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MOON'S SWEET POISON

Scarlet Hyacinth



MOON'S SWEET POISON

Deadly Mates

Scarlet Hyacinth

EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

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MOON'S SWEET POISON

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Letter from Scarlet Hyacinth

Regarding E-book Piracy

Dear Readers,

Your support and opinion always mean a lot to me. I was a reader before I was writer, and as such, knowing that people enjoy my stories gives me tremendous happiness and satisfaction.

Some of you may know that I originally started writing on FictionPress and AdultFanFiction. It was because of the many friends I made there and through their constant support that I persevered in writing.

However, I have to point out that, unlike stories on FictionPress and AdultFanFiction, my published books are intellectual property and are not free. The amount of time and effort authors, editors, and cover artists put into each and every one of these books is astonishing. I spent one month polishing *Enraptured* for my readers, to offer them the best experience when reading my work. It hurts me, emotionally and financially, that before I could earn anything from my book, it was pirated and distributed illegally.

I sometimes can't help but wonder if all the effort is worth it. Writing is my passion, but writing for publishing is very different than posting free stories online. As much as I hate to admit it, taking into account all the work I put into these books and the poor financial profit, it somehow seems I'm wasting my time.

Maybe many of you think that being a writer instantly translates into thousands of dollars. Well, it doesn't. Many authors cannot support themselves with their writing, especially in the e-publishing industry. They have to hold day jobs while they write in the evenings and on weekends. I am still a student, sneaking in writing between studying for exams and trips to the library.

Please do not pirate my books. If you have downloaded this copy illegally, know that every reader is important and your support would mean the world to me.

I hope you enjoy the story. Please e-mail me your thoughts and comments at scarlet.hyacinth@gmail.com.

With love,

Scarlet Hyacinth

DEDICATION

For everyone who doesn't think I'm a freak for admiring snakes so much.

MOON'S SWEET POISON

Deadly Mates

SCARLET HYACINTH

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Chapter One

Pale rays emitted by a full moon shone down through the darkness of the night. They seemed to sing a ballad, a hypnotizing melody that reached out to a chosen few. The magic of the night was said to soothe restless souls and cradle lovers in its embrace. Yet for Viktor Petrovic, the gift and blessing sought and yearned for by many meant only fury and betrayal. The melody of the moon taunted him, making him even more aware of the anger and hatred that surrounded him...

For their kind, a full moon meant a celebration, a night of revelry and freedom. The animals within awoke to bond with their brothers and sisters. Rather than a custom, it was almost a compulsion. However, just as with many other rules, this one didn't apply to Viktor. He knew this. He accepted this. But when his father chose to announce his mating to Emilie, the daughter of a neighboring pack leader, without so much as consulting him, Viktor stopped being so accepting. Sasha had crossed the line, and Viktor could no longer withstand his father's meddlesome ways. He felt tired of being manipulated, used, and forced to change.

The Alpha of the Rook Valley pack did not take Viktor's disobedience well. Sasha Petrovic ruthlessly eliminated and dealt with anyone who dared to oppose him. Because of this, his relationship

with his son had actually turned into a tense, silent confrontation. Unlike everybody else, Viktor didn't allow his father to intimidate him. In the forested grove where the pack always met, he faced Sasha dead on, heedless of the hostility radiating off of the other pack members. Sizzling fury burned in two identical sets of ice blue eyes as Sasha attempted to force Viktor to submit. "I'm sick of your insolence, pup," the Alpha growled, his voice arrogant and commanding. "You will obey me in this!"

"Your orders mean nothing to me, Sasha." Viktor laughed derisively, feeling his claws extend in clear contradiction to the indifference of his tone. "Do you really think a fossil like you can force me into anything?"

Insulted, the Alpha snarled, his anger flowing off him in waves. Under normal circumstances, such an offense would have been considered a challenge to the Alpha's leadership position, resulting in a fight for power. However, due to Sasha's hold on their pack, Viktor suddenly found himself surrounded by a circle of his father's minions, ready to strike at the Alpha's order. Ignoring the danger, Viktor laughed again. "Look at you, old man! You can't even face me on your own! You're pathetic."

Viktor felt the tension thickening in the air with his every word, until it became almost palpable in its intensity. His nerves tingled with the knowledge of the imminent fight and his wolf paced impatiently inside of him, yearning to break free and attack.

Fortunately—or unfortunately—the crowd parted to reveal a silhouette Viktor knew too well. He frowned at the sight of his old friend, Flame, heading towards him. The worry and sorrow of the past few weeks marked Flame's handsome black face. Quite honestly, Viktor couldn't bring himself to care, since after all those years of close friendship, Flame betrayed him. In the end, Flame proved to be just like everybody else.

Viktor directed a glare at his former friend, silently warning him away. Ignoring his anger, Flame grabbed his arm and pulled him

aside, away from the Alpha. "Pull yourself together, Vik!" he begged in a whisper. "You don't want to do this."

Viktor broke out of Flame's hold, giving his former friend a disgusted look. "You've no right to tell me what to do, Flame."

"I'm your friend," the other werewolf countered. "I care about you."

Viktor just snorted. "Yeah, right. I suppose that's why you've been so supportive of my new mating. Because you're my friend and you want what's best for me." Ignoring Flame's wince, Viktor continued to speak in a disdainful tone. "You know, I really thought you were different than these ass-kissing, back-stabbing bastards. Shows how much I know about people. You can just—"

A familiar feminine voice suddenly interrupted his angry rant. "Oh, stop being so stubborn, Viktor. Flame is right."

Viktor turned to face Flame's mate, Jessica, and barely managed to suppress a growl as the sickeningly sweet voice of his enemy continued to taunt him. "Besides, you need a mate and what better choice than Emilie?"

Viktor prayed for composure, hoping he'd manage to keep himself from irreparably harming Jessica. She'd been the bane of his existence for the past fifteen years, and he needed all the control he could muster to deal with her.

Giving the female werewolf a scathing look, Viktor growled back. "And who, pray tell, gave you the right to judge whether I need a mate or not?"

Jessica attached herself to Flame's arm and gifted him with one of her famous fabricated smiles. "It's for the best. Besides, the agreement is already in place. We can't back out now."

"I don't give a fuck!" Viktor bellowed. "There is no 'we' in this issue! You did not bother to ask me when you agreed to my supposed mating. It's your mess. You fix it."

Flame looked like he wanted to say something, but Viktor's anger silenced him, just like it silenced all of the other members of the pack.

Viktor's inner Alpha rarely got the better of him, since he always tried to keep his dominant side hidden. He knew it wouldn't be wise to challenge his father for leadership of the pack now. Many wolves didn't trust his volatile personality and considered him unfit to rule. Unfortunately, he had yet to prove them wrong and his continuous refusal to mate didn't help much. Inwardly cursing, Viktor turned on his heel and began to push through the crowd, daring them to attack him. He actually felt the urge to take them on, to rip some throats out and unleash his temper on his father's stupid followers. Even so, he knew none of the wolves present would attempt any act of violence upon his person. His Alpha voice cancelled out any possibility of them doing so.

As expected, the werewolves allowed him to pass, and he managed to reach his bike without any opposition whatsoever. The pack's sudden unnatural stillness irritated Viktor, but perhaps it was better this way. He needed to get out of there immediately. He needed to leave behind every word spoken today, every glare that caught his eye, each and every moment he spent in the company of his pack.

Climbing on his motorcycle, Viktor took another look back at the gathering of werewolves he'd just abandoned. Jessica seemed smug, and his father still seethed, but Flame's sad expression somehow reached Viktor. Shaking his head, he looked away from his former friend and started the bike, abandoning the forest and the rough terrain in favor of the concrete marking human civilization.

* * * *

"I'm sick of this, Jamari. I want out." Kai glared at Jamari as the other assassin calmly sat on his leather chair and smirked.

"Really, little brother?" Jamari arched a dark brow. "You want out?"

Jamari's voice sounded almost friendly, but his eyes held the threat that hung over Kai's head all his life. The Assassin Guild

treated everyone with cruelty, not only its targets, but also its members. They didn't take betrayal or rebellion well. Kai no longer wanted to be afraid. "I don't want to do this anymore."

As expected, Jamari didn't delay in showing his true colors. In an instant, his strong body pinned Kai's to the wall, and he hissed in Kai's ear. "I always knew you were weak. Weak and uselesssssss."

Kai could feel the cold anger radiating from the other assassin and he wondered if the moment of his death had finally come. Jamari killed many of their kind, and Kai always suspected that he would one day meet the same fate. He'd futilely tried to find a way to escape the guild, but in the end, he'd given up. He was, and had always been, alone. It didn't matter anymore.

The pressure on his windpipe suddenly disappeared, and Jamari dropped him unceremoniously on the floor. Before Kai could recover, Jamari returned to his place behind the desk.

"All right," Jamari said as he sat down. "I agree with your proposal."

Kai suppressed a gasp at the astonishing answer. He never actually expected that Jamari would grant his request, but he knew better than to trust his half-brother. There had to be a catch.

As Kai suspected, Jamari continued to speak. "On one condition." Jamari gave Kai a wicked look, a wide smile on his ebony face. "One last job."

Kai frowned at his half-brother. What did Jamari have in mind now? He analyzed his brother with suspicion and reluctantly nodded. "Show me."

Jamari grinned and retrieved a black envelope, throwing it on the table in Kai's reach. "Viktor Petrovic. Son of the Alpha of the local werewolf pack. He needs to be dealt with quickly and efficiently. However, an outright attack would not be indicated in this case. We need to proceed with caution."

Kai took the files, swiftly browsing through the notes on the particulars of his target. He could see why Jamari would prefer a more

subtle approach to the assassination. In spite of his assassination talents, Jamari couldn't really blend in with the environment and had zero skills of undercover work. Werewolves in general were known for their fighting skills, but they did have a weakness: their libido. This particular wolf seemed an extraordinary opponent, but his peculiar sexual orientation could be exploited as a lethal vulnerability. The best way to get to him would be seduction, the field where Kai excelled.

Kai flipped through the pages of the file, taking in all the details of the job. He felt sick to the stomach at the idea of having to kill again, but if it gave him a chance of getting rid of this life forever, he'd do it. His frown deepened as he realized that the contents of the file didn't help him prepare for the job much. Other than the identity, a brief physical description, expected strengths, and the general habits of the target, it was pretty much useless. It didn't even contain images of the werewolf to be killed.

Kai stole a glance at the other assassin, confused. "Pictures?"

"We don't have any." Jamari just shrugged. "We've just received the job and the information."

Kai sighed, acknowledging the fact that he wouldn't get his freedom for a while now. He couldn't go ahead with the job armed with only the succinct information in the file. *Damn it!* With a frustrated sigh, he threw the file back on the desk.

"I'll need time to prepare, to infiltrate the environment, to—"

"You'll do it tonight," Jamari interrupted.

Kai almost gaped at his brother. The information in the file didn't give him a complete picture of the target, and it hadn't even been double checked. In the case of such a delicate operation, this was the recipe for disaster.

"You can't be serious. Jamari, you know better than—"

The moment these words escaped his lips, Kai found himself pinned against the table face down, immobilized for the second time that day. It felt humiliating, and Kai hated himself for not fighting

back. Behind him, Jamari gave a dark chuckle and whispered, “Oh, I’m serious, Kaiden. I’m actually being nice with you today, you little slut. You’ll do what I tell you to or else...”

Jamari’s strong hand squeezed Kai’s hip, and Kai winced in pain, fighting to remain still. Even on Jamari’s good days, Kai preferred not to cross him. Actually, he always tried not to cross his half-brother. Nothing good could ever come out of Jamari’s anger.

“All right, brother,” Kai said in his most obedient tone. “It will be done.”

“Good boy.” Jamari let him go and petted him on the head like he was a good dog. Kai smoothed his clothing and met Jamari’s eyes again. “Thank you for your trust. I will not let you down.” He gritted his teeth, struggling to keep his anger and hatred from showing on his face.

Jamari practically beamed at him, and the smile made him look even crueler. “I know you won’t. Now go.”

Kai turned his back on his half-brother and made for the door, only to be stopped half way by Jamari’s final words. “Remember, you need to do it tonight to get your prize.”

Kai didn’t answer, knowing his brother didn’t expect him to. He exited the room and took a deep breath. One last kill. One last kill and this would all be over.

* * * *

As Viktor entered the urban area, he welcomed the lights and deafening sounds, all bustling with human life. He needed to get his mind off Flame, his father and the pack, and thankfully, he knew exactly where to go to achieve this purpose.

Rook Valley had long ago ceased to be the quaint, small American town. The nearby shifter packs made it prosperous, and the humans naturally flocked to money. Because of that, Rook Valley

grew from a small community into an actual city. Luckily, influences of shifter leaders pretty much kept it from the public eye.

The presence of the humans would have been unpleasant if not for the advantages stemming from becoming one with the crowd. Now, Viktor could actually be himself for a change, without worrying the local florist would come running to his father. He could actually find people with the same interests and desires they weren't afraid to show.

Impatient, Viktor revved the engine and turned up the speed, reveling in the feel of the wind blowing through his white hair as he effectively dodged vehicles in motion and ignored the angry horns that sounded when the motorcycle ran through traffic lights. Due to his outrageous speed, he soon arrived to his destination. Viktor grinned in satisfaction. His favorite club was private, inconspicuous, and best of all, gay. From the outside, it looked like a perfectly common building, but Viktor knew better. Here, he could indulge himself in male flesh all night long, without risking detection by fellow members of the pack. Here, he could find the forgetfulness he so badly needed.

Studiously ignoring the mocking face of the full moon, Viktor made his way to the entrance and sauntered past the guards, who didn't even attempt to check his ID. As he walked in, the excitement of seeing the swirling bodies on the dance floor and smelling the scent of male arousal that permeated the air did wonders for his mood. Viktor felt the dancers' appraising looks slide over him like an invisible caress, but paid them no heed. Every time he came to the club, the same thing happened. He didn't even have to bother to look for someone to sate his lust. They all flocked to him, willing—no, begging—to do whatever he pleased.

Heading towards the bar, Viktor ordered a drink and sat down in a more secluded corner, surveying the crowd. Even under normal circumstances, the club overflowed with patrons, but tonight seemed to be a particularly good night. Scantly-clad males flooded the dance

floor, most of them engaged in dancing that bore a significant resemblance to hard core sex.

Naturally, the sight did not leave Viktor unaffected. A creature of instinct, his inner beast wanted to feast on the prey spread out before him. However, Viktor knew that showing interest would be pointless. Humans felt an unnatural attraction to the danger Viktor represented, requiring little effort from him when it came to getting what he wanted. This made his conquests empty, but what could he do? Willing prey didn't deserve a true hunt.

Viktor reined his wolf in and, abandoning his drink, proceeded to fish a cigarette pack from his jacket. Lighting a cigarette, Viktor reveled in the soft feel of the smoke inside his lungs. Considering the fact that any hallucinogen or alcoholic substances didn't really affect werewolves, this was more a habit than an actual vice. Like the club, it made him forget, made him feel more human.

Viktor knew that he would probably be approached before he managed to properly finish his first smoke, and his suspicion proved to be correct. While extinguishing his cigarette stump, his keen hearing managed to pick up the sound of approaching footsteps, even over the noise in the club. The beast within stirred again, but Viktor ignored both it and the blond man sitting down beside him. Staring impassively at the crowd, he disregarded his new companion entirely, waiting. His patience was soon rewarded as the human spoke. "Ummm...I've just arrived and I couldn't help but notice you. I don't suppose you're here alone?"

Lifting the glass before him, Viktor pretended to focus on his drink, hiding his smile behind the glass. He didn't know whether to feel amused or bored by the human's tone. The lousy attempt at coyness tried to combine shyness with seduction. Viktor inwardly shrugged. This human would be as good as any.

Placing the glass back down on the counter, Viktor turned towards the blond human with a smile. He looked cute, in a twinkish kind of way, and his entire body radiated desire. Viktor licked his lips. Yes,

most definitely, this human would do. "Actually, I am. Care to join me?" He patted his lap, grinning suggestively at the human.

The human grinned back, slipping seductively into Viktor's lap. He intentionally squirmed a little, rubbing his ass against the werewolf's crotch. Viktor growled and pulled the daring human towards him, mashing their lips together. He ravaged the human's mouth, swallowing moans and whimpers with savage satisfaction.

* * * *

Kai had initially felt irritated upon being forced to go on this job on so little information. However, the moment Kai's eyes landed on his target for the first time, he knew he need not have worried. The brief description in the file didn't do him justice. Viktor's white hair reminded Kai of pure snow and his ice blue eyes shone like a cold flame in the darkness. He walked like he owned the world, his gait arrogant and seductive. He was a walking wet dream, the image of power and sex wrapped in one incredible package. Unsurprisingly, the humans seemed drawn to the werewolf like flies, and Kai himself could feel the attraction. He swallowed, fighting back the overpowering feeling of lust. He really wished the file had provided him with pictures. They could have at least prepared him for the perfection of Viktor Petrovic.

Kai shook himself and pushed back the lust that clouded his mind. He needed a clear head if he wanted to be successful in this. From his hidden position in the back of the club, Kai carefully watched as his target toyed with a little insignificant human and made a face. The heat of aroused bodies almost made him want to hurl. He hated coming to such places, where his sensitive eyesight could see more than he actually wanted to.

He shook his head at the shameless display and forced his eyes to turn human. He would have thought that one such as Viktor Petrovic would have better taste. For some reason, the image of the stupid

twink all over Viktor irritated Kai, and he was startled to realize that he would feel no remorse at eliminating the human. His fangs lowered, and he imagined sinking them into the man's neck, pouring venom into the young body of his prey until it went limp.

Kai eliminated the disturbing, and yet satisfying, thought from his mind. He didn't have any issues with the human, and at any rate, he didn't have the right to judge the tastes of others. Soon, it wouldn't even matter. Soon the arms of the werewolf would not be able to circle anyone's waist, his lips would become cold, and his heart would stop beating. Kai tried to ignore the pang of sadness that the thought brought to his heart. He would do this one last job, and then, he could be free. The rest didn't matter.

* * * *

When the kiss broke, Viktor looked at the blond man, noting the lust-filled expression. His body responded to that lust, but Viktor felt reluctant to follow up on the attraction. He knew exactly why.

Recently, he had become increasingly aware of the solitude that surrounded him. All around him he saw people that found mates—humans, shifters, and even vampires. The night hid the secrets of a thousand lovers everywhere he turned. And Viktor had no one, no family, no friends, not a single person to give him a smile or a friendly welcome, or to worry about him when he went on a dangerous expedition, or to care if he lived or died. Flame's mating with Jessica and his friend's ultimate betrayal, deprived him of the only person he cared for.

He futilely tried to forget about these treacherous feelings by losing himself in insignificant flings. Every night he went to the club and ended up in bed with a complete stranger whom he promptly cast out afterwards. He used, and he was used in return. For a little while, it meant he could forget and pretend, but was this what he really needed?

Suddenly feeling disgusted with himself, Viktor pushed the man in his lap aside. He needed to get away. He needed to breathe. Ignoring the human clinging to his arm, he got up to leave, only to then pause when a tantalizing scent tickled at his senses. Viktor's heart started to beat faster, his cock hardening again. Turning, he scanned the crowd, seeking to detect the source of the scent. It took a bit of effort, seeing as the scent of drugs, sweat, arousal, and blood filled the club. Not to be deterred, he continued to look around, finally finding what he searched when he met the most amazing eyes he'd ever seen in his life. Mate. His mate. No, it couldn't be.

