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Caged

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Caged

By Sean Michael

Chapter One

Palin gazed out the wide window. The view always fascinated him. He wasn't sure if it was because he hadn't always had it to look at or if it was because the huge window so dominated the room. It took up the entire wall, from floor to ceiling. Only the domed edges were steel. The window itself was reinforced glass, as strong as brick or mortar or steel, not invulnerable, but close enough. Or at least as close as possible.

He didn't live at the very top of the building, but he was up pretty high. There were only two buildings higher than The Romaliot and both stood behind it. A half dozen buildings rose higher than his apartment in front of him, but they were placed in a way that he could see the city sprawling away from its core, rolling over the land to the very edge of the sea.

He couldn't actually see the water from here; the horizon was buildings, the shorter flats that were a dozen stories high and all the same. He'd come from a place like that, his parents and his sister and himself squeezed into two small rooms that were like boxes.

His sister was older and she'd escaped when he was seven. She'd wanted to be an entertainer. Father had refused -- he wanted his children to live in the higher buildings, closer to the core, not serve the people that did. So she'd run away when she was thirteen.

He'd seen her once after that. He and his mother had come to the core for tests and he'd seen her on a street corner. She was thin, eyes so hungry and dark. She held her hand out to him, called out to him, but his mother held tightly to his hand and pulled him along. He'd watched until the crowd ate his sister up.

Looking down now, he wondered if she was still out there.

Palin couldn't see the street from here, with too much traffic between him and it, and nearly 200 stories. The aircars looked so different from above than they had when he'd been looking up at them that day. They'd seemed huge when he was twelve, their occupants larger than life, mysterious.

He was one of them now.

The bell rang, warning of the imminent arrival of his first client. Palin slid the gold and bronze embroidered white robe over his naked body. The robe was warm and the clients didn't know what he wore beneath it. Some of them made him feel vulnerable, and he would wear his jeans and shirt and a tri-klev robe beneath the robes of his office, even though the building had security and he was assured that there was no way for someone to arrive at his door with a weapon.

Still, it didn't hurt to be too careful.

Not everyone thought information agents deserved to live. Many were understandably wary, and he was slender and short at 5'6" -- an easy target.

It always amused him that some of the clients never realized that it would be as easy for him to pluck information from them -- easier, in fact, as they were right in front of him -- as it was for him to do it to the subjects they presented. Of course he would lose his license if he were to do that and, while some people were quite happy and prosperous operating outside of the law, it wasn't something he preferred.

The clients were all similar, dressed in silk suits, hair cut short, clean-shaven and always carrying a slim briefcase. It was always black. The case was almost as much of an identifier as the heavy silver robe information brokers had to wear in public so everyone would know who they were.

People never touched him when he was out, scared to give him an opening to their minds. He didn't need to touch them, and he figured most of them knew that in their heads, but their bodies still shrank from him. On the streets and walkways they would part in front of him like a river around a rock.

Today's client, Sahib Jonas, was a regular. Palin had garnered much information for the man and always been well-paid for his services. The Sahib was used to his stutter and his stature and knew well not to judge him by either.

He slid the gold turban on his head just as the knock came on the door. The turban and robe were gaudy and rather silly, but they were what the people expected information brokers to wear when they worked. It identified him to them in a way they could understand.

He wondered sometimes if it wasn't also that it made him and others of his kind less of a threat -- the gaudy show lending the profession an air of trickery, chicanery, that made the clients more comfortable.

There were histories in the office of the Council of Informations. In them he'd seen pictures of "circuses" and "freak shows" from hundreds of years past. There was always an information broker traveling with such groups, usually called a fortune teller and dressed similarly to his uniform. It kept them from being taken too seriously, made people associate them with entertainment.

It didn't matter; most people were still uncomfortable around information brokers, refusing to touch them or even meet their eyes. As if that was how it worked.

Palin sat cross-legged on the thick tapestry cushion in front of the low table and pressed the button that opened the door, admitting Sahib Jonas. Inclining his head, he indicated the cushion across from himself with a sweep of his hand.

Jonas appeared to be a nice man, quiet and unassuming until you looked into his eyes. There was a lust for power in them. It was another thing these men had in common along with their black briefcases. They wanted to rule the world, hungry for power, for the ability to control their environment and beyond.

In his appearance, Jonas was the same as Palin. He imagined the man's innocuous and retiring manner fooled many into dismissing him much as they dismissed Palin himself. Palin thought that to dismiss Sahib Jonas would be a very dangerous thing.

Jonas came once a week. Sometimes he was looking for specific information, most of the time he just wanted something the subject was keeping hidden. He would write down what Palin told him in a little paper book with a real stylus. Palin had only ever seen those before in the Council of Preservations offices.

Jonas knew the routine. He gave Palin the name of today's subject and told Palin he was seeking information on the man's mother, as much as possible without the man knowing Palin had been there.

Palin closed his eyes and slipped into the great mind that held them all.

Jonas was easy to find, as he was the closest and he was reaching out. He offered the image of a vala, a slave bred and engineered for pleasure if the tattoo that covered one side of the man's face was anything to go by. The way in was always something the client was willing to share, usually something unimportant that couldn't be used against them -- in this case a session at a flesh house that Jonas made no effort to hide his membership in.

Palin usually didn't linger, but there was something about this vala. He was large and dangerous; there was anger in the dark eyes and something else as well. Need. Palin could almost hear the man calling to him. Palin understood need.

He let the image go, latching on to the bright thread that would lead from Jonas to the subject. The two men had met, were friendly colleagues, the way between their minds was easy, direct, lit in brilliant neon.

Palin slid undetected into the subject's mind and searched for the man's mother. She was well-hidden, but once Palin found her, the information flowed easily. He began to tell Jonas what he saw, only slipping from the subject's mind when he could feel conscious attention begin to turn toward him. After that, he told Jonas as much as he could remember.

Sahib Jonas was practically crowing, hand moving quickly over the page as he scribbled everything down. "Wonderful! Wonderful! And he doesn't know you were there?"

"N-no."

"Wonderful! You shall have a very good bonus for this."

"Act-tually, S-s-sahib, I w-was hoping f-for an exchange th-this t-t-time."

The man's face grew sharp, calculating. "What kind of exchange?"

"Inf-f-ormation f-for inf-f-ormation. T-t-tell m-me about the v-vala y-y-you showed m-me."

Jonas relaxed, smiled. "In exchange for all you've told me today?"

Palin nodded and Jonas' smile grew wide.

"It's a deal. Don't ever go into business, boy, you'd be lousy at it."

"He's a vala at the flesh emporium on Broadway. A man named Favila owns the place and the man. The vala's a beast. Fights until you drop him with electric shock, but then he's a great fuck. It's a good workout, if a little dangerous."

"I heard someone dropped the controller once and the vala broke his arm and shoulder before he was subdued by the club guards."

"F-for sale?"

Jonas laughed. "Yes, I daresay he is, though no one's been able to keep him. He'd have you for breakfast, Palin, no offense meant."

Palin only inclined his head. Jonas was too good a client to lose over what could be perceived as an insult. His private life was none of this man's business anyway.

Jonas thanked him for the information, made an appointment for the following week, and left. As Palin watched the man go, he wondered suddenly if Jonas was behind the attempts to get into his own mind. He guarded well, any invasion setting off an alarm and he'd been able to fight off the attacks. It would be like Jonas though, to want information on him as well.

It made him shiver, to think there might be something written about him in that little book in Jonas' black-inked scribble.

Palin considered the address he'd printed and wondered if he should really go. There had been attacks lately, making it dangerous to be out, and the flesh emporiums were all on street level. It had been months since he'd been so far down, but he was already in the aircar, the leather seat cushioning him. The driver waited expectantly for the destination; in a moment he would have waited too long and the look would turn to impatience, annoyance. Palin gave the address quietly.

It was rare that he had such insight as had led him to pursue Jonas' offered thought, but that insight and instinct had yet to lead him astray. It would only haunt him if he didn't go, the temptation of searching out the vala's mind to see why he felt so compelled by the man would grow and become

harder and harder to resist. He would hardly be persecuted for invading the mind of a vala, but it would violate his own code.

The worldnet entry on Favila's establishment made it clear he rented out his vala by the minute, the hour or the day. Palin could look and come away again without any harm to himself or anyone else. It didn't need to be more than that, a satisfaction of his curiosity. He didn't think too hard about the fact that he had pocketed the money card to his full account instead of just the everyday account card he usually carried.

The air became more crowded as they drew nearer to the ground, the aircars zipping all around, following routes and rules that only the drivers knew. He could feel the press of people, the hum of unguarded minds growing stronger. It was alluring, like the opening bars of a symphony, seducing you to it. It took discipline to ignore it, to keep his mind on his own business, but today it was easy, the pull of the vala a stronger lure.

The car pulled into a drop-off zone in front of wide double doors that sat beneath a sign that proclaimed Favila's to be "the true home of dark fantasy." Palin raised his hood and stepped out onto the crowded sidewalk. A path opened in front of him, leading him straight to the heavy doors. He knew it was because they saw his silver robe and were afraid, but still-. it seemed prophetic, an omen that he was on the right path.

Time would tell.

Chapter Two

He hated this part most of all.

The fucking was all right, the hurting good and deep, the fighting fabulous. But this -- being trussed and gagged, oiled and gilt and displayed like some pointless fucking show pony?

He despised it.

He bit down into the gag, groaning as the Owner kicked his thighs further apart. His head and neck stretched painfully, anchored to the wall by his hair, plaited and gathered and twined around a shining hook, and he could only look up, see the naked, writhing bodies upon the invis-i-ble above.

"You'd better get it up, vala, or I'll fry your balls off your body."

He tried not to roll his eyes -- really -- but the fact was that he wasn't old or common and he fucking knew his worth. Men paid well for the good fight, to subdue one who fought with true fury. Everyone knew anger grew from the balls.

Still, he didn't quite manage to swallow the look and the ring beneath his loincloth vibrated, sending a single, sharp warning shock through him. He felt his cock fill, press against the black vinyl draped over his hips.

"S-s-sahib F-f-f-avila?" The voice was soft, the stutter unmistakable. "I've c-c-come f-f-for your v-v-vala."

The Owner chuckled, he could see the lights shining off the jeweled earring as the man shook his head. "I believe you are in the wrong place, friend. This vala is not for one small as you. You're searching for Sahib Jalen."

Soft footsteps drew nearer and he could feel the weight of this one's eyes. "N-no. I w-w-w-want him."

"You want-." The Owner's laugh filled the room. "He'd eat you alive in three bites -- two if he's lucky. This vala is no cuddly bear, no gentle giant. He's a fighter, he has his balls, his will. You don't want him."

"You d-don't kn-n-now m-m-me. You m-make assump-assumptions. Y-you are w-w-wrong."

A gentle hand slid along his neck, fingertips following his stretched skin. Gooseflesh followed behind the touch, his body vibrating as he fought not to struggle against his bonds.

"Okay. No offense meant." The Owner sighed and the shock came to his balls again, sharp and short. "How about you try him out? Fight him, fuck him. Test his strength. He's an expensive piece of flesh."

"N-not t-try. B-b-buy." Despite the stammer, the voice was sure, and the soft touches never stopped.

"You want to... No one wants to buy him. No one will keep him."

He began to shiver, panic filling him. Buy him?

Buy him?

No one tried to buy him.

Not anymore.

The stroking hand moved to his chest, touching his nipple ring very lightly before tracing his collarbones. "I w-will keep h-h-him."

"And when they find you beaten and bloody in your up-level rooms? This isn't a toy, not a 'bot or a holowhore at all."

"W-w-w-w-w-what d-d-do y-you c-c-c-care?" The fingers on his skin curled around his arm as the voice stuttered badly and then the hand was gone. "I'll c-call and have y-y-your license r-removed."

"Now hold on! I just was worried about your well-being." The Owner's face appeared suddenly, cheeks crimson and eyes glinting. "Hate these silly rich uptowners. Don't get excited. He can't handle you. He won't buy you and he won't give you a name."

He forced his tension away, focusing only on the pull in his jaw, his neck, his thighs.

"H-how m-m-much?"

"Two hundred thousand commocreds and he's yours. The rate changes with rarer currency."

"D-d-done. Untie h-him."

"Untie him? You... you're serious?" Suddenly his hair was untied, his head falling forward. The world swam, blood throbbing as he fought to catch a glimpse of the owner of the broken voice and gentle hands.

Covered in a voluminous cloak, it appeared his soon to be new owner was a boy, certainly no more than twenty years, if that. The fine chin was stubbornly set, light glinting off of windows over his eyes. The boy was handing his Owner a money-card. "M-m-make the tr-tr-transaction."

The Owner was right. This boy could not take him, could not even hold his own for a single blow, much less a fight. No one had kept him. No one but the Owner.

The Owner took the card and the boy turned, coming over to him, blue eyes wide and curious behind the windows.

"W-what's y-y-your n-n-" The boy shook his head, a frown appearing, "n-name." The boy half-turned back toward the Owner. "W-w-what's his n-n-name?"

"Vala." The Owner came back into view, handing the boy his card. "Your money's good."

The frown was back. "Vala? N-n-no, that w-w-won't d-do." A sudden smile lit the overly serious face. "N-no w-w-wonder he is s-so g-grumpy -- w-w-with no name."

He blinked, eyes moving, almost panicked, from the Owner to the boy. A name? For him? His own name?

"Name him what you will. He's yours. It's going to cost you a ten percent penalty when... I mean, if you have to return him."

"W-what d-do y-you think of Tigre?"

He realized the boy was looking straight at him, the question had not been directed at the Owner. The boy's next words, though, were imperious, despite the continuing stammer. "K-k-keys."

The Owner handed over a series of small key cards, all attached to the control to the ring around his cock and balls. He tensed, hands balling into fists behind his back.

"Here you go. You want him sedated or stunned? We don't let 'em just walk out, you know?"

The boy shook his head and held up the controller. "W-w-we're fine." Then his new owner began to unlock him.

He looked over to the Owner, a questioning moan leaving his throat. Walk out? But he hadn't left since he'd come. Even when they'd bought him, before they brought him back, they'd tried him, fought him, fucked him here.

This was where he *was*.

Warm hands, gentle but implacable, took his face and turned it back until he was looking into the boy's face. "I own y-y-you. M-me. N-n-not him."

His breath was coming quick, hands clenched, the temptation to strike out struggling with the urge to press back against the wall and feel the solid *normalcy* of it. He had been the Owner's forever, for years, from before he was even a man. No one kept him.

The hands stroked gently over his cheeks, the boy's blue eyes staring down into his own. "You will obey me."

His head was shaking, eyes searching for answers. Blue. The boy's eyes were blue.

His new Owner -- his Eiba? It couldn't be -- had blue eyes.

In a matter of moments he was released from his bonds and the boy stood back. "Stand and follow." Without another word or glance back, the boy turned and headed for the door.

He groaned, eyes fastened upon the Owner, who simply smiled and nodded. "Go on then, vala. You'll be back where you belong soon enough. No worries."

He stood slowly, getting his balance before taking a step forward, heading toward the door.

"B-b-belongs w-with me," the boy told the Owner as he walked by. Then the hood was pulled up over the boy's head, the dark silver concealing.

He followed the slight figure, steps slow and unsure, heart pounding in his chest. The temptation to attack the figure before him grew with each motion; whenever he left the room to move down this hall he was going to fight. To fuck. To battle.

"Stay close." The order was softly issued. "Especially outs-s-side."

He stopped short. Outside. He remembered outside. They never went outside, the vala here. Never. He keened through the gag, head shaking.

The boy turned and made a noise. "S-stupid. F-f-forgot."

The gag was removed and the boy frowned up at him. "The c-c-car w-w-will t-take us home, b-b-but it is in the st-st-street."

"Street, Kelme?" He swallowed hard, clearing his throat. "Forgive, but they do not allow vala outside the building."

"Eiba. Y-y-you're n-not vala -- Tigre n-n-now." The boy turned again and began walking. "Follow me."

"Eiba." He stepped forward, and then again and again -- each step that he took without pain giving him confidence.

The doors swished open as his Eiba drew near and the boy stepped through them effortlessly, half-turning, waiting for him. He braced himself -- he had seen a vala step outside once, saw him writhe upon the ground as his balls and wrists and ankles fried -- frowning and growling low, and then he stepped outside, waiting for the worst.

"This w-w-way." His Eiba headed away from the building.

His eyes were huge, staring at the things he had only seen through windows, and he hugged the wall of the building, following slowly. The boy walked along, seemingly unconcerned by the people that thronged along. His Eiba seemed to almost float, his feet covered by the robe he wore. The boy turned suddenly and came back. Trying not to cringe, he waited for the pain, but instead, the boy took his hand in a small one and continued to walk.

He followed, dazed by the smells and colors that were *everywhere* and the solid warmth in his hand. It was surprisingly cold outside compared to the inside and the air was wet, too. So was the ground.

"H-here," said the boy, darting suddenly through the crowd, dragging him behind. He was pulled through a small, low door after the boy, who only let go of his hand once they were both seated.

He closed his eyes and then opened them again, alternating between not wanting to miss anything and not wanting to see anything at all.

The boy took his hood off and spoke softly to the man in the front of this car. They began to move when the boy sat back. The motion made his stomach spin and his eyes slammed shut. He could look later.

"Are y-y-you s-sick?" The boy's voice was soft and gentle, concerned. As was the hand that touched his arm.

Sick? No. He was unnerved and dizzy and completely disoriented and utterly unprepared for this. He was not where he belonged, in a *car* -- a car, what would the One whose Marks were Golden and the One with Only One Eye say when he got back and told them? -- with this very small, very confusing Kelme, and going somewhere he didn't know. He was angry and concerned and thirsty and more than a little scared. But sick? No.

The car made a motion and his stomach felt like it had been left behind, snagged on the corner of a passing building.

Okay, maybe a little sick.

"Forgiveness, please. This vala has not been in such a car in very long, Kelm... Ei... Eiba."

The warm hand slid along his leg, rubbing his thigh and then patting. "W-won't be long, Tigre. W-we live c-c-close, b-but high."

He nearly vibrated within his own skin, muscles shifting, insisting that he move, that it was time to fight. His mind whispered otherwise -- wait, watch, learn. The Owner would give rewards for useful information -- a woman of his own to fuck perhaps, or a boy.

The car tilted suddenly as they began to climb sharply, and he could feel sudden tension in the boy.

"W-w-w-what's w-w-w- h-happening?"

"Some sorti accident on mid-levels. Everyone's bein directed 'round it, gub," the driver said.

He opened his eyes at his new owner's sharp intake of breath. The boy was pressed against the window, looking down. He risked his own glance.

There was a platform against the building they were next to, several aircars on fire, crumpled, bloody figures next to them. The side of the building was a gaping maw, jagged glass and concrete and pipes making dangerous teeth.

It became less and less real as they climbed and the platform grew smaller.

"N-n-not accident," the boy murmured, sitting back, face serious, sad.

The network feed that was piped into the main rooms showed such things, aircars exploding and people screaming about things that made no sense, held no import. He liked to watch the network, see the interesting places outside the walls, but he hadn't quite believed it was real.

He still didn't.

He pulled tight within himself, surrounding himself with the impenetrable stillness and silence that served as his strongest protection.

"F-f-faster," the boy ordered the driver before turning to him. "Safe at h-home."

The aircar seemed to jump forward suddenly, a whining noise filling the car. It stopped abruptly as they evened out again, the boy bracing himself against the sudden shift, hands against the seat in front of him.

It was force of will and sheer unadulterated stubbornness that kept him seated, refusing to so much as budge, muscles in his thighs and lower back straining to keep him in place.

The landing was not gentle, almost bouncing, and the boy shook his head. "C-closer to the d-d-door."

They drove the short distance.

"Two creds, gub."

The boy handed across a money-card and the driver pushed it into the payslot, handing it back moments later. Leaning past him, slender body pressing close, the boy opened the door and motioned him out.

He stepped out reluctantly, immediately slamming back against the aircar, hands covering his face. Light. Light that was brighter than the main room, brighter than the bulbs in the tanning pods, brighter than anything he could imagine. And cold, wind blowing against his skin and biting in like ice and he wanted to be back in his cell, back with his things and his blanket that had been given to him by the Trainer and his life and his Owner. The Owner whom he knew and who knew him and good fights and hard, fast fucking and... He growled low, body and mind preparing to fight. He would fight and then this Kelme would send him back.

The boy came out beside him and suddenly there were loud sounds, explosions and screams and the acrid smell of smoke and chemicals. The small hand grabbed his own again, the boy running, pulling him along, toward the doors.

Panic filled him and he fought, letting the animal within him free, unable to see or hear or comprehend properly.

Another explosion slammed him against the door, stunning him. He could feel himself being slowly dragged, the bitter bite of glass into his skin keeping him from passing out.

The doors closed with a heavy thud, the noise and smells suddenly muted. The boy was panting, one hand wiping at his cheek and coming away with blood.

"G-get up. N-n-n-not safe here."

He followed, more from a sense of survival than obedience. His ears were ringing, world swaying dangerously as he found his feet. His hand was taken again, the boy's grip firm, sure as he was led down stairs. The boy moved quickly, light on his feet.

He would find a safe spot. He would stay there until he figured out what to do, how to get home. He would fight and fuck and return to the Owner and the One with Only One Eye and the network feed in the main room and the tanning pods and the exercise room.

First he had to find a safe spot.

They passed through a door and down a corridor and through two more doors and finally the boy stopped in a large, almost empty room with a huge oval window filling up where one wall would go. The boy pressed a button, making a small red light appear above the door.

He backed into the closest, darkest corner away from the window, wincing as the walls pressed the shards of glass deeper into his skin, a low, scared noise finding its way from his throat. The boy stood against the door for long minutes, breathing deeply, and then straightened, coming right for him. The cut on the boy's cheek was bleeding, making him look strangely fierce.

"N-n-not meant f-for m-m-me. Safe n-n-now."

He moved across the wall, protecting his wounded back, but giving himself more room to maneuver, looking for the right moment to attack.

"H-hurt. I'll f-f-fix." The boy came right up to him and took his hand as if the Kelme had no clue that he was dangerous. "Tr-r-reatment and f-f-food and s-sleep."

He shook his head with a growl, stepping away. No, this was not where he slept, not where the food came from. "Fighting and fucking if Kelme wins and then back to the Owner."

