

Let Them Kneel

Chapter 2 Chapter Two

“Damn,” Tessa muttered as she appeared at Kaelani’s side, wiping her hands on a flour-dusted rag. She craned her neck toward the door, where the bell had only just stopped swaying. “Did you see him? He was hot. Like—unfairly hot. The suit, the shoulders, the whole smoldering ‘I eat interns for breakfast’ vibe...”

Kaelani shot her a look and turned back to her tray of pastries. “He ordered a cake and coffee. That’s all.”

Tessa groaned. “That’s all? Girl, you’re impossible. A man like that walks in here, drops cash without blinking, and you don’t even think about—” She made a vague gesture with her hands that Kaelani refused to interpret.

“He’s not my type.” Kaelani’s voice was flat, but her chest still felt too tight, her pulse uneven. She hated that she could still feel the weight of his presence even though he was gone.

Tessa smirked, undeterred. “Please. A man like that is everyone’s type.”

Kaelani rolled her eyes, lining the pastries into neat rows. “Get your hormones under control and get back to work,” she said, a faint smile tugging at her lips.

Tessa gasped theatrically, hand pressed to her chest. “Excuse me? See, that’s why you’re so tense all the time. You need to get fucked—good.”

“My vibrator does just fine,” Kaelani shot back dryly.

Tessa barked out a laugh. “Please. That’s nothing compared to a man jackhammering his way to glory.”

Kaelani shook her head, biting back a laugh as she turned away. “You’re too much.”

The afternoon wore on in a steady blur of customers, flour, and baking. By late day, the rush had thinned, leaving only the hum of ovens and the soft scrape of Kaelani’s spatula against the mixing bowl.

She paused, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead. Warm. Too warm. The bakery ovens always kept the place toasty, but this was different – a slow heat crawling under her skin, blooming low in her belly.

“Ugh, it’s like a sauna in here,” Tessa groaned from the front, fanning herself with a menu. “I swear, if we get one more order of triple fudge brownies, I’m staging a revolt.”

Kaelani forced a small smile, though her throat felt dry. “Maybe you’re just hungover.”

“Rude,” Tessa shot back, but her grin was easy.

Kaelani wiped her palms on her apron. No, this wasn’t the ovens. Or the day. Or anything she could name. A restless hum buzzed in her veins, making her heart beat too fast, her hands unsteady as she reached for another tray. She pushed through it, ignoring the unease gnawing at her chest.

By the time the sun dipped lower, streaking the shop windows with gold, Kaelani felt sweat prick at the back of her neck. She tied her hair up with quick, frustrated fingers, pretending not to notice the way her body was betraying her.

Something was wrong.

“Hey,” Tessa called from the front, eyeing her closely. “Are you okay? You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine,” Kaelani said quickly, forcing her hands to keep moving as she wiped down the counter. But deep down, she knew she wasn’t fine at all.

“Bullshit,” Tessa said flatly, planting her hands on her hips. “Your face is flushed. Like, really flushed.”

Kaelani tugged at the collar of her shirt, the fabric clinging uncomfortably to her damp skin. Her flush wasn’t just in her face – heat spread everywhere, pooling in places that made her thighs press together instinctively. Her hand drifted to her stomach, only to realize the strange pressure wasn’t in her belly at all. It was lower. Sharp. Gnawing.

What’s happening to me?

Tessa's brow creased with worry. "Hey, maybe you should go home. I can close up tonight. Seriously, you look like you're about to keel over."

Kaelani hesitated, wiping her palms against her apron. "Are you sure you'll be alright?"

"Of course," Tessa said, waving her off. "Go home and rest. Honestly, I knew your workaholic tendencies were going to finally catch up to you. Now go, I'll handle everything here."

Kaelani managed a small, grateful smile, though inside the pressure was coiling tighter, demanding, insistent. She untied her apron, hung it on the hook by the door, and stepped out into the cooling evening air.

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Julian sat at the long polished table, posture composed, voice even as he addressed the council. Maps and charts lay spread before them, arguments over borders and highways bouncing from Alpha to Alpha like restless sparks.

"Expansion north is inevitable," one of them insisted. "Better to profit than fight."

Julian's mouth tightened. "Profit won't matter if control is lost. Humans don't share. They consume." His tone was crisp, confident, the kind that usually silenced a room.

And it did. For a moment.

But then a strange pulse stirred low in his chest, faint but insistent. Heat, like an ember catching flame, spread beneath his collar. He shifted in his chair, willing it away.

Jace's sharp gaze cut to him from across the table. The Beta tilted his head slightly, a silent question in his eyes. Julian ignored it, lifting his glass of water and taking a measured sip.

Minutes passed, voices droning on about highways and parcel sales. The ember didn't fade. It grew. His jaw flexed, a bead of sweat breaking at his temple despite the cool hum of the air conditioning.

"Alpha Julian?" One of the older Alphas prompted, brows raised. "You seem... distracted. Are you well?"

Every eye turned toward him.

Julian's fingers curled into a fist against the table, nails biting into his palm. His wolf prowled, restless, a growl rumbling faint in the back of his mind.

"I'm fine," he said flatly, though the words grated against his teeth.

But Jace's frown deepened. He wasn't fine. Not at all.

The ember had grown into a slow burn, coiling tight in Julian's gut. His wolf clawed at him, restless, snarling to be set loose.

"Alpha?" Jace's voice cut through the noise, low but firm. "You don't look too well."

Julian's jaw ticked. "I'm fine."

But murmurs stirred around the table. Another Alpha leaned forward, frowning. "He's pale. Fevered. Has he been exposed to wolfsbane?"

Julian's head snapped toward him, insult flashing hot. "I am not poisoned."

"Perhaps we should call in a physician," another suggested, tone carefully neutral.

The air in the room tightened, eyes circling him like vultures. An Alpha, sick at the table — weakness laid bare for all to see. His wolf bristled at the insult, demanding he prove them wrong.

"Perhaps we should continue this tomorrow," Jace said quickly, cutting across the whispers. "My Alpha should rest."

Julian turned sharply. "That's ridiculous. I said I'm fine."

"Julian..." Jace's tone sharpened, the Beta's authority breaking through years of loyalty.

Across the table, one of the older Alphas inclined his head. "It has been a long morning. I'm perfectly fine with reconvening tomorrow."

Julian's hand tightened into a fist, knuckles whitening against the table. His wolf snarled, but the heat flooding his body gave him no ground to stand on. Reluctantly, he gave a sharp nod.

The meeting adjourned.

But Julian already knew – no physician, no fever, no wolfsbane explained this. This was something else.

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