He thought the human said something, but he got too caught up in those beautiful eyes to care. He'd never seen such color in his entire life, swirling orbs of gold and onyx. In the dim light of the club, they seemed to glow with an inhuman light, a dangerous glint that drew him like a moth to a flame. Heart pounding with excitement, Viktor took in the sinful form of his mate's slender but toned body, hugged by leather that clung to him like a second skin. The stranger's long, flowing hair glinted with a peculiar rusty shade, and his full lips twisted in a suggestive smile. His patrician nose gave those flawless features an aristocratic look. Viktor drank in the vision and knew without a doubt that he'd found his destiny.

* * * *

For some reason, Viktor abandoned his human plaything and got up, apparently intending to leave. Kai felt a little surprised at the sudden twist. He squashed the glimmer of satisfaction caused by the twink's failure and considered his approach. He didn't want to appear pushy or desperate like the human, but the werewolf seemed to be on his way out. Kai needed to make sure Viktor saw him. Once he did, leaving would be the last thing on the werewolf's mind.

Smiling to himself, Kai proceeded with his plan, stepping out of the darkness that shielded him from sight. He could barely contain his

surprise when the werewolf's eyes found him. He had never been detected so easily before. Kai inwardly frowned. How did the werewolf sense him? Luckily, years of training helped him keep his displeasure off his face and set his work mask into place. He doubted Viktor knew or suspected his identity. Perhaps Viktor just scented another supernatural creature. Despite the fact that the assassin guild prided itself on eliminating the chances of such a thing happening, a small margin of error always existed.

Giving the other man his best come-hither look, Kai leaned against the wall and patiently waited. The werewolf looked at him as if Kai were the prey and not the other way around. Too bad Viktor would die today. He was a truly handsome specimen. As expected, he didn't have to wait long. Keeping his eyes on Kai, Viktor started to make his way across the club, pushing violently through the crowd. With another seductive look, Kai melted back into the shadows from where he'd emerged.

* * * *

When he finally managed to free himself of the crowd, Viktor anxiously sought out his mate, desperate to know where he'd gone. He couldn't believe it. His mate had been right there under his very nose, and Viktor lost him. How was that possible? Feeling more than a little desperate, Viktor carefully scanned the entire club, hoping to catch a glimpse of his mate's rusty hair. His gaze moved past the throng of writhing bodies on the dance floor, over the lounging area's leather couches and to the bar. Viktor could barely contain his surprise when he saw his mate seated close to where he himself had been moments earlier. When did he manage to get there?

Inwardly shrugging, Viktor decided that it didn't really matter how his mate ended up sitting at the bar. After all, it took Viktor a while to navigate through the crowd and there could be many other ways to get across the club. Routes he, perhaps, didn't know of, even

if he visited the club regularly. Eye on the proverbial prize, Viktor made his way back to the bar and towards his mate's seated form.

His mate ordered a drink and seemed lost in thought, ignoring the looks he received from more than one of the clubbers. His mate seemed, in fact, completely oblivious to a certain more daring human, already making his way towards him, lustful intent clear in his gait. Viktor directed a glare at the approaching human. The man froze in midstride and backed away slowly, reconsidering his actions. Smart man. Viktor did not share well.

Competition safely eliminated, Viktor carefully approached his mate, suddenly feeling nervous. "Hi," he began, wincing at how lame the plain greeting seemed.

The mysterious man didn't acknowledge him at first, and Viktor thought that he probably missed the greeting due to the volume of the music in the club. Steeling his resolve, he sat down at the bar, next to his mate and repeated his greeting, raising his voice as he did so. "Hi."

This time, the stranger lifted his eyes, meeting Viktor's gaze curiously. "Hello," he answered simply. His voice sounded like silk over steel, strong, yet soft. It embraced him seductively, wrapping him in a cocoon as mist would, numbing him to everything else. Now that they finally sat beside one another, Viktor could smell his mate's scent once more, the unique mixture intoxicating as it invaded his senses, driving him subtly insane. His mate, however, seemed reluctant to deal with him, and the wolf inside of him whined in distress, confused as to what his next course of action should be.

Viktor felt the overwhelming urge to curl into his mate's side in an attempt to drive away whatever thoughts plagued his mate. He longed to kiss him and possess him until Viktor himself remained the only thing in his mate's mind. "Can I buy you a drink?" he offered instead, struggling to keep the feral lust he felt inside. This was not the pack, and his mate would not understand or appreciate typical werewolf behavior. He needed to remember that.

“I already have a drink,” the man said, pointing to the glass in front of him.

Viktor swallowed, suddenly feeling incredibly inadequate. The whirlpool of emotions and sensations swirling around inside him effectively erased all possibility of coherence. The wolf inside started to pace, acutely feeling the intrinsic rejection in his mate’s words. But Viktor wouldn’t give up so easily. “Can I join you then?” he asked .

The beautiful stranger just shrugged. “It’s a free world. Suit yourself.”

A long silence stretched between them, the music coming from the dance floor loud enough so as not to make it awkward. Viktor’s mind raced as he struggled to find something, anything to help his mate overcome his concerns, thus drawing the man closer to him. It was so much easier for the wolf. Animals innately knew what they needed. They didn’t need to use pretense, nor did they feel constricted by the rules that governed a society so different from their own.

Normally, in the pack, Viktor would be nuzzling his mate’s neck by now, maybe even sucking a mating mark on it. The wolf growled in satisfaction at the thought, and Viktor scooted a bit closer to his mate, his hand travelling across the bar to gently trace small patterns across his mate’s leather-clad arm. He wasn’t in the pack, but if he played his cards right, he’d be able to do all these things to his mate, regardless. “So...I haven’t seen you around here too much.”

Viktor’s mate absently played with his drink, fiddling with the rim of the glass. For a second, Viktor actually thought he would be ignored. “I don’t come here a lot. What about you?” The beautiful stranger smiled mysteriously. “Weren’t you with someone already?” he asked, arching a perfect brow.

Viktor suppressed the urge to blush at the reference to his earlier escapade. “Not really,” he managed to respond. “I just...”

“That’s all right. I understand.” The stranger’s smile brightened, pulling Viktor’s thoughts right back into the gutter as he contemplated how those lips would look wrapped around his cock. He snapped back

to reality, only to realize his mate was introducing himself. “Hi. I’m Kaiden Hearne. I suppose since we’re trying to be friendly, you can call me Kai. Before you buy me that drink, maybe you will tell me your name too?”

Viktor took hold of his mate’s hand and squeezed it, thankful even for that brief moment of contact. He held on to his mate’s palm a bit longer than necessary, reveling in the feel of Kai’s body and noted that his mate’s skin felt peculiarly cool. In truth, he didn’t pay much attention to that particular fact. He felt more than a little flustered by his mate’s remark. He started off their conversation entirely on the wrong foot—or paw, as fate would have it. He didn’t normally introduce himself to the men he picked up. They had no interest in each other’s identities, only in getting off. But, in the case of his mate, Viktor needed to concentrate and think with his head, not his dick. “I’m Viktor. Viktor Petrovic.”

Kai smiled again and proceeded to free his palm from Viktor’s grip, much to the werewolf’s regret. His mate was unlike anyone he’d ever met. Something about him spoke of an aloofness, a perceived superiority between him and the rest of the world. And yet, hidden beneath that detached, cold exterior, Viktor felt so much restrained passion. “Can I ask you a question, Viktor Petrovic?” Kai inquired, that same inscrutable smile on his face.

Viktor leaned against the bar, studying his mate’s elegant profile and schooled his features into cool nonchalance, despite the fact that he felt anything but calm. His insides burned with need, the desire to claim his mate giving unprecedented power to Viktor’s wolf. “Ask away,” Viktor managed to answer, struggling to keep his inner battle from showing on his face.

Kai nodded, those eerie black-gold eyes looking almost magical as they focused on the werewolf’s face. “Why did you refuse blondie’s offer?”

Viktor felt both startled and aroused by the straightforward manner of the inquiry. He half contemplated using a smooth reply to

complement his cool image, but in the end, decided against it. He didn't think he managed to do a very convincing job of being suave, anyway. Besides, lying to his mate wouldn't be a good basis for a future relationship.

Despite this, Viktor couldn't just come out and proclaim ownership over Kai's life. It didn't automatically grant him rights on Kai's person, and he needed to respect that. The wolf inside of him wanted to take possession of his mate and mark Kai as his. However, Viktor was not just a wolf. He was also a person, and he refused to allow the animal inside to think in his stead.

Viktor dug his emerging claws into the flesh of his palms, fighting to push back the beast, instead forcing himself to calmly answer Kai's question. "I didn't want what he offered," he finally managed to croak out.

Kai arched a brow, disbelief clear in his expression. "Oh? What is it that you want then?"

Viktor half wanted to give Kai the pure honest truth and say, "You. I want you." He felt the deep primal need to merge their bodies into one, in order to cement the bond that already existed between them. That bond urged him to approach Kai, as the wolf could tell his mate felt the same attraction Viktor did. However, it also dictated that he needed to tread carefully. It told him Kai was a special, but fragile, person. Something inside, that golden thread that connected them together, held him back, and Viktor opted for a half truth that wouldn't scare Kai away. "Someone special."

Kai's peculiar eyes twinkled with an indescribable emotion, and he nodded, looking away from Viktor's scrutiny. The wolf immediately sensed that his mate was distressed for some reason and whined, the need to comfort and the need to couple merging into a single, all-encompassing emotion. Viktor reached for Kai's hand, caressing it gently. "Is everything all right?" he asked, both his human and his animal sides concerned.

“Yes. Everything is fine,” Kai answered snappishly, glaring at the liquid in his glass.

Kai's attitude changed in mere seconds, shifting before Viktor's very eyes. “I'm sorry. Thank you for your concern. You're sweet.” Kai passed a cool hand over Viktor's cheek, a gentle caress that made Viktor's wolf want to wag his tail and Viktor the human hard as a rock.

“What do you say we take this someplace else?” Kai whispered in his ear. The seductive whisper froze the protest Viktor wanted to make in his throat. He nodded, the heat inside of him too strong for him to counter now.

“Good. I'll go out first. Wait a few minutes and then meet me in the back.” With those final instructions still echoing between them, Kai placed a bill on the counter in payment for his drink. Viktor remained dead still when his mate pressed the smallest of kisses to his lips and then turned around, melting into the crowd.

Chapter Two

As he headed towards the back door of the club, Kai struggled to focus on the task ahead. He couldn't think about how breathtaking Viktor looked, about how perfect his touch felt on Kai's hand.

He refused to dwell on foolish thoughts and wishes. Viktor couldn't melt the perpetual ice in his heart. Even if Kai were willing to give Viktor a chance, the fact remained that Viktor needed to die, and by Kai's hand. No amount of useless hoping could change that.

Struggling to shut down that part that screamed at him to stop this insanity, Kai exited the club and leaned against a wall to wait. His target would soon come after him, of that he was certain. Viktor would have fucked him on a club table if he thought he could get away with it. He would not linger much just because Kai told him to be discrete.

Kai dug his nails into his palms as a flash of Viktor's flustered smile passed before his eyes. Could he really do this? He didn't even know if Jamari would keep his word and allow him to leave the Guild. Perhaps it would be all for naught. Why would his half-brother suddenly accept his wishes, when all their lives they'd been enemies?

In truth, Kai thought that Jamari didn't actually want him in the Guild. Since they were both sons of the Guild leader, they both had the right to take over once their father agreed to it or went into hibernation. Normally, assassins refrained from hibernating in winter, but after a certain age, it became much too difficult to withstand the pull of the animal within them. Kai suspected that upon their father's first hibernation, Jamari would try to get rid of the man and take over the Guild. But, if their father died, Kai would also be a candidate for

leadership, and in spite of his size and looks, Kai earned a certain position in the Guild through his skills.

Acknowledging Jamari's plans still didn't help him find a response to his mental dilemma. What should he do about Viktor Petrovic? Could he truly hurt the werewolf? Kai didn't know, and he really didn't want to find out.

* * * *

Viktor tried to follow Kai's instructions, he really did. He even managed to wait one minute on the clock. In the end, there was only so much that the animal within could accept. Right now, the wolf didn't feel very pleased with the prospect of remaining in an establishment filled with disgusting, worthless humans, when he knew a horny, perfect mate waited for him just outside.

He placed a second bill onto the counter, not even giving attention to the more than generous tip he left behind. The hunt for his mate was on.

The club seemed even busier now, suddenly overwhelming Viktor's sensitive senses, a variety of scents and sounds, all clamoring for his attention. Unfazed, he consciously blocked out all the offensive odors, focusing on the traces left by his elusive mate, his body already welcoming the excitement of the hunt. Following the scent, he delved farther into the club, his wolf's hackles rising in silent warning. Something about the direction the scent led him in worried him. Kai told him that he would wait for him out in the back of the club, but why would that be necessary? Why did Kai take off so suddenly and interrupt their conversation?

Alarm bells started to ring in his mind, giving him the distinct impression that danger lay ahead. Even so, Viktor knew he would not back down. Nothing could stop him from going after his mate. Every part of him screamed for Kai's presence, yearning for his touch, drowning out the warning.

Determined, Viktor walked out of the club and into the moonlit night. Caution thrown to the wind, his hungry gaze fell on the form of his mate lying in wait, his leather-clad body leaning against the wall. Viktor took a deep breath, suppressing the urge to jump the other man and ravage him.

“Hey,” Kai whispered softly, licking his lips.

“Hey.” Viktor swallowed, praying for composure. He was so hard it hurt, but he needed to focus on their future relationship, rather than on dealing with his enflamed libido. What did one say when one finds his mate? *Hey, you know what? You're my mate, and we're fated to be together for all our lives. So, wanna fuck?* No, that would never do.

Luckily, Kai saved him from his dilemma. “It’s a beautiful night tonight.”

Viktor agreed with a nod. “Yes, it is.” He took a step forward and caressed the flawless skin of Kai’s cheek. Like Kai’s palm, it was almost unnaturally cool and pale like the moon. “But not as beautiful as you.”

He mentally winced at the terrible cliché, especially when seeing the mirth that twinkled in his mate’s surreal gaze.

“I’ve always had a soft spot for full moons.” Viktor froze at Kai’s softly-spoken words. Could he possibly know about...? Viktor mentally shook his head. Kai couldn’t know about the existence of werewolves. It had to be just a coincidence.

“Is something the matter?” Kai smiled, his expression unreadable. In the light of the moon, it made his skin look marble white, almost surreally pale, his eyes shifting unnaturally. It looked hypnotic, mesmerizing, and it made Viktor’s blood boil and his thoughts scatter to the point of madness. A growl emerged from Viktor’s chest a second before he pushed his mate against the wall, pinning his hands above his head and meshing their lips together.

His mate’s tongue wrapped around Viktor’s in a dance of seduction as they kissed and rubbed against each other, insane with arousal. Oddly, the coolness he’d registered before entirely

disappeared, and Viktor made short work of the other man's leather top, slashing it with his claws and discarding it in one swift movement. Then he feasted on his mate's pink nipples, which instantly perked up and pebbled at his touch. Moaning, Kai arched his back, exposing the pale column of his neck.

"Mmm, nice," Viktor rumbled, reveling in the taste of his mate on his tongue. The animal inside of him became almost feral with lust, and Viktor lost the battle with his other side completely, no longer caring about anything but taking his mate. The wolf needed to mate, needed to possess the body of his other half. There was no more time for conversation, no more time for courtship. His claws deftly removed the rest of the leather outfit hiding that perfect body from sight and granted him access to his hardness. Kai hissed at the touch, moaning. "Oh, yessssss, there! Oh, please!"

Viktor smiled as Kai struggled and writhed in his arms. The beast inside him reveled in Kai's loss of control, in the implicit submission and total surrender. Still holding Kai's hands pinned over his head, he sunk his teeth into Kai's neck, the feeling of marking his mate flooding his senses.

The sizzling heat of Kai's blood almost burned in Viktor's veins. It was the most exhilarating sensation Viktor had ever experienced in his life. As he reveled in Kai's taste, he felt a shift in the air, like something was about to happen. The next thing he knew, Kai sank his own teeth into his neck.

* * * *

As Viktor's mouth devoured his own, Kai tried to comprehend what was happening to him. Snakes weren't creatures of passion and he'd never known that the touch of another could bring him such bliss. He'd always been aware of his powers of seduction, but whenever he lured his prey to their deaths, they had never managed to steal more than a kiss from him. Now, in the arms of the werewolf,

Kai felt like his world melted, the warmth of the werewolf's body turning his cold blood into lava. Somehow he managed to answer, but what came out seemed like a pathetic mockery of his own voice. Was that him, clinging to the werewolf like a slut? Could that be his voice pleading for more, begging for Viktor to touch him? Was he really no better than those idiotic humans?

Suddenly, Kai could see himself from the outside, and the image shamed him. The way he writhed against the werewolf, rubbing against Viktor's body... It wasn't acceptable.

Everything started to fall apart around him. He couldn't allow the werewolf to shake him like this. He didn't come to the club in search of pleasure, but in search of freedom. One last kill and it would all be over. One last kill and he'd be free to start a new life. Yes, he had to do this. As much as he hated the thought, he needed to kill Viktor Petrovic.

Without allowing himself another moment to change his mind, Kai took advantage of Viktor's distraction and struck. It would take but a moment, only a moment, to hold on and allow the venom to slip into his victim's body. Kai's venom held one of the most potent poisons in existence. Just a few drops would easily kill a fully grown adult male.

It was easy, too easy. Viktor didn't even fight it. And maybe for that reason, Kai found himself unable to allow himself to hold on to the bite. Somehow, this thing, this kill, everything about the whole night, was so wrong.

Why did he even feel like this? He'd long ago schooled himself to forgo his conscience when on a job, to put aside his guilt for taking a life. This time, he couldn't do it. He hurt when he realized that even with his change of heart, the venom still entered Viktor's body and started to do its job. He felt the pain of the werewolf's heartbreak like his own. His fangs retracted almost by their own volition, and Kai allowed the limp body of the wolf to slide to the ground.

Seeing Viktor in pain and knowing that he'd been the cause of that pain nearly tore him apart. In that moment, Kai hated himself more than ever. He hated what he was, what he'd always been. He wanted to take everything back, to start the evening all over again and do things differently, but he knew he couldn't. Viktor would never believe him now. He'd lost his chance for love before he even had it.

* * * *

In different circumstances, Viktor would have felt ecstatic about the fact that Kai wanted to mark him, just as he marked Kai. Alas, he felt the bite wound burn, weakness seeping into his body, and he knew that he'd been right to fear danger. Viktor's heart broke as he realized that Kai betrayed him.

As if purposely trying to further the feeling of hurt and betrayal present in Viktor's heart, Kai freed himself from Viktor's grip, easily pushing him aside. As his vision dimmed and his muscles went lax, Viktor found himself unable to fight the separation. Dizzy, he wobbled on his feet, futilely trying to fight off the effects of the peculiar bite. He didn't have a chance. Viktor fell on his knees as it seemed to take over his every limb, leaving him numb and unable to move. Viktor finally understood that somehow, his mate had poisoned him. Kai's touch – the touch he'd desired for so long – would now kill him.

Distantly, Viktor wondered how exactly Kai could do that to him, but it didn't really matter. He couldn't find it in himself to care that he would die when it was his mate that killed him. Every instinct for survival fell into the background, overcome by heartbreak. If Kai wanted him dead, then he'd accept it. It was as simple as that. Kai's indifferent look, just as cold and distant as the moon, already became too much for him to stand, more poisonous than whatever venom entered his blood. Death meant nothing in comparison to the pain crushing his heart, and Viktor wished he could stop feeling altogether.