The boy looked almost surprised for a moment and then the expression disappeared, leaving an expressionless mask behind. "Eiba." The boy came closer, stepping right up to him. "Mine. Fighting and fucking if *I* say."

He had dropped into a fighting stance when the boy moved, nostrils flaring, a low snarl of warning sounding. He could feel the blood trickling over his skin, feel a deep, bright red pain in his lower back. Scared and confused and trapped within a cage not his own, all he wanted was to frighten the boy and be sent home.

The boy's head tilted. "Scared. Are home. New, but good. You'll see." The small hand came up, caressing his tattoo. "Safe now."

His breath came light and quick, vision dark and cloudy around the edges. He grabbed hold of the term he understood, hoping the boy would understand what he needed. No one kept him. No one was his Eiba. No one ever. "Home. Please, Kelme, Honored One, take this vala home."

"Eiba." The boy repeated the word, fingers so soft on his face. There was a tug at his shoulder, a flare of pain and then the throbbing eased somewhat. "Fix first." Another piece of small glass was pulled from his flesh.

He winced, a small noise catching in his throat. It didn't even hurt so much as he was lost and confused and well and truly frightened and didn't know what to do. Even if he fought the boy, he would have to find the car and he would have to go outside in the brightness and cold and noise again. Exhausted and hurting within and without, he simply dropped his eyes.

Over and over again the same pattern was repeated: tug, flare, ease, the boy turning him this way and that to reach all the glass.

A soft catch of breath filled the silence between them when he was turned to face the wall. He could hear something slide in the wall and then something cool was sprayed against his lower back, the pain there suddenly gone. He slumped against the wall, the lack of pain a shock, after so many minutes of coping with it.

"There." The soft hands were caressing his shoulders and then his hand was taken again, the boy pulling him along through another door.

Shivering, he followed the flowing silver cape, noticing that the light caught the hundreds of tiny specks of glass caught within the fabric.

The room they entered was bright, but soon they were in another, smaller room. This one had no windows, but a toilet and a sink, a mirror, a shower stall and a big tub in one corner.

The boy pushed him toward the shower, putting a bottle into his hands. "Wash."

He took off the leather loincloth and stepped into the stall, wincing as the boy reached in and punched the buttons that started the water pounding against him, front and back. He could hear the sound of glass falling, knocked loose from his hair.

He reached back, tugged it loose from the band and wet the thick, heavy mass down. His fingers fumbled against the bottle, almost dropping it more than once as he worked the top open.

It was taken from his fingers and the glass on the floor swept away. "Kneel."

His muscles tensed, but he moved, simply too exhausted to struggle. The tile was slick and warm from the water, the position comfortable and familiar. The boy began to work the soap through his hair, fingers pressing into his scalp. It felt good. He closed his eyes, holding perfectly still, feeling the slight sting as the soap bubbles ran over his back and shoulders.

His hair was sudsed up and then rinsed, twice, and then the gentle, but firm fingers soaped up his skin, the touch impersonal as it passed over his nipples and genitals. It occurred to him, distantly, that maybe he was sleeping, that he had fallen asleep waiting for a Kelme and was dreaming idly of being bathed and touched.

The water stopped then, hands tugging him back up, drying him with a soft towel. He opened his eyes to find the boy kneeling before him, drying his legs.

Not dreaming then.

"Th... thank you." He didn't know what to do, to say, so he silenced himself and simply waited.

"I'll h-have a tailor c-c-come in t-tomor-r-row, b-but here y-y-you'll w-wear only skin."

The boy stood and smiled at him again, taking his hand and leading him back into the bright room with lots of windows and plants.

"W-we'll eat."

He shook his head again, trying to clear it. Eat? It wasn't time for food, at least he didn't think so, and Kelme never ate where he was. When he was younger, he had served at one or two of the big parties, but he wasn't good at it, kept dropping the plates and tiny, thin cups.

The boy pointed at the small table with the chairs and went to the cupboards, taking down two plates and filling them with food. He watched, desperate to understand the rules. When would he go home? When would the fighting come?

Perhaps the boy truly had made a mistake, taken the wrong vala. Perhaps the boy didn't understand. He sighed. He was worse at talking than he was at carrying dishes.

The boy brought the plates over and put them on the table. "S-sit." He was given another shy smile. "Eat. L-l-long day."

He blinked, eyes wide. Long day?

He was *not* home, not fighting, not where he belonged. He'd been outside, seen an explosion, and given a shower. He was naked and bloody and not fucked or fought with. All of the rules had changed, without reason, without sense, and this man-child who continued to insist that he was *Eiba* was smiling at him.

"This vala does not understand." He held out his hands, intending to show his lack of aggression and comprehension.

"Tigre," the boy informed him, finger poking gently at his chest. "N-not vala."

His hand was taken again. "S-sit." The boy sat, as if to show him what the word meant.

"Eat." The boy mimed eating and then smiled at him, pointing at the other chair and plate.

"Not vala?" He frowned, moving over to the table. "Not fighting, then not fucking, then not home. Big lights and noise and cold and outside and still not home. Now, not Kelme, not vala?" He was trembling violently, hands turning into fists, words bitten off. "This vala does *not* understand."

"You will sit." The boy's face had turned again into a blank mask; the words were flat, hard. "I don't care if you do not understand, you will sit and you will eat. And if I think you deserve it and *need* it then you will get your fight and your fuck."

"No." He slammed his hand down against the plate, shattering it, roaring in his fury. "Home, this vala should go home to the Owner!"

The boy stood. He didn't look angry or upset, only maybe a little sad. He took the controller out, showing it, but he didn't use it -- just pointed to the door at the end of a short hall.

He growled, backing away. Finally something he understood. "Home. Home to the Owner."

The boy continued to point to the door. "Go."

His muscles tensed, adrenaline flooding his system like a drug. His legs kept backing him away from the controller, away from the hated box, even as he continued to speak. "Home. Home. Home! Home to the Owner!" The angrier he got, the calmer the boy seemed to get.

His back hit the door the boy was pointing at and the Kelme nodded. "Go."

His fists slammed into the door, creating a low, thudding noise. "Home!"

"You are home."

With that the boy pressed the controller, sending him to the floor with a long pulse at the highest level. He couldn't breathe, couldn't see, but it didn't matter. The hurt was true and real and familiar and engrossing.

When the pain stopped the controller hit the floor near his head, smashing into a thousand bits.

"You are home."

The boy's footsteps were loud in the sudden silence, and he heard the door open and close and he was alone.

He screamed brokenly, slamming his shoulder again and again against the door. When his voice was gone and his shoulder bruised and knocked out of joint, he crawled over to the plants and collapsed on the floor amongst the pots, looking up at the leaves and flowers, breathing in the unusual scent of green life.

He should probably throw them, assure that the boy sent him home, but they were alive and real, not dusty inventions, and he ached all through and was so very tired.

So he didn't. He found a comfortable spot, back and shoulder protected by the wall, legs and stomach defended by the pots and plants, rested his head upon his arm, and slept. Tomorrow, the boy would take him home.

Chapter Three

Palin's hand trembled as he hit the button that locked the door, and there was a sick feeling in his stomach. He was angry, furious at himself -- he couldn't believe he'd used the controller. He should have gotten rid of it sooner, as soon as they'd left the flesh emporium or as soon as they'd gotten home, but he'd been distracted, first by Tigre himself and then by the bombings.

They hadn't been meant for him, but he'd never been so close to one before. He'd walked through the aftermath, felt buildings rumbling beneath his feet, but never had he been almost deafened, cut, the man with him badly sprayed with glass.

It had shaken him badly.

Still, it was no excuse to shock a man. He knew better, knew you didn't use pain or physical strength to bend another to your will.

He slid down the door, fingers stroking over it. It should have been Tigre he stroked, comforting and reassuring his vala. But he didn't want Tigre to associate that kind of care with the shock. Tigre was obviously used to rough treatment. It was no wonder no one had been able to keep the vala. Shocking only got you immediate obedience, not devotion, not willing submission.

Palin would accept no less, and Tigre would give it to him. He believed that, believed it with all he was. He wasn't sure if it was his instinct talking or the fact that he had touched another human being today for the first time since he'd taken on the silver mantle. He could still feel Tigre's hand swallowing his own. There was such gentleness in that big hand, waiting only to be found -- it was only a matter of time.

The building shook faintly. Another bomb.

Perhaps time that he did not have.

It was light when he drifted back into consciousness, bruised shoulder throbbing dully. He almost wept when he realized he was still in the high rooms, still not home, still lost.

He forced himself to sit up, to look around, to find the most easily defended place, the things that could be used for weapons. The sitting up made him dizzy, made him feel rather disoriented and off balance.

After a few minutes he managed to find his feet, stumbling across the room towards the sink. The water was cold and clean and tasted good, waking him up. He tried drawers and cabinets, hoping one would be loose, easy to break, but they were all locked tight and solid.

After searching thoroughly, he went to stand behind the plants, giving himself some protection while keeping a clear view of the room and door.

The door opened and the man-boy came in, walking through the room without hesitation, without apparent worry for himself, eyes searching. "Tigre. Y-you don't n-n-need to hide."

He stood still, silent. He was unsure how to say words that the man would understand, how to find out the rules, if there were rules. He just wanted to go home, to return to his little room with the feed and his blanket and pillow and where he knew the rules.

The Kelme -- Eiba -- did it matter if he was returning home soon? -- came into the plants and right to him, smiling softly. "G-good m-m-morning, Tigre."

He opened his mouth to respond, but only a squeak came out, last night's screaming taking its toll. He couldn't remember ever being so unsure about anything, ever being so nervous.

The boy's hand was warm and soothing along his arm, petting gently. "Hungry n-now? Eat. D-d-drink."

He thought about struggling, but his stomach was growling and he wanted more of the sweet water, maybe even needed some. He nodded, taking a deep breath as he relaxed his muscles.

"G-good." The boy pointed to the small table with its two chairs. "Sit."

He sat, unnerved, uncomfortable, focusing on his hair where it fell over his shoulder.

The boy didn't make a lot of noise, cupboard and fridge doors opening and closing with soft touches of his fingers to the printpads, the soft clink of plates and glasses and then a plate of toast with sweet preserves and a bowl of fruit were placed in front of him, a spoon set down next to them and a glass with clear water. The boy sat to eat with him. He had never eaten with anyone other than vala before.

He watched, waiting to eat until the boy did. When the Kelme ate a berry, he ate one. Then another and another. He moaned softly as the taste hit him -- so fresh, so real. He snuck another look over at the Kelme, respect increasing. It was a rare animal that would feed his vala real fruit, fresh fruit, much less eat it with him.

"I have t-to w-w-work. T-two clients. Then w-we st-start on us. Y-you w-w-ait in y-your room."

His room? He was going home now? Back to the owner? That didn't seem to make sense, not with the way the boy kept looking at him. He picked up the glass of water and drank it down. There was nothing so sweet and cold with the Owner; the water there was tepid and tasted of sulphur.

"Y-you kn-n-now med-ditation?"

He shook his head. He only knew the Owner and some of the other vala. None of the other Kelme had even spoken to him, not even the ones who thought to buy him.

This Kelme frowned as he began to nibble on his toast, his small, pink tongue sliding out to lick crumbs from the Kelme's lips. "It's q-quiet in y-y-your room. Y-you think ab-bout b-being y-you." The Kelme's smile wasn't nasty or triumphant and reached the man's eyes. "About b-being Tigre."

Tigre. His concern deepened. His room was not quiet, the feed was always on and the sounds from the house echoed always. Tigre. The Kelme gave him a name.

A name.

He could feel the distress and worry swirling in his belly, moving around the berries and the water.

"N-new p-place. Strange to y-y-you. D-d-differnt. B-but good. Y-you'll see." The Kelme smiled softly again and stroked his arm with a gentle touch.

He looked at his arm, blinking. It tingled, warm and strange, but somehow right and faintly, surprisingly arousing. His cock began to slowly fill, lengthening against his thigh.

"Th-think of th-th-that."

There was a soft bell and the Kelme sighed. "W-w-work now."

The Kelme stood and cleared the table and then took his hand again. "C-come to y-y-your r-room."

He followed, utterly confused and too tired of being lost to fight.

The Kelme led him through the door that he had refused to go through last night. There was a small room beyond it with a bed and a console full of buttons and another door opposite. They went through that door as well into another little room. The walls were a light grey and there was a single bed along one wall.

"Y-yours."

The Kelme showed him the light switch, more a depression in the wall that made the lights bright or dim with the touch of a finger.

"T-two hours." Another of those soft smiles and his hand was squeezed and then the Kelme left, closing the door behind him.

The Kelme was wrong. This was not his room. His room had a network feed and see-through walls and his blanket. He paced, grunting out his unhappiness through his raw throat. He turned the lights up as far as they would go and searched for something to look at, something to touch and learn and know about this not-his room.

Finally, he sank onto the bed, finding it comfortable and soft. He settled down, careful of his sore shoulder, and pulled the blanket over him.

Lights still blazing, cheek resting on the not-his pillow, he closed his eyes and went to sleep, dreaming restlessly of bombs and cars and soft, gentle touches.

Chapter Four

Palin eagerly watched his last client leave. Only a few clients today, but he'd been distracted, wanting to get back to Tigre. The man was obviously lost and uneasy. They needed a session together to start to break down Tigre's old habits, his old training, and replace it with something that would work for them.

Tigre did not know meditation or, Palin suspected, stillness, quiet inside and out. He would grow used to it, he would grow to understand that he needed it. In the meantime, Palin would work him over until he found that place of stillness through pain. Pleasure would be his reward, touching and kissing and coming, bathing and swimming, working out and working with Palin in their everyday chores.

They were Eiba and vala, but it was more than that. They were two halves of a whole, and merged properly they would fit together like a puzzle. You couldn't force that. Palin didn't understand why anyone would want to make a place for themselves always on the top, always have to fight to be there. It was so limiting.

Palin locked the door and undressed quickly. Pressing buttons, he closed the big room down into a small corner, perhaps twice the size of Tigre's room. He slid the chains from their hiding places, those for wrists and ankles, and he went through his whips and floggers and straps and canes. He needed something that would hurt but not do a lot of damage, something he could wield through a long session so that Tigre could be taken into himself through the pain.

He settled on a small multi-tailed whip to begin with, to be followed by a heavy flogger. He laid them out in the middle of the floor and went to get Tigre.

When the door slid open, he found Tigre curled into a ball, sound asleep and dreaming, eyes moving quick and random beneath the closed eyelids. Fascinating, even the eyelid was stained, pattern inked into it.

Before Palin could step into the room, Tigre's eyes flashed open, body slamming against the wall as his vala sat up, looking wildly around the room.

"Stop. Relax. It's time to start."

Tigre looked lost and confused for a second, and then those brown eyes slid down his body, noticing he was nude. The confusion disappeared, replaced by a cold, calculating gaze, Tigre moving off the bed into a fighting stance upon the floor.

Palin kept his sigh silent at Tigre's conditioning. Perhaps his preparations had been premature; they would see.

"Follow me." He turned and began to walk back to the Room.

He could just hear the brush of Tigre's hair upon the wide shoulders as he was followed, silently, closely.

He led the way back to the room and stepped aside so Tigre could come step in and see. With the door closed behind them and the lights soft, the room was close, intimate, shutting out everything but the two of them.

He let Tigre have a moment to look around.

Tigre's breath quickened, eyes flashing from chains to whips to him and back. The strong muscles flexed, instinctively readying for combat.

"I will not fight you. That's not how it works. Go and restrain your ankles and one wrist, I will do the other wrist." Palin knew this was the sticking point. With the controller gone, without a single weapon in his hand, Palin could not force Tigre to do anything. He kept his expression calm but expectant, waiting for Tigre to obey his order.

Tigre looked at him for a long moment, confusion heavy in the marked face. Then Tigre stepped forward, invading his space and looking down at him, eyes curious and questioning. He held his place, neither breaking the gaze nor stepping back. After a long moment, Tigre gave a soft growling sound and moved toward the chains, bending to fasten one shackle around his ankle.

Palin blinked and let his pleasure show in a small smile. They needed this, needed to come together in this effort and begin to build what they would be together.

Tigre stood, ankles bound, looking at the arm chains and then over at him, eyes dull.

Oh, he'd hoped Tigre would obey him and they could just do this, start on the journey that would wind them together. He gave Tigre one chance, in case the vala had not understood him.

"Lock one of your wrists, too."

The big man looked up at the chains, then over at his arm, muscles clenching for a moment. Then the shoulders slumped and the vala shook his head.

Disappointment filled Palin and he let it show. "Fine. Take off the ankle cuffs."

The vala bent, removing them without so much as a twitch of the marked face.

"Follow me." Palin opened the door and led Tigre back to his room.

Tigre was shuddering, face more confused and frustrated than ever.

"W-when y-y-you do n-not obey, the s-s-session is over. Y-you come b-b-back here. W-w-we w-will try again w-when y-you have had a f-f-few hours t-to think about it." Palin smiled despite his own frustration, hoping to encourage Tigre. "N-next t-time y-y-you w-will do b-better and w-we w-will b-begin pr-properly."

Tigre frowned, muscles clenching again. The big head shook, hair flying over his face. He spoke, the deep voice raw and scratched, almost nonexistent. "Home. Home. When does this vala go home?"

"Y-you are h-h-home, Tigre."

An angry cry sounded, full of confusion and loss and fury, torn from Tigre's throat. So painful, to shatter so many years of training, of bad habits and ill treatment.

Palin let the door close quietly behind him, leaning against it as his own body shook with each broken sound that came from the room behind him.

He would have to prove himself as stubborn as Tigre.

Palin waited several hours, pretending to watch a vid, before going to the room that was to be Tigre's. He knocked on the door to let Tigre know he was coming and then opened it.

"Come with me." He turned again, walking through to the kitchen, hoping that if he believed Tigre would follow then Tigre *would* follow.

The huge man shuffled along behind, moving almost silently. Hulking.

He stopped in the kitchen and took out two glasses, filling them with water and handing one to Tigre. "Drink."

Tigre's throat worked, draining the glass. "Thank. This vala thanks the Kelme."

"Eiba. And you're welcome, *Tigre*." He nodded and led the big man into the Room, right over to where the chains hung. He took a breath and gave the order. "Shackle your ankles and one wrist."

Tigre's shoulders slumped, the big man shackling his ankles and looking up at the wrist chains. Palin waited, licking his lips, fingers curling into his fists to keep from fidgeting. It was such a simple thing. All Tigre needed to do was obey, submit.

Those brown eyes stared over at him, quiet, almost desperate.

"Just shackle your wrist, Tigre." It was such a simple order, and he couldn't understand why it was this one that Tigre was refusing.

Tigre made a low, frustrated sound, one hand reaching up to pound against the chains.

Palin sighed. "Take off the ankle cuffs. You will return to your room." They were done. He would have to try again after tomorrow's clients.

He pushed down his disappointment. He couldn't expect everything to just click right away. It would take time for Tigre to obey him, to trust him.

The ankle cuffs were thrown off, the growls and cries increasing. Palin ignored them, leading Tigre back out of the Room and through the kitchen, through his own room and to the little room that was Tigre's. He couldn't go soft, couldn't let Tigre get away with this, even though it was such a little thing. He knew the vala was testing him, searching to see where he would crumble.

And so Palin would not.

Two days later and Palin was worried that he was going to lose this battle of wills with Tigre.

Several times each evening he would take Tigre out to the Room and ask Tigre to cuff himself. Every time it was the same thing. Tigre would cuff his ankles, but refuse to do his wrist. Palin felt like growling and crying just like Tigre did.

It broke his heart to see the big vala brought so low by homesickness, especially when Tigre was homesick for something as harsh as Favila's place. He didn't understand, though, why Tigre thought that refusing to cuff his wrist would make Palin send him home.

And he was trying not to let his frustrations show. Trying very hard.

After a quick shower, he put out a light meal and went once again to get Tigre.

"C-come with m-me. We w-will eat."

"Yes, Kelme." He could almost feel the tension ease, see the relief in Tigre's eyes.

"Eiba," he corrected absently, looking into those brown eyes, seeing the intricacies of the tattoo on Tigre's face.

Those eyes clung to his, the need to communicate obvious, the temptation to reach into Tigre's mind sudden and sharp. He fought it. His own ethics more than the laws keeping him from doing it. A vala would not be able to prosecute, but Palin knew it would be wrong.

"S-sit," he told Tigre as they came to the kitchen.

"Yes, Kelme." Tigre sat, the chair creaking, dark braid tangled in one hand.

He'd prepared them each a bowl of cottage cheese with sugar on top. He picked up his spoon and took a spoonful. "Eat."

Tigre took a single bite, the spoon awkward and clumsy in the large fingers, then Tigre ducked his head, shoveling the food in.

Palin smiled and ate his own more slowly, pleased that Tigre was eating at least.

It made him feel that perhaps they would figure this out, that Tigre would finally submit.

Chapter Five

He curled up in the bed, tears of sheer frustration and unhappiness sliding down his cheeks. He didn't want to be here, didn't want to walk down the hallway simply to be brought back into the little empty room. His stomach hurt, his eyes hurt, his throat hurt, his balls hurt, his *heart* hurt. He needed to go home, to be back where he understood all the rules.

He had tried fighting, tried obeying as best he could, tried just throwing himself at the door. Nothing had worked, nothing had been right, and he was still here and he was growing to hate this boring, sterile little room.

The pillow smelled good, familiar, like him. His hair was a mass of tangles, sweaty and bunched around his face. Sighing, he closed his eyes, trying to force himself into sleep.

He had no idea how long he'd been in there this time when the door opened again, the man-boy coming in.

The Kelme came in and sat on the bed next to him, looking tired. A gentle hand stroked along his arm and then over his cheek, pushing his hair away. "I'll b-brush this. G-get it out of the w-w-way. Then ag-gain."

The touch on his arm felt good. It seemed like weeks since anyone had touched him. He wanted more, more sensation, more input. So he sat still and waited, not doing anything to make the boy go.

The Kelme continued to push his hair off his face, hand warm against his skin. "I h-have a b-brush in m-my room. C-come w-with m-me."

The boy stood and held out his hand. Tigre pushed himself up, taking the hand. His shoulder was stiff, still not moving easily, but the pain was faded, the range of motion growing. He followed slowly, silently.

