior and slow drawl for ineptitude and suffered the unfortunate consequences. Aden would never make that grievous error.

“I didn’t realize this was a party, Aden.”

“It’s not. I think you’ll be impressed by Darren’s unique insight.”

Domingo snorted. Aden made a mental note to have a word with him when they returned to the store.

The waiter dutifully added a fourth place setting to the table, though neither Oakes nor Domingo seemed pleased with that. Aden ignored them, his attention on Darren as he made his excuses. The agent didn’t look pleased with whatever Darren was saying, and she sent more than one pointed glare Aden’s direction. Everything inside of him screamed to march across the dining room and claim Darren, making it clear that August didn’t have a single right to Darren, or his time.

Darren wound through the tables with a pleasant smile on his face. He didn’t look uncomfortable, though Domingo was still frowning heavily, and Oakes wasn’t smiling. He nodded to

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Domingo politely, then extended his hand to Terence. "Mr. Oakes, I'm thrilled to have the chance to meet you."

Terence half-rose, grunting as he shook Darren's hand. "Who might you be, young man?"

"Darren Sumner, sir. I'm the manager at Rebound Books."

"Darren's a recent discovery," Aden added. "He has this innate ability to ferret out the most amazing finds."

"Not better than you, though."

He smiled. "Is there anybody better than me?"

Terence relaxed slightly, though Aden still didn't like the way he was so wary of Darren. He supposed it couldn't be helped. Darren was still an unknown by most of Aden's contacts. It would take time for them to trust him the same way they did Aden.

"Well, you're learning from the best, Darren. You should be glad of the opportunity."

"I'm thrilled, actually. I've always been pretty good at hunting...books. But Aden has really elevated it to a science." He sipped from his fresh glass of water before adding, "It's actually a pretty major career change. I never thought I would be paid to track down books."

"Oh? What did you used to do?"

"I was an animal control officer."

Aden nearly choked on his water, though Darren seemed unfazed. His long lashes, too damn long for a man even as pretty as he was, blinked solemnly as he regarded Terence.

"Interesting career change," Oakes commented. "One might even think you'd be the type of person Aden would avoid."

"It was a surprisingly stressful job," Darren continued pleasantly. "I got more than a little burned out. People think animal control officers are like the old cartoons of dog catchers. You

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know, nothing to do all day but chase down mongrels. Most people I talk to are surprised to learn there's actually a lot more to it."

Terence chuckled. "I hope you're not calling your boss a mongrel."

"Oh, he's got his own pet names for me," Aden replied.

The chuckle turned into a real laugh. "Yes, I bet he does."

"I hope you don't mind my intrusion on your lunch," Darren said. "Normally, I would decline somebody else's lunch meeting, but I did want to have the chance to meet you. And Aden doesn't like to hear no."

"Much to our mutual benefit."

The waiter arrived and took their orders, making a note that Darren's had already been placed. Domingo still hadn't relaxed, but Aden stretched slightly in his chair, pressing his knee to the side of Darren's. He refrained from smiling when Darren slipped his hand into his lap to lightly squeeze Aden's thigh.

"So why have you been flirting with my assistant for the past week to get this lunch, Aden?"

"Because just calling for those first three days didn't get me anywhere."

"I hope you didn't take that personally. It's been a very hectic month, and Julie is on strict orders not to overbook my schedule. Of course, I hadn't expected somebody to charm her into creating a lunch meeting."

Aden smiled. "I can be a little persuasive when I need to be."

"A little?" Darren cut in. "Aden's being modest. In all the time I've worked for him, I don't think I've ever seen him walk away from a transaction unsatisfied."

"What's the point of pursuit if you don't get what you want from it?" Though he leaned forward to better address Terence,

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Aden pressed harder against Darren's thigh. "Which brings me to what I wanted to discuss. There have been some parties downtown recently that have come to my attention. Pack parties. Have you heard about them?"

Terence's brow furrowed. "Funny. You'd think it would be me asking you that question."

"So you *have* heard about them."

"Indirectly. My office has received a few invitations for so-called fundraisers. A hundred dollars a plate, and everything looks completely normal. Except that the organizations and charities don't exist."

It was Aden's turn to frown. "I hadn't heard they were fundraisers."

Terence waved his hand. "I doubt the goal is to actually raise any money. But in this town, who's going to even look twice at one? There's a fundraiser being held every night of the week."

Maybe so, but to Aden's knowledge, werewolves rarely bothered with such social functions. Most of the packs he knew were too focused on their own base needs to bother. It was one reason why he thrived as well as it did.

"Did you recognize any of the names attached to the fundraisers?"

"Not really. One, Oliver Moss, rang a bell. Turns out he interned in my office for about three months a few years back."

Though Aden kept his features blank at the unexpected name, Domingo wasn't nearly as stoic. It was nothing Terence was likely to catch on to, but the distinct scent of alarm emanated from Domingo's skin, enough to make Aden's nose itch.

"I didn't realize Oliver was interested in politics," he said smoothly. "Would you still have contact information for him or the

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people associated with the fundraiser he was involved in?"

Terence shrugged one massive shoulder. "Julie probably does. She'd still have his information on file because of the internship. I'll make sure she calls you this afternoon."

Domingo leaned in and murmured in Aden's ear, "Do you want me to call Enzo?" *And warn them* was what he left unspoken, but he was smart enough to know not to say anything to alert Terence.

Aden nodded. While Domingo quietly excused himself, Aden tilted his head toward Darren. "I don't suppose you've heard anything about fake fundraisers."

"Fake fundraisers? No. I don't think I'm wealthy enough to receive any invitations for fundraisers, fake or otherwise." Darren leaned back in his chair, his hand still resting on Aden's lap. "But if there's some sort of mix-up at the post office, and I get one, how can I tell it's fake? You're right, there are fundraisers all over the place, and anybody can register a PAC. There must be a million special interest groups."

Terence chuckled. "Not quite a million, though when I have to deal with lobbyists, it seems like there are twice that many. But in my position, I can't have my name attached to just any special interest group that wants to hold a dinner. Everybody knows that. The guest lists for these things are put together carefully to maximize attendance and profits."

"So, the fact that you received them was enough to raise a red flag?"

"That, and I have Julie double-check everything."

Darren nodded. "Then the invitation wasn't to trick you into attending. Whoever's behind these parties wanted to be sure you had plausible deniability."

"If Oliver worked for you, he would know that," Aden mused.

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“Sure he would. My guess is anybody who ever sorted mail on the Hill knows that. He was probably responsible for tossing out any number of invitations as an intern.”

“You haven’t been curious enough to attend one?” Darren asked. “Or send somebody on your behalf?”

Darren’s query drew Aden’s brows together, but the other man seemed oblivious to his sharp regard. Though he’d wanted Darren’s insight, Aden wasn’t thrilled with this particular line of questioning. Darren’s specialty was undercover work. Of course, his brain would go automatically to a place where undercover work was necessary. But sending an ex-Argenti agent into a nest of wolves who were not part of Aden’s pack was as good as killing him.

“I never saw a reason to,” Terence replied. “Why? Do you think it merits further investigation?”

“No.” Aden’s brusque tone brought curious glances from both men. “This is just preliminary intel. I’m just trying to ascertain if there’s anything to be concerned about with all these unexpected pack parties.”

“You tell me,” Terence said. “Is there anything to be concerned about? The last thing I need right now is to get caught up in this sort of crap. The mid-terms are only a year away, and we’re going to be facing serious contention from the Democrats *and* Republicans.”

“At this point, it’s too early to tell. But now that I know some of the names involved, I’ll be able to focus my investigation a little better.”

“Keep me in the loop,” Terence instructed. “And I’ll forward any more invitations I receive.”

Conversation lapsed into casual discourse about happenings on

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the Hill and Aden's latest acquisitions for several of Terence's acquaintances. Domingo returned from his phone call before entrees were served, but he was characteristically silent for the rest of the meal. It was one of the reasons Aden valued his service to the pack so much. Domingo knew his place, and was willing to act without question. He'd even helped get Darren settled, though Aden knew Domingo didn't trust him.

Darren kept his hand on Aden's thigh all throughout the meal, sneaking upward the further it progressed. Aden let him, though truth be told, his thoughts weren't completely on what Darren might do when he reached Aden's cock. He kept going back to the one name he hadn't anticipated, the same name Domingo had felt the need to warn the pack. If Darren had known the importance of just who Oliver Moss was, Aden suspected even he would be distracted from thoughts of sex. If only mildly.

When Terence stood to leave, Aden stood as well, shaking his hand and repeating his promise to keep him in the loop. Only when he was gone did he exhale, and he sat back down, his shoulders already heavy.

"If it helps, Enzo said nobody's heard anything about Oliver in months," Domingo offered.

It didn't, but Aden nodded anyway.

"You going to fill me in?" Darren asked mildly.

Aden felt Domingo stiffen. By all rights, Aden knew he should refuse Darren's request. Darren was too inquisitive for his own good, and the more he knew, the more he would push for even further details. And Aden couldn't keep an eye on him every hour of the day, as much as he might like to. He needed to be able to trust Darren wouldn't get himself into trouble.

Which was the exact reason he knew he had to tell him at least

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a little bit. He'd invited Darren into the pack, taken him as a lover, and given him no room to leave once he'd accepted. As a pack member, he deserved to know, and if Aden couldn't show his trust for him, he knew he would never fully gain Darren's trust in return.

"Oliver used to be a part of my pack." He ignored Domingo's angry exhalation. "He left on very hostile terms."

Darren nodded. "And now he's formed his own pack?"

"It would seem that way."

Darren studied him for a moment, and Aden could almost see the wheels turning behind his eyes. Darren knew a great deal of werewolf culture and pack dynamics. He wouldn't have lasted so long as an Argenti agent if he didn't know his prey. He braced himself for the flurry of questions that must have been forthcoming, but Darren only inclined his head.

"If the pack parties are already on your radar, you can bet other people have been noticing."

Aden's eyes narrowed. "Were they on Argenti's radar before you left?"

"They may have been on Jasmine's. That may even be why she decided now was a good time for the blood rituals."

He swore under his breath. That made perfect sense. With new and increasingly dangerous packs forming right under their own noses, Argenti could've been getting desperate. Stronger, faster, deadlier agents had probably seemed like a godsend, and Aden had taken those means away from her.

"This might call for a meeting with some of the other pack leaders. Domingo, compile a list of every leader within a sixty-mile radius, where they are, what leanings they've taken lately, if any of them have seen any extra trouble in the past couple

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months.”

“When do you want it?”

“Yesterday would have been preferable. I’ll settle for tomorrow morning.”

“What do you want me to do?” Darren asked.

“Nothing for now.”

Darren’s eyes darkened. “You’re going to need all the help you can get with this, Aden.”

“And what would you suggest I let you do?”

“I could find out what’s going on at those parties, for one.”

“You could. You won’t.”

“You don’t think that would be pretty damned good information to have?”

“I think it would be excellent information to have. I’m not going to let you crash one just because you’re a little bored hanging around the store.”

“Right. Because that’s the only possible reason I could have to want to help you.”

His lips pressed together. He counted to ten and then said, “Domingo, start on that list for me. I’ll be back at the store in an hour for an update.”

“Are you—”

“Go.” He didn’t look away from Darren as Domingo’s chair scraped back and he rounded the table to leave. Aden caught the glimpse of disgust Domingo shot Darren and sighed. He did not need this crap right now. “Don’t turn this into something it’s not, gorgeous. Now is not the time.”

“Fine. But you don’t make the mistake of underestimating me. If there’s something building on the horizon, you’re not going to want me sitting on the bench.”

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His mouth twitched. He couldn't resist. "No, I much prefer you taking a different kind of seat."

Darren snorted. "You're like a modern day Prince Charming."

"I meant at my side." He reached for his water. "I can't imagine what you're thinking about."

"I bet you can't. Not with a mind as pure and innocent as yours."

"Well, this mind is going to make sure it doesn't get to a point where anybody is put into danger. I'm not underestimating you, gorgeous. I wouldn't be happy about anyone in my pack crashing one of Oliver's parties."

"I know that's what your instincts are telling you. I get that. All I'm asking is that you don't listen to them to the point that you can't hear me."

From the look in Darren's warm, dark eyes, Aden knew he was serious. He had known from the beginning that he had to be careful about finding a place for Darren within the pack, and not just one that included Aden's bed. Darren would never be satisfied with that. Or fully satisfied, anyway.

"I think I can do that, as long as you promise to understand I do know what I'm doing. My pack hasn't survived this long because I'm an idiot."

"I would never call you an idiot, sunshine. Bullheaded, yes. Arrogant, sure. But an idiot?" Darren grinned. "Never. And I do trust you."

"Good." He picked up the check and scribbled his signature across the bottom of the receipt. "Do you have another ex-colleague to meet up with, or do you have time to pick up where we left off in the bathroom?"

"Even if I did have another meeting, I'd blow it off. You know

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you drive me crazy when you talk to me like that, all romance and flowers.”

“Romance and flowers are for when we don’t have an audience. Like back at the loft.”

Darren tossed his napkin on the table and stood. “Then what are we waiting for? Let’s get out of here.”

Aden smiled and rose as well. He had to refrain from taking Darren’s hand in public, but he made sure to stand as close as possible as they walked out of the restaurant. At Darren’s car, he pressed into his back and pinned him to the door before Darren could open it.

“I want you naked and in your collar when I get there,” he murmured in Darren’s ear. He smoothed his hand over Darren’s stomach and teased the tip of his erection through his pants. “I have some new rope you’re going to look absolutely gorgeous in.”

There was no missing the way Darren shivered. Or the sudden heady scent of his arousal. Submitting, sexually or otherwise, was still new to Darren, and Aden wouldn’t have been surprised by the occasional protest—or outright struggle—but Darren never voiced any opposition.

“I’ll be ready.”

CHAPTER 3

Aden deliberately took his time returning to the bookstore. He wanted Darren dripping and desperate by the time he walked into the loft. It would take even longer to get him bound properly, but he planned on tasting his lover's salty skin every step of the way. Though Aden had had his share of partners in the past, none had ever been as responsive as Darren, as hungry for everything Aden had to offer. He was already reaching the point where he couldn't imagine a life without Darren in it.

He took a moment to go over his messages before heading for the loft. The scent of Darren's arousal grew heavier with every step he took, and the image of what he would look like, spread out on Aden's bed, made his cock throb. There was always the possibility that Darren wouldn't obey, but somehow, Aden doubted it. Not

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after his reaction at Barcello's. He would be there, he would be ready, and he would be as ravenous for Aden as Aden was for him.

When he opened the door to his studio apartment, he almost stepped on the shirt Darren had worn to lunch. It rested, discarded, on the hardwood floor, an invitation to even more. Several yards away, there was a shoe, with its mate sitting at the bottom of the spiral staircase that led up to his bedroom. Darren's pants hung over the railing at the top. The hardest thing Aden had done all day was ignore them to go to his chest at the window and retrieve the rope he had bought especially to put Darren on display.

He had bought several yards, intent on wrapping the length around Darren's naked body again and again. It was a soft nylon, very smooth to the touch, and unbreakable. As soon as he had seen it, he could imagine it wrapped around Darren's muscled body, his skin red, his cock dripping, his balls straining against the tight knots. He had specifically been looking for something soft, something that wouldn't bite into Darren's skin. He wanted Darren to enjoy the ropes, enjoy the pressure, anticipate the tight knots holding him in place. The last thing he wanted was for Darren to associate them with pain.

Aden carried the long coil up to the loft, pausing on the stairwell to listen for the familiar rhythm of Darren's breath. He smelled delicious, but his breathing was normal. That wouldn't last for much longer. He planned to have Darren panting and gasping before he even had the ropes secure. When he reached the top of the stairs, he realized he'd probably be breathing hard in a few minutes, too.

Darren was stretched out on the bed, his hands resting behind his head casually, his eyes heavy-lidded as he watched for Aden. He had a heavily muscled frame, despite his slim build, and his

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skin wasn't quite smooth. He had scars, marks from his years of hunting, fighting, and killing wolves. That should have disgusted Aden, but he liked the way Darren wore them. They only emphasized his undeniable beauty, rather than taking anything away from him.

"You certainly took your time, didn't you?"

"And yet, you waited for me." He came up to the side of the bed and dragged his fingertips up the length of Darren's leg. The light hairs tickled across his skin, and he was gratified to see the clear pre-come drip from his cock in response. "You look absolutely scrumptious, by the way. Better than you did at Barcello's."

"I suspect you're only saying that because you hate to see me in clothes."

He stopped at Darren's hip, tracing over a small scar near his groin. There was a story behind each of the marks, stories he hadn't pressed to learn yet. But he would. He ached to know them. Only his respect for Darren's privacy had held his tongue so far.

"Don't look so good out of them and we wouldn't have that problem."

"Are you suggesting I should let myself go and get all flabby?" He caught Aden's free hand, his thin fingers strong around Aden's wrists. He brought it to his mouth, kissing each knuckle. "Wait, I better not do that. You might kick me out then."

"I'm never kicking you out." Just the delicate touch of Darren's lips was enough to make Aden's chest tight. "I made you a promise."

Darren's pleased smile made his eyes light up. "What are you going to do with that rope?"

Though the last thing he wanted was to pull away, Aden did so,

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slapping him lightly on the flank. “You’ll see soon enough. Sit up. I’m going to do your arms first.”

He separated the coil into its individual lengths, watching Darren rise onto his haunches as he’d been told. Gently, Aden turned him around so his gaze was fixed on the far wall, and stood behind him with one of the rope sections. Darren’s arms hung at his sides. As pretty as he looked, his back sculpted and delectable, Aden grasped one wrist and sank to his knees.

“You’re getting better about the restraints.” With both hands now caught in one of his, Aden quickly wound the rope around his wrists. “These aren’t as soft as the leather, but it shouldn’t chafe.”

“It’s still not exactly easy,” Darren admitted softly as Aden looped the rope into a tight knot. “I’m not saying I don’t enjoy it. I do. But fighting is still my first instinct.”

“But I like that it is.” He grabbed a second length to wind around his chest and bind his arms to his sides, but stopped to indulge in a long lick up Darren’s spine. He took his time on each knob, flicking to the salty skin stretched across the hard muscles alongside the straight path, and ended at the base of Darren’s neck. “I want you as a fighter, gorgeous. I just don’t want you to fight me.”

“I know.” Darren moaned softly, his head falling forward as Aden lapped at Darren’s nape once more. Aden reached for a third, longer piece of rope. The previous one went around Darren’s biceps. This one wound around Darren’s shoulders, lashing around his chest, just below his collarbone. “It’s a good thing I don’t have any desire to fight you, or we might have problems.”

One of the best parts of Darren’s chest bound like this was the way it constricted the blood flow near his nipples. Aden had deliberately placed the biceps rope so the strands wrapped just

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below them, and now they were slightly swollen and hot, begging for attention.

Pressing to Darren's back, Aden reached around to stroke the dark circles with his thumbs, flicking across the harder points at random intervals. His cock strained against his zipper, but Darren's position and Aden's clothing meant Darren probably had no idea just how aroused Aden really was. It was taking all of his control not to bend Darren over right now and pound into him.

At first, Darren sighed with pleasure, but it wasn't long until he was moaning. Every flick of Aden's thumbs elicited a low sound, which went directly to Aden's already throbbing cock. Darren could still move, since his legs weren't yet bound, but he didn't. He remained still against Aden's chest, his body tense, his skin hot with rushing blood.

Aden didn't want to, but he pulled away from Darren and reached for a short piece of rope. After a moment of calculation, he wrapped it around Darren's elbows. By the time he was finished, Darren couldn't do anything except wiggle his fingers, and though Aden wasn't touching his heated flesh directly, Darren still moaned with each breath.

He went around the end of the bed to survey his handiwork. The pale rope was stark against Darren's skin, the strips between the coils already pinkening from the blood surging to the surface. Darren's cock was fully erect, a thin line of pre-come connecting it to his twitching stomach, and for a moment, Aden debated binding his balls as well. They had never gone that far yet. Darren probably wouldn't argue. In the end, though, Aden decided not to. He wanted to be able to touch Darren everywhere, to pull and squeeze at his sac without the hindrance of rope in his way.

"How does that feel?" he asked.

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Darren licked his lips, the tip of his tongue a light pink against his dry lips. "It...it feels good."

Aden smiled. "It'll feel even better soon."

All that remained was Darren's lower half. Aden worked quickly, wrapping the rope around his thighs and lower calves so his legs were folded in half. It also forced his legs farther apart. Darren could sit on his heels if he wanted, but Aden had other things in mind.

Resting a hand to the middle of Darren's shoulder blades, Aden pushed him carefully forward. It left his ass high and exposed, his muscles quivering from how tightly he held himself. Aden caressed the hot swell, first one side, then the other, absorbing every degree of heat into his own flesh.

"You are the prettiest thing I have ever seen," he murmured.

The top of Darren's head rested against the bed, and he turned, angling it so he could see Aden from his position. His mouth was partially open, like he was waiting for something to fill it. Aden wanted to kiss him, but instead of hauling him upright to claim his mouth, he stepped back to have a better view of his handiwork. He had the feeling he would never see anything better than the way Darren looked at that moment. The spread of his legs forced his cheeks apart, exposing his clenched hole, and his sac hung heavy between his thighs.

"The problem with this is that I can't touch you." Darren shifted. "I can't even see you."

"You don't need to see me to enjoy what I'm going to do." Aden knelt down and grabbed the front of Darren's thighs, hauling him back to the edge of the mattress. "And if it makes you feel better, next time I'll just lay there and let you do all the work."

Darren chuckled. "That sounds like a fair compromise."

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His mouth watered. Starting at the top of the crease, Aden ran the tip of his finger down between Darren's spread cheeks, slowly, delicately, watching the minute hairs stand up to attention at the contact. Darren sucked in a sharp breath, but otherwise didn't move, not even when Aden stopped to trace around the tiny opening.

"But you like it when I do this," Aden said. He circled it two more times before descending lower to the heavy balls. "You can't deny you love being at my mercy to explore however I want."

"No. No. I can't deny that." Darren arched his back, but only for a moment. Only long enough for the ropes to press into his flesh. "I even dream about it. Did I ever tell you that? I dream about it all the time. Ropes. Chains. Leather."

Aden was glad Darren couldn't see him. He couldn't see him squeeze his eyes together at the images Darren presented, or see the flare of his nostrils as he fought to contain his breathing. He couldn't see the way he had to reach down and adjust his erection, and he definitely couldn't see the higher color in his cheeks as all the heat tried to escape the prison of his body.

To bring his focus back, Aden gripped a cheek in each hand and spread Darren even wider, his fingertips digging into the taut muscle. The path he drew this time along the crease was with his tongue, and he sighed in contentment at the musky scent of skin he left in his wake.

"Oh...fuck." Darren rocked backward, and when Aden didn't stop him, he continued the slow rhythm, easing forward and then back against Aden's tongue. Aden traced his tight opening, making it wet, moving in steady circles, occasionally changing the speed. Each time he did, Darren's moans went up in pitch, his entire body responding to the caress. "Fuck, Aden. Your mouth...feels so

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good. Love it.”

He was very glad he never put a gag on Darren. He loved the way the other man talked during sex, like he needed the release or risk combusting. After Aden had first discovered his identity, Darren had never held back on him, a feat that had always seemed remarkable on its own since he was Argenti and Aden’s sworn enemy. But something about the way they clicked together, as if simply being in the other’s presence was enough to unlock every barrier that might separate them, made their relationship unlike any other Aden had ever had. He took the encouragement Darren offered now and concentrated it back at him, delving deeper into the hole every time he went over it, nipping at the ready flesh when he had to fight to keep his head.

“Fuck me...oh please...please fuck me...” Each word went directly to Aden’s cock, his flesh throbbing in response to every syllable. “Fuck me with your mouth...please...please...” Darren’s whole body thrummed with his pleas, he moved with the force of them, panting and gasping for breath. Aden pushed his tongue deep into Darren’s channel and was rewarded with a keening moan. The kind that devolved into more whimpered requests.

The taste of him exploded on Aden’s tongue. This was what spurred him on, each and every time he got his mouth on Darren. The salty tang of his body, the heat of his skin, it made him yearn to give more than the little love bites he often left on Darren’s flesh while they fucked. More than once, he’d had to restrain himself from sinking heavy wolf fangs past the fragile skin, to know once and for all just what a human descended from a werewolf might taste like, but there was no way Darren was ready for that, if he ever would be. It was a wonder he’d managed to overcome all his training simply to live with a werewolf. Aden wouldn’t push for

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more until he knew he wouldn't break the man.

His own growls joined Darren's whimpers. He feasted on the clenching muscle, pushing deeper, digging harder, biting in between thrusts, until all he knew was Darren's sweaty flesh. The scent of Darren's free-flowing pre-come added to his banquet, and he finally yielded to the desire to reach around his lover's hip and skim hot fingertips up and down his dripping cock.

"Yes," Darren hissed. "Oh, yes." The tip of his cock dragged across the bed as Aden brushed fingers down his length, and the tension in Darren's body did nothing but climb higher. His muscles were rock hard beneath Aden's fingers, and it occurred to him that maybe he should have tied a rope around Darren's cock. He definitely didn't want the other man to come too soon, but his skin was already drenched with his arousal, and he was quivering for more.

He abandoned the well-lubed hole to lick a path down to the tight sac. "Maybe next time we'll have to put a cock ring on you. I think you might like this just a little too much, gorgeous."

"I don't think it's possible to like this too much."

"You say that now." Grasping Darren's shaft in a firm grip, he pulled it down and back, holding it still to exert even more pressure on the firm balls. "You might disagree if you shoot too soon and I decide to back off to teach you some willpower."

"Yeah, it's real easy to talk about willpower when you're not in my position."

Aden lifted his head without relinquishing his hold on Darren's cock. "Would you submit as easily without being tied up? If I forced you to stay in this position of your own free will rather than with the rope as backup?"

Darren paused a moment before answering. "No. If you untied

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me now, I'd probably knock you down and pin you to the ground. Or try my damndest."

He grinned. "I almost think I want to see you try."

"You don't think I could get you on your back?"

"I think if anybody could, it would be you." He nipped at his ass, chuckling when the hole constricted. "But it's the idea of fighting for you to do so that turns me on the most."

"I'm going to have to keep that in mind for the future." Darren's fingers wiggled and flexed, like he was reaching for something. "How about if I last as long as you want me to without shooting, we'll try it tomorrow?"

Aden won, either way this played out. "You're on." He sealed his mouth over Darren's hole and thrust his tongue inside the clenching channel, pumping Darren's cock at the same time.

"Cheating...that's cheating...you're a cheater..." Darren caught his breath, and for a moment, he was actually silent. But it was only a moment before a fresh plea rushed out. "Please don't stop."

He had no intention to. Already, the scent of sweat coating the surface of Darren's skin was joining the pre-come leaking freely from his cock, and all Aden wanted to do was devour every drop of it. He abandoned Darren's hole to duck his head and suck the taut sac past his lips, lashing it with his tongue as he breathed Darren in. Darren cried out, sliding forward and more onto his shoulders. In the next moment, he was pushing back again, trying to force even more of his body into Aden's mouth.

Aden sucked on Darren's balls until he was squirming, muscles straining against the rope, his entire frame rocking and wiggling back and forth. Darren's cock was so slick that it almost felt like he had already come, and even though the ropes weren't supposed to

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chafe, Aden thought they might against Darren's wet skin.

"Aden...please...fuck me. Need you to fuck me. Please. Please."

The desperation in his voice was too much to resist. Releasing his hold on Darren's cock, Aden ignored his anguished whimpers to unzip his pants. He wasn't going to bother undressing. He needed to bury himself inside Darren's tight ass as much as Darren needed to feel it. He pulled his cock through his fly and stroked it once, then ran the length up and down between Darren's cheeks. It slicked him up only a little, but when Darren was this excited, he didn't care about the niceties.

That was one of the things Aden adored about him.

"Ready?" he said, lining the tip up with the narrow opening. He didn't bother waiting for a response. He simply pushed his thick length past the quivering muscle, not stopping until his balls were smashed against his zipper and his cock was completely inside.

Darren buried his face in the bed, letting the blanket muffle his shout. His fingers stretched, the tips barely brushing against the material of Aden's shirt. The muscles in his back flexed, and his ass clamped around Aden's length, holding him with a natural strength that was only increased by Darren's arousal. He smelled unbelievable. He sounded better. And nobody, no other lover, had ever felt as perfect as Darren.

Aden could have taken his time. He could have stayed buried in Darren's ass for long moments, then slowly pulled out, making sure Darren felt every single inch burning through his entire body. But he didn't have the patience for that. He barely rocked back before slamming forward again, moving with short, sharp thrusts of his hips.

The force of his strokes kept pushing Darren across the slippery

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surface of the blankets. Within just a few, Aden got frustrated with the increasing loss of contact, and grabbed the ropes binding Darren's arms together. Using them as a leash, he tugged back with the same strength he shuttled forward. It had the added bonus of unburying Darren's face, and the constant stream of pleas and whimpers fueled Aden's desire even more.

Darren glanced over his shoulder. His pupils were blown, and the color was high in his cheeks. Sweat beaded his brow and his hair was wet, plastered against his skin. Every breath had a hint of a word—sometimes a plea. Sometimes Aden's name. The view only lasted for a moment before Darren was forced to drop his head. There was no resistance in Darren's body, and he no longer pushed against the ropes binding him.

The utter submission in the bow of his back nearly undid Aden. The wolf inside howled, while the man held onto Darren even tighter. He smoothed his free hand over the reddened skin between the rope coils, massaging the muscle, glorying in the way they reacted to something as simple as his touch. It wasn't just that Darren was likely one of the prettiest partners he had ever had. He was easily the most giving, turning himself over to Aden without hesitation in spite of his own training.

Aden couldn't keep this up. His stamina was usually far greater than this, but between the teasing at the restaurant and Darren's sheer deliciousness now, his balls were already tightening, his thrusts already growing erratic. Darren's channel clenched around him on every stroke, making it harder to leave, harder to stop. He slammed into him again and again, over and over, until it finally became too much. The sweet, silken heat squeezed around his cock one final time, and Aden drilled into him, everything going white-hot as he shot deep inside Darren's ass.

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“God...I’m so...” Darren’s heated muscles contracted, pulling every bit of come from Aden’s cock, but he hadn’t given in to his own release. Aden stayed inside Darren’s heated channel for as long as he could, until the tremors stopped racing through his thighs, almost until his own breathing returned to normal. Darren’s was still ragged and erratic, desperate.

“So...so...close...please...”

Aden finally pulled away from Darren, dropping to his knees once again. He caught Darren’s wet cock and pulled it backward, guiding the crown to Aden’s mouth. His lips barely closed around the throbbing flesh before Darren erupted with a high shout. Long streams of come filled Aden’s mouth, his cock jerking hard with each one.

He swallowed greedily, sucking hard at the tip as he pulled at the shaft. Darren’s orgasm seemed to last even longer than Aden’s had, his shout descending into a low keening that made Aden want to fuck him all over again. He refused to let go of Darren’s cock, even after it finally stopped twitching and Darren’s whimpers turned into harsh cries. Sometimes, he thought he could happily suck Darren off all day, if the boy would let him.

“Aden...fuck...fuck...stop. I can’t take it...” After maybe a dozen pleas, Aden released his cock and instead dragged his tongue up Darren’s cock, to his balls again, and then along the lines of his thighs. No matter where Aden touched him, Darren twitched and shivered.

As much as he would love to simply lick Darren all over, Aden knew he had to get him out of the ropes. Gently, he helped ease Darren onto his side, taking the strain off his legs. Darren held still while he undid the knots, and when the first rope came free, Aden tenderly straightened his knee, rubbing the quivering muscles at

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the same time.

“We should go out to the reserve tomorrow if we want to do this right,” Aden said. “I’ve got a training room if you don’t want to use the grounds for a hunt.”

Darren smiled. “Yeah, let’s go out to the reserve. It’ll be good to stretch my muscles a bit.”

Aden worked quickly at the rest of the knots, unfolding Darren’s body with each one freed. Once they were all on the floor, he rolled Darren onto his back, stretching out on his side next to him with his head propped up on his hand.

“How did you used to stay loosened up? Just on the job?”

“Yes. I never had three weeks of downtime. If things were quiet in DC, then Jasmine would send us out on field assignments. She kept track of possible wolf attacks up and down the east coast.”

“Have you thought any more about contacting some of the freelancers?”

“I decided to wait on that for a bit. Everybody around here is enough on edge without me going out on hunts every night.”

Aden focused on caressing the flushed skin of Darren’s hard stomach. “They’re still adjusting. They’re not used to me inviting lovers into the pack.”

“I don’t think it’s as simple as that,” Darren said softly. “Not that I blame them. I don’t. But I’m not going to give them more reasons to hate me any time soon.”

Leaning down, Aden brushed a tender kiss across Darren’s damp brow. “I’ll talk to them. The way they’re behaving isn’t acceptable.”

“If you think it’ll help.” He closed his eyes with a soft sigh. “Thanks.”

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Aden leaned back, happy to watch as Darren started to drift to sleep. He always liked watching Darren. It was peaceful. But a booming knock on the door disrupted them both. Darren started awake and Aden stiffened. The knocking continued until Enzo's voice carried up the stairs.

“Aden? We know you're there! We need to talk! Open up!”

CHAPTER 4

The look on Aden's face when he left the bedroom made Darren very happy that he would not be on the receiving end of the werewolf's wrath. He wasn't sure what pissed Aden off more—the interruption or the tone of Enzo's voice as he shouted through the door. Darren moved much slower, taking the time to wash himself up in the bathroom and dress before going to the stairs. In the small apartment, it was easy to catch every single word, every single complaint. And every single time Enzo said Darren's name.

Enzo was a large man, and though Darren had never seen him shifted, he guessed he was a truly massive wolf. Darren didn't know what the pack dynamics were before his arrival, but Enzo had elected himself the official president of the We Hate Darren Club. None of the other wolves would risk pissing off Aden, but

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Enzo was young enough, and brash enough, that he didn't care. He was also one of the few wolves in the pack actually related to Aden by blood. Darren supposed that meant he was comfortable enough with their bond that he knew Aden would never toss him out on his ass.

He wasn't alone, either. From Darren's vantage, he counted four others from the pack. Domingo was there, looking as smug as ever. Darren understood why Aden relied on the guy, but in Darren's opinion, he was the biggest douche bag in the District. At Enzo's side was his girlfriend, Patricia. Darren never knew what to think of her. She had more than a hint of meanness in her eyes and around her mouth. He wouldn't be surprised to learn one day that she had been targeted by Argenti, or any other wolf hunter in the area. Gail was also with them—the closest thing to a den mother Aden's pack had. She didn't have a formal designation. She wasn't Aden's right hand. But at nearly sixty, she was strong, smart, and ferocious. If Aden's wolves ever revolted, it would be under her leadership, not Enzo's.

Knowing that Aden would never call him down to face the four wolves himself, Darren didn't wait to descend the stairs. His earlier exhaustion was gone, chased away by the rush of adrenaline. Four combatant, angry wolves would frighten most people, and rightfully so. But the sight made Darren feel more than a little high.

"If you're so worried about me, why don't you say something to my face?" Darren invited, once he reached the bottom.

They all turned to face him, and Enzo's eyes were flashing. "Fine. I'd like to know just why the fuck you're meeting with Argenti, when Aden told us you were finished with them?"

Darren folded his arms. "I wasn't meeting with Argenti. I was

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meeting with an old friend.”

“To exchange information, no doubt,” Patricia said.

“If Darren says it’s innocent, it’s innocent.” Aden folded his arms over his chest and glared at Enzo. “He’s also been made aware of my feelings on the matter. That’s all that counts.”

“He didn’t even tell you he was going to be there,” Domingo snapped.

Aden’s head whipped around. “Do you tell me every time you go off and have dinner with some old friend from high school?”

“My friends don’t kill pack members.”

“If there was a real problem here, Aden would have taken care of it,” Darren pointed out. “Don’t you trust your alpha?”

“Aden wouldn’t be the first wolf distracted by a pretty face.” Enzo stepped closer, seemingly uncaring of Aden’s imposing presence. “And what it comes down to is I don’t trust *you*.”