His wish, however, was not meant to be fulfilled. His senses cleared for but a moment, and Viktor realized that he could once again smell Kai's tantalizing scent and savor the taste of Kai's blood in his mouth. Somewhere in the distance, he thought he heard the rumbling of thunder. The moment passed him by in a flash, and he barely had time to register the numbness starting to disappear when his immune system began to fight the poison, two enemies vying for supremacy over his blood and his existence. The battle between life and death unleashed a new flood of agony within him.

Jolts and jolts of pain tortured Viktor's body until he felt like he was locked within an iron maiden, unable to escape, every second twisting his insides, stealing his air and piercing his flesh with invisible daggers. Viktor gritted his teeth, attempting to suppress the screams born inside his chest. He was unwilling to display further weakness, and he hated the fact that he couldn't hide the unbearable agony.

Just as suddenly as the pain had started, it faded away. His body finally stopped writhing, and helpless as a pup, Viktor collapsed again, boneless, onto the pavement. As it happened in moments of extreme weakness, his human shape blurred and disappeared, leaving only a white wolf behind.

The humiliating feeling of helplessness irked Viktor to no end and he uselessly tried to get on his feet, only to fall back down on the ground mere seconds later, panting. However, all feeling of dismay vanished as if by magic when Kai's gentle hand passed through his fur in a ghostly caress. The sensation made Viktor want to wag his tail, in spite of the weakness.

A soft whisper escaped Kai's lips, echoing a deep and hidden sorrow Viktor could feel as if it were his own. "I'm sorry..."

Suddenly, his own pain didn't matter. Viktor wanted to reassure his mate, to take the sorrow in Kai's voice away, to protect him forever. He didn't get the chance. Kai hastily got up and looked up at the clouds, frowning. Viktor could smell the coming rain in the air,

and he vaguely wondered why a little storm would bother Kai. The thought disappeared from his mind when Viktor caught the scent of another individual.

Viktor's lupine eyes darted to the end of the alley, and the sight of the new arrival pulled a growl from his chest. In wolf form, he couldn't distinguish color, but he didn't need it to realize the danger the stranger represented. Like Kai, he wore a leather outfit hugging his large, muscular body. Where Kai exuded elegance and confidence, this man oozed darkness, threat, and cruel power. The darkness seemed to echo in his outward appearance, as both the man's skin and hair seemed a flawless black. The stranger blended so perfectly into the night, a deadly predator waiting to strike, looming in the shadows in silent anticipation. His cruelly-handsome looks and his virility only contributed to the aura of danger that surrounded him.

"Well, well.... If it isn't little Kaiden." The man gave a little chuckle, but it sounded nothing like genuine amusement. "How is the job going?"

"It's going just fine," Kai said coldly.

"Really?" The man arched a brow towards him. "Hmm...I'd like to check that for myself, if you don't mind."

The stranger stepped farther into the alley, apparently intending to make good on his words by checking on Viktor. Startlingly, Kai halted the other man's approach. "Stay out of this, Jamari! It's none of your business!"

"I don't think so, Kai." The new arrival, Jamari, chuckled. "It's my duty to help my little brother when he needs it, you know?"

"This is my job, not yours!" Kai said, his voice low and threatening.

Heedless of Kai's silent threat, Jamari shrugged and pushed him out of the way. As Jamari approached again, Viktor, instinctively sensing danger, snarled viciously. Jamari arched a dark brow. "Your job, huh? Well, apparently you're not doing it very well. He doesn't look like he's dying to me. Care to explain that?"

Kai didn't even flinch at the accusing tone, but Viktor could easily tell that it was a mask. He seemed as tense as a bow string, but when he spoke, his voice revealed nothing of the turmoil within him. "It's just his body's last stand. He'll be finished soon enough."

Jamari's face darkened, anger and hatred twisting his features. "You know ass well ass I do that thisss isn't sssupposed to happen. Ssstupid boy, can't you do anything right?"

Kai clenched his jaw, the insult seemingly getting to him. "He iss a werewolf. It'sss natural that thingsss are sssomewhat different."

Instinctively, Viktor knew Kai was lying. He felt the effect of the poison starting to disappear. He didn't know why such a thing would happen, but Jamari needed to be kept in the dark. Therefore, Viktor stopped moving. Even on a normal day, Jamari would be a worthy opponent. He would try for a more indirect approach. Maybe take him down by surprise. This way, Kai wouldn't have to explain why the venom wore off.

Viktor forced his body into stillness, faking unconsciousness and ignoring the way Jamari's presence burned into him like a firebrand. The seconds felt like hours as they passed by in silence. Finally, Jamari spoke. "Well, he's out cold, even if he is alive. I suppose the client did specify that we kill him slowly."

"You see? What did I tell you?" Kai scoffed. "Just get out of here already and let me do my job!"

Even if Kai's tone sounded rough, Viktor somehow knew that Kai wanted to deceive Jamari. However, Jamari didn't allow himself to be so easily convinced. "Still, I'd rather kill him now, just to make sure. The client doesn't have to know, right?"

At the proclamation, Viktor opened his eyes, only to observe as Jamari produced a large katana that had been strapped to his back. The blade shone in the moonlight, drawing his gaze like a magnet. Viktor was staring at his death. He just knew it. His body still struggled against the aftermath of the poisoning, and he couldn't possibly expect to win this fight. The knowledge cut him to the core.

He wanted so many things. He wanted to touch Kai again, to hold him, to whisper sweet nothings in his ear as they made love. He wanted to live, to fight and to protect his mate, but apparently he wouldn't get the chance. He would die alone, just as he'd lived.

Suddenly, a hoarse scream pieced the air. "No!" Terror coursed through him as Kai jumped the bigger man, only to be intercepted and thrown aside with ease. He hit the wall of the building hard, sliding down to the ground like a broken doll.

"Ssstupid, idiotic, worthless creature!" Jamari hissed, taking hold of Kai's neck and lifting him off the ground with one powerful arm. "How dare you ssstand in my way? I'll eat you alive and digessst you while you're still breathing, and I'll make him watch! And after I'm done, I'll cut him to little piecesss and throw hisss remainssss to the dogsss!"

Unimpressed by this display of power, Kai glared at Jamari with hatred. A smirk appeared on his lips, and to Viktor's surprise, he head-butted Jamari, causing him to lose focus for a second. Kai's body disappeared, the form of a beautiful taipan appearing in its place.

As he watched the scene unfold, disbelief gripped Viktor's mind. Kai was a snake! Of course! It all fit, the blood temperature, the peculiarly hypnotizing eyes, the poison, the speech pattern. Strangely, somewhere deep inside, this didn't surprise him, not really. Did he know all along? Did he hide the knowledge in a sheltered corner of his mind to avoid the sorrow of being faced with reality? It was very likely. It hurt to realize his mate approached him with the intention to assassinate him, so much so that he didn't even want to acknowledge it. However, the truth remained that three quarters of all snake shifters became assassins of some sort, selling their services to anyone who could pay to have a rival efficiently and quickly disposed of. Whispers in the pack spoke of a specialized Assassins' Guild, although its existence had never been confirmed. Even so, something told Viktor that Kai wasn't like the rest of them. He couldn't be.

Kai's snake form slithered away from Jamari, disappearing into the darkness. However, Jamari didn't give up so easily. "Ssstupid sssslut! You think you can essscape me ssso easily?"

A forked tongue crept out of Jamari's mouth, making him look every bit the snake that he so obviously was. The tongue started darting around left and right, searching for Kai's hiding place.

When a triumphant smile appeared on Jamari's face, Viktor knew Kai had been found. The knowledge gave him strength, and Viktor leapt to his feet, his anger morphing into blood lust as he leaped towards his enemy. Jamari hissed when the wolf's weight landed on his back, Viktor's sharp teeth snapping at his neck, his front paws ripping into his shoulders and hind legs digging into his back. Taking advantage of the surprise, Viktor greedily tore into sensitive tissue, reveling in the sounds of anger and pain his prey made.

Unfortunately, the element of surprise could only give Viktor a momentary advantage as Jamari's strength came into play. Jamari's human form melted into a huge, black king cobra, and the confusing transformation caused Viktor to fall forward, hitting the ground hard. The huge snake raised itself behind him, unblinking eyes staring at him with cruel decisiveness.

The fall barely affected Viktor. He quickly recovered and jumped to his feet, facing Jamari head-on. Viktor's human mind guessed that the cobra reached at least twenty-six feet long and weighed about one hundred pounds. It was seriously abnormal for a cobra, but Viktor supposed that snake shifters couldn't be compared to normal snakes, just like werewolves and their animal equivalents couldn't be compared. It didn't matter. This snake would die this day, and Viktor would kill it for his beloved mate.

Viktor easily disregarded Jamari's threatening hiss and paced in wide circles around the snake, waiting for a moment of carelessness. Just one moment would be enough. He could still taste Jamari's bitter blood in his mouth, and he could imagine himself ripping Jamari's

head from his body. It would be sweet vengeance for daring to attack Kai.

Suddenly, lightning tore through the clouds above, followed a mere breath later by the dark rumble of thunder. Cold rain started to pour, icy hail mixed with drops of rain water. The hail crashed against rooftops and windshields, a force of nature impossible to be denied, denting metal and breaking glass. All around them, the world turned to ice and water as nature unleashed its fury upon the helpless city.

Despite the rain's intensity, Viktor knew he could have easily ignored the storm. He faced many such natural displays, and they stopped fazing him long ago. Even drenched, his white coat still protected him from the downpour. However, his ears detected a hissing sound somewhere behind him, and he instinctively knew that it came from Kai. Viktor looked in the direction of the sound for a second, startled by the sound of his mate's pain. Kai seemed to be trying to find a shelter, but the only thing that qualified was the dumpster at the end of the alley, too far for Kai to reach. Kai tried to slither away and make for the dumpster, but the rain obviously affected him, hail crashing into his lithe body.

Distracted by the sight of his mate's plight, Viktor didn't sense the danger until it was too late. Jamari lunged for him, and before Viktor could dodge, he wrapped his long body around the wolf. In spite of Viktor's heavier weight, he found himself helpless when faced with such an attack. He dropped to the ground littered with ice pellets, rolling his body around, hoping to dislodge it. He awkwardly tried to scratch at the snake, to crash it into the walls, but nothing he did affected Jamari. The powerful body of the reptile slowly squeezed the life out of him, effectively cutting off his breath. Viktor's vision dimmed again, and the sound of the rain and the hail crashing against the concrete seemed to come to him through static. All that hail, all that rain and Kai faced it alone...

Viktor continued to fight, the thought of Kai still helpless in the hail renewing his strength. Inevitably, though, the fight drained out of

him, and he felt his life slip away with the last breath of oxygen in his lungs. Distantly, he thought he could feel Jamari's fangs trying to get to his skin. He was too tired to feel triumph over the fact that Jamari could not bite him because of his coat. He could only think about his beautiful mate, the exquisite creature who risked his life for him and now paid the price. *Forgive me, Kai! Please forgive me...*

* * * *

In his snake form, Kai watched with horror as Viktor fought Jamari. He knew Viktor didn't have a chance against his half-brother. In order to survive, Kai had studied Jamari, and he knew all too well the extent of the abilities Jamari inherited from his parents. Kai had met Jamari's mother, a dark spotted anaconda, and her cruelty surpassed even that of their father, the leader of the Assassin's Guild. With his size from their father and his color and temperament from his mother, Jamari would probably be their next leader. A venomous constrictor. Ideal for the Assassins' Guild.

In that moment, Kai knew Jamari wouldn't live long enough to attain leadership over the Guild. He shifted and took hold of Jamari's large sword. The falling rain and the ice hitting his naked body seemed like something distant now, unimportant when compared to his goal. He could not allow Jamari to hurt Viktor. No matter what, Viktor needed to live.

His bare feet crushed the ice pellets on the ground, sending shivers of numbing cold through his body. He knew that he should probably find some sort of shelter, some way of protecting himself from the weather, but he simply couldn't find it in him to care. With no hesitation, he walked towards the two struggling shifters, carefully judging the scene with a skilled eye. He shifted his eyes and his infrared vision took in the way they moved, anticipating and judging the position. He needed to be careful to not hurt Viktor when aiming for Jamari.

Absorbed in squeezing the life out of his current prey, Jamari didn't see Kai approach. Kai guessed that Jamari tried to steal warmth from Viktor's body, as the cold weather greatly affected snakes his size. However, in his foolishness, he gave Kai the opening he needed to act. The blade swished through the air, and in a swift motion, Jamari was no more. The tight hold of the snake's body around the wolf loosened, and Kai had the time to thank whatever deity watched over them before succumbing to the deadly chill that surrounded him.

Chapter Three

Forgive me Kai...Please forgive me.... Just as this last thought drifted into his mind, Viktor felt the pressure across his windpipe weaken until it disappeared altogether. Immediately, blessed air flooded Viktor's lungs. He was alive. He could save Kai now and everything would be all right. He struggled to discard the weight of the snake, but when he looked up to search for his mate, he witnessed the most unlikely sight ever. Kai stood just inches away, naked in the rain, the bloody katana in his hand, a snake head at his feet. Shock and disbelief morphed into terror as Kai fell to the ground and instantly turned back into his reptilian form.

Viktor forced himself to shift back into his human form. The cold rain chilled his blood, and the hail bruised his naked body, but he didn't care. He lovingly picked up Kai's snake form from the icy concrete and coiled him around his hands and neck, trying to shelter him from the freezing temperature. Kai's rust-colored skin felt cold and clammy to the touch, and Viktor's heart started to beat a thousand miles an hour at the thought that his mate might not survive the ordeal. The rain intensity increased, and Viktor knew Kai needed to be in a dry warm place. The only option would be the club, but how would the staff receive a snake Kai's size inside? It didn't help that shifting forms caused Viktor to be naked as well. The club personnel would probably take him for a lunatic, call the cops, and toss Kai back into the rain or worse. No, he needed something else.

A car! He could probably find several cars in front of the club. Hastening in that direction, Viktor looked towards the club entrance and gaped when he realized that, with the exception of his battered

bike, he could see no vehicles there. The owners probably decided to move them when the rain started. Where could he hide Kai now?

Viktor could feel despair threatening to overwhelm him, when his gaze fell on the dumpster next to him. It wasn't the Ritz, but it could at least provide a dry shelter, so it would be much better than standing in the rain. He didn't have another choice anyway. He only hoped the rain would give way soon, so that he could take Kai to a safer, warmer place.

Without another moment's hesitation, Viktor rushed to the dumpster. As he opened the metallic lid, the sound of an approaching vehicle drew his attention. Holding Kai protectively under the metal, he squinted to get a better view of the car and its driver. It was a silver Chrysler. Viktor knew that car well. Instantly, he realized the identity of the person behind the wheel and the knowledge woke mixed feelings within him. Suspicion, hope, relief, fear, and bitterness. Flame.

As the car drew closer, Viktor took a deep breath, praying for patience and composure. He felt acutely aware of every second that passed, ticking away mercilessly, stealing Kai from him. Viktor knew that his mate's life hung by a thread now. Flame could mean Kai's survival, but if he turned against them.... Viktor could try fighting Flame, but the results would probably be disastrous. Even in the doubtful situation that he would win, the time lost with the fight would probably claim Kai's life. Besides, he didn't want to accept that his friend had changed quite so much. Surely Flame couldn't have anything to do with the assassination attempt.

So Viktor waited. Desperately ignoring the hostile elements of nature, he focused on the approaching car. He didn't know how much time passed when Flame finally pulled over next to the dumpster and hastily opened the door to the passenger seat, gesturing Viktor inside. "Get in!"

Viktor didn't wait for a second invitation. He circled the car and got into the passenger seat, still clutching Kai to his chest. He didn't

completely trust Flame, but taking into account the situation, he didn't have much of a choice. At least the car would be warm and dry, exactly what Kai needed.

At the same time, though, he kept a close watch on Flame, just in case the other werewolf did indeed have malignant intentions. He distantly wished he remembered to take the katana with him. It didn't matter. Either way, he couldn't have carried it with Kai in his arms.

"Drive! My place, now! And hurry!" he snapped at Flame, unable to keep the roughness from his tone.

A frown appeared on Flame's handsome face when he took in Viktor's appearance. Still, the other werewolf didn't question him. The tires of the car shrieked as Flame revved the engine and drove out, crushing the pellets of ice covering the ground with an almost eerie sound.

In spite of the warm temperature in the car, Viktor barely managed to suppress his shivers. As the Chrysler sped down the streets of the city, his wet hair clung to his skin, but he felt too worried about his mate to even think about his own discomfort. "Do you have anything warm, a coat, a blanket, something like that?"

Flame nodded. "In the back," he said, pointing towards a jacket in the back seat. Viktor took the indicated coat and struggled to wrap it around Kai. The material wasn't very thick, and it didn't provide for much protection, especially for a snake Kai's size. True enough, Kai's body couldn't really compare to Jamari's huge weight, but he still seemed to be at least eleven feet long. Even so, the coat was better than nothing. Flame arched a brow and gave him a curious look, but didn't ask. Viktor thanked God for the little miracle, since he didn't think he'd be able to face an interrogation right now.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between the two werewolves, broken only by the sound of the windshield wipers ineffectively fighting the elements. "I overheard something in the pack." Flame suddenly spoke up. "Jessica and the Alpha were talking on the phone

with someone, and I immediately understood they would try to kill you. I came right over.”

Viktor absently nodded, unsure of how to respond. His mind couldn't function properly, clouded by the terror of losing his mate to the elements of nature. As he looked out the passenger window, he saw very little through the curtain of rain. They didn't even seem to be moving. For once, Rook Valley seemed to have suddenly turned into New York. “Go faster,” he growled at his friend.

Flame frowned at him again, but didn't question the order. Viktor felt the Chrysler accelerate. Distantly, he acknowledged the fact that the speed endangered all of them. The rain hadn't stopped, and the hail still battered the metal of the silver car. However, it was a necessary risk. The warmth in the car and the jacket would not be enough to save Kai. Viktor could only hope that his friend was as skilled a driver as he remembered him to be.

The Chrysler skidded on the wet tarmac of the highway, but Flame expertly maneuvered it, controlling the skid to get the vehicle back on track. Even so, when the silver car stopped in front of his house, Viktor almost sighed in relief. Taking a moment to better wrap Kai in Flame's jacket, he exited the car and headed to his apartment. He cursed when he realized that he lost his keys during the attack at the club. Well, fuck it!

Growling, he kicked the door, and it opened with a crash. Even if solid and almost unbreakable for a human, the wood couldn't take the pressure of an angry, fully-grown werewolf. He ignored the alarm that started screeching with his violent entrance and hastened to the bathroom, Kai's snake form still coiled in his arms. He immediately ran the hot water in the shower and entered the cubicle, cradling the unmoving reptile to chest.

The scorching hot water hurt, but also did wonders for Viktor's frozen arms and legs. Yet, despite the high temperature, Viktor's blood still felt like ice in his veins. Kai did not transform back into his human form, and Viktor knew that this was most definitely a bad

thing. Even so, Viktor refused to give up. As the minutes ticked by, he gently bathed Kai in the hot water, hoping against all hope that it would help revive his beautiful mate.

* * * *

Cold.... He was so cold. Somewhere he could feel a warmth he knew and yearned for. But he found himself surrounded by pain, and Kai didn't want to feel it any longer.