"S-sit on the fl-l-loor," the Kelme told him, pointing at a spot in front of the bed. As he watched, the boy opened a drawer in the wall and pulled out a hairbrush.

He sat, settling easily on the dark carpet. It was thick and soft, swirls of browns and greens melding together in a dizzying pattern. He liked it, liked the way it looked, liked the way it felt under his thighs.

The Kelme sat on the bed behind him and began to run the brush through his hair. There were a lot of snags, but the boy didn't just yank and pull, he worked carefully, stopping and working each knot out as gently as possible. He fought the relaxation that threatened for a few minutes and then

surrendered. The touches felt good, caring, His head bowed and his shoulder slumped, taking the contact that the Kelme offered.

The tangles were long gone, but the man-boy continued to pull the brush through his hair in long, even strokes. Finally the brush was set aside and the Kelme braided his hair into a single tail.

A gentle stroke moved over his back, fingers brushing gently over his abused shoulder. "W-what happened?"

He blinked, relaxed and almost sleepy. "The wall. Hit the wall the first night and it popped out. 's in now."

There was a long sigh and the Kelme stood and knelt in front of him, looking at him sharply. "Y-y-you h-hurt, y-y-y-y-you t-t-tell m-m-m-me. N-n-numb-ber one r-r-rule!"

He nodded, relief filling him. Rules, yes. Those he understood. "This vala does not hurt so much. The arm doesn't raise, yet."

The Kelme glared at him. "Th-that's w-w-w-why y-you," the glare got bigger as the Kelme had trouble getting the words out, his frustration clear. "W-w-wouldn't d-d-d-do th-the ch-ch-chains?"

"Couldn't. Couldn't reach." He had tried, but the arm wouldn't work and he couldn't figure a way to lift it without losing sight of the Kelme, without losing his ability to defend himself.

"N-next t-t-t-time t-t-tell m-m-m-me!" The Kelme was angry, for the first time. "I p-p-pun-n-nished y-y-you w-w-when n-not y-y-your f-f-fault. W-w-w-wrong." The Kelme got up and began to pace.

Sinking down into himself, the vala waited. This Kelme did not want to fight, he understood that. This Kelme did not want to fuck, at least he didn't think so. Perhaps if he just sat and stayed quiet, he would not be locked away in the quiet again.

The Kelme stopped and knelt in front of him again. "R-rules. T-tell m-me w-when hurt. T-tell m-me w-when y-you have a r-reason f-for n-not d-doing. Y-you d-don't und-derstand, y-you ask, unl-less I s-said n-no t-talking. Y-you c-can s-speak unl-less I s-say n-no t-talking."

He nodded, finally handed something he understood, something he knew. It made him confident, eased a need he hadn't quite been aware he'd had. "This vala understands rules."

"Ok-kay. L-last r-rule. I s-say, y-you d-do."

He nodded again, frowning as he worked to make sure he understood. "No fighting, yes, Kelme? No fighting without Kelme asking?"

"Eiba." The Kelme corrected him.

"Ei..." He swallowed hard. An Eiba -- someone to give him a name, a home, a real place? The Owner said this vala would never find that, to never look. "N-no f-fighting. R-right."

The Kelme -- the Eiba -- smiled at him.

And then turned and headed toward the door. "Come. Follow me."

He stood, following quietly, reminding himself of the rules. Tell if he hurt. Tell if he couldn't do. Tell if he didn't understand. Do as the Kelme said. No fighting. He didn't want to go back into the little room. He wanted to see the sun and drink sweet water and be touched.

They came into the Room again. It was the same as it had been every time. The small area with the soft, artificial lighting, the chains near one corner and the whips in the middle of the room.

"Put on the ankle cuffs."

He nodded and walked over, fastening his ankles easily. Then he stood, sighing as he waited for the inevitable command that would eventually lead him back to the little room.

Instead, the Kelme came over and raised his uninjured arm, fastening the cuff around his wrist. The boy's hands were gentle as they took his braid and moved it to curl around his shoulder and hang down in front of him.

"If you are injured, say so, otherwise no sounds." Then the Kelme picked up a small whip with six little tails.

He tested his bonds at his wrist, feeling his muscles twitch, the instinct to fight growing. No fighting, he reminded himself. No noise. No fighting.

The Kelme stepped behind him. "Listen to the blows as they land. Feel them. Let them take you on a journey."

He nodded, confusion warring with curiosity. This Kelme spoke to him, talked to him, touched him. He didn't understand at all, but he did like it.

The whip made a noise as it flew through the air, like bugs' wings screaming softly, and then another noise as it hit him. He took a deep breath, body jerking just slightly under the bite of the leather. Strong, the Kelme was stronger than he seemed.

A second blow came, this one lower, near the small of his back. It was followed by a third and a fourth and a fifth and a sixth, each one in a different spot on his back, though the Kelme was avoiding his injured shoulder.

The burn traveled through him, settling in his spine, in his balls. His body began to rock with the blows, picking up the rhythm, the slapping pain of each blow turning into fire.

It continued for a few moments and then the Kelme slipped around and picked up the other whip. Upon closer inspection, he could see it was a flogger, the brass handle solid, rounded at the top, the leather ends wide and numerous.

Before moving to stand behind him again, the Kelme slid a gentle hand along his chest in a long caress down to and including his cock. "You are doing well, Tigre. Now comes the pain that will take you somewhere special, let everything go and follow it."

When the soft, warm hand had touched his cock, something in his stomach clenched, arousal making his legs shift, his thighs tighten. Warm and floating upon waves of sensation, his back tingling and burning, he relaxed. This he knew, this relaxation and pain. It belonged after the fighting, after the battle.

The flogger made very little noise as it flew through the air, though there was sound if you listened for it. It was very loud as it landed against his back.

He stretched, body reacting to the blow. Dozens of slapping fingers kissed his back, leaving behind bites that felt as if they glowed. More blows followed, more than he could count. The Kelme found a rhythm and the strokes were hard and even and constant.

He swayed beneath the flogger, breath coming with each blow, head dipping down. Slowly things began to drop away -- the Owner, the House, the nerves, the anger, the fighting, all of it. Focus came to him, clear, sharp -- there was him and the flogger and the man who wielded it and that was all. He could hear the Kelme's breathing, each breath deep and even and matching his own. It was as if they had gone to a place where no one existed but the two of them.

Everything seemed to slow, to stretch. He could feel the brush of hair against his chest, the blood throbbing through his veins, the nerves of his back screaming and burning. He could hear the strips of leather now, hear them in the air, hear them kissing and connecting against his skin, hear them parting from the flesh almost reluctantly.

He was sweating, the Kelme was sweating. He could smell it, could swear he heard the drops sliding against skin and falling to the floor. He was unsure if his eyes were closed or open, his vision was filled with bright sparks of color, exploding and fading with the rhythm of the flogger.

At length the blows stopped and he heard the flogger hit the floor with a dull thump. One word was whispered into the silent, still world he'd been taken to. "Come."

To his surprise, his body shuddered, cock pulsing steadily as his seed splashed at his feet.

His breath caught, panic filling him. He hadn't been touched, hadn't been fucked, hadn't even been close, and yet...

The Kelme had made him come with a word.

Just a word.

He shuddered violently, pulling restlessly at his bonds.

There was a soft noise from behind him and heat splashed against the bottom of his spine and over his ass. Something soft, maybe a kiss, maybe not, lighted against the top of his spine and then the Kelme came around again. The boy's body was glistening with sweat, his color high, eyes bright behind the windows and he was smiling. "So good, Tigre. So strong and obedient."

His breath was coming light and quick, frightened by this Kelme, scared by the place he was taken. The words, the praise he was given were like a lifeline and he held onto them, holding them close.

So good. Strong. Obedient.

The Kelme was undoing the chains, arm first and then his feet, fingers digging into his muscles, massaging. "Now, a bath and some ointment and a small meal as reward."

The boy leaned up and touched their lips together, so softly, so gently, the kiss was almost chaste. "Thank you."

He didn't know what to do, whether to strike out or run or scream or cry. The Kelme's eyes were so sure, so steady, they *knew*. He didn't know what those eyes knew, but they weren't nervous or angry or scared and they promised a bath -- a real bath.

So he simply followed.

The lights in the bathroom were soft and the Kelme used something in the water, making the rising steam smell like almonds. "D-do y-y-you w-want to b-bathe alone?"

He frowned and shook his head. What did it matter? Vala had no desires for themselves. They only needed to please their Kelme, or if they were lucky, their Eiba.

He got a brilliant smile in response. "Y-you g-go in first."

He stepped into the tub, groaning low as the heated water covered his feet and calves. He turned to look at the Kelme, unsure where or whether he should sit.

The Kelme nodded. "S-sit. B-be comfort-table."

He sank down into the scented water, grunting softly and tensing as the heat hit his abraded back. Then he relaxed, head falling back, eyes closing as he luxuriated in the feel of water all around him.

Magic, this was magic, floating in the water like this. It was like being held, or what he imagined being held was like -- close and gentle and warm. If this was what being obedient resulted in, he could try. He could really try.

The water shifted around him and the Kelme's slender body pressed close against him, back to his front. He tensed for a heartbeat, unsure of what was expected of him, but when the Kelme did nothing but lean against him, he relaxed and floated.

They stayed like that for a long time, floating together, the Kelme pressed close against him.

He might have fallen asleep, or maybe he simply floated away, he wasn't quite sure. But when he returned to his body, his arm was resting around the Kelme's waist, holding the slender body close, thumb drawing circles over the slick skin.

He moved his arm quickly, jerking slightly. All this being good and he was going to be put away for overstepping his bounds. "Sorry. Please forgive this vala. Sorry."

"Tigre. W-was n-nice." His hand was taken and returned to where it had been.

Oh...

His thumb began to move again, but he wasn't floating anymore, not even a bit. He was awake and aware, eyes searching over the body in his arms. Thin and small, but the muscles were defined, lean and strong. The blue eyes were closed -- he'd seen many blue-eyed men, but none who wore windows. No vala wore windows.

His own eyes were supposed to be blue, to match the tattoo upon his face, but there was a mistake at the lab that developed him. His eyes were the brown of a worker vala, one meant to build bombs and tall buildings. Those vala were made without their balls, though, and a mutated eros vala was still worth more than a worker.

The Kelme sighed softly and smiled, eyes still closed. "N-nice."

They floated together until the water began to get cool. He held the Kelme the entire time, touching with his fingers, exploring the soft skin of the flat belly.

The Kelme eyes opened slowly and he sat up with a soft smile for Tigre. "Y-your b-back is ok-k-kay?"

"This vala is all well, Kelme." He nodded, sharing a small smile of his own. The pleasure in those eyes felt good in his belly.

"Tigre," the Kelme said hand pressing against his chest. "Eiba." This time the boy pointed to himself.

"Eiba? No more Kelme then? This vala is only for Eiba? Eiba gives this vala a name?" He looked into the blue eyes, needing to be sure he understood this.

The boy nodded. "Yes."

He took a deep breath, heart pounding in his chest. "T-.this Tigre is well, Eiba."

"Good."

The Eiba stepped out of the bath, wrapping himself in a towel and picking another up, holding it out. He took the towel and held it awkwardly, unsure whether he was supposed to finish drying the Kel... the Eiba or dry himself or dry the floor.

The Eiba tsked and took the towel back from him, drying him with it.

"Sorry. Sorry, Eiba. This...Tigre... this is very different than with the Owner."

"Y-you w-will learn."

The Eiba took his hand again and led him into the room with the plants. "Hung-gry?"

"Yes, Eiba."

Even as he answered, his eyes were drawn to the plants again and again. They smelled so alive and were so green.

"S-sit."

The Eiba went to the cold unit and brought out two plates with fruit and cheese. Glasses were added, filled with an orange liquid.

He sat, feeling odd and uncomfortable. He was a vala. He did not belong at a table eating food with an Eiba. Of course, the Eiba had said that he was to sit, and "Do what the Eiba says" was one of the rules.

He hoped things got less complicated. This confusion gave him a headache.

The Eiba ate quickly, but neatly. He stopped, looking at Tigre with a small frown. "N-not hungry?"

"Not... not a vala's place to eat with a Kel... an Eiba." He let his conflict, his confusion show, offering it over, hoping that the Eiba would understand.

The Eiba nodded. "In y-your old p-place. Here, w-w-we eat together." The Eiba smiled suddenly. "Rew-w-ward."

Oh. He knew about those -- his were usually a swim in the big pool or being able to watch a telemovie on the large feed, but this was very good, too. He nodded, tension fading, and he began to eat.

He liked the yellow fruit very much and the white cheese was delicious. The purple fruit wasn't as good, but he ate it and the drink was very sweet and sour all at once and it make his tongue tingle.

He watched the Eiba eat out of the corner of his eye, realizing suddenly that the Eiba was doing the same. It made him blush, made his fingers clumsy, and one berry rolled across the table, bumping into the Eiba's fingers. He froze, watching the Eiba carefully, unsure if he would be punished.

The small fingers grabbed the berry and popped it into the Eiba's mouth, a small smile teasing across the Eiba's features. It made him want to grin, made the corners of his mouth turn up. He looked down and picked up another berry, offering it over to the Eiba.

The warm fingers tickled at his palm as they plucked up the berry. "M-my f-favorite."

He nodded; he would remember this. The dark red berries were the Eiba's favorite. He picked up a little berry and put it in his mouth, learning the flavor, drinking in the tart sweetness. It was bright, bursting on his tongue.

This was what the Eiba liked.

The Eiba yawned, eyes blinking behind their windows. "Sleep n-now."

He nodded, swallowing his sigh. Back to the little room. At least there was a light. He stood, picking up both of the plates and looking at the Eiba with questioning eyes.

"In the s-sink."

He nodded, putting the plates down. He turned back to the Eiba, eyes fastened to the floor. "Thank you, Eiba."

"F-for?"

He knelt, touching his forehead to the Eiba's foot before raising back to his knees. He didn't know what to say -- for the touches? For his name? For the fruit, the bath, the care? "This vala wished for an Eiba to attend. Thank you for being him."

The Eiba's fingers were soft on his head. "Y-you're w-w-welcome."

They stayed that way until the Eiba stood, motioning for him to follow. He stood, following easily, looking over at the plants as they left the room.

He was led back to the plain grey room. "S-sleep. T-tom-m-morrow w-we w-work."

The door clicked softly and he was alone.

He sighed, turning the lights up to their fullest. He pulled his hair out of its braid and shook it over his shoulders. Then he began his nightly walk.

Six steps, then eight, then six, then eight.

Chapter Six

Palin woke a few minutes before the chime of his alarm went off. He stretched and slid along the covers, comfortable in his own skin, awake after a the first good night's sleep since he'd bought Tigre.

Working during the day and trying to train Tigre in the evenings and at night wasn't easy. Not with a man as stubborn as his was.

Even when he'd left Tigre in his room for long stretches, so Palin could sleep, he hadn't, not very well. The knowledge of Tigre still not obeying the simplest commands had kept him awake, worrying that his instinct, which he had up until always trusted completely, could be wrong about Tigre.

He hadn't been wrong though, finally working with Tigre, finding a true place for just the two of them had proved to him that he was right, that Tigre was his.

He had made a mistake with Tigre, though, made assumptions about his training, his rules from before. He still felt somewhat outraged that Tigre had to be *told* to tell him if Tigre was hurt, that he had to make that a rule. That Tigre had to be told to tell him if he was refusing an order for a reason other than just being a stubborn, disobedient vala. Tigre should have known already to do that. He was a vala, yes, but he was also a person.

Favila did not have Tigre's respect, Palin knew that. Tigre had obeyed because Favila had the controller, had the food, had the power and Tigre had no means to take it away from him.

Palin didn't have Tigre's respect yet; he knew that as well. But he would. Already Tigre knew that Palin would not control him with pain.

A man was likely to live up or down to the level you expected of him. Palin would expect Tigre to obey him out of a desire to do so, and eventually that would happen. He had faith. In himself, in Tigre, and in the instinct that was telling him he was right.

He would let Tigre sit in the corner of the Room while he worked today. There was no one dangerous on his list of clients today, no one who scared him, so it was a good day to train Tigre to watch and be ready.

He dressed himself in a pair of jeans and a dark bluish-purple shirt. He realized it was the same color as Tigre's tattoo, and the small coincidence made him smile.

He knocked to warn Tigre he was coming, and opened the door.

Tigre sat up with a soft growl, his hair flowing wild over his body, eyes shadowed and dark in the bright lights. Moving quickly, body ready to fight, muscles rippling, Tigre moved to the corner of the room. When the feral gaze fell on Palin, the threat of violence faded, Tigre relaxing.

Palin hid his anger from Tigre, but he could have readily gone to Favila and tied him to a post and whipped him until the man bled to death. What did Tigre have done to him that he woke up vicious and expecting a fight?

He pushed his anger away and offered Tigre a smile. "G-good m-m-morning, Tigre."

"Eiba." Hoarse still, but just slightly and in an early-morning-used way instead of a screamed-himself-silent way, Tigre gave him an almost-smile and a nod, eyes curious and intent now, instead of dull and angry.

"Y-you w-will help m-m-me w-work today."

He indicated that Tigre should come with him and stopped by his drawers to pick up the brush. He handed it over -- Tigre would have to do it himself this time, Palin didn't have time to do it properly.

He let the way to the kitchen.

"S-sit. B-brush and th-then eat."

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre sat and began to brush through his mane with steady strokes, pulling through the tangles with a quick, almost brutal efficiency. When he was finished he pulled the nut-brown waves back in a rough, clumsy braid.

Palin quickly made two bowls of oatmeal with sugar and a little bit of milk. "I usually d-don't eat ag-gain unt-til even-n-ning," he told Tigre as he brought the bowls over to the table. He gave Tigre the bigger of the two.

Tigre waited silently for him to begin eating and then picked up the spoon and took a bite. Palin grinned at the surprise and pleasure in Tigre's face at the taste. Without fanfare, Tigre devoured the entire bowl without mess or complaint.

When they were done eating and had each drunk a glass of water, Palin explained how they would work together. "I w-work in the Room. Y-you w-w-will sit in the corn-ner and w-watch. K-keep m-m-me safe if th-there is a p-problem."

"A problem, Eiba? This vala does not understand." Tigre frowned, then a sharp look crossed his face. "The Eiba means fighting, yes?"

He nodded. "I am s-sm-mall and I s-speak funny. S-sometimes p-people think that m-means they c-can t-take w-what they w-want."

Tigre gave him the oddest look, a mixture of confusion and curiosity, and then he was given a short, definitive nod. "Sit and watch for fighting. This vala can smell the ones who fight."

"Tigre," he said softly.

"This... Tigre can smell the ones who fight."

"G-good. Th-that m-means y-you can help m-me. K-keep m-me safe." He looked at the time piece on the wall by the cooler. "It is t-time t-to g.g-go."

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre stood and put the bowls in the sink and then followed Palin into the Room.

Tigre had only been in the Room once when it was wide open like it was while he worked, so Palin gave Tigre a few moments to look around.

"I s-sit at the t-table. The c-client s-sits ac-cross f-from m-m-me. Y-you w-will s-sit in this c-corner here."

Tigre nodded, moving over to the corner and sinking back into the heavy shadows. It would be unlikely that any of his clients could see Tigre and yet Tigre couldn't move without him noticing.

"S-silent and s-s-still. If s-someone t-tries t-to hurt m-m-me, u-use w-whatever force n-neces-s-sary t-to st-stop them."

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre settled, huge hands curled upon the muscled thighs.

"G-good."

He made his way to the small dais with the low table and his cushion and put on his robe and turban. As he settled into place and leaned forward to admit his first client, he realized he felt safe in a way he never had before.

The Eiba talked and talked and talked. Some of the people smelled bad, some smelled good. None smelled like fighting. It was good, to rest and watch, to listen to the rise and fall of the Eiba's voice.

To be.

He was beginning to suspect he would not go back to the before-home, not for some time. The Eiba had decided, he thought.

Another of the people left and a light came on over the door, the Eiba standing, stretching and removing the funny hat and robe.

"Tigre? C-come to m-me."

"Yes, Eiba." He stood, padding over, stretching as he went. He could feel the Eiba's eyes on him, watching him move.

His hand was taken and the Eiba turned to the window. "It's b-beautiful, y-yes?"

He looked out at the lights, fascinated by the sparkles, the motions.

"W-when I w-was s-small I p-played k-king of the c-castle and n-now h-here I am. It f-feels l-like I'm the k-king, w-way up h-here in m-my c-castle." The Eiba's voice was soft, not weak, despite the stutter.

"Castle?" He tilted his head, confused, intrigued.

"F-from f-fairy tales. S-stories."

"Stories. Like on the vids."

"Y-yes, b-but p-paper." The Eiba shook his head. "N-no matter. C-castles are f-for p-people who h-have everything."

Everything. That he understood, so he nodded. "The Eiba has a good home. A real home."

The Eiba looked around and nodded. "Y-yes. And b-better now." The Eiba's hand wrapped around one of his arms, warm, gentle.

He blinked down, watching the way the Eiba's skin looked against his. "It is?"

"Y-yes. B-b-because y-you are here n-now."

His cheeks got hot and he looked down, unsure what to do, what to think.

The Eiba smiled and tilted his head up. "K-kiss m-me, Tigre."

"Yes, Eiba." He leaned down, brushed his lips against the Eiba's, moaning softly.

"Oh. Y-yes, Tigre. M-more." The Eiba's mouth opened slightly, the breath that warmed his own lips was sweet.

He was very careful, gentle, touching the inside of the Eiba's mouth with his tongue. The Eiba whimpered, melted against him. He wasn't sure what to do, so he simply held, pretended they were in the bath and that this was easy.

The Eiba's tongue came out and met his, soft and gentle, warm. It made him shiver, but he opened, gave the Eiba his mouth, his heat. The Eiba moaned and he could feel the heat of the Eiba's need grow and press against his thigh through the pants the Eiba wore.

It was his purpose. To fight. To fuck. To be for an Eiba. His goal.

"Und-dress m-me," murmured the Eiba, eyes looking up at him from behind the Eiba's windows.

"Yes, Eiba." The shirt was soft, silky. He liked how it felt to his fingers.

Beneath it the Eiba was slender, but not skinny. He knew there were muscles there -- the whipping had been hard, well-done. He put the shirt aside, then knelt to remove shoes and pants, his own braid heavy against his back. The Eiba's hands slid over his shoulders, touching him as the Eiba's breath grew stronger, came quicker. He breathed in deep, the smell of need familiar, strong.