Everything about Enzo was threatening, from the sparks of silver in his eyes, to his aggressive stance. A person would have to be blind, deaf, and very stupid to miss each warning sign. Darren had seen countless wolves in this stance, prepared to turn themselves over to their instincts in order to protect themselves, their pack, and their ground. Aden was tense, too. If he had been shifted, he would be showing his teeth.

“Sounds like a personal problem to me. And since I’m not going anywhere, I think you better just get over it.”

He wasn’t sure if Enzo had been about ready to move or not. He didn’t see it coming, and he’d been ready for it. But in the blink of an eye, Gail was standing next to Enzo, her weathered hand grasping his wrist, as if holding him back from striking Darren.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said to him, her voice even. She swiveled her black eyes toward Darren with the same calculating

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intelligence. “Personal problems are just as valid as pack problems, cub. Or do you think you’re too good to be a part of this pack?”

Darren’s eyes flicked over to Enzo, then back to Gail. “Do not call me cub. Darren works just fine.”

“You’re a cub until you’ve proven otherwise,” Gail shot back.

And that was really the crux of the matter. Darren didn’t think they were angry because he was a normal human. There was no rule that said wolves couldn’t fuck humans, or even have relationships with them. It was rare, but not verboten. He didn’t even think they were angry he was a hunter. But he did hold a place of honor in the pack. Aden had made it very clear that Darren was not just some plaything he brought home with him when he was bored. Darren had the ear of the leader of the pack.

“Do you want to challenge me?” Darren asked Enzo. “Is that why you’re here?”

“I want you gone,” he ground out. “If kicking your ass is what it takes, so be it.”

“What if you don’t kick my ass? Will that be an end to all this ridiculousness?”

“Won’t happen.”

Gail pressed her palm to Enzo’s chest and pushed him back. To Darren, she said, “This isn’t one of your Argenti games. You fight for your place within the pack. That place needs to be earned.”

Her unspoken *and not on your back* made Aden bristle, but he remained still, waiting for Darren’s response.

Darren could only smile at Gail’s blithe dismissal of Argenti. Did she really think he had only been playing a game? Did she think he was only playing now? The look on her face, and the one in Enzo’s eyes, told him that was exactly what they thought. His body was already tensing, automatically preparing for the

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confrontation, each second of his training, and each honed instinct, ready to take over.

"I'll fight Enzo. I'll fight anybody in this room who wants to try me."

"Not here, you won't." Aden finally stepped forward. "The ring at the warehouse. Half an hour."

"The ring?" Enzo snarled. "It's all a bit civilized, isn't it, Aden?"

"If he was a wolf, you'd let them fight wherever they wanted," Domingo said.

"If Darren was a wolf, there wouldn't be a fight at all," Aden snapped.

"If that's where Aden wants us to fight, then I'm not going to fight anywhere else," Darren said.

"Of course not," Enzo sneered. He backed off Gail's touch, though the distance didn't make him any less menacing. "Fine. Half an hour in the ring. But I'm not going easy on you just because you're Aden's latest plaything."

"That's fine. And I won't think less of you if you come to your senses and realize this really isn't a fight you want to have."

Enzo whirled on his heel and marched for the door, his girlfriend and Domingo on his heels. Gail lingered behind, her shrewd gaze jumping from Aden to Darren and back to Aden again.

"You knew this was coming," she said to him.

He didn't relax. "I know."

"Are you ready for him to lose?"

"That depends. Are you ready for him to win?"

Her mouth thinned into a narrow line. With one last glance at Darren, she followed Enzo out. Darren's smile still hadn't faded.

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Now, though, he was more eager than amused. “Just so we’re clear here, they realize what I’ve spent the majority of my life doing?”

Aden didn’t look nearly as happy as Darren felt. “Yes. And just so you’re clear, you realize he’s going to fight dirty, right? You’re not going to have your usual arsenal at your disposal.”

Darren almost laughed. “I don’t need a weapon. I don’t plan to kill him.”

“And the fact that I’m not going to be there to watch?”

“The outcome is going to be the same whether you’re there or not. Hunters, Argenti or otherwise, don’t make it this long if they can’t fight, Aden. Besides, they’re all underestimating me. Enzo probably thinks he’ll have my head on a stick in under five minutes. They don’t know I’m nearly as fast and strong as they are. And they don’t know my personal record when it comes to hand-to-hand fighting. They probably assume I find a nice high point and pick wolves off with a rifle, all cool and distant with no blood, no muss, and no fuss. But that’s not my style.”

Aden finally relaxed. “I know. Do me a favor, then, will you? Try not and mess up this pretty face. I kind of like it the way it is now.”

“He’ll never get close to this pretty face. Where are you going to be? Anywhere nearby?”

“I’ll stay here and go over the lists I told Domingo to get ready for me. The warehouse is just around the corner. I’ll know how it goes one way or another almost as soon as it happens.”

“Oh? Domingo had time to do that? I thought he was too busy rallying the troops.”

Aden grimaced. “I’m pretty sure he called them while we were still at lunch. I have to talk to him about his gossiping. I can’t have him undermining you at every turn.”

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“No, don’t. I’ll make sure he gets the message this afternoon.”

“Are you sure? Fighting with Enzo is one thing. Domingo’s sabotage is something else.”

“Domingo only does that because he thinks he can get away with it. Let’s face it, you need him and he knows it. So you won’t get rid of him, and right now he thinks I’m harmless. But he’s also a good little pack animal. He’ll fall in line once he understands that undermining me does have serious consequences.”

He still seemed unconvinced, but he nodded anyway. “Not that you need it, but Enzo’s strength in a fight comes from his cockiness. He always assumes he’s going to win. You can exploit that.”

“I plan to,” Darren said. Among other things. If all went to plan, Enzo would be bearing the scars of this particular confrontation for a very long time.

* * *

Darren wondered if the members of Aden’s pack were always so ungrateful. Or perhaps they had it so good, they never realized just how bad it could be. Aden thought the pack should fall in line just because he said the word, and Aden wasn’t wrong to have that expectation. The fact of the matter was, Aden was one of the better pack leaders Darren had ever encountered. Every alpha had a different style. Some took a hands-on approach. Others seemed to barely be aware of who was in their pack. Most of them were almost just like normal people. Normal homes, normal bank accounts, normal families. They weren’t necessarily political leaders or important people in the community. Very few had the power Aden had.

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The ring at the warehouse was a perfect example. It was modeled after an Ultimate Fighting ring, and the cage took up a huge amount of real estate inside the warehouse itself. Aden had had it built to give the pack members a place to play, a place to work out, and a place to fight, without attracting attention to themselves. Because Aden took the time to do things like that, his pack very rarely ended up on Argenti's radar. Which meant they lasted longer and had happier lives than other, less fortunate packs.

Darren arrived ten minutes before the agreed upon time. He had taken the time to change his clothes, dressing in what he casually thought of as his Argenti uniform—a pair of comfortable, well-worn jeans, steel-toed boots, a black T-shirt, and leather gloves. Aden had watched him dress without a word, and Darren had quipped about the pants being more reasonable than a mini-skirt, but Aden hadn't even cracked a smile at the reference to Darren's undercover Halloween costume. He always wore a knife, but he left it and its sheath at Aden's. He didn't even notice its missing weight as he strolled into the warehouse. As he told Aden, he didn't need a weapon if he didn't plan on delivering a killing blow.

The first time he stood toe to toe with a wolf, he had been fourteen. Already standing nearly six-feet tall, he had been pathetically scrawny and under-developed. He hadn't been armed then, either. By all rights, he should have been torn limb by limb and devoured. Ignorant of his own strength, untrained, and frightened, he had been the perfect target. He had tried to run at first, but the wolf wouldn't let him get far. He had cornered Darren at the end of a street, against a chain-link fence, all teeth and claws and silver saucer eyes. That was the night Darren learned he was immune to a wolf's bite.

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It was also the night he vowed a wolf would never get another chunk from him. In fifteen years, no other wolf had.

Jasmine found him as a result of that first attack. She had contacts at every hospital in the area, and she regularly received updates on any injuries that matched a specific pattern. Darren had caught her attention not because of the wolf bite, but because he lacked any lycanthrope qualities. He showed no physical changes, even on a cellular level. At first, Darren had assumed Jasmine monitored the hospitals in order to generate leads. It wasn't until much later that Darren realized genuine victims of werewolves never made it to the hospital. Jasmine was looking for survivors. For possible recruits.

Those early days came rushing back to him in quick succession as he strolled through the warehouse. He heard the werewolves before he saw them, talking and laughing and snickering. They were excited, though Darren hadn't even had the chance to meet most of the pack. But what did that matter? He was the stranger. He was the interloper. He was the one with something to prove. As he had been when Jasmine brought him to Argenti. Too young, too delicate, too unprepared. Too much of a risk.

But he was also strong, fast, and smart. Under Jasmine, he had been a quick study. He had spent his days in classes and at the gym, and she took him out on hunts nearly every night for the first six months. Once they found a wolf, she would fade out of view. She left him to his fate, and whatever mistakes he made, he didn't make twice. Like Aden, she had refused to be in a position that might weaken Darren. If he thought she would step in to stop a wolf from killing him, he might not give the fight his full attention and energy. It also meant Darren never had the time to be afraid. If he wasted time on fear, he would die.

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There was one great advantage to the large fighting cage—nobody would be able to jump in and join them. As soon as Darren rounded the final corner, he realized how absolutely critical that was. At least thirty people stood around the ring. Darren couldn't tell if they were all members of Aden's pack, or even if they were all wolves. Enzo noticed him first. Only seconds after Enzo saw him, the rest of the group stared at Darren, marking each step. Darren didn't falter. When he left the ring, they'd all be staring again, but for a very different reason. The thought brought a fresh smile to Darren's face.

Enzo had stripped down to just his jeans, his chest rippling with muscles. He was heavier than Aden, and not nearly as tall, but he bounced on the balls of his feet like a much smaller man. Patricia kept hanging on his arm, but that only seemed to annoy him. He shook her off more than once as Darren approached.

"You must have a death wish," he snarled. "I didn't think you'd show."

"Or if he did, he'd be hiding behind Aden," Patricia said.

Enzo moved to backhand her, but she danced out of the way. "This is the ring." He jerked his head toward the cage. "Anything goes."

Everybody around Enzo laughed at that, and Darren was reminded of another reason he didn't like wolves. He could handle them on an individual basis, but put three or more into a room, and they immediately lost all sense of their identity in favor of being accepted by the pack. He didn't honestly believe that every single person in that room truly wanted Enzo to tear him apart, but at that moment, they were all happily united against him.

"Right. Anything goes. But when you've had enough, just say the word. I'm not going to stop until you do."

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“It’ll be hard to fight when I’ve snapped your arms. Though that’s not really your specialty, now is it, *gorgeous*?”

“After we’re done here, and we will be very soon, you’re going to call me *sir* every time you see me.” Darren marched past him and pulled the ring door open. “After you.”

Enzo pretended to act scared of Darren’s attitude, eliciting snickers from the other wolves. Rolling his neck, he cracked the joint, then proceeded to do the same with each of his shoulders. Darren waited patiently for him to finish his posturing, ignoring the continuous glances from the other wolves. Gail was present, but separate from the others, while Domingo was nowhere in sight. He was probably still at the bookstore, working with Aden. Darren sincerely hoped Aden respected his desire not to talk to the other man. This fight was going to make it better, not Aden’s interference.

Enzo finally strode forward, deliberately knocking against Darren as he crowded inside the ring. He skirted the edge, touching the hands of the others who pressed to the walls like he was some rock star and they were his groupies, and assumed a position on the opposite side.

“Which part should I break first?” he called out to the spectators.

Cries of, “Tear his arms off!” and “Smash his pretty face!” led the crowd.

The door slammed shut, and for just a moment, he was that fourteen-year-old kid cornered against a chain-link fence, wondering if he was going to live to see the next morning. The shouts and cheers faded away as he focused his attention on Enzo. The fight would be brutal. Darren had no doubts about that. But it would also be easier than facing some random wolf in a dark alley,

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or an abandoned house, or in the bedroom of the wolf's latest victim. He stood on the opposite side of Enzo, his hands loose at his sides, his heartbeat even. He decided to let the other man make the first move. He could turn Enzo's aggression around, use it against him, if he was patient.

"Get him! What are you waiting for!"

Goaded by the crowd, Enzo charged forward.

He had power on Darren; there was no question about that. For the first time, Darren saw the wolf's grace as Enzo leapt through the air. Silver shot through his dark eyes, and he wondered if Enzo would shift when he learned Darren wasn't someone to be trifled with. He had to count on yes. Aden had warned him Enzo would fight dirty. Taking his deadliest form was as dirty as it could get.

In the meantime, though, Enzo seemed satisfied to remain in human form. His jump was swift and sure, but Darren had seen it coming and easily sidestepped it, swinging his arm around to slam into Enzo's back as he flew past him. The force slammed Enzo face-first into the cage wall. The entire structure vibrated, sending tremors through the soles of Darren's feet, but Enzo recovered almost immediately, whipping around to glare at him with hate-filled eyes.

"If I wanted a chase, I'd run you through the streets," he spat.

"You want me, come and get me."

Enzo responded to the taunt exactly as Darren thought he would. He sprung through the air a second time, his lips pulled back in what seemed like a parody of the growl. Darren waited until the very last moment before slamming his fist into Enzo's chest. The force combined with Enzo's momentum sent him flying backward into the wall. Enzo picked himself up, his face splotchy with rage.

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“That’s it,” Enzo snarled. “You’re asking for it, asshole.”

Darren grinned and wiggled his fingers, beckoning him forward.

No more talking now. Enzo came low and hard, slamming into Darren’s thighs to take both of them down to the mat. Darren flipped him over, almost too easily, but not before Enzo finally managed to land a blow to his midsection. His fist was as powerful as he’d been ready for, and would have broken a rib if Darren hadn’t steeled his abdominals and twisted to the side to change the angle of the punch. It also managed to unseat Darren from where he’d pinned Enzo, and he rolled to the side to leap to his feet in time to see Enzo do the same.

Aden had warned him about Enzo’s cockiness, and Darren wondered if Enzo’s impatience stemmed from that arrogance. Darren quickly realized that if he held himself back for just a second or two, Enzo would get impatient and rush forward. Allowing Darren the perfect opportunity to use his own weight against him. But Enzo wasn’t completely stupid. Each time Darren sent him flying was an object lesson, and it wasn’t long until Darren was forced to shift tactics. Enzo went low, aiming for his legs. Darren was only a second too slow, but that was long enough to be brought down to the ground again. Pinned beneath Enzo’s weight, he couldn’t move his arms or torso. Enzo grinned, clearly pleased with the new position. Until Darren rammed his head into Enzo’s face, obliterating the grin with blood.

The wolves outside the cage howled at the first spill, heedless of the fact that it came from one of their own. Someone rattled the walls, but Darren didn’t have time to look around and see who it might be. He took Enzo’s momentary distraction to wriggle free, driving the heel of his foot into Enzo’s groin as he twisted away.

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Enzo moved at the last minute, and Darren made contact with his upper thigh instead. The effect was to make Enzo wobble as he stood, a weakness too obvious to ignore. Darren did a roundhouse that swept Enzo's legs out from under him. He landed with a thud on his back.

Darren immediately jumped on him, settling on Enzo's chest and pinning his shoulders with his knees. He slammed his fists into Enzo's face, wetting his knuckles with blood, feeling the satisfying crunch of bone and teeth with each blow. Horrible pleasure washed through Darren. He never, ever admitted to liking this part, but he did. His blood rushed faster, and his vision narrowed into hard little points, and there was nothing except the body beneath him, desperate and straining for escape.

Enzo writhed beneath him, finally bringing his leg up far enough, and hard enough, to connect with Darren's back. It was just enough to knock Darren off center, and Enzo got an arm free. He drove his fist into Darren's solar plexus. His breath stopped. Pain erupted in his chest. And Enzo pushed him off, rolling onto Darren's body to hold him down. Enzo's fist looked the size of a picnic ham as it rushed to Darren's face.

He turned his head in time to take the blow across his cheekbone rather than his nose or jaw. His ears rang from the strength behind it, and stars danced before his eyes. Though he couldn't see Enzo, he felt the shift of his body as he brought back his arm for another blow, fueled by the encouraging roar of the onlookers. This one went wide, across his ear. This one managed to draw blood.

Enzo settled a meaty hand over Darren's throat, pinning him from another head butt as he brought their faces just inches apart. Blood spittled when he spoke, his teeth nearly fangs from how

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close he was to the edge of shifting. “Nice try, gorgeous,” he hissed, mocking again with Aden’s term of affection. “Though if you fight like this with Aden, I think I can see what some of the appeal might be. Maybe I’ll take your ass for a spin before I finish you off.”

“Try it, cupcake, and I’ll have your dick as a trophy.” Darren freed a hand, knowing he didn’t have the proper angle for a good hit. Any punch would be ineffectual at best. But Enzo himself had specified that in this fight, anything goes. He reached between Enzo’s legs, his fingers closing around his balls through the loose material of his shorts, and squeezed as hard as he could. “In the meantime, I think I’ll take your balls.”

Enzo tried to scream, but he couldn’t even breathe. His fingers went lax around Darren’s throat, and Darren freed his other hand, closing it into a fist to slam into Enzo’s broken nose. He gurgled, blowing small bubbles in the blood coating his face, and slid to the side. Darren swung his legs around, kneeling Enzo in the kidney. It knocked him flat on his stomach, and Darren jumped to his feet, ignoring the blood that flowed freely from his ear. He kicked the hard toe of his boot into Enzo’s thigh, and the wolf finally screamed—a high pitched, pained sound.

“Give up?” Darren asked.

“Enzo’s not smart enough to know when he’s lost.” Aden’s voice came from the back of the crowd, and the wolves parted to give both Darren and Enzo a view of him striding forward. Darren had no idea how long he had been standing there, how much he had seen, but there was a hungry glint in his eyes when they locked with Darren’s that was all too familiar, a flare to his nostrils Darren knew all too well.

“I haven’t lost,” Enzo spat.

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“Not yet, but you will. Gail?” Aden waited for her to come up and join him, never looking away from Darren. “What do you think?”

She held her chin high. “I think the cub proved his place.”

Enzo moved to stand, but Darren kicked him down again. The crowd booed, but Darren ignored them and pressed his knee to Enzo’s back, between the shoulder blades. Holding him in place, he wrapped his fingers around Enzo’s throat, cutting off his air. He put his mouth close to Enzo’s ear and dropped his voice so low even Aden’s sharp hearing wouldn’t catch the words.

“Come after me again, and I’ll put a leash on you and make you my bitch. Do you understand me?”

“Fuck you.”

With the last of his strength, Enzo tried to buck Darren off. But it was a feeble attempt. Darren bent his knuckles, digging his nails into Enzo’s tender throat. He didn’t have razor sharp claws like a wolf, but his nails were still sharp enough to draw blood. If he were a wolf himself, he would shift then and bite into the back of Enzo’s neck, holding him in place until the other man went limp. But he improvised, “Unless you want to spend the rest of your life on a leash, I suggest you answer my question.”

“I understand.”

“You understand what?”

“I understand, sir.”

“Good boy.”

He tightened his grip for a moment, letting warm blood flow down his fingers before releasing Enzo and pushing himself to his feet. His gaze locked with Aden’s, and all of the adrenaline and energy shifted focus. His blood rushed to his cock, and he didn’t care if every wolf in the building sensed his arousal. He only had

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eyes for Aden. Even when the cage door slammed open and Patricia and another wolf ran to Enzo's side and pulled him to his feet. Even when the rest of the wolves surged forward.

"Clear out," Aden barked.

Darren half-expected them to all bitch and moan. They hadn't done anything but in the past three weeks, but he supposed now they were finally moving beyond that. Aden didn't have to speak again. They sent a few more curious glances to where Darren still stood, in the middle of the cage, his chest lifting and falling rapidly, his cock pushing against his zipper, but nobody spoke to him, or tried to approach him. With his heightened senses, he couldn't ignore the fact that Aden was the most powerful person in the room, and he couldn't ignore what that did to him.

Aden circled the cage, and Darren spun in a tight circle, tracking each step until Aden finally reached the entrance. Darren finally moved. With blood rushing in his ears, he crashed into Aden, seeking out his mouth before either of them could say a word.

CHAPTER 5

Darren molded himself against Aden, gripping the sides of his head and plunging his tongue into Aden's mouth. Aden responded with equal vigor, his strong hands holding Darren's shoulders, his erection pressing into Darren's hip.

"How long were you watching?" Darren asked between gasps for breath.

"Just the last couple minutes." He didn't protest when Darren pushed him back against the wall, widening his stance to better brace against Darren's onslaught. "I watched from the back. I didn't want you to know I was here."

"Honestly?" He pressed his mouth to Aden's neck, leaving a trail of hard kisses across his skin. "You could have let yourself into the cage and I might not have noticed." He pulled Aden's shirt

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from his pants, desperate to get to his hot, salty skin. “Not that you’re easy to ignore. But I was a bit focused.”

“I saw.” Gripping the back of Darren’s neck, Aden bent his head to leave his own fiery trail, nipping at the soft spot below Darren’s ear that always drove him wildest. “You were fucking gorgeous.”

“I was having a bit of fun, too.” Darren left hot kisses down Aden’s chest, unmindful of the shirt blocking his mouth from Aden’s skin. He shuddered with pleasure as soon as he reached Aden’s stomach, lapping at the small lines of sweat clinging to the hard lines of his abdomen. His hands were as busy as his mouth, yanking at Aden’s belt, pulling at his pants, revealing new patches of skin. “It felt good.”

Aden groaned when Darren bit at his stomach, pushing his hips forward until his covered erection nudged against Darren’s throat. It didn’t stay covered for long, though. As soon as the zipper was down, Darren shoved his hand inside to find the hot, hard length. He couldn’t believe they’d only fucked an hour earlier, but this desperate desire never lost its edge, never got fully satisfied, no matter how often Aden made him come. He wondered if it ever would.

“I can’t wait to get you on the reserve now. I want some of that fight for myself.”

Darren moaned. He had temporarily forgotten about the promised trip to the reserve, but now the thought of tracking Aden through the dark, of sparring with him, of feeling Aden’s power and strength unleashed, sent sharp bolts of desire down his spine. He pushed Aden’s pants down to his feet, exposing his muscled thighs to Darren’s seeking hands. He caught the tip of Aden’s cock with his lips, lapping at the pre-come, moaning again as the flavor

erupted across his tongue. He loved the way Aden tasted—his skin, his mouth, his come, everything. He tasted vibrant.

“You’ll get it,” Darren promised. He flashed to another image. Aden tracking *him* through the dark. Aden silently hunting him down, moving as sleek and sure as a shadow through the trees. Darren’s stomach twisted into tighter knots.

For all the lust coursing through both of them, Aden’s hands were surprisingly gentle. Callused fingertips caressed the sharp line of his cheekbone, skimming over the bruise he knew must be forming already. They skidded through the dripping blood at his ear, collecting it and making his skin sticky. They did nothing to pull Darren away or to push him down, allowing him the freedom to take as much of Aden’s cock as he wanted.

Darren swallowed Aden’s erection inch by inch, pulling the length deeper into his throat. He loved stretching his mouth to accommodate Aden, loved relaxing his throat so he could get that unbelievable *filled* sensation. But he knew that wasn’t going to keep him satisfied for long. Not while his blood raced so hot, not while his entire body tingled for more. Without distracting himself from Aden’s cock, he moved into Aden’s touch, tilting his head and sighing with each caress across his face.

“Enzo won’t underestimate you now.” Aden’s husky voice caught on every other syllable, though his hand remained sure and steady. “I don’t think any of them will underestimate you now.”

What about you? Darren didn’t voice the question. He didn’t want to move his mouth from Aden’s cock just yet, and he didn’t want to have the conversation that night at all. Maybe he would the next day. Or the day after. He eased back until only the tip of his length remained between Darren’s lips, and dug his tongue into the slit. He wanted to taste Aden’s pre-come, lingering in his mouth,

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while Aden fucked him. He lapped hungrily at the slick skin until Aden's fingers curled in his hair. It wasn't much. It certainly wasn't enough to hurt Darren, but it was the signal he had been waiting for. Even though he hadn't even known Aden for a month, he knew how to read his lover. They were both ready for more.

Darren straightened and put a hand against Aden's chest, pushing him with enough force to make the wall rattle, then claimed his mouth once again.

Aden didn't waste time working at Darren's clothes, tearing the shirt up the front so that it laid his chest bare. Blood had dripped down to his collar and now smeared across both of their skin, branding Darren in heat only eclipsed by Aden's kiss. He bit at Darren's tongue, growls rumbling from his throat. The wolf was close to the surface. Blood always seemed to do that to him. One of these days, Darren expected the shift to happen anyway. He had absolutely no idea how he would react when it did.

Aden unzipped Darren's pants, and they worked the jeans down Darren's slim hips, toeing off the boots in the process. As soon as he was free of the entanglement of clothes, Darren lifted himself off the floor and wrapped his legs around Aden's hips. Aden's smooth shaft sliding against his ass made him shudder. It occurred to him that if the entire pack was still surrounding the cage, he wouldn't stop. He wouldn't care. He wrapped his arms around Aden's neck, clinging to him as he slid up and down Aden's body, his cock trapped against the other man's stomach.

"God..." Darren sighed. "You always feel so good."

Heavy-lidded eyes locked on his. The only thing better than the lust in his gaze was the firm grip over Darren's ass, spreading the cheeks to give Aden's cock someplace to nestle.

"We feel good," Aden corrected. "Remember that."

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“How I can forget it?” Darren grasped Aden’s cock and guided the tip to his hole. “You don’t give me the chance to forget it.” He rocked back, forcing the thick head past his opening. Despite the lack of lube, he didn’t move slowly. The pressure of Aden’s cock, the welcome burn, the tight friction, completely clouded his brain. He tilted his head back, gasping for breath.

The sharp hitch of Aden’s chest came with a tightening of his hands. Darren tensed, ready for Aden to force him farther down his length, but instead, felt a soft lick over the hollow of his throat. Then another. A third. Each one was followed by a low growl, muffled by the sound of Aden swallowing.

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out he was lapping away the blood.

Except for the continual slide down Aden’s shaft, Darren remained still, fighting every adrenaline-fueled instinct he had. His pulse throbbed. Could Aden feel it? He had to. His mouth worked too hard at Darren’s skin, sucking at the sweat and salt and blood that coated it. Any moment, he expected fangs to extend.

Darren’s arms and legs tightened around Aden, and he didn’t check his strength. He didn’t have to. The absolute worst he could probably do to Aden was bruise him, and he didn’t think Aden would mind. He paused once he was fully seated, focusing on Aden’s tongue, and the way his cock throbbed in Darren’s channel, and the way his breath fanned across Darren’s damp skin. His fingers linked in the fence behind Aden’s head, and he began to rotate his hips, grinding down against Aden.

“Fuck...” Aden muttered. His teeth scraped against Darren’s throat, still blunt but still hungry. “What the hell are you doing to me, gorgeous?”

“Something you like, I hope.”

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One hand abandoned Darren's ass to cup the back of his skull. Aden forced Darren to tilt his head down again, sealing their mouths together in a kiss of passionate desperation, the taste of his own blood turning the caress coppery. The revulsion he expected never came. There was no time for it. He was too lost in the heat Aden promised, drowning under the weight of more sensations than he could ever hope to disentangle.

Darren continued to move in a small circle until he ached for more friction. Every inch of him screamed for it, and his body clenched with anticipation. Aden moaned as he tightened around his cock, the pressure of his mouth increasing until his teeth bit into Darren's lips. Without breaking the seal of their mouths Darren lifted himself, allowing no more than a few inches of Aden's erection to leave his body. They both grunted as he pushed down, and Darren saw flashes of light behind his tightly closed eyes.

With Darren bearing his full weight with the hard circle of his legs around Aden's hips, Aden eased his tight hold to stroke up and down Darren's crease. It tickled where it lingered at the top of his ass, but when it strayed closer and closer to his hole, Darren clenched in reflex. Aden jerked, pushing harder into his tight passage. Darren's reaction encouraged him closer until he traced around the stretched opening, occasionally teasing it by pushing his fingertip inside.

The added pressure of Aden's finger sent Darren into a near frenzy. Darren always enjoyed it when Aden tied him up—even if his instincts told him to fight—but he also hated the fact that he couldn't unleash himself and just let his body take over. He did that now. The more friction he craved, the faster he moved. Whatever he needed from Aden, he took. And Aden only found

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more ways to drive him crazy, his hands and mouth exploiting any tender spot Aden could reach.

His cock remained trapped between their bodies, but for the longest time, Aden never went near it. He was more content taunting Darren with a finger in his ass, or slapping at an ass cheek, or even finding a nipple and twisting it almost painfully. He never pushed for more, letting Darren set the pace and take whatever he wanted. He just met each slam of his hips, or answered each kiss, without anything more than murmured encouragement.

Until he finally scraped his nails down the length of Darren's shaft.

"Fuck..." Darren tore away from Aden's mouth and buried his teeth in Aden's shoulder to stop the scream building in his throat. Nobody else played his body the way Aden could. Nobody else pushed him to such heights with simple caresses. Aden ran his nails down his erection again and again, until Darren squirmed and moaned, disrupting their rhythm completely.

"I thought you wanted to ride me, gorgeous."

"I do." It was all he could do to not grab Aden's hand and press it to his cock. "You're not making it easy."

"Easy's boring."

"Do I bore you?"

"Never." His fingers drifted lower, running along the underside of Darren's sensitive balls. His hot breath rasped across Darren's cheek. "Life's never been as interesting as it has been since Halloween."

"Same...same..." Darren tried to concentrate, tried to focus on moving his hips, on sliding up and down Aden's body. But all he could think about was Aden wrapping his hot hand around

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Darren's prick, stroking him in time with each hard thrust. "God...Aden...fuck me. Just...fuck me."

"Please." Suddenly, he squeezed Darren's cock, not stroking, the sides of his hand pushing against the flare of the crown. "Say please."

Darren didn't hesitate. He enjoyed a good battle of the wills, but not when need and hunger clawed through him. "Please, Aden."

The entreaty opened the door on everything Aden had been withholding. He pressed one hand to the small of Darren's back, using it to even out the slams into Darren's ass, going deeper, harder, longer than he had before. His other hand stripped Darren's cock, swiping over the wet tip on each pull to help coat the harsh path down all the way to his balls. He clamped his mouth over the tender skin where shoulder met neck, sucking almost painfully when Darren tipped his head to the side to make it easier.

And he never stopped.

The entire wall rattled behind Aden, and Darren's fingers began to hurt from the force of his grip on the chain-link. This was what he wanted. What he craved. Like Aden hadn't fucked him like this just an hour before. Like Aden didn't fuck him like this any time Darren needed him. With each second, the pleasure compounded, building on itself, until it eclipsed everything.

"I'm going to..."

Darren didn't even have the chance to fully warn Aden before everything exploded. Colors erupted before his eyes and then everything turned black as the bliss rolled through him. His cock jerked in Aden's hand, painting them both with come. But he was still greedy for more. He didn't want to lose the friction or the pressure. He didn't want to lose Aden's mouth or the sharp points

of his teeth.

“Don’t stop...not yet...please...”

Aden held him close, keeping him together, keeping him from flying apart into the thousands of pieces that always threatened him when he was poised on the verge like this. It didn’t matter that his orgasm was past. Until Aden was spent, Darren would remain ready for him to mold into whatever he wanted, ready to shatter at the slightest provocation.

The strokes into his ass became brutal. Darren whimpered against the heat, clinging to the wall, to Aden, to anything he could get his hands on, as Aden took exactly what he needed now. Without releasing his bite, Aden brought his come-coated hand up to Darren’s mouth, forcing his sticky fingers past his lips.

Darren didn’t need to be told what to do. He sucked as hard as he squeezed around Aden’s cock.

Aden shuddered violently, driving upward with a final, bruising thrust. Fresh come filled Darren’s ass, and he moaned around Aden’s fingers, shivering at the sensation of the thick cock jerking inside him.

The tension slowly eased from Darren’s body, and he released the wall and collapsed around Aden. He knew he would have to stand on his own two feet soon, but in the meantime, he just wanted to enjoy Aden’s body, and the arms that wrapped around his back. The adrenaline that had been fueling him was gone now. And his face was starting to hurt a little.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of this,” Darren muttered.

Aden licked over the spot on his shoulder where he’d been biting, in long, soothing caresses. “Good. I’d hate to have to chase you down if you got bored.”

“Somehow, I think you’d love to chase me down.”

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Chuckling, Aden lifted his head and leaned heavily back against the wall, taking Darren's weight with him. "Think you know me so well already?"

Darren rested his head on Aden's shoulder and closed his eyes. "Yeah, I think I do. Or, at least, I think I get you."

Aden smoothed his hands up and down Darren's back, working away the kinks the adrenaline had left behind. His lips pressed to Darren's damp temple, lingering much longer than Darren would have thought possible.

"I can't really ask for more, now can I?"

Darren wasn't sure if there was any more to ask for. Aden had sized him up the moment they met, and from that point forward, he understood Darren without explanation. It was liberating. He always had a very difficult time dating—most men could not handle Darren's life, his strength, or the urges that sent him out into the night. Aden could, though. That had been worth the sudden overturn of his entire life. That was worth the fight with Enzo. That would even be worth fighting every single wolf in Aden's pack.

"Do you have to go back to the store today?"

"Yeah. Unfortunately." Though regret roughened his voice, his arms remained tight around Darren's body. "I have to start calling the other pack leaders to organize a meeting."

"I guess I better go up to the apartment and stay out of your way, then."

Aden was silent for a moment, his hands still massaging Darren's back. "How much do you know about local packs?"

"Quite a bit. As much as I can without living with them." Darren lifted his head, despite how heavy it felt. "Why?"

"Because I can always use fresh perspectives. If you didn't

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have anything else to do, you could help me go through some of the notes Domingo gave me. Maybe help me organize who'd be best to meet with."

Darren was too exhausted to control his pleased smile. "Let me shower first, and you've got a deal."

"The only way I could possibly concentrate was if you did shower first." With a light slap at his ass, he finally relinquished his hold and let Darren slither down his body. "Take as long as you need. I'll be in my office when you're ready."

Darren moved stiffly as he dressed. Any other time, he would have spent about an hour in a hot shower, gorged himself with food, and collapsed in bed. But he would not pass up the opportunity to help Aden with pack business. Not for any reason. Fresh pleasure filled him at the thought, and once they were dressed, Darren closed his fingers around Aden's, squeezing them briefly.

"Walk me home?"

Something warm passed behind Aden's eyes. Without warning, he bent down and captured Darren's mouth in a soft, almost gentle, kiss.

"Let's go," he said when they parted. He never let go of Darren's hand.

CHAPTER 6

It was hard not to smile like a loon while he organized the notes Domingo had left for him. Darren had been marvelous in the fight, better than Aden had ever dreamed, and far better than his pack had considered possible. Aden hadn't seen the whole thing, but he'd managed to sneak in for the last couple minutes to witness Darren turning every trick back on Enzo, and Enzo slowly getting beaten down. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen anything so beautiful. Asking for his perspective on the other packs had seemed the most natural progression.

After taking that luscious ass first, of course.

In spite of the problem he feared Oliver presented, concentrating was even more difficult now that he wore Darren's scent even more thoroughly. He couldn't stop replaying the fight

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inside his head, or the way Darren had attacked him afterward, or the way he'd writhed and whimpered on Aden's cock. He was voracious, as hungry a lover as Aden had ever had. Aden often wondered if the boy was going to be the first to ever break him. He thought if anybody could, it was Darren. Rather than fill him with dread, the prospect only made him happier.

When the knock came at the door, he fought not to leap to answer it. "Come in!" He turned sideways in his chair to face the wall so he didn't look quite as eager to see Darren again, too.

The smell of sex and blood had been scrubbed from Darren's skin, but his ear was red, and his swollen eye was a magnificent shade of purple. The corner of his mouth was split, and when he shut the door, Aden noticed his knuckles were raw and red. He sat in the chair across from Aden, crossing one leg over the other. A simple action, but even that was done with the grace he had come to associate with Darren.

"Sorry I kept you waiting." He touched his face. "I lost track of time, trying to get the swelling down."

"No, there's no rush. Did you see the witch hazel lotion in the medicine cabinet? That helps me better than ice does."