He swirled back, lost in a whirlpool of icy darkness. Suddenly, the darkness turning crimson red and the nauseating, yet familiar scent of blood filled his nostrils, coppery liquid invading his lungs, choking him. Flashes of a long forgotten past, of a sorrow buried deep inside invaded his mind and Kai found himself in another place, in a different time.

The two assassins grinned as they dunked the beautiful woman in the cold water. Fat tears flowed liberally on Kai's cheeks as he watched his mother being tortured.

"No, mother, no, please..." He dared a glance at the tall man behind him and pleaded, his eyes in tears. "Father, please, stop them.... You have to stop them!"

The man's black eyes narrowed, and he squeezed the child's shoulder, crushing the still-fragile bones under his strong fingers. Ignoring Kai's cry of pain, he hissed. "Don't call me that, whelp. What makessssssss you believe you can order me around?"

Kai's cries died as Tamara's human form melted into a graceful dark-rust taipan. The assassins laughed as they threw Kai's mother down on the grass. Tamara tried to slither away and hide, but finding safety with so many assassins around would be impossible. All of a sudden, a new person emerged from the group. "Now, father, please. The boy wants us to stop. Surely we can grant him this request."

The Guild leader grinned at his eldest son. "Of course, Jamari. Perhaps that would be wise."

Kai watched his brother, confusion, suspicion, and hope warring inside of him. Jamari spent the better part of his days tormenting him. Why would he try to help save his mother? Why would he interfere?

Tamara must have known this as well, because she instinctively tried to disappear into the greenery. However, her movements looked sluggish and uncoordinated, and she didn't have time to make her escape. One minute Jamari stood by their father's side and the next his muscular form shifted into a huge king cobra. Kai's eyes widened in horror, and he tried to step forward, forgetting all about his father's strong hold on him. The man laughed as Jamari lunged for Tamara, easily cutting her escape.

He could practically hear his mother tell him, "Close your eyes, baby! Don't look." But he did look, and the day was forever branded in his mind as the day when his brother had eaten his mother alive.

The nightmarish images disappeared in the wake of a small sensation of warmth. Kai tried to cling to it, but as much as he wanted to be free of the horror, it seemed that his efforts met with failure and laughter from the ghosts in his past.

Kai refused to be thwarted. He ignored the bouts of laughter and kept grabbing to the thread that seemed to connect him to reality. He needed to live, for himself, for Viktor, for his mother who had died wanting him to be free. The thought empowered Kai, and he fought with all his might to reach the life-giving warmth, until he finally managed to touch it.

* * * *

Viktor's efforts weren't in vain. Little by little, life seemed to return to the cold body in his arms. Finally, the reptilian form blurred entirely, shifting to reveal a very naked Kai. When his mate dazedly opened his eyes and gave Viktor a sleepy smile, the fist clenching Viktor's heart finally loosened, and he beamed back, drinking in the sight of Kai's smile.

Viktor pressed his lips to Kai's, feeling the need to reassure himself that Kai was indeed there, alive and with him. Moaning, Kai wrapped his arms around Viktor's neck, his mouth clinging to Viktor's almost desperately. It was heaven. Kai tasted incredible, intoxicating, like the finest French Merlot, as addictive as cocaine. Viktor wanted this moment to last forever. Alas, he couldn't prolong it for as long as he would have wanted, since they did need to breathe. Reluctantly, Viktor separated their mouths, suppressing the desire to rub his erection against his mate. If one kiss made him so hot, he couldn't even imagine the incredible ecstasy they'd feel when they finally made love. For it would be making love—not sex—so it needed to be in the best conditions. Yes, when they finally made love, Viktor would worship every inch of that sweet body before finally taking Kai in their bed. Their bed...that sounded so beautiful.

Viktor was startled from his dreamy contemplations when Kai finally took in his environment and tensed. Pulling away from Viktor's embrace, he slowly asked, "What? Where am I? Why did you bring me here?"

Viktor's heart fell at the coldness and suspicion in Kai's voice, his dreams suddenly distant illusions. "We're at my house," he answered cautiously. "Don't you remember what happened?"

Kai's eyes met his, and those onyx and golden orbs seemed to try to delve deep into his soul. For one single moment, their souls seemed to connect, and then Kai looked away. Breaking away from Viktor's arms, he whispered brokenly. "I remember. Oh, I remember far too well. The way I seduced, betrayed, and poisoned you. I remember everything."

Gently, Viktor took his mate in his arms again and tilted Kai's chin upward. Kai's tears mixed with the shower water, and his sorrowful expression made Viktor want to protect this beautiful creature forever. "Hush now," he whispered softly. "You saved my life, beautiful. Twice. Stop berating yourself needlessly."

Kai pushed Viktor away and shook his head violently. “No, no. You’re wrong. You’re wrong.”

“I can’t be wrong about you, pretty. You’re my mate.” The words slipped out before Viktor could stop them, and he cursed himself for just blurting out something as important as that.

Kai’s eyes widened, and he shook his head again in denial. “I can’t. I can’t be your mate. I’m a murderer.”

“You’re not,” Viktor said decisively. “If you’d been a cold-blooded assassin, you would have killed me in the alley.”

Kai let out a bitter laugh, looking down again in shame. “In cassse you didn’t notice, I am a cold blooded assssassin. First of all, because I’m a ssssnake, ssssecond of all, because I killed Jamari. I killed my own brother. And I don’t regret it in the leassst.”

Upon hearing the shock apparent in Kai’s tone, Viktor’s heart hurt for his mate. Kai sacrificed so much for him. He’d risked his life, gone against his brother, and almost died in the process. How could Kai not see everything he’d done to save Viktor?

“Look at me. Look at me! Anyone else would have killed me. I would be dead without you. You can’t deny this. Nor can you deny that there is a connection between us. You can feel it, can’t you?” Viktor punctuated the last phrase with kisses, wanting, needing Kai to feel the bond, to accept the fact that he was indeed Viktor’s mate.

Kai licked his lips as if savoring Viktor’s taste in his mouth. “Yessss, I can. Like a thread woven from gold,” he murmured almost dreamily. “It’sss warm and sssso very real...”

Viktor smiled at his mate, finding the peculiar hiss of Kai’s speech endearing. “You see? Why deny something so genuine and beautiful?”

“But I—”

Viktor placed a finger on Kai’s lips, interrupting his protest. He reached down to turn off the still-pouring water. “Stop, just stop. You think too much.” He scooped his mate up, causing Kai to yelp in surprise. “You need to get some rest now.”

“Hey!” Kai squirmed in Viktor’s arms, trying to escape his hold. “Let go! Ssstop! It’s embarrasssing. I can walk by myssself.”

“I never said you couldn’t, beautiful,” Viktor said as he exited the shower and crossed the house towards the bedroom. “But since you’re my mate, I want to carry you. You wouldn’t deny me this pleasure, would you?”

A smile flitted across Kai’s lips, a second before his body tensed again. “There’s sssomeone in the housse,” he hissed, his eyes scanning the hallway in anxiousness.

Viktor just smiled reassuringly at his mate. He’d felt Flame’s presence as well. “Don’t worry. It’s a friend of mine.”

“But...”

Viktor entered the bedroom and gently put his mate in his bed, covering him with the blankets. “Later, pretty. Sleep now. You’ve been through a lot today. I’ll take care of everything.”

Kai actually pouted, but was obviously tired, so he obeyed and relaxed under the covers. Seconds later, his eyelids fluttered closed, and he fell into a deep sleep. Stealing another brief kiss from his mate’s lips, Viktor rummaged through his closet and took out a pair of worn jeans. He needed to talk to Flame. His friend saved Kai’s life. The least Viktor could do was give him an explanation. With a final longing look towards the slumbering form in his bed, Viktor exited the bedroom, closing the door with a soft click.

Flame waited in the living room. He scrutinized the décor at random, apparently as terribly uncomfortable with the whole situation as Viktor. In fact, Viktor felt confused as to why Flame had even helped him. True, they’d been close friends, but that changed after Flame’s mating.

Viktor distantly realized the alarm had at some point stopped screeching and supposed his friend must have silenced it one way or another. He decided to use the topic as a way to break the strained silence. “You stopped the alarm.”

Flame shrugged. "I broke it actually." He paused as his gaze wandered towards the bedroom. "Is everything all right?" Flame finally inquired. .

"He's my mate," Viktor blurted out, fully expecting Flame to be repulsed. After all, Kai was not only a snake, but also male. Even so, Viktor could never, would never, deny the bond between them, no matter what.

Surprisingly, Flame showed no trace of shock or revulsion. "I figured as much. I was wondering, though, what exactly happened."

Torn between excitement, relief, and suspicion, Viktor decided to tell Flame the whole story. In as few words as possible, Viktor summed up the events of the night, telling him everything that happened at the club after his argument with the pack. As he spoke, Viktor watched Flame's expression change in a display of unrestrained emotion. When Viktor finally finished his narration, Flame let out a heartfelt sigh. "I was afraid this might happen. It's the way they always deal with things."

The tone of Flame's voice hinted at a secret sorrow, a pain beyond that of compassion towards a friend. "Flame, what do you mean?"

Another sigh escaped Flame's chest before he answered Viktor's question. "I couldn't tell you this before, Vik, but the whole thing, my supposed mating with Jessica, was all arranged. I fought them all the way, but in the end, they forced me into it by threatening my younger siblings." Flame paused, looking away again, as if in shame. Taking a deep breath, he continued, in a more matter-of-fact tone. "Anyway, the point is that they'll do anything to get what they want. Look, Viktor, you're lucky. You found the person you're meant to be with, the other half of your soul, but you need to get out of here, man. Once the pack finds out about all this..." He left the rest unsaid, the meaning clear.

As his friend spoke, Viktor's hands tightened into fists, anger and shame swirling inside of him. It was all Jessica's fault. He just knew it. Not only did she arrange his assassination, but she practically

forced Flame into mating with her. As the Alpha female, the manipulative bitch always held too much sway in the pack. With his father supporting her, she could do even more damage to the pack. She already managed to break Flame. His friend looked lost, having seemingly abandoned all hope of finding his true mate. And for once, Viktor had no idea what to say or do to make it better.

* * * *

As soon as Viktor left the room, Kai threw the covers off his body and climbed out of the bed. True, the chill of the icy rain still lingered a bit, but he would be fine. He needed to find out more about what was going on. He needed to get a clear picture of his situation.

Kai slipped into the corridor, taking in his environment. Tasteful furniture adorned Viktor's house, and the walls were painted in rich colors and boasted expensive art. Kai sneaked through the hallway, reveling in the feel of the soft carpet under his bare feet. The Guild house had no carpets, nor did it hold paintings or sculptures of any kind. Viktor's house seemed warm, if slightly empty.

Shaking his head at his own musings, Kai felt for Viktor's scent with his tongue. He easily detected Viktor's presence and slowly crept through the corridor until he finally heard the sound of voices.

From his hiding place, Kai listened to Viktor's conversation with his friend. The situation was even worse than he had suspected. And Kai knew that now that he'd killed Jamari, the Guild would come for him.

A bond did indeed exist between him and Viktor. He could feel it. Viktor's touch made him feel complete, warm for the first time in his life. Nevertheless, Viktor remained a werewolf. If what Kai heard was true, Viktor had a duty to his pack. Kai couldn't stay with him, not if he wanted to keep Viktor safe. Kai's presence would only draw the Guild's attention to the pack, and Kai couldn't allow that. Viktor

deserved a safe life, away from the filth and death that Kai's existence represented.

Besides, in spite of their natural connection, they were practically strangers. Kai needed to leave now, before too much of an attachment could be formed. Viktor wouldn't have too much trouble finding someone else, someone who didn't belong to this accursed breed, maybe even a female to give him children. He ignored the pang of hurt he felt when he thought of Viktor being with anyone else but him. Kai had to let Viktor live his life. It would be the right thing to do.

With a heavy heart, Kai slipped back into the bedroom, unseen and unheard and rummaged through Viktor's closet in search of some clothing. If he hurried, he could probably make it before Viktor finished his conversation and returned. He didn't have much time left. Soon, the Guild would come, and by then, Kai needed to be as far away from Viktor as possible.

* * * *

Viktor wanted to say something, anything that could comfort Flame, but he couldn't find the right words. In the end, he settled for asking Flame for another favor. "Can you get rid of that snake's corpse and take care of my bike, please?"

Flame solemnly nodded and got up from the living room couch, obviously taking the request as a hint that he'd worn out his welcome. Heading towards the door, he emphasized his earlier warning, "Remember what I said. You have to hurry."

Viktor gave his friend one last look. "They won't get away with this. I swear it."

Flame didn't acknowledge his promise. Viktor sighed as he heard the door open and close. He was in Flame's debt, not only because Flame saved Kai, but also because of his own unjust accusation. Soon, he'd release his friend from the bonds of the unwanted mating.

His father and Jessica got away with too much, and Viktor would no longer allow it.

Still musing over his problem, Viktor quietly entered the bedroom, hoping to allow Kai a bit of sleep before they had to face their enemies. To his surprise, the covers had been thrown off the bed and his mate no longer slumbered. Instead, Kai busied himself with going through Viktor's wardrobe, buck naked, nude...completely undressed.

Knowing that he couldn't afford to lose his head right now, Viktor struggled to achieve some degree of composure. It wasn't easy. The sight of Kai's naked body made his blood boil in his veins and the sultry sound of his voice didn't help Viktor's intentions at all.

"Hey! I couldn't help but overhear the conversation," Kai said, no trace of repentance in his voice.

Clearing his throat, Viktor managed a breathless answer. "You eavesdropped, you mean."

An elegant shrug accompanied Kai's shrug. "Whatever. As your friend said, we should leave at once, right? So I wanted to pack some stuff for us." A small smile twisted Kai's perfect lips. He stopped messing up the things in the closet to look at Viktor instead.

Kai's almost awed expression pushed Viktor over the edge and dissolved his practical intentions. His glum thoughts slipped from his mind, gone as if they never existed. Growling, Viktor pounced, effectively forcing Kai's body to the floor, trapping it with his own before Kai could even try to wiggle away.

Kai wrapped his arms around Viktor's neck, moaning happily as Viktor plundered his mouth. The wolf reveled in Kai's surrender, and his arousal skyrocketed as he took in the scent and the taste of his mate's need. Kai's skin exuded male desire through every pore, a desire that clouded Viktor's mind to the point where nothing else mattered, just the two of them. The fire of mutual need turned into an all-encompassing flame that threatened to devour both of them.

Viktor's mind simply stopped functioning, overwhelmed by the surge of feelings and sensations Kai awoke in his heart and body. When his mate surrendered to him, wrapping his legs around his waist, he knew he'd found heaven. Without separating their lips, he got up, Kai's pale limbs still wrapped around him. The carpeting was soft, but he didn't want to chance hurting his mate by taking him on the floor. Holding Kai tightly, he somehow made his way to the bed and collapsed on top of the sheets, careful not to crush Kai's body in the process.

When the kiss finally broke, Viktor pulled away from Kai's embrace, suddenly needing to see his mate's body in its entire magnificence. The view made his mouth water. Kai's rusty hair spread out, creating random patterns upon the pillows. The mist of desire clouded his eyes, the gold and onyx seeming to swirl magically. Kai's pretty lips looked swollen from Viktor's kisses, and his face flushed in a telling sign of his arousal. He seemed a wanton and debauched angel. Viktor's angel.

When Viktor's gaze washed over Kai's lower body, he noticed a certain peculiarity on his mate's skin that he hadn't seen before. Around his collarbone and ribs, Kai boasted beautiful golden scales, a reminder of his reptilian nature. They shone in the artificial light of the lamp, and Viktor suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to touch them.

"You don't like them?" Kai whispered shyly. The whisper drew Viktor's attention to Kai's face again, and he felt shocked and angry when he could see a touch of fear and shame shading the arousal from before. Could his mate really not know how beautiful he was? Viktor would not allow that.

"They're beautiful. Like you," he said softly.

To prove his point, Viktor lowered his head, licking across Kai's collarbone until he reached his target. The golden scales were smooth like silk and tasted exquisitely like the essence of Kai. His mate let

out a surprised sound, arching his back. Oh, would you look at that, a sensitive spot.

Viktor tortured the soft scales over and over, licking and nipping. He realized with awe that more scales sprouted down Kai's chest and over those long, smooth legs. The evidence of his mate's passion and surrender made Viktor want to howl in triumph. He wanted to worship Kai's body, teach his mate how beautiful love-making could be. He wanted to prove to Kai that mate bonds could cross any abyss and that Viktor's feelings would never change, no matter what. More than anything, he needed to make Kai see himself through Viktor's eyes and realize how special and amazing he was.

Smiling to himself, Viktor ignored his own painful hard-on and proceeded to torture each and every beautiful scale. The artificial light coming from the lamp made them shine in a myriad of colors that shifted in swirling patterns. Kai begged and pleaded, but Viktor took his time, reveling in the taste of his mate on his tongue.

Down and down he went, lingering over beautiful pink nipples and teasing the naughty belly-button. He licked across Kai's abdomen, following the treasure trail of scales to his prize. Viktor swiped his tongue over his mate's hard cock, drinking in the nectar of Kai's pre-cum with greed.

Viktor didn't give blow jobs often, preferring to be on the receiving end, but with Kai, it felt more amazing than anything he'd ever experienced. He couldn't take all of Kai's dick, as Kai was more than generously endowed. He massaged the rest of his mate's cock with his hand, reaching down to fondle Kai's balls.

As he played with his mate's testicles, he noticed with a gasp that tiny scales the size of small gems now dotted Kai's sack. Mouth watering, he dragged his tongue across the scales surrounding the base of Kai's cock. Kai almost arched off the bed with a choked cry. "Viktor, ssstop! I'm going to come!"

His mate's sweet hissing reached out to Viktor, and he knew he could not put off claiming Kai much longer. "Mmm...and what's so bad about that?"

"I want to...oh...oh, Viktor...when you're inssside me..."

Viktor's blood turned into molten lava as he lost what little composure he'd managed to preserve. His mind became a frenzy of desire, and all he could think about was taking his mate, permanently marking Kai as his own with his seed. He fumbled at the nightstand, sighing in relief when he found the familiar tube of lube.

Viktor coated his fingers with a generous amount of the slick liquid and urged Kai to spread his legs farther. Licking his lips at the sight of Kai's pretty pink hole, he vowed that one of these days he'd worship it with his tongue. Right now, he needed to be inside his mate so badly it hurt.

Viktor slipped his fingers, one by one, inside his mate, thrusting them in and out of Kai's body. Mewling, Kai moved with him, fucking himself on the invading fingers. Finally, Viktor could no longer resist the sight of Kai's passion, and he replaced his fingers with his shaft.

Slowing pushing inside, Viktor cursed at the sensations that overwhelmed him. Kai's passage gripped him tightly, like a fist. Taking a deep breath, he struggled to remain still so that Kai's body would have time to adjust to his length. Kai didn't have such restraint though. He impaled himself on Viktor's manhood, giving him a pleading look.

"Please, now..."

The dam keeping Viktor's desire in check broke, setting his lust free. He growled as his forceful thrusts hit Kai's prostate. His mate's body writhed beneath him, Kai's head thrashing on the pillows. The bed creaked when Viktor increased the pace, pulling incoherent pleas from Kai's mouth.

Viktor continued to thrust into Kai's hungry entrance faster and faster, harder and harder, until pleasure bordered on pain. His mate's

nails dug into his back, and Viktor reveled in the knowledge of having those small half moons upon his skin, marking him. Kai's desperate pleas intensified with each second that passed.