As he undid the Eiba's pants, the long, slender cock pushed out eagerly, standing proudly and reaching toward the Eiba's belly. When he had the Eiba bare, he sat back, waiting, patient.

"T-taste m-me, Tigre."

"Yes, Eiba." He bent his head, swallowing the Eiba down, curious to learn the flavor, the taste.

A soft cry filled the air, fingers sliding into his hair as he pulled the salt and sweet taste in. So gentle, compared to the others, so sweet. It confused him, made him shudder.

"G-good, Tigre." The Eiba's hands encouraged him to move on the long, slender cock.

He took every inch, swallowing carefully, his mouth well-trained.

A shudder moved through the Eiba's body. "Oh!" The Eiba whimpered and began to move carefully.

He wasn't sure if the sound was good or bad, so he just followed the cues, sucking and humming as he could.

"Oh. Y-yes. Yes." Another whimper and the Eiba was looking at him, eyes hot on where his mouth was wrapped around the Eiba's cock.

Yes. Heat flooded him, the praise sweet, perfect. The Eiba's fingers slid on his cheek, traced his lips where they stretched around the Eiba's cock. The Eiba's hips moved faster, pushing the hard cock into his mouth over and over. It was easy to let the Eiba in, let himself be taken.

"Tigre... Oh." A soft cry sound, the Eiba's hips bucking, seed pouring down his throat.

He swallowed, drinking the bitter salt down, drinking the Eiba down.

The Eiba sank down into his arms and leaned against him, hand reaching for his cock. "Thank y-you."

"Thank you?" His cock leapt, pushed up into that touch, begging for it.

"F-for the p-pleasure." The Eiba's lips pressed against his, the hand around his cock stroking, sliding and squeezing.

"Oh." He moaned, body shivering. "Pleasure. Pleasure."

"Y-yes." The Eiba's free hand slid along the chain that ran from his nipple to his cock and tugged.

He cried out, eyes going wide as the sound left him. Oh. Oh, please don't stop. "Sorry."

"F-for w-what?"

"Noise." The noise. The sound.

The Eiba frowned for a moment. "Oh! N-no, I d-did n-not say n-no n-noise." Another tug came to the chain, the fingers around his cock continued to stroke. Another moan broke free, his cock harder than ever. The Eiba nodded. "I w-want to h-hear."

The chain was tugged this time, harder, the Eiba's lips pressing against his again. He rocked, trusting the Eiba to tell him when to stop, when to still. The hand around his cock tightened, moved with faster and faster strokes. A finger slid across the tip, sliding liquid down over his shaft.

"E...Eiba. Eiba." Hot, he was hot, aching, caught in the touch.

"Take y-your p-pleasure, Tigre."

Oh! Oh, Eiba. Eiba...

He came, roaring his need, his joy, his pleasure.

"Oh. Y-yes!" The Eiba nodded, looking happy. The hands on him gentled, kept touching though.

"This... this vala thanks the Eiba." So much.

"Tigre," the Eiba corrected softly.

"T... tigre." He panted. "This Tigre thanks the Eiba."

The Eiba nodded, smiled. "Y-you're welcome." Then the Eiba stood and held out a hand. "C-come. W-we eat."

"Yes, Eiba."

His hand fit with the Eiba's just like it was meant to be there.

Chapter Seven

For two days Tigre sat in the corner and guarded him, made him feel safe. For three evenings they worked in that corner, with the room closed down: chains, whips, pain and pleasure. Palin thought they were becoming more comfortable with each other, that Tigre was beginning to understand what was expected of him, what was needed.

He had no clients this day, so he decided it was time to go shopping. To take Tigre to the rooftop mall with its little shops that Palin preferred. The first hurdle would be getting Tigre to wear pants.

After they'd eaten he put their dishes away and brought the pants, holding them out. "F-for you."

Tigre tilted his head. "For the vala?"

He shook his head. "F-for *Tigre*."

Tigre looked pleased, just beamed, nodding. "Yes. Yes, Eiba."

Then Tigre disappeared, pants in hand.

Oh. He hadn't expected that reaction, not at all. It made him feel good and he would have to make sure to buy something specifically for Tigre while they were out. Not something that Tigre needed, just something that Tigre would like.

Palin followed Tigre, almost chuckling when he found Tigre spreading the pants out, so carefully, on the little bed. He stood in the doorway, watching, fascinated.

Tigre stood up, looking, admiring, then carefully covered the pants with the blanket so they couldn't be seen, huge hands patting them.

Palin bit his lips to keep from laughing. "Tigre? The p-pants are f-for y-you to w-wear."

He got a completely confused look. "Eiba?"

Palin pointed to his own. "P-pants. B-But f-for you."

Tigre shook his head. "Vala wear the cloths, Eiba. The cloths."

"N-now you w-wear p-pants." He smiled encouragingly.

"Wear pants." Tigre took the pants out, looking at them and then putting them on the floor so he could step into them, pull them up over the thick thighs. They were indigo in color, matching the tattoo on Tigre's face, as well as his own shirt.

"L-looks g-good."

"Good. This vala has pants." Tigre sounded satisfied. Pleased.

He chuckled this time. "Y-yes. Tigre has p-pants. C-come n-now. Shopping." He held out his hands.

Those huge hands swallowed his. "Yes, Eiba. Thank you, Eiba."

He led the way out, and up the stairs. He'd arranged for a car to be waiting for them on the roof. It was the first time they'd been out since Tigre had come to live with him.

Tigre began vibrating, eyes searching and scared. "Eiba?"

"It's ok-k-kay, Tigre. S-stay with m-me. C-close." He squeezed Tigre's hand and kept going.

"Not going back, Eiba? Not?"

"Oh!" He shook his head. "N-no. Shopping. To b-buy f-food. Then h-home." He squeezed Tigre's hand again. It hadn't occurred to him Tigre would think there was still a chance he would be taken back. "Y-you s-stay w-with m-me n-n-n-now."

Tigre took a deep breath, then he received one of those smiles. "Yes. Yes, Eiba."

He smiled back, pleased down deep at the progress they were making.

Tugging on Tigre's hand, he continued up the stairs, the steel a cold, impersonal grey. Tigre stayed at his back, rumbling softly, holding on.

He took a breath when they got to the door, a little nervous himself. The last time he'd been out, they'd been caught up in an explosion; the vid-feeds had shown there were several dozen that day and dozens more since. He pulled the hood of his robe up and opened the door. Tigre hovered over him, growl louder, body hulking as they moved.

They made it to the car unscathed and he settled in, relieved. "R-Risa Market."

The car took off and he turned to see how Tigre was doing. Tigre was pale, quiet, eyes unhappy, but those fingers held onto his tight.

"It w-will b-be fine." He squeezed Tigre's hand and tried to distract Tigre. "L-look at all the c-cars."

"Where do they go?"

"L-lots of p-places." He pointed to the tall buildings they were zipping by. "B-businesses. M-making m-money."

Tigre nodded, but Palin knew Tigre didn't understand, didn't know. Just nodded.

"N-need m-money for l-living." The truth was he didn't always understand it himself, the way people drove themselves.

"Valas fight and people bet money."

"B-but the valas d-don't g-get m-money."

"No. Valas have nothing. Valas are nothing."

Palin shook his head, not because it wasn't true, but because it wasn't right. "Y-you are s-something. Y-you are Tigre."

"I." Tigre shuddered, eyes rolling just a little. "Valas have nothing. Valas are nothing."

"Y-you are Tigre," he insisted. "M-my Tigre."

"The Eiba's Tigre."

Palin nodded, happy enough with that.

The aircar came to a stop on the rooftop mall and Palin opened his door and tugged Tigre out behind him. Tigre followed, the odd, constant growling starting yet again, almost surrounding him. He pet Tigre's arm as they stepped into the bright light, reflections coming from the steel and glass structures around them.

They didn't have far to go before they were under the clear reinforced glass that covered the rooftop mall.

"Eiba?" Tigre, so large and solid, looked around, so nervous, so frightened.

"J-just stay w-with m-me." He pet Tigre's arm again and moved to the first store where fruits could be bought, the produce fresh and beautiful.

Tigre blinked, eyes wide. "Eiba berries."

He laughed softly. "Y-yes. M-my favourite." He picked up a basket of them and another of the melba fruit. Tigre nodded, watching every single move he made.

He took the baskets to the payment table and added a basket of mixed fruit. "W-want anything?"

He couldn't have stunned Tigre more if he'd hit the man. "Eiba?"

"Y-you choose s-something." He kept forgetting that Tigre had nothing of his own, never had.

"Any thing, Eiba?" Tigre pointed to the pale globes of the hai. "Those taste good."

"P-pick a b-basket, Tigre." He watched, smiling at how a simple thing could bring pleasure.

Oh, those brown eyes simply shone, looking at him as if he were magic. "Yes, Eiba. This one, Eiba."

"G-good." He beamed at Tigre, feeling so good to have done this for Tigre, to bring happiness to his... lover.

He handed over his credchip and once their fruit was packed into a straw basket, he handed that to Tigre. "C-carry, p-please?"

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre nodded happily. "Yes."

He smiled up at Tigre. "Thank y-you."

He led the way out and along the corridor, pointing to the clothes in the next store and the shoes in the one after that. They didn't go in, though, until the next store, which had baked goods. "S-smell," he suggested to Tigre, breathing in the sweet and bread scent of the place.

Tigre's belly growled audibly, eyes wide. "Bread."

"And p-pastry. G-good." He was about to go for his favorites, when he remembered Tigre's pleasure at being able to choose some fruit. "Y-you choose. F-four or f-five."

Tigre squeezed him, pointing out the ones Palin liked best, bouncing with please. "Bread."

He laughed softly, enjoying Tigre's eagerness. "S-something for y-you, Tigre."

Tigre pointed to a cherry tart. "That, Eiba?"

"W-whatever y-you want." He nodded encouragingly.

"That, Eiba. Red berries. This vala likes red berries."

"G-good." He put two of them on the tray, along with the other sweets Tigre had pointed out and a loaf of crusty bread.

There was a muted boom and the building shook a little, startling him, and he nearly lost the tray. Tigre growled, pressing close, wrapping around him. He pet Tigre's arm, leaning back against the man and feeling safe despite the noise and the threat.

The sirens sounded a moment later and they were far away. He took a breath. "It's ok-k-kay."

"No fighting?" Tigre stayed close, no one would touch him.

He shook his head. "N-no. B-but we'll g-go f-fast n-now."

They needed to go to the dairy store and the meat store and then they would go home. The pleasure had been leached from the outing by the violence, even if it hadn't been too close.

"Yes, Eiba. Fast." Tigre herded him, protective, worried. It felt good, having someone caring about him, caring for him.

He pointed to the dairy and let Tigre take him there and then to the meat shop before hurrying them out to the aircars.

"The Eiba and the vala go back?"

"Tigre. Eiba a-and Tigre." He nodded though, hurrying toward the first free car in the queue.

"Eiba and Tigre go back? Go home?" Tigre stopped, eyes wide, a street vendor displaying hand-woven blankets. "Oh."

"Y-yes." He took a few steps toward the street vendor. He wondered if Tigre would ask for what he wanted, or if it was too soon.

Tigre looked at the blankets, blinking, almost trembling. "Pretty."

Palin nodded and touched one, watching the vendor shrink back from him in his silver robe. He sighed, ready to turn tail and go to the aircar without buying a blanket, but Tigre had such a look of longing on his face. "F-feels w-warm. S-soft."

Tigre nodded, pointed to one, careful not to touch. "You, Eiba."

"F-for m-me?" He was touched. "Oh. N-no. Y-you. P-pick."

"You. This one. This one is the Eiba's eyes. Pretty. Home." Oh. Oh, the blue. Oh.

He beamed up at Tigre and handed over his credcard. The vendor took the card, being careful not to touch him, but Palin was feeling good again, Tigre's choice and the reason for it, brightening the day once more.

Once he'd paid for the blanket, he carefully handed it to Tigre. "L-let's g-go home."

"Yes, Eiba." They settled in the aircar, Tigre purring and stroking the blanket, crooning softly.

He was glad they'd gone out, glad they'd found something that could be Tigre's own. Pleasure and happiness looked good on Tigre's face.

The aircar delivered them safely and Tigre stayed close behind, defending him, pushing him. Herding him in. It was different, having someone who wasn't afraid to touch him, having someone who cared about his safety.

Not being alone.

He walked quickly across the roof, going into the stairwell and feeling Tigre's relief as they came in out of the open.

"The Eiba's home." Tigre sighed. "Home."

He waited until they were down the stairs and into his apartment before putting down the one bag he'd been carrying and touching Tigre's chest, the muscles warm and solid beneath his fingers.

"Tigre's home, t-too."

"The Tigre's home." The food was placed on the table, the blanket held tight. "For the Tigre? Yes, Eiba? This is for the Tigre?"

He nodded. "Y-yes. This b-belongs t-to Tigre."

Tigre knelt in thanks, then ran, blanket carried to his room.

Palin took a deep breath, fighting tears, moved by Tigre. One day Tigre would be used to such small generosity.

It was beautiful, the color of the Eiba's eyes, the color of sky. Tigre took the pants off, placing them carefully under the sheet so no one would take them, then the sheet, then the soft beautiful blanket, then the plain covering over that.

He sat, fingers slipping under the edge to touch, to feel.

So beautiful. So soft.

The Eiba's knock came at the door some time later, and the Eiba came in. "Are y-you h-hungry?"

"Yes, Eiba." He could be hungry. He could just sit and touch.

"C-come with m-me." The Eiba held out a hand, smiling at him before frowning. "W-where's y-your blanket?"

He lifted the edge of the top blanket, exposing the beautiful blue.

"Oh. G-good." The Eiba beamed at him and reached out to touch the blanket. "S-soft."

Yes. Soft and warm and blue. He nodded, petting the fabric, showing more.

"I s-sit?" The Eiba asked, pointing to the spot he'd uncovered.

"Yes, Eiba." He smiled, scooting over to give the Eiba room.

The Eiba sat next to him, hands sliding along his blanket first, and then his leg. "Y-you're soft, t-too."

His leg shivered, a heat inside him beginning to grow. "This vala? Is strong."

The Eiba laughed softly. "Y-yes. B-but skin is s-soft. N-nice to t-ouch." One slender-fingered hand slid over his thigh.

He purred, cock filling, skin beginning to tingle. "Yes, Eiba."

Yes.

The Eiba smiled up at him and he could smell that the Eiba wanted him, could see the way the Eiba's pants were getting tight in his crotch. The Eiba's eyes were very blue behind their windows. It made him shudder, made him nervous. He didn't know what to do, what to feel.

The soft touches moved up to his belly, the Eiba stroking. "I l-like t-touching, Tigre."

"This vala feels the touching, Eiba."

Inside. Inside deep.

"Tigre. Y-you are Tigre." With the words, the Eiba leaned up, pressed against him and brought their mouths together. The gentle hand wrapped around his cock.

Oh. He purred, lips parting as he let the Eiba in and in and in. The Eiba's tongue was hot and wet and wriggly and felt very good inside his mouth, almost as good as the hand that was stroking his cock, thumb playing across the tip. The temptation was to return the touches, to move, to press the Eiba against the bed and rub them together.

The kiss ended, the Eiba's tongue sliding over his lips as the hand around him squeezed tight. "D-do y-you want t-to touch m-me?"

"Yes." He jerked, hips bucking. "Yes, Eiba. Please. Please."

The Eiba nodded. "Y-yes. Please."

He reached out, cupped the hardness under the Eiba's clothes, rubbing gently. Oh. Hot. Hard. Want. "Eiba."

The Eiba cried out, pushing up against his hand. "Tigre!"

A groan left him, surprising him. Good. So good. The Eiba smelled good.

"M-more. Please, Tigre." The Eiba's free hand wrapped around his shoulder as the Eiba leaned back, lying on the bed and tugging him, encouraging him down.

His fingers pushed the fabric away, holding himself over the Eiba, moaning as they rubbed together. Sweet cries came from the Eiba, the slender body pushing up against him, writhing eagerly.

It was... better than fighting. Not better than the whip, not better than the water, but good.

One of the Eiba's hands took hold of the chain that was attached to the ring in his nipple and tugged as the Eiba's lips once again pressed on his. He growled, the kiss hungry, needy. The Eiba's other hand grabbed one of his ass cheeks and squeezed hard, pulling him down harder. The show of strength eased him and he thrust down, tongue pushing into the Eiba's lips, hips rocking.

The Eiba's lips wrapped around his tongue, sucking in time to his thrusts. The blue eyes stared up at him from behind their windows.

Beautiful. Eiba. Beautiful. He groaned, shuddering, muscles shaking with his need.

The Eiba's eyes widened as he groaned and the slender hips bucked up against him, wet heat spreading between them.

He met the Eiba's eyes, need coursing through him. "Eiba?" Please. Please give him leave to come.

"W-wait," murmured the Eiba, fingers fumbling between them. Once the Eiba had pulled up his shirt, baring the slim belly, the Eiba nodded. "N-now. C-come, Tigre."

He threw his head back, roaring as he shot, seed pouring out of him.

The Eiba moaned softly, fingers sliding over his face, the touch so warm, so gentle on him. He shivered, leaned toward the touch without even thinking. The Eiba tugged him down so he was resting on the slender form, sort of rubbing lazily against him.

His blankets would smell of them, of the Eiba.

"W-we should eat," murmured the Eiba, snuggling closer against him.

"Yes, Eiba." He held the Eiba close, purring.

"L-later." The word was almost a sigh, the Eiba's body heavy with sleep against him.

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre settled, fingers brushing against the blanket, against the Eiba. Yes. Later. Yes.

Chapter Eight

It had been a good day.

Tigre had coped very well with being out in the aircar and at the shopping mall, even with the bomb they'd felt. Tigre's instincts were already pushing the man to protect him, and Palin knew his faith, his belief that they were meant to be was well-founded.

Lying with Tigre in the small room that was Tigre's, making love, those had been lovely as well, as had their shared meal, Tigre seeming to especially enjoy the things he'd chosen. Now they were sitting on cushions among the plants, watching the sun disappear, making the sky go pink and orange and purple, dark blue.

Palin leaned against Tigre's arm, enjoying having the big, strong body to touch, to be near. Tigre was humming, the sound sweet and low and random, dark eyes quiet. He pet one thick thigh, his fingers drawn to Tigre's warm skin.

Tigre tilted his head, looked down at him. "At the old place... The Eiba went to find this vala? *This* vala?"

He nodded. "Y-yes. N-not a v-vala. *Y-you*."

He watched Tigre try to understand that, try to process it. "The Eiba knew the va... the Tigre?"

"It's c-complic-cated." And it might freak Tigre out, to learn that he was an information broker, to hear what that meant. "I'm an information b-broker. D-do y-you know w-what that is?"

"No, Eiba."

He took Tigre's hand in his and held on tight, hoping the connection would keep it from being too scary a concept for Tigre. "I g-go into m-minds to f-find information, s-secrets."

Tigre's head tilted. "In? The Eiba goes in to find the vala?"

"I s-saw y-you in the h-head of a c-client and I w-wanted to s-see y-you."

"Oh." Tigre blinked, thought. Nodded.

He smiled and squeezed Tigre's hand. "W-when I saw y-you I kn-new w-what w-we could b-be t-together."

Tigre nodded. "Good, Eiba. Together."

"Y-yes." He beamed at Tigre, so pleased Tigre felt it, too.

The sun disappeared completely and the sky went dark, the lights of the city twinkling, keeping it from being too dark.

"Come to the Room," he told Tigre, standing and beginning to remove his clothes.

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre stood, calm, quiet, solid.

He led the way to the Room, which was already broken down into the small, intimate corner where the equipment was kept. He felt Tigre's breath speed, felt the anticipation, the curiosity.

"Tonight there will be no chains. You will accept the pain and be still with it."

"No fighting." Tigre searched his eyes, so careful, fighting the training of years.

"No fighting. I will whip you. You will take the pain into yourself until you feel the center, the stillness with me." He could never go into a fighting arena with Tigre, but the beatings, the pain, there he could meet Tigre on even ground and they could go to a place where it was just the two of them.

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre nodded, muscles rippling, swelling.

Tigre was beautiful in his obedience, in submission. And he would be even more beautiful when they were both transformed by the whipping, drawn together by the pain and the need.

Palin went to the cupboard and drew down a flogger with three inch-wide bands of leather, each with a leather-covered stud at the top.

He gave it to Tigre to touch, to feel, to weigh in the big hands. "This is what I will use."

"Yes, Eiba." As if Tigre could argue, complain.

He leaned up and gave Tigre a soft kiss. "Turn and face the wall, Tigre. Brace yourself with your hands."

Tigre was beautiful, arched and stretched, body offered for him readily. He test the whip on the air and then let it fly, let it thud against Tigre's back, the studs smacking with a satisfying noise. The dark skin wore his marks beautifully, the tanned flesh warming, pinking.

He liked this whip because it was hard work to wield it, to make the leather land where he wanted it to, with enough force to leave the marks.

"I want to hear you," he told Tigre, as he laid the whip across the wide back again.

"Eiba..." Tigre's muscles rippled, his name a whisper.

"Yes, I'm here. With you. Just us."

He let the whip hit again, his body starting to find a rhythm with it, the sound of the whip guiding his breathing. Soft groans and sighs filled the air, Tigre rocking, shifting, feeling him.

He could feel it in his arm, his muscles beginning to burn as he continued to lay the leather over Tigre's back. It was beautiful, the criss-crossed lines, the deeper marks where the studs hit. Tigre began to sweat, to pant, entire body in motion.

It was amazing, how much Tigre took without moving, hands solid against the wall, no attempt was made to move out of the way of the lashes. Palin could smell Tigre, rich and powerful, controlled. His.

He reached out and touched the small of Tigre's back, fingers gathering sweat, which he brought to his lips and tasted. Salt and musk, strong and male, and it made him moan. Shivers rocked Tigre, buttocks going taut under his touch. It had him reaching out, touching again, letting his hand slide from Tigre's lower back down to his ass, cupping the firm, beautiful globes.

"Eiba-." So hungry, trembling for him.

His own cock throbbed, need flooding in him as he touched Tigre's ass.

