

Chapter 19

Ace and I stayed like that for a while.

I sat crisscrossed on the floor in front of the bars, petting him and feeling his soft fur between my fingertips while he nestled up against me and licked my hands and shins.

Madoc was right: Ace had calmed down quite a bit now that he had spent some time with me. He even lay down on his stomach, wagging his tail happily behind him like a sweet golden retriever.

I had calmed down quite a bit too. It was hard not to be calm in the presence of my mate after spending weeks apart. The mate bond washed over me, feeding my starving, broken heart.

I had hoped to spend time with Ace's human side, but I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy his wolf's company too. It was nice to enjoy his wolf's company quite a bit. I liked watching him.

Despite my goal of speaking with Ace, I was happy to sit in silence. My brain was too muddled by my lack of sleep to have a real conversation anyway.

As time passed, I found myself starting to nod off. My head lulled against the bar of Ace's cell, my eyes drifting shut.

Ace barked, waking me with a jolt. My head snapped up.

"I'm awake," I exclaimed. "Sorry, I'm awake."

Ace made a whimpering sound and stood. I frowned when he stuck his head between the bars as far as it would go and clamped his mouth down on my sweatshirt, tugging slightly.

"What are you doing?"

I was jostled slightly as he continued to tug. I could only assume that this was his way of waking me up so I could keep petting and spending time with him.

"I'm sorry, I won't fall asleep again. I'm awake now."

I ran my hand over his head, hoping to soothe him, but he wasn't having it. With a growl, he tugged me forward with more force, forcing me up and onto my knees with my chest pressed against the bars.

I gasped.

He was trying to pull me into his cell.

"Ace, hold on," I said, attempting to push his head away. "I'm not going to be able to get through the bars, silly wolf. I have to stay out here."

Unless I unlock his cell...

But if Ace used that as an opportunity to escape his confinement, I wasn't sure I would be able to get him back in.

Ace didn't seem to hear what I said, only pulling me harder against the bars. It didn't hurt, but it was a little jarring. He was just so much bigger than me. And strong.

His whine of distress made my chest hurt. Some deep, primal instinct urged me to care for him, to give him what he wanted.

He pulled me forward hard enough that my upper half was dragged between the bars. I paused.

Wait a second, can I fit my entire body between the bars?

With Ace's mouth clamped securely on my sweatshirt, I wiggled between the hard metal. It was a tight squeeze, especially around my chest and ass, but I held my breath and eventually made it through.

"Huh," I said, looking back at the bars, "I don't think I'm supposed to be able to do that."

Ace barked and started to leap and race around the small cell like a dog with zoomies. He was clearly very excited to have full access to me again.

I giggled as I watched him, my mood lifting significantly. How could it not? He was just so cute.

At the sound of my laugh, Ace's black eyes zipped back to me.

We both froze.

Then he charged me.

Gasping, I staggered back and fell against the cold stone wall behind me as Ace ate up the distance between us. He stopped once his face was only an inch in front of mine.

For a beat, I forgot how to inhale.

Then he dragged his big, slobbery, wet tongue down the middle of my face.

"Ew!" I exclaimed, shoving him away from me while I laughed. "That's so gross!"

Ace wasn't concerned by my weak, giggly protests. He continued to glide his tongue all over my face, along my jaw, all the way down to my neck. He didn't miss a single spot.

His licks slowed as he neared my slightly swollen mating gland. My pulse pounded against my throat, and my laughs ended abruptly.

I was extremely aware of the significance of him being so close to the spot.

He was unhurried and careful as he licked over my gland.

Warm tingles shot through me. I slumped against the wall behind me. The noise in my mind settled, replaced by the low hum of a very familiar purr.

It was a purr I had heard Ace make a thousand times before. I had fallen asleep to it while snuggling close to his chest. I had come to depend on it whenever I needed to calm down.

But it wasn't a purr, was it? It was a growl. Low, quiet, barely even there—but a growl nonetheless.

A shuddering breath escaped me as realization hit me square in the chest. I knew that sound. I had been hearing it in the background for years.

I thought it was Ace. Well, Ace's human side, I mean. I even used to joke that he had a rattling lung or must have swallowed a handful of marbles when he was young.

But it was his wolf. All this time, it was the animal inside of him, letting me know he was there. Communicating his presence even though he couldn't actually be with me.

Images flooded my mind, one after another. Quick, vague memories from my childhood that I hadn't thought of in years...that included this beast in front of me.

I remembered laughing while he chased me around the living room right before hearing my father yell, "Ace, no shifting in the house!"

I remembered him crouching down low so I could climb onto his back and ride him like a horse around the backyard.

I remembered countless nights of snuggling into his furry chest and falling asleep to the exact sound he was making right now.

My heart swelled. "I know you."

Tongue mid-lick, Ace froze against me, his hard exhale of breath warm against my neck. He slowly pulled back. My fingers speared through the fur at his neck, worried he was trying to leave me.

But he wasn't. He would never leave me. He had always been here, even when I didn't know it.

His black eyes seemed to glow in the darkness of the barely lit room, penetrating my soul. So, so familiar.

I choked on a sob, my fingers curling tighter around his fur. "I know you."

Not only did I know him; I had missed him. Desperately. Hopelessly. So much so that there were times when I physically ached for him. Ached for this growly, beastly creature in front of me.

The other half of the man I loved.

I loved this wolf. Just as much as his human side. He was the other half of my best friend, the supporting character of so many of my childhood memories.

And I hadn't had contact with him for years.

Similarly, he had gone years without me.

I remembered how obsessed this wolf was with me—protective and possessive and maybe a little uninged. But also, so unbelievably caring and tender and attentive and loving.

Growing up, whenever I was sad, I sought out Ace's human side to comfort me.

I could talk to him, and he would listen, give me advice, let me cry against his chest while he held me close, and whisper in my ear that everything would be okay.

His wolf side, however, I sought out when I was done being sad and needed cheering up.

This silly wolf in front of me always knew how to make me laugh—be it by licking me nearly to death, or making goofy faces, or dragging me outside to get some much-needed fresh air.

His human side was my rock. His wolf side was my sun.

I needed both of them. Equally.

Realizing all this, it was of little wonder that he was so desperate to see me. His wolf hated being without me. It made him weak, sad, and erratic. He couldn't think when we were apart for too long.

Ace's strange behavior over the years suddenly made sense. Half of him was suffering.

Suffering...to protect me.

At the sight of my tears, Ace whimpered and pawed at the ground. He pressed his wet nose to my cheek, almost as if he were leaving a kiss there, and licked up the tear.

This only made me cry harder. He was so protective. So worried and eager to make me feel better.

"I'm okay," I whispered around the ball in my throat. I petted him again, my hands seeming to remember the exact way to touch him to calm him down. "I'm okay, Ace. I just missed you, that's all."

Ace let out a huff of air and lovingly nuzzled his nose against the mate gland on my neck.

Almost as if he were saying, "I missed you too."