No longer able to withstand the incredible pleasure, Viktor sunk his teeth in his mate's neck. Sweet, hot blood invaded his mouth, and all of the sudden Viktor could feel Kai's emotions passing through his mind's eye. Kai's fears, remorse, regret, and ecstasy entwined with his own, weaving a protective web around them. He saw flashes of a long forgotten past, images telling of a sorrow buried deep inside, memories of pain, hatred, and guilt. A slideshow of memories passed through his mind's eye as his mind connected to that of his mate. Blood and pain, death and hatred, hurt and longing, so much emotion it overwhelmed him. For one incredible moment, flashes of their pasts, feelings of the present, and hopes for their future became one integrated thought as they came together in the most perfect orgasm of Viktor's life.

Breathing hard, Viktor collapsed at his mate's side, pulling Kai close. Emotions and sensations warred in his mind and body, the afterglow of orgasm mixing with the primal delight of having claimed his mate. His wolf rumbled in satisfaction, and Viktor squeezed Kai tighter to his chest. He'd seen Kai's mind, and Kai had seen his. Nothing could possibly separate them now.

The same thing seemed to be on Kai's mind, because he turned into Viktor's embrace and gave him a serious look. "Well, then? Now you know who I am. Do you still—?"

Viktor brushed a lock of hair out of his mate's face and smiled. "Shh.... You don't have to take responsibility for what your family forced you to do."

"But I—"

"You had no choice but to live the way you did, and I'm thankful for it." Viktor softly caressed the nape of Kai's neck in an attempt to calm his mate down.

“How can you say that? I killed people. I...” Kai shook his head violently. “Yes, Jamari and the others pushed me into it, but in the end, it was all me.”

Viktor silenced Kai's words with another kiss. “It doesn't matter, pretty. Not anymore. It's all in the past,” he murmured against Kai's lips as his mate melted into his arms.

Now, more than ever, Viktor wanted to make Kai understand how special he was, but they didn't have time. Sighing, he hugged Kai tightly, wishing they didn't have to face Sasha and the pack, wishing they could just be together freely.

“We still have to deal with the present, don't we?” Kai softly inquired, echoing Viktor's own thoughts.

“Yes, pretty, we do,” Viktor answered briefly. Stealing another peck, he got up from the bed and went to the bathroom. Returning to the bedroom with a wet cloth in hand, he cleaned himself and his mate before retrieving two outfits from his closet. His clothes would probably look ridiculous on Kai's slender frame, but for now, they would have to do.

“Right now, facing my people is impossible,” Kai said with a frown as he swiftly dressed.

Already hating the clothes covering Kai's body, Viktor agreed with a nod. “That's true, pretty. But my father's been a thorn in my side for too long. Once we take over the pack and get rid of the rotten apples, we'll be fine.”

Kai seemed to consider this for a second. The second passed, and Kai beamed, wrapping his slender arms around Viktor's waist and hugging him tight. Yes, everything would be all right as long as they were together and no one would ever be able to part them. No matter what.

Chapter Four

They moved quickly and efficiently. In five minutes, Viktor had managed to secure the most important items in his house: the papers from his safe and a gun he rarely used. Kai also scanned the house and took a small, sharp knife from the kitchen, claiming he preferred to be prepared for anything that might happen.

Heading towards the broken alarm, Viktor attempted to fix it. After several failed attempts, Kai pushed Viktor away, smiling and muttering under his breath about incapable werewolves. It was endearing, and it made Viktor feel a little more optimistic about what he needed to do.

The garage door opened with a smooth sound as they climbed into Viktor's blue truck. In spite of the fact that he preferred his bike as a mode of transport, Viktor did own a Chevrolet Silverado. He knew it wasn't the beautiful sports car preferred by most, but it suited his needs. On this particular occasion, the Silverado proved to be particularly useful, especially seeing as his bike remained out for the count.

Reversing into the cool evening air, he realized the violent torrential rain from earlier faded to a drizzle. As they drove, the dented metal and broken glass of the buildings and vehicles around them reminded Viktor of how cruel nature could be. Ice pellets on the ground crunched beneath the wheels of the car as they drove over them. It was almost unnerving to see how the world practically disappeared under the onslaught of nature. Viktor had too much on his mind to really care about that.

His mate seemed to have lost himself deep in thought again, his eyes distant and vacant. "You were supposed to be my last kill," Kai whispered almost inaudibly. The comment came so out of the blue that Viktor almost jumped in reaction to it.

"Jamari promised me that if I killed you, he'd let me leave the Guild. I have wanted to leave the Guild for so long it seemed like a dream come true, and I was so close to achieving it. But I couldn't do it."

Kai seemed so frustrated it made Viktor's blood chill in his veins. His inner wolf knew that Kai had been a killer and didn't care, but it didn't change the fact that there were still things between them, things that needed to be talked about, sorted out.

"Are you sorry for that?" he whispered, unable to keep the hurt from his voice.

"Of coursse not. How can you ssay that? " Kai's gold-onyx eyes glared at him filled with heated fury, and Viktor's inner wolf stirred, yearning to stoke a fire of an entirely different nature. Before he could act on the impulse surging within him, Kai's shoulders slumped and his voice turned broken and dejected. "I jussst...I jussst wish thingsss were different."

Yet again, Viktor found himself struggling to find words of comfort. Unlike in Flame's case, they somehow came, flowing from the love he felt for his mate. "Kai, it's all right. We're together now. I won't ever—"

"No! I'm not sssorry I killed him, Viktor. He murdered my mother and ate her alive when I wasss only ten. Did you know that? But now that Jamari isss dead by my hand, the whole Asssassinsss' Guild will go againsst usss."

Viktor suppressed a shudder, fighting the images brought on by Kai's little speech. What the hell had his poor mate been through? He glanced away from the road and stole a small kiss from Kai's sweet mouth. "We'll find a way, pretty," he murmured against Kai's lips. "You'll see. Let's just tackle one problem at a time, all right?"

Kai turned his surreal black and gold eyes on him and smiled gently. “Yes. One problem at a time.”

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Even as he smiled at his mate, Kai knew Viktor was being naïve. Problems didn’t disappear just because you willed them away. Things wouldn’t be all right if you simply told yourself they would be. Viktor would soon see that for himself.

Kai hated lying to Viktor, but he had no other choice. He wanted to help Viktor ensure his position in the pack and then he could disappear and leave Viktor’s life forever. He hated the thought, but in the end, it would be in Viktor’s best interest. He would treasure his memories with his mate forever. Memories. A few hours together, one night of love, a few stolen moments of passion never again to be experienced. Perhaps Viktor would even believe their connection had only been a lie, that Kai wasn’t even his true mate.

Something inside Kai rebelled against the thought. He wanted Viktor to know how he felt, to at least acknowledge the fact that Kai did indeed care about him. It was foolish and immature, but Kai couldn’t help it.

“Viktor?”

“Yes, pretty.” Viktor looked away from the road to give him a concerned look. “What’s wrong?”

Kai opened his mouth to finish his confessions, but found that he could not. “Nothing,” he said instead. Declarations of love would be pointless. The end result would be the same and digging deeper into emotions could only make the heartache worse. He gave Viktor another small smile and concentrated on just taking in his mate’s presence. He would dwell on the pain of separation later. For now, he would just live these few hours he still had at Viktor’s side and ensure his mate found his rightful place in his pack. He would worry about the rest later.

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The rest of the journey was silent, the city fading as they reached the edge of it, heading towards the grove. At some point along the way, Kai leaned his head against Viktor's shoulder, his pale hands tracing invisible patterns on Viktor's thighs. Viktor took advantage of Kai's closeness to sneak light soft kisses onto his skin, still marveling at how cool it felt beneath his touch. It was a reminder of the difference between them, a reminder of the many things they still needed to fight. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the fact that they were together. Besides, he looked forward to making Kai warm.

All too soon, they arrived at the edge of the forest that shielded the pack land. Viktor didn't know if his father would still be there. Taking into account the sudden rain, he suspected his pack had probably opted to shift and find shelter somewhere in the neighboring caves. Such places were abundant in the forest, and Viktor hoped he wouldn't have too great a difficulty getting the pack together. He needed to have everyone present to confront his father.

Kai's voice interrupted his train of thought. "It's really beautiful here," he noted as they climbed out of the vehicle.

Viktor nodded, a smile spreading on his face. "It is. I love to spend time around here, alone, when the rest of the pack isn't around."

Kai grinned cheekily at him. "Alone until now."

Viktor leaned over to steal a kiss. "Yes. Until now." Reluctantly separating their bodies, he made a conscious effort to focus on the issue at hand. "It's this way." He pointed in the direction of their meeting grove, gesturing for his mate to follow. Kai did, moving soundlessly behind him. Viktor felt grateful to know that his mate could defend himself if need be.

They remained cautiously silent after that, knowing that the area could be teeming with enemies. Viktor stopped when he heard sudden movement coming from the direction of the grove.

A black wolf emerged from the bushes, fur stained with blood, bearing signs of violence. Kai tensed, readying himself for attack, but Viktor shook his head in denial. Viktor would know this black wolf anywhere and this was not an enemy.

As expected, the black wolf shifted, the magnificent animal gradually turning into a tall, muscular African American man. Viktor frowned at the sight of the wounds covering Flame's body. He had a sinking suspicion that he knew what caused them.

Before he could ask, Flame started to speak. "Viktor, they know. They know you escaped. Somehow they found out I helped you."

Viktor felt anger rise in his chest at the confirmation of his suspicion. "Not to worry," he answered, his voice a low growl. "They won't be a concern for much longer."

A gentle hand on his shoulder stopped him in his tracks. "Viktor, they'll be expecting you to come," Kai pointed out in protest. "It's too dangerous!"

"I don't care," Viktor snapped. "This ends now." The werewolf winced at the shadow of hurt that passed through his mate's eyes. He took Kai's hand, squeezing it gently. "I have to do this. For me, for us, for Flame, and for the pack. Please, beautiful..."

Kai nodded miserably. "Okay, then. But I'm going with you."

They walked in silence, back the way Flame had come. The black werewolf joined them on their path, thankfully keeping any comments regarding Viktor's decision to himself. Viktor only hoped he'd made the right choice and wasn't leading them all to certain death.

All too soon, Viktor heard the familiar sound of wolf paws against the forest floor. The sound stopped as the two groups met. The pack of werewolves—his pack—shifted one by one into human form, giving the trio looks that varied from outright disdain, to fright and pity.

“So, the prodigal son returns,” Sasha noted, a smug smile on his lips. “I see you’ve taken to hanging out with rogue assassins.”

“And I would wonder, Sssasha Petrovic, how you would know that I am assassassin in the firsst place,” Kai hissed at the Alpha before Viktor even had a chance to answer.

Kai looked completely cool and composed. However, Viktor could read Kai’s anger in his demeanor and voice. He suppressed a grin, pride swelling in his chest at the evidence of his mate’s loyalty and strength. Even so, he knew that this was his fight, and he couldn’t allow Kai to interfere.

“Let it be known this day that my father, together with Jessica, arranged my assassination in the most dishonorable of manners,” he boomed, his voice so loud in the silence of the forest it seemed almost deafening. “I only managed to defeat his vile ploy with my mate’s help. This stops here, now!”

No one even attempted to challenge his claim. Viktor had no reason to invent such a terrible fact, and they all knew it. Sasha himself didn’t even try to deny it. Instead, he spat at Viktor’s feet and proceeded to point out the connection between him and Kai. “Viktor has shamed the pack! You heard it yourself. He is mated with this man, with this thing. We cannot bear this abomination.”

Sasha’s assessment of their relationship apparently bothered Kai, because he immediately took hold of Viktor’s hand. “What is it that bothers you?” Kai slyly asked. “The fact that I am male or the fact that I am a snake? Or perhaps you are simply jealous at your son’s good fortune?” He grinned as he plastered his body to Viktor’s side. Viktor shuddered as he felt a hint of a forked tongue playing on his skin. He knew it was just a game, something Kai did on purpose to bother Sasha. Still, that didn’t mean he himself was not affected by it. He fought to keep a straight face, to maintain control over the beast that urged him to take possession of his mate.

Kai's little show actually worked. Sasha took a deep breath, seemingly unprepared for Kai's defiance of him. "You little...I'll take great pleasure in skinning you alive."

Kai just laughed at the Alpha's anger. "Perhaps you think you are a better fighter than me, then..." Kai licked his lips, a hint of fang shining in the moonlight. "I will take great pleasure in showing you how mistaken you are."

Viktor shook his head in his mate's direction. This was getting out of hand. Kai could handle himself in battle, but the fact remained that Viktor needed to deal with his father. "No! This is my fight, Kai!" Turning his attention to Sasha, he smiled crookedly and asked, "Isn't that right, father? Isn't it high time that we settled this?"

Sasha scowled, apparently not thrilled with the idea of facing Viktor in a fair fight. In an instant, his expression immediately shifted to carefully-engineered disdain. "I don't know what you're talking about. You are not worthy of such a thing, Viktor. This outrageous mating"—he spat the word as if it were poison on his lips—"the union you have chosen with this cursed creature is only evidence of a fact I have known to be true for quite a while now. I am ashamed to say this, since you are my son, but you have no place in this pack, Viktor."

"I am ashamed of having a father who is such a coward that he will refuse an outright challenge," Viktor said, not missing a beat. His father's insults stopped affecting him a long time ago. "All of you, is this who you want for a leader? This is your pack, not his."

When silence met his words, Viktor simply shrugged. He did not really expect the pack to go against its Alpha. Even if the Alpha's orders were abusive or wrong, werewolf nature would keep others from acting. The members of the pack wouldn't see their leader's abuse as permission to question the leader.

Rightly interpreting the pack's silence, Sasha barked out a laugh. "Do you really think they will believe your lies? This pack is mine, pup, not yours, never yours."

The reminder of his inadequacy in the eyes of the pack did nothing to calm Viktor's temper. Sasha spoke true this time. The pack was his, not Viktor's. However, that needed to change, not only for Viktor, but for all those pups that would be born to the pack. They deserved a real Alpha as a role model, not someone rotten to the core, a liar and a coward like Sasha. They needed a real werewolf. Viktor didn't truly want to lead, but anyone would be better than Sasha.

"I should have never allowed you to lead this pack for so long. You don't deserve it," Viktor noted coldly. "You know, the pack aside, this is not only about them, not anymore. You crossed a line when you sent assassins against me, Sasha, and you know it."

At these words, a murmur started to pass through the crowd, as if the knowledge just now penetrated the pack's common consciousness. It was considered shameful for a werewolf to resort to using outsiders in order to settle domestic disputes. The idea that the Alpha could have resorted to treachery and backstabbing shook the very foundations of the pack, and Viktor knew it.

However, it wasn't Sasha who responded to Viktor's accusations. "Do you have any evidence to support these claims?" Jessica stepped forward to Sasha's side and gave Viktor a disdainful look. "It is a very serious accusation, and you can't just come here to our pack and accuse our leader of such vile things, without even having a solid base to prove what you are saying."

Viktor arched a brow at Jessica's speech. She gave the pack what they wanted to hear, finding them an enemy other than their leader. Jessica had long ago taken on the role of the Alpha female, and her word was as precious as gold to their pack. Viktor wouldn't stand for it. Jessica had done enough damage already. He suspected she'd been sleeping with his father, even if she only recently mated to Flame. "Oh?" he asked, struggling to keep himself in check. "And tell me, where were you all going when we met just now?"

Jessica hesitated, glancing swiftly at her supposed mate, who still stood proudly at Viktor's side, only to look away once more, the

movement a silent admission of guilt. "Flame was injured in an altercation with an unknown creature," she answered smoothly. "We were concerned for him."

A bitter laugh escaped Flame's lips. "Unknown creature? Concerned? Don't make me laugh. Is it because you were concerned that you were hunting me like I was some kind of rabid animal?"

"The creature seemed feral, Flame," Sasha explained voice tinged with fake concern. "You could be affected by its bite."

"Oh, this is too much," Kai said sarcastically. "Now Flame is suffering from rabies? Please!"

Kai didn't know Flame all that well. As a matter of fact, Viktor's mate had only met his friend minutes ago. Despite the fact that Kai didn't really know Flame, Viktor knew that even Kai could see the lie in that excuse. Flame's sanity simply couldn't be doubted, especially by people who actually knew him.

Viktor shook his head, aggrieved by the absurdity of the situation. "Father, this is ludicrous. For once, take responsibility for your actions! Stop this charade and admit to what you've done."

"I have done nothing," Sasha snapped. "Your accusations are just poisonous lies, and you offend me and the pack through your presence, falseness, and perversion."

Flame smirked at the Alpha's reply. "You would think that by now, the Alpha would feel entitled to discipline the member of the pack that dared to offend him in such a way."

Sasha visibly tensed at Flame's words. Flame had a point. An insult towards an Alpha represented an insult towards the whole pack, and according to pack law, the Alpha needed to punish the wrongdoer. He was stuck.

"Fine!" Sasha barked. "Enough of this foolishness! I will give you a lesson you will never forget."

In the blink of an eye, the Alpha shifted, Sasha Petrovic's human form replaced by that of a white arctic wolf. The moment he fully shifted, the wolf launched itself at Viktor, not even giving him a

warning or a moment to prepare. Fortunately, Viktor expected this sneaky attack. His father's jaws clamped around air, since Viktor had moved from his previous position.

Viktor shifted as well, his wolf form eerily similar to that of his father. He attacked his opponent, and they collided in a flurry of white fur, fangs, and claws, snapping and angrily tearing at each other's throats. Sasha fought with the cunning and tactics years of experience gave him. Even so, Viktor had the advantage of the strength and agility of youth, something that Sasha lacked. Furthermore, Viktor fought knowing that he had no other option but to win.

He needed to protect his mate and yearned to exact revenge for his best friend's pain. His wolf knew that the pack belonged to him by right, that he needed to prove to his mate that he would be worthy of their bond. Above all, the need to punish the betrayal of his own flesh and blood drove him forward.

All these reasons slipped from his mind, and the wolf knew nothing more but the excitement of fighting, the satisfaction of tearing into his opponent's skin and the taste of blood in his mouth.

* * * *

As Kai expected, Viktor's father didn't go down easily. If Sasha Petrovic hated his son enough to hire snake shifters, he would give everything he had to win the challenge. Intellectually, Kai knew Viktor could handle the fight, but he still wished they could have done things differently. If only Viktor could have avoided the challenge of fighting his father himself, Kai could have taken care of Sasha Petrovic. The pack would never manage to find him, and Viktor wouldn't have to be hurt now.

Kai mentally sighed. As much as he wished to take his mate's pain away, his purpose here wasn't to win Viktor's battle in his stead, but to watch Viktor's back while he fought. Kai let his snake eyes roam around the gathering crowd. He nodded towards Flame and

Flame nodded back, a signal that he would watch over the rest of the pack as well. Normally, werewolves weren't treacherous, but Viktor's pack seemed to have decayed under the leadership of Sasha Petrovic.

As if to confirm Kai's suspicions, a small group of werewolves slowly and stealthily tried to move away from the crowd. Kai watched as they talked in hushed whispers with the woman from before, the one who claimed being concerned about Flame. Kai instinctively knew she was involved in everything that made this pack not right. For Viktor to have a safe future, she would have to disappear.

Adding the woman's demise to his increasingly horrid to-do list, Kai turned his attention yet again to the treacherous werewolves. They slipped from the grove and vanished into the dark forest. Kai realized that if he wanted to help his mate, he would have to follow them. As much as he resented having to leave Viktor's side, he served his mate better from a distance, just like it would always be.