"I'm going to fuck you soon," he told Tigre, finger sliding along Tigre's cleft before he stepped back and let the whip fly through the air again.

The cries came faster, sharper, Tigre's hands fisting on the wall. Palin let the leather land on Tigre's ass, wanting the imprint of it, of the studs, to be there when he fucked Tigre after.

He was panting, his arm aching and his own cries echoing Tigre's when he let the whip drop onto the floor. With a moan, he leaned against Tigre, let the muscled body hold him up. Burning, Tigre was aflame against him, just burning.

He slid his tongue along the inflamed skin, moaning at the strong, solid male taste of Tigre's skin.

Once he'd caught his breath, he backed off. "Hands and knees, Tigre. So we can join."

"Y... yes. Yes. Eiba." Tigre moved slow, carefully settling, heavy balls swinging between the spread legs.

He knelt behind Tigre, fingers teasing along Tigre's crack again. The heat poured from Tigre, making him shake, making him need. Making him wonder about the heat inside.

He sucked on his finger and then pushed it against Tigre's entrance, gasping at the heat, the silkiness as it slid right in. Tigre stilled, pushing back against him, so carefully, so gently.

He moaned, free hand stroking across Tigre's ass, fingertips sliding on the welts, finding the rounded ones that matched the studs. "So hot."

"Y-yes. Yes, Eiba. Hot."

He pushed another finger alongside with the first. Yes, hot, but so tight, too. And yet, Tigre's body grabbed at his fingers, pulling him in. He shuddered, cock sliding along the back of Tigre's thigh. Tigre moved, riding his fingers, a low purr filling the air.

"Going to be inside you," Palin whispered, almost shaking with eagerness as he tugged his fingers from Tigre's body.

"Yes, Eiba. Inside." The tight hole was pink, eager, ready for him.

His cock was leaking, and Palin spread the liquid from the tip along the head of his cock and then lined up and began to push in.

They cried out together, his moan higher, Tigre's deep.

Tigre's body grasped his cock, hugged it tight and hot. He moaned again as he sank all the way in until his hips pressed against Tigre's bruised ass. Tigre's muscles fluttered and moved around him, the constant motion in stark contrast with Tigre's stillness.

The sensations started in his cock and settled in his balls, making him ache, need, and he started to move. Each thrust was long and slow as he pushed deep, hips slapping Tigre's ass like the leather had slapped against Tigre's back. Tigre took him, moaned for him, shivered for him.

He ran his fingertips lightly along Tigre's back, the heat there amazing, each welt an inferno. Bending on a thrust into Tigre's body, he kissed a shoulder blade.

"Eiba." The kiss broke Tigre's stillness, the big man shifting, moving.

"Yes." He nodded, one hand wrapping around Tigre's cock. "Take what you need," he murmured, giving Tigre another kiss.

Tigre began to move, rocking furiously between his cock and his hand, bucking madly. He found Tigre's rhythm, joined it, fucking Tigre hard. He felt Tigre's body jerk, tighten, so needy for him.

"Yes. Yes, come, Tigre. Give me your need." He could barely get the words out, his breath was lost, his body moving and moving.

Heat poured over his fingers, Tigre's body clenching tight around him. He cried out, his own come pouring from him into Tigre's body. He collapsed over Tigre's back with a cry.

"E... Eiba." Tigre panted, held them up, so strong beneath them.

He fought to catch his breath, tried to move so Tigre wasn't doing all the work, but his legs were trembling and he needed a moment.

He knew Tigre would hold him up, support him. He knew it now.

Chapter Nine

It was a long week, more and more clients coming to see him, the news full of dire reports from other city centers and reassurances that they were safe here. The businessmen with their silk suits and slim black suitcases were harried and demanding, and the unrest made it harder for Palin to concentrate.

He'd worked in the evenings with Tigre, but only brief sessions after a light meal and then quickly to bed.

It felt good, having a guard in the room with him, someone who was watching and looking out for him as he went into the mindstream, as he searched for people and secrets. The work left him vulnerable; Tigre negated that, tipped the balance in his favor.

Their first day off in a week dawned... well, it didn't dawn. He could hear the thunder in the distance, could hear the rain on the windows in the kitchen through his open door.

Tigre's room was further in and had no windows, but Palin wondered if Tigre could hear the thunder, wondered if it was scary for Tigre. He slipped on a pair of soft sweatpants and a t-shirt and knocked on Tigre's door before letting himself in.

Tigre was wrapped in the blankets, back against the wall, shivering.

"Oh!" He went quickly to Tigre. "D-don't b-be scared." He pet one wide shoulder.

Tigre puffed up a little, rumbling for just a moment as if denying the fear. Then those dark eyes searched his, Tigre pressing closer. "Bombs, Eiba. So many bombs. Stay."

He shook his head. "N-not b-bombs." He wrapped a hand around Tigre's arm. "C-come. S-see."

"Eiba?" Tigre shook his head, surrounding him, trying to protect him.

He fell in love a little with Tigre then, with the way Tigre was caring for him, even scared and worried. "It's n-not b-bombs. I p-promise."

Tigre's fingers twined with his and Tigre allowed him to lead him out of the little room. They went through his room and into the kitchen, the rain just streaming down, pounding against the glass windows, making the area with the plants dark and almost magical.

"Water." Tigre blinked. "Sky water."

He nodded, watching the water running along the windows. He'd seen an old vid once with lakes

and waterfalls that had looked like this. It wasn't often that it rained this hard; usually there were just electrical storms. It made it special. "P-pretty."

The thunder boomed and Tigre jumped, arms wrapping around Palin, pulling him from the window.

"N-not a b-bomb," he told Tigre, curling into the warmth of his lover. "W-watch. There w-will b-be q-quick light and then b-boom again."

Tigre watched, eyes wide, refusing to give him up.

He didn't mind though; Tigre was warm and good against him. "There!" he said as the sky lit up, a jagged flash of lightning going across the sky. A few moments later the boom of thunder came.

Tigre's eyes were huge, watching. "Eiba..."

"It's l-like a b-bomb, a l-little. V-violent. P-powerful. N-not m-manm-made." Storms like this amazed him with their power from seemingly nowhere.

Another boom came and the electricity failed, Tigre near roaring with a pure terror.

He wrapped his arm around Tigre's waist. "Sh. Sh. It's ok-k-kay. J-just the l-lights out." He stroked Tigre's back, the skin warm beneath his fingers, small welts still there from the session they'd had the night before.

"Lights. Lights, Eiba." For the first time, Palin heard fear in Tigre's voice, the careful control shaken.

"C-candle." He had a candle somewhere. He untangled himself from Tigre and went to the cupboards, reaching up into the highest one, feeling around for the fat cylinder of wax.

Tigre followed him, crowding him.

"Tigre? There's n-no b-bombs." He turned, and stroked the muscled belly.

"No lights. No lights." Tigre growled, head tossing. "This vala does not like the dark, Eiba. This vala does *not*!"

"Oh!" He tilted his head, hands moving on Tigre's skin. "W-why?"

Tigre shook his head, hiding from him, heart pounding.

He kept touching, letting Tigre know he was there, thinking hard on it. Tigre was frightened of the dark, but there was no reason to be. Unless of course it had been used as a punishment by Favila.

He grabbed Tigre's hand and tugged, heading back to his bedroom. "C-come."

Tigre followed, little whimpers sounding. He squeezed the big hand in his own and then pushed Tigre down onto the bed. He stripped quickly before climbing into Tigre's lap.

Tigre blinked at him, arms wrapping around him. "Eiba?"

"L-lie b-back. C-covers over our h-heads." He would make the dark a good thing for Tigre.

Tigre tensed, body hard as stone.

"Tigre. I'm h-here. I w-won't l-let anything h-happen." He pushed, encouraging Tigre to lie back.

Tigre went, tense and shivering. "Yes, Eiba."

"The c-covers," he whispered. "Ov-ver our h-heads." His hands were already sliding on Tigre's skin, trying to reassure, to arouse.

"Eiba. The *dark*."

"Ign-nore. C-covers and then k-kiss me."

"Y...yes, Eiba." The covers went up, Tigre's heartbeat audible.

He found Tigre's lips in the dark, tongue sliding over them and then pushing in. Tigre opened, whimpering for him, wanting him. He hummed, tongue tasting Tigre's mouth, the spicy, male flavor strong. His hands roamed, sliding on the hot skin.

Tigre sighed, beginning to relax, to breathe. It made him relax as well and he melted against the strong body, sinking into the kisses, into Tigre's warmth.

"Dark, Eiba." Tigre pressed closer.

"D-don't n-need to s-see t-to m-make l-love."

"Bad things happen in the dark, Eiba." Tigre held him close.

"G-good things, t-too. J-just l-like the l-light."

"Good things." Tigre's sigh was soft, face pressing into his throat.

"Is th-this g-good?" he asked, lips sliding on Tigre's again, fingers finding the chain attached to Tigre's nipple ring and tugging gently.

Tigre moaned, eyelashes tickling his skin. "Good."

"L-let m-make m-more g-good." Palin tugged on the chain again and kissed Tigre. "C-close y-your eyes and enj-joy."

Tigre's eyes closed, lips opening for him, letting him in. He slid his tongue into Tigre's mouth, fingers dropping the chain, sliding over Tigre's skin instead and moving to tease the ringed nipple with soft pinches. He teased at Tigre's tongue with his own, urging Tigre to return the kiss.

Tigre's fingers tightened, legs shifting. "Eiba." The name was pushed into his lips.

"Y-yes. I w-want y-you to m-make love to m-me." He rubbed against Tigre, his cock hard, sliding along the heat of Tigre's belly.

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre nodded, hands sliding over his body.

Palin moaned, pushing into the touches, mindful of continuing to touch Tigre, to keep Tigre's mind on what they were doing and not the darkness they were doing it in. Tigre's shaft began to fill, body rocking beneath him.

He caught Tigre's tongue in his mouth, sucking gently as he brought Tigre's hand down to his ass. Tigre's fingers wrapped around his hip, tugging him down, pulling him close. He loved the way Tigre touched him. No one else ever did, but Tigre enjoyed it, seemed to want it.

The air felt heavy, heated, their need joining, meeting.

He slid up Tigre's body, arm reaching out of the covers for the bottle of oil. He found it, and pushed the small bottle into Tigre's hand. "Y-you must p-prepare m-me."

"Hurt." Tigre rumbled, head shaking. "No hurt."

"N-no. Y-you w-won't. C-careful." He opened the oil and poured it into his own hand, then slicked up Tigre's fingers. "I w-want you."

Tigre was tense again, face buried against his throat, but the thick fingers slid behind his balls. Careful. He moved slowly, pushing into Tigre's touch, encouraging. His fingers slid through Tigre's braid, separating it, undoing it.

The touch seemed to ease Tigre a bit, so he continued, petting and grooming, stroking as those fingers slowly circled his hole. Palin had never done this before, and he moaned as Tigre's fingers shot sweet sensations up along his spine. He shivered, body pushing into Tigre.

"No hurt." Tigre's touch was so gentle, rubbing in lazy circles.

He shook his head. "N-no. G-good. G-good shivers, Tigre." He pushed back against Tigre's fingers. "More," he demanded.

"Yes, Eiba." One careful finger pushed in, filling him.

"Oh..." Palin moaned softly. He'd never felt this before, never felt the slight burn of being stretched. It was warm too though, hot. It made him shiver and want even more.

Tigre could hurt him, kill him, but the touch was so gentle, so very careful.

He started moving with Tigre, rocking back onto the thick finger, making soft noises as the feelings built. His own hands slid on Tigre's skin, but he was distracted, focused on what Tigre was doing to him.

In the darkness it seemed so huge.

Over and over, the touches drove him wild, the pace slow and steady. "M-more," he begged, body shivering and shuddering, wanting more.

The reason they were there had faded; all Palin knew was he wanted this, wanted more.

Another finger joined the first, spreading him, stretching him. "Eiba."

He shuddered. "Tigre! S-so big!" He rocked back onto Tigre's fingers, whimpering, his cock dragging along Tigre's belly.

"Good? Good, Eiba?"

"G-good. Y-yes. Y-yes. Please, Tigre. M-more." He nodded, lips fastening onto Tigre's neck.

The thick fingers slipped away, replaced with something thicker, something bigger.

"Oh. Oh, Tigre, th-that's y-y-you." His legs slid to either side of Tigre, knees digging into the mattress as he slowly pushed back.

"Yes. Yes, Eiba. Tigre. Your vala." The pressure increased, so very, very careful.

He was stretched and stretched, Tigre going so deep into him, the sensations so very strong. And so very good. His hands curled on Tigre's chest and his breath came from him in low, needy pants. So careful, so gentle -- Tigre's motions were more than obedience, the touches, the heat entering him, that was loving.

"Tigre..." he whispered. "It's g-g-good." He sat back completely, the blanket like a tent over his head. His whole body squeezed hard on Tigre's cock, the thick heat so deep inside him.

Finding Tigre's hands in the dark, he put one on his hip, the other he encouraged to wrap around his cock. "W-we m-move now."

"Yes. Yes, Eiba. Move." Tigre whimpered, hand stroking his cock, petting him.

He started to move, lifting himself up off of Tigre and then dropping carefully back down again. It made him gasp as Tigre's hard length slid deep once again. Tigre's soft deep purrs filled the air, hips rocking so carefully. The chestnut hair spread out everywhere, lush and dark. Soft.

He rocked with Tigre for a bit and then, once he was used to the amazing stretch, he leaned forward, finding Tigre's lips with his own.

"Eiba." The word was pushed into his lips, so low.

"Is it g-good, Tigre?" It was for him. So good, but he needed for Tigre to be enjoying it, too, for this to be better than the dark and the thunder.

"Good. Good." He could feel Tigre, feel the wonder, the joy.

"G-g-good," he murmured, lips pressing harder against Tigre's, tongue pushing in as he rocked his hips.

His fingers slid over Tigre's chest, finding the nipples, pinching them both and then playing with the gold ring, hot from Tigre's body. Tigre's body moved faster, bucking beneath him, head tossing.

He started panting, moaning almost continually. He wanted to hold on, to make it last as long as he could for Tigre, but the pleasure was so large, so good. His body went tight, squeezing Tigre's cock so hard as he cried out, his seed splashing out over Tigre's hand.

"Eiba. Eiba, please." Tigre's voice was needy, hungry. "Please."

"Yes! C-come for m-me, Tigre." He nodded, squeezing Tigre's cock with his ass.

Tigre roared, heat pulsing inside him, all the strong muscles taut.

Shivering, he collapsed down onto Tigre's chest, breath steaming out him.

"Eiba." Tigre stroked his back, pet him.

Palin hummed and cuddled, pressing a kiss to Tigre's chest before tugging down the covers to find the lights back on. "S-see? The d-dark wasn't s-so bad."

Tigre made a noncommittal noise, just touching him.

He chuckled and gave Tigre a kiss. "D-do y-you like t-to swim?"

"In the big water?" Tigre nodded eagerly. "Yes, Eiba. This vala likes the water."

"Y-your reward f-for n-not panicking in the d-dark."

Tigre's eyes lit up. "Reward. This vala knows rewards."

"Y-you were v-very brave. V-very good." He smiled, letting Tigre's softening length slide from him and stretching out on top of the solid body.

"Yes, Eiba. Very good." Oh, such excitement, such pleasure.

He laughed softly, so pleased at having found a way to help Tigre through the dark, and to make him so happy now.

He got up, stretching, holding his hand out to Tigre. "C-come. We'll s-swim."

"Yes, Eiba. Yes. In the big water." Tigre nodded, disheveled and wild.

He nodded and went to his drawer, pulling on a pair of jeans and a sweater. They could swim in the nude once they were there. He was anxious to see Tigre in the water, see Tigre enjoying something just to enjoy it.

Tigre's' hand slid into his, warm and solid, strong. Squeezing a bit.

On impulse he leaned up, kissing Tigre again. "Are y-you h-happy?"

Dark eyes met his, shining. "Yes, Eiba. Happy. This vala is happy."

He poked Tigre's chest. "Tigre. Y-you are Tigre."

"This Tigre is happy."

"G-good."

He led Tigre out and up, eager to show Tigre his private pool.

The wound their way up the stairs, the storms still raging. Tigre, though? Never noticed the sky in the vast glassed-in ceiling. Those dark eyes were fastened on the pool, lips open. "Eiba. Eiba, *look*."

"Y-yes." He started to strip. "We'll s-swim t-together."

Tigre's eagerness was palpable. Tigre nodded, leaning down at the edge of the pool, fingers trailing in the water. "Water. Water."

Naked, he padded over to Tigre and crouched by the water, trailing his own fingers in it before flicking it up and splashing Tigre.

Tigre snorted, eyes dancing. "Water."

He laughed and splashed Tigre again. "Y-yes."

"In?" Tigre was pushing, pushing, excited and bouncing.

He nodded and sat on the edge, getting his feet and legs wet first.

Tigre didn't hesitate, just dove in, slicing through the water, surprisingly sleek and fast, natural. Oh. Once again Palin was struck by Tigre's beauty.

The large man with his muscles and smooth, sleek skin, was built for beauty, but when Tigre was focused on something he loved, like their sessions, like this swimming, that beauty was intensified, made more real. Palin stayed where he was, watching Tigre's body move easily through the water.

Over and over, Tigre cut through the water, muscles working tirelessly. Eventually Palin slipped into the water and joined Tigre, not trying to keep up, but swimming close enough that he could feel Tigre just brush by him whenever they passed each other.

He tired out long before Tigre did and he turned, floating on his back, looking up at the sky through the high glass ceilings. Finally Tigre stopped, breathing hard, face completely at peace.

Palin kicked gently with his feet and used his hands to steer himself as he sort of floated over to where Tigre was. "G-good?" he asked.

Tigre nodded, out of breath but smiling.

He smiled back, hand latching onto Tigre's shoulder, letting Tigre keep him upright.

"W-we w-will come often. F-for r-reward."

"This Tigre thanks the Eiba. Good water. Good."

"Y-you're w-welcome, Tigre." He beamed at Tigre, fingers pushing Tigre's wet hair away from his face. "It's a g-good d-day."

And it was. Despite the thunder and the rain and being afraid of the dark, it was a very good day.

Chapter Ten

The dishes from latemeal were cleaned and put away, the sound of music coming from the vid machine. Every muscle he had was exhausted, worked from the tension and swimming and pleasure. Tigre was happy.

Quiet.

Peaceful.

Tired.

He went to the plants, looking them over, tending them.

The Eiba came to him and handed him a pot with a handle and a long spout. "F-for the p-plants. W-water."

"Yes, Eiba." He nodded, very careful to give each one what they needed. He could feel the Eiba watching him, the blue eyes sharp behind their windows, seeing everything. "Is good, Eiba? This vala is good?"

"Tigre," corrected the Eiba. "V-very g-good, Tigre." He was given a smile and a touch, the Eiba's hand small and slender and very warm against his skin.

"Yes, Eiba." He nodded, preening.

The Eiba laughed softly, eyes smiling up at him. "Y-your job n-now. The plants. Y-you take c-care."

"Yes, Eiba." He nodded, beamed. He would.

"G-good." The Eiba watched until he was done and then offered a hand. "A b-bath, Tigre? Then v-vids?"

"Yes, Eiba. Yes." He followed easily, humming quietly, enjoying the line of his Eiba behind him.

His Eiba bent and started the water, adding some oil that smelled pretty, like a sweet vanilla cake.

Then the Eiba stood and smiled. "Und-dress m-me?" It was a question, a request, not an order.

He nodded, smiled back, carefully unbuttoning the soft, silky shirt.

Pretty.

So pretty.

The Eiba stood there, smiling at him, and when he pushed the silk off the Eiba's shoulders, his hands were taken, brought to the Eiba's skin. He found himself purring, petting, exploring the Eiba's skin. The Eiba moaned softly, pushing into his touches, hands moving to mimic his own, touching him back.

Tigre knelt, carefully stripping the loose pants away, hands touching the lean, pale legs.

"Oh..." The Eiba's moan was low and shaky. "N-no one ever t-touches m-me."

"This Tigre touches." He enjoyed the touching.

The feeling.

The Eiba.

"Y-yes. Thank y-you." The Eiba's fingers were in his hair, sliding, gentle, sweet.

The Eiba's cock was near his cheek, growing slowly in front of him. He kissed the base, beginning to hum again as he removed the Eiba's shoes and socks. Another soft moan sounded, the Eiba's fingers stuttering over his head. He sat back once the Eiba was nude, hands massaging the pale legs.

Soft sighs and gentle moans sounded, the muscles under his fingers relaxing. The Eiba's cock was heavy, a drop of liquid at the tip, tantalizing. "D-do y-you w-want to s-suck m-me?"

"Yes, Eiba." He enjoyed the actions, the flavors of pleasing his Eiba.

The Eiba's hand touched his cheek, fingers tracing his tattoo. "N-not an order. B-but I w-would l-like it. If y-you w-want."

He turned his face into the touch, lips open, tongue licking and tasting the shape on the Eiba's hand.

The Eiba's noises became louder, fingers curling, sliding on his face. "G-good, Tigre."

He nodded, moving to lick and kissed and suck in the Eiba's cock, mouth working it easily. The soft whimpers that fell from the Eiba were sweet and wanton, the Eiba's fingers sliding from his face to his head, stroking through his hair. Drops slid from the Eiba's cock onto his tongue.

He sucked, head bobbing, cheeks hollowing as he sucked eagerly. The Eiba's other hand came up, both sliding over his head as the thin hips made small movements, sliding the long cock into his mouth. "Tigre, oh."

It was easy to hum and pull, stay close and touch as the Eiba moved. The Eiba's eyes closed, the

soft sounds of pleasure grew louder, falling rapidly from the Eiba's mouth. The gentleness of the Eiba's movements gave way, became eager, hard. The fingers in his hair began to tug and pull, the Eiba taking him, pushing into him.

"Tigre. Tigre." His name -- *his* name -- was repeated over and over, the long, slender cock bumping the back of his throat.

He swallowed hard, nose buried in the soft curls above the Eiba's cock.

"Tigre!" A shudder moved through the Eiba and the cock in his mouth throbbed, seed pouring down his throat. Salt and heat and he drank it all, pulling and pulling.

The Eiba curled over his head, gasping, panting, hands sliding on his shoulders. "Oh. Th-th-th-thank y-you, Tigre."

He kissed the Eiba's belly, nodding, purring. It was good.