"I didn't see it. I'll be sure to use it tonight. I don't mind the bruising, but it makes me nervous to be half-blind."

With a half-smile, Aden adjusted his glasses. "You make adjustments as necessary."

"You're half blind? I thought you just wore those glasses to disarm unsuspecting people with your blue eyes."

"I need them for all the really close stuff, and since I spend most of my day around books..." He leaned back in his chair, toying with the pen he hadn't really been using anyway. "My sight's not as affected when I'm a wolf, but I don't rely on my

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close-range vision anyway.”

Darren tilted his head, his lips twitching. “So disarming people is just a bonus?”

“I didn’t realize they had that effect on people. I wasn’t wearing them the night of the Halloween party, after all.”

“Fortunately, I noticed your pretty blue eyes even without the glasses.” Darren leaned forward and studied the papers on Aden’s desk. “Are you really going to try to get all the pack leaders together in one place?”

He’d forgotten all about the reason he’d called Darren into his office in the first place. The reminder jolted him from the pleasant buzz going through his system at their mild flirtation, and he sat up, straightening the worst of the notes.

“As many as I can. If Oliver is up to something, people need to be warned.” He found the short list he’d made and slid it across. “Do you recognize any of those names?”

Darren’s lips thinned as he scanned the list, his face otherwise impassive. Aden was sure Darren recognized at least three or four of the names. Besides Aden himself, they were the most powerful pack leaders in the area. Even if Darren didn’t realize they were wolves, he would recognize them as political and business leaders.

“Yes.” He grimaced. “You’re not really going to invite Vince Crane and Tyler Berry, are you?”

He deliberately kept a cool mask. “I was considering it. Crane has run of the Beltway, and Berry’s pack is one of the oldest in the region. Why do you think I shouldn’t?”

“Crane has his run of the Beltway because he’s a snake. Nothing wrong with that around here, but last year, we got reports of a young girl at the morgue who had been torn to shreds. After a pretty straightforward investigation, we learned she was a call girl

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and she disappeared after a date with one Peter Phillips. Or Peter Vincent Phillip Crane. The police were on to him, too, and next thing we know, they're arresting Jake Harrison and charging him with her murder. The police didn't see the connection, but we did. He was part of Crane's pack. He either framed Jake or sold him out."

The packs had wondered how much of the frame-up had leaked out. Aden didn't approve of what Crane had done, but it wasn't his place to interfere.

"What if I told you Harrison was a rogue with his own agenda? How would that affect your feelings on Crane?"

"It doesn't change the fact that a girl was brutally murdered and justice probably wasn't served. If what you say is true, it sounds like Crane is an opportunistic bastard who'll mold any situation into fitting his own purposes."

"That might be all the more reason to keep him under close scrutiny."

Darren shrugged. "Keep him under close scrutiny. Do some investigation and find out how much he knows. Or better yet, if he's been attending Oliver's parties. But if by some miracle Crane *doesn't* know there's a wolf in town building up a base of power and money, I don't see any reason why you should tell him, because he won't necessarily be your ally."

Aden would bet the store that Crane did know, but he kept that knowledge to himself. Crane was one of the sneakiest bastards in the DC area. One of these days, he'd fill Darren in on just what kind of scouts he had in the other packs, but not now.

"And what about Berry?" he asked. "What's your problem with him?"

"For starters, he's a prick. And I know he's hunting young

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teens. You ever notice how many kids are in his pack? One of these days, I'll catch him in the act, and that'll be the end of his career as an alpha."

Aden's eyes narrowed. "You still talk like Argenti."

"I promised you that I wouldn't kill any members of your pack, and I fully intend to keep that promise. I never said I would turn a blind-eye to other wolves, or pretend that I don't know what I do."

"I have peace with Berry's pack. Killing him will disrupt that."

Darren folded his arms. "Then maybe you should drop a friendly word to him and let him know he needs to stop sniffing around children. I haven't killed him because it's just a very strong suspicion, and Jasmine was never able to get anything solid on him. She's still watching him, too, I'd wager."

He made a mental note to call Berry about that very issue. He didn't like the wolf, either, and thought his practices despicable, but as the oldest alpha in the DC area with the oldest pack, he merited respect until he could be deposed.

"I can't get out of inviting Berry. If I don't, I'll risk looking like a threat to him. But if I set the meeting up at the reserve, Crane won't come, so that solves that problem."

"Good." Darren passed the list back to Aden. "Do you think...is this going to be too much of a problem?"

Aden knew he referred to the Argenti comment. He shrugged. "I think that depends on who you talk to and how you talk to them. Others don't know you like I do."

"I don't plan to talk to anybody else about what I'm doing or why. And I don't care what others think. I care about what you think."

"What about friends? You can't isolate yourself."

"Friends?"

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He cocked a brow. "You know. People you hang out with. People you bitch to about your boyfriend. People you tell how fantastic your boyfriend is in bed."

"Yeah, I know what you mean, but I've never had any. Jasmine was the closest thing to a friend I ever had, and you can see how that turned out. And August...well, I never hung out with her or anything like that. Unless stakeouts count, I suppose."

"But that was before. When you didn't have anybody. Now you've got the pack."

Darren touched his cheek and smiled wryly. "I think you missed the part where they wanted Enzo to tear my arms off and eat them. I fought Enzo so they'd leave me alone, and in return, I'll stay out of their way."

"You fought Enzo to earn their respect," Aden corrected. "And now that you've beaten him, you've got it, which means they are not just going to ignore you anymore."

"What do you mean? What are they going to do?"

"Maybe nothing. But you've proven you can fight now. And there might come a time when the pack needs that. At the very least, they're going to expect acknowledgment that you're one of them."

"I'll fight for the pack if it's necessary. And I'll do whatever else you ask me to do but... I don't know. I guess I never thought any of the pack would want anything to do with me."

"Why?" Darren's refusal to see his own appeal, beyond what he brought to the table to their budding relationship, perplexed Aden. "They don't hate humans. They live and work with them every day."

"But they do hate Argenti. I might have earned their respect today, but every single one of them knows exactly why I was able

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to beat Enzo. And I don't know..." Darren leaned back in his chair, looking more uncertain than Aden had ever seen him look before. "You say that I have the pack now, but I don't know what that means."

"They hate Argenti, because to them, they're murderers. The fact that you went into a fight with Enzo without a weapon to kill him almost told them more about you than the fact you won." He itched to get up and pull Darren into his arms, but he didn't want to look like he was coddling him. He wanted Darren to figure this out on his own. "And having the pack means now you have family. Family you can trust. Family who isn't going to try and kill you to create a new and better family."

Darren snorted softly. "In that case, I'll make sure not to mention any hunting I might or might not do in the future. And I won't go out of my way to avoid them, should our paths cross."

Their paths would cross, of that, Aden was certain. But he'd said enough on the matter today. Darren needed to process the information to his own satisfaction. Eventually, he'd find the resolution he needed.

"Have you had any direct contact with any of the leaders on this list?" he asked, reverting back to the original topic.

"Direct contact? Yeah, I met Ben Lodz once. He tracked me down once with a tip about a rogue wolf. I actually liked him. I had a gun on him the whole time, but he gave me the information he needed to give me. And I was introduced to Justin Baker and Leo Lane at different parties, but they didn't know who I was or why I was there."

That would work to his advantage. Argenti agents weren't widely known by face, just by reputation. The only reason Aden had known August Hogue was one was because he'd called in

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most of his markers to get as current a list of agents as possible. In his book, Jasmine was the enemy. Darren might trust her not to come after him, but Aden sure as hell didn't. The only way he could guarantee Darren's safety was to know who might be the one sent after him.

"My plan is to call for a meeting at the reserve in three days. I can't have you there because the other wolves will sniff you out right away, but that doesn't mean you have to be twiddling your thumbs."

"What do you want me to be doing?"

"You can work with Domingo on following through on what Oliver might be up to."

"I could sniff around and find out if Oliver is going to be having another party any time soon."

"No, that's already covered. Terence is going to forward that information to me when he gets it."

"What are you going to do with that information?"

He frowned. "I haven't decided yet."

"Let me go investigate, Aden. That'll be the easiest way to find out who's there and what the hell is going on."

With a sigh, Aden tossed his pen onto the desk and shook his head. "We've had this discussion already."

"No, you've told me why you don't like the idea. That doesn't actually count as a discussion. You can't send any other member of the pack in there, because Oliver would recognize them immediately. And you can't trust that anybody else attending the party would give you accurate information, if they even talk to you at all. Plus, we know that it's not just a houseful of wolves, if Oakes is getting regular invitations."

"That doesn't make it any less dangerous. The biggest mistake

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you could make is underestimating Oliver. Trust me. That was mine.”

“I’m not going to go into the party unprepared. The first thing I do when I get a new assignment is gather intelligence. You can tell me everything I need to know about the man before I go in. We can agree upon the parameters, including what time I leave and how and when to contact you.”

His first instinct was to tell Darren he wasn’t Jasmine and Darren couldn’t treat this like an assignment. Except as soon as he thought it, he realized how wrong it was. Because Darren was part of his pack, and he gave the same types of orders to any one of his wolves when there were problems to be addressed. He’d given Domingo an order to collect information, after all. He’d given him strict requirements to follow, with a deadline. How was that different to what Darren was asking?

He wasn’t fucking Domingo. That was what was different. He didn’t want Darren anywhere near Oliver. His instincts told him to protect Darren. Shield him. In ways he didn’t feel for the rest of the pack.

But there was no way in hell he could tell Darren that.

“It’s too soon for any kind of move. I don’t want anybody approaching Oliver until we’re better prepared.”

“What is this? Do I have to prove myself to you, too?”

“This isn’t about you.” Which was a lie, through and through. He could only hope Darren wouldn’t call him on it.

“Then what is it about? You say we can’t make a move until we’re better prepared, but there’s no way you can be better prepared until you know *what* he’s doing. And you’ll never know that until you get somebody on the inside.” Darren sat up, moving to the edge of the chair. “Or am I asking the wrong question? Not

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what it's about but who it's about?"

He had to give Darren something. It killed him to have to talk about it, but Aden knew he didn't have a choice. "Yes," he admitted softly. "Oliver is ambitious, ruthless, and unafraid. I made the mistake of trusting him once, and he betrayed me. I cannot afford to make that kind of mistake again."

Darren shook his head. "No, you're not telling me anything. I already know the man is ambitious, and most wolves are ruthless and unafraid. A number of them also betray their alphas. If that scared me, I would have quit Argenti a long time ago."

"I don't know what you want to hear then."

"Something other than a bunch of excuses. You don't want to make the mistake of trusting him again, but I'm not asking you to trust him. You don't want to make a move until we have more information, but I'm not asking you to make any move. You say this isn't about me, it isn't about not trusting me, but you're clearly not telling me something."

His resolve snapped. "Which part do you want to hear? How he was the last lover I had who was a member of my pack? Or the part where he put the whole pack in the middle of Argenti fire because he thought fucking me gave him certain privileges?"

The wheels of his chair squeaked across the runner beneath his desk when he shoved it back and stood, whipping off his suit jacket and tossing it over the arm. He removed his cufflinks and started rolling back his sleeve. "You say I don't trust you to do this, but clearly, you don't trust me when I say I know what I'm doing. So trust this."

He shoved his exposed forearm toward Darren, baring the long, pale scar that marred the skin, the scar he bore as a result of the first time he'd ever met an Argenti agent.

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"I stood in front of him, in front of my pack, in front of everybody it's my duty to protect, and took a silver bullet from one of your kind, because I made the mistake of believing Oliver when he lied to me about everything he was doing. He made a fool out of me when everybody found out the truth. Which part of making a fool out of me again are you so comfortable with, Darren? Tell me, just so that we're perfectly clear on the matter."

Darren lowered his lashes, and when he looked up again, his eyes were clear. Aden half-expected them to be dark with anger, reflecting his own rage. The rage he felt every time he thought about Oliver, and the pain of a silver bullet tearing through his flesh.

"You haven't cornered the market on pain and regret. I understand how much it hurts to be betrayed and lied to. Jasmine didn't just recruit me into Argenti when I was fourteen, she took me into her home. I would have taken a bullet for her. I would have done anything for her." He stood up. "But while we're making things perfectly clear, I'll say this. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to make a fool out of you. I don't want to put you or your family at risk. Whether or not you believe I'm on your side, whether or not that matters to you, doesn't change the basic fact that Argenti isn't *my kind* anymore. I was kicked out, and the woman who was my mentor and best friend is willing to shoot me on sight. But I'm not a wolf, either. And I don't know how to lead a normal life, or even if I'm capable of that. So maybe I don't fit in anywhere. But I think I might fit with you, and I don't want anybody to finish what Oliver started five years ago."

"I know that." And God, he did. Somehow, he'd known that when he'd made the offer to Darren to stay with him in the first place. "But fitting with me means fitting with my pack, which

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means you have to trust that I know what I'm doing. That's all I'm asking."

"I know you need me to trust you. I know. But you say *that's all* as if it's really as easy as that. You say it like I've been living in a wolf pack all my life instead of hunting them. You say it like the person I trusted implicitly didn't just try to kill me three weeks ago. You say it like I'm some naïve person who needs your protection, when you know I'm not. It's not as easy as that for me. Not right now."

"So where does that leave us?" Because right now, he had no fucking clue.

"It leaves us with a summit to plan. I won't go to a party. I will not go anywhere near Oliver. I'll even work with Domingo, if you want me to. But I'll be honest with you, Aden, I'm not going to sit back and pretend I can't help. Trust is a two-way street."

He was right, of course. Now Aden just had to figure out a way to prove that he did trust Darren. Without getting him killed.

* * *

Darren not only needed to sleep, he wanted to sleep. He was exhausted. His body was sore from the fight with Enzo. His mind was racing after his conversation with Aden. Or maybe that had been a fight, too. He kept hearing the disgust in Aden's voice when he said *your kind*, and he kept seeing the twisted scar on Aden's arm when he closed his eyes, and his mind kept turning over the problem of Oliver. A wolf he had never met, yet one that was quickly becoming his worst enemy.

Darren knew how to bring down wolves. Sometimes, it wasn't easy. Sometimes, it was ridiculously difficult. Sometimes, he had

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to concoct elaborate plans and execute each minute detail perfectly, with nothing but faith in his own ability. This problem was no different. This wolf would be no different. And finally, just after one—shortly after his eyes became dry and itchy—the plan came to him.

“Aden? You awake?”

At his side, the broad expanse of Aden’s back didn’t move, his breathing as silent as it had been for the last two hours since he’d climbed into bed next to Darren. Seconds passed. Darren was almost ready to concede that somehow Aden had managed to find sleep when the blankets shifted with Aden’s soft sigh.

“Yes.”

“I still think we need to know exactly what the fuck Oliver is doing at his parties. And I think I’ve figured out a way to get that information without putting anybody in the pack at risk.” Darren took a deep breath. “We use August.”

Aden rolled onto his back. Light filtering through the curtains caught his eyes, making them gleam silver in the darkness. “What do you mean, we use August?”

“Wire her up for visual and audio and send her into the party. She does things like this all the time. It’ll be easy for her to get into the party itself. She’s good at undercover work because nobody looks at her and thinks she’s a hunter.”

“Why would she ever agree to do something like that?”

“Because we’re on the same side. She...one reason she called me today was to give me a warning. She heard that something big is brewing, with your pack right at the center. She doesn’t know what, though, and she doesn’t know who’s at the center of it. If I tell her I suspect it’s Oliver Moss, she’ll be all over it.”

“I thought you said she was warning you about Jasmine.”

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“She did. She warned me that Jasmine is serious about orders to shoot me. She also made it clear that Jasmine is lying to the entire organization about what happened that night and why. And she swore me to secrecy and told me there are some major rumors going around about a huge power struggle with you in the middle of it.”

Aden fell silent again. Only the reflection of the moonlight off his eyes told Darren he was still awake.

“Oliver would never associate her with me, that’s for sure,” he finally mused. “And if he did discover she was Argenti, he would never in a million years think I had anything to do with it. Not after what happened last time.”

“Plus, it can only help us to put Argenti on Oliver’s tail. Jasmine won’t be interested in him if he’s only building up a base for a power struggle, but if August discovers anything illegal, Argenti will be all over him.”

Aden snorted. “That’d make a nice change.”

“I’ll get in contact with her tomorrow.” Darren rolled to his side, curving around Aden’s body. “After I sleep for twenty hours.”

The slide of Aden’s arm beneath him, pulling him closer and onto Aden’s chest, was the best thing he’d felt all day. “No moaning in your sleep, then.” He brushed a kiss across Darren’s forehead, his lips warm and dry. “You’re absolutely adorable when you do that, and I won’t be able to resist.”

“If you would just stay out of my dreams, we wouldn’t have that problem.” Darren yawned so wide, he thought his jaw would pop free. “Nobody’s ever called me adorable before.”

“I could call you cub instead.”

“Just because I don’t hit old ladies when they call me that

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doesn't mean you're safe," Darren warned.

Aden's arm tightened around him. "That a promise?"

Darren sighed with satisfaction. After sleeping by himself his whole life, he loved the way Aden held him as closely as he could. "Absolutely. If you ever want a fight, now you know how to get it."

Another kiss. This one longer, softer. "Good night, gorgeous."

Darren yawned again, settling more comfortably against Aden's chest. "Pleasant dreams, sunshine."

CHAPTER 7

The reserve was beyond the circle of the Beltway, out toward Maryland City where population became sparse and privacy was at a premium. It was Aden's haven when he needed to escape the city, where he could have miles upon miles to run and roam without fear of recrimination or hunting because of his form. He let the pack use it when they wanted to. A happy pack was a much better alternative than one wound up from lack of exercise. He was convinced that was why his was one of the most stable packs in the district. Others had to skulk through streets and wrestle with urban living to vent their true natures. Sublimating their energies only made them restless and impulsive.

Three days wasn't long to organize the kind of summit he had in mind, but waiting any longer was out of the question. The

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undercurrents Oliver had been stirring had been going on for too long. Patience had never been Oliver's strong suit, though he'd been a stunning liar, so if Aden was hearing about his machinations now, that had to mean they'd been in play for quite some time.

Oliver had to be stopped. Before the people who trusted him got hurt. Aden had no doubts they would be. In the end, the only thing Oliver cared about was himself.

The house on the reserve was much larger than his apartment over the book store, and security was a hell of a lot tighter. A locked main gate blocked the long, narrow road that wound through the property to the building at its center, with additional alarms on the house itself. Having the alarms off for the purpose of the summit made him itchy, but this was an important meeting amongst leaders. He had to prove he trusted them. Of course, he still wasn't allowing seconds to come with the pack alphas, but that was about the sensitive issues at hand, not trust. Several had declined the offer for that very reason. Aden had a shortlist of men to contact when he was back in the city, to discuss matters one on one instead.

There were only four rooms in the house, though each was massive. Three couches barely made a dent in the oversized living room. Aden took little time to rearrange them so none had their back to the front door and everyone got a good view of each other. There was food and wine ready to be consumed, though he questioned whether or not anyone would actually eat or drink anything.

Five minutes before he'd told people to start arriving, headlights flashed across the front window. Aden took a seat furthest from the door, open to allow his guests to walk in without

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having to be invited. The other advantage was nobody could surprise him on the other side of a closed door with a silver bullet.

Leo Lane appeared in the entrance. He was one of the youngest pack leaders in the district, barely twenty-two when he'd taken over his small, intensely private group nearly eight years earlier. At five-ten, he had the look of a younger, stockier Hugh Jackman, always smiling, always charming the pants off anything that moved. Aden had been relieved when Darren hadn't had anything negative to say about Leo. He genuinely liked the younger wolf. Beneath his gregarious exterior was an honorable fighter who defended his own to the bone, and had the scars to prove it.

"So this is the inner sanctum." Leo prowled around the edge of the room, fingertips skimming along wooden window sills, steps deceptively long for his height. "Funny, but I didn't figure you for so rustic."

"It's all appearances." Like keeping his seat and letting Leo roam. He knew Leo was scenting the place out. He wasn't worried about anything untoward happening. "How's the Hill?"

Leo made a face. "Talking about appearances."

"Hey, it's your life."

"We could talk about yours instead."

"Mine's boring. All books."

"And secret summit meetings among pack leaders." Leo shot him a grin. "That's not boring."

Aden stretched his arm across the back of the couch, resting his ankle on his knee. "Nice try. But I'm not telling you before the others get here."

"Well, that's no fun."

"This isn't about fun."

"Oh, it's a little fun." Hopping over the back of the opposite

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couch, Leo sat on its cushion with his feet on the seat, looming over Aden in a clear dominant position. Anybody else, and Aden would've knocked him off. Since it was Leo, he merely smiled. "Just so long as this isn't about your books."

"Some people like books."

"Some people like brussels sprouts. There's no accounting for taste."

"Mine's exquisite, thank you."

Leo winked. "Yeah, I heard."

Aden was prevented from asking more by the arrival of more cars outside the house. This time, he stood, though it was to stand at the fireplace and wait. It was one thing to let Leo posture when it was just the two of them. It was something else to let it happen in front of their peers.

One by one, the leaders trickled in. Ben Lodz. Justin Baker. Tyler Berry. Paul Kahlert. Within ten minutes, everyone had arrived, all eleven who had accepted his invitation. Crane had refused, as Aden had expected. He never left the sanctuary of the Beltway. Six others had declined to come. Aden would've preferred a larger group, but he'd settle for the majority in this case.

"Gentlemen," he said, when everyone was seated. "Thank you for coming tonight."

Berry cleared his throat. He'd grown a beard since the last time Aden had seen him, and the thick, gray hair hid his multiple chins. He was getting fat and lazy as he got older. Aden fully expected him to be replaced by someone younger and hungrier within the next couple years.

"No pussyfooting around, Richter," he said. "What's this about?"

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“Now, would I call you all the way out here if it wasn’t important?”

“Who knows what the hell you’d do these days,” Kahlert complained.

Leo laughed. “Someone’s a little green.”

“Someone’s a little pissed off he had to cancel out of a White House engagement to sneak into the woods,” Kahlert snapped.

“Jesus, are you a wolf or not?” Long and lanky, Justin scowled at Kahlert from where he stood near the doorway. He was one of the few who refused to sit. The man practically vibrated from all the energy he contained. “Let Aden talk. The sooner we find out what’s going on, the sooner we can get out of here.”

“I’m not completely sure about what’s going on yet,” Aden said smoothly. “But I called this meeting because it’s come to my attention that Oliver Moss is back in town.”

His ex’s name cast a hush over the room, much as he’d expected. The events with Oliver and his subsequent banishment from the pack had made the wolf circuit within two days of everything happening. There wasn’t a leader in this room who didn’t know what had happened.

“Well, he’s got balls,” Leo said. “Has he contacted you?”

Aden shook his head. “But he’s contacting other people. He’s been throwing parties all over the city. Pack parties in the guise of charity functions.”

“He’s forming his own pack?” Berry shook his head. “Idiot upstart. He can’t seriously think any of us will let him get any kind of power. Not after the stunts he pulled.”

“He can, and he is,” Aden said. “He went straight for the Hill. I’ve got it on good authority that he’s been sucking up to anybody who even breathes in a political direction.”

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At mention of the Hill, Leo sat up. "I haven't heard about this. At all."

"Probably because it's your territory. He doesn't want to tip his hand to you until it's too late."

"Well, he can tip his hand. I'll tear it off and shove it up his ass."

Kahlert laughed. "Oliver could take you any day."

All eyes turned to him. Aden's narrowed. "I don't remember you and Oliver being on such friendly terms before."

"We weren't." When nobody looked away, he shrugged. "I might've heard from him since he came back to town."

"Might have?" Berry pressed. "Either you did, or you didn't."

"Fine. I did."

Aden crossed his arms over his chest. "And you didn't think to warn me he was back?" He'd never cared for Kahlert. The wolf was sloppy and stupid, two of his least favorite characteristics in others. Now he had even less reason to like him.

"So he's throwing a few parties. So what?" His tiny black eyes glared at Aden. "It's not like you don't schmooze with the best of them. Or Leo. Or Berry, for that matter."

"I don't go recruiting new wolves from DC's elite."

"Humans aren't the elite." He might as well have curled his lip back and bared his teeth, there was so much disgust in his tone. "We are."

"That's exactly the kind of thinking that's going to get your pack targeted," Aden said. "Don't be such an idiot."

"Or get the rest of us targeted," Justin added.

"Oliver's not interested in drawing undue attention to the packs," Kahlert argued. "Why do you think he's going to these extremes?"

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Berry shifted to better face him. "Why don't you tell us what he's doing?"

Kahlert's gaze jumped around. "I'm not the only one he's approached. I know he talked to Crane."

"Crane's not here to defend himself." Though Aden couldn't say he was surprised. "We want you to tell us."

"And have you tear him down again? I don't think so."

When Kahlert moved to stand, Leo leapt from his seat and nearly tackled him back to the couch. Snarls erupted, fur shimmering over exposed skin, before Berry grabbed the back of Kahlert's neck and Aden had Leo's. A bloody gash marred Kahlert's cheek, while his eyes flashed silver as he growled at the group.

"This was supposed to be a peaceful meeting." He tore away from Berry's grasp, though the only place to retreat was deeper into the living room. "I should have known Richter would go back on his word."

Aden gave Leo a good shake before dropping him to his feet. "Nobody is going to keep you here if you want to leave." He cut Leo off when he opened his mouth to protest. "But if you leave now, without answering our questions, don't expect us to just forget."

Kahlert didn't look convinced. In fact, he looked ready to strike again, should anyone be unfortunate enough to get close enough. He edged to the side, weighing each reaction, each response. Nobody moved. Berry's nostrils flared, and Leo's knuckles cracked when he balled his hands into fists, but otherwise, everything remained still.

Justin stepped out of his way when Kahlert made a run for it. Three others immediately followed, each one souring Aden's

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mood a little bit more. The blaze of their headlights flooded the room as their cars roared to life. Two minutes later, all was silent again.

"I guess it's fair to say they probably heard from Oliver, too," Leo commented.

"Yes," Aden agreed. "Which makes me wonder who else is on his list."

"Well, now we're on the alert." Ben stood and stretched. "Personally, I'd love to know what's going on at those parties of his."

Aden held his tongue. He didn't want the others to know he'd already taken care of that. If all was going to plan, Darren and August should already be in place and monitoring the latest soiree.

"I think our next priority should be in locating his base of operations," Berry said. "Where's his pack hunkering down, where's he planning on defending if it comes down to a fight."

"Apparently, that's the Hill," Leo said dryly.

"Just because he's garnering favors there, doesn't mean he's staking it out as his territory." Aden clapped a reassuring hand on Leo's shoulder. "And I have no doubt that if you smell anything funny going on, you'll take care of it. Right after calling me."

Leo laughed. "Right."

"Are we done here?" Justin asked.

Aden nodded. "Anybody who wants to stick around and discuss this further, though, is welcome to stay. I think it's a mistake to underestimate Oliver."

Someone muttered, "You would," but most of them were too close together as they headed for the door for him to discern exactly who had said it. Only two alphas remained when the last car had pulled away from the house—Leo and Berry. The presence

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of neither wolf surprised him.

“You know this is personal.”

Under Berry’s shrewd gaze, Aden finally sat down. “I know. I’ve had it from a few sources that my pack is supposed to be in the middle of whatever it is Oliver has planned.”

“You should have killed him when you had the chance.” Leo’s matter-of-fact tone came with a simple shrug. “But hey, at least you learned from it. You’ve been a lot smarter about lovers since then.”

None of them knew of Darren yet, thank God. Though it wouldn’t take long for that to get out either.

“And you know I’m on your side,” Leo continued. “If you need anything, just call. I’m not interested in losing ground to this asshole just because he’s got a grudge.”

Aden tried to smile. “You just want me to owe you.”

“That, too.”

He turned eyes to Berry. “What about you? Can I count on you if it comes down to a fight?”

Berry was slower to chime in. “I agree with Leo. You should have killed him when he brought Argenti down on you. That was a fatal mistake, Richter.”

“If it had been fatal, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“You still might not be here. He was dangerous when he thought he was in love with you. Think of how much more dangerous he’ll be now that he’s fueled by revenge.”

That was all Aden had been able to think about. What scared him even more was if Oliver found out about Darren. He didn’t fear Darren wouldn’t be able to hold his own, but if Oliver decided to play dirty and sic his whole pack on Darren, that was a different story. How many wolves had Darren ever faced at one time? How

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many wolves did Oliver have at his disposal? Damn it, he hated not having these answers. Hopefully, Darren would have some by the time the night was through.

“He’s not getting the upper hand this time,” he said. “My whole pack is on alert.”

“And if you have to kill him?”

“I will.” That was all there was to it.

Berry finally seemed satisfied. He lumbered to his feet, scratching at his beard. “Keep me updated on what’s going on. And if you need us to fight, just call.”

He hadn’t realized just how worried he was about not having Berry’s support until the relief washed over him. Keeping his features even, he walked Berry to the door and watched as the man got into his BMW. Leo hovered at Aden’s elbow. First to arrive, last to leave. That suggested an agenda.

Aden was fucking tired of agendas.

“Berry’s on the skids, you know.” Leo said it casually, without malice. “You should be prepared in case he can’t follow through.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t say that in front of him.”

“I’m not completely stupid.”

“And you think it’s safe saying something like that in front of me?”

“I think you know it, too. And you appreciate honesty.”

Aden snorted. “I just hate liars more.” He leaned against the jamb. “Is there some reason you wanted my ear all to your own, Leo? And remember what I just said.”

With a nod, Leo pulled himself straighter, all humor wiped from his face. “I want you to see how serious I am about this. I meant it. Anything you want. My pack is yours until this goes away.”

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“Why?”

“Because it’s like I said. Berry’s on the skids. It’s not going to be long before you’re the most powerful alpha in the district. Unlike Kahlert, I support the winning side.”

Of course, he did. “Don’t let me down then.” He forewent the warning. Leo knew.

Jogging down the few stairs, Leo melted into the darkness as he headed for his car. He waved once without looking back, but already, Aden was turning back into the cabin. He had a lot to consider.

And more than anything else, he wished desperately Darren was there for him to talk to about it all.

CHAPTER 8

Darren's gaze drifted to his watch. Just after eleven. Aden's meeting should be in full swing. The thought of all those pack leaders in one place made him nervous. Almost as nervous as the sight of all the pack leaders flocking around Oliver. The fact that Oliver's party was on the same night as Aden's summit was Darren's first, and last, stroke of luck. And it wasn't even that lucky. It really only allowed him a single day to track down August—not an easy thing to do since he didn't dare call her—tell her the plan, convince her to go along with it, and find the equipment necessary to make the plan a success. He didn't dare let Aden down, not after reassuring him everything would work, but it was sure as hell tempting to throw everything out and just do it himself, regardless of what Aden thought.

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Instead of relying on third parties to put him in contact with August, he decided to seek her out. She didn't technically have her own home. She stayed with friends and family throughout DC—precisely so nobody could accomplish what Darren was trying to do. He wished he could just call Jasmine. She would want Oliver's head as much as Darren wanted it. They were on the same side of this issue. What did it matter if he was helping Aden? Aden hadn't been guilty of any crime. And wolves would continue to exist, living right under their noses, regardless of what they did. But if Jasmine did accept that, she'd have to actually admit her own crimes, and Darren doubted she would ever do that.

August didn't seem surprised to see him once he tracked her down to her cousin's house. Perhaps she had predicted he had a good chance of crawling back to the familiar, trying to make his life make sense again. She had looked knowingly at his swollen eye, but she didn't ask about it. Darren didn't volunteer any information, either. It seemed like too much of a risk to tell a fellow hunter that he had been fighting for a position in the pack. He also did not have to do too much talking to convince her to help him. Her eyes had widened with the mention of an invitation to Oliver's party, and when he assured her he wouldn't interfere with her investigation, she actually hugged him in her excitement.

They visited Stanly next. If Stanly had a last name, nobody knew it. Nobody needed it. He was the thorn in the side of everybody who wanted to do anything even vaguely questionable. He was aware of the wolves, but he was almost exclusively interested in politicians. He had surveillance equipment throughout the city, and he sold the tapes to tabloids and news stations. Not everything he sold could be run as a story, but he still made more than enough at his chosen occupation. Stanly wasn't the sort to

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care about his own illegal actions. He justified those by pointing out that if DC wasn't full of pimps and whores, he wouldn't have to spy on them. He was just trying to bring a bit of accountability to the city.

His eyes lit up like twin Christmas trees when Darren mentioned Oliver Moss.

"I haven't been able to get into his house at all. He's got security like you wouldn't believe."

"We can get in," Darren said, "we just need the equipment."

"I'll give you the equipment, but I own the rights to everything you record."

Darren imagined Aden watching the report of the party on CNN. He didn't like the image. "After two weeks."

"Two weeks? Nobody will care about this in two weeks!"

"They'll care. But I'm not doing this because I want the money. We're trying to conduct an investigation here."

"You think there are going to be any politicians there?"

"Sure. Don't you?"

Stanly nodded absently. "Fine. Two weeks. I'll get her all hooked up, and you can watch the festivities from here."

"There's no way we could get a bit closer to the party? I'd feel better if she wasn't going in without backup."

"Are you going to make it worth my while?"

August stepped forward. "You take care of this, and you won't need to sell your trash for another year. Deal?"

Stanly shrugged. "Yeah, sure, it's a deal. What time you going into the party?"

"Ten. Hopefully by then it'll be so crowded nobody will notice me."

"Be here by eight, then. That'll give us enough time to get

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everything wired up.”

They were there by eight, and a little over two hours later, August was inside the party, looking absolutely gorgeous in a blue dress that complimented her eyes, her curtain of hair flowing down her back. Her clutch had a camera in it, which didn’t provide the best angles, but the picture quality was surprisingly sharp. The small brooch on her wrap hid a microphone, and once again, Darren had to be impressed with the quality of the equipment. But then, he supposed, Stanly wouldn’t make any money if he couldn’t sell television-ready recordings.

For the first hour or so, August didn’t see or hear anything remotely interesting to Darren. It was just like any other cocktail party in the District—or at least every other cocktail party Darren had ever attended. People stood around in small groups, discussing elections, and taxes, and new laws, and ongoing fights, and other boring shit that didn’t matter. How they could calmly have those discussions in the middle of a wolf’s lair, he didn’t know.

Of course, the wolf’s lair was quite comfortable. Seductive, even. Everything from the location on the Hill to the way it was decorated was meant to impress. Meant to reassure the guests that the owner really did have power. And money. It would intimidate most people, but the politicians, the wolves, and the billionaires who made up Oliver’s guest list wouldn’t be overwhelmed. They probably weren’t even mildly impressed. This was their life, after all. Oliver was the one with something to prove.

Darren was more interested in the man himself than in his house. August mingled, moving from group to group, introducing herself and asking all the right questions. Darren had to admit sending her in was probably a better idea than attending the party himself. He wasn’t good at mingling. He probably would have set

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himself up in a corner and simply watched the function, possibly attracting attention to himself and creeping people out in the process. But even with August's mingling, it was still over an hour before Darren finally caught a glimpse of the man behind the party.

Oliver Moss was young—or he looked much younger than his years. At first glance, his face wasn't at all attractive. His nose was too long, his mouth too hard, his eyes too small. But there was something about it that drew a person's attention again and again. His brown hair was perfectly cut, and somehow even the way it gleamed beneath the lights spoke of the money he must have spent on it. He wore a perfectly tailored tuxedo over his compact body, and Darren knew there wouldn't be a single inch of fat. It would all be muscle. Darren wouldn't be surprised to learn that Oliver spent at least two hours at the gym every day. When he smiled, his teeth were perfect and white, but the expression lacked any depth or sentiment. His eyes lacked depth, too. Everything about him was shallow. Why were so many people falling for his act? Darren only saw a slick snake-oil salesman.

Of course, snake-oil salesmen were successful for a reason. Darren found him positively repulsive, but he faked sincerity well. Politicians, at least, could respect him for that.

Darren never took his attention from the video feed, but for the first two hours, the party was nothing except a party. People drank champagne, ate *hors d'oeuvres* from passing trays, and talked about boring shit. He had gotten in a fight with Aden over this? Aden had called a summit meeting over this? There were rumors and whispered warnings making it all the way to Argenti because some wolf liked to throw boring parties? Darren wondered how he could make it up to August, and Stanly, when the huge grandfather clock began to chime.