Shaking himself, Kai snuck away from the scene of the battle and hastily followed the tracks of the departing werewolves. As he slipped through the shadows, he carefully stayed downwind so the werewolves would not smell him. He allowed his human-shaped tongue to shift back into his snake one and stuck it out to detect the direction his enemies had taken. His heightened snake senses instantly processed the required information and indicated the right path. Half of Kai wanted to go back to the grove, since Viktor's scent attracted him like a magnet. But he knew that he could not. He had to focus and complete his mission. He needed to protect his mate.

Not even bothering to shift into his animal form, Kai followed the trace the werewolves left. His senses led him to yet another meadow, where the group seemed to have stopped to discuss the issue. His snake eyes could see in the dark, taking in the heat of their bodies and registering their position with ease.

"Jessica said we needed to take out the snake as well," a tall, well-muscled blond who resembled Jessica said. Two others stood behind him, silently offering support.

“Won’t that draw the wrath of the Guild upon us?” another protested. “Surely there has to be another way.”

Kai mentally marked the latter as the smart one who would probably survive the entire thing.

“Maybe the Alpha will just defeat Viktor, and we’re discussing this for naught,” an older werewolf suggested. He gave the rest of the group a pleading look, apparently not very happy with the plan.

The first werewolf snorted. “Yeah, right. Either way, it doesn’t matter. There are only three of them. Viktor, Flame, and the snake. Flame’s family isn’t here, and they’d be too young to help. We can easily take them.”

“I don’t know,” the smart one intervened. “I think maybe we should just let things follow their course. After all, what have Jessica and Sasha ever helped us with?”

Silence followed the rhetorical question as the men seemed to debate if defending their Alpha was worth the trouble.

“Come on. We have to get ready,” the first man finally said. “You’re not going to be cowards and back out on me now.”

At that, the rest of the werewolves suppressed whatever protest may have occurred to them. They obviously didn’t want to be seen as cowards. In Kai’s opinion, agreeing with the idiot was the best proof of cowardice in existence. Then again, given that the idiot already had the support of the rest of the group, he couldn’t really blame them for their choice.

Kai watched as the werewolves opened a hidden hatch in the ground revealing a secret stash. They retrieved a large shotgun, two crossbows, and several guns. Kai instantly knew the bullets and the arrows used would be silver. The treachery of Viktor’s pack had gone too far.

They clearly meant to prevent Viktor from winning the challenge. Even the thought was unusual. Other werewolves were forbidden from interfering in challenges for Alpha positions. It would be against pack law and would shame them all.

Kai stepped out of the greenery, allowing his footsteps to rustle the leaves on the ground. “How interesting that you would agree your Alpha is a weakling.”

The five werewolves immediately turned to him. Some hid their shock under a mask of anger. Others actually seemed shamed at having been caught. The leader of the group snarled at Kai. “What the hell are you doing here, you little freak?”

“Finding out valuable information about my mate’s pack.” Kai grinned, wondering if he could get them to return to the grove with no bloodshed. Perhaps their treachery could even be useful for Viktor.

“Your mate? Your supposed mate is a traitor and an abomination, just like you,” the other man spat.

“Maybe. But he will soon be your Alpha. I will not allow you to stop the challenge.”

The two werewolves Kai labeled as possibly useful stepped back and dropped their weapons. “I don’t want to do this,” the older one said. “I just want a safe, happy pack for my pups.”

The other one nodded, directing a slightly pleading look towards Kai. The blond werewolf turned to sneer at them. “Fucking pansies! I’ll deal with the snake and then you’ll see what I do to traitors.”

Kai answered in their stead. “Oh? You think you can defeat me so easily? Bring it on!”

The werewolf charged towards Kai, shifting as he ran. Kai jumped and dodged the wolf’s attack. Using his poison to kill his opponent would be difficult because the fur prevented him from sinking his fangs in. Still, the fur didn’t protect everything, and he already had a plan.

As the wolf turned to attack again, Kai shifted as well, easily freeing himself from his loose clothing as he did so. The wolf’s jaws closed against thin air where Kai’s neck had been just seconds before. Kai took advantage of the wolf’s confusion and snapped up from the grass, striking swiftly and expertly. He dug his fangs into the wolf’s snout, retreating to safety after only a few moments. Even if he didn’t

hold on to the bite very long, his venom would be potent enough to incapacitate, if not kill, the werewolf. Actually, Kai wasn't aiming to kill. He wanted the werewolves to live because their deaths would cause trouble for Viktor.

The wolf actually howled in pain, but it sounded strangled and Kai knew the rest of the pack would not hear his cry. The wolf's body had already started to shake as the effect of the venom kicked in. Several of the other wolves came running, sniffing to find Kai in the grass. Kai wondered if, in their anger, they didn't see they exposed themselves to the same fate as their companion.

Mercilessly, Kai attacked once more, this time aiming for another wolf's vulnerable belly. The venom worked even faster for Kai's second victim. The second wolf's body collapsed to the ground and started seizing.

Still in human form, the older werewolf approached cautiously, having obviously chosen to stay out of the search and the fight. "Please, stop this," he said. "We'll go back and confess to Viktor. We'll let everyone know. Just stop this."

Satisfied, Kai shifted back. He picked up the clothes Viktor had given him back at his house and pulled them back on, keeping a close eye on the werewolves. "It's the right thing to do. You won't regret it."

Kai retrieved his fallen knife from the grass as the uninjured wolf changed forms as well. Kai gestured to the remaining three werewolves to grab the bodies of their fallen companions. He briefly looked his two victims over to make sure they would survive his venom. Once he made sure he would not have any deaths to deal with, he nodded to the old werewolf. "All right. Let's go."

Smirking, Kai indicated that the werewolves should walk ahead. "After you." They gave him an ugly look, but silently obeyed. Finally, after what seemed like forever, they left behind the secret stash of weapons and headed back to the grove, sneaking back into the crowd to watch the ongoing fight.

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Sasha collapsed beneath Viktor in the grass, bloody and motionless, still alive, yet evidently defeated. Viktor shifted back to human form, an effort he made to further the image of power he was trying to convey. Sasha was unable to do so, the weakness of blood loss and defeat binding him to his wolf.

"I have beaten your Alpha. The pack is mine by right."

The werewolves exchanged glances before turning back to Sasha, lying defeated and barely breathing upon the ground. Accepting Sasha's defeat, they then turned to face Viktor. One by one, they knelt, submitting to their new Alpha. Even his father's former inner circle yielded to Viktor's victory. The only people left standing were Viktor, Kai, Flame, and Jessica, who gave Viktor a hateful glare. "You're nothing but an abomination, Viktor," she spat. "You will lead this pack to ruin."

"Oh?" Kai interceded. "I think you and your friends have done a pretty good job of that already. Isn't that right?"

Behind Kai, a werewolf got to his feet. Viktor recognized him as Philip, one of the oldest members of the pack. "The snake is right," Phillip said, voice trembling ever so slightly. "Viktor is telling the truth. Jessica and Sasha planned his death and wanted to use the Assassins' Guild for their purposes. Gregory also wanted to lead a small group of us to try and stop the challenge now so that Sasha could conserve his leadership."

"Where *is* Gregory?" Flame asked.

Kai's eyes turned cautious, and Viktor instantly knew what had happened. "He attacked me and I just immobilized him," Kai replied neutrally.

Viktor instantly felt the pack tense. Even if Gregory betrayed them, he remained a werewolf, whereas Kai was an outsider. A snake. An assassin.

He growled low in his throat, prepared to protect his mate, come what may. None dared to take him up on his silent challenge. They wanted to go against Kai, but feared Viktor too much to do so.

"The snake didn't do anything wrong," Phillip thankfully intervened, drawing dozens of werewolf eyes to him. "It was his right to protect his mate. He didn't even kill Gregory, even when he easily could have."

By Viktor's side, Flame nodded. "All of you standing here, judging, wouldn't you have done the same thing if Gregory threatened your family?"

Viktor didn't even wait for Flame's question to receive an answer. "This isn't about Kai. I have no doubt my mate's actions were more than justified." He glared at his pack's members, pointing out that he would not allow anyone to voice a different opinion. "Gregory and Jessica betrayed us, as did Sasha. They must be punished."

Viktor turned to look at Jessica, wondering how such hatred and ugliness could hide beneath such beauty. "Jessica Kyle, I hereby charge you with treason. You have brought shame onto this pack, as evidenced by the various misdeeds you have performed against it. Consequently, I sentence you to exile and to dissolve your mating with Flame Grayson, a mating which took place under false pretenses and into which the second party was coerced by threats to his family. Together with Sasha Petrovic and Gregory Kyle, you will leave the lands of this pack. Should you ever return, you will be subjected to a second trial and will be sentenced and judged according to pack law."

Having proclaimed his first decision as an Alpha, Viktor turned his attention to his kneeling pack. "Anyone else who doubts my leadership is free to go, either with Jessica or on their own."

Each and every member of the pack remained in his or her kneeling position, silently submitting to Viktor's leadership. Satisfied, the new Alpha nodded. "Get up now, my friends. Lift your heads and let us escort our former brothers and sister from our midst."

Flame took the initiative and grabbed Jessica's hand, drawing her away from the middle of the grove. Someone else lifted Sasha's still-unmoving body and followed behind Flame, the two removing the traitors from pack land. Viktor nodded towards Phillip, silently telling him to deal with the Gregory issue.

Having dealt with the most immediate problem, Viktor spoke again. "Tonight is the full moon. It is a night of celebration, but it is also a night of new beginnings, for all of us, and for me, specifically." He walked to Kai's side, taking his mate's hand and drawing him close. "And on this note, this is my mate, Kaiden. Please welcome him to the pack as only werewolves know how."

Instantly, the pack shifted form and tens of wolves of all sizes and colors lifted their heads and howled at the moon, a welcome to their new, peculiar member.

At first, Kai looked uncomfortable, but to his credit, he kept it to himself. Viktor smiled and then shifted as well, his howl joining that of his brothers in praise to their mistress, the moon. His wolf rejoiced when he felt a reptilian form snake around his body, effectively curling around his neck and torso.

Jessica and Sasha wouldn't be gone forever. Viktor still had so many things to deal with. The Guild, Kai's sad past. For tonight, though, Viktor would allow himself to enjoy his newly-found mate and his freedom. Everything else could wait.

Chapter Five

Viktor opened the door to his house and gestured his mate inside. When the pack meeting had finally ended, they had all gone for a run. Flame invited them to his house, saying his brothers and sister would love to meet Kai, but Viktor asked for a rain check. He needed some time alone with his sweet mate.

“Who repaired this?” Kai gave the door a questioning look and reluctantly stepped inside, carefully taking in his environment.

Viktor suppressed a smile at his mate’s behavior. Questioning the smallest things seemed to be ingrained in Kai’s character. He wrapped his arms around his mate and kissed the top of Kai’s head. “Flame must have sent one of his many brothers to deal with it.”

Kai looked up at Viktor and for a moment, Viktor saw something indescribable flash in his eyes. Regret? Longing? He didn’t know. Viktor inwardly sighed, wishing Kai would speak to him about whatever plagued his mind. He didn’t fool himself though. Even if he knew they were meant to be together, their bond remained so new and fragile. He needed to give Kai a bit of time to get used to the idea of a new life.

And, for a few hours at least, he needed to make Kai forget about this day. They both had blood on their hands, but if they wanted their relationship to survive, they couldn’t let it linger. Even if Kai put up a brave front, Viktor knew killing Jamari left a trace on him. Viktor would make sure he erased that memory completely. He wanted to give Kai the best life had to offer, show him that he could allow himself to forgive and forget.

“Come here,” he urged softly, pulling his mate into a kiss. Kai didn’t protest and melted in his arms, moaning as he wrapped his arms around Viktor.

Viktor groaned when he felt his mate’s dick against his thigh. His cock went from half aroused to rock hard in an instant. The bedroom suddenly seemed very far away. He broke the kiss and let out a tortured breath. “God, Kai! Fuck, I need you. Don’t think I can get to the room.”

Kai seemed to agree, and he dropped to his knees in front of Viktor. Without another word, he desperately started working the buttons of Viktor’s jeans. Freed from its confines, Viktor’s cock sprang up, pointing accusingly at Kai. Kai smiled cheekily and lowered his mouth towards Viktor’s hard dick. A naughty, human-looking pink tongue escaped Kai’s lips and under Viktor’s very eyes shifted into a forked one.

Viktor hissed as his mate’s prehensile tongue wrapped around the sensitive head of his cock, then swiped across the slit, stealing the drops of pre-cum already gathering there. Kai closed his eyes and moaned, and Viktor could practically sense his mate’s ecstasy at tasting it. “Fuck, Kai! Suck me!”

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Kai would have laughed at the need in his mate’s voice if he didn’t have his mouth full of Viktor’s cock. Feeling his mate’s hard dick against his tongue sent tingles of pleasure down his spine to pool into his groin. Naturally, given his snake nature, he knew his tongue was sensitive. Hell, he experienced kisses with much greater intensity even with his tongue in human form. He didn’t allow Viktor to kiss him with his tongue shifted. What a mistake from his part. God, tasting Viktor on his tongue felt so amazing.

He almost forgot that the whole cock-sucking thing was supposed to be about blowing Viktor’s mind. Berating himself for his

selfishness, he started bobbing his head up and down on his mate's shaft. Viktor's groans and curses increased in volume, and for once in his life, Kai felt thankful that he was a snake. He found with surprise that he could easily eliminate the gag reflex that prevented humans from giving head and that having a prehensile tongue really enhanced the sensation. He lost himself in the experience, rejoicing in the sounds of pleasure his mate made, enjoying the one person who accepted him, who truly wanted him.

Viktor tasted and smelled so addicting that Kai wanted to suck his dick forever. He absently realized that he was humping Viktor's leg as Viktor gripped his hair and started fucking his mouth with abandon. Kai took him in greedily, feasting on his mate's dick like a starving man on a king's buffet.

With a wild howl, Viktor came. The taste of his mate's essence exploded in Kai's mouth, and Kai moaned around his mate's dick, the flavor of Nirvana and ecstasy too much for him to bear. He came like that, on his knees, in front of his mate. Viktor's slowly deflating cock was still in his mouth. It should have been humiliating, but instead, it felt soul-lifting, almost divine.

Taking a deep breath, Kai looked up at Viktor, hoping he hadn't hurt his mate with his enthusiasm. He forced his snake eyes to turn into normal ones. Even if they gave him infrared vision, they stole what Kai needed most, real visual connection with his mate's body. Viktor looked back at him wide-eyed and fell back down on his ass on the floor. "Holy shit."

"Are you okay?" Kai asked, reaching for his mate.

"I'm great. Just give me a second to recover my brain cells."

Kai knew exactly how Viktor felt. Their first time together had been incredible, but Kai had never really let go, afraid that Viktor would reject him if he saw Kai's true nature. Even when his body disobeyed him and sprouted scales, he still didn't allow himself to completely feel the experience. He knew that it would be wiser to step back, not to become more involved than he already was, but he didn't

have a chance. Now that he had tasted Viktor, he couldn't possibly restrain himself. One more time at least, he would indulge himself in his mate's perfection.

Kai realized he'd been more than a little transparent in his contemplations when Viktor took a deep breath and jumped to his feet. He yelped as Viktor pulled him up into his arms. Kai somehow ended up draped over Viktor's shoulder like a sack of potatoes. All possible protest died in Kai's throat as a gentle hand passed over the curve of his buttocks. "I want you so bad," Viktor croaked out.

Kai could only nod, and he knew his mate could feel his agreement. Moving faster than humanly possible, Viktor carried Kai into the bedroom and dumped him on the soft mattress. The same bed they'd first fucked in. Their bed. Kai licked his lips, taking in the scent of his mate's arousal, combined with his own. "Come on, lover! Come here."

Viktor gave Kai a hungry look and started tearing at his clothes. Buttons flew around and material shredded, but Viktor didn't seem to care. Kai just watched in frozen fascination as his mate's incredible body emerged from under the clothing. He wanted to mimic Viktor and take off his own clothes. He wanted to be skin to skin with his incredible mate, but alas, he couldn't move a muscle.

Luckily, Viktor didn't mind taking care of that small aspect. Jumping on the bed, he pushed Kai down, covering Kai's body with his own. He pressed his mouth to Kai's and desperately grabbed the material of Kai's shirt. Kai didn't even have time to try and help his mate, nor did he bother, as he heard the distinct sound of material tearing. Kai couldn't make himself care either. Why should he? After all, these were still Viktor's clothes, and if his mate wanted to destroy them, Kai couldn't find a fault in that. Especially not given the purpose behind the destruction.

Kai's wet pants followed after his shirt, and he had the presence of mind to kick off his shoes. Since he didn't wear any underwear, Kai ended up completely naked in seconds, with the exception of his

socked feet, which Viktor didn't bother to deal with. Kai couldn't have agreed more. Clothing was inconsequential. He needed his mate so bad it hurt. Even if he came just minutes ago, his cock already answered to his mate's proximity, yet again demanding release. This time, though, Kai knew the only thing that would be enough was Viktor's cock inside of him, fucking him, possessing him like only Viktor could.

Apparently, Viktor wanted to torment Kai a bit, as he lowered his mouth to Kai's cock, swiping his tongue over the swollen head and cleaning it of the already cooling cum. Kai let out a gasp. "Oh, God, Viktor, fuck me!"

Viktor lifted his mouth off Kai's dick and licked his lips. "Hold your legs up!" he ordered, and his commanding tone enflamed Kai even further. He swallowed in nervousness and lifted his legs, exposing his hole to Viktor's greedy gaze. He shivered in pleasure as a gentle caress ghosted around his opening, rewarding him for his obedience. "So beautiful, so perfect," Viktor whispered as he kissed Kai's leg. "My mate."

Kai wanted to say something back, but he couldn't find the words. Kai struggled not to squirm and stay in the uncomfortable position, but Viktor immediately understood the increasing strain on Kai's body and flipped Kai over on all fours. Kai would have taken the slight discomfort over not seeing Viktor's face, but he soon found this position had its advantages. Viktor's wicked tongue traced up Kai's inner thigh to his ass, and Kai let out a choked sound as Viktor licked along his crease.

Half of Kai wanted to protest to his mate doing such a thing to him. Surely, it couldn't be pleasurable for his mate. The other half, though, squashed his good intentions and ordered him to relax and enjoy the ride. If something didn't appeal to Viktor, Kai would know it.

As if to confirm Kai's thoughts, Viktor let out a ragged moan. "Fuck, you taste so good, baby!"

With no other warning, Viktor thrust his tongue into Kai's ass. The forbidden feeling of his mate eating his ass short circuited Kai's brain. He pushed his ass back, desperate to take everything his mate offered. He clung to the sheets in desperation, distantly aware that his skin had started to sprout scales once more.

Viktor growled against his anus, and his talented tongue disappeared from Kai's ass. He licked up from the curve of Kai's buttocks, over the sensitive scales that now covered his spine. Kai cried out, pushing back against his mate, needing now more than ever to be filled and stretched by Viktor's cock.

Viktor wrapped his arms around Kai's torso and pulled him up, shifting him so that they could face each other once more. Kai somehow ended up in Viktor's lap and his mate took his mouth in one of his trademark devastating kisses. "Ride me, pretty," Viktor practically growled out when they separated their mouths. "I want to feel your ass take my cock."