The sweet touches continued on his face, his shoulders. "N-now y-you, Tigre. What w-want?"

"Bath, Eiba." He pressed close, nodded. "The bath."

"Okay." The Eiba tugged on his arms, encouraging him to stand and then get into the bath. The Eiba slipped in after him, leaning against him.

He relaxed back, hands moving idly. Tired. He was tired. And happy. The Eiba half turned, head on his shoulder, hands moving over him, sliding on his skin with gentle, but sure touches. His belly was stroked, his pecs felt, his nipples teased, the tops of his thighs squeezed.

His cock began to fill, desire making his heart pound. The Eiba purred, fingertips teasing across his cock before moving again to his belly. The Eiba kissed his shoulder, open mouthed, tongue sliding on his skin.

"Eiba." He shifted, belly going tight, hard, hungry.

"W-what do y-you w-want?" His Eiba asked, fingers teasing across his cock again. Then they came back one finger pushing against the slit, pushing in a very little.

"Oh..." He rippled, the sting exciting him, making him need. "Eiba..."

"G-good?" The Eiba did it again, one finger and then another, pushing against the slit, spreading the liquid around the head of his cock which was poking out from the water now.

He nodded, spread, groaning as he pushed into that touch. "Big."

The Eiba smiled and pushed against his slit again before bending, tongue now doing what the Eiba's fingers had.

"Eiba!" He shuddered, hips bucking up instinctively, needing. Wanting.

The Eiba hummed, looked up and smiled at him and then turned to his cock again, licking and pushing the hot tongue against his slit. The burn felt good and he stretched, trying to make room inside himself.

The Eiba's finger continued to play with the head of his cock as the Eiba looked at him again. "M-more?"

"Please." He ached, burned.

"W-wait there," murmured the Eiba, giving him a quick kiss and getting up out of the bath, dripping as he hurried off.

Tigre blinked, watched the Eiba leave. The Eiba left? He frowned, trying to understand. He didn't have long to try though because a moment later the Eiba was back, smiling at him, something long and silver in the Eiba's hand. The Eiba grabbed two bottles from the shelves by the sink and climbed back into the tub.

"Eiba?" He opened his arms, cradling the Eiba back in.

"S-something f-for y-you," murmured the Eiba, handing over the long, thin silver thing.

He looked at it. Pretty. Hard. Shiny. "For the Tigre?"

The Eiba's hand took his cock again, sliding a finger across the tip, pushing a little inside the slit again. "F-for here."

He frowned, looking. "Eiba?"

"Inside." The Eiba took the silver thing again and sprayed it with stuff from one bottle, then there was slick gel poured from the other bottle, pressed into the tip of his cock. He knew that sure sound, that firmness in his Eiba's voice. He shivered, thighs parting.

He was given a little smile, the Eiba pushing even more slippery gel into his cock. His breath panted from him, toes curling as he watched. The Eiba kissed him suddenly, mouth firm, warm, tongue slipping into his mouth for just a moment. Then his cock was taken in one hand, the silver thing pushed into the tip.

"Eiba..." His thighs spread, went taut, the burn sharp and stunning.

"It's g-good." The words were soft, but still sure, confident. The Eiba pushed the silver thing in a little further and then let go of it and it slid, just like that, into his prick.

"Eiba!" His hands opened and closed, the sensation unlike any other.

The Eiba bent and licked around the tip of his cock, fingers sliding down into the water to cup his balls, fondle them. Tigre twisted, soft cries pouring out, heat filling him. The Eiba's tongue teased the tip of the silver thing, making it vibrate, the Eiba's breath hot.

"Eiba. Eiba. Eibaeibaeibaeibaeiba."

Those blue eyes turned back up to him. "G-good, Tigre?"

He shook, just staring, words lost as he nodded.

"G-good." He was given a smile and his Eiba wrapped lips around his unadorned nipple, pulling strongly while his cock was squeezed.

His eyes rolled and he jerked, hands gripping the side of the tub. The water splashed against him as Eiba's teeth grazed his nipple, the hand at his balls tugging. His heart pounded, almost pushing out of his skin as he thrashed.

"S-soon," whispered the Eiba, mouth moving to his other nipple, thumb and finger pulling the silver thing partway out and then letting it drop again.

He arched, water splashing violently as he screamed.

The silver thing was gripped, pulled right out as the Eiba's hand stroked up and down along his cock. "N-now, Tigre."

His roar echoed, seed pouring out of him, almost painful. The Eiba kept stroking, warm lips pressing against his, mouth offered to him. He gasped into the Eiba's mouth, shaking, the sensations overwhelming him.

Long, slender fingers cupped his cheeks, the kiss going on and then the Eiba pulled back a little, smiling at him. "I h-have y-you."

"Have the vala. Eiba."

"Tigre," insisted his Eiba.

"Yes."

He nodded, blinking slow.

The Eiba smiled, blue eyes so warm. The Eiba kissed him again, fingers stroking. He smiled back, sinking into the water. The Eiba kept touching and kissing him, gentling him, making the overwhelming sensations ease.

His eyes closed, sated and melted all through.

He was almost asleep when the Eiba unplugged the tub, draining the water. "T-time for b-bed, Tigre."

"Bed, Eiba." He nodded, blinking slowly.

His Eiba nodded, drawing him out of the bath and drying him carefully, gently. Thoroughly. He just stood, following blindly as the Eiba led them into the Eiba's room, where the little door of his room was.

The Eiba didn't lead him there though; instead the Eiba stopped at his own bed. "S-sleep with m-me?"

"Eiba?" He nodded, eager to be in the big bed, with the Eiba.

"Th-thank y-you." The Eiba leaned up, kissed him softly and then climbed onto the bed, patting the mattress.

He crawled in, humming low, purring as the covers were drawn over him. The Eiba's arm wrapped around his waist, the slender body pushing close.

They curled together, sleep drawing him down almost immediately, the Eiba's name on his lips.

Chapter Eleven

Tigre was itching and his hands wanted to move. Waves of unrest made his back tingle, his head hurt. The Eiba worked hard, long hours with no moving and the Eiba was tired. Too tired to talk. Too tired to play or fuck or fight or anything but sleep and eat.

So he fed the Eiba and washed the Eiba and put the Eiba to bed.

Then he went into his little room and sat and waited for the morning and the noises that said it was time to wake the Eiba up and he thought maybe this was the worst punishment of all -- that every morning it just started over.

He paced his room, swinging his hair and growling low, pretending he was getting ready for a fight, back at the House, with someone strong. Dangerous. Someone who wanted to test him and try him. He would never tell the Eiba, but he liked it, liked the fighting part, the running and excited and fucking part. He had been *good* at that. A good vala. A strong, fierce vala.

A frightening vala. A dumb, silent, wordless vala who would bite and tear and claw until they used the controller and made him fall. His muscles were bunched, sweat coating his skin, eyes slitted.

There was a knock at his door and then his Eiba's face appeared. "Tigre. Come."

For a single, terrifying second, his muscles wouldn't relax, fists wouldn't unclench and he looked to his Eiba in a panic, then, thankfully, they did. He stepped forward, muscles obeying, growling his "Yes, Eiba."

His Eiba watched him come forward for several steps and then turned and led the way through the Eiba's room and through the common area and kitchen room, to the door beyond. When they got there, his Eiba's hand rested on the door handle.

"You will protect me. No weapons outside bodies, no death. When I say stop, you do."

He frowned, head tilting, searching for danger in the air, muscles growing tense again. "This Tigre protects the Eiba in all ways."

His Eiba nodded and repeated the last instructions. "No death. When I say stop, you do."

With that his Eiba opened the door, letting him go forward first.

The door had barely closed behind his Eiba, when another man wearing the mark of a vala launched himself toward Tigre's Eiba. He turned, baring his teeth, and reached out, slamming the man headfirst to the floor with a snarl. He grabbed the man's hair and yanked him up, throwing him across the room. Then he began to herd his Eiba towards a corner, somewhere protected. Safe.

His Eiba let him, but that didn't stop the other man from approaching, landing a hard fist in his stomach before trying to dodge around him.

Tigre's growling threat filled the air, loud and clear. *His Eiba. His.*

He caught the man's throat in his fist, squeezing for a moment and then hurling him away. No one would hurt his Eiba.

The man shook himself and attacked again, going for his knees, kicking hard. He grunted and then drove himself onto the man, elbow slamming into the side of his head, fist finding the intruder's face. The man didn't go down easy, legs coming up, one foot kicking him in the head, arms wrapping around his middle and squeezing tight.

Teeth bit his hand. With that, Tigre saw red, free hand slamming against the bridge of the nose until it snapped, the enemy's blood mixing with his.

They fought viciously for several long moments, the advantage passing back and forth until sweat began to make their hands slide on each other's skin.

"Enough. Stop." His Eiba's words rang through the room.

They both hesitated, muscles trembling, low, violent growls passing between them. He was furious and he hurt and this intruder would pay for attacking his Eiba, for not backing down, backing away.

The man did back away now though, head low, respectful. Another man slipped from the shadows, dressed similarly to his Eiba, and put a cloak around the other vala's shoulders.

The man nodded toward his Eiba. "Thank you, Palin."

"Thank you, Sorjin. Safe home."

The one called Sorjin guided the vala out, the red light coming on above the door as soon as it was closed.

"Are you in pain?"

Tigre looked down at his hand, blood dripping from his fingers, sweat dripping from him. He did not understand. "Eiba?"

"Are you in enough pain yet?" Before he could answer, or even process the question, his Eiba took his arm and spun him, pushing him lightly until he was facing the wall. The sound of the whip though the air came seconds before the pain across his back, his buttocks and his thighs.

He frowned, entire body beginning to tremble. He did not know what he had done, how he had offended -- he had followed the rules. He *had*.

The whip came down twice more and then it was tossed aside. There were no sounds in the room, only his own breathing and that of his Eiba.

"Hands and knees."

"Yes, Eiba."

He dropped to the floor, holding his weight off his wounded hand, head hanging towards the floor.

His Eiba's clothes dropped to the floor and then there was heat behind him. Without ceremony or fanfare his Eiba's cock pressed into his body. He sighed softly, forcing himself to relax, to give his Eiba everything, to please. His mind whirled, worry filling him.

His Eiba moved, long, slow thrusts, over and over again. "This is how it goes, right? Fight. Fuck. Tigre is happy now."

Tigre frowned. He had been imagining, thinking. He had meant no offense. He had been trying to let the Eiba rest and be quiet and good. He stiffened, heart pounding. He did not wish to go back to the House. He did not wish to be sent away.

"This vala is sorry, Eiba."

His Eiba stopped, buried deep inside him. "This is not what you wanted? Fight and then fuck?"

"This vala wants only to please the Eiba." Please, Eiba. Please. This vala does not wish to be sent away. This vala will be good. This vala will follow the rules. Please, Eiba.

The Eiba's head came down, resting against his back, hands stroking. A long sigh sounded and then his Eiba's heat slid from his body. "I m-m-made a m-m-mistake. I am s-s-sorry. T-tired."

"Eiba?" He was shaking now. His Eiba always took pleasure in his body. "This vala is sorry, Eiba. This vala is so sorry."

His hand had stopped bleeding, pieces of his hair caught in the forming scab.

His Eiba's hand was warm on his back. "N-no, Tigre. M-my f-fault. I'll f-fix." His Eiba stood and went to the wall, fiddling.

"Come here now. We will find a place together."

He stood immediately, moving towards his Eiba, eyes fastened to the floor. His Eiba's hand slid along his arm, bringing it up and fastening the wall chain around his wrist. And then the other. The slender hands were smooth and warm as they slid over his chest to his belly, along his back to his buttocks.

"We will find each other again, Tigre."

Oh. Oh, yes. This he understood. This he knew. He nodded. "Yes, Eiba. Yes."

His Eiba's hands continued to touch him, sliding like silk along his skin. No part of him was untouched by that gentle, sure hand. He relaxed beneath the attention, worry and unease sliding away from him, leaving only his Eiba and his Eiba's hands.

"The strap tonight, my Tigre. Hard, solid, undeniable."

"As you will it, Eiba." *My Tigre* -- he would give his life, his world for those words.

The strap was thick and solid and his Eiba slid it along both shoulders and over his cock. Then the slender body pressed up against him, his Eiba whispering in his ear. "I'm going to start now."

He closed his eyes, offering himself -- his love, his pain, his need -- to his Eiba's touch, his Eiba's will.

The first fall of the strap hit his right shoulder, solid and sure. It was followed by another. And another. Soon his Eiba had a rhythm going, a pattern he could lose himself in. He fell through the pain, his heart, his soul seeking the one they belong to. His Eiba. His center.

The blows continued to rain down on him, carrying only the rhythm with them now. The rhythm of his heart. The rhythm of his breath. The rhythm of his Eiba. Tigre flew, eyes open wide, sightless, lost.

He had no idea how long they were wrapped together in the rhythm of the strap, but at last it faltered, his Eiba's hand slipping. The strap dropped to the floor, his Eiba's forehead resting against his back, breath loud, hot against his abused flesh.

He was aching, hard, so settled in his burning skin.

His Eiba's tongue licked from the top of his spine to his tailbone. The word "come" whispered across the top of his ass.

"Eiba..." He arched, body shuddering violently as he obeyed his Eiba's will in this as in all things.

He felt a matching heat against his legs, his Eiba's sweet cry like a song. Tigre slumped against the chains, nerves alight. So good to him. His Eiba was *so* good. A last kiss graced the small of his back and then his Eiba was opening the shackles, letting him loose.

Tigre kept his feet, biting back his hiss as his arms lowered. "Thank you, Eiba."

Slender fingers slid through his hair, wrapping around his neck and pulling him down for a long, deep kiss. "Thank you, Tigre."

One of the slender, soft hands slid into his own, his Eiba leading him out of the Room. He followed without question, eyes resting on the curve of his Eiba's shoulder.

He was led back to the Eiba's room and his Eiba lay down on the small bed, patting the mattress behind him. "S-sleep w-with m-m-me, Tigre."

"Yes, Eiba." He crawled into the bed, curling close, knowing his Eiba wanted his touch, wanted to feel.

His Eiba sighed and leaned heavily back against him. Very soon there were no sounds but for the soft, even breaths of his Eiba.

He closed his eyes, relaxed and home in his own leather-stripped skin, and slept as his Eiba had asked.

Chapter Twelve

Palin sat cross-legged on his bed, slowing drawing the brush through Tigre's long, chestnut hair. Tigre knelt on the floor before him, head bent forward, silent and still, preparing for what was to come.

Palin loved the thick mass, and it had quickly become ritual, this brushing and quiet before their play began. It settled Tigre, reminded him that Palin cared for him and took care of him, and it settled his own nerves.

They were both already naked, both hard. That was another thing the brushing brought -- it made their bodies eager for what was coming.

Satisfied with both his own readiness and the smoothness of Tigre's hair, he put the brush aside and slid his hands over the broad shoulders.

Now he would begin.

Carefully parting Tigre's hair into three even parts, he began a tight braid, binding the hair. A thick, heavy metal clasp fit around the end, falling against Tigre's back with a muted thud when Palin let the braid drop.

"Up," he commanded softly.

Tigre stood immediately, moving with a silent, graceful strength. Not a word, even Tigre's body held its noise until he bade Tigre speak.

Palin stood, sighing and leaning his forehead against the strong back, hands traveling along warm skin, his cock nudging along the bottom of Tigre's buttocks. He let his hands travel to Tigre's back and then drew the thick braid up and looped it around Tigre's neck, pulling until it was snug. The end was left dangling down the broad chest, within easy reach for later.

"Follow," he ordered, pleased that his stutter remained silent as it always seemed to when they played. He preceded Tigre through the kitchen and into the Room.

The sun was long gone, the dark sky filled with lights from the city. Palin pressed a button, bringing the sliding walls out, closing the room down to a third its original size, window disappearing behind the new wall. It was dark, shadowed and cozy, intimate.

"One word, Tigre, and you shall have it -- position, toy, binding, your choice, but only one word."

Tigre slid to his knees on the grey tile, settling quietly. "Yours."

Oh-. He smiled and slid his hand along Tigre's face, cupping one cheek and sliding his thumb over the generous lower lip. "Yes, Tigre, you are."

His cock throbbed and he nudged Tigre's lips open, stepping closer. "Suck me."

Tigre pulled him in eagerly, tongue and lips working over his flesh. The dark eyes closed, his lover lost within the sucking rhythm.

"Oh, you're good at that." Palin sighed and let his hips flow, the movements easy and natural as he fucked Tigre's mouth. His hands stroked over Tigre's face, fingers tracing the hollowed cheeks, the closed eyelids.

Heat and sweet suction surrounded him, Tigre taking him in deep, swallowing hard around the tip of his cock.

"Oh!" He cried out and came, spilling himself into the hot mouth. Tigre drank him in, not losing a drop as the full mouth gentled, tongue sliding hot and soft over his flesh.

He let his cock slip from the warm haven and stroked it along Tigre's face. "Oh, that was nice. Your turn now, my Tigre. Something for you."

He pushed a couple of buttons on the console, chains with manacles attached falling from sliding panels. Dark eyes watched, caught by the glint of the chains. Palin watched the muscles ripple involuntarily across strong shoulders as Tigre waited for his instructions, his words, his command.

He looped his arm around the trim waist, tugging Tigre with him toward the corner. He shackled Tigre to the chains, arms and legs spread wide. It was darker in the corner, the bare light from the console further away now, leaving Tigre in darker shadows than usual. It made the man appear fierce and dangerous, reminding Palin of all he was capable of, and yet he was here, obedient to Palin's every command.

He stroked his hand over the familiar lines of Tigre's face again before pulling on the length of hair falling over Tigre's chest, tightening the loop around the wide neck, not quite choking. Tigre arched, body stretching towards his touch, cock hard, eyes hot. No sounds fell, nothing from the graveled voice, but the plea was clear.

"So strong, my Tigre." He pulled sharply at the chain connecting nipple ring to cock ring, pulling it toward himself, applying pressure to both ends. Stepping back to better see the full effect, he kept the tension on the chain between his fingers.

The chains creaked as the huge hands tightened upon them, Tigre's breath coming quick. Every muscle was stretched, trying to ease the pull of delicate, tender flesh. As he watched, a single drop of sweat trailed down the center of the muscled chest. Moving forward again, but not releasing the chain, he licked at the drop, moaning as his mouth was filled with salt and musk.

Finally he let the chain go and went to one of the hidden cupboards, pulling out the gloves with the small rubber spikes on them. He slipped them onto his hands and brought them over to show Tigre. The dark eyes flared, teeth burying into the still-swollen lips. The shudder traveled through Tigre's body, shoulders to balls.

He nodded and offered Tigre an encouraging smile. "Sounds allowed."

He started with the muscled abdomen, stroking lightly, as if he were petting. The gloves stuttered along Tigre's skin, the rubber spikes catching and releasing the flesh unbroken.

A low groan, deep and dark, filled the air, offered to him like a cup of dark wine. It made him smile, made his cock twitch with interest and he slid his hands around to Tigre's sides, pressing a little harder now. Another sound, rougher, harsher, full of need, sounded. The skin beneath his hands rippled, trembled.

"Yes." Tigre was so good, so perfect in his reactions.

He ran his hands down over narrow hips and between the wide-spread thighs, teasing up toward the tight balls. Tigre's breath was speeding, thigh muscles clenching. Palin could smell Tigre's musk, feel the man's fight not to pull away from the biting touches.

"So strong."

He walked around to Tigre's back, a pleased little noise escaping him at the sight of the way Tigre's muscles bunched and released. Bending, he began long sweeps from Tigre's ankles up, leaving the flesh behind an angry red.

Tigre moaned and hissed, ass tightening, strong body barely moving in slow pulses, almost as if Tigre's heartbeat was throbbing along his skin, brought to the surface by Palin's touch. When he reached the top of Tigre's thighs, he stood and stroked down from shoulders to the small of Tigre's back, making the pulses stronger, quicker. He paddled Tigre's ass lightly, letting the rubber spikes break the skin here and there.

Tigre's body jerked, chains rattling and hands tugging. Moans were gathering form, threatening to become cries.

Hands stuttering along skin like his own broken words, he ducked under Tigre's arm and knelt in front of Tigre. He looked up into glittering eyes. "Wait for it, Tigre."

Leaning forward he sucked gently at the tip of Tigre's cock, letting the strong flavor of his Tigre's precome fill his mouth before releasing the straining flesh. He raised his hands slowly, letting the tension build and then gently scraped over the hard flesh.

The cry was sharp, almost a bark, Tigre's body convulsing, arms and legs straining against the chains as his body jerked. Hot seed sprayed in Palin's face, making him shudder. He licked his lips

and then bent forward to lick the tip of Tigre's cock clean before standing to lean against the solid, bound body.

He let the gloves drop to the floor and slid his hands over his own and Tigre's warm flesh.

"Lick me clean," he murmured, turning his face up as he began to rock against Tigre's strength and warmth, his hand moving to work his erection.

Soft, hungry lips and tongue moved over his skin, licking and sucking gently at his cheeks and chin and jaw. Low, almost gentle sounds poured against him, Tigre almost vibrating.

"Yes, oh, yes." He continued to move against Tigre, breath becoming short as pleasure ran through him. Soft shudders moved through him, each lick of Tigre's tongue finding a home in his balls. With each encouragement, Tigre lapped again, tongue so hot, eyes dark and devoted and focused on his pleasure.

As his climax crashed down over him, he tilted his head just enough that their mouths closed together, the kiss wild and fierce. Tigre swallowed the sounds of his pleasure as his seed spilled against the bound body.

The kiss continued, Tigre whimpering softly against his lips, tongue lapping against the top of his mouth, sliding over his tongue. He suckled gently on Tigre's tongue, letting the solid body support him until his soft shudders and aftershocks faded away.

Straitening, he began to undo the chains, hands rubbing gently into Tigre's muscles. Tigre kept his feet, refusing to give into his own weakness and fall. His head did fall forward against Palin's shoulder, lips pressing hot and wet.

Palin wrapped his arms around Tigre's head, stroking softly. "So good."

Tilting Tigre's face, he kissed Tigre's forehead and then bent to undo the chains at Tigre's ankles. He unbound the hair noose last, letting the heavy metal closure pull the braid back into place along Tigre's back.