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The room became so silent, so quickly, that Darren wondered if the mic malfunctioned. Except, he could still hear the echoing chimes of the clock. The overhead lights flickered off one by one. It was very Hollywood, but still quite effective. The room was so quiet, he heard August's dress rustle as she moved—possibly to get a better view of whatever was happening.

“Ladies and gentlemen...my dear friends...I'm so pleased you could join me tonight.”

August spun around quickly, but Darren couldn't see the source of the words. Not until August tilted up her clutch, supplying a somewhat limited view of the balcony where Oliver stood. He had somebody with him, but Darren didn't recognize the person. Darren couldn't even tell if it was a man or woman, due to the poor light and the distance.

“Many of you here tonight know Lonnie. She is a gracious and beautiful woman, and I have long admired her commitment to helping DC's poorest citizens.”

Darren opened the mic between him and August. “Lonnie Jensen?”

“Yes,” August whispered.

“When I first asked her to join my pack, she was hesitant. Like many of you, she heard all of the nasty rumors about wolves.” Oliver's voice rose. “Vile and vicious lies, all of them. We don't want to hurt anybody. We only want to help this city we all love so very much. So Lonnie and I began to discuss our options, what we wanted to do to help the city, and how our combined forces could open doors to even the most down-trodden. The forgotten. The children who are sleeping in the cold tonight.”

“What is this?” August murmured.

Darren wished he knew.

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“I know why you are all here tonight, and I’m not interested in delaying the big event any longer than necessary. I believe Lonnie has a few words.”

“Thank you.”

Most people wouldn’t know Lonnie’s name, but she had a face everybody would recognize. She had married a business tycoon forty-five years her senior, who had died only a few years after their vows. Instead of taking his money and living the high life, she began devoting her time, effort, and resources into charities across the area. She funded politicians. She invested in businesses and had controlling shares in a number of companies. She could pass out ten thousand dollars a day for the rest of her life and never run out of money.

“There is a plague in our streets tonight, ladies and gentleman. Certain people would have you believe it’s the result of werewolves, but it is not. Children are dying while their parents look on helplessly. Families are being torn apart. Every day, we hear worse news about our national economy, and every night, it is the innocent who are made to suffer from the poor decisions of our leaders. I know now that the only way to fight this is to throw out the old way of doing things! Members of a pack would never turn on each other and let each other die. Family members are bonded and must ensure the survival of everybody in the pack, including the weakest members. And that is why I will be joining Oliver’s family, and encourage everybody here to do the same. Together, we can make a difference.”

“August...what is happening?” Darren whispered.

“He’s going to...should I stop him.”

“No.”

“But...”

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“It’s not illegal to make wolves. Especially if the victim wants to be a wolf.”

“Fuck,” August whispered.

“I know.”

Oliver took Lonnie’s hand. “That was beautiful. I hope others see the truth that you have so eloquently presented. Now, if you would be so kind as to repeat after me. I, Lonnie Jenson...”

“I, Lonnie Jenson.”

“Do swear to remain loyal to my alpha and faithful to my pack.”

“He’s making her take an oath?” August said, her voice rising slightly.

“Shh. I guess an oath looks better than just a bite.”

“But...does anybody else do this?”

“Not that I know of.”

Lonnie dutifully repeated the words, sounding more and more like a bride with each breath. Oliver wrapped his arm around her and pulled her flush against his body. With his free hand, he tore her shirt open. There were mingled gasps from the rest of the guests, but Lonnie didn’t pull away. She didn’t even seem surprised.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” August muttered.

Darren silently echoed the sentiment as Oliver’s face began to morph. With fangs glistening in the trapped moonlight, he pressed his muzzle to her breast and easily bit through the fragile skin.

CHAPTER 9

As soon as August made it back to the van, she wanted to plan an attack. She wanted to get back into the house, kill Oliver, and stop him before he could convince anybody else to join his new world order. She didn't even want to wait for Argenti. And Darren was tempted to listen to her. Aden certainly wouldn't hate to learn that Oliver had been put out of his misery. All their problems would be solved.

Except, they had no idea just how many of the guests were wolves. Worse, they had no idea how many of the *famous* guests were wolves. The last thing either of them needed was the possibility of being linked to a congressman's death. Besides, Darren wasn't afraid of taking on an entire pack of wolves, if he was well armed and *knew* he was fighting wolves. If all the regular

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humans there were possible converts, they might fight on Oliver's side on principle. It was too risky, and August recognized that, too. She just didn't like it.

"Not too long ago, you would have jumped in, feet first," August reminded him.

But not too long ago, he didn't have any reason not to take that sort of risk. Now he had a message from Aden on his phone, telling him to come out to the reserve so they could talk. Darren couldn't pick out any clues in Aden's voice, so it was impossible to tell if things had went well or not.

Before he left August for the night, he took her arm. "Don't tell Jasmine what you saw."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want her involved yet."

August studied him for a beat before nodding. "Yeah, you're right. But we need to talk about this."

"I agree."

"Can you meet me tomorrow?"

"Do you have a safe phone line?"

"I've got a personal cell that nobody knows about."

"Use it to call me."

She arched her brow. "And give you my private number?"

"We're going to have to trust each other a little bit," Darren said.

"I'll call you tomorrow afternoon," August promised.

He had a feeling that he had formed a partnership that night. One that was probably temporary, but temporary or not, Aden wouldn't like it. Aden probably wouldn't like anything Darren had to say about his night out.

So lost in his thoughts, he barely noticed the drive out of town.

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The narrow driveway leading through the reserve appeared in his headlights before he realized it, and he slowed down only enough not to jar his teeth out as he headed to the house. He'd only been out there a couple times since that first fateful night, but its path would forever be etched in his memory. Even when his mind was elsewhere.

The porch light was on, softer light filtering through the curtains. Darren parked next to Aden's Viper, his gaze automatically scanning over the earth for the other tire treads. There were quite a few, as well as footprints. No paw prints. That was a good sign.

The door was unlocked, but the front room empty when Darren let himself in. Steam filtered through the open door to the bathroom, as well as the distinct sound of water splashing. Aden didn't call to him, but Darren strode forward anyway, pushing the door open wider to see his lover soaking in the oversized whirlpool tub.

"I thought it would help me relax," Aden said without opening his eyes. His head leaned back against the edge, his hair damp, his skin glistening. "So far, it's not working."

Darren gently pushed the door shut behind him. "That bad?"

"It could've been worse. No blood was shed. What about you?"

"Well...blood was shed. Not mine." Darren perched on the edge of the tub. "You want to hear about this right now? I don't mind waiting until tomorrow to talk about it."

Blindly, Aden lifted a hand out of the water to find Darren's arm and tenderly stroke it. "I don't know what I want. I just get tired of all the games sometimes."

"I know. Can I ask you a possibly personal question that is likely none of my business?"

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He snorted. “When has that ever stopped you before?”

“Good point. What do you do when you want to make a wolf? Do you have some elaborate ceremony with a reception and vows?”

Aden’s brows drew together as he opened his eyes. “Why would I need something like that? My pack isn’t some secret fraternity. We want someone, they want to join us, we bite them. End of story.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Oliver has a new twist on an old idea. Though I’d say he’s making more of a cult than a secret fraternity.”

“Why? What did he do?”

“He recruited Lonnie Jenson to his pack. Right at the stroke of midnight, he very dramatically turned off all the lights, and then delivered a speech about why he chose her out of everybody in the city. Then she explained how our world will be a better place if we’re all a member of the same pack. He bit her, they all applauded, there was some call-and-response thing about faith and loyalty. It was bizarre.”

Water splashed over the edge as Aden sat up. “He bit her? In front of everybody?”

“Yep. And nobody seemed the least surprised or perturbed. I don’t think these parties are about recruiting friends, I think they’re about celebrating new members.”

“That would imply get-togethers or correspondence preceding these parties.”

“Yes. Which would also imply he knew full well the public parties would catch your attention.”

“Fuck.” Scrubbing at his face with a wet hand did little to erase the frustration etched in every line. “He’s telling me I’m too late,

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the son of a bitch.”

“What about the other pack leaders? Did they know what Oliver is up to?”

“A few.” Briefly, Aden told Darren about Kahlert’s outburst and the other alphas who had followed him out. He ended with, “I wouldn’t normally worry about him, but Kahlert’s dumb as dirt and clearly Oliver’s convinced him I’m the bad guy here. And, they’re not alone.”

“This could turn into an old-fashioned war, couldn’t it? August promised not to tell Jasmine about what we saw tonight. Jasmine is very black and white. She’d hunt down wolves like Lonnie Jenson without a single thought of the consequences.”

“How much do you trust August not to say anything to her?”

“I trust her. If I didn’t, I would have never asked her to wear a wire for me. I can’t guarantee she’ll never tell Jasmine, but right now we have some time.”

“How much? Because it sounds like Oliver isn’t fucking around anymore.”

“Anymore? I don’t think Oliver has ever been fucking around. As for how much time...that really depends on Oliver. If he does something that August cannot keep from Jasmine, then she’ll probably talk. Right now, he’s just skirting that line.”

Aden slid back down in the water, leaning his head against the edge to stare up at the ceiling. Darren had the overwhelming urge to slide in with him, clothing be damned.

“I wish I knew what he hoped to accomplish with this. Other than take me down. There are a lot easier ways to build a pack without all the pomp and circumstance.”

Darren slid from the side of the tub to kneel beside it. “He’s rounding up the elite, making them take loyalty oaths, and

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becoming their alpha. He wants money and power in the one place it really matters. You already said he's ambitious."

"Having the politicians on his side also makes it harder for Argenti to get to him." He shook his head, a sad smile curving his mouth. "That was actually one lesson he managed to learn from me."

"If he manages to make everybody in DC part of one happy pack, he won't have to worry about Argenti anyway. And Lonnie sure sounded like she'd seen the light about how great being a wolf is."

The more Darren spoke, the more distant Aden became. "I think there's only way to get to the bottom of this. As much as I hate the idea."

Darren didn't like the tone of Aden's voice. "What?"

"I have to talk to him. Get this out there, once and for all."

Darren blinked. "Talk? You think there's something to talk about here?"

"Fine. I have to go kill him." He sighed and closed his eyes. "Happy?"

"No, I'm not happy. He's waiting for you, Aden. He knows you're coming sooner or later. He's going to be prepared."

"And the longer I wait, the more prepared he gets. If I strike now, before he gets even more support, I can nip this in the bud."

"Aden...please think about this. You don't know Oliver's house, you don't know how many wolves are there, you don't know his security system. You don't even know how he's armed himself. I still have the van with the camera and everything. Let me at least scope the place out for you."

"No." The firmness had come back to his tone, as if making this decision had banished his languor. "This is my pack. My

problem. I'm not going to do anything as stupid as go to him on his turf. I'll find neutral territory. Maybe Leo's, or Berry's, or something."

Darren didn't know if Aden purposefully shut him out of the pack every time he was angry, or if he did it without thinking. He tried not to take it personally, but the reminder that *Aden's* pack was *Aden's* problem and had nothing to do with Darren, stung more than a little.

"Why do you think he'll agree to meet you anywhere? What if he suggests that Crane or Kahlert is more neutral than Leo or Berry?"

"He'll agree, because I'm the one he wants. He won't be able to resist meeting up and gloating. If it takes a little negotiation to find a mutually acceptable meeting place, so be it."

Darren knew he was arguing in vain now, but he couldn't stop himself. He cared about Aden more than he had ever cared for anybody, and he wasn't going to sit back and let him go off and get killed. "You're letting your feelings cloud your judgment. Which is understandable, but Oliver was counting on that. Hell, even if he wasn't out for revenge, he'd still go after you. He needs your pack if he wants long-term success."

"I beat him once, I'll beat him again." Those blue eyes lasered in on Darren's. "Why don't you get this? You should hate what he's doing as much as I do."

"I never said I don't get this. I never said we shouldn't kill him. But doesn't this argument sound familiar to you? We had the same one three days ago, except you were arguing for caution. You were right. We should be cautious."

"The time for caution was when we didn't know what he was doing. Now that we do, we have to strike."

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Darren pushed himself to his feet. “Okay. I have some bullets back at the apartment, along with my knife. It’ll be good to have some silver items on hand.”

Aden caught his wrist before he could turn around. “You’re not going.”

“Do you think Oliver is going to fight you without backup?”

“Honestly? Yes. I think he’s just arrogant enough to think he can do it.”

“He’s been building up a motherfucking army under your nose for the past several months, and you think *he’s* the one too full of himself to be careful?” Darren pulled free of Aden and crossed to the door. Aden could get himself killed, if that’s what he wanted to do. “Good luck with that.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, I was a little busy trying to figure out who was setting me up as a ritual murderer,” Aden snapped. “But I guess you’ve been too focused on getting my cock as much as you can to actually remember that particular detail.”

Darren ripped the door open, letting it slam against the wall. “Well, fortunately, neither one of us will have to deal with that particular distraction anymore. As much as I would love to see the look on everybody’s faces when Oliver comes to claim his new pack, I’ll be on my way.”

He heard the splash of water a fraction of a second too late. Aden’s wet body shoved him against the jamb, slippery and hot and unyielding.

“You think you can just walk out the door?” Aden’s mouth hovered at Darren’s ear. “I gave you a chance to walk away from me on Halloween, and you turned it down. I warned you then it would be the only chance you had.”

“What do you want me to do, Aden?” Darren asked tightly.

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“Sit here and watch television while you go out and get yourself killed? Maybe if you come back, we can sing another verse about how I don’t know shit about *your* pack?”

“This isn’t about what you know, or don’t know. This is about me doing what I have to, to protect my family. *You’re* part of that family.”

Darren tried to pull away from Aden, but the other man wasn’t going to give him an inch. “That’s fine. You do what you have to do to protect your family. But I have the right to try to protect you, too.”

“Then find another way to help. Keep his pack busy. Work with Domingo to make sure our pack is safe. Something.” He mouthed the tense sinew of Darren’s neck. “I have to do this. This is my mess to clean up. I’m not going to let you get caught in the crossfire.”

Darren sighed. Aden’s intelligence was never in doubt. His instincts were likewise sound. His passion, his drive, his loyalty to the pack were all admirable qualities. Sometimes, just thinking about Aden tied him up in so many knots, he thought he would never feel normal again. But when it came to Oliver, he was blind. Darren didn’t think he could lift the veil. So he cupped the back of Aden’s head.

“One of these days, you’re going to figure out that you don’t have to do everything alone.”

Aden’s hot breath washed over him. “The leader always stands alone, Darren.”

Darren squeezed his eyes shut. “When are you going to meet him?”

“As soon as I possibly can. Tomorrow, if I can arrange it.”

Darren turned his head to rest his mouth on Aden’s brow.

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“Why not the day after tomorrow? One more day won’t make a huge difference, except give us a chance to gather more information.”

Slithering an arm around Darren’s waist, Aden molded their bodies together, heedless of the fact that he was still dripping wet. “All right. One more day.”

It was the smallest concession, almost meaningless, but at least Aden wasn’t going to run off and risk his life on an impulse. That gave Darren a day to try to talk to him about it, or at least a day to figure out the best way to help Aden. Because whether he was invited or not, he would have Aden’s back.

CHAPTER 10

When Oliver didn't balk at Aden's suggestion to meet at the National Arboretum, he almost canceled the whole idea. Darren certainly wouldn't have objected. He was still very unhappy about the plan in the first place. But Aden wanted neutral territory where he would be free to shift if he had to, and at over four hundred acres, the Arboretum was his best option.

He simply had to remember that if he had freedom to shift, so did Oliver. Considering how devious Oliver had been so far, Aden fully expected he would.

The one thing he wouldn't do was take any silver weapons. Silver bullets or blades could be used against him. As much as Darren kept advocating for them, Aden refused to give Oliver any more ammunition than he already had. The one concession he

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made was planting a few weapons around the Arboretum ahead of time. He bought Darren's reasoning that it was better to be safe than sorry, but the thought of putting a bullet in Oliver's brain, even if he was an ex-pack member, churned Aden's gut. Oliver deserved to go down as a wolf, if it came to it. A fight to the death if he couldn't be talked down from whatever plan he had in mind. Fangs to fangs, fur to fur. That was the way it had always been. That was the way Aden was determined to keep it.

He dressed for efficiency. Jeans he didn't care about, a T-shirt that molded over his upper body. The coat he picked was lightweight and barely able to hold back the elements, but he couldn't be bulked out in case the fight he figured was probably inevitable was hand to hand.

Darren disappeared while he got ready, not that Aden blamed him. Things had been tense between them ever since the night at the reserve, their arguing continuous. They had both said things to hurt, like Aden's comment about Darren only being interested in the sex, without ever really apologizing. They just got swept under the rug until Aden thought there were so many damn lumps in that proverbial rug, he was going to trip over them. Once the mess with Oliver was over, he planned on sitting Darren down and working everything through. When neither of them was stressed. Maybe he'd take him away for a little vacation to make it up to him. Someplace where they could just be together like those first couple weeks after Halloween.

Still, when Darren still hadn't showed when it was time to leave, Aden was mildly annoyed. He got into the Viper and squealed the tires as he pulled out into the street.

The Arboretum closed at five to the public, but any wolf in town knew how to sneak in and use the grounds to roam. Aden

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parked near the Bladensburg Road entrance and scaled the gates barring entrance to head past the boxwood and azalea collections. Their meeting was in the open ground near the National Capitol Columns, where there could be no surprises. If something went wrong, it would be easy to run for cover from there.

Aden arrived early and expected to be the first one there. He wanted to use the time to remind himself of every rock, every tree and bush, everything that might get underfoot and in the way. He used the Arboretum often, but it had been years since he had any sort of fight there. Not since he bought the reserve. But as soon as he reached their meeting place, he saw that he was too late, despite his best intentions. Oliver unfolded himself from a nearby bench, a strange smile playing on his lips.

“Long time, no see. I thought you would be calling on me sooner.”

“Maybe you should’ve let me know you were back in town a little bit sooner then.” He stopped several yards away, his arms loose at his side. “You always did play your cards a little too close to the chest.”

“I thought I was letting you know. I didn’t think I would have to practically send you an engraved invitation to get your attention. Or a dozen for that matter.” Oliver shook his head. “I was certain as soon as Oakes got one, he’d go running to you.”

“It doesn’t work like that. It never did.”

Oliver shrugged. “Oh, it worked. You’re here, aren’t you? A little bit later than I would have liked, but that’s fine. I’m not complaining.”

No, he wasn’t. In fact, he looked far too smug for Aden’s liking. “Well, I’m here now. And I can’t say that I’m thrilled about what you’ve been doing.”

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“Oh, really?” The smile turned into an exaggerated frown. “Aden, I’ve got to tell you it disappoints me to hear that. Wait. No, it doesn’t. I stopped caring about what you thought a long time ago.”

“If that was true, you wouldn’t have come back to DC.”

“It’s sweet that you think that. I’m back in DC because DC is where all the good action is. You’re not my endgame. You’re nothing but an obstacle.”

The corner of Aden’s mouth lifted. “Nice try, but I was always your endgame.”

Oliver shook his head. “Not anymore. When I get rid of you, I’ll take over your pack. And then I’ll move on to the next one, and the next, all the while making my own little cubs. But I will admit, I’ll probably have a drink to your memory and reminisce about the good times.”

“You couldn’t get rid of me the first time.” Though it was nice to have confirmation about what his intentions were. “And this time, I’m not alone. You make a move, and you’re going to find yourself destroyed. I’m here to give you one last chance to get out with your tail tucked between your legs instead of your throat torn out.”

“Oh, I know about your little party. About the pack leaders who didn’t attend. About the ones who walked out. Besides, I know you better than anybody. You’re always alone.”

He wasn’t going to rise to Oliver’s bait. “I’m serious about this being your last chance. Don’t be stupid. Take it while you can.”

“And what? Slink off again, banished from my family and my city? No. You want me gone a second time, you’re going to have to kill me.”

“You gave up any rights to your family when you put us all in

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jeopardy.” His lip curled into a sneer. “Do your new cubs know just how fast you’ll turn on them as soon as you think you can get a better offer?”

“You never understood anything, Aden. You’re so bullheaded, you can’t conceive of a world outside your own perceptions. I never betrayed you, and it’s sad you’ll die believing that I did.”

“You betrayed the pack. Same thing.”

“No. But in your own rush to ignore your own mistakes, you blamed me for everything that happened. I did think one day you’d come to your senses, but since you won’t, then I guess we’ll always have this unfinished business between us.” Oliver peeled off his jacket. “Shall we?”

Though he had known it would come to this, part of Aden didn’t want to fight Oliver. He had loved him, once upon a time, and even if he’d committed the ultimate betrayal, Aden felt a tug to honor the relationship they had once had. It was one reason why he couldn’t kill Oliver the first time. As much as he might despise the man now, and hate where they had come to, it was hard to just forget everything that had happened.

That didn’t stop him from mirroring Oliver’s actions. He tossed his coat aside, rolling his neck to loosen the joint. “I hope you’re a better fighter than you used to be. Otherwise, this is just going to be sad.”

“I don’t like to brag.” Oliver’s shirt joined his jacket, despite the chill in the air. His shoes followed. It didn’t feel like five years since the last time Oliver undressed in front of him. It didn’t seem natural that they were preparing for a fight—especially since Oliver still looked like the man who had once shared his bed. “But I think you’ll be surprised.”

Oliver’s nudity meant shifting. Aden shed his clothing quickly,

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his gaze never leaving his opponent. The crisp winter air was filled with the rich scent of earth and the softer greenery, but Oliver's eagerness overlaid all of it. He was hungry for this. Aden hoped that made him sloppy.

"I'm not sure anything you could do can surprise me anymore."

Oliver shifted, and the final words of Aden's sentence were directed toward a large, silver wolf. Without so much as a growl, he sprang forward, his powerful body flying through the air. Aden only had time to brace himself before two hundred pounds of solid muscle, claws, and fangs landed on him, sending him to the ground. They rolled on the cold earth, blades of grass, tiny twigs, and stones digging into Aden's flesh as Oliver's muzzle snapped just an inch from his face.

He stole the second after the lunge to plant his feet in Oliver's belly and kick him off. Oliver went flying back into the darkness, but Aden needed only those few seconds to shift. The cold disappeared, blocked out by his thick, black pelt, while bones and tendons ground together to take his other shape. His paws never hit the ground before he leapt at the fallen Oliver, but the other wolf expected the attack and twisted away, finding his feet to square off with Aden.

Oliver seemed larger than he remembered. He was still smaller than Aden, which would work to his advantage, but the wolf he faced was a stranger. Where was the lover who ran with him over the grass? Where was the young man who had intrigued him so with his intelligence and sly humor? It would be easier to kill him in this form, Aden realized. This wasn't the specter of his memories. This was something new. He was almost grateful.

This new wolf was far more aggressive than Oliver had been when he was younger. His lips were pulled back, exposing his

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teeth, and his ears lay flat against his head. The waxing moon caught his eyes, and created silver highlights in Oliver's fur. He darted forward, a white streak. Aden rose up to meet him, and they met each other on hind legs. Oliver's teeth closed in Aden's shoulder, slicing through the thick fur.

Aden howled, both in pain and in protest. He slashed forward, raking his claws across as Oliver's belly, while snapping at any bit of muscle he could reach. Oliver refused to ease the tightness of his jaw, though, and his fangs sank farther into Aden's flesh. Blood seeped from the fresh wound. The scent of it sharpened the air, filling it with the smell of death and victory. While Aden's senses went automatically on alert, he knew Oliver's did the same. He had no choice but to throw his weight to the side, hoping the force of it would either tear Oliver's teeth away or give Aden an opportunity to attack as well.

The swift move did free Oliver's teeth, tearing a chunk of flesh out of Aden's shoulder in the process. But he moved like lightning. Aden swiped at his stomach again, but Oliver lunged, throwing his weight forward as his jaw clamped down on Aden's throat.

* * *

Darren kept the gun tucked in his jacket, afraid the moon would catch the steel and draw attention to him. From his vantage in the top of a tree, he could not only see both wolves, he heard them, too. Including Oliver's confirmation of Darren's suspicions—both about Oliver's plans and about Aden. Aden hadn't responded to the accusation that he was always alone—hadn't even reacted—but Darren knew it would linger in the back of his mind.

He was surprised that Oliver had arrived by himself. He fully

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expected the other wolf to show up with two or three guards from his pack. But as near as Darren could tell, Aden and Oliver were the only wolves in the Arboretum. He could have shot Oliver at any point while they exchanged words, but he promised himself as he followed Aden that he would absolutely not interfere unless Aden was outnumbered or somehow injured.

Now as the two of them tore at each other, Darren itched to intercede. Even if he couldn't get a clear shot at Oliver while the two rolled and snarled, he could still jump down from the tree and throw himself in the fight.

Blood speckled the closely cut grass. It gleamed wetly in the moonlight, the smell of it drifting even as high as Darren's perch. Most of it was Aden's. He didn't know how or why Oliver kept managing to get his teeth into Aden, but there was no mistaking the fact he always seemed to find a hold a split second before Aden could block him. This wasn't the same predator Darren had seen on Halloween. Then, Aden hadn't hesitated to tear out Ray Giessen's throat. Even when Ray had burned him with silver, Aden had continued fighting.

Now, though he was still in the thick of it, Aden was on the defensive. He always twisted out of Oliver's grip, biting back when he was still close enough to reach, but there was never that extra edge that Darren associated with him. The only time he saw Aden land a harmful blow was when he threw Oliver off and into the nearby bench. Oliver's awkward landing gave Aden a moment to lunge, his jaws clamping around the other wolf's rear leg and hauling him back to the ground.

Darren caught his breath, hoping this would be the end of it. If Aden delivered the killing blow here, Darren would stay hidden, following in the shadows only to ensure Aden made it home safely.

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But he didn't deliver the killing blow. In the dim light, Darren couldn't make out the details. He wasn't sure if Aden somehow missed, or if Oliver twisted out of the reach of Aden's fangs. Either way, it didn't matter. Instead of pinning Oliver to the ground, Oliver flipped his body and used his weight to throw Aden off balance.

Aden's front paw slipped in the wet grass. He stumbled, and a hoarse whimper reached even Darren's ears. Oliver pounced without hesitation, straddling Aden's back and burying his teeth in Aden's nape. Not even the toss of Aden's head was enough to loosen him this time, and the whimper turned into a long drawn-out howl, piercing the night air.

Darren aimed the gun for the air just above Oliver's head and fired. The booming sound made both wolves freeze. He hoped it wouldn't send Aden running into the night. He lowered his aim, allowing the second shot to graze across Oliver's back. He immediately released Aden, his howl of pain eclipsing even the sound of the gunshot. Oliver swung his head around, seeking out the source of his pain, but Darren ducked back, pressing himself against the tree.

Aden took advantage of the distraction, freeing himself from Oliver and immediately aiming for the growing circle of blood on his back. Oliver roared and twisted away, but he didn't go in for another blow. He took off, disappearing into the underbrush.

Aden didn't follow. His forelegs crumpled, and his muzzle dipped to the grass. His sides heaved. For a moment, Darren thought he was sniffing out the trail, but it became all too obvious, all too quickly, that Aden had no intention of moving.

Darren shimmied down the tree, running as soon as his feet touched the ground. It occurred to him that Oliver might just be

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hiding, waiting for him to show himself, but even that thought wouldn't keep him from Aden. He hit his knees once he reached Aden, but he didn't dare touch him. Not yet.

"Oliver's gone. If he has any sense, he won't come sniffing around here again tonight." When Aden didn't shift, Darren swallowed. "I know you're not parked far from here. We'll take the Viper home tonight so it won't attract any attention."

His fur rippled as Aden let out a deep breath. One by one, he braced his front paws against the ground and pushed himself back up. Now that he was up close, Darren saw the very real wounds still bleeding into his pelt. The shoulder was the worst, the edges broken and torn, but the slash across his throat was more frightening. The fact that it seeped as much blood as the others burned fear through Darren's veins.

Without lifting his head, Aden turned toward the road. He took one step and immediately stumbled.

"Wait. Just wait."

Darren whipped his shirt over head. He quickly ripped into strips, creating makeshift bandages. They wouldn't do any good to stop the blood, but Darren hoped they would create enough pressure to ease the flow. He never thought he would be attempting field dressing on an injured wolf—he wasn't trained for this sort of thing. But that wasn't going to stop him. Once he used up his shirt, he hunted around for Aden's clothes. He tied the strips around his chest, his shoulders, and his stomach.

His hands were sticky and too warm in the cold night air by the time he was done. He wiped them off on the rags that remained, but the chill that was left behind was as bad as the nerves twisting his insides. Aden wasn't making a noise. Not a whimper. Not a growl. The fight seemed to have completely gone out of him,

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though Darren had no idea if that was because he was conserving his energy against his injuries or something more dire.

When he turned to dig through Aden's jeans for his keys, something nudged the back of his elbow. Darren sat back and met Aden's silver eyes, only for a moment before Aden lowered his head and licked the back of Darren's hand.

If any anger or annoyance lingered from their earlier fight, it disappeared as soon as he felt Aden's warm tongue on his skin. Aden hadn't shifted in front of him since Halloween night, but he already felt a certain comfort level with Aden in this form. And that comfort only increased when Aden licked him. It was a little unnerving, but Darren pushed it out of his mind. He would think about that later.

Darren stroked the side of Aden's face, running his knuckles across the soft, short fur on his muzzle. "It'll be best if you don't use the energy to shift. If you can't walk, I'll figure out a way to get the car to you."

The one disadvantage to this form, though, was that Aden couldn't speak. Communication became more basic. Darren had to rely on the gentle push of Aden's wet nose against his hand to draw back, and the shift of Aden's body as he pushed himself back to his feet. His gait was still wobbly, but he made it several yards before stopping and looking back, waiting for Darren to join him.

Darren clutched Aden's key in one hand and held his gun in the other, prepared to shoot if Oliver showed himself again, though the other wolf was probably long gone. Their progress was slow, but steady. Every time Aden stopped to rest, Darren knelt at his side, double-checking the rags. They were already growing damp with blood, but it could be worse. Darren tried to tell him that as he wiped his hands on his pants.

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Once they reached the tall chain-link fence, Aden sat on his haunches with a soft whine. Darren rubbed his ear reassuringly. "Wait here. I've got some wire cutters in the car."

He scaled the fence as quickly as possible. Getting the tools he needed took longer than he wanted, and he jogged back to find Aden resting on his side, panting as he watched the street. Darren's heart leapt into his throat. He was about to climb back over and check on Aden, when Aden thumped his tail against the ground and gave a short bark. That was the only assurance Darren needed. He knelt on the sidewalk and cut through the bottommost links, making a hole big enough for Aden to slide beneath.

Aden crept forward before he thought it was ready. Darren had to stand back out of his way as he wormed his way through the opening, the bloody rags leaving a smeared trail in his wake. After what felt like an eternity, Aden finally pulled free of the fence, though there were a few more scratches along his back to show for his effort.

Darren was just relieved the Viper was nearby. Aden limped over to his car and Darren helped him into the passenger seat, lifting him from the ground so Aden wouldn't strain himself, or pull at the wounds. Aden watched him through the windshield as Darren circled the front of car. Even through the glass, Darren could feel the weight of the wolf's silver gaze. When he settled in the driver's seat, he gently pulled Aden until he rested his head against Darren's thigh.

"I'll be really careful with the car," Darren promised.

Aden sighed. His eyes were closed when Darren pulled onto the street, and they stayed that way all the way through the city. Darren kept his hand on the back of Aden's head as often as he could, stroking the soft fur, trying to take comfort in the fact that

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Aden's breathing remained deep and steady. Resting was the best thing he could do right now. Darren had no idea how he was going to take care of Aden back at the reserve.

Aden looked up at him when they reached the locked gates. Without protest, he eased back, allowing Darren the space to get out and disarm the security. As soon as Darren was settled behind the wheel again, Aden licked his hand once before resuming his prone position.

He drove the Viper right up to the front door. The house was dark, and even a little foreboding, but Darren felt nothing but relief. They were home. That was all he cared about. And if he couldn't help Aden by himself, he would call Domingo or, God forbid, Gail, and they would know how to deal with his injuries.

Aden's head hung low as he made his way up the walk to the front door, and Darren's heart twisted. He had never seen his lover like this, and he hoped to never see Aden beaten, bleeding, exhausted again. He unlocked the door, holding it open for Aden, and then went ahead of him to the bathroom. He spread a towel on the floor, and began searching through the cabinets, finding anything that would help him clean and close the wounds.

Aden's claws clicked over the tiled floor when he entered. The sound paused, then started again, and Aden appeared at his side, pawing at a cupboard beneath the sink. His paw left a faint dirty smear across the polished wood, and he dutifully retreated when Darren opened the door to reveal a large first aid kit inside. The box burst with fresh bandages, as well as prepared syringes of morphine, needle and thread, and antibiotic cream. While Darren laid out the supplies, Aden laid down and began gnawing at the bloodied bandages he could reach.

Once Darren had everything in order, he lightly touched

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Aden's snout. When Aden looked up, Darren offered a small smile. "I got it."

He used scissors to cut away the bloody rags and tossed them aside. Under the bathroom's harsh lights, the wounds looked even worse. He could stitch wounds. He knew he could. His hands were even enough, he could stitch his own wounds if necessary. But he felt more than a little shaky at the sight of Aden's injuries.

"If you want, I'll call Domingo. He probably has more experience at this sort of thing than I do."

Aden's ears twitched, and then, he unmistakably shook his head.

"Okay, but I am going to give you some morphine. This is going to hurt like a motherfucker, and I can't..." He couldn't make Aden hurt like that. Even if it was in the process of helping him. He smoothed his palm over Aden's head, pulling the fur back away from his eyes. Aden stared back at him, and it *was* Aden. His intelligence, his emotions, his passion, everything that made Aden who he was. "Then we'll get you into bed and tomorrow you'll feel as good as new."

That was probably a lie, but Darren thought it was a nice one. Something that would make both of them feel better.

Aden remained still during the injection, and though it killed Darren to have to wait, he sat back and counted silently to give the drug time to take effect. His throat tightened when Aden edged closer and ran his rough tongue up and down Darren's arm. Small grunts punctuated them, soft and unexpectedly tender. Darren caressed the top of his head with each stroke, unable to resist touching him.

When Aden finally slowed and then stopped, lying back down on his side, Darren went to work. He started with the gash across

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Aden's throat. That was the most life-threatening. It also kept him focused on Aden's face, so he could gauge whether or not he was causing Aden additional pain. The fact that it also allowed him the luxury of drinking in Aden's steady, heavy-lidded gaze was just a bonus.

The stitches weren't hospital quality, but they were small, and even, despite the fur getting in the way of his needle. The morphine, at least, seemed to be doing its job. Aden didn't even flinch as the needle penetrated the tender skin. He had to pause occasionally to flush the blood out of the wound with a syringe of warm water. It took a little over thirty minutes, but by the time he was finished, the bleeding had completely stopped.

"I'm sorry I didn't kill him," Darren murmured, as he shifted focus to Aden's shoulder. "I didn't want to risk hitting you. It was too dark, and I was too far away, to be certain of a clean hit. But I'm pretty sure I bought some time. The bullet only grazed him, I think, but it won't heal any time soon."

The other injuries didn't take nearly as long to suture. He wasn't entirely sure how quickly Aden would heal, or how much of his work would carry over when Aden shifted again, but by the time he rose to wash his hands, Darren was convinced he'd done the best he could. Aden's continued silence helped bolster his confidence, though with the absence of something tangible to do, he was again at a loss.

Aden solved his dilemma of what to do next by lumbering to his feet. He swayed slightly, the morphine still prevalent in his system. Darren grabbed a towel to dry off, but Aden nuzzled his hip before he was done.

He glanced down to meet the silvery blue eyes. Aden whined and looked to the door, then back to Darren.

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“You ready for bed? I feel like I might pass out as soon as I lay down.”

He pushed the door open, allowing Aden to pass through. How long would it be before he had the energy or the inclination to shift again? He wished they could talk. He didn’t think Aden was upset Darren followed him—especially considering what could have happened—but he wasn’t sure Aden would be completely sanguine about it, either.