Kai reached down to grasp his mate's cock, guiding it to his hole. As he felt the thick head nudging at his opening, he pushed out and gasped at the invasion. Even if his mate prepared Kai's passage so erotically, Viktor's dick still wasn't easy to take. It didn't matter, though. Just like with their first time together, he welcomed the slight burn, the twinge of pain that completed the pleasure. Ever so slowly, he lowered his body down on Viktor's shaft until his ass took in the invading member completely. Impaled by Viktor's thick cock, he felt so incredibly full, and the position only added to the sensation, pushing Viktor farther than Kai thought he could go. Kai wrapped his arms around Viktor's neck and let his head fall on his mate's shoulder. Their union felt so incredibly perfect. Kai wanted to make this moment in time last forever.

"Are you okay, pretty?" Viktor murmured, his voice sounding a bit strangled.

Kai couldn't help a little smile. Viktor clearly intended to restrain himself, to avoid hurting Kai at all costs. After all, they'd only just

fucked a few hours ago. Viktor's concern touched Kai at a deep level. No one had ever worried about him, only his mother so many years ago.

Shaking his head to dispel the memories that threatened to emerge, Kai licked a drop of sweat off Viktor's neck. He didn't want Viktor to misinterpret his body language. "Just fine. Fuck me." Viktor didn't immediately comply, so Kai let his tongue play around his mate's ear. "I'm serious. Fuck me. Hard."

Just like that, Viktor's control broke. With a growl, he started thrusting in and out of Kai's ass. Kai did his best to impale himself on Viktor's cock, although the position slightly sabotaged his efforts. It didn't matter, though. Viktor's strength compensated, and Kai surrendered his body to Viktor, allowing his mate to lift and bring him down at will.

Then Viktor shifted his angle a bit, and Kai dissolved into incoherence when his mate hit his special spot. Kai had never felt so thankful in his life that in this form, his body could enjoy the same pleasures humans did. His mind blurred at the onslaught of pleasure, and he rode Viktor with abandon, no longer caring about anything but the two of them. At some point, he distantly realized Viktor's skin seemed hairier than before, but the feel of the light, white fur rubbing against his scales only heightened the sensation.

The cocktail of pleasure and love soon became too intoxicating to withstand. Kai could practically feel his orgasm approaching, just within reach. Close, so close. Then, Viktor sank his fangs into Kai's neck, claiming him once more, and Kai's vision exploded into a thousand waves of heat. With a shout, Kai came all over his mate's chest, painting them both with hot streams of cum. For a moment, he thought he would lose consciousness because of the overload of pleasure, but he managed to regain his senses. He felt warm liquid drip down his thighs and realized his mate had come as well. Taking a deep breath, he looked up to Viktor's face. "God, I love you," Viktor blurted out.

In an instant, the buzz of orgasm faded as cruel reality struck yet again. They couldn't be together, and because of that, Kai couldn't say the words back. Therefore, he just smiled and pressed his lips to Viktor. "Come on. Let's get some rest. It's been a long day."

If Viktor felt hurt about his evasion, he didn't show it. Instead, he hugged Kai tightly and kissed the top of Kai's head. His spent dick slipped out of Kai's channel, and he moved from the bed. "In a minute."

Kai closed his eyes, struggling against the whirlpool of emotions inside of him. Yes, he loved Viktor, just as much as Viktor loved him. But how could he tell his mate that when this would be the only night they had together? He should have left before they even got to this point. Viktor would have been fine only with Flame by his side.

As that thought sprung into his mind, Kai suppressed the urge to scream. He was Viktor's mate, not Flame. Kai should be enjoying his afterglow rather than thinking about future sorrows.

Pushing back his erratic feelings, Kai's allowed his eyes to drift shut. He heard Viktor come back into the room and felt his mate pass a warm cloth over his privates. He sighed in contentment as Viktor got in the bed and spooned Kai's body with his own. "Good night, pretty," Viktor whispered, kissing his ear, and for the first time in many years, Kai allowed himself to fall into exhausted, dreamless sleep.

* * * *

Kai woke up to the feel of a warm body cuddled by his side. Strong arms held him tight against a powerful chest. Kai took a deep breath, inhaling the distinctive scent so uniquely Viktor. His mate. The mate Kai would have to abandon.

He did acknowledge their mate bond, and he accepted his own feelings for Viktor. However, the fact remained that they couldn't be together. Flame's problem seemed to have disappeared, but Kai knew

better than to believe the pack would accept him just like that. Even if they managed to overcome the issue of his gender, Kai was still a snake. The pack would surely, and righteously, turn against him if they found their pups threatened by the Guild due to Kai's presence. By proxy, Viktor would also be rejected. Kai couldn't allow his mate to lose everything he had fought for—the pack and family he deserved.

Perhaps Viktor loved him now, but there would come a time when he would realize that Kai didn't deserve to be his mate. Kai was a murderer. No power could be strong enough to redeem him. Nothing could give him the ability to start anew. Even as he lay there in Viktor's arms, the faces of those he had killed flashed before his eyes. And Jamari had been his brother. He was now dead, and his blood stained Kai's hands.

In truth, perhaps Jamari's death formed the chasm between Kai and Viktor. Kai had killed his own brother, and he couldn't even find it in his heart to regret it. Could he even be more horrible and disgusting? True, he had burned with hatred for Jamari ever since he had watched his mother being eaten. Still, there should be some sort of emotion, some kind of regret. After all, Jamari was his blood. Kai felt nothing. Not even satisfaction for getting rid of an enemy. Nothing.

Kai got out of the bed and brushed a kiss on Viktor's forehead. His lips twisted into a bitter smile as Viktor muttered something that sounded an awful lot like *Kai, baby* under his breath. Half of Kai wanted Viktor to wake, to say something—anything—that could keep them together. Alas, Viktor seemed to be exhausted from their night together, and he continued sleeping.

Sighing, Kai stepped away from the bed and to the wardrobe. He rummaged through Viktor's clothes until he found a T-shirt and a pair of shorts that didn't seem horribly large. He then dressed in silence and grabbed his knife off the floor. Kai didn't use blades for assassinations often, since more often than not, he poisoned his

targets. His venom had an almost instantaneous, deadly effect, courtesy of his ancestry. He may not have inherited his father's size, but the mix of king cobra and taipan in his genes produced the ultimate assassination tool. However, he preferred to have a knife with him, even a tiny kitchen knife, just in case.

Kai let out a small, bitter laugh. The blade in his hand was yet another reminder of why he could not stay. Viktor would be better off without him. In time, Viktor would come to see Kai as a murderer. Kai would rather run now than to wait for that to happen.

Even so, every step away from his mate physically hurt. God, he didn't want to leave Viktor. He would rather die. Hell, he would have probably taken his own life if he didn't know such a cowardly action would only shame his mate and not help their situation. In these circumstances, he needed to face the Guild and take his punishment. He would not allow the Guild's wrath to fall on Viktor's pack, not now that things finally seemed to be going well for Viktor.

He tried to hang on to that thought as he slipped out of Viktor's house. The rain had stopped at some point and dawn loomed ahead, promising a day of cloudless, clear skies and life-giving warmth. Not even the hottest sun would be able to heat Kai inside, not now that he had experienced the fire of Viktor's passion.

"Pretty? What are you doing?"

Kai turned around to see Viktor standing in the doorway of his house, giving him a puzzled and slightly concerned look. "Come back to bed. It's too early for a walk and it's chilly still."

A smile ghosted on Kai's lips at Viktor's words. He didn't know if Viktor truly thought he only intended to go out for a brief walk, but he felt certain that his mate's concern for his safety was genuine. For that, and for the bond that still burned bright between them, Kai would be honest with him.

"I can't ssstay here, Viktor," he replied softly. "I don't belong with your pack."

Viktor's eyes widened, and he gave Kai a look that seemed to be a mix of shock and pain. "You don't mean that. You said it yourself. There's a connection between us. You can't abandon that. You can't abandon me."

Kai sighed tiredly. He'd known Viktor would try to stop him. "We're ssstrangers, Viktor. You don't know me, not really. There'sss no ssuch thing ass true matesss."

Even saying the words broke Kai's heart, but what else could he do? Viktor wouldn't understand his point of view. He would never allow Kai to leave if he didn't have a good reason. "Besidesss, even if matesss did exist, you dessserve better than being bound for life to a killer. Dessstiny doesssn't guarantee feelingsss."

"No, it doesn't. It just foretells it," Viktor replied with a certainty that almost scared Kai. He hated being so transparent. "I love you, pretty. You're my other half. And you love me. Otherwise you wouldn't have accepted our mating. You wouldn't have given yourself to me. I know it and you know it."

"How can you possibly love me? We only just met last night!"

Viktor shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I know you better than any other. You're sweet, brave, and strong. You saved my life and gained the respect of my pack. You being forced into a life of blood doesn't change any of that."

Kai couldn't look at Viktor anymore. In fact, he wanted to slap himself for his stupidity. Half of him wanted to run back into Viktor's arms. He didn't want to leave his mate behind. He hated the thought that Viktor could disregard their mating, but at the same time, he knew Viktor needed to forget him and move on. He didn't even know what to do anymore. Each decision he took seemed wrong and eventually blew up in his face. Helping his mate with the pack suggested that he would want to stay here and sleeping with Viktor cemented their relationship. Kai did want to stay, but it was impossible.

Kai suddenly felt the urge to scream. He should have just chosen one path and stuck to it. This indecision killed him inside. He almost wished he had never met Viktor. Life seemed so much easier without feelings.

“Viktor...” Kai rubbed his eyes, trying to find a way to explain. He couldn’t argue with Viktor’s words. Lying would just be useless now, since Viktor would see right through him. “I truly can’t ssstay. The Guild will come for me. Death will fall onto you and your pack. I can’t allow that.”

Viktor’s face turned to stone. Kai didn’t know what his mate could be thinking, but he hoped Viktor realized the truth of his words.

Viktor crossed the distance between them in seconds and wrapped his arms around Kai. “I’m never letting you go,” he murmured in Kai’s hair. “If it means I have to leave my pack behind, I’ll do it. I will follow you until the ends of the earth.”

Kai pushed out of Viktor’s embrace. “But you jussst won leadership over the pack! You can’t just leave.”

Viktor shrugged, although his tense demeanor lacked the nonchalance suggested by the action. “I never wanted to lead. I just fought Sasha to get him out of our hair.”

Kai took a deep breath, struggling for composure. Why did Viktor have to be so stubborn? Couldn’t he see that, in the end, Kai didn’t care about the pack, but about Viktor himself? “If you follow me, the Guild will hurt you. I can’t allow that.”

“And what makes you think you can order me to let you go?” Viktor seemed calm, but his eyes flashed with barely-restrained fury. “Don’t even think about it, Kai. If you want to face the Guild, we’ll do it together. Everything we do from now on, we do together.”

Kai tried to pull away from Viktor’s embrace, but his mate just tightened his hold around him. “No, don’t even think about it,” Viktor repeated almost desperately. “I won’t let you go. Not ever.”

Kai’s eyes filled with tears at the emotion in Viktor’s voice. He wanted to scream at the realization that he was slowly starting to lose

himself because of this man. The last time he had wept was the day of his mother's death. That day, Kai had buried the part of him that could feel. And now, in just a few hours, with just a few words and touches, Viktor had demolished all his protective walls and torn apart his defenses. God, what was he going to do?

* * * *

Viktor held his mate as Kai cried. He hated the sight of Kai's sorrow, but he hated the thought of not being there to provide comfort even more. Perhaps it meant he was selfish, but Viktor couldn't help it. He needed Kai by his side like he needed air to breathe.

Viktor couldn't argue with Kai's point regarding the pack and the Guild. However, he had no intention of letting Kai go off alone to brave the assassins' punishment while he stayed behind to protect a treacherous pack. He had become Alpha when he defeated Sasha, but he didn't want the position.

Taking a deep breath, he kissed Kai's auburn hair and started to explain. "Pretty, listen to me." Kai lifted his golden black gaze to look at him, and Viktor offered him a small smile. "I've been thinking since last night. Truly, I don't think I have a place here either."

Kai's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to speak. Viktor placed a finger on Kai's lips, stopping his protest before it emerged. "I'm serious, pretty. My place isn't here. It never has been. I belong by your side forever."

"Viktor..." Kai's voice turned into a barely audible whisper. "I don't want you to get hurt."

Viktor wanted to tell Kai it would be okay, but he knew that argument wouldn't work with his mate. "We stand a better chance of getting out of this safely if we're together," he offered instead.

Kai hesitated briefly, but then a tremulous smile appeared on his face. Viktor gently caressed his mate's cheek, and just like that, reality started to fade. Their lips met in a kiss that melted Viktor's

heart. How could they even consider giving this up? Their mate bond shone between them, a flawless, unbreakable thread uniting them, binding their destinies together. For better or for worse, they would be one forever.

Just as this thought flashed through Viktor's mind, an eerie presence appeared somewhere in the distance. Kai tensed, and before Viktor could even figure out what was going on, his mate pushed him down with strength surprising for someone his size. Their bodies fell together on the pavement as bullets flooded the area, aiming for the spot where they'd been standing just seconds earlier.

Acting on instinct, Viktor allowed his human body to change into the wolf and rolled them so that his large animal form could cover Kai's body. They didn't have enough time to escape. The only thing he could do was to make sure the bullets didn't touch his mate.

Viktor could practically feel Kai's need to protest his decision. However, his lover didn't have time to do anything about it. The bullets came again, and this time, they didn't miss.

* * * *

Kai's eyes widened in horror as the deadly projectiles struck, hitting Viktor's shifted form. The wolf let out a pained sound, but didn't move, still holding Kai down with his weight. Kai struggled to look around, to find anything that could hide them. He simply couldn't see anything useful. The door of the house seemed miles away, and the garage would probably be locked. The only thing that qualified as some sort of shelter was a tall oak tree somewhere to Kai's right, but Kai didn't think they could get there without being even more vulnerable to the Guild.

Kai realized the absurdity of his own thoughts. Where could they possibly be more exposed to the Guild's fury than in the middle of the street? Here, they had no cover whatsoever.

As he took in his mate's pain, Kai made a decision. He only hoped he wouldn't kill them both in the process of trying to save their lives.

Struggling with his mate's weight, he pushed Viktor off him. His heart fell when Viktor no longer tried to hold him down or to stop him. Kai hoped the bullets hadn't hit any vital organs. Viktor was still breathing, but he'd lost consciousness, a fact that didn't look very promising to Kai. He needed to solve this problem as soon as possible.

Fighting to keep his despair from showing, Kai took a deep breath and shouted, "Stop! Don't do this!"

A bullet wheezed past his ear, but Kai kept his ground. The Guild despised cowardice, and if he wanted to have a chance, he needed to forsake his instincts of self-preservation and focus on his bond with Viktor. God, Viktor. The smell of Viktor's blood permeated the air, making Kai want to throw up. *Please, please, please, don't die!*

"Stop," he said again, proud that his voice didn't shake. He hoped his father would listen. If not, both Viktor and Kai would die, most likely in a very painful manner.

Surprisingly, the rain of bullets actually stopped. He suppressed a sigh of relief, knowing that this brief respite meant nothing. His father could still decide to kill them, and Kai would be helpless to stop him.

His mind whirling, and his heart beating one thousand miles per second, Kai waited. If his father chose to keep them alive, it stood to reason that he would allow Kai to explain. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking on Kai's part. He certainly hoped not.

Luckily, his guess proved to be correct. Heavy footsteps echoed on the asphalt, and Kai suppressed a wince as he identified his father's gait. Tynan Hearne, the leader of the Assassins' Guild came accompanied by two more assassins, whom Kai identified as his usual guards, Ian and Quil. Not that Tynan needed them or trusted them. A snake assassin learned from a very early age that he could trust no one but himself.

“Well, well,” Tynan began, sounding almost amused. “Looks like little Kai finally has a backbone. I wonder if it’s a consequence of being ass fucked by a werewolf. Perhaps we should include it in standard training. Don’t you agree?”

The two guards just nodded silently while Kai fumed. He hated the sensation of inadequacy his father’s words brought forth. He owed this man nothing. In fact, he couldn’t even call him father. Tynan had never showed Kai any love, only cruelty. Kai would never forgive him for what he did to his mother. This time, Kai wasn’t a helpless child anymore. He wouldn’t allow the Guild leader to make him feel ashamed of his bond with Viktor. This time, he would protect his loved one.

“He’s my mate,” he replied calmly, knowing his father would detect a lie a mile away. Tynan probably suspected anyway, since werewolves wouldn’t be openly affectionate to a man if the relationship wasn’t serious. “I have the right to be in love.”

“Do you now?” Tynan arched a brow sarcastically. “Since when?”

Kai couldn’t exactly find an answer to that question. In the past, he actually avoided open rebellion against his father and Jamari. The fact that he decided to act now, and because of falling in love, apparently seemed peculiar to Tynan. Perhaps Kai could exploit that.

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied evasively. “I want out of the Guild.”

Tynan’s smile vanished, replaced by a cold mask. “I’m afraid that’s not possible. Since Jamari is dead, you’re the only one left to take over once I go into hibernation.”

Kai blanched. How did they find out about Jamari’s death so fast? Surely, Flame couldn’t have been so careless in disposing of Jamari’s body.

Tynan laughed in Kai’s face. “I’m not Guild leader for nothing, boy. Since Jamari never returned or reported, it’s natural for me to believe something happened to him, something connected to our last job. It would seem I was quite correct in my assumption.”

Kai cursed under his breath. Of course his father just guessed and suspected. In his stupidity, he'd given himself away. Damn it!

"Don't worry," Tynan continued, ignoring Kai's shock entirely. "I don't begrudge you for it. I knew of your rivalry, so I expected something like this to happen sooner or later. Just out of curiosity though, was it you or your *mate*?"

Yet another question Kai couldn't find the right answer for. If he confessed, would his father be angry or just accept it? He didn't know.

In the end, he opted for truthfulness. After all, blaming it on Viktor would just make the situation worse. If Tynan really did plan to make Kai take over the Guild, then it meant the bullets had been intended to kill Viktor. Kai needed to draw attention from his mate at any cost. "I killed Jamari," he said coolly. "I cut his head off."

"Oh...details. And I didn't even ask you for them. Nice." Tynan gave Kai an interested, almost pleased look. Kai wanted to smack him, acknowledging the mockery in those words. But no, that couldn't be right. Smacking him would never be enough, not when taking into account all the pain Tynan put him through.

In that moment, Kai knew what he needed to do. It came to him with crystal clarity, like an epiphany, only not. Something so evident couldn't actually be considered a true revelation. In his heart, Kai always knew he would need to do this. The only way he could escape was by killing his father.

* * * *

Viktor mentally went over his injuries, classifying his wounds as reasonably light. Forcing back his pain, he focused on pushing the bullets out of his body, all the while paying close attention to the conversation taking place. Being a werewolf really did help sometimes.

“What do you want, father?” Kai asked, his voice cool and almost disinterested.

The man, Kai’s father, let out a harsh laugh. “This isn’t about what I want, boy, but about your own wishes.”

Viktor carefully cracked his eyes open to take in the scene. Just then, Kai opened his mouth to say something, but his father lifted a hand, stopping him from even uttering a word. “Let me guess, you expect me to let your miserable little wolf live.”

Kai gritted his teeth in obvious frustration. Viktor couldn’t say he fully understood the thoughts passing through his mate’s mind, but he did realize how much Kai hated the games his father played.

“Well, given that you’re my son, I would be willing to grant you this little favor.”

Kai’s body tensed even more. “In exchange for what?”

The older assassin grinned, his golden eyes sparkling in wickedness. “You offend me, son. What makes you think I want something in return?”

Kai just snorted, not gracing the ridiculous question with an answer. Viktor wondered what exactly Kai’s father could want. He knew it couldn’t be something good for Kai or himself.