"Follow me," he ordered once again, leading the way from the room. Silent and steady, only the heat behind him let him know Tigre followed behind him.

He grabbed a large container of juice as they passed through the kitchen, only stopping when they got back to his room. He turned and smiled up at Tigre.

"Thank you," he said, placing a soft kiss on the corner of Tigre's mouth.

He moved to sit cross-legged on his bed. Pushing the brush out of the way, he pet the space beside him. "Sit w-with m-me?"

Tigre nodded, moving to sit beside him gracefully, one knee brushing his just slightly.

He offered the juice and opened the wall with a press of a button, turning on the television. Sighing happily, he curled up into Tigre, letting his eyes almost close.

The hair brushing was good. The scene was even better, hearing Tigre's moans of pleasure, bringing about Tigre's climax and then taking his own, those were wonderful. But this was his favorite part.

Sated and sleepy and warm.

"Eiba." Tigre's hands began to rub his back, slow, lazy caresses that spoke louder of Tigre's care than anything else.

Palin rubbed his cheek against Tigre's side, face turning to place a soft kiss on the smooth skin.

He did nothing to stop the slow descent of his eyelids, letting sleep have him.

Chapter Thirteen

Sometimes, when he was very angry, he wanted nothing more than to chain Tigre to the wall and whip him until he couldn't move his arm anymore.

He never whipped Tigre when he felt like that.

Tigre would not complain if he did, but neither of them would enjoy it. So on days like that he would fuck Tigre's mouth and then fuck Tigre's ass until he was too tired to move and then he'd let Tigre clean him and put him to bed.

He saved whipping for days like today. Days when he woke up feeling good and strong and had nowhere to be and nothing to do. Days when the sun shone brightly and his food tasted fresh and the soft sound of Tigre's bare feet on the floor made him hard.

Tigre sat next to him, slowly peeling fruit for Palin, eating when he was bid. Palin watched him, anticipation making his skin tingle, making him smile and his toes curl.

The light fell upon the dark, sharp-edged stain that bordered half of Tigre's face, soft blues deepening into indigo into ebony. Sunk deep into the olive skin, each mark held a measure of pain and skill and rank.

The peel of the fruit fell away in one long strand, then another piece was offered to him, fingers sure and steady. He fed directly from the thick fingers, letting his tongue slide along the thick pads, eyes hot upon Tigre's face.

Melted chocolate eyes were fastened upon his lips and the unmarked cheek flushed to rose. Tigre made no sound, but nostrils flared, lips parted and slicked by a wet pink tongue.

"Oh..." His balls tightened, cock pulsing within his jeans. "W-we are going to p-p-play today, my Tigre."

"Yes, Eiba. As you wish." Tigre's voice was a low rumbling, danger held at bay by only his will, his control.

He reached out and stroked his fingers along the tattoo, tracing it. "Go and prepare the chains and choose a whip. I will be along in a few minutes."

"Yes, my Eiba." With an almost unnoticeable nuzzle into his hand, Tigre stood and disappeared silently, bowl and fruit in hand.

Palin stood and took off his clothes, folding them neatly. He brushed his teeth and washed his face and his hands and his cock, the cloth rough and good on his heated flesh. He took his time. Usually

he and Tigre prepared together, undressing each other and performing the ritual of brushing Tigre's long hair; today they would prepare alone, and he wanted to make sure Tigre was ready when he went to him.

He looked at the sky for a moment, the bright sunshine almost hurting his eyes, and then went to the Room to find Tigre.

The heavy chains were dangling; the thick, single-tailed braided whip with the thick cock-shaped carved handle was resting upon the low table, along with a glass of clear water and a clean towel when he entered. Tigre knelt silent upon the floor, beautiful hair bound up and out of the way, leaving nape and back exposed and vulnerable.

Oh, his Tigre was beautiful, especially in submission. He slid his hands along the soft, warm flesh, tracing the muscled back. Perhaps he would forgo the chains today, whip Tigre as he knelt before him, only Tigre's submission to him keeping him beneath the kiss of the whip.

Yes. He would test Tigre's desire to please him today.

He picked up the whip, fondling the handle, knowing Tigre could see. He let the tail hang and then slid it along his erection, the weight of Tigre's eyes almost a caress. Tigre made no sound, but he could see the muscles twitch, the thick cock jump.

He let the braided rope slither across his skin, always coming back to loop around his erection -- he gave a thought to masturbating like this, making Tigre wait and watch him come, but he was too eager to test Tigre's devotion.

A flick of his wrist and the braid snaked out, catching Tigre across his unpierced nipple without warning. Tigre jerked in surprise, lips opening on a silent intake of breath. Then Tigre settled back into stillness, fingers curling into fists upon his thick thighs.

"Mmm, yes, so lovely."

Walking around Tigre, Palin let the braid trail over the sturdy body. He stopped when he was behind Tigre, letting the silence and anticipation build.

Then he let the whip fly, thick braid coming down against Tigre's back. The whip cracked with a satisfying snap and it thudded audibly against Tigre's skin. The muscles bunched, olive skin going white for a moment and then flushing deep rose, blushing at him like the cheeks of a timid virgin when chastely kissed.

He let the whip crack again, setting the braid along the same length of skin. Tigre's breath quickened, head falling forward. A tiny drop of blood gathered on one dark shoulder, where the tip of the whip had bitten deep.

Heat flooded Palin, his cock throbbing and heavy between his legs, his balls beginning to ache.

The next stroke followed the same path as the first two, widening the split at Tigre's shoulder. The fourth time the whip kissed Tigre's skin, it landed on the other half of the wide back.

He could see Tigre's toes, clenching and unclenching rhythmically in time with the almost unnoticeable sway of the firm buttocks. Breath slowing, he could see Tigre beginning to lose himself in the familiar pattern and sensations of pain.

He began to lay the strikes down, one after another in rapid succession, forcing Tigre's rhythms to be Palin's own.

The effect upon Tigre was beautiful -- knees parted, fists tight upon trembling thighs, head dipped low, sharp gasps filling the room. No longer attempting to avoid the pain, control the pain, Tigre took it, accepted it as Palin's will.

He continued until his arm was aching, Tigre's back swollen, skin broken, torn and bloody. Tigre did not cry out once.

So strong. So beautiful, it had him nearly in tears.

"Head in your hands, ass high." His voice was thick with emotion, with arousal, but steady.

Tigre moved immediately, if stiffly, swollen dark eyes disappearing into huge hands as he curled forward. His ass was raised up for use, thighs together protecting the sensitive balls. Palin laid four stripes across the wide buttocks and then let the whip drop, hand sliding along the swollen flesh. He touched the clenched thighs briefly. "Open."

Tigre opened to him, for him, the flesh quivering and sensitive, a soft sob breaking loose at the exposure.

"No, my Tigre," he said softly as his fingers stroked across the wrinkled flesh that twitched with every touch. "Now turn the pain into pleasure." He slid in two fingers, curling them to find the sweet gland that would make Tigre jump as if electrified.

Hips jerking, he could see every muscle in the torn back ripple. Tigre seemed almost to hunch in upon himself, wrapping around the sensation.

"Take my fingers."

After a deep, shuddering breath, the tightness around his fingers eased and then Tigre slowly pressed backwards, taking his fingers in completely. Satisfied, he pulled them out and slid his hands over the red buttocks, holding the ass cheeks open as he placed the head of his cock snug against Tigre's opening.

"And now my cock."

Another soft sob sounded and Tigre pressed back, sweet, involuntary shudders rippling through hungry flesh. As he watched, the tip of his cock was swallowed by hot, tight pleasure.

He swallowed his own moan and fought the urge to surge into the tight heat.

"All of it."

So heady, this heat, this strength, this passion -- lashed tight beneath the weight of his will. Slowly and steadily, Tigre took him in, pressing back and pulling him inside.

Oh, so good and so right, sheathed within such tightness. He remained still until his hips were flush with the abused buttocks, pressing tightly. His hands began to wander, dancing among the patterns of stripes.

With every touch, Tigre's body fluttered around him, belying the outward appearance of stillness, of control. Tigre's flesh held him, tight and grasping, the mottled skin flushing with heat as he stroked.

At last he gave in to the urge he knew was growing upon them both and slid his hand down to wrap around Tigre's erection. "Fuck yourself."

A broken cry fell into Tigre's cupped hands. The rhythm Tigre set was fast, furious, hips moving between hand and cock with utter desperation.

"You are mine, Tigre. Your pleasure. Your pain. All mine." The sensations of being swallowed and then taken, as Tigre's body first took him in and then pushed into his hand, were intoxicating, pleasure spiraling quickly.

"Your climax is mine as well. Come for me, Tigre. Give me what is mine."

The low, sobbing wail and fierce grip around his cock heralded the fiery splash of come into his hand, Tigre's obedience complete.

He waited until the tight clamp of Tigre's body loosened and then began to thrust, hard and deep. His own climax was soon upon him, filling Tigre's body with his pleasure.

Gasping, he collapsed against Tigre's back, the flesh hot against his own. Tigre was shivering beneath him, holding strong and steady, breath coming in harsh pants that, given more strength, might have been whimpers.

He waited until his cock grew flaccid and then pulled gently out of the large body. He placed a soft kiss in the middle of Tigre's back.

"So strong. So good."

Standing, he moved to one of the hidden cupboards and retrieved a healing salve. Kneeling next to Tigre, he began to smooth in the slick cream, crooning to Tigre all the while, nonsense words that nonetheless spoke of his pleasure and joy in his lover's performance.

The silent sobs started slowly, tension leaking from the strong body. Tigre's face was hidden and held within the cupped hands, body moving gently beneath his touch.

Cream smoothed in, he shifted, sitting and pulling Tigre's head into his lap. His fingers loosened the topknot and began to comb out his hair. "That's right, Tigre, let it go, let it all go. I have you. I won't let go."

With each caress to the damp, dark waves, Tigre relaxed further, tears sliding over his thighs, hands holding him tight.

Finally a soft whisper sounded. "Eiba."

A soft shudder went through his own body. "Yes," he whispered.

Turning Tigre's face, he bent, his kiss slow and gentle, a soft confirmation.

The dark eyes held Tigre's soul: stunned, vulnerable -- his.

He slid his fingers along the indigo tattoo, fingers gentle as he held Tigre's gaze. "So good. So strong. My Tigre."

He placed another soft kiss on Tigre's mouth.

The swollen eyelids fell, shuttering Tigre's eyes as the heavy head relaxed into his hands with a quiet sigh.

"You'll get stiff if you fall asleep on the floor. Up, you can sleep in my bed tonight."

Tigre's eyes popped open, flashing up at him even as Tigre moved, standing stiff, arms held carefully.

Palin stood and gave Tigre the glass of water. "Drink."

Using the cloth, he cleaned his penis and then knelt and carefully cleaned the seed from the backs and insides of Tigre's thighs. Tigre was beginning to shake, more deeply undone by tenderness than any pain.

Standing again, Palin moved around to press himself close, hugging the big man for moment. Then he took one of the big hands in his own and led Tigre from the Room.

Chapter Fourteen

Palin watched as the client left, door closing behind him with a soft click. He pressed a button beneath the small table in front of him, the red light coming on. It was locked now. And he had almost half an hour before his next client arrived.

Just enough time for Tigre to suck him to orgasm and for Tigre to jerk himself to completion. If Palin let him.

He'd felt Tigre's eyes, hot and heavy, on him all morning. He could feel them now, could feel the hunger and the need and the want. His own cock was hard. Had been since he'd woken, Tigre still asleep, rubbing against him while he dreamed, the thick cock hot and solid against his ass. He hadn't relieved himself, hadn't let Tigre relieve himself either.

They could both wait. He had self-control, and so did Tigre. Tigre had amazing self-control. It was impressive. It made him harder, thinking of Tigre's self-control. It made him even harder, thinking of letting Tigre suck him and then making Tigre go back and sit, still and silent, in his corner. Oh, the weight of those eyes then... it would be phenomenal.

He looked casually out the window and pretended to watch the traffic go by. It wouldn't do to look too eager. At last he called for Tigre, still looking out, still pretending he wasn't hard and desperate.

"Tigre. Come here."

Without a word or the slightest hesitation, Tigre stood, shaft hard and full, and stalked across the room. Kneeling gracefully with his head bowed, he waited for Palin's orders, the scent of need and the swollen flesh the only hint of his impatience.

Palin stood and took off his turban, carefully putting it on the low table. Then he pulled the robe over his head; he was naked beneath it, his own shaft as hard as Tigre's and leaking slightly. He rolled the robe carefully and set it down next to the turban.

Looking down at Tigre, he wrapped his hand around his shaft and pulled slowly. He knew Tigre could see what he was doing, he saw Tigre's nostrils flare with need. Maybe he would just do this, come in Tigre's face and send him back to his corner.

Except that Tigre had done nothing wrong and deserved at least the taste of his flesh, even if Palin didn't allow Tigre his own climax.

He let his hand drop away. "Taste me."

With the softest sound, Tigre's face lifted, lips open and sliding over his flesh before he even knew Tigre had moved. Oh, yes, Tigre was hungry, tongue searching out the flavor of his passion. He could feel the moan building from his toes and let it loose, let it drift down over Tigre like a caress.

The heavy-lidded eyes dropped and the sweet, pulling suction began. Cheeks hollowed, lips fastened strong as they slid and caressed his flesh. Tigre's tongue returned to flick over the head of his cock again and again.

Another moan slid from his lips and he dropped his hands to Tigre's shoulders, letting Tigre support him.

A low vibration surrounded his flesh, Tigre humming too softly to hear. The sensations continued for a few sweet moments before the stretched throat relaxed, letting him slide deep, offering up even the need for breath.

To ask him to be still would have been more than any man, except possibly Tigre, could do. Palin slid his hands up to Tigre's head, cupping it, holding him in place, though he knew that Tigre would not move, and let his hips loose, thrusting in and out of the sucking heat.

Open and so needy, so hungry, Tigre took him deep, lips reluctant to allow him to pull away, clinging and pulling at his skin. Cheeks hot and flushed, eyes closed -- Tigre was focused desire, strong and powerful and his.

He thrust harder, watching his cock slide between the swollen lips, watching Tigre accept each thrust with hunger and need. He could feel his balls tighten, could feel the pleasure begin to send jolts through his spine. It wouldn't be long now.

Tigre groaned, the sound low, vibrating deep in the base of his balls and spreading through his body in rapidly widening waves.

His movements became graceless, hips jerking as his climax overcame him. He cried out, shouting as his body convulsed.

Tigre drank him down, soft, hungry rumbles continuing as the hot, slick tongue cleaned and laved, lips trembling around his cock.

He rode the soft shudders and aftershocks as Tigre cleaned him, letting Tigre hold him in the hot mouth long after he was done. At last he pulled out, sliding to his knees, taking a kiss and tasting himself in Tigre's mouth.

Tigre whimpered softly into the kiss, a long shudder sliding through the heated body.

He stroked Tigre's head and then gently broke the kiss.

"So good, Tigre." He smiled and placed another soft kiss on Tigre's forehead. "Thank you."

He stood and unrolled his robe, letting it slip down over his body.

"Y-you can go b-back to y-y-your post."

"As you wish, Eiba." The low voice was husky, dark, hungry, and full of need.

Tigre stood and returned to his corner, the muscled body gleaming with a fine coat of sweat, cock almost purple, swollen and almost angry as it bobbed.

Palin let his gaze linger for a moment, let Tigre know how much he was admired. Then he straightened his robe and put on his turban, sitting down cross-legged at the table. His next client would be arriving shortly.

He didn't look back at Tigre again, but he could feel the heavy gaze like an intimate touch, knew it would linger on him all day.

He allowed himself a small smile.

Allowed Tigre to see it.

Chapter Fifteen

He shivered, body clenching upon the thick stiffness that invaded it.

The day before had been terrible -- the universe and all the little gods that controlled it conspiring against him. He'd woken with a headache, broken a cup, and burned his fingers attempting to make tea. Then there had been something on the floor in his spot, something itchy and crumbling and irritating to his skin, slowly driving him mad.

He'd thought he'd been quiet, thought he'd been still enough not to bother, and, honestly, by the time he'd botched dinner, slipped and bumped his Eiba on the way down the hall and not managed more than a mostly enthusiastic -- but hampered by embarrassment and shame -- erection, he'd forgotten all about whether his slight case of wiggles had been noted.

This morning, however, his Eiba proved without a shadow of a doubt that he'd noticed. A thick, heavy dildo had been fastened to the floor, already slick and shiny. He had looked over at his Eiba in shock and had been answered with a simple. "You *will* be still, Tigre."

He never realized how much freedom of movement he had enjoyed, but now, with the unforgiving hardness anchoring him, each motion sent shocks throughout his body.

It had only been a few hours since his Eiba's workday had begun, but there seemed to be an inordinate amount of time between each client. Time in which his Eiba would stand and stretch, walk around restlessly. Once his Eiba had even come and caressed his face, tugged on the chain between his nipple and cock rings.

It was agony -- arousing and aching and constant. His body seemed intent upon betraying him, clenching and releasing around the dildo, shifting just so the tip pushed hard into the tiny gland within him, wanting to gasp and grind and move.

It was the longest day he could remember. Again and again the door opened to admit a client, his Eiba doing what his Eiba did and the client leaving. He was pretty sure it wasn't just the hardness inside him that made it seem so long.

At last the little red light appeared over the door and his Eiba stood, stretched and removed his robe and turban. His Eiba practically stalked across the floor, body fluid and graceful. He would have bent to the floor, but he could not, could only kneel and shiver and watch beneath lowered lids.

His Eiba stopped right in front of him, the slender cock, only just beginning to fill, grazing against his face.

"Suck me."

He reached out, hungry lips covering the warm flesh and pulling with strong, steady swallows. His body pulsed in time with the suction, moving just barely upon the hardness within. His moan sounded loud, captured and echoing within his own head.

His Eiba fingers slid into his hair, holding tightly to his scalp and his Eiba's hips began to thrust, fucking his mouth with long, hard strokes.

He forced his throat to relax, to sink into the rhythm of his Eiba's pleasure. As his body responded to his Eiba's need, the sensations of being held, being entered, being opened and taken and touched, melded into one true, necessary feeling, sliding over his over stimulated nerves like salve.

The flesh in his mouth moved faster and faster, his Eiba pushing with more and more strength. It wasn't long before the sweet cry of completion sounded, his mouth flooded with burning seed. Swallowing hard, his eyes wide and staring, he pulled each pulse of fluid deep within. He searched for each moment of pleasure, offering himself to his Eiba with a soft, vibrating moan.

His Eiba made a soft noise of pleasure, but offered him no words of praise.

The soft cock was pulled from his mouth, the hard hands untwisting from his hair, and his Eiba walked over to one of the hidden cupboards. A moment later his Eiba returned, a wide leather belt in his hands.

His eyes fell, hands settling in his lap as he awaited his punishment. He focused upon a tiny crack in the floor, twisted like a worm trying to imbed itself in the tile.

The leather snapped, but no blow fell. The noise came again without pain and then once again. The next blow landed on his right shoulder.

"Ride."

He gasped, so convinced that the order would have been for stillness that it shook him loose from his focus.

He lifted himself slightly on the dildo and then pushed down, moaning at the combination of sore muscles and motion and heat.

Then he did it again.

The leather cracked again, a wide band of pain burning against his abdomen where it fell.

"Faster."

His shoulders hunched, body curling in upon itself as he moved, silent now and fast, thinking of nothing but his Eiba's approval. Two more blows landed, each catching his unadorned nipple, and then another set fire to his back.

"Harder."

His toes began to clench, giving him something to cling to, a focus, a touchstone, as he pushed his body down upon the invader over and over, hips slamming down upon it. Every time he rose up, the strap hit his skin: across his shoulders, his back, his chest, his abdomen and his buttocks.

Time slowed, each breath, each motion, each blow slowing until they seemed to last forever. Reaching the point of begging -- of promising never to move again, to be graceful, to be better -- his head fell forward and he gave a broken sob.

"Come." The order was hard, implacable, accompanied by another blow, this one intersecting the chain that hung from his nipple down to his cock.

Heat pulsed from his body as fire ripped through his skin. He was almost bent in two, chin cradled upon his chest, shoulders leaning towards his knees.

Warm hands slid beneath his arms, tugging him up and off the dildo. He crumpled in on himself, forehead hitting the floor as he huddled there, waiting and trying to remember how to breathe.

His Eiba curled around him, soft belly at his head, head upon his back. The soft hands moved firmly along his thighs, massaging the trembling muscles. Strength shattered by the gentle touches, he whimpered softly, soaking up his Eiba's heat.

It seemed no longer than a few seconds before his Eiba drew back, a finger going beneath his chin, bringing his head up to look into blue eyes.

"You will remember this next time you cannot find a way to be still, yes?"

"Yes, Eiba. So sorry. So sorry." His whisper was fervent, honest, pleading.

His Eiba's lips covered his, the kiss soft, gentle. He sighed, shivering, the sting of his skin fading to a burn, throbbing slightly, making him feel swollen.

"Up now. Shower, food, bed together." His Eiba stood, a hand held out to him.

"Yes, Eiba. As you wish." He let his respect and care show in his smile and he found his feet, sliding his fingers into his Eiba's hand. If there was bathing and food and, most importantly, a place for him in his Eiba's bed, he was forgiven.

"Thank you." His Eiba leaned against his arm as they walked from the Room.

He held his Eiba's hand, looking forward to being allowed to slide soap over the smooth, soft skin and grateful for the days when the universe overlooked him, but his Eiba did not.

Chapter Sixteen

One lap after another, he swam, feeling nothing but the burn in his shoulders and hips and the glide of water over his skin.

Every night that he had not failed, that he had performed well, his Eiba brought him here, letting him stretch and exhaust his muscles. Naked and relaxed, he moved for his Eiba's eyes, hoping to attract, to arouse.

He ached for the touch of those hands, to feel the slide of the fine cock over his tongue, the burn of being fucked, well and thoroughly. His need bubbled beneath the surface, forbidden to take his pleasure for the last week, even with his own hands. Washing this morning had been a torture, watching his Eiba all day sheer agony.

Now, even the water itself worked against him, sliding over his aching hard cock like a hand.

He heard the splash of water, but didn't really pay any attention to what it might be until he swam over his Eiba.

He blinked and looked back. Yes, it was his Eiba, floating at the bottom of the pool, hands moving in small circles at his sides to keep him down there. The blue eyes were looking up at him, seeming to stare right through him, and then his Eiba pushed himself up, breaking through the surface several feet away.