When they reached the bedroom, Aden jumped onto the bed without Darren’s help, collapsing to the mattress with a soft sigh. Darren pushed his pants down his hips and kicked off his shoes. He climbed onto the bed behind Aden and settled on his side, his chest pressed against the silky soft fur on Aden’s back.

“Is this okay?” Darren murmured. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Aden’s response was to burrow farther back, pressing their bodies closer together. Darren braved stroking Aden’s uninjured flank, again surprised by just how soft his fur really was. Another sigh escaped Aden, and when Darren checked, his eyes were closed.

Despite Darren’s claim that he would pass out immediately, he couldn’t even close his eyes. He was afraid that once he did, one of Aden’s wounds would begin to bleed again, or his breathing would change, or Oliver would surprise them both by showing up at the reserve, or some other horrible thing would happen. So he simply lay there, watching the rise and fall of Aden’s ribs.

They had lived together for almost a month. That was barely enough time to get used to each other’s obnoxious habits. Darren didn’t think that was nearly enough time to form any real attachments. Not any lifelong attachments. Not that he would know, since his romantic entanglements were limited to the

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occasional one-night stand. But as he held Aden close against him, noting each beat of his heart, each exhale of breath, he realized he simply didn't want a life without Aden in it. If Oliver had been successful that night, he would have destroyed two lives.

Darren buried his face against Aden's neck. He still smelled of the night air, mingled with the antiseptic Darren had used. He didn't quite know what to think, only that when Aden licked his hand, it hadn't just made him forget he was ever annoyed with the man. It made everything in his chest melt. It had made him feel weak in a way nobody—no wolf—ever had before.

CHAPTER 11

Aden fought to wake up, weary of his morphine-addled dreams where Oliver stood over his inert form with the head of a wolf and the body of a man. Darren played a part as well, a silver streak that darted in and around them, finally beating Oliver back with a whisper and a howl. When Darren descended to Aden's side, Aden struggled to get away, but his muscles refused to obey his commands, leaden and sore. He braced for the burn the silver always brought, but even that was not as it was in the real world. Where Darren touched, heat flamed all right, but not the kind that hurt. His was the kind that warmed Aden through.

He opened his eyes to the dim light of his bedroom at the reserve. His body ached, the stitches tender. Darren was molded over his back, his face buried in the fur at his neck. His arm

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wrapped around Aden's chest, inches away from each of the wounds.

Carefully, he bent his head and licked over Darren's hand. Its salty texture made his mouth water, but as he had the night before, he withstood the urge to bite.

Aden continued lapping until Darren twitched. He felt the body behind him tense as Darren woke, and then the hand turned, his palm facing Aden's mouth. Darren's fingertips barely glanced over his muzzle, a careful caress.

"How are you feeling?" Darren asked against his fur.

He needed to shift to answer. He hadn't done so the night before to conserve his energy, but now, the urge to stay in wolf form was fed by his guilt over the entire Oliver incident. Aden hadn't been that thoroughly beaten since he'd been a cub. Having Darren witness it was even more humiliating. Knowing Darren had been right all along... Aden didn't even want to go there.

Except he had to. He knew that. And though it made his flesh ache, he changed back into his human skin, taking the pain and using it to strengthen his resolve.

In the absence of fur, Darren pulled away a little, though at least he didn't separate from Aden completely. Aden rolled onto his back, catching Darren's arm, and gently eased his sore shoulder against the mattress.

"I'm alive. Thanks to you."

"Trust me when I say that you're welcome." Darren pressed a kiss to Aden's shoulder. "But I meant with the pain. Do you want me to get you anything?"

"No." Which was a partial lie because drugs sounded like heaven right then. But that would mean Darren getting out of bed, and Aden didn't want to lose his heat. Now or ever. "I meant that,

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you know. Things would have gone very differently last night if you hadn't shown up."

"Yeah...I know. I really hoped you wouldn't ever know I was there."

Shame washed through Aden. He stared up at the ceiling, unable to meet Darren's soft brown eyes. "I wish you hadn't seen it. It wasn't exactly my shining hour."

"Aden...that really doesn't matter to me. I'm not in...I'm not here just because of how you fight. I mean, I understand that you didn't want me to see it. But it doesn't change anything."

That wasn't true. It changed a lot of things. Like... "I couldn't kill him. I tried. And if the pack finds out..." There was going to be mutiny. He wasn't supposed to lose. If the others saw him as weak, it would only be a matter of time before someone tried to take him out.

"Nobody is going to find out. You didn't tell anybody you were going to fight him, and he is not going to broadcast the fact he failed. The pack doesn't even know what's going on. Just stay here at the reserve for a few days until you're healed."

"I can't. I've got to take care of the store."

"I can cover the store. Or I can put up a sign that says we're closed for inventory."

Darren's offer drew his attention back with a frown. "You hate the store. It bores you to tears."

"So? If it buys you time to heal, then I can deal with being bored for a few days."

"Even after everything? Because you were right. About all of it. I've made a complete ass of myself. The last thing you should be feeling right now is generous toward me."

"I didn't...I didn't want to be right. I'm not counting this as

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some sort of victory. And I'm not going to make you pay for not listening to me. The only thing I want is to help you beat Oliver."

That was all he had wanted all along. Everything Darren had said and done ever since discovering the truth about Oliver's plans had been about that. And Aden had been too stubborn—too proud—to admit it.

"I don't know if I can," he confessed quietly. "I couldn't kill him last night, even though I knew I had to. I gave him every opportunity I could to avoid a physical fight. I wanted him to take it, even though I knew he wouldn't."

"Aden...do you still love him?"

"No." He'd almost been expecting the question, mostly because he had needed to answer it for himself. "But I did. I hate what he did to the pack, and I hate what he's doing now, and I hate that even after everything, I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. I know I can't. But he meant something to me once, and I can't...I don't know how to forget that."

Darren rested his hand on Aden's chest, making soft patterns with his fingertips. "I'm not entirely convinced you have to forget that. It sounds like he turned his back on you, not the other way around. And...I don't believe you should have to kill somebody you loved once. That's just...it's cruel. And unnecessary."

"Except he's a threat. And he's not going to stop until he's won or dead."

"I know. But he's nothing to me except the asshole who hurt somebody I care about. I can stop him."

Darren's eyes blazed with barely restrained anger. Aden covered his hand with his own, grateful for the extra point of contact, because with each added confession, he needed Darren a little bit more.

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"I should've had you shoot him while I had him distracted. This would all be over now if I hadn't been so blind."

"You were just doing what you thought was best at the time. But now we know what it'll take to beat him." Darren tilted his head, and despite the anger in his eyes and the certainty in his voice, he kissed Aden with surprising restraint. "You were right. He is arrogant. When you're feeling a bit better, we'll figure out exactly how we can use that."

He caught the back of Darren's neck when he tried to lay back. It hurt to lift the few inches to meet Darren's mouth again, but it was worth it for the delight that he spotted in his gaze the second before they touched again. Though he wanted it deep, he settled for lingering, trying to pour everything he felt into the simple caress.

"I'm so sorry," he rasped. "It should never have reached this point."

"You can make it up to me," Darren said, kissing Aden's chin, rubbing his lips across his stubble. "Just promise me you'll never scare me like that again. I'm not sure I can deal with it."

"I'll promise whatever you want." He closed his eyes, losing himself in the feel of his lover. "Starting with a decent night's sleep tonight. You can't have slept well last night. Not with me as the wolf."

"I...it didn't..." Darren faltered. "It didn't bother me. Not as much as you probably think it did."

"You were worried. I know you didn't want me to shift and waste my strength."

"Yes, I was worried, but it wasn't that." Darren dragged his mouth to the side of Aden's neck, muffling his voice. "I liked it. I liked the way you felt."

"Wait a minute." He tried to turn, but pain shot down his arm.

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He settled for holding Darren even closer. “You offer to watch the store, you tell me you like me in wolf form. Did I miss an ice storm or something?”

Darren laughed softly. “My offer to watch the store comes from a purely selfish place. I want you healthy again, and I want it soon. As for the other thing...I’ll admit that I found it very...disturbing...on Halloween night. But this time it was different.”

“Because I wasn’t a threat?”

“No...no, it’s not because of that. You weren’t a threat to me on Halloween, were you?”

“No, but you didn’t know me as well then.” Though he found it curious that Darren could relax enough to sleep with him in wolf form, to hold him as he must’ve done throughout the night, he had little desire to push Darren when it was obvious the topic wasn’t a welcome one. He wanted to give Darren anything he wanted, and then he wanted to do it all over again. The last thing he’d anticipated was Darren’s easy acceptance of Aden’s fallibility and fault. He wanted to show how much that meant to him. “I’ll call Domingo and tell him I’m staying out here for the short-term to follow through on some leads about Oliver, and that I shouldn’t be bothered. Gail can be in charge while I’m gone. And if you don’t want to work the store, you don’t have to. I’ll make Domingo do that, too.”

“If that means I get to stay here with you, then yes, I’d much rather you make Domingo work at the store.” Darren lifted his head and gently touched the wound just below his throat. “Do you think you should go see a doctor? I did the best I could, but...”

“No, no doctors.” Nobody who might spill the beans. Right now, the only person he trusted was Darren. “I’m sure everything’s

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fine.”

Darren tilted his head and frowned. “You’re sure? Well, I can see that you are. Fine, but if I see one sign—one *hint*—of an infection, I’m dragging you to the hospital.”

He couldn’t help but smile. “Whatever you say, gorgeous.”

A spark lit his eyes. “I like the way that sounds, sunshine.”

Aden laughed. In that moment, so did he. He had gone far too long without a real partner in his life. Darren had done too much, given more than he could ever imagine, for Aden to think of him as just a lover any longer.

As they lay there in each other’s arms, he wondered if maybe, somewhere in the depths of his heart, he’d known that all along and simply been too scared to accept it.

Not anymore.

* * *

Aden had been wrong about one thing. Darren didn’t *hate* the store. He was actually growing to like it. He didn’t enjoy being trapped indoors for hours on end, dealing with inventory, customers, computers that only worked on occasion, and vendors that did nothing but cause problems. He had never been much of a reader, so being surrounded by books didn’t exactly thrill him to his toes. He wasn’t entirely sure what joy Aden received from the store.

But, on the other hand, it was beginning to feel like home. The smell of old leather made him think of Aden, and the rustle of pages turning, the ding of the bell over the door, and the muted conversations of the customers all blended into the background of Darren’s life. He did enjoy wandering through the stacks after

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Aden closed up for the night. Not because he wanted to find a particular title, but because he liked the quiet. He liked the way the store made Aden smile—even if he didn't understand it—and he even liked to see the occasional customer's look of unmitigated joy when they finally found the book they had been searching for.

Still, he was glad Aden wasn't going to make him run the place. He was also glad he wouldn't need to stay there for more than thirty minutes while he waited for August to come and pick him up so he could get his car. He stayed out of Domingo's way, respecting the fact that Domingo was making an effort to stay out of his, and watched the slow trickle of people moving past the counter, trying to pick out which ones could be wolves.

When Nick walked in out of the cold, Darren almost moved to wait in the back room. The only wolf in the pack who had surpassed Nick in the I Hate Darren sweepstakes had been Enzo. Now that Darren had beaten him, he wondered if Nick would be looking for the same opportunity. He had no doubts he could beat Nick, too. He was a round-faced, squat man with more muscle than speed. He probably outweighed Darren, but Darren had six inches and a longer reach. But he really wasn't in the mood to fight anyone today.

He clenched his jaw when Nick noticed him and turned in his direction. Burying his face in the book he wasn't reading anyway, he tried to look busy when Nick came to a stop at the leather chair opposite him.

"Mind if I sit down?" Nick asked.

Yes. Darren bit back the automatic response. Aden wanted him to start treating the pack like family, and while Darren didn't really care one way or the other, he supposed it wouldn't kill him to be friendly.

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“No, go ahead.”

Nick eased himself into the chair, though the way he knotted his fingers in front of him and sat toward the edge put Darren even more ill at ease. A minute passed where neither spoke. While Darren pretended to read, Nick glanced at his watch, looked out the window, even looked over his shoulder before finally clearing his throat.

“That was some fight you had with Enzo the other day.”

Darren looked up, trying to read Nick’s face. He wasn’t sure if the words were meant as a compliment—unlikely—or the preface to a challenge. “Yeah, well...thanks.”

“You really impressed some of us. Enzo looks like shit.”

“He still looks bad? He hasn’t shown his face around here, so I wouldn’t know.”

Nick grinned. “He doesn’t want you to see just how bad it is. Everyone’s been riding him pretty hard for losing.”

While Darren liked the thought of Enzo’s continued humiliation, his stomach churned a little at the implications. “He’s not off somewhere plotting his revenge, is he?”

“Nah. He’s not that stupid. He knows you’re the better fighter.”

Darren nodded. He hoped that meant Enzo was taking his final warning seriously. “If you’re here to see Aden, he’s holed up at the reserve, taking care of some business.”

Nick’s smile faded, his fingers fidgeting again. “No, actually, I was kind of hoping to catch you.”

“Why?”

“I was...a little rough on you before.” His cheeks flushed. “And I wanted to apologize.”

Darren set the book aside. “Well...thank you. But it’s cool. I get why nobody was exactly happy about me being here.”

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“Yeah, but Aden trusts you, and we should’ve respected that better. It’s just...” He leaned back in the chair, looking relaxed for the first time since sitting down. “The whole Argenti thing. And Aden’s track record hasn’t always been the greatest. The last time he got involved with a guy, well, you know.”

“Yeah, I know what happened.” And despite their current difficulties with Oliver, Darren wished everybody would let it go. It wasn’t as though Aden had gone out of his way to find the worst possible person to fall in love with. “You have to kind of admit, though, the whole Argenti thing should have made Enzo think twice about the fight.”

“Maybe,” Nick conceded. “Except Enzo’s got an ego the size of Texas. Nobody but Aden has ever beat him that bad before. And no offense, but you’re a little on the scrawny side.”

Darren smiled. “No offense taken. I learned early on that being on the scrawny side usually works in my favor precisely because of people like Enzo.”

“And you did it without any weapons. That’s what impressed me the most.”

Darren inclined his head. “Thanks, but I don’t always have weapons on hand when I need them. If I couldn’t fight without them, I would have been dead a long time ago, and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Do you train on your own, or do you ever work with sparring partners?”

Darren frowned thoughtfully. “Neither, I guess. I do—did—all my training on the job, from the very first day I joined Argenti.”

“But you’re not on the job anymore, and it’d be a shame for you to get rusty.”

Even if he did decide to hunt the occasional wolf—like Oliver

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or if Berry tipped his hand—it wouldn't be nearly the same level of activity he had been accustomed to. He had even asked Aden to basically let him *hunt* Aden through the reserve, just because he needed to stretch.

"Yeah, you're right about that. I'll have to figure something out."

Nick picked at something beneath his nail. "If Aden doesn't mind, maybe you could work out with some of the pack. I know I'd be interested in learning some of those moves." He laughed. "Not that I think I can be quite as aerodynamic as you. But it'd be worth a shot."

"Oh." Darren blinked, surprised by the invitation. He wasn't entirely sure he felt comfortable teaching the pack better moves. He wasn't a traitor, regardless of what Jasmine told everybody. On the other hand, he had promised again and again that he was on Aden's side, which included being on the pack's side. "I doubt Aden would mind. He seems to think that I should be more, you know, involved with the pack now. I guess we could use the ring?"

His acceptance brought the smile back to Nick's face. "That's what it's there for. And hey, I might be able to teach you a thing or two at the same time. Stranger things have happened."

"I'm sure you showing me a few things wouldn't be so strange." Darren looked around to see if Domingo was listening, but he wasn't even standing near the counter. "You're the only one who's even tried to talk to me. Are you here on your own?"

"Yeah. Well, some of the others knew I was going to talk to you about this, but I didn't want to put you on the defensive by showing up with the whole pack. And I figured this would give me the chance to say I was sorry about how rough I was on you." He extended a single hand. "No hard feelings?"

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Darren only paused for a brief moment before accepting Nick's hand. "No, no hard feelings. Once Aden gets his business taken care of, and we come back from the reserve, I'll call you."

Nick let out a long breath, like he'd been holding it the entire time he'd been sitting there. "I'm looking forward to it. I've been trying to get up the nerve to ask you this for days now, but Aden was in such a bad mood, I wasn't sure I should press my luck."

Darren's first inclination was to remind Nick that Aden was not his keeper, and his mood didn't necessarily affect Darren's decisions. But given the reason for Aden's sour mood, Nick had probably made the right decision.

"I know. Hopefully, Aden's mood will improve soon." Darren's phone began to vibrate in his pocket, and he knew without looking that it was August. "I've got to go. My ride's here. It was...good talking to you."

Nick rose with him, though he stayed out of the way to give Darren room to pass. "Any time you need a breather from Aden, or you're looking for an escape from inventory, just give me a call. We can go out for a beer or something."

Darren smiled a little at the prospect. It wasn't that he hadn't gone out for a drink or two before, but those had always been meetings. He had the feeling that Nick would want to talk about things other than plotting and killing. Or maybe he'd be quite happy to talk about killing? Darren supposed there was only one way to find out.

"I'll do that. Thanks."

He waved at Nick one final time before stepping out of the toasty bookstore and into a cool wind. August was waiting for him in her sporty little Eclipse, a huge pair of sunglasses obscuring half her face.

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“Sorry if I kept you waiting,” Darren said as he opened the door.

“Not a problem.” Her tires squealed as she pulled into traffic, her foot heavy on the accelerator. “Considering how interesting you’ve made my life this past week, the last thing I’m going to do is complain.”

“I think things are about to get more interesting. I’ve got confirmation that Oliver Moss plans to take over the other packs, one by one, until he’s got complete control of the city.”

“How’d you get that?”

Darren shook his head. “You’re just going to have to trust me on this one.”

“You keep saying that.”

“I know. I tell you what I can. But if you don’t want to be involved with this mess anymore, I understand.”

She exhaled loudly. “No, I’m in, I’m in. You know I can’t just turn my back on what Moss is planning. Not now.”

“Good. Because I think we’re going to need to help each other on this one. Is Jasmine going to start investigating the parties?”

“I haven’t told her about them yet. I was waiting to get the go-ahead from you.”

“Don’t tell her yet. I have the feeling there’s not going to be another one for awhile. And if Argenti gets involved, I want it to be on my—our—terms. Not hers. But you should be careful. Don’t do anything that’s going to make her turn on you, too.”

“Me? Get in trouble? Please. I’m the poster child for covering your ass. Jasmine’s had me collating databases on southern activity. As long as I don’t slack on that, she’ll never suspect we’re doing this on the side.”

August was right. Jasmine would never actively suspect her.

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Especially after Jasmine gave such specific orders about never seeing Darren again. It still made him uneasy. He didn't have any vested interest in August staying with Argenti, but he sure the hell didn't want to be the reason she died.

"I want to get that bastard, August. At his next party, if possible. I don't want to shoot him, either. I want to use the knife."

They turned the corner, a little too fast, and she glanced in his direction. He wished she wasn't wearing the sunglasses. He hated not being able to read her better.

"Did something happen? You weren't this excited about getting him the other night."

"I don't really want to get into it, but I found out his history with Aden. And the fact that he's already had a run in with Argenti. About five years ago. Aden didn't tell me what he did to attract Jasmine's attention. Do you think you could find those records?"

"Sure, but why didn't we know about this before now?"

Darren shrugged. "I'm not privy to every detail of Aden's past. But considering what I know, I have the feeling Oliver is not going to stop until he's taken out Aden's pack."

"Which means you're worried he's going to take out Aden, too."

"I'm worried he's going to try," Darren corrected. "I don't even want him to have the chance." Again. "I just want to step things up so the next time we go into a party, it's for removal, not recon."

"A knife means up close and personal. We'd have better luck doing double long range."

"You're not up to the challenge?"

She glanced at him again. "No, but I thought this was about taking him out, first and foremost. Am I wrong?"

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“No.” Darren flashed to Aden’s stitched throat, and his stitched shoulder, and the pain in his voice that morning. Not only the pain, but also the humiliation. But worse than that, he thought about Aden’s confession that he had loved Oliver once. He didn’t know if the strange heat in his stomach had more to do with jealousy, or anger at Oliver squandering something so wonderful, but he did know it just fueled his anger. “We need to take him out, but...if he’s shot from a distance in the middle of a party, that might just fuel tensions.”

“His pack will turn on whoever kills him. Are you suggesting we set someone up to take the fall?”

Just two months before, Darren wouldn’t have cared if a wolf’s death led to a major war between prominent packs. What business of it was his if they killed each other? He would have slipped in, done the job, and gone home. But if even one person pointed the finger at Aden—or anybody within Aden’s pack—then that would be all it took to cause a skirmish. That was not acceptable.

“Yes, but I’m not sure who yet.”

His answer seemed to satisfy whatever bug had been in her ear. “Just give me enough time to get the frame-up in place. I’ll dig around to see what packs might be giving us particular trouble around DC, too. We could kill two wolves with one knife.”

“I’ll do some digging, too.” Could he give Aden the chance to absorb Oliver’s pack, as well as another? That would definitely elevate Aden’s position in the city. But keeping the peace in the city was paramount—even more important than Aden’s power—and he had to keep that in mind. “You’ll definitely have enough time. I want to take him out, but I don’t want to be stupid about things.”

“Good.” She reached across the distance separating them and

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squeezed his hand. "That's the Darren I know. Sometimes, I worry about losing him."

"You know that once Oliver gets taken care of, we probably shouldn't work together anymore. If you get through this without Jasmine catching you, we shouldn't push our luck."

Her hand fell away, and she fell uncharacteristically silent as she navigated closer to the Arboretum. Several blocks later, she said, "I don't suppose there's any way of talking you out of that."

"Talk me out of what? Not working together anymore? I don't see how we can."

"Maybe not here. But I was thinking...we work well together. And it's kind of nice not having to report to Jasmine. And you don't already. We could partner up and start our own business someplace else."

"You're talking about leaving DC? About the two of us leaving DC?"

"Sure, why not? Nothing's tying you here. We could wrap this up, and head off to anywhere we wanted. Maybe New York, or LA. Or Miami. You know Miami is always crawling with wolves."

"Yeah, it is." Darren turned his face into the window. "But Aden's here."

"True, but, and please don't take this the wrong way, Darren, Aden's always going to be a wolf, and you never will be. I know you're grateful to him, and yes, he's hot, but what kind of a future could you really have with him? All I'm saying is don't forget to look at all the pieces here."

What kind of future would I have without him?

"I know that...I know. Why don't we talk about this after we take care of Oliver? There's too many other things on my mind right now."

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“Okay.” Though her tone said she really didn’t want to abandon the topic. “Just promise me you won’t automatically dismiss the idea.”

“I’ll think about it.” It wasn’t a hollow promise. There were advantages to leaving DC with August, and they both knew it. His feelings for Aden were undeniable, but Darren wasn’t convinced they could overcome everything. Sure, Aden was willing now to let Darren help him, but that didn’t mean Aden had completely turned around and changed who he was. And there was still the issue of being a member of the pack—despite his chat with Nick, he just didn’t know if he was cut out to live with wolves.

On the other hand, it had felt unbelievably right to curl around Aden’s form, to feel the powerful muscles beneath his soft fur, and to look in his eyes and know that Aden trusted him. Maybe even needed him.

There was a lot to think about.

CHAPTER 12

It had been one thing to get used to having Darren around all the time. It was something else entirely to have Darren around while Aden was injured and not able to do everything he usually could on his own.

Not that he was complaining. He wasn't. He expended a lot of energy making sure his pack was safe, seeing to other people, serving customers and contacts in an effort to make others' lives more comfortable. Having Darren around to carry some of the load was a godsend, especially when his stitches ached more than he would ever admit, and sometimes just swallowing gave him a headache.

Darren had seemed relatively normal before he left to pick up his car at the Arboretum. He had prepared a simple breakfast for

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both of them, and served Aden in bed with a gentle admonishment to stay put while he was gone. Aden had chuckled lightly and agreed, but he hadn't really believed Darren was serious. When he got tired of lying around, he made his way into the living room and settled on the couch to read the newspaper. That peaceful pastime ended as soon as Darren opened the front door.

"What are you doing out of bed?"

Aden glanced pointedly at the paper still in his hands. "It's one of those newfangled hobbies called reading."

"If you wanted the newspaper, why didn't you tell me before I left?"

"Because I didn't want it before you left."

Darren dropped his keys on the table and shrugged off his jacket. "Did you open any of your stitches?"

Now, he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. "From reading? Um, no, I don't think so."

"No, not from reading. From getting out of your bed that's like six feet tall and walking all the way in here. Here, give me that." Darren plucked the newspaper from his hand and tossed it aside. "I need to check."

Aden sat perfectly still as Darren knelt in front of him. His dark head remained bowed as he first peeled back the bandage covering his stomach, exposing the small, even stitches he'd used to sew Aden back together. Unable to resist, Aden caressed the sharp line of his cheekbone, remaining otherwise motionless as he warmed Darren's skin with his fingertips.

"Am I going to live?" he teased.

"You shouldn't joke about this. What if you had popped your stitches while I was gone and bled all over the place?"

"You would be mopping up the floor now instead of in one of

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my favorite positions.”

“Ha ha. Very funny.” Darren pushed himself to his feet. “Come on. You’re going back to bed.”

Aden took the hand Darren offered to brace against as he stood. Together, they walked back to the bedroom, but it was Darren who guided him under the blankets again, forcing him to remain still as he finished checking the other injuries. Aden stayed there the rest of the day, every need attended to. Darren even helped him into the bathroom when he had to use it, refusing to leave anything to chance.

The next day was more of the same. The smell of breakfast woke Aden up, but as he swung his legs out to go and find out what was cooking, Darren appeared in the doorway, a frown on his face.

Aden froze. “You’re not seriously going to make me eat breakfast in bed again, are you?”

“Breakfast in bed. Lunch in bed. Dinner in bed. Everything in bed, because I do not want to risk my amateur stitches getting pulled out.”

“What about showering? I need one soon. I’m starting to smell. And not in a good way.”

“Sponge baths. Which I’m sure will be quite the hardship for you.” Darren took Aden’s good shoulder and gently pushed him back to the bed before setting the tray on his lap. “It’s not going to kill you to stay in bed for a few days.”

His stomach grumbled at the sight of the eggs and sausage filling the plate in front of him. “It’s boring. I’m ordering a TV for this place as soon as you stop hiding my wallet from me.”

“A TV you’ll never watch once you’ve recovered? Don’t you have a big to-be-read pile? I’ll bring you some books.”

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“They’re all at the store.” Which meant Darren would have to run into town and Aden could get up and stretch his legs for a couple hours. He picked up his fork and cut into the nearest sausage. “That would be great if you could do that. Oh, and get my other reading glasses. This prescription is an older one and bugs me after a while.”

“Right, so I can leave and you can get up and probably do a little jig while I’m gone?”

“I don’t jig.” He smiled as he took a bite. “Maybe a little waltz.”

Darren settled on the bed beside him, sitting cross-legged. “Are you always a difficult patient, or am I just lucky?”

“I’m not usually a patient. Am I being particularly difficult? I’ve done everything you said I should.”

Darren sighed. “I know. You’ve been great. I’m just...I’m worried. Every time you get up and move around, all I can see are the stitches in your throat popping out. And the thought of being *out* when it happens just makes it worse.”

Setting down his fork, Aden reached over and caressed Darren’s knee with the back of his knuckles. “What are you doing to keep from going insane out here? This can’t be easy for you, either.”

“Oh, you know, going through your things, thinking, plotting. Nothing too exciting.” Darren absently rubbed Aden’s hand. “If you promise not to get up and wander around, I’ll go to the apartment and bring back your books, glasses, and your laptop.”

“Let me eat dinner on the couch, and we’ll call it a deal.”

Darren brought Aden’s hand up to his mouth and kissed it. “It’s a deal, as long as you let me help you out to the couch.”

The urge to curl his hand around the back of Darren’s neck and

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kiss him properly almost made Aden knock his breakfast aside. Only the knowledge that Darren had gone to a lot of trouble and would likely be pissed about Aden's unnecessary exertion stopped him.

"Sponge bath afterward?"

"After dinner? Are you kidding? That's what we're doing after breakfast. You really are starting to smell a bit ripe."

With a chuckle, Aden resumed eating. "After breakfast then."

Though he'd held hopes the sponge bath might distract Darren from his dedication, all it did was leave Aden aching for more contact and tired from holding himself still. He went back to bed without protest and promptly fell asleep. When he woke up, there was a stack of books on the nightstand and his better glasses sitting folded on top.

He smiled as he put them on. As soon as he was better, he was spoiling Darren rotten.

On the fourth morning, Darren actually conceded to letting Aden sit at the table for breakfast. He hovered, fluttering around the kitchen in an oddly silent way. Like he was moving through shadows instead of a brightly lit room with a pot of coffee in his hand. Aden was feeling much stronger, but Darren didn't look convinced of that.

"Do you think it's going to scar?" Darren asked, leaning against the counter.

Aden sipped carefully at the hot coffee. "Which one? I'm a smorgasbord right now."

Darren set his mug down and moved over to the table. His fingers were warm from the mug where they gently touched the wound on his neck. "This one."

As the heat seeped into his skin, Aden sighed. "Yeah, of any of

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them, that'll be the one to do it. The skin's thinner, and it bled too much."

"I'm sorry," Darren murmured. "This is the sort of reminder you don't need. Is it still sore?"

"A little." Not when Darren touched him like that, though. "But it's miles better than what it was."

Darren skimmed his fingers lightly over the ragged wound. "He's going to have a matching one."

Nothing would please Aden more, but the thought of Darren getting close enough to Oliver to deal the blow sent a shiver racing down his spine. He caught Darren's wrist and turned it over, lifting it to drag his tongue across the palm. "Mine will be prettier. I had an excellent doctor."

He detected the lightest shudder moving through Darren's frame, and the unmistakable scent of excitement. Darren was always responsive, but it had been nearly a week since they even touched each other like this.

"The crazy thing is, I think you mean that, even though you're probably going to resemble Frankenstein."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "I'll have to blindfold you so I can fuck you again without scaring you away."

"You can blindfold me any time you like, but you don't have to do it because of your scars. I like them. Even this one."

He glanced up through his lashes. "They don't remind you of what I am?" He nipped at the fleshy pad at the base of Darren's thumb. "I would've thought you hated them."

"Do you hate my scars?"

The question surprised him. "Of course not."

"But they remind you of who I am, don't they?" Darren pulled his shirt up, exposing three faded claw marks just above his hip,

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each about two inches long. “You can’t pretend that I didn’t get this one in a fight that only one of us walked away from.”

Aden let go of Darren’s wrist to lightly grip his waist instead, drawing him closer to stand between Aden’s legs. While Darren kept the shirt out of the way, Aden leaned in and ran his lips over the same scars he had just pointed out, reversing the path when he reached their end until its shape was branded on his memory.

“These tell me how strong you are. How determined. That you’ll do whatever it takes to survive. There’s a lot to admire in just these little marks.”

“Your scars tell me the same thing.” Darren traced one along Aden’s arm, his fingers as light as when he touched the cut on Aden’s throat. “I may not know everything about running a pack, but I do know that you don’t get where you are unless you’re ready to fight for it. Besides, I don’t hate all wolves. I’ve never been on a mission to wipe them all out or anything.”

He didn’t want to tear his mouth away from Darren’s warm skin, skin that got hotter by the second. It felt like it had been forever since he’d been able to taste and touch to his heart’s content, and right now, he needed to savor every last moment.

“Do you know how many you’ve killed?” Aden popped the button on Darren’s jeans to expose more of his lower abdomen, and another scar he’d always wondered about. “Or is that too morbid for you?”

“Actually, Jasmine always insisted we keep precise records. Do you want the number? Keeping in mind I’ve been doing this for fifteen years, and Jasmine would often send us out all over the east coast.”

“Only if you want to share it.” His thumb drew soft circles over the new mark, while his mouth strayed farther toward the middle

and the angled bulge in Darren's briefs. He ran his teeth along the covered shaft toward the head, trying not to smile when Darren suddenly gripped his elbow in an unbreakable lock. "I think it's more telling that you could tell me without having to look it up."

"One hundred and seventy," Darren said softly, his grip still tight on Aden's arm. "Which... sounds like I'm some sort of serial killer when I say it out loud."

"So what does it sound like to you if I say my number is more than twice that?" Reaching the tip, Aden closed his mouth around the crown, sucking it into his mouth complete with the cotton weave of Darren's briefs.

Darren leaned back, pushing his hips forward with a low moan. "It sounds like you're a wolf. And no matter what number you tell me, I'm always going to know that."

Aden didn't actually have any intention of sharing the number, even if he knew it as well as he knew his own age. He wasn't ashamed of what he'd done in his life, and the vast majority of his kills had been other wolves in pack fights, but these were things Darren was already aware and accepting of. He would never have agreed to Aden's protection, otherwise.

Sliding a hand down the loose back of Darren's jeans, Aden cupped his ass, caressing along the covered crease as he further wet the front of his underwear. "I love your scars," he said against Darren's cock. "And at some point, I'm going to tie you down and make you tell me the story behind each and every one."

Darren ran his hands up and down Aden's back, pausing occasionally to knead out a knot he found with his strong fingers. "If you keep tormenting me like this, I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

Aden finally tore away, leaning back in his chair to gaze up at

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Darren. "What happened to the mother hen I had to argue with for ten minutes this morning just to eat at the kitchen table?"

"Clearly the problem is that you were using your mouth for talking. But you're right. If this'll tax your body too much, I can leave you with your eggs."

He didn't want eggs. He wanted Darren. More and more with every passing day. "Or we take it back to bed so that I don't overexert myself."

Darren took Aden's hand and helped him to his feet. "You know I never have a problem with taking you back to bed." His fingers moved down Aden's body, finally stopping at the hard line of his cock. "I'll make sure you don't have to work too hard."

The last word was almost lost as Aden bent and claimed Darren's mouth, the way he needed, the way he'd craved every moment he'd had his mouth elsewhere. His tongue probed past the willing parting of Darren's lips, and they both moaned at the first touch together. Aden cupped the back of his head, tilting it slightly in order to better plunder the hot depths of their kiss. Yet, through it all, Darren kept his touch light, as if he still feared hurting Aden.

Aden nibbled at his lower lip. "I've missed you, gorgeous. More than I ever thought possible."

"Missed you, too." Darren took a step backward, guiding Aden rather than pulling away from him, as their mouths came together again. They shuffled out of the kitchen, locked together, Darren's tongue sliding against his. Once they reached the bedroom, Darren tore his mouth away to kiss Aden's chin, then his jaw, and the ridge of his cheek. "Need you."

"You have me." He shivered when Darren flicked his tongue across his ear. "You've always had me."

Darren worked his hand down the front of Aden's pants, his

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fingernails grazing Aden's cock. He shivered again. "Not just for this, though. And not just for protection. I mean...in every way."

The declaration made his skin run hot, then cold, then hot again. Aden squeezed his eyes shut, remembering the harsh words he'd flung at Darren more than once when they'd been fighting, how he'd accused Darren of being addicted to the sex and nothing else. Someone who only cared about the sex wouldn't have risked following Aden to the Arboretum to make sure he was safe, or spent hours cleaning and suturing his injuries, or waited on him hand and foot for days while he healed, all without thought to his own needs. Aden couldn't even imagine what life would be like without Darren in it anymore, and more importantly, didn't want to.

"Will it scare you if I say the same?" He caressed Darren's nape, holding him close. His lips moved across Darren's temple with every word he uttered. "I know you're okay with being with a wolf now, but what if that wolf told you he wanted you as a mate instead of just a lover?"

"I..." Darren lifted his head, meeting Aden's gaze with clear brown eyes. "Even though I can't ever be a wolf?"

"You understand me better than any wolf ever has. That matters to me a hell of a lot more than whether or not you can shift."

"Then...if that wolf told me he wanted me to be a mate instead of just a lover, I would tell him yes, I'd be honored."

His chest ached, and his tight throat made it difficult to breathe. Aden swept his thumb across Darren's lower lip, watching it tremble beneath his touch, and swallowed to try and find his voice again.

"Me being Frankenstein won't matter much," he tried to joke.

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“You were always the beautiful one anyway.”