“Very well. If you insssisst.” The man’s tone turned dark, fierce, almost vicious. “You have to leave your wolf behind. Like I ssaid, the leadership of the Guild will be in your handsss eventually, but in thisss ssstate, you aren’t adequate to lead.”

“And what is required to lead the Assassins’ Guild?” Kai actually seemed interested, and Viktor wanted to howl in protest. No, he couldn’t do that. He needed to trust his mate. Besides, it wouldn’t help them any. If he judged by the angle of the shots, and by the guards he saw behind Kai’s father, at least a dozen more assassins hid somewhere nearby. Viktor couldn’t pinpoint their location, but then again, he would have never felt Kai back in the club if not for the mate bond. Clearly, for now, he needed to play dead like a good little

dog. His own analogy irritated him, and his wolf snarled in protest, but he simply couldn't find another way.

Oblivious to Viktor's silent fuming, Kai's father directed a displeased glare towards his son. "Ruthlessssssnessss. There'sss no sssuch thing ass love for usss, boy. I'll teach you that eventually."

He stepped around Kai and towards Viktor's still form and kicked his exposed belly. Viktor killed the sound of pain that threatened to emerge before it could betray him and focused on looking completely harmless.

"You need to realize, Kai," the man continued, briefly moving away from Viktor, "that infatuationsss sssimply aren't allowed."

Glancing towards his mate through barely-cracked eyelids, Viktor experienced a sensation of déjà vu. They'd gone through this just the day before with Jamari, when Viktor suffered from Kai's poison attack. The solution suddenly became clear to him. This man would never keep his promise to Kai. He probably intended to kill Viktor as a lesson to his mate. Well, Viktor wouldn't allow it. He needed to get rid of Kai's father.

Viktor didn't kid himself. Fulfilling his plan would be more than a little hard. His werewolf nature slowly took care of the bullet wounds, but Kai's father remained an experienced assassin. He also had the other two guards, who would instantly attack if they detected any threat to their leader.

If only he could find a way to tell Kai to help. Together, they could do this. Taking in Kai's posture, Viktor desperately wished he could read his mate's mind. Unfortunately, werewolf matings didn't work like that, and he needed to act upon his guesses and instinct. He knew Kai wouldn't resent him if he hurt the older assassin. At the same time, though, he couldn't be sure if Kai would be ready to attack.

Viktor didn't have much time to plan or to find a way to communicate with Kai. The man approached him once more and unsheathed a blade. Viktor made a mental calculation of where he

needed to strike. As Kai's father lifted the sharp, heavy sword, Viktor attacked. The man's eyes went wide in astonishment, but he managed to jump back and dodge Viktor's fangs. Viktor would have cursed if he had the vocal cords to do it. He'd missed.

Even so, his attack caused the man to let his guard down and turn his back on Kai. Kai didn't even hesitate, and before his father could try to escape, retrieved his small knife, and embedded it in the man's neck, impaling the top of his spine and his throat with the blade.

The assassin let out a surprised sound and reached back, unsteadily trying to remove the weapon from his body. Viktor's heart fell. As deadly as the wound would have been for a human, the snake assassin would live through it. They had sealed their own fates.

Much to Viktor's surprise, the shots he expected never came. Viktor dared a glance towards the man's guards. They just stood there, dispassionately watching their leader thrash around and apparently having no intention whatsoever of helping him.

Even so, the wolf couldn't bring himself to trust their harmless stance. Kai seemed to share his opinion as he moved next to Viktor, facing both his father and the other two assassins. One of the men grimaced ever so slightly as Kai leaned down to pet Viktor's fur. Viktor licked Kai's hand and snarled at the two assassins. His wolf told him to attack and eliminate the threat to his mate. Still, Viktor felt reluctant to leave Kai's side, as he wouldn't be able to truly protect his mate if he engaged in a fight with the two assassins.

The decision was taken out of his hand, when with a choked sound, Kai's father finally managed to get rid of the knife embedded in his throat. Shaking his head, he threw a deadly glare in Kai's direction and picked up his sword from where it had fallen. Viktor felt slightly amazed that the man could still move, but then again, shifter anatomy wasn't like the human one. An assassin as powerful and experienced as Kai's father wouldn't die just because of a neck injury from a kitchen knife.

Viktor nudged Kai's leg with his snout. They needed to get out of there. Viktor didn't want to think about what would happen once the man recovered completely.

Kai took a few steps back, slowly nodding towards Viktor. They both froze, however, when one of the assassin guards retrieved a gun from his jacket. Time seemed to slow as the armed assassin aimed to shoot. Viktor leapt on his mate to shield Kai yet again, but he needn't have bothered. The bullets weren't meant for them.

Viktor lifted his eyes to see Kai's father fall back on the ground, a shot straight in the middle of his forehead. Not even shifters could dodge death if bullets tore through their brains. Apparently feeling the need to make sure, the armed assassin stepped forward and emptied the cartridge in his former leader's body.

Finally, he turned towards Kai and Viktor. "I have no issue with you, Kaiden. However, you will never lead the Guild. It's time for a change in the assassins' world."

The second assassin stepped forward as well. "We can't afford to take any chances. You killing Jamari affected long-term plans, things we fought to figure out for years."

Kai lifted his hands in a gesture that attempted to convey harmlessness. "I couldn't care less about what happens in the Guild. Like I said to Tynan, I want out."

The armed killer took another step towards Kai, and Viktor bared his fangs at him. "Keep your pet at bay, Kaiden, or else you may find yourself mateless." He chuckled as Kai's fist clenched into Viktor's fur.

"You know as well as I do that the only way to get out of the Guild is in a body bag. I should kill you right now, but I would gain absolutely nothing from it."

Kai let out a sound of frustration. "So what now? If you don't plan on killing us, what do you want to do?"

“We will allow you to live,” the second assassin said, “but make no mistake, this isn’t forever. We will refrain from sending you jobs, but we might ask you for *favours* from time to time.”

“You will never be free of your past, Kaiden.” The first man threw a meaningful glance towards Viktor. “Will your mate accept that?”

“Viktor loves me, Ian,” Kai replied softly. “That will never change.”

Ian snorted, but didn’t comment. “Come on, Quil. We have some scorpions to talk to.”

Kai’s eyes widened at the comment, and the two assassins grinned. “A new era in the assassins’ world,” Quil murmured, grabbing the body of their dead leader from the pavement. “Remember that, Kaiden.”

“Oh, and don’t worry.” Ian directed an almost warm smile at Kai. “The humans around here didn’t hear or feel a thing.”

With those final words, the two assassins turned their backs on Viktor and Kai.

“I can’t believe it,” Kai whispered in disbelief. “I simply can’t believe it.”

Viktor immediately shifted, suppressing a wince when the change strained his still-raw wounds. “You’re free, baby. You don’t have to leave me. Not ever.”

Kai turned towards Viktor and wrapped his arms around him. “No, I don’t have to. I won’t. I love you, Viktor.”

“I love you too, baby. I love you, too.”

Epilogue

One year later

The cordless phone hit the wall with a crack, making Viktor wince. “Damn, fuck, shit!” Kai cursed under his breath. “Ssstupid, ssson of a bitch bastard!”

Viktor didn’t bother to ask who Kai had been talking to. He knew, even if he hadn’t managed to hear the actual conversation. Ian Montgomery.

From what Kai had told him, after the sudden demise of Kai’s father, Ian took over the leadership of the Assassins’ Guild and initiated diplomatic talks with the most dangerous races of shifters. Creatures ranging from Australian spiders to crocodiles, sharks, and scorpions, united in the shadows of the Assassins’ Guild. According to Kai, though, so far, Ian hadn’t had any luck in convincing the various races to form a coherent deadly union under his leadership. Viktor couldn’t say he felt surprised. Many shifters held onto their arrogance with their teeth. Traditionally, they were group mercenaries or simply isolated individuals, and they wouldn’t take kindly to anyone attempting to suddenly take over.

Alas, the whole thing caused Ian Montgomery to several times cash in on the *favor* Kai owed him. More often than not, he asked Kai to acquire certain items to convince people to join their cause. Viktor hated to admit it, but Kai couldn’t really refuse. The combined strength of the Guild could wipe them off the face of the Earth, and now, more than ever, they couldn’t risk it.

Kai rubbed his forehead, and Viktor's heart immediately clenched in concern. Kai had begun having nightmares about his dead family from the day of his father's death. Viktor helped his mate in his own way, offering comfort and love when he could. Getting over this trauma would take time. After all, Kai had watched his mother be assassinated in a brutal manner, then had killed his own brother, and had seen his father die. Viktor would have given anything to erase those memories, but things like that couldn't just disappear. They stayed in a person's mind forever. Ian's interventions in their life only made things worse.

However, Viktor knew he could find a way to slowly heal his mate's heart. In spite of everything, Kai was slowly getting better, more used to his new environment and less jumpy. The frequency of the bad dreams started to decrease. Viktor felt convinced that, in time, he would manage to drive them away. They would slowly fade, bad memories being pushed away by a happy life. Even with the shadow of Ian Montgomery over their lives, they could make it work.

Either way, Viktor knew Kai needed his support now. He stepped into the room and slowly made his way to his mate. "Are you all right, beautiful?"

Kai jumped, turning around suddenly and punching Viktor in the face. Viktor managed to avoid the sudden hit and dodged having his nose broken, but his wrist ached like a son of a bitch from blocking the punch. Kai's eyes widened as realization struck. "Oh my God, Viktor. I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"It's okay, baby," Viktor said with a smile, clutching his wrist and mentally checking if the punch had done any significant damage. "My fault entirely. I shouldn't have snuck in behind you like that."

Kai looked towards Viktor's wrist and then turned his back on Viktor. "It's not okay," he murmured softly. "Not okay at all."

Viktor didn't utter a word. He placed a tender kiss on Kai's lips and held his mate tightly, petting his hair. They remained like that for the longest time, until the tension in Kai's body slowly started to fade.

"I don't know what to do, Viktor," Kai whispered almost brokenly. "It's just gets too much."

"Don't worry, pretty," Viktor offered Kai a small smile. "You're here with me, safe. It will be fine. We'll find a way."

Kai's eyes shone with unshed tears of love, gratitude, and relief. "Thank you, Viktor. I just don't know what I'd do without you."

"You don't have to know, baby. I'll always be with you."

Viktor leaned to lick the traces of tears on Kai's cheeks and then took his mate's mouth into a kiss. His dick filled with blood at the first touch of Kai's lips against his own. Kai moaned and wrapped his arms around Viktor, opening his mouth and surrendering to the passion.

"God, Viktor, fuck me!" Kai gasped as they broke the kiss, his eyes no longer haunted, but burning with desire.

Viktor didn't have to be asked twice, but at the same time, he knew what Kai needed, and it wasn't fucking. Kai needed to be made love to, to be surrounded by affection, and to realize he was special.

He lifted Kai up in his arms, carrying him in bridal pose to their bedroom. Gently placing Kai on the bed, he took a second to admire his mate's beautiful form. He didn't know what he'd done to deserve Kai. He truly felt like the luckiest werewolf on the face of the planet.

Joining his mate on the bed, Viktor took off his shirt and went on to remove Kai's sweater. Kai eagerly helped him get rid of the garment. It seemed quite funny, given how fond Kai was of heavy materials that kept him warm. Then again, Viktor did a much better job keeping his mate warm than any sweater or jacket.

Smiling to himself, Viktor started placing feather-light kisses on his mate's body. He licked across his Adam's apple and down his collar bone, ever so slowly worshipping each inch of creamy skin within his reach. He allowed himself to be particularly thorough whenever he ran into a patch of golden scales.

Then down and down his mouth went, until it reached Kai's right nipple. Kai let out a gasp as Viktor's lips closed over the small nub,

sucking gently. His hand tweaked its left counterpart, massaging it to increase the stimulation.

“Viktor, please!” Kai moaned.

Anyone would have thought that Kai wanted more pleasure, that he craved the raw intensity of their more usual couplings. Viktor knew better. It was these moments that truly cemented their bond, the soft, gentle touches, the stolen kisses that spoke of a bond deeper than their fated one. Viktor thought he probably loved Kai the moment they first set eyes on each other, that something more than his animal instincts called to him that day. The golden thread that united their destinies strengthened with each passing day, with each caress or shared joke, with every domestic moment they spent together. Love and passion couldn't be separated, but for Viktor, love took over. His wolf needed his mate with the same animalistic power, but it surrendered to the very human feeling between them.

Kai needed the love between them more than ever. Gently licking down Kai's belly, Viktor followed the trail of scales to the line of Kai's jeans. He could see the outline of Kai's hard cock through the material. Since Kai rarely wore underwear, a wet spot had already started to form.

Taking in the mouth-watering sight, Viktor worked the buttons of Kai's jeans, keeping his movements deliberately slow. As Viktor released his cock from its confines, Kai let out a sound that seemed a mix between a sigh and moan. Viktor couldn't help but be drawn to his mate's beautiful lips yet again. He pressed their mouths together, letting out a moan of his own when a half-shy, half-daring forked tongue met his exploration. Kai often seemed sensitive about the snake aspects of his physiognomy, and Viktor reveled in the fact that his mate could let go and just be himself when they made love.

They kissed languorously, their hands roaming along naked torsos in tender and light caresses. Viktor consciously kept their little make-out session almost innocent, lightly teasing Kai's tongue with his own, but never pushing, never taking possession like he usually did.

He didn't even take off his own jeans, knowing that doing so would just speed the whole thing up. In spite of the urgency he felt every time with Kai, this time he wanted to take it slow.

They took their time kissing, enjoying the unhurried, sizzling passion. When Kai's hands finally reached for the buttons of his jeans, Viktor allowed his mate to work the Levis open, not wanting to rush Kai in any way. Even so, he couldn't suppress a sound of pleasure as his mate's hot hand closed in on his erection. "Oh, fuck, Kai..."

Kai smiled against Viktor's lips and held his gaze as he helped Viktor finish taking off the jeans. Viktor reached for the bottle of lube they kept in the nightstand and groaned softly as Kai spread himself, eagerly exposing his hole.

Viktor swallowed, aching for a taste of his mate's opening. Dropping the tube of lubricant, he helped Kai hold his body up and buried his face between his mate's buttocks. This would probably be easier with Kai on all fours, especially since Viktor's wrist still felt a bit achy, but Kai didn't like not seeing Viktor when they made love.

Viktor leisurely licked over Kai's crease, taking his time to enjoy the decadent flavor of his mate's body. He thrust his tongue into Kai's anus, growling in pleasure at the sinful sensation of eating his mate's ass. He truly loved rimming Kai. Often times, he would take Kai with just the preparation of his tongue, but this wouldn't be one of those times.

He reluctantly got up to retrieve the lube bottle again and squirted some liquid on his fingers. Kai arched his back and gasped as Viktor pressed two fingers inside of his already-prepared passage and thrust them in and out, searching for Kai's special spot. Kai let out a sound of surprised pleasure, and Viktor couldn't help but grin. He inserted another digit and rubbed at the little gland, prolonging the moment, loving the sounds of pleasure his mate made.

Finally, Viktor deemed his mate ready. He removed his fingers and positioned himself at Kai's hole, slowly pushing into his mate's

tight channel. He clenched his teeth as the animal inside clawed out, demanding to claim its mate. But this wasn't about claiming. They already belonged to each other. This was about their love mending things that the past had broken.

Viktor scanned Kai's face for any sign of pain at his intrusion. "Okay?"

Kai nodded and beamed up at Viktor. So much happiness and ecstasy shone in those bright golden eyes that Viktor's heart swelled with love. Entwining their hands, Viktor started a steady rhythm in and out of his mate's passage. They rocked against each other slowly, drawing out the pleasure, reveling in the intimate connection rather than on the physical pleasure.

Viktor didn't know how long he lost himself in his connection with Kai. His orgasm came unexpectedly, like a build-up, sweeping him up in a wave of deep pleasure and love for his mate. He thought he must have howled as he filled Kai's ass with his seed. Kai came almost immediately after him, and Viktor's wolf settled down in contentment at the knowledge of his mate's pleasure. Exhausted and almost overwhelmed by the emotion, Viktor allowed himself to collapse at Kai's side. Kai would tell him about what bothered him in his own time. Viktor just needed to be a little patient.

* * * *

As he came down from the rush of his orgasm, Kai stole a glance at his gorgeous werewolf. He couldn't help but wonder how Viktor knew him so well. How could Viktor always realize what he needed when sometimes Kai himself didn't know?

"Oh, Viktor... love you so much."

Viktor squeezed Kai tightly and pressed their lips together once more. "Love you too, baby."

With one year since their meeting, Kai could now easily admit that this was forever. He trusted Viktor with his life, even if he did

have moments of doubt, specifically when Ian called with one of his little requests. Then, Viktor came and did something like this, almost worshipping him, showering Kai in love and all those negative emotions vanished. He still felt frustrated over Ian's interference in their life, but under Viktor's tender care, the nightmares slowly began to fade. He truly thought that he could leave behind the horror of his days as an assassin.

Thinking of this, Ian's request came back to mind. Strangely enough, now that he lay cuddled at Viktor's side, the thought of having to aid Ian didn't bother him so much. It would just be something he needed to get over with. After that, he could get back to his life at Viktor's side. He truly should consider himself lucky. Ian's demands were a small price to pay for happiness with his handsome and loving mate.

Kai turned towards Viktor, knowing that his werewolf would worry if Kai didn't share Ian's new plan. He didn't really want to ruin the afterglow, but he didn't think he should wait either. "So Ian called."

Viktor offered him a gentle smile. "I assumed that much by the phone destruction thing."

Kai winced at the realization that they would have to again purchase another cordless. A flash of his mate's hand then passed through his mind's eye. "How's your wrist?"

Viktor just chuckled. "It's just fine, baby. Hurts a bit, but werewolves heal fast."

Kai sighed, still feeling guilty at the knowledge that he caused his mate pain. Viktor didn't allow him to dwell in his morose thoughts though. "You were telling me about the phone call?" He arched an inquisitive brow, and Kai couldn't help but think that Viktor looked just plain edible.

Kai shook his head, struggling to focus on answering the question. "Right. Ian called. He said I had to meet some harpy creature on Saturday."

Viktor blinked in surprise. “A harpy? I didn’t even know they existed.”

“Apparently they do. Ian mentioned something like them belonging to the Thieves’ Guild. Supposedly, Ian wanted them to acquire something to bribe I don’t know what shifter. Either way, will you come with me to the meeting?”

“Of course, baby,” Viktor said with a grin. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. Besides, remember what I said? From now on, we do everything together.”

At Viktor’s words, Kai forgot about harpies or scorpions or snakes. Only one white wolf remained in his mind and in his heart. Viktor Petrovic. His mate. “Yes,” he said, smiling happily. “Together forever.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native Romanian, Scarlet was born in 1986 and grew up an avid fan of Karl May and Jules Verne, reading fantasy stories and adventure. Later, when she was out of fantasy stories to read, she delved into her mother's collection of books and, of course, stumbled onto romance.

As a writer though, Scarlet Hyacinth was born one sunny summer day, when a dear friend of hers—the same friend who introduced her to GLBT fiction—proposed they start writing a story of their own. As it turns out, the two friends never did finish that particular story, but Scarlet discovered she had a knack for writing and ended up starting to write individually. And so, between working on her dissertation, studying for exams, and reading yaoi manga, she started writing the Kaldor Saga. Along the way, Scarlet met a lot of wonderful people who supported her, and in the end, she found her story a home and, in the process, fulfilled a beautiful dream.

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