Darren smiled a little at the attempt, then cupped the back of Aden’s head and pulled him into another kiss. They had both been frantic before, trying to make up for all the lost time, but now Darren moved slowly, his tongue thoroughly exploring Aden’s mouth. He looped his other arm around Aden’s shoulders, holding him close, his hard body pressed to Aden’s.

The bandages still on his body prevented him from feeling Darren everywhere, but what there was, was glorious. Aden enveloped Darren in his embrace, holding him as possessively as he had ever dared, and let their kisses say those things he hadn’t yet had the opportunity to share. His head swam from the implications of Darren’s agreement. Though he hadn’t thought of it before, now it seemed like the only possible conclusion to the path they had started on Halloween. Why else would he cling so hard to someone he should loathe? Why else would he fight against his own pack, against his own habits, to include a man he had even more reason to mistrust than Oliver?

Neither man made a move to shed the rest of their clothes. Aden had the advantage, as he hadn’t bothered with a shirt, but Darren was still mostly dressed, only his fly open from Aden’s earlier exploration. Though Aden didn’t want to break the embrace, he ground lightly against Darren’s hips, making sure he felt his arousal, shuddering at the thick bulge of Darren’s.

Darren released the hold on the back of Aden’s head, his hand gliding down Aden’s back to find the waistband of his sweats. He pushed them past Aden’s hips, dragging the tight band over his cock, until they were free to fall down his legs. Despite the fact that Aden was free of his clothes, Darren didn’t break away to try to remove his own pants. He just pressed himself closer to Aden,

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still hungry for his mouth, still taking whatever Aden could offer him.

He stepped back, closer to the bed, then stepped again until he felt it nudge at his leg. Darren followed without hesitation, and Aden had to pause to devour more of his mouth. He would never get enough of this man, not now, not in a year, not in a decade. He looked forward to showing Darren just how serious he was about proving that.

Starting with getting him on their bed.

Lightly grasping Darren's hips, Aden slowly sat down, never breaking the contact of their lips. He tugged once he was done, and spread his legs to give Darren room to kneel on the edge of the bed between them.

Seconds or minutes could have passed. Aden's sense of time, his sense of place, his sense of anything except Darren completely faded. Darren finally lifted his head just as Aden's chest began to burn and yanked his shirt off. His pants and underwear followed, joining Aden's sweats in a heap on the floor. Darren's eyes had darkened, until they were the color of burnt chocolate, and he let Aden pull him to kneel on the mattress. Aden's arms immediately went around him, but Darren bypassed Aden's mouth in favor of the side of his neck, which led to his shoulder, and then down to his nipple.

Aden groaned, his head tipping back as heat flared in his body. "I cannot get this hurt again. It's been too long since you've done this."

He felt Darren's smile. "Is this what it takes to remind you to be careful?"

"I have a feeling you'll remind me anyway."

"Absolutely. Do you have any idea how hard it is to sleep next

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to you every night and keep my hands to myself?" He put his hand on Aden's good shoulder and gently pushed him backward until he had no choice but to lay down. He could only see the top of Darren's dark head as he kissed along Aden's ribs, constantly shifting from his path to lick or caress small scars and marks. When he finally reached the bandage on Aden's stomach, he kissed around the edges tenderly.

It was impossible to resist touching him. Aden pushed back the hair that fell across Darren's forehead, collecting the beads of sweat and brushing his fingertips over the fine brows. Every touch of Darren's mouth made his stomach twitch, the muscles dancing at the tender caresses, and his cock throbbed with every inch he got closer.

"I need to taste you. C'mon, gorgeous, you wouldn't deny me now, would you?"

At first, Darren didn't show any signs of hearing him. Instead of coming closer, he moved lower, not stopping until he reached Aden's cock. He left a trail of tiny kisses from the base to the tip, then licked a new path down the sensitive underside. Aden's groin and stomach tightened at the slow caress. Before Aden could ask for more, Darren reversed his path, winding his way back up Aden's body, once again careful of his healing wounds, until his mouth reached Aden's—hot and salty.

Aden clamped his arm around Darren's waist before he could escape again. Darren protested the direct contact against his injuries, but this time, Aden didn't care. He needed this as much as he needed to breathe. His assault on Darren's mouth was unrelenting, voracious, though he kept the swipes of his tongue as slow as they had ever been. He didn't necessarily want to speed this up, but damned if he was going to lose Darren's heat now that

he had it.

Aden rolled Darren to his back, trapping him against the bed. Though Darren wasn't free to explore with his mouth, his hands never stopped moving. Up and down Aden's back, along his ass, and over his chest again. Their mouths finally broke apart as they both gasped for breath, and the color was high in Darren's cheeks.

"So...what, exactly, does it mean? Being a mate?"

"It means..." He searched for the right words. Another wolf wouldn't ask, and he'd never thought he would have to explain it to a human. "Think of it as being married. Partners in every sense of the word. I would die to protect you, to give you what you want, what you need. And I'd seek your leadership in guiding the pack. It would be our pack to take care of. To keep together."

Darren kissed the corner of Aden's mouth, then smiled. "I just wanted to make sure I understood. God...this is crazy. But..." He pulled back and met Aden's gaze once again. "I promise I'm not going to change my mind. I love you too much to do that."

Aden went still. The last person to say those words to him had attempted to kill him a few days earlier. Yet, there was no doubt in his mind that Darren would never do so. The differences between Darren and Oliver were like night and day. Aden would put his life in Darren's hands and consider it safe at any time. He had already placed his heart there, after all.

He propped himself up on his good arm and skimmed his hand down Darren's side. "Good. Though chasing you down if you did would've been fun."

"That reminds me. You still owe me a chase when you're back up to one hundred percent."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten about that."

His hand veered inward when it reached Darren's hip, gently

prying his thighs apart. Darren gasped when Aden caressed his balls, and spread his legs even farther. Already, Aden ached to be inside him, but not at the frantic tempo that usually characterized their coupling. No, he wanted to savor Darren for hours, adore him as he deserved to be adored. He would take every step necessary to make sure it happened.

Darren moaned as Aden's fingers closed around his sac, arching off the bed and seeking out Aden's mouth once again. Darren's body had been tense beneath him, but the more he flexed his fingers, gently squeezing Darren's balls, the more taut he became. Aden controlled the tempo of the kiss, especially when he sensed that Darren was ready to forget taking his time. He always surged to life under Aden—it was one good reason to keep him tied—but he didn't fight Aden's control.

Every once in a while, he let his fingers slip, to the velvety skin behind the sac, to the clenching muscle of Darren's ass. Every time he did, Darren lifted his hips to meet him, and every time, Aden pushed him carefully back down. He nipped at Darren's lips, reminding him who was in charge, and it worked for a few minutes at least. But then he would touch another spot, and Darren would make a sound that went straight to Aden's cock, and the battle for tempo would start all over again.

"You didn't have any plans today, right?" he murmured against Darren's mouth.

"If I did, I don't remember them." His fingers grazed over Aden's cock, his thumb catching the head, smearing the pre-come he found there. Aden hissed, automatically jerking his hips as every nerve ending flared to life. He brought his hand to Aden's mouth and spread the fluid he gathered across his lips. "Must not have been very important."

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“Good.” He caught Darren’s thumb and sucked into his mouth, wishing that it was his mate’s pre-come he tasted instead of his own. Darren’s breath quickened with each second, and the flare of his nostrils nearly made Aden growl. He scratched his nails up over Darren’s sac, this time venturing farther along the shaft to what he truly desired. He only opened his mouth to replace its treat with his own sticky finger, moaning at the tang exploding across his tongue.

As soon as he moved his hand away from his mouth, Darren caught the back of his head and smashed their lips together. His tongue immediately invaded Aden’s mouth as he sought every trace of the salty taste. Aden let Darren lead the kiss, drawing on his hunger and his need, before purposefully slowing the caress. The head of Darren’s cock dragged against Aden’s stomach, spreading even more pre-come, another reminder of just how much Darren wanted him.

They kissed until his lips felt bruised. He had no intentions of letting Darren get out of bed that day, and perhaps the next if he could get away with it. Darren wouldn’t protest, most likely. They had gone without each other for far too long. If Aden had his way, they would never go this long again.

He finally stopped to trail kisses down Darren’s smooth chest, licking around one nipple and then the other before continuing downward. “Tell me what you want, gorgeous,” he said at his stomach. He grasped the long, hard length nuzzling against his cheek, and turned his head to run his tongue along it as well.

“This. What you’re doing.” Darren reached down, his fingers trailing over Aden’s face, catching in the strands of his hair. “I want to feel your mouth. And I want to taste you, too.”

“Later. We’ve got all day.”

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He didn't bother with niceties. Dropping his jaw, Aden sucked the hot shaft past his lips, into his mouth, and down his throat.

"Oh..." Darren was always vocal, but this time, he didn't shout. He gasped for breath, holding it for long seconds as Aden swallowed around his length, and then released them in long, low moans. Darren went through the pattern again and again, following several beats of silence with what could only be described as a sound of pure pleasure.

Aden moved deliberately, resolved to prolong each moment of bliss for as long as he could. Darren's fingers fluttered through his hair, fell away, and then returned. The long vein running down Darren's cock throbbed against Aden's tongue, and his cock twitched with every shift of Aden's mouth.

When Darren started to thrust to meet Aden's mouth, Aden knew it was time for more. He stroked up and down the inside of Darren's thighs, coaxing them apart. His fingertips scalded wherever he touched, whether it was the tight sac or the quivering muscle at Darren's knee or the lower swell of Darren's ass. Darren braced his heels on the bed, making it easier for Aden to explore, but rather than tease the opening he desired, Aden went ahead and pushed two fingers slowly inside, taking his time to make up for the lack of lubrication.

Darren immediately clenched around Aden's fingers, his back lifting off the bed. Aden paused, waiting for Darren to relax before pushing in a little bit further. The first knuckle of his fingers disappeared, and then the second knuckles. When Darren began rocking side to side, Aden touched his hip, reminding him to be still. Aden continued pressing forward, until both fingers were completely buried.

"More," Darren rasped. "Please. Please."

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He slid up Darren's length to say, "More...what? Fingers? Tongue? Me?"

"Yes, yes." Darren swallowed. "All of it. More of everything."

Aden twisted his hand, making sure his knuckles scraped and stretched with the revolutions back and forth. It hurt a little twisting his body like this, though he would never voice his discomfort out loud. And he was dying to get his mouth on Darren's ass, but that would require another position that wouldn't let him enjoy it as much as he wanted to. So instead, he pulled his fingers free and bowed his head to run his tongue once over the tight ring, chuckling when Darren immediately rose to meet him.

"Next time," he promised, sliding up Darren's body. He reached for the lube in the nightstand, flipping it open expertly with one hand. "Right now, I'm going to fuck you. Next time, I'm going to be on my back, and you're going to climb on so I can eat your ass the way it should be."

Darren whimpered, which sounded like an agreement to Aden. The lube felt cold on his flushed skin as he smeared it over his cock, working it up and down his length. He took his time, giving Darren a show, making sure that his gaze lingered on Aden's cock. A fresh wave of arousal flowed from Darren's body, and Aden's predator senses caught the quickening of his pulse, the smell of sweat and adrenaline coating his body.

Aden leaned forward, covering Darren's body, and Darren immediately responded by wrapping himself around Aden's frame. The slick head of his cock pushed against Darren's stretched hole, but Aden didn't need to rock forward. Darren rose to meet him, his legs hooked around Aden's hips, his body burning.

He took his time, as he had promised himself, as he had sworn to Darren he would do. Part of him had to or risk hurting Darren

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with the force. He wanted no pain associated with this day, no discomfort, nothing negative. And as excruciatingly tight as Darren's channel was around his shaft, he refused the urge to slam forward and take what Darren so freely gave.

"Anything you ever want," he vowed, his voice a hushed whisper. "I swear to you. You have my heart, my loyalty, everything."

"Aden..." Darren's breath caught as Aden filled him completely. He paused there, waiting for Darren to adjust to him, waiting for his head to stop spinning, waiting for his own breath to return. He felt every beat of Darren's heart, and it pulsed through him, making his nerves spark and pop. "Thank you. I just...I don't...thank you."

He wasn't looking for gratitude, but he knew that wasn't how Darren meant it. As he eased out of the clenching passage, he lowered his head and kissed Darren, as slowly and carefully as their bodies joined together. Strong hands molded down his back, careful to avoid any of his lingering injuries, but Aden would've sworn he felt a slight tremor in the fingers. The same tremor that threatened his own muscles long before his crown reached the tight ring again.

That was the pace he set—long, deep strokes that kept him buried in Darren's ass for even longer seconds when he was fully sheathed. Sweat coated both of them from the exertions of their languorous pace, alternately heating and cooling him as the minutes passed. Through it all, he never stopped his soft promises, even when Darren swallowed them down in even softer kisses.

Darren was always impatient—always strained against the ropes that held him or gently resisted Aden's control. But there was nothing impatient in the way Darren met Aden's strokes, or in

the way he welcomed Aden into his body again and again. Each time Aden rocked forward, his stomach scraped along Darren's trapped cock. It caught the bandage occasionally, but Aden barely noticed it. He was too high on the pleasure, too intoxicated on Darren's kisses, to notice the pressure against his tender skin.

Darren smoothed his hand over Aden's ass, his fingers moving up and down his crease. He brushed a nail across Aden's tight hole, not trying to press for more, but still catching Aden's attention.

"One of these days, I'll ride you instead of the other way around." Aden nuzzled at Darren's neck, barely able to keep from sinking his teeth into the salty skin. "In fact, maybe I'll tie you to the bed later and do it tonight."

Darren tilted his head back. "I didn't know...you were into getting fucked."

"And why wouldn't I want your pretty cock inside me?" The muscles jumped beneath his tongue when Darren swallowed. "You should know I can't get enough of you by now."

"I...I know now. God, I'd love that." Darren swallowed again, and his pulse jumped. "Especially if you use the leather to tie me down."

"Whatever you want."

He couldn't hold back any longer. The fire radiating down his legs stripped away one of his last remaining vestiges of control, and his thrusts began to quicken, driving harder into Darren's willing body. He succumbed to the desire to bite by nipping at the tight sinew, tasting the salt, then tearing his mouth away to seal it to Darren's again. That was safest. That was what he truly wanted anyway.

Darren responded instantly, like he had just been waiting for

Aden to let him off the leash. He rose off the bed with each thrust, his tongue winding around Aden's, his fingernails digging into Aden's flesh. The headboard rattled, slamming into the wall, the entire mattress shaking beneath them. Darren's moans were muffled against Aden's mouth, but they still filled the room, echoed inside of Aden's head.

"Love this..." Darren gasped between kisses. "Love when you fuck me. Love you."

Aden was too overwhelmed to respond. He pounded into Darren's ass, heedless of force, blind to anything but the demanding call of both of their desire. His kisses became rougher, and now, the slightly coppery taste of blood tinged Darren's tongue. Darren never uttered a word of protest, though. If anything, he goaded Aden into taking more, tearing his mouth away at awkward angles to turn his head and bare his neck for the taking.

So Aden took. With his mouth watering, he snapped his hips even harder and sank his teeth into the soft flesh below Darren's ear.

Darren shouted with his release, though Aden picked out hints of surprise and pain in the sound, too. But Darren didn't push him away, or try to break the contact with his mouth. His hands flattened against Aden's back, holding him down as his cock jerked. Aden tensed his jaw slightly—not hard enough to break the skin, but just enough to let Darren know he wasn't going to let go. That Darren belonged to him. Darren's cock jerked again and hot come shot across Aden's stomach, coating his skin as he continued to thrust forward. Darren shouted again, his ass clamping down around Aden's shaft.

The contraction was too much to withstand. Two strokes later, Aden's balls slapped painfully against Darren's flesh as his orgasm

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exploded through him. Everything narrowed down to the heat of the tight channel, the scent of Darren's lust, the taste of him against Aden's tongue. He shot deep inside, vibrating from the intensity, as growls he couldn't contain echoed through both of them.

Aden collapsed forward, and Darren immediately tightened his hold. They remained locked together for long, shaky seconds as they both struggled to bring their breathing under control. Darren left lazy kisses along Aden's neck, working up to his ear.

"Your stitches are all okay, right?"

Unbidden, Aden chuckled. "You're coherent enough to ask about my stitches after coming that hard? I'm losing my touch."

He felt Darren's sheepish smile. "No. No, nothing like that. I just want to make sure you're okay."

Licking over the spot he'd bitten, Aden drank in the smell of him, his eyes closed as the emotions took him over. "I'm better than I can ever remember, gorgeous."

"Me, too, sunshine." Darren sighed softly and shifted beneath him, settling more comfortably. "Me, too."

CHAPTER 13

Darren yawned and stretched, debating the relative pros and cons of getting out of bed. On the one hand, he was tired and a little bit sore, and he didn't have a truly compelling reason to leave the comfort of the thick mattress. On the other hand, Aden was already up, driven by his hunger to leave Darren behind and explore the kitchen. It would probably be nice of him to get up and help Aden prepare the meal, but Aden wouldn't expect him to get out of bed. In fact, he had specifically told Darren that he would serve him in bed.

Aden's ringing cell phone interrupted his thoughts, and Darren reached for it automatically. "Do you want me to get this?"

"Who is it?"

"It's..." Darren's eyes widened as he recognized the number. It

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was Aden's number—the landline in his apartment above the bookstore. Dread pricked along his spine, even as he told himself it was probably just Domingo. Just Domingo or not, the uneasy feeling persisted, and he didn't wait for Aden's permission to answer the call. Not sure what to expect, he brought the phone up to his ear. "Hello?"

Though the line was open, all he heard was the soft hiss of silence from the other end. Then, a muted but harsh, "Who is this?"

"A friend of Aden's. Who are you?"

A frustrated growl. "Leo Lane. Put Aden on. Now."

"Yeah. Okay." He untangled himself from the blanket and rolled off the bed. He hurried to the kitchen, where Aden stood over the stove with a quizzical look. "It's Leo Lane. He's calling from our apartment. Here."

Aden swapped the phone for the wooden spoon he held, moving out of the way so Darren could stir what was in the pot. "Leo? What're you doing..." His voice faded away at the same time his frown grew dark and furious. Within seconds, he was marching out of the kitchen. "No, just keep doing what you're doing. I'll be there as soon as I can. I'm outside the Beltway, but I've got the Viper. Just don't let him in, you got that?" Darren already had the burner turned off when Aden yelled from the other room, "We gotta move! Oliver's at the store!"

Darren didn't ask any questions. The answers didn't matter. All that mattered was that Darren had misjudged, and Oliver was healthy enough to attack. Had he gone after Leo? Was that why Leo was calling from inside the apartment? That seemed the most likely scenario. Oliver wanted to consolidate power, and Leo's pack was small, but Leo's influence was not.

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He dressed quickly, making sure to arm himself with his gun, a fresh clip of bullets, and his knife. Would Oliver be stupid enough to linger at the store? Probably not, but Darren wanted to be prepared anyway.

Aden was ready before him, though he hadn't bothered with any weapons. He waited impatiently at the front door, only hurrying out when Darren emerged from the bedroom.

"Leo's locked in the apartment," he said as they both slid into the Viper. He tossed his phone into Darren's lap. "Call Enzo. Tell him to get his ass over to the store with as much backup as he can manage in five minutes."

Darren scrolled through Aden's long contact list, looking for Enzo's name. He supposed this would be the real test. It was one thing to pay lip service to respect—and to get out of Darren's face—it was quite another thing to obey when issued a direct order.

The phone rang twice before Enzo answered, his voice blurry with sleep. Darren didn't bother with niceties. "You need to get to the bookstore right now. Bring as much backup as you can. Oliver is there. We're on our way."

Blankets rustled. At least he was moving. "What the fuck is Oliver doing at the store?"

"I don't know. But Leo Lane is there as well. He might be cornered there."

"He *is* cornered there," Aden interjected. The Viper raced down the narrow trail leading back to the road. "Domingo's trying to hold Oliver off."

While Darren gaped at Aden, Enzo's startled voice shot through the line. He didn't sound half-asleep anymore. "*Domingo's* the watchdog? Shit."

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Darren imagined Domingo trying to fend off the stronger, more aggressive Oliver, and felt a curious twinge in his chest, like something was twisting inside of him. Domingo didn't stand a chance against the other wolf, and though the thought shouldn't have bothered Darren at all, it did. He didn't want anything to happen to Domingo, even if he was a prick.

"Just get over there as soon as possible. And listen, you need backup. Oliver is strong...stronger than you expect."

"Oliver's going down," Enzo hissed. "Tell Aden not to worry. We'll take care of it."

The phone beeped, indicating the call was disconnected. Darren fingered the knife's ivory handle, wishing he had shot Oliver when he had the chance.

"Did Leo say if Oliver had any backup with him?"

"Two wolves. They targeted him specifically." His knuckles were white around the steering wheel. "When he realized he couldn't take them down, he made a run for the store. Domingo got him to hide upstairs."

Darren wanted to offer something reassuring, something that would ease Aden's mind, but there was nothing. The absolute best case scenario was that somehow Enzo and the other wolves managed to kill Oliver, but Darren didn't like Enzo's chances. Far more likely was that Oliver would get spooked by the superior numbers and run off, holing up somewhere to lick his wounds and plan the next attack. Which would probably be even more vicious, since he had been thwarted from killing Aden as well as Leo.

Darren also wanted to ask Aden not to immediately jump in for the attack if they arrived and Oliver was still there. But he didn't dare. Not because he thought Aden would necessarily be angry at the suggestion, but because it was just completely pointless. Aden

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would defend his pack, and his home, from an immediate threat, and no amount of argument or logic would trump those desires.

The Beltway was dead at that hour, and Aden whipped along at well over a hundred miles an hour to get to their exit. His speed diminished when they hit surface streets, but not by much, and Darren caught himself checking all the mirrors for the telltale flash of red and blue sirens.

Their luck held out. Aden skidded to a halt in front of the store and leapt out before the engine had completely switched over. He raced straight for the open front door.

Darren followed hot on his heels, his hand resting on his gun, though he could tell from the distance that the fight—for good or ill—was over. There were four figures standing in a small circle. The store was dim, nobody had bothered to turn on the light, but Darren could see the shadows move. They all looked up as Aden entered the store, and everything was completely silent. Darren heard his own heart pounding as he raced to join them.

The front half of the store was utterly destroyed. It seemed like two large packs had squared off against each other, not just two or three wolves. Books were strewn everywhere, torn apart, covered in a dark substance that could only be blood. Shelves were knocked down, and the front counter was empty. Everything, including the till, was spread across the floor. There were shards of broken glass underfoot, though Darren couldn't place the source of that. Maybe a window. And at the center of it all was Domingo's prone body, completely still in the full moon's light.

His normally perfectly tailored clothes hung in tatters along his lean form, shredded by multiple claws. Those same claws had raked over his body until there was more exposed flesh than untouched skin. The largest pool of blood was at his head, but even

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lying on his stomach, the ragged edges of his torn-out throat were more than visible. Puffs of dark fur mottled his arms, while his jaw looked curiously elongated, like he'd been taking by surprise in mid-shift.

All Darren could wonder was why he hadn't shifted earlier.

"We got one of them," Enzo said, breaking the silence. He nodded toward a dark mass in the middle of the room.

Slowly, Aden crouched down. His eyes flickered silver in the moonlight, and for a moment, Darren wondered if it was his wolf or the onslaught of tears.

"Where's Leo?"

"Still upstairs. He's pretty bad. We called Gail to get out here and take a look at him."

Aden nodded without looking up. The hand he rested on the back of Domingo's head shook a little.

Darren had never felt so helpless in his life. He wanted to help, but he had no idea what they needed from him. Now wasn't the time to go upstairs and interrogate Leo about Oliver, especially since Leo had no idea who he was, and he didn't think now was the time to explain. He considered breaking away from the group to call August and put her on Oliver's trail, but Darren didn't want to get August more involved than she already was. Not without Aden's approval.

Mostly, though, Darren wanted to track Oliver down. He wanted to slit his throat and drag his carcass back to Aden as an offering.

Instead of following his first instinct, he put a light hand on Aden's shoulder, a silent reminder that he was there, and willing to do whatever Aden needed.

"Who's tracking Oliver?"

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Enzo looked away from where Darren touched Aden to meet his leader's hard gaze. "Nick. He was the only one of us not to get bloodied."

"I can go join him," Darren offered. "Oliver probably left a hell of a trail to follow."

"No," Aden said. "Two trackers give double the opportunity to realize they're being followed. Besides, he probably got too much of a head start."

"Ten minutes," Enzo confirmed.

Darren disagreed that ten minutes was a major problem. He also disagreed that Oliver would figure out Darren was tracking him. Aden hadn't even noticed Darren following him to the Arboretum, but Darren bit his tongue.

"I can go check on Leo. Make sure he doesn't have any major injuries that should be seen to right away."

"Leo doesn't know you," Aden straightened. "We'll both go. Enzo, get some clean-up in here. And call Marita. Tell her about Domingo. It's her decision what happens to him now."

Darren waited until they were away from the wolves before asking softly, "Is Nick going to be okay on his own?"

Now that he knew the immediate threat was gone, Aden's steps had slowed. "He knows not to get too close. Tracking after a fight is standard procedure for pack intel."

"Yeah, I just...I just don't want to see anything happen to him. That's all."

At the top of the stairs, Aden paused as he fit the key in the lock. A hole in the plaster wall was the perfect size of a human fist, and blood smeared a crooked path back down to the main floor. "He'll be fine. Right now, our priority is Leo."

Leo was standing as they entered the room—but just barely. He

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had a defiant glint in his eye, like he wasn't going to face whoever stood on the other side of the door sitting down. He leaned heavily against the back of the couch, his shirt gone, his pants hanging from him in strips. He had a large, vicious bite just below his shoulder, and large drops of blood hit the floor behind him in an irregular pattern indicated a deep wound on his back. His face was battered, and blood was drying on his lip below his nose. There were cuts on his brow, and his bottom lip was split open. As soon as he recognized Aden, he sighed and collapsed to the couch.

"Don't think you're going to be the prettiest one for long," he said to Aden.

"I was always the prettiest one." Aden scanned him over, examining his wounds without infringing on his personal space. "Where did he get you?"

"Jumped me when I was leaving the Kennedy Center tonight. Hopefully, my date didn't crash my car when I threw her my keys and told her to run." His gaze slid to Darren, and his nostrils flared. Immediately, his eyes narrowed. "Who's this?"

"Darren Sumner. Darren, this is Leo Lane. He runs the pack on the Hill."

Unsure of what to say, Darren nodded. Though they had met once before, Leo didn't seem to recognize him. Which was good. "Let's move to the bathroom and I can help you clean out that bite."

Leo's brows shot up. "Well, you've got balls, I'll give you that. Who is this guy, Aden?"

"Someone you can trust."

"Because you say so?"

"Considering my personal assistant died protecting your ass, you're damn right it's because I say so."

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“All the more reason for me to be a little more wary around you, don’t you think?” Leo glanced at Darren. “You wanna clean me up, you can do it out here, where I’ve got more room for a fight.”

Fuck it. You can bleed all over the floor. Leo was, after all, just a wolf. He wasn’t even a member of Aden’s pack, which meant he wasn’t any of Darren’s concern. On the other hand, they wouldn’t get any information at all if Leo passed out from his blood loss, and he was already looking wan. Without a word, he disappeared into the bathroom and pulled the first aid box from beneath the sink. It was an exact replica of the one Aden kept at the reserve, including the syringes, needle, and thread.

Aden sat in the nearby chair, giving Darren plenty of room to work. “You can speak freely in front of Darren,” he told Leo.

Leo clearly wanted to ask more questions, but the look on Aden’s face would’ve told an idiot he wasn’t in the mood. “Where were you?” he asked instead.

“Out at the reserve.”

“While Oliver’s running wild in town?” Leo shook his head. “I hope whatever you were doing was worth it. I want this son of a bitch’s head.”

“Aden doesn’t have to explain himself to you,” Darren said. “If anything, you should explain just what you were thinking leading Oliver right to Aden’s door.”

Leo blinked at Darren. “Because we have an arrangement. And I needed help. If anyone would have been ready for Oliver, it would’ve been him. If he’d been here.”

“Trust me,” Aden interceded. “Nobody regrets the fact that I wasn’t here more than I do. Is this the first move he’s made against you? Or just the first I’m hearing about it?”

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“No, it’s the first. He seemed a little slow tonight. I wouldn’t have been mauled like this if he hadn’t had others with him.”

Darren froze, the newly stained rag hovering over the bite mark. “He was moving slow? Was he doing any of the fighting himself? Or did he leave it to his lackeys?”

Leo frowned. “It was a pretty even split. He started it out, but I landed a good blow to his back that had him listing to the side enough for him to put his lackeys in front. Why?”

“I knew it.” Darren looked over to Aden. “He might still have a bit of silver in his system. We need to get him alone, somehow.”

“Will one of you tell me what’s going on here?” Leo interrupted. “What silver?”

Aden sighed. “Darren and I had a run in with him the other night. Darren wounded him, but he got away before we could finish it.”

“You only wounded him?” Leo asked. “You couldn’t have killed him?”

“It wasn’t a clear shot,” Darren said tightly. Of all the things that had happened to him in the past month, having a wolf question his abilities while he doctored said wolf back to health probably grated the most.

“Why did you even have any silver with you?”

“Habit.”

“What sort of habit requires carrying around silver?” Leo asked, his voice dripping with suspicion.

Aden stared him down. “The kind where he’s not a wolf and needs to protect himself because he’s my mate.”

The rag fell from Darren’s suddenly numb fingers. Fortunately, Leo didn’t even notice, because his full attention was locked on Aden, his face mirroring Darren’s own surprise. Darren never

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expected Aden to tell Leo that he was Aden's mate. He appreciated that Aden wanted him as a mate, and he loved everything that meant, but he never thought Aden would make it common knowledge. At least, outside the pack.

"What?" Leo finally asked.

"You heard me."

"Since when? Why have none of us heard about it?"

"Because it's none of your business." He waved a hand toward the bedroom. "He's been living here for a while now if you don't believe me. And I mean, come on. Do you really think I'd go around broadcasting my love life after what happened with Oliver?"

"I think we're getting a bit far from what's important here," Darren said. "Even though Oliver is clearly still hurt, he's on the attack. And instead of being careful and working under the radar like before, he's doing it right out in the open. Either he's turned stupid all of the sudden, or something's got him spooked."

"Oliver's not stupid," Aden said.

Leo swiveled his attention to Darren. "You got a piece of him the other night, and now he's doing this. Sounds to me like you're the one who's got him spooked."

"He didn't even..." *See me.* Darren stopped. Of course Oliver hadn't seen him. But he had been shot in the dark, from an assailant he probably hadn't sensed at all before the nearly fatal shot. Exactly the sort of thing a wolf would expect from Argenti, or another hunter. And since Oliver had already had a run in with Argenti, he was probably particularly sensitive to being targeted again. "Maybe."

"No maybe. The question is, how are we going to use this to our advantage?"

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“We aren’t going to do anything,” Aden said. “*You* are going to lay low and let your pack protect you while you heal up. I’ll take care of this.”

“Like you’ve been taking care of it?” Leo shook his head. “This is my territory we’re talking about. I’m not going to sit back and just let him take it.”

“Neither am I.”

“It’s not just your territory,” Darren said. “This isn’t about you. And it’s not about Aden. Or any other individual pack leader. And if you get all huffy over *your* territory, then you’re probably just going to get in the way. You’ve got to think about the bigger picture, and that means putting things ahead of your own immediate interests.”

Aden nodded. “He’s right, Leo. That’s mostly why you came to the meeting, remember? Trust us. That’s all I’m asking.”

Leo held himself stiffly for several seconds before sinking back into the couch. “Fine. I’m too busy bleeding out of all these holes in my body to think too much right now anyway.”

“Is there anybody you want us to call?”

“No, just give me a ride home when I’m patched up. I’ll put my pack on alert and then sleep for the next week.” He waved a warning finger at Aden. “I don’t want Oliver to be around when I wake up.”

“You and me both.”

Darren lowered his head, focusing on the wounds again. Holding Leo back from retaliation was an important first step, but Darren had the feeling that would be the easiest step, too. When the rest of Aden’s pack caught news of Domingo’s murder, they would begin calling for retaliation—maybe even acting independently to attack Oliver’s pack. Wars had been started over

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less than a dead body.

Darren barely finished the thought before fists began pounding on the door. Darren expected Enzo's voice, not the lighter, higher tones of a woman. "Aden? What the fuck are you doing in there? You should be out hunting down the piece of shit that killed my husband."

CHAPTER 14

Darren knew before Aden even opened the door that Marita wasn't alone. He could hear the other wolves shuffling behind her, pushing against the door, growling softly in their frustration and bloodlust. His spine stiffened in an automatic reaction. That many angry wolves nearby, and he wanted to fight. He forced himself to relax, though. The last thing anybody needed was more tension in the room. He needed to remain calm, focus on Leo's injuries, and let Aden handle his pack. Darren was sure they would listen to their alpha.

That certainty, however, fled when Aden actually opened the door. Marita was a short woman, her dark hair cropped close to her head, her face arresting if not particularly beautiful. Darren had expected red-rimmed eyes, or a few tears glistening on her cheeks,

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but apparently she hadn't even taken the time to cry. Her cheeks were red with rage, her eyes flashing silver, and her small body tense for battle.

"What the fuck are you doing up here? Is Oliver up here? No?"

Aden gripped her shoulders and held her at arm's length. "We're finding out what happened, Marita. You need to calm down."

"I need to calm down? Maybe you need to get a bit worked up. Domingo loved you. He worshipped the ground you walked on. He did everything for you, and now he's dead for you, and you're telling me I need to calm down?"

"He's dead for the *pack*, and don't you forget that. Just like I'm not going to forget what he did for us, for me. Oliver's not going to get away with this. I swear that to you."

"The pack? He didn't die defending the pack. He died defending this..." She gestured at Leo, the color on her face rising. "And he was here because he was taking care of *your* store, making sure everything was just perfect for *you*. He died fighting the wolf you should have killed five years ago. You should at least take responsibility for that much."

"He died because he was doing the right thing and defending his turf and an injured wolf who asked for his protection," Darren said, unable to bite his tongue any longer.

"I don't think anybody here asked your opinion," Marita snapped.

Aden's eyes glittered. "Darren's opinion matters as much as any of yours." He let her go and pulled himself straight. "But you're right about one thing. It's my fault Oliver could do this at all. And I'm going to fix that."

Enzo stepped up to Marita's side. "Then let's go after him now."

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We'll call Nick, find out where he is, and strike."

Aden shook his head. "He's going to be expecting that."

"Aden's right," Darren said. "As soon as Oliver went home, he probably raised the alarm and surrounded himself with his pack. If we go in with torches and pitchforks waving, he's going to be prepared, and he's going to have the home field advantage."

"Are you just suggesting we do nothing?" Marita asked.

Enzo looked uneasy. "We can't let him get away with this. He attacked your home."

"And we're not going to," Aden repeated. "But I'm not going to lose any more of you because we're reacting in the heat of the moment. I wouldn't be surprised if that's exactly what Oliver wants."

"If you wait, too, you'll have my whole pack at your disposal," Leo said from the couch.

"We should bring Oliver to us. Instead of going to him and letting him decide the rules, we need to make him come to us, on our terms."

"How do you propose we do that?" Marita asked, as though no matter how Darren responded, it would be stupid.

"Use Domingo's funeral."

The wolves erupted in argument, each louder than the one next to him. The general consensus seemed to be outrage that they'd sully such a sacred rite, but others voiced concerns about waiting more than a couple days to retaliate.

They only quieted when Aden growled, a dangerous sound that made all the short hairs on Darren's body stand on end.

"It's a valid suggestion," he said. "One we should seriously consider."

"Because he's not your latest plaything that's just going to stab

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us all in the back?” someone in the rear of the crowd grumbled.

Everyone went silent. It was one thing to think such thoughts about Aden’s choices; it was something else entirely to say them out loud in front of their alpha, especially in light of Darren’s fight with Enzo.

Aden didn’t move. He didn’t even raise his voice, though with the silence, there was no need to. “The difference between Darren and Oliver is I never took Oliver as a mate. Which means you will give him the proper respect he deserves as a member of this pack.”

Everybody was perfectly silent for a beat. Darren actually thought he could hear a pin drop. Beside him, Leo shook his head, like he couldn’t believe Aden would choose that moment to make this particular announcement. Darren didn’t care about the timing. No matter how many times Aden said it, he still loved to hear it. He doubted it would ever get old.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Marita asked slowly.

“Mate?” Enzo looked back and forth between Aden and Darren. “*Mate?*”

Darren abandoned Leo, choosing instead to stand beside Aden. “I didn’t mean any disrespect by suggesting the funeral, but I’m sure Domingo would want us to do whatever is best for protecting the pack.”

“Darren’s right about that, Marita. Let’s focus on—”

The sharp ring of Aden’s cell phone cut him off. Darren pulled it out of his pocket and handed it over. Aden took one look at the caller ID and answered.

“Nick, where are you?” He immediately stiffened, his nostrils flaring. “What have you done to him, you son of a bitch?”

Darren caught his breath, a strange sort of fear slicing through him. He was accustomed to his co-workers dying. Some of them

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disappeared. Some of them were taken hostage on the belief that Jasmine would bargain with a wolf and do whatever she had to do to save her people. She never did. There was a certain, undeniable risk to hunting wolves, and every single person knew it when they signed up. Darren accepted that he would lose acquaintances and people he cared about, but this was different. This was a biting fear that demanded his attention, a heavy dread of the inevitable, and worst of all, anger.

With the fear came the understanding that everything had changed. He had wanted to trap Oliver, to bait him like the animal he was, but now that wasn't an option. Before Aden even uttered another word, Darren knew that possibility was off the table.

For several seconds, Aden just listened. The way the pack stood still meant they were listening in, and Darren wished he could pick up more than the muffled sound of a man's voice. He had only the wolves' reactions to what was being said, and the fading of all color from Aden's face.

"Listen to me, Oliver, because I'm only going to say this once. Do one more thing to him, and I will tear apart every cub you've ever made, then feed your still bleeding body to my pack. You have twenty-four hours to let him go. After that, I start killing, and I don't stop until everything you know is gone."

He didn't wait for a response. He disconnected and slid his phone into his own pocket, as if he hadn't just received dire news.

Enzo pushed forward in front of Marita. "You're not going to turn the pack over, are you?"

Aden stared at him. "Did you not hear my ultimatum?"

"That's what he wants?" Darren asked. "He wants you to turn everything over to him?"

"Yes. It's not going to happen."

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“Are you sure Nick is still alive?” Darren asked, keeping his voice even.

A muscle in Aden’s jaw twitched. “He better be. Marita, go start taking care of Domingo’s arrangements. The rest of you go help clean up. Enzo, you stay here.”

Leo struggled to rise from the couch. “That’s my cue—”

“No.” Aden stepped away from the pack to return to his seat in the chair. “I need you to stick around. We have plans to make.”

Instead of grumbling and arguing, they all began to filter out the door. None of them looked happy about it, but now wasn’t the time to argue with their pack leader. Darren was just relieved they were leaving. He didn’t want to discuss this issue in front of everybody. It was bad enough that Enzo and Leo were still there, though Aden trusted them, so Darren would have to as well.

“Nick’s not going to be alive in twenty-four hours,” Darren said.

“I know,” Aden conceded. “Which means we have to act quickly.”

Leo cocked a brow. “What about all that talk about not rushing in at the heat of the moment?”

“That was before the clock started ticking.”

“We don’t have to *rush* anything,” Darren pointed out. “Oliver is probably expecting Aden to come on his own, ready to face him down. Either that, or he’ll be counting on the entire pack showing up. Like they wanted to do. So we’ll have to take him by surprise.”

Enzo stared at him. “You say that like you have an idea.”

“I might.” Darren took a deep breath and glanced over at Leo. “We do this like Argenti.”

Two growls rumbled through the room, neither of them from Aden. He simply regarded Darren, unblinking and intense.

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“I think you should elaborate.”

“When an Argenti agent needs to take out a wolf, the wolf very rarely is thoughtful enough to come out in the open. Usually, they’re holed up and laying low. If you can’t flush them out, then you’ve got to go in and get them. It’s not exactly easy, but that’s why those sort of covert operations were usually assigned to the same people.”

In spite of his injuries, Leo was looking increasingly dangerous as his features hardened. “How do you know so much about Argenti?”

“I can show you, or you can focus on what’s important here. Or do you want to be the reason we lose two pack members tonight?” Darren asked.

“We’re not losing anyone else,” Enzo snarled.

“You can leave if you’re going to waste our time, Leo,” Aden said. “But if you go, you can forget about any kind of alliance.”

Leo tensed as if to stand, then pointed a warning finger at Aden. “You’re going to explain all of this when Oliver’s dead.”

“We’re going to need two teams, I think,” Darren said, pointedly ignoring Leo. “One to take out Oliver, the other to rescue Nick. And...” He looked over to Aden. “I think that August needs to be involved in this. She’s been in his house, and she’s got a ton of experience with assignments like this.”

“Who’s August?”

“A friend of Darren’s,” Aden said evenly, not looking at Enzo. “And that’s going just a little bit too far, I think.”

“She had her chance to betray me. She could have gone to Jasmine any time in the past week, but she hasn’t. She’s on my side, and I’m on yours, and we need her.”

“We don’t even know if Nick’s being held at Oliver’s house.”

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“Then we have much larger problems than whether or not to trust August,” Darren pointed out. “But if you can get a hold of Oliver, I know somebody who can trace the signal. We can confirm his location, and finalize the plan. But even if he’s at an unknown location, I still think we need August.”

Aden still seemed uncertain. It was one thing to ask him to try Argenti methods, but including August in such a crucial operation was an even bigger step than trusting her involvement at Oliver’s party.

“You’ll have to work with her,” Aden warned. “She won’t trust me or Enzo, or vice versa, and we can’t afford to make any mistakes on this.”

“I’m going?” Enzo asked.

“You heard Darren. We need two teams. You’re the best wolf I’ve got.”

“If she’s with me, we’re not the rescue team,” Darren said softly, bracing himself for the argument he knew would come.

Enzo was the one to visibly react. “This is Aden’s kill!”

Aden met Darren’s unflinching gaze. He knew Aden wanted this. He knew how badly Aden needed this. But they both knew what had transpired at the Arboretum, and for all Aden’s good intentions, both understood the risk it would be.

“We have to find Nick first,” Aden said, matching Darren’s tone. “We can figure out logistics then.”

Darren inclined his head, recognizing the intent behind Aden’s words. “You guys do what you need to do. I’ll get Stanly and August over here.”

“This won’t take long, will it?” Enzo asked.

“Don’t worry about that,” Darren said. “This isn’t our first time at the rodeo. Just be ready to go when I give you the word.”

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“We will be,” Aden promised.

Darren just hoped that it wasn’t all a moot point. He could kill Oliver any time. This mission was about rescuing Nick—and he would count it as a personal failure if they didn’t make it in time.

* * *

Despite the sense of urgency, it took almost forty-five minutes to round up Stanly and August, and get in contact with Oliver again, tracing his location and confirming that Nick was still alive. Even Darren could hear his screams of pain, despite his distance from the phone. Aden’s face lost its color, Enzo looked green around the gills, and even August winced.

Darren was not surprised when Stanly announced that Oliver was at his known address. Relieved, but not surprised. Even though he had broadcasted his address across the city, it probably never occurred to him that Aden would have the patience for a more covert operation. No doubt, he expected Aden to be all tooth and claw, crashing and bashing his way into the house. Stanly had grinned and informed that he had been keeping up his surveillance of the house since Darren first hired him. He didn’t just have a hard drive full of incriminating photos of Oliver’s guests, coming and going, he also had full floor layouts of the entire house.

While August looked over the floor plans with Enzo—her body tense for fight or flight—Darren cornered Aden in the bedroom.

“I think we better work out the logistics now,” Darren said.

Dark shadows made Aden look gaunt. Out of the company of the others, he held himself more stiffly, slower to move. “I know you want to kill Oliver. I can’t let you.”

“You have to let me. You’re still hurt. And he’s expecting

you.”

“The pack would never forgive me.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I’m the reason Domingo is dead. And why Nick is gone. Marita was right about that.” He sagged against the edge of the bed, rubbing at his eyes. “Shit, Darren, this is such a fucking mess.”

“No, Marita was lashing out in her grief. Not surprising, but that doesn’t mean you have to pay any attention to her.” Darren settled beside him, resting a hand on Aden’s thigh. “I know it seems like everything’s a fucking mess, but I can fix it. For you. For the pack. And you can focus on getting Nick to safety.”

“How am I supposed to do that when you’re going to be right in Oliver’s way?”

“I admit, I always figured a wolf was going to take me down, but it is not going to be Oliver. And it’s not going to be tonight.” Darren studied his fingers on Aden’s thigh, almost afraid to look up to meet the wolf’s eyes. “Besides, you’re injured. And honestly...do you think you could forget everything you ever had with him?”

Aden slumped farther. “I hate that I have to answer that with a no.”

Darren leaned closer. “I don’t. In fact...I admire it. I admire that you can...feel that deeply. I admire that your loyalty is innate, and an integral part of who you are.”

“The pack will say it makes me weak.”

“It doesn’t make you weak. It’s what makes you a good leader. They don’t know what it’s like to follow somebody without a single loyal bone in their body, and if they’re lucky, they never will.”

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Aden tilted his head toward Darren's, their breath mingling at the proximity. The flicker of his eyelashes tickled over Darren's cheek. "Do you think you can do it? Answer me honestly. And when I say do it, I mean, do it and not get killed in the process."

"Yes. I'll admit this won't be the same as the other wolves. I mean, before it was always impersonal. They were nothing but animals, and I had a job to do. I know this is personal. I know I'm angry because of what he did to you, because of Nick, even because of Domingo. But no kill has ever meant as much to me, either."

Aden smiled softly. "Gee, and here I thought I meant the most to you. My feelings are hurt, gorgeous."

Darren snorted. "Why do you think I want this one so much? I want him to pay for what he did to you, and I want to make sure that you never have to deal with him again."

Covering Darren's hand with his own, Aden squeezed it and sighed. "You know I'm only conceding because these stitches hurt like a bitch and I'd rather not be all drugged up on painkillers while trying to tear his throat out. The way my luck is going, I'd miss and hit his ass instead."

Darren smiled. "Not a pretty thought. Come on. We better get back out there before August and Enzo go at each other."

Aden let Darren pull him to his feet. "That actually sounds like it would be fun to watch."

"It would definitely be fun to watch, but Enzo probably wouldn't enjoy getting his ass kicked again."

"From a looker like August? I think he might make an exception."

"Wait. Were you checking August out?"

"It's not my fault she wears her hair that long so men will

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check out her ass.”

“Have I mentioned that I get crazy jealous?”

Aden paused at the door and shot a smile back at him. “You’ll just have to work out those frustrations when we finally get our hunt out at the reserve.”

Darren smiled. “I’m counting on it.”

CHAPTER 15

Hiding in the back of a large van, watching some guy he didn't know play with monitors and speakers and a keyboard he used with frightening proficiency, was not Aden's idea of comfortable. He knew why they were doing it. Darren was right. Oliver expected a full frontal assault, retaliation in blood and carnage as befitted the havoc he had already wrought. Attacking Argenti-style was the smartest idea, as well as the one most likely to succeed.

It just made him uneasy. He had a silver tongue when it came to political friends and maneuverings, but when it came down to it, Aden preferred working with his hands. He liked fighting. He loved the chase. It was why he adored books as much as he did and preferred them to computers. He liked the tangible page, resting in his palm. Perhaps that made him archaic, but it worked for him.

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His pack survived because he recognized his strengths.

But Darren had different strengths. He had different abilities. He had the same need to get his hands dirty like Aden did, but he also had a cunning mind that was long accustomed to these kind of backdoor games. Subterfuge was his specialty, and considering Oliver knew Aden's methodology backward and forward, using Darren's expertise made the most sense.

It also showed the pack how serious he was about having Darren as a mate. Enzo's reaction would mirror the rest of the pack's when they found out. Revolts were possible. Defections. Attempts to assume leadership. If Darren's plan succeeded, the pack would see Aden's selection in a far more pragmatic light, rather than an emotional one. Darren was a valuable asset to have as an ally and partner, beyond what Aden felt for him. The pack would see that.

Provided Oliver died and they rescued Nick, unharmed.

Darren's contact, Stanly, sat at his board, adjusting his displays. "I can't tell you exactly where your man is. But I can tell you where he was last recorded."

Aden moved to stand behind him. "Show me."

Stanly's fingers flew over the keyboard. A blueprint of the house appeared on the nearest screen. "They came in through the rear entrance." He pointed to the door that led into the room marked as the kitchen. "I have a good part of the lower floor covered, but there's stairs here..." He tapped the far right of the room. "There's a second story there, but I can't confirm whether or not the stairs they used go up or down. They could go both ways. They took him through that door, and when you were talking to him on the phone, that's where the signal came from."

"That shouldn't be hard to track." Thank God. "What about

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Oliver? Where is he?"

Darren came to his side, pressing slightly into his arm, warm and inviting and safe. Together, they watched Stanly scan through the footage he had on the house, until Oliver's familiar form appeared from an aerial view over what looked to be the front room of the great house.

"This is where he went after the phone call." He hit play, and the group watched Oliver disappear off-camera, a distant ding immediately following. "It's not on any of the blueprints I've been able to dig up on such short notice, but I'd bet anything he's got an elevator in the house. Maybe to a subterranean level."

From where she sat off to the side, August frowned. "I don't remember seeing an elevator."

"It might just look like any kind of door," Stanly said. "You can disguise them to look like anything these days."

"So he might not even be in there," Enzo offered.

Stanly shrugged. "It's a possibility. But he has no idea he's being monitored, and he's always used any one of the doors to get in and out before. I find it unlikely he'd use some secret passage to get out."

Aden tilted his head toward Darren. "Did you see the way he was limping? He's still hurting from the other night. You can use that."

Darren nodded. "I'd planned on it."

Through the speakers, a phone inside the house rang. Almost immediately afterward, Aden's rang in his pocket. He answered it at the same time a wolf he didn't recognize picked up the phone in the kitchen.

"It's started," Leo said on Aden's phone. He sounded a lot stronger than he had when he'd left the ruined store, though Aden

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knew that was a front. “Oliver should be getting the call any time now.”

“He already did.”

The wolf in the house voiced alarm at what he was being told, disconnecting whoever had called to turn his attention to his cell phone. Everyone in the van stiffened, listening to him convey the alarm they had arranged for a diversion.

“I can’t tell you how long you’re going to have,” Leo was saying. “But my pack is pissed, so the fight is likely to be hard one. They’re not going to stop until they’re forced to, or until I give the word.”

“Thanks, Leo.” Aden meant it. Without his pack’s cooperation, creating a fight elsewhere to draw away as many wolves from Oliver’s house as possible, breaking in to rescue Nick would’ve been suicide.

“Just make sure you kill the son of a bitch.”

“How long do we wait?” Enzo asked after he’d disconnected.

“Only as long as we have to.”

They were parked around the corner, so the only evidence they had of the wolves’ mass exodus was through Stanly’s surveillance. Aden stared at the screens, refusing to blink, for fear of missing Oliver if he decided for some insane reason to go with his pack. He was hurt, and Leo wasn’t involved in the fight. No leader would be that stupid. Aden hoped this was one lesson Oliver had learned the right way.

“I think he’s still in there,” Enzo said.

Darren nodded. “I didn’t see anybody moving Nick, either. We should be good to go.”

They had agreed a simultaneous approach was best. If both teams went in at the same time, it would split whatever resources

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Oliver had left. Their odds increased exponentially then.

Outside the van, they split up. August and Darren disappeared into the night to approach the house from the front, while Aden and Enzo crept through the nearby yards to get in through the back. Nobody spoke. Aden led the way. He hadn't told Enzo about his injuries, though he knew the scent of his blood still clung to his skin. But he didn't want Enzo worrying about him, or fearing his reflexes when timing was crucial. Aden was fully prepared to push his body to its limit to rescue Nick. It might be detrimental in the long run, but that wasn't his priority right now. Nick was.

The other advantage to the diversionary fight was all the perimeter security had been disabled to allow the wolves to leave. Stanly had fitted them with compact disrupters that hooked into any one of the cameras and short-circuited the entire system, but they had proven superfluous when security never went back up after the last wolf fled. Aden had to admit that he kind of liked having the technical hocus-pocus as backup for an attack. It eliminated extraneous problems and allowed him to concentrate on the task at hand.

Getting Nick out of the house in one piece.

* * *

In any other circumstances, Darren would not have brazenly gone through the front door like he owned the house. But after checking each of the windows, they ascertained that nobody was lurking in the entry, waiting to sabotage them. They both ducked down low, pressing to the side while Darren slowly turned the handle and pulled the door open. A slice of yellow fell across the walk, and he froze, holding his breath, waiting for a hint of a

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shadow to disrupt the light. When nothing moved, they both slipped through the entrance, Darren silently pulling the door shut behind them.

Every one of his senses was on high alert. While they were sharper than a regular human's, he would never be as sensitive as a wolf. He should have been terrified. Every instinct should have been yelling at him to get the fuck out of the wolf's lair. Instead, he only wanted to press forward. He never felt nervous, and this time was no exception. Adrenaline raced through his system, every muscle was taut, and the weight of his knife was a steady, constant reminder of his mission.

When they reached the sweeping staircase, August pointed up to the second floor. Darren nodded, indicating she should lead the way. He had been on a handful of missions with her, and he couldn't think of anybody else in Argenti he would want at his side. She had been more than a little skeptical of joining up with a wolf pack, but ultimately, she wanted Oliver's hide. And, Darren suspected, she wanted to prove to him how well they could work together. He did not think she would be excited to hear that he was now Aden's mate.

In fact, he was pretty sure she would go ape-shit. Which was why he hadn't mentioned it yet.

She wore her long hair in a bun, tucked under a black cap. A black body suit completed her outfit, and she slunk up the stairs, hugging the wall like she was a shadow herself. Darren half-expected the old wooden stairs to creak beneath their weight, but they were both light, and he tested each step before he applied his weight. It was slow going, but Darren didn't feel any need to rush their advancement.

He scanned the second floor landing continuously, searching

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for any signs of a visitor. They were only three flights from the top when he thought he saw a shadow move. He touched August's back lightly, and she immediately came to a stop, her body straining forward. Darren held his breath, reaching beyond the echo of his own heartbeat for the light sound of a padded paw scraping across the carpet, or gently touching a wooden stair.

August reached back without turning her head, gently tapping his right hand. Narrowing his eyes, he studied the far right side of the balcony. Something silver caught the light, and then was gone again. Darren slowly unlatched the leather on his sheath, wrapping his fingers around the bone handle. With his free hand, he touched August's back, encouraging her to move forward again.

Darren saw the silver eye twice more. Each time closer to the landing. Did the wolf know they were there? Darren hoped not. They could use the so-called surprise attack if the wolf was just a little bit arrogant.

A growl rumbled through the darkness once they reached the second floor, and eyes flashed like twin daggers as the wolf launched himself at them.

* * *

The entire kitchen was done in stainless steel, polished cherry, and even shinier marble. Dozens of blurry Adens and Enzos surrounded them as they got their bearings, and Enzo crossed to the far door as Aden tried to find the staircase Stanly had pointed out. He caught the flicker in the refrigerator's surface a moment after Enzo did, and whirled to see the skinny little blond launching himself at Enzo's legs.

The two men went down with growls and grunts, and though

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the fight was short, it was still brutal. Enzo carried more than one bruise from his fight with Darren, but that did nothing to slow down his reflexes. If anything, it made him more determined. He had a good fifty pounds on the leaner wolf. He used each and every one to take him to the floor.

When the blond started to shift to have a better chance, Enzo didn't waste time. He grabbed the wolf's head between his hands and twisted. The neck cracked audibly, and Oliver's man went limp.

"Check the door," Aden murmured.

Enzo wasn't even breathing hard. He slid along the wall and caught the door with the tip of his finger, opening it barely a crack to peer outside. Aden held still, straining his senses. He couldn't hear or smell anything, but there were a lot of competing scents in the vast kitchen.

Ice dropped in the freezer.

Enzo jerked, letting go of the door. It clicked shut, just loud enough to make every hair on Aden's body stand on end.

"We need to find those stairs." He turned and swept his gaze over the wall.

"What do you want me to do with this one?"

"Toss him out back." They didn't have time to look for a better hiding place. If there was one, there were more. There were two other doors, other than the exit or rear entrance. One probably led to the garage, while the other led to Nick. As Enzo took care of the body, Aden summoned a mental image of the blueprint Stanly had shown them.

The left. Definitely.

It opened into darkness. He saw the stairs leading down into a void at the same time a distant alarm pealed through the house.

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* * *

August immediately responded with a high kick, her foot unerringly finding the wolf's chest. She planted herself in position for another attack, her body taking on the perfect stance of a third degree black belt in Taekwondo. Darren held back, scanning the area for any more surprise visitors as she sent a flurry of kicks into the wolf's snout. She backed him down the corridor, forcing him to retreat a step at the time.

Darren didn't follow. He used the distraction to move the opposite direction, searching for any signs of life. He held a vivid image of the floor plan in his mind's eye, including Oliver's last known whereabouts. All of the doors down the hallway were closed, and he paused at each one, ears pressed against the heavy wood, listening for any sounds of life on the other side. There was nothing. Not even a tiny line of light escaping from underneath the door.

"Darren!"

He spun around and raced back to August's side, the knife pulled free from its sheath. He had fully expected August to trap the wolf against the wall and kill it, but she was the trapped one. Her suit was shredded down one leg, giving the effect of a barber pole from her thigh to her knee, with thin, vertical stripes of red. The wolf's fangs were a glaring, surprising white in the darkness, and they lunged for her face, but August ducked at the last second, letting the wolf snap his jaws harmlessly above her head.

Darren wished he could use the gun, but in the enclosed space, the report would be too loud. Not only would he risk blowing out their eardrums, but they would broadcast their location to every wolf in the house. With the knife in hand, he lunged forward,

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burying the blade in the wolf's shoulder. It wasn't enough to kill the beast, but it distracted him from August.

Darren yanked the blade free, sending a spray of chocolate colored blood across the floor. The wolf turned eyes the size of saucers on Darren, ears lying flat against his skull, fur standing on end. At that distance, he saw there was a white patch on its chest, and Darren resolved to use that as his target.

The wolf leaned back on its hind legs, its massive muscles gathering for a fresh attack. Darren braced himself, attuned to every flinch, every twitch, every snarl of the wolf's lip. He needed to feel the wolf beneath his skin, he needed to stare him down, challenging him without a word. He didn't look away. He didn't blink. The stare down could have only lasted for a second, maybe two, but for Darren, it stretched on much longer.

He expected the wolf's attack to disrupt the moment. Not the blaring echo of alarms. The wolf immediately straightened, his ears perking forward, his head swinging to the side. He howled in response to the blaring peals. Darren didn't know if it was a response to the alarm, or if he was calling for backup. But he didn't care.

Darren's knife slashed through the wolf's throat, turning the howl into a thick gurgle. Hot blood poured over his hand and splashed against his shoes.

* * *

"Go." Enzo was already stripping his clothes off. "I'll guard up here and keep everybody back."

Though Aden agreed they needed someone to watch the top of the stairs, he worried a little about splitting up. He needed Enzo to

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back him up. Darren would throw a fit if he knew Aden was facing the unknown all by himself, and if Aden tore even a single stitch, well...

There wasn't time to debate the issue. He had to trust Enzo. He had to save Nick. End of story.

He shut the door to Enzo and reached blindly along the wall in search of a light switch. The complete lack of ambient light made it hard to adjust, especially with his not perfect eyesight. Beyond the walls, the alarm vibrated through the house, but he couldn't let that slow him down. If anything, he needed to speed up, and began a careful descent without the benefit of illumination.

His fingers snagged a light panel on the second step. Gratefully, he flicked switches until a weak yellow light filled the narrow stairwell.

No time for hesitation now. Aden leapt down the stairs, barely touching the risers, until he reached the closed door at the bottom. The knob was locked, but he snapped it without thinking twice. The alarm had already been set off. He didn't have to worry about particulars anymore. Somewhere in the back of his mind, it amused him to think this was probably not what Darren had intended when he suggested a covert attack.

The door opened into a wine cellar, with a low ceiling and rows upon rows of racks shrinking the walls. Aden had to duck in order to walk between them, but his senses were all attuned on the trail that might as well have blazed before him. The cellar reeked of blood. The wolf inside him howled when it recognized Nick's, but there were others, almost as fresh, mingled in with it. Some splattered on the bottles, disturbing the dust. Halfway down the row, he stepped around broken glass where someone had obviously kicked at the racks.

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He heard nothing from upstairs or behind him. Either Enzo was doing a phenomenal job keeping Oliver's men at bay, or Darren was creating enough of a disturbance elsewhere to keep them occupied.

Aden sincerely hoped it was the former. He wanted Darren to get in and out, just like they had planned. The less time Darren took, the better it would be for all of them.

Reaching the end of the row, he stopped to assess his options. The cellar branched out in both directions, but the blood went to the left, farther under the house. Less light reached this corner, and the racks licked more ominous shadows along the floor. A single door broke the steady line. Though the blood led straight to it, he would have tried it anyway. He smelled people on the other side.

He snapped the lock before sensing multiple people. And only one of them was a wolf.

* * *

As soon as he felt the hot liquid, Darren realized his mistake. He may have silenced the animal, but the fresh blood would alert Oliver to their presence long before they actually found him.

"What the hell is that?" August whispered.

"Aden must have set off the alarm."

"We got to get moving." She nodded her head toward the door. "There's another staircase through there, right?"

"Yeah. How's your leg?"

"I'll live."

"Sure?"

"Yes. Do you think Aden..."

"He's fine," Darren said, cutting her off. He didn't know for

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sure, but he needed to believe that. Aden had faith in him, Darren needed to have an equal—or a greater—amount in his lover. “We gotta keep moving.”

“I’m worried about those alarms,” August said, her voice still a bare whisper.

“You think Oliver doesn’t know we’re here already?”

“What’s up with the stealth then?”

Darren grinned. “It’s more fun this way. Come on.”

Even in the dim light, he could see August roll her eyes, but she didn’t quite subdue the grin that mirrored his. “I think you should take the lead.”

Darren nodded, wiping his blade off on the slain wolf’s coat before replacing it on his belt. Beneath the continuous alarm, they moved silently once again. Darren opened the door, revealing another stairwell, as they expected, and took a deep breath before moving up the first stair. The walls were narrow, and he couldn’t make out if there was another door at the top, or just a landing. There was no window, no light from the moon outside, and Darren didn’t dare search out a light switch.

When August closed the door behind them, they were plunged into a perfect darkness.

“Do you have the goggles?”

“Yeah.” He felt something cool and smooth press into his hand. “Here.”

Seeing each step without trouble, he set a quick pace, his mind wandering to the last time he had ascended a flight of stairs like these in the dark. That time, he had been following Aden, and seriously considering whether he should just shoot the wolf in the back. Despite his training, he had ignored that impulse, opting instead to follow him and fight at his side. Had it really only been a

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month before? Four weeks? It seemed like a lifetime to him.

There was a door at the top. Darren felt a brief spark of fear. What if it was locked? But that fear was snuffed out when he took the knob and it turned easily in his hand.

“Darren.”

“What?”

“My leg. It won’t stop bleeding.”

“Do you need to stay here?”

“No. I’m pretty sure I’ll be okay.”

“He didn’t nick the femoral artery, didn’t he?”

“No...no, I don’t think I’m in any danger of actually bleeding out.”

Darren frowned. She didn’t exactly sound sure about that. “If we need to fix you up, say so now. There’s probably a welcoming party on the other side of this door.” Given that the alarm was still sounding throughout the house, Darren would be shocked if there wasn’t a wolf or two on the other side of the door—or right below them. They weren’t exactly safe lingering in the stairwell.

“No, I’ll be fine. Let’s just keep moving.”

Darren braced himself for another growl and glint of teeth when he opened the door, but there was nothing but silence. The alarms weren’t sounding on that floor, and a fixture overhead lit the hallway. Darren’s stomach clenched. There were only two doors. An elevator was behind one, no doubt.

And Oliver was behind the other.

* * *

With so many unknown variables on the other side of the door, Aden found himself at a loss. Wolves, he could defend himself

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from. But what if Oliver had hired human guards who were prepared to shoot on sight? He could be jeopardizing everyone inside, let alone himself. Pressing his ear to the door did little to alleviate his concern. There were scratchings, most likely Nick struggling against his bonds, and some harsh breathing, but no way to discern exactly what he might find.

He should have brought a gun like Darren had suggested. Then he wouldn't be as worried.

Flattening as best he could against the racks next to the door, he reached for the handle. This wasn't locked, either. Oliver had likely figured his alarms would be enough. He shoved the door open and braced for whatever gunfire might erupt.

Overhead, something crashed. Enzo was finally getting a fight. But nothing emerged from the room except muffled whimpers.

He peered around the edge of the door jamb. As he expected, Nick was bound against the far wall, a muzzle locked around his face. It was common practice among wolves to restrain their own kind this way. It kept them from shifting to escape. This particular muzzle would shatter a wolf's jaw and break his nose if he tried to change while wearing it. Dried blood clung to Nick's hairline, bruises already swelling one eye nearly shut. The other lit up at the sight of Aden, and he hastily jerked his head toward the one wall Aden couldn't see without entering.

It wasn't a guard. It was two people, a man and a woman, that looked familiar but he couldn't quite place. Their expensive clothes were torn and bloodied, their arms shackled to the wall to keep them from running. Nobody else was in the room.

Aden went for Nick first. Pack was his priority, no matter what Nick or Darren might think. He snapped the lock on the muzzle and slipped it off, tossing it aside to go to work on the padlocks

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holding the shackles shut.

"We gotta get them out of here," Nick rasped, once he could speak. "Oliver's planning on using them to feed his new pack."

The other locks came free. "Why would he be so stupid?"

"Because they were planning on speaking out against him. I think they're pretty important."

They couldn't have been too important; otherwise, Aden would have recognized them. But he went to their sides anyway and proceeded to free them as well.

"Thank you," the woman panted when she could speak.

Aden worked on her partner. "Who are you?"

"William DiRicco," the man said. "This is my wife, Sherry. Tell me the police are on their way to arrest this fucker."

"Not quite, but I'm getting you out of here." He scooped an arm beneath DiRicco's back, while Nick appeared at his side to help with the wife. Together, they helped them to their wobbly feet.

"Keep your head down and do exactly as I say," Aden warned. "The alarms got triggered when I came down."

Nick followed him out the door and back through the cellar. "I'm sorry I didn't know about that. I would've tried to warn you."

"Are you FBI, then?" DiRicco pressed.

"Stop asking so many questions." He didn't think they'd like to hear that he was a wolf, too. The man's weight was pulling on his stitches. One of them was already seeping down his stomach, adding to the other smells of blood in the basement.

Nick stumbled once behind him, but they made it to the stairs without another word being uttered. Growls and barks echoed through the door at the top, loud enough to make DiRicco pull away and step back.

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“Isn’t there another way out?”

Aden shook his head. “Stay here. I’ll help clear the way.”

He ran up the stairs. As he reached for the knob, something landed heavily against the wood. The kitchen fell quiet.

There was no time to debate whether Enzo had fallen or not. Aden shoved the door open, pushing away the dead weight of the wolf that had slumped in front of it. He was ready to vault over it when he met Enzo’s sharp, silver gaze.

“I’ve got them,” Aden said. He scanned the room. Three other dead wolves littered the tiled floor. “Get them out of here. I’m going to go check on Darren.”

He didn’t wait for a response before bolting for the front of the house. There was no time for one.

* * *

Despite making it a point to wear his shoulder-holster, Darren had no intention of using his gun. If August knew he planned to use his knife on Oliver, she probably wouldn’t have agreed to join him. Just because she was well-trained for hand-to-hand combat did not mean she would choose the option, if she were in the situation to make a choice.

She grabbed his arm, stopping him from pushing open the door. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going in.”

“Your gun?”

Darren shook his head.

“You want a fight?” she asked, her eyes wide. “They’re waiting for you downstairs.”

“I know.”

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“Aden’s not going to leave until you show up.”

Darren arched his brow. “Are you worried about Aden’s safety?”

“I’m not going through all this just so you can get yourself killed. Or anybody else.”

“I’m touched. Now, are you done? We don’t want to keep him waiting.”

The door flew open before Darren had the chance to touch it. Oliver stood there, grinning like a cat. “Especially since it feels I’ve been waiting all night.” He looked over Darren’s shoulder. “Where’s Aden? I thought I heard his name.”

“He couldn’t make it. Previous engagement.”

“And he sent you instead.” His gaze raked over Darren’s lean frame, flickering immediately to August’s bloody leg. His grin widened. “Oh, look, a peace offering.”

Darren stepped out of the way, giving August a clear shot. “You’re welcome to her, if you think you can catch her.”

Oliver didn’t even have a chance to react to Darren’s invitation before August delivered a roundhouse kick with her good leg, catching Oliver in the ribs and sending him sprawling to the floor. As soon as he hit the ground, he winced.

“How’s the back?” Darren asked genially.

His smile vanished. Eyes narrowed, he scuttled back beyond their immediate reach. “I thought you were here because of Aden.”

“Because of Aden?” Darren glanced over to August. “Are you here because of Aden?”

She advanced, with no hint of pain except the pallor in her cheeks. Somehow, that only made her seem more formidable. “No, I’m not here because of Aden. I’m here because we’ve had reports of a new wolf cutting a swath through town, and building up his

base.”

Darren circled wide, sticking to the perimeter of the room as he worked his way behind Oliver. “I’m here because I injured a wolf the other night, and I need to put him out of his misery.”

Oliver tried rolling beyond their reach, but August’s double-step cut him off. She slammed her heel down where his hand would have been, and he yanked it back just in time to keep it from getting crushed.

“There’s no law against biting willing humans.” He grabbed the leg of a chair and whipped it around toward Darren.

Darren stepped back, the chair swinging by him harmlessly. “You’re telling me that if I started sniffing around this place, I wouldn’t find one person, wolf or otherwise, held against their will? Kidnapping is a crime.”

“Yes, it is,” August agreed, the toe of her boot connecting with Oliver’s hip. He screamed and tried to roll away, but he only succeeded in moving closer to Darren.

Darren curled both fists into Oliver’s shirt and picked him up, spinning around to slam him against the wall, knocking frames from their hooks. Glass shattered at their feet. “Well?”

“You’re after the wrong wolf,” Oliver growled. He lashed out, but Darren twisted easily to avoid his kick, without losing his grip on his shirt. “Aden Richter’s the dangerous one. Whatever he told you is a lie. I’ve got dozens of supporters who’ll testify to that.”

Darren held Oliver with one hand, the other closing into a tight fist and slamming into Oliver’s hard stomach. Despite his obvious strength, he was barely fighting back. Had Domingo injured him more severely than they thought? The possibility made Darren smile a little. Maybe Domingo hadn’t been such a prick after all.

“Wrong answer, asshole. But we’ll talk about Aden, if you like.

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How about the fact that you killed one of his pack tonight?"

"Who said it was Oliver?"

The voice from the doorway surprised both Darren and August. Darren glanced back in time to see a man transform to a wolf in the blink of an eye, leaping toward August. Oliver wriggled in his grasp. He took advantage of Darren's momentary distraction to slam his head forward, smashing the top of his skull into Darren's nose.

"Motherfucker," Darren muttered, blood flowing freely down his face.

Oliver punched Darren in the chest, giving him space to escape. As soon as he was away from the wall, he began to transform, his face twisting into a snout, long hair sprouting across his arms. Darren knew August could hold her own against the other wolf. He couldn't let the surprise appearance distract him from Oliver.

He sprang from the ground and landed on Oliver's back, tackling him. They rolled across the carpet, Oliver's jaw snapping, his long, lethal claws trying to gain purchase in Darren's skin. Darren waited until he rolled on top of Oliver to punch him in the snout, pulling his arm back as far as possible to connect with the wolf's sensitive nose.

Oliver yelped in pain. He snapped at Darren's fist, but closed on air. His back claws scratched at Darren's shins, finally catching in the fabric and tearing it the length of Darren's leg. He caught skin as well, and the fresh sting added new blood to what already smeared across the floor. It made it harder to get a real hold of Oliver, so he grabbed a hank of fur and slammed the wolf's head back.

Darren risked looking away from Oliver for just a split second. Just long enough to see August struggling against the new wolf.

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Really struggling. Darren didn't know if it was because of her leg, or if the wolf just plain had her overpowered. Or maybe she was letting him get close? Teasing him with the possibility of a bite? Just a drop of her blood would be poison to him. Darren hoped that was August's plan, because he couldn't do anything to help her. Not with two hundred pounds of muscle twisting beneath him.

His gun was out of his reach in his shoulder holster, but his knife was another matter. The difficulty in getting it, however, rested in the fact he could barely keep a hold of Oliver now. Releasing one of his hands would lose his advantage. Until Oliver weakened further, that is.

"Darren!"

Aden's faraway shout brought a fresh gleam to Oliver's eye. He suddenly went limp beneath Darren, tearing away from his grip more effectively than with his struggles. As soon as Darren's hand was loose, Oliver flipped him off, rounding about to dash for the open door.

And Aden.

Darren reached for his knife as he ran to close the space between him and Oliver. As he gripped the handle, something electric moved down his spine. To his left, August was still trying to hold off the wolf. Darren knew Aden's impulse was to help him, rather than interfering with August. He just hoped he didn't act on that impulse, because August was completely overwhelmed.

With the knife in hand, Darren jumped on Oliver's back. The wolf howled with pain as his weight settled on the still-tender bullet wound. It was enough to slow him down, send him stumbling forward. Darren gripped Oliver's muzzle and yanked his head straight back.

"I lied," Darren said in Oliver's flattened ear. "This is for

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Aden.”

With that, he dragged the blade across Oliver’s throat, the long blade pushing through the thick coat, the skin, to find the jugular underneath.

The howl ended in a gurgle, the blood gushing to the floor. Oliver’s front paws slid in the new pool, but it was already too late. The breath fluttered from his chest as his body went limp.

A black blur whipped past, too swift to make out, but Darren knew that scent. He didn’t need to look back to hear Aden landing on the other wolf, or August’s cry of shock turning to relief, or the snarls that ended the howls. He recognized the sound of flesh tearing from bone, too. He would never have thought something so feral could fill him with such relief.

Darren pushed himself to his feet and spun around, prepared to help if necessary. August was on her back, propped up on her arms, and watching Aden tear into the other wolf with simultaneous disgust and interest. Darren rushed to her side and helped her scramble backward, putting even more distance between her and the wolves.

“Are you okay?” Darren asked.

She took a deep breath. “I’m sitting here, watching one wolf eat another one, and I’m not stopping it. How do you think I am?”

“I meant your leg.” He bent, putting an arm around her, and pointedly ignoring the hungry growls coming from Aden. “Can you stand?”

She let him pull her up, though her gaze never left the wolves. “Is it safe to think that if he’s up here, he rescued his pack member already?”

“Yes. Nick’s probably waiting for us down in the van. Which means, we should get down there, too.” He slowly removed his

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arm from August, watching carefully to make sure she could support her own weight. Once he was satisfied she wouldn't fall, he left her in favor of approaching Aden. He hated that he felt a little thrill of fear at seeing Aden's silver eyes and bloody muzzle, but it was a very human response. Even so, he crouched near Aden and spoke softly. "Hey. Let's get out of here, sunshine."

His snarl died away, and he swiveled his head toward Oliver's inert form. Blood dripped onto the floor, one, two, until Darren had to tear his attention away from it and meet Aden's gaze again. Slowly, Aden pushed himself up to his paws, prompting Darren to rise as well. On his first step, Aden's leg buckled beneath him, and Darren was back down, his arm beneath his belly, propping him up.

"What happened?" Darren murmured, not expecting an answer. He gently pulled at the fur on Aden's throat, confirming that the stitches there were still intact. They were, but the ones on his shoulder were a different story. Most of them were torn, and the wound was gaping open again, matting Aden's fur with thick, hot fluid.

"What is it?" August asked.

"A previous injury. It's started bleeding again."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"What?" Darren asked without looking up.

"All this blood?"

"Since we're the ones who spilled the blood, no, not really. How's your leg? Will you be able to make it to the elevator?"

"I'll be fine." She paused. "Thanks to Aden."

At the mention of his name, Aden lifted his head and met her gaze for several seconds before she turned toward the door.

"This whole situation is thoroughly fucked, you know that,

right?” she said.

Darren thought some thorough fucking might improve the situation, but he kept that comment to himself. Especially since that would have to wait until Aden had his shoulder re-stitched, and Nick was seen to, and August was safely bandaged and returned to her home, and they would have to deal with the power vacuum they had just created. Darren was glad he was still high on adrenaline, because the night was only just beginning.

CHAPTER 16

The silver sliver overhead barely cast any light on the hard ground. The trees stretched toward it, skeleton fingers in the dim light. Even the bushes were stripped of their leaves, waving naked and shorn in the cool breeze. The sky was clear, and the stars were nothing but cold points of light. It was unseasonably warm for the second week of December, but that only meant the overnight low was in the mid-thirties instead of the mid-twenties. Darren acknowledged the low temperature by wearing a thin jacket and gloves with the tips of the fingers cut off. Aden, of course, had shifted. He probably didn't even feel the night's chill.

Wherever he was.

Darren didn't care if it was cold. And he didn't care the moon was only barely returning after being absent for a week. He didn't

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even care that the trees on the reserve offered no shelter, and the leaves were dangerously loud underfoot. If he could have magically turned the calendar from December to July, he would have, but that was not an option, so he was going to be happy with what he could get.

And at that moment, he had a lot to be happy about. Aden was out there somewhere, searching for him, his body sleek and healthy. Darren had insisted on pampering Aden until his wounds began to heal for real, and now, nearly two weeks later, none of them were in danger of opening again. Aden had a full range of motion, and Darren had no doubt that he was taking advantage of that fact. As well as every one of his senses, and anything else he could use to reach Darren before Darren found him.

But Darren didn't let himself think about Aden searching for him. When he did, it made him hard. The last thing he needed was the breeze to pick up the unmistakable scent of his arousal and lead Aden to him like a giant, red, blinking sign. Instead of imagining what could happen once Aden found him, he focused on locating Aden in the huge reserve.

It wasn't going to be easy. He tried to stay close to the ground, but the dirt was too hard. There were no tracks to guide him. At least he knew Aden wasn't sitting on a limb above him, patiently waiting for Darren to wander beneath him. Even Aden wouldn't be able to hide in the bare limbs. It wouldn't be wise for Darren to linger in a tree, either, but he decided to scurry up the trunk of the nearest one.

From his vantage, he could see most of the reserve. The trees looked even more like skeletons from this angle, clawing at the sky. He strained his eyes, but he knew it wouldn't help. Why hadn't he insisted on waiting until the end of the month, when the

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moon was full? Aden would have been stronger then, but at least Darren would be able to see.

The soft, unmistakable crunch of leaves drew Darren's attention to the right. He tensed, waiting patiently for Aden to emerge from the trees, but he never did. Darren heard the crunch again, and again, but he couldn't spot the wolf. Hugging the trunk, he moved to the other side of the tree, finding a good, solid branch to rest on. His new vantage did not help. With a sigh of frustration, Darren moved to the lowest branch and jumped down to the ground.

Though it often felt this hunt had been too long in coming, there was one advantage to the added weeks. He'd had more time to learn the reserve, to go out and wander through the trees and imagine what Aden would look like doing the same. Even just padding over the closely cut grass, the wolf would be dangerously elegant, a midnight shadow slipping along the green. Darren held no illusions that he knew the land nearly as well as his mate, but he'd had the opportunity to get comfortable roaming the hills. He felt far more comfortable now than he would have otherwise.

Steadying his breathing, he realized he should have gone out and taken walks at night, as well.

Perhaps the trick was not to find Aden. Out here, Aden had all the advantages. He saw better in the dark, his sense of hearing was sharper, and nothing could touch his sense of smell. So, the smart move was to draw Aden to him. It didn't matter where it happened, or who hunted who. What mattered was who took who down.

The thought of the silky fur between his legs worsened his erection. He adjusted himself discreetly as he stood up tall and did a slow revolution. Bare trees, empty swells, more bare trees. Wind whispered over his nape. Something snapped behind him, and he

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whirled on instinct, only to be greeted by even more nothing.

A bird started up to the left, wings fluttering rapidly in the cold air. Darren lifted the corner of his mouth and slunk forward. He stuck close to the trees, using their shadows even if he couldn't use their foliage. He knew exactly what he wanted if he won, but the question of what Aden wanted interested him more. Darren had tried to draw out the answer, but Aden refused to even offer a hint. He played the whole thing close to the chest, which only increased Darren's anticipation. He didn't have any doubt that Aden would want to tie him up, somehow, but the question of whether or not he would was far less interesting than just *how* he would.

Darren made it to the clearing where he was pretty sure the bird had been, but it was empty, without even a hint of what had startled the animal. Darren made a slow revolution, scanning the darkness, looking for any hint of silver. He saw nothing, but the hair on his neck stood on end, and his stomach clenched. Was he psyching himself out? Or was Aden in the area?

On the off chance that Aden was not lying with his belly against the ground, watching everything Darren was doing, he unsheathed his small knife. It wasn't really anything more than a pocketknife—it wasn't even made of silver. Taking a deep breath, he cut a shallow cut across his hand and let the blood drip to the ground. Darren couldn't even see the tiny, dark drop against the grass, but it would be an irresistible beacon to a wolf. With that done, he slunk backward, settling against a tree.

A long, haunting howl split the night. It was closer than he'd expected, with an edge that made his chest hurt. Aden. He knew it like he knew his own voice. He could recognize every nuance, when Aden was happy, when he was horny, when he was frustrated. This didn't sound like any of those. This made his heart

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stutter and start again, and forget for precious seconds why exactly they were out here.

He couldn't be hurt. Security was up. Nobody else was out here. Nobody—

Darren caught himself taking the step closer to the sound. They were alone. Just him and Aden. Aden was using his own tricks to try and draw Darren out, just like Darren had done with the knife.

He almost smiled. *Nice try, sunshine.*

The howl didn't exactly give him the best clue about where to find Aden, since it echoed around him. He knew Aden was close, but he was still at a loss as to where. He looked straight up, considering climbing to the top of the tree again. But he didn't want to perch in the tree, passively waiting for Aden to finally circle by him. If Aden would even slink that close to a tree that would no doubt reek of Darren's blood and arousal and sweat.

He licked his upper lip, tasting the salt gathered there, and moved back, away from the likely location of the howl. It occurred to him that he was glad he had never seriously tried to hunt Aden. Not only because then he would have missed out on the best thing in his life, but also because he wasn't entirely convinced he could beat Aden. Which made sense. Wolves didn't get to Aden's age, and his position of power, without being pretty damned careful and pretty damned smart.

Darren avoided clearings, not wanting to put himself in an open or vulnerable position, but also didn't move too close to the trees. He didn't want a stray leaf or brittle stick to give him away while he circled the area, trying to come up behind Aden. The night was perfectly silent. Darren didn't even breathe hard as he watched each careful step. But it wasn't an errant twig that finally shattered the stillness.

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It was a soft growl.

Right in front of him.

Darren stopped. The night looked exactly the same. A slice of silver cut across the grass about twenty yards ahead, but that sparse illumination did little to reveal its surroundings. Without turning his head, he scanned the ground, trying to discern irregularities that could be Aden's crouched form. He stopped at a cluster of trees, some thick, most of them skinny. Aden could have changed back to human form to hide behind one of the trunks. That was against the rules they'd set, but perhaps Aden had decided to change those rules.

There was nowhere else to hide.

Then another growl rumbled through his skin. Even closer than the first.

But now behind him.

A shiver danced down his spine. His hand automatically went to the place on his belt where he usually kept his knife, but of course, it wasn't there. His legs were entirely unresponsive. That had never happened to him before, and he wasn't sure if it was fear that paralyzed him or something else. Something like desire. He took a halting step forward, but his mind was utterly blank. All he wanted, all he could think about, was getting caught.

A third growl. Even closer. Was Aden giving him a warning? Telling him to run? Something clicked into place, and Darren sprinted forward, moving his legs as hard as he could.

The first rush of air over his skin eliminated the rest of his doubts. Freedom. That was what it was. The burn of lungs struggling to process oxygen he couldn't take in fast enough. The burn of muscles as he pushed his legs, pumped his arms, harder than he'd ever pushed them before. The slow crawl of heat through

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his veins as his body warmed up and then begged for more of the sweet, delicious adrenaline fueling his every step.

Behind it all, the knowledge that Aden was at his back. The freedom was false. Temporary. Because Aden would never, ever let him go.

He imagined he could hear Aden whipping over the ground, but that was just as much of a lie as the other. Aden hunted with deadly precision, a specter skimming along the earth even more dangerous than the darkness. Aden *was* the darkness, but Darren knew with all his heart that he was more than that, too. He was the glimmer of a silver blade, and the welcome of a moonbeam. He would hunt Darren down and do so with every animal instinct he had. And Darren would love every second of it.

Darren didn't know how far he ran. He only knew that his lungs weren't burning and his legs were still pumping at full force when Aden landed on his back. Darren didn't even have the chance to put a hand up to catch himself. He slammed to the ground, the grass barely cushioning his fall. The air was forced out of his lungs, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't catch his wind again. But all of that seemed inconsequential compared to the weight of Aden on his back.

In one way, it was entirely familiar. Aden's weight on his back was a common, and welcome, occurrence. But in another way, it was very strange. Aden's breath was hot against his damp neck, and his huge paw rested between Darren's shoulder blades, holding him to the ground. He felt the hint of Aden's claws pressing into his shirt. He couldn't do anything except remain utterly still.

The heat along his nape grew more intense. He jumped when pressure clamped around the back of his neck, enough sharp edges to prick at the skin and tell him they were teeth. Aden's growl

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followed, low, almost soft. Neither moved. Darren couldn't if he wanted to. The clamp of Aden's jaw forbade it.

Darren's cock throbbed, painfully hard against the ground, and his heart thudded in his ears. A fresh flood of endorphins heated his blood, making his muscles taut. He wanted to run again. He wanted to relax beneath Aden and never run again. He wanted Aden to tear his pants off, because he couldn't stand the restriction for another second. And the teeth remained in his neck. Darren couldn't tell if Aden was breaking the skin, if the slow moving fluid rolling down his neck was blood or sweat.

"Aden...God..." He lifted his hips slightly, maybe just an inch, but didn't otherwise move.

Aden's weight settled more heavily against him, forcing him back to the earth. His long legs settled over Darren's arms, and when another growl came, Darren squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't know how much of this he could take.

The third growl wasn't as deep as its predecessors, and the pressure against his neck shortened and eased. The fangs pinning him down smoothed, replaced by Aden's blunter teeth, and the paws resting over his hands elongated to familiar fingers.

"I win," Aden murmured against his skin.

Darren sighed. "Yes. Yes, you do. What's your prize?"

"You, of course." He licked over the sore points his canines had left. "Though it means getting back to the house."

Darren moaned softly. "Please tell me we're not too far from the house."

"A few hundred yards off to our left." Another lick, this one longer, this one ending at his ear. "I could chase you there if you ask me nicely."

Walking close to Aden would be great. He wouldn't have to

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keep his hands to himself, and his heat would seep into Darren's skin. On the other hand, if they ran, they would get there much sooner, and then collapse with each other, flushed and slick with sweat. The sizzle of electricity dancing across his nerve endings told him the latter option was the right choice.

"Please chase me back to the house?"

Aden skimmed his hand down Darren's side, shifting so he could cup Darren's ass. He kneaded it, hard, and dropped one last kiss on his neck before rolling off. "Run, gorgeous. I'll be right behind you."

Darren pushed himself to his feet before Aden finished speaking. He swerved to the left, running like Aden had never tackled him. His lungs cooperated, though they burned with each deep breath. He tried to listen for Aden, but he couldn't hear anything except his own ragged breathing as he sailed over the grass. He felt like he was flying again. This time, he wasn't running from Aden. He was racing with him.

The trees cleared as Darren neared the house, and he sprinted over the patio to the backdoor. He managed to stop himself before slamming into the glass, but only barely. He fumbled with the handle with slick fingers, finally forcing the door open just as he felt Aden's hot breath at his back. He stumbled over the entryway, finding his feet just before he did a face plant on the floor. Darren bounded through the house, not stopping until he jumped on the bed.

He slammed forward when Aden tackled his legs, smothering him with his naked length as they sprawled atop the blankets. It was the roughest play they'd been able to have in weeks; Aden's stitches had made anything like this impossible before now. As Aden immediately began sucking and gnawing at his neck, Darren

realized just how much he had missed this, how excited it made him to be the one Aden so vehemently needed to possess. He wriggled against Aden's touch, trying to help free his clothing, but Aden caught his wrist and twisted his arm over his head, pinning him from moving farther.

"I have plans for you." Aden buried his face in Darren's neck and inhaled. "God, you smell so good."

"God, you feel good." Darren didn't even try to loosen Aden's grip. He lifted his hips, grinding his ass against Aden's erection. "What plans?"

"Something we've never done before. Do you trust me?"

"Always," Darren answered, even as his mind raced through the all the possibilities. "Does that mean it's going to be a surprise?"

He felt Aden's smile. "Do you want it to be?"

"I do like surprises."

Aden's weight shifted. His legs settled between Darren's, and with one last kiss to his nape, he peeled away to kneel on the bed. He massaged Darren's thighs, working slowly upward, and Darren rested his cheek on the pillow as he got lost in the sensations. Aden lingered on his ass for several minutes, long enough for Darren to feel like he was melting into the mattress. When he pushed beneath Darren's shirt to skim over his hot skin, Darren nearly jumped from the direct contact.

"Roll over," Aden instructed. He scooted backward off the bed while Darren complied. "Take your clothes off while I get your new cuffs, or I'll end up tearing them off you."

Darren kicked his shoes off, then unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned his pants. He could have stripped the rest of his clothes, but he liked the thought of Aden tearing his clothes off. He

liked the thought of it so much that he stretched his arms above his head and curled his hands around the headboard.

The moment Aden returned with leather cuffs Darren didn't recognize dangling in his hand, he chuckled. "You're lucky you're so adorable when you're this hungry," he said, tossing the cuffs momentarily to the far side of the bed. He returned to his spot between Darren's legs and grabbed the hem of his T-shirt. Every muscle flexed as he tore it up the middle, the two scraps fluttering to Darren's sides. Hunger glinted in Aden's eyes. "I'm starting to think I shouldn't have toyed with you so much outside." He smoothed a hand up over Darren's flat stomach, bending at the same time to trace the path his tongue. "We could've been in here all that much sooner."

Darren arched beneath him, straining to feel more of Aden's hot mouth. His cock lay against his stomach. Aden's chest brushed against Darren's throbbing skin as he slowly licked and kissed his way up Darren's body. "Do you think I'd be so hungry for it if you had dragged me in here earlier?"

Aden veered outward to catch the tip of a nipple between his teeth. "I like to think you're this hungry for me all the time."

"I am always hungry for you. But it doesn't hurt when you give chase." Darren released the headboard and ran his fingers through Aden's hair. "It gets my blood pumping."

Without lifting his head, Aden grabbed Darren's wrist again. His unforgiving grip bent Darren's arm back again, holding him still even when Darren held the baluster. "I think I better get you cuffed first." He stretched to seal their mouths together in a hard, all too short, kiss. "You're going to fidget and ruin everything if I don't."

He stretched to grab the leather restraints, the wet tip of his

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erection brushing over Darren's twitching stomach. He worked quickly, like he was just as eager as Darren to get to the good stuff, and only let him go once both cuffs were firmly in place.

"Of course, having you stretched out like this, helpless to stop me from doing whatever I want, is a pretty good reward for winning, too."

Darren curled his fingers. The leather was smooth against his skin, and his pulse was beating a hard tattoo in his wrist. These cuffs were new, but they were already beginning to feel familiar. Darren lifted his head, trying to get close enough to taste Aden's skin, his mouth watering for the salty texture, but Aden was just out of reach.

"Like I would stop you from doing whatever you wanted. With or without the cuffs."

Aden smiled. "You'd try. Because you love me putting a stop to it."

Aden was right, and the mere thought of Aden overpowering him again, like he had when they were outside, made his cock slick with new pre-come. Darren wiggled his hands as much as he could. "Undo these cuffs, and we'll see."

This brought an outright laugh. "Maybe next time." Back between Darren's legs, he gripped each side of the open fly of his jeans and gave a hard yank. The denim tore down the middle seam, exposing the rest of his cock and all of his balls. Aden growled and bent over to bury his nose in Darren's balls. Just the sound of his deep inhaling made Darren whimper. "I've wanted this cock all night."

Darren closed his eyes, waiting for the first touch of Aden's tongue to his heated skin. The seconds crawled by, sweat gathering on his forehead and upper lip as he waited. He felt Aden's hot

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breath, felt his nose, his cheeks, even the barest skim of his mouth, but nothing more. Despite Aden's words, he seemed more than happy to wait just a little bit longer. To prolong the light touches until Darren was squirming. One firm hand on his hip stopped him from moving, but it didn't do anything to dampen the growing desire beneath his skin.

At the first touch of Aden's tongue, Darren's eyes flew open. He wanted to see Aden lick him. He wanted to see just how red Aden's mouth was against his taut, pale skin. He opened his mouth, trying to ask for more, but he could only whimper.

What he saw was Aden's lips skimming up the length of his cock, reaching the head, and then engulfing it within the heat of his mouth. Darren bucked into the hot recesses, relieved when Aden didn't fight it. Instead, Aden sank down the shaft at the same deliberate pace he'd set going up it, not hesitating when it hit the back of his throat. His throat squeezed around the tip, and Aden swallowed again, as if the first time wasn't nearly enough.

Each time Aden's throat constricted around his crown, Darren moaned. This was Aden's reward for catching him? Darren vowed that if he ever ran from Aden, it would only be so the wolf could catch him again. He longed to touch Aden's face, to cup his cheek as it hollowed, increasing the suction around Darren's length. His blood rushed near his skin, he felt almost feverish, and Aden wasn't even moving yet. He was just holding Darren in his mouth, his vivid gaze locked on Darren's face, not missing a single detail.

When he finally slid back up the shaft, his tongue danced along the vein, leaving behind a line of spit he didn't wipe away as he lifted his head. "I better not keep that up, or you'll come before I'm ready for you to." His rough voice whispered more promises than that, especially when he yanked the denim down Darren's

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legs to free them the rest of the way. “And I definitely don’t want that.”

Darren dropped his head back with mingled relief and frustration. Aden was right. He was already enough on edge that it wouldn’t take too much to push him completely over. “No, no, of course not. That’d be awful.”

Except the last thing he wanted was for Aden to climb off the bed again. He devoured his mate’s every movement as Aden went to the side of the bed and pulled out the bottle of lube. His ass clenched. Aden had fucked him plenty of times while he’d been cuffed to the bed. How was this supposed to be something they’d never done before?

With a small, enigmatic smile on his face, Aden squirted some out onto his hand and set the lube aside. Darren spread his legs wider in anticipation of getting slicked and stretched for Aden’s cock.

“A little greedy for it, aren’t you?” Aden said, coating his fingers.

“I’m just greedy for you,” Darren said, his ass clenching with anticipation.

Aden kneeled on the bed again, and Darren caught his breath, waiting for at least two of his longer fingers to slide into Darren’s passage. Only, Aden’s hand disappeared behind his back. Darren’s cock jerked, but he didn’t ask what Aden was doing. He didn’t even dare speak. He just watched Aden’s face as his slick fingers disappeared into his own ass.

“You’re...are we...”

Aden didn’t answer. His head tilted back as his fingers worked, while his free hand fisted his cock. He pulled at it, slowly, ever so slowly, covering the dripping tip completely when he reached the

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head. There, he lingered for seconds, then stroked down back to the base, smashing the side of his hand into his balls.

The muscles in his other arm flexed as he worked his ass. When Aden licked his lips, Darren whimpered, wishing Aden would say something, or touch him, or do anything to include him. The problem with that was this glorious spectacle would end, then, and that wasn't acceptable either. So he settled for drinking in the sight, fidgeting when he could to press more of his hot skin to Aden's.

He moaned in anticipation as Aden pulled his hand out of his ass.

Aden smiled. "Just because I'm ready, doesn't mean you are." Keeping a hold of his own cock, he wrapped his fingers around Darren's, slicking them up in the same way.

The muscles in his legs and chest pulled tight. Aden's fingers were tight around his shaft, and each pull made his head spin. How would he be able to tolerate Aden's tight channel wrapped around him? The last thing he wanted was to shoot as soon as Aden sunk down. Especially since he didn't know when, or if, Aden would want to do this again. Each time Aden's palm rolled over his sensitive tip, he gathered more pre-come, spreading it with the lube.

Though he continued to smile, Aden watched him carefully, assessing every flicker of Darren's lashes, every flare of his nostrils. "If you had won, what would you have wanted?" He tilted his cock up, straddling Darren's hips to fit the shaft along Aden's crack. Keeping his hand cupped around the length to hold it in place, he slowly rose and fell until there wasn't an inch of either of them untouched by the lube.

Darren blinked, surprised Aden expected him to be coherent at

a time like this. But he dug deep, searching his memory for the thoughts he had been harboring earlier that night—it felt like an eternity ago.

“I would have wanted to fuck you. Except...maybe not like this.” Darren sucked his breath in sharply as Aden guided the head of his cock to his slick opening. He eased back, just an inch, just enough so Darren felt Aden’s amazing heat close around the tip. “On second thought, maybe...exactly like this.”

“Great minds think alike.”

And then Darren couldn’t think at all as Aden sat back, not hesitating, not stopping, not doing anything but taking him in, inch by incredible inch. The resistance was excruciating, powerful muscles constricting around his cock more tightly than Aden’s fist, or mouth, or throat. Darren arched away from the bed as he struggled to come to grips with the pleasure, his eyes squeezing shut then opening again when he realized he had to watch Aden while he could.

Aden loomed over him, all sculptured beauty, with fine beads of sweat sprinkled across his brow. His hands braced against Darren’s stomach, but his eyes fixed on Darren’s face, glowing with emotion he recognized matched his own.

If Darren’s hands were free, he would hold Aden’s hips. He would run his fingers down Aden’s perfect chest. He would fist Aden’s cock and run his thumb over the leaking slit. But he didn’t have any of those options, so Darren didn’t linger over those thoughts. Instead, he focused on the way Aden’s balls rubbed against his abdomen, and the curve of his body as he arched his back, and the soft moans Aden couldn’t quite hold back.

Once Aden was fully seated, Darren throbbed. Everywhere. From his feet to his eyes. For a moment, Darren was afraid Aden

never planned to move—he would just stay in that position, clenching around his shaft, until Darren exploded. But those fears banished as soon as Darren focused on Aden's face again. His control was starting to slip. Despite that, Aden eased forward slowly, dropping his head while he did so, his mouth teasing Darren's.

He barely moved. He just kind of rocked on top of Darren's body, letting him slip out an inch before pushing back down to envelop him again. Even his kisses were deceptively spare. The tip of his tongue tickled over the dip in Darren's upper lip, and when Darren tried to chase it, Aden turned his head and nibbled at the corner of his mouth instead. His hands smoothed down the length of Darren's arms, folding over the death grips he had on the headboard's balusters. Those were hard. Those helped root Darren in the moment, opening to his mate's lead when he desperately wanted—needed—more.

Aden always made Darren forget the rest of the world when they were together. But this was different. When Aden's eyes locked with his, Darren forgot every second that led to this moment. Aden was the beginning and the end, and he made Darren's chest ache. He made every inch of Darren ache, but it was a good sort of pain.

Darren got caught up in the rhythm of Aden's body, and it carried him away. Each time Aden clenched around his shaft, sparks went off behind Darren's eyes. Each time Aden's cock dragged across his stomach, Darren's mouth watered for a little taste of the pre-come smeared on his skin. He could move his hips, could brace his feet against the mattress and try to create more friction, more heat, but he didn't want to disrupt Aden. Aden's hot fingers made him forget the leather around his wrist. Instead of

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being bound, unable to move, he felt like he was simply being held.

“Can’t remember it feeling like this.” Aden spoke between his constant kisses to Darren’s neck and jaw, his tongue dragging over the slightest of stubble to create a cascade of shivers down Darren’s back. His hips were quickening, the force just that much more to create stings where bare skin met bare skin. “But you were always the best surprise, gorgeous.”

Darren’s breath quickened. He might have been able to resist the swells of pleasure crashing through him, carrying him closer to the brink, but he couldn’t fight the feelings Aden’s words invoked. Satisfaction, and pride, and the sense that he was exactly where he belonged, regardless of the differences between them. But it was the sweet, hot flood of devotion that made Darren more than a little heady.

“I’m so...God...Aden...” Before he could finish his broken thought, Aden claimed his lips with a hard kiss, his tongue invading his mouth, as if he was trying to taste Darren’s words. It was all too much. Far too much. Darren tensed until he thought his body would snap in two from the strain. Aden rocked back, bearing down on Darren’s cock, and everything shattered. The world split around him like a dome of glass, and he shot deep in Aden’s channel.

The trembling threatened to overwhelm him until Aden slid an arm beneath his back and embraced him throughout the duration of his orgasm. He never stopped kissing him, either, infusing Darren’s strength with his own in spite of how broken Darren felt. And still, his throbbing cock rested between their bellies, reminding Darren that Aden had yet to come.

“We are definitely doing this again,” Aden murmured when he

broke away.

Darren tried to agree, but he was reduced to nodding his head. He felt vaguely sorry that he hadn't lasted longer—at least until Aden had the chance to come—but he didn't get to apologize before Aden's mouth met his in a slow, searching caress. Darren relaxed beneath him, feeling boneless and weak.

He blinked with confusion when Aden pulled away from the kiss and crawled up Darren's body, his cock dragging over Darren's chest, then hitting his chin. Darren automatically opened his mouth, expecting to feel the length slide down his tongue and come to a rest in his throat.

"Oh, not quite yet," Aden teased. He slapped his cock against Darren's cheek, the scent of pre-come tantalizingly filling his nose. "I want something else more."

He continued moving upward, his knees coming to a rest on either side of Darren's head. It positioned his ass directly over Darren's face, droplets of come marking the perfect skin, each one mouth-watering in its own right. Darren strained to reach them, and moaned when his tongue flicked over the hot flesh.

"More." Aden's command was almost a growl. Reaching behind, he pulled apart his cheeks and bared his twitching hole. "I want you back inside me."

Darren had never done anything like what Aden wanted, but it didn't occur to him to protest. Not that protesting would do any good. Aden told him what he wanted, and he expected Darren to comply. His tongue darted out, and he traced the ring of muscle, gathering up the combined saltiness of sweat and come. Aden moaned softly, then repeated his command. Darren pushed his tongue into Aden's pucker, and was rewarded with a deeper moan of pleasure.

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Darren felt Aden move above him, stroking his cock with hard, fast jerks of his wrist while his channel clenched around Darren's tongue. Darren didn't have the space or the ability to set the rhythm. As before, Aden rose up on his knees, then sank onto his tongue again.

The heat permeated everywhere they touched, and everywhere they didn't. The sharp tugs at Aden's cock made his balls slap against Darren's nose, making it impossible to escape either the taste or the smell of him. Not that he wanted to. He didn't. He would be eighty years old and still want Aden surrounding him, in every way possible.

Emboldened by the sounds his mate made, Darren dug deeper into his ass, sucking at the opening when Aden rose up, letting his teeth catch on the skin when he came back down again. He didn't let a single drop escape, while his body sharpened with renewed desire. The urge to beg for Aden to fuck him tightened his throat, the words about ready to spill out when Aden abruptly shifted backward.

Darren cried out in frustration. He lifted his head to try and reach Aden's cock, but Aden pressed his free hand to Darren's forehead and forced him back to the pillow.

"Stay." Aden stripped his cock at an ever increasing, ever rougher pace. The muscles in his thighs twitched, and as Darren watched, his balls puckered and pulled harder into his body. A low growl rumbled from Aden's chest. It surged into a roar, and he fisted his cock one last time before erupting.

Darren closed his eyes and felt the come paint his face, hot and surprising. It rolled down his cheek, lips, and chin. He even felt some of the liquid on his brow, at the line of his hair. His tongue darted out, and a string landed on his mouth. Darren opened his

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eyes, watching as Aden milked his orgasm, coaxing the last of his spunk from the slit of his cock. He smeared it across Darren's chin, adding to the hot liquid already drying there.

Aden shuddered one last time before releasing his shaft. He blinked once, then slowly slid back down Darren's body, cradling him within his arms when he was fully stretched. Without a word, Aden ducked his head and began carefully licking away the fluid clinging to Darren's face, the long, languid sweeps of his tongue eliciting gasps from Darren's throat.

Aden saved Darren's mouth for last. He cleaned his brow and his cheeks and tormented him by licking his chin and even his upper lip. By the time Aden's tongue moved to the corner of his lips, Darren couldn't hold himself back. He turned his head, catching Aden with a hungry kiss that began fast and slowed into an almost sleepy caress.

Darren strained against the leather cuffs. "Get me out of these?" he asked against Aden's mouth.

Without questioning or breaking away, Aden reached to undo the locks with one deft hand. The moment his arms were free, Darren wrapped them around Aden's back.

"I'd almost consider moving out here for good if we got to have those kind of chases every night," Aden said between kisses.

"I'd support that plan, but I think you'd miss your bookstore too much."

"I would." He rolled to the side, though he didn't break their embrace. "You know me too well."

"At this point, I'd be worried if I didn't." Darren nuzzled against Aden's neck. Beneath the sweaty musk of his skin, Darren caught a faint hint of the cool night air. "We could stay out here for another night, though."

ON THE RAGGED EDGE OF THE WORLD

Aden sighed and pulled him closer. “I wish we could. But we’ve been gone too long as it is. It’s time we stop pretending things are okay back in the city, and time to start cleaning up some of the mess I made.”

“The mess Oliver made,” Darren corrected, his voice muffled. “Where are we even going to start with the mess?”

“It has to be with consolidating the packs. There are too many out there without a real alpha now. We have to do something for them.”

Darren hadn’t known until much later that the wolf that had attacked August was also a pack leader—Paul Kahlert. His lieutenant had stepped up to take temporary control of the pack, but since Aden was the one who brought him down, Aden had the right to take it over, if he wanted. They weren’t too concerned about Kahlert’s pack. It was a long-established group with its own hierarchy, but Oliver’s pack was an utter mess. A cult of personality without the personality could easily devolve into chaos, and probably would soon.

“Are you going to take them both over? That might prove to be a bit unwieldy.”

“I don’t want either of them,” Aden admitted. “Bringing in new wolves is a balancing act in the best of situations. This one is so fucked up, it’s going to take us weeks to fix.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Darren said, with more confidence than he felt. He knew absolutely nothing of what they were facing. His knowledge of wolves extended to what he needed to know to kill them. That did not include how to fix the packs once the alpha was slain. “It’ll probably help that Leo and Berry are strong allies.”

“Yeah. And Berry’s used to assimilating broken packs into his own. It’s a lot of how he came into power in the first place.”

ON THE RAGGED EDGE OF THE WORLD

Darren lifted his head. "Did you give Berry my message?"

"Not yet. Things were too sticky for me to mention it before."

Darren hoped Aden figured out a way to mention it before too long. The last thing they needed was a third pack without a leader, but Darren would stand by his promise to kill Berry if he ever caught the wolf in the act. Aden knew it, too.

He rested his head on Aden's shoulder again and closed his eyes. "Did you talk to Nick today? How is he?"

"All up to speed." He brushed his lips across Darren's temple. "And if I wasn't sure Nick was straight, I'd start to get a little jealous about all the concern you're showing for him."

"You needn't be. I think he might be a friend."

"Good. You need more of those." Burrowing deeper into the bed, with Darren firmly in his embrace, he added, his voice a soft sigh, "I love you too much to see you lonely, gorgeous."

Darren swallowed at the sudden tightness in his throat. "I'm not lonely anymore, sunshine." His eyes were heavy. He felt warm and secure, and more than that, he felt like he was exactly where he belonged. "Not as long as I have you."

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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