He began another lap, unsure whether his Eiba wished to be disturbed or left to swim. Stretching, he pulled himself across the pool with long, strong strokes.

The next time he passed his Eiba the boy stopped him, saying his name softly. "Tigre."

He floated, treading the water. "Yes, Eiba?"

"You have done well this week. So obedient. So strong. I would give you a reward."

"A re..." He silenced himself with a nod. "As you will it, Eiba."

"What would you have?"

"I would feel your touch, Eiba. I ache within." His heart was pounding in his chest, cock throbbing.

His Eiba swam slowly toward him, hands finding his shoulders, legs wrapping around his waist. His groan couldn't have been prevented, his eyes falling closed as he fought valiantly not to come.

They sank below the water as he forgot to swim, his Eiba's warmth disappearing, and when he surfaced again, his Eiba was halfway across the pool, heading toward the steps.

He sighed silently and continued his lap. Next time he was offered a reward, he should remember not to drown his Eiba so early on in the caress.

He did another lap before he was met at the side of the pool by his Eiba with a towel. "T-time to c-come out."

"Yes, Eiba." He hauled himself up, reaching behind him to tug the excess water out of his hair, dropping his shoulders as the motions tugged the chain between nipple and cock.

He was dried off, his Eiba doing a more thorough job than usual, sliding the towel over his skin with long, slow strokes.

He shivered, toes curling against the wet tile. It felt so good, each stroke echoing deep within him, and he soaked up the contact, thirsty for his Eiba. The Eiba leaned down and kissed his foot, his knee, his hip and his collarbone.

Stepping back his Eiba smiled at him, the look familiar, kind and fond. "Lick me, from toe to head."

Shuddering, he sank to his knees, whimpering softly as his lips moved over one of his Eiba's feet. He lapped and licked, moving over the fine skin with a steady hunger, drinking each drop of water away.

He was moaning softly by the time he reached the round knees, eyes focusing on his Eiba's cock and balls, so close. He could smell the sweet musk of his Eiba's need, could see the way the slender cock had filled and stood proudly, reaching toward the slender belly.

The skin beneath his lips shuddered.

He licked the slender thighs carefully, spending time on the sensitive inner thighs. The soft sacs rested on his cheek, so delicate, so velvety, so warm. It took every ounce of control he had to dry the sweet thighs before tilting his face and taking a long lick of the hanging balls.

He heard his Eiba's breath catch in his throat, could see the slender hands curl into fists at his Eiba's side.

Each ball was licked, kissed, drawn into his mouth and suckled softly and then he moved up, drawing crystal drops of water off the damp curls, the sharp hipbones, the sweet, addictive curve of his Eiba's shaft.

He licked short, soft lines, covering the flat belly and dipping into the indented navel. Then he turned his attention to the head of his Eiba's cock, body shuddering as the bitter, salty, necessary taste of seed filled his mouth.

One of the fine hands grasped his shoulder, squeezing tight. "Finish the rest first."

He sobbed, dipping his head to lick and nibble at the fingers on his shoulder, moving up to lick the blue-veined wrist, the thin arm, the warm crook of elbow. His body undulated, hot liquid dripping, splashing on his legs.

He continued up the slick arm, standing to taste the curve of shoulder. Then he bent forward to suck a peaked nipple, mouth hungry. His Eiba cried out, hips pushing forward, the full cock sliding slickly along his skin.

So sweet, so hot. He whimpered upon the smooth skin, mouth moving to dry the other nipple, lips and tongue searching out his Eiba's pleasure. Soft sounds filled the air and echoed off the water as his Eiba's hips moved, sliding the hot cock against him. Both hands gripped his shoulders now, holding tightly.

Grabbing his control in both clenched fists, he explored the lines of his Eiba's throat, the angled jaw, the sweet full lips. His Eiba's mouth dropped open, sweet breath wafting over his face, inviting him in.

"Oh..."

His tongue crept inside, touching the sweet, beloved flesh within so carefully, almost drowning in the flavor hidden there. He was fed a moan, his Eiba otherwise remaining passive in the kiss.

He licked again and again until the kiss became too much, the intimacy and taste threatening his control, and he pulled away, moving to kiss the water from his Eiba's forehead.

The slender body moved against him, cock hot and hard, urgent against his skin. His Eiba was trembling, making soft noises of need, desire, want. From where he stood, he could see the lines of water, trailing down the slim back and he followed it, whining softly as he lost the contact with his Eiba's need.

He felt the muscles of his Eiba's back tighten. "Finish it."

His Eiba's voice was husky, but still sure, brooking no argument.

He dried each line of water, tongue dragging along the unmarked skin. Shoulder blades, spine, curve of lower back -- he tasted them all and then dropped to his knees, licking at the drops gathering at the top of the sweet crease.

The slender body trembled, hips still pushing into the air, the motion flowing now to include a backward push against his tongue. He licked along the crease, tongue sliding over the secret, wrinkled flesh, moans vibrating at the hidden taste filling him.

A loud gasp slid over him, his Eiba rocking back to him more quickly.

He reached down, grasping his cock and balls and squeezing hard, forcing himself to focus, to crawl away from the edge of completion and please the man before him, tongue stiffening to press within, licking and caressing the nerves there.

With a low moan, his Eiba bent slightly, giving him easier access, rocking back steadily against his tongue. He moaned against the soft flesh as his Eiba moved against his face, tongue pressing deep. His Eiba rode his tongue, gasping and moaning, body beginning to tremble again.

His own body was afire, thighs spread, hips rocking up in rhythm with the motions of his Eiba. His jaw ached, tongue stiffened and extended, his Eiba's pleasure its only purpose and reason.

A shout echoed through the room, his Eiba's body tightening, squeezing his tongue. His hands tightened into fists, need making his nerves jump and flare. As the pressure around his tongue eased, he slowly backed away, tongue smoothing over the curves of his Eiba's ass, the crease where thigh and buttock joined.

His Eiba was gasping, breath slowly evening out as he licked his way down first one leg and then the other. Then his Eiba turned, one hand cupping his cheek gently, fingers stroking over his tattoo.

"So lovely. So obedient. You make me happy." His Eiba smiled, thumb sliding along his bottom lip. "You can come now, Tigre."

His mouth opened on a gasp and that thumb slid inside to press against his tongue. Without a thought, without a single stroke to his cock, he arched, heat pouring out of him in one long pulse after another.

"Mm... so good."

The caressing hand continued to stroke, moving over his face in light, easy touches. Every now and then one of the long, slender fingers would slide into his mouth.

Tremors shook him, strong and deep, body and spirit soaring beneath the attention, the care. His cock bobbed, still hard, but not aching, simply full and swollen for his Eiba. The touches continued for long moments, his Eiba smiling down at him.

At length his Eiba's hands moved away. "Let's g-go home."

"Yes, Eiba." He stood, feeling loose-limbed and relaxed down to his bones. "Home."

Chapter Seventeen

When he was not needed, when his presence was not pleasing yet he had not earned punishment, his Eiba sent him to "stay out of the way and out of trouble, Tigre."

During those times, he invariably found a secluded spot in the kitchen behind the potted plants and watched out the window. He enjoyed the colors, the people as they zipped by in the sleek aircars. He wondered what they spoke about -- their mouths were always moving -- where they were going, what their lives were like. It was like watching the network feed, but better, because it was quiet and relaxing and real.

Today he was sitting -- dozing, really -- chin in his hands, legs crossed, leaves periodically tickling his back, watching the world fly before him and waiting for his Eiba to call for him.

He must have missed the soft click of the door because the next thing he knew his Eiba was crouched next to him, calling his name. "Tigre."

He blinked up, head raising, body straightening, embarrassed to be caught napping. "Yes, Eiba."

"I l-l-like to w-watch, t-t-too." His Eiba smiled, face tired. "S-so m-m-many."

He nodded. "Yes, Eiba. Very busy."

He settled back, offering his Eiba the use of his lap, his strength. He disliked when the Men Who Came made his Eiba weary or sad or ill. It itched inside him and made him want to growl.

Smiling at him, his Eiba sat and settled back against him, head resting on his shoulder as they looked out together. The slender hand found his own, twining their fingers together.

This was bliss -- to sit quiet and feel the weight and warmth of his Eiba in his arms. A most precious gift, to hold happiness upon one's lap. The echoes of who he had been before he was Tigre had faded, becoming nothing more than vague memories that he could not grasp with his mind, slick, oily recollections.

They sat like that for a while, quietly together, watching the world go by the window. Then his Eiba brought their linked hands to the denim-covered crotch, rubbing slowly. After a couple of strokes, his Eiba's hand slid away.

His hand remained, cupping and warming. His fingers moved gently over the fabric, careful not to catch skin or irritate, only arouse and comfort.

His Eiba shifted back against him, pushing his hips into Tigre's hand. "S-s-slow and easy."

"Yes, Eiba."

His fingers never moved away from the worn material, constantly stroking, almost petting the hot flesh that slowly filled, pressing against his palm. He forced his breath into a gentle rhythm, discarding his own arousal in favor of focusing on erasing the lines of exhaustion from his Eiba's face and replacing them with pleasure.

His Eiba murmured softly, head tilting back to lick softly at his neck. He was tasted with long, slow swipes of his Eiba's tongue, the soft murmurs continuing.

He rumbled quietly in response, finger sliding down to awaken the nerves hidden behind the soft, warm sacs. He stroked the seam of the jeans so softly, knowing that the heat and friction would send shivers of bliss up through the slim body.

"Oh!" A sweet tremor moved through the body in his arms. "S-so good."

He repeated the caress, then began alternating long strokes to the bulge straining against the soft denim with cupping and holding the delicate sacs and then stimulating the nerves behind. The motions were fluid, so languid and careful, bringing his Eiba pleasure in steady, easy waves.

"T-touch m-me."

"Yes, Eiba." He unfastened the jeans, sliding his hand inside the warm cotton to find heat-silk skin.

"Oh!" Hips surging forward, his Eiba pushed into his hand, flesh hot and full.

He moaned softly, hand sliding up and down over the fine skin, pumping steadily. His other hand reached down to worry the seam behind his Eiba's sacs, pressing firmly.

His Eiba's hands slid up around his neck, holding on as slender hips thrust, pushing into his hand. Soft gasps and panting breath were loud against his skin.

He dipped his head, daring to touch his forehead to the soft damp skin of the smooth jaw. With every upward pull of the precious flesh in his hand, he stroked over the wet slit with his thumb.

Suddenly his Eiba's body grew tight, hard shivers working through it. His Eiba cried out, a wordless sound of pleasure, and came, spilling his essence over Tigre's hand.

Another moan found its way out of his throat, nostrils flaring at the heady scent of his Eiba's seed. He eased his touches, finding each tiny shudder of pleasure, each sweet sensation to feed the man he held.

At last his Eiba was still and relaxed in his arms. "Thank y-y-you."

He nodded, cheeks flushing, pleased to his core. He lifted his hand, slowly licking the fluids from his fingers before moving to carefully tuck his Eiba's cock back away inside the jeans.

Turning slightly, his Eiba curled up against him, head tucked in beneath his chin. Soft hands stroked in lazy circles along his chest.

He watched as the sun set, the lights of the city beginning to sparkle. The cars with their busy passengers whizzed by and he felt sorry for each and every one of them, for they were without an Eiba to sit with and rest with and hold.

Chapter Eighteen

His Eiba was reading aloud.

He hoped he wasn't supposed to be listening.

He'd heard a few words here and there, but they were long and boring and meaningless and the Eiba hadn't said to listen. So he'd stopped. He watched the aircars. He watched a little bug crawl across the floor. He tried wiggling his toes one at a time.

He fell asleep at least once.

He watched the way his Eiba's lips moved, admiring the ways his Eiba's jaw stretched, the fineness of his Eiba's skin. The sound of his Eiba's voice was nice, too. Interesting and smooth and choppy all at once.

Sort of like the big water he'd seen on the netfeed, but different.

"Tigre!" He had a hunch, from the tone of his Eiba's voice that it was not the first time his name had been called.

"Yes, Eiba?"

"Are y-y-you l-listening t-to m-m-me?"

He nodded. "Yes, Eiba."

One of his Eiba's eyebrows rose.

Tigre looked into his Eiba's eyes, worried. He was listening. Or he would be, if his Eiba was talking, which he wasn't. The whole thing confused him, so he settled and waited. If he was in trouble, the Eiba would tell him.

His Eiba closed the book. "I thought it w-would b-be n-n-nice to r-read together."

He didn't know what to say. He looked at the floor, waiting and unsure. He did not try to do wrong. It was a good thing, too, considering the amount of trouble that found him unasked for.

His Eiba stood and held out his hand. "Maybe you just need the right incentive to listen."

He took the Eiba's hand and stood. "This vala did not mean to upset, Eiba."

His Eiba's hand slid up and down along his chest. "Tigre."

He rumbled soft and low, his Eiba's touch filling him with warmth, with the desire to please and protect. "This... this Tigre *tries*, Eiba."

"I know. Now we do something you know how to do really well." His Eiba rose on tiptoe and kissed him softly. "Come."

"Yes, Eiba." He followed; the act of obedience, mixed with the fact that his Eiba knew what was best, filled him with comfort.

His Eiba brought him into the Room and went to a cupboard, bringing out an elaborate leather harness. "I saw you looking at it in the store."

It was placed in his hands.

"Eiba?" The leather smelled good, the straps with the metal buckles and chains felt good and heavy in his hands. He looked over, unsure of what to do.

"Put it on."

He managed, after a few false starts, to fit the straps around his body. He managed all but the final buckle between his shoulders at the back. His Eiba stood and watched, waiting, still and silent.

He knelt before his Eiba, eyes down. He couldn't reach the buckle, could not fasten the harness completely.

"Is there a problem?"

"This va... Tigre cannot make his fingers close the buckle, Eiba."

His Eiba smiled. "Very good."

Leaning over him, his Eiba closed the last buckle behind his back, fingers warm and soft and sure against his skin. His Eiba's hands lingered on the harness, tracing the leather up over his shoulders.

He didn't know what he'd done right, what he'd said to please his Eiba, but he sank into the pleasure of his Eiba's touch. The leather felt good, tight and thick against his skin, the metal warming. The smell was best, though. Rich and heavy and real -- Tigre liked that smell very much. It made his cock fill, his balls ache.

His Eiba stepped back. "Stand."

He stood easily, eyes hot upon his Eiba. The action, combined with the tension in the leather, tugged his chain, pulling his nipple. His Eiba made a soft sound he recognized as happy, and warm fingers slid over the harness. One of his Eiba's hands trailed all the way down to slid along his cock.

"Would you like to feel the bite of the whip, Tigre? The leather protecting parts of your back, the whip biting the rest?"

"Tigre wishes his Eiba's pleasure." He trembled, the touch of that hand to his cock so sweet, so very good.

"I would like to watch your back slowly rise up in welts." His Eiba's hand circled his cock and began to pump him with long, even strokes. "I want to watch you come from it."

"Yes, Eiba." Slow shivers ran under his skin, sparkling and hot. Oh, he liked this, liked the touching and fucking and not fighting. Even the hurting was different with his Eiba, something right, like being home.

Giving him a soft smile of approval, his Eiba tugged one last time on his cock and went to the cupboard where the whips were hidden. It was only a moment before his Eiba was turning back to him, long cat o' nine tails in his hand.

Tigre swallowed his moan, stilling his body. This was the hardest part -- the waiting part, waiting for his Eiba's will.

His Eiba stroked the leather, let it slide through the long, slender fingers. Then the whip was handed to him as his Eiba stroked the leather of the harness he wore. "Touch it. Feel it."

"Yes, Eiba." He felt the long braided strands, so well-cared for and supple. One tail was just shorter than the others.

His Eiba's hands slid against his as the whip was taken from him.

"Hands and knees. Legs spread as wide as you can."

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre dropped to the floor, thighs stretched open until they burned. His braid coiled on the ground beside his hand, sleek and shiny in the lights.

The leather of the whip slid along his ass and his balls, his only warning. It was all he could do to keep his legs parted, the instinct to protect himself second only to his need to obey. The whip came down hard across his back, the short tail catching his buttocks. His toes clenched as he swallowed his gasp. The burn was strong, familiar, and the smell of leather was beginning to intensify as his body heated.

"I want to hear you." The whip sailed noisily through the air, nine tails landing again on his back.

"Eiba." He bit the word out, muscles clenching as his skin throbbed and tingled and burned.

The next blow came right away and another followed immediately after it. He ducked his head, breathing speeding as he groaned. He could smell leather and musk and sweat -- his sweat and the warm, sweet scent of his Eiba's sweat.

The bite of the tails moved slowly down his back to his buttocks and thighs. Occasionally one would lick across his balls. He was trembling now, deep inside. His skin felt too big for the leather straps that held it, his need too big for his body. His moans tumbled out, some just soft breaths, others near-worried cries.

His Eiba was silent, only small grunts of effort sounding with each stroke of the whip. It went on and on and on, one stroke blurring into the next and becoming the next. Tigre felt his body begin to sing, drawn by his Eiba's will.

Soon they were no longer Eiba and vala but something else, two made one by the kiss of the whip, the strength needed to wield it and the strength needed to endure it melding together.

Peace filled him, his body undulating gently, breath shaped into groans and sighs. Any pain, he would take any pain to feel his Eiba so close and warm and right.

He was almost unaware when the whip stopped falling.

A soft voice commanded his release. "Come."

"Eiba..." He forced out the only word in his throat, the only word ever in his mind when his seed spilled. His cock throbbed, pulsing hot and sweet on the floor.

"Perfect."

His Eiba's hands were warm and sure as they began to move over his back and buttocks and thighs, sliding against his abused flesh. He struggled to catch his breath, muscles beginning to shake under his Eiba's hands. Hands became lips and tongue, so hot against him, tracing each welt.

Oh. So good. So hot and good and wet and his Eiba, touching him. Licking him. Tasting the salt of his obedience. Tigre whimpered softly, undone.

It continued until his Eiba had tasted every single welt.

When that was done, his Eiba crawled beneath him, blue eyes blinking up at him from behind the small windows. "Make love to me."

"Yes, Eiba." With all he was. He bent down close, cock rising again at his Eiba's words. "May this Tigre kiss the Eiba?"

"Oh, yes." His Eiba's head tilted for a kiss.

He moaned as their lips met, the sweet flavor of his Eiba filling him. He balanced on one hand, fingers stroking down the smooth, sweat-slick skin, touching and loving his Eiba with all he was. Soft sighs and low moans met his efforts, his Eiba arching up into his touch, legs spreading wide.

His fingers found the hard, hot shaft waiting for him, swollen and silky. He stroked it, pulling with careful, smooth motions, bringing his Eiba as much pleasure as he could. His Eiba started to whimper, head tossing back and forth on the floor, hips pushing the hot cock up through his hand.

"Eiba..." He needed the lube or oil or something but his Eiba hadn't said he could move and he didn't. Tigre licked his hand, slicking his cock was best he could and pressing the tip against his Eiba's wrinkled entrance. "Now, Eiba?"

"Yes, Tigre. Now." It was a plea and an order and a wish.

He pushed inside, slow and careful, a low growl torn from him as his cock was gripped in tight heat. His Eiba moaned sharply, pushing into his invasion.

Once he was in, he waited for the tight grip of his Eiba to ease, one hand slowly pumping the long, thin cock, lips taking soft kisses. He would not hurt his Eiba. He could not. It wasn't long before his Eiba's body loosened. His Eiba's fingers began to slide over his chest, tracing the leather of his harness as well as the metal loops.

He closed his eyes, purring with pleasure. His hips moved in slow, easy pulses, letting his Eiba feel him inside.

"Oh! Oh, Tigre." His Eiba started to move with him, hips pressing up in counterpoint to his thrusts.

"Yes, Eiba." His skin burned, welts stinging with sweat. He pushed harder, deeper, farther.

His Eiba's breath was coming in short, desperate gasps, fingers starting to grasp at his skin and the harness.

He kept pulling and pushing and kissing and moving, focused on his Eiba -- on the pleasure and gasps and touches and tastes. His Eiba's eyes were wide with pleasure and when they became wider still, he watched his Eiba's climax bloom in the blue depths.

"Eiba..." So good, so beautiful. Tigre watched, stunned and pleased all through. He had done this, given this.

"Come inside me, Tigre. I want to feel you."

His mouth dropped open and he nodded, hips pumping as he thrust deep, held tight and close by his Eiba. His Eiba who knew him, named him, gave him a home.

Tigre came with a low cry, lost in his Eiba's eyes.

His Eiba's hands were sliding over him, his Eiba's face happy and relaxed.

Leaning up, his Eiba kissed his mouth softly. "Thank you, Tigre."

"Yes, Eiba." He looked over at the cabinet with the towels and cloths, unsure whether he should stay or clean his Eiba.

Clever fingers undid the clips that kept the harness bound. "A b-b-bath, Tigre?"

"Oh, yes, Eiba." He sat up carefully, shrugging off the harness and setting it aside to be cleaned and oiled after his Eiba was settled. "Yes."

"That w-w-was b-better than r-r-reading, y-y-yes?"

"This val..." He stopped and sighed at himself. One day he would remember. "Tigre understands touching, Eiba."

Palin nodded and stood. "I w-w-will r-read to m-m-myself."

Tigre looked over, toes clenching, worrying. "Did this vala do wrong?"

"Tigre."

Tigre closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. He *would* learn. "Did Tigre do wrong, Eiba?"

His Eiba gave a little sigh. "N-no."

He nodded and knelt before his Eiba, needing to please, to give comfort. "Tigre would make his Eiba happy inside. This Tigre *would*."

Slender fingers stroked his cheeks, tilting his head up for a soft kiss. The blue eyes gazed down at him. "Y-y-you d-do, Tigre."

"Yes, Eiba." He smiled, nuzzling into the touches. He swayed slightly, body beginning to ache, to come away from the place the Eiba took them.

"C-come. B-b-bath."

"Yes, Eiba."

His Eiba's fingers slid around his own and together they left the Room.

Chapter Nineteen

Palin had been sleeping soundly enough, but something woke him.

Blinking, he reached for the light switch above his bed, raising the light level just enough to see what had woken him. He didn't have to look far. There, at the end of his bed, curled up into as small a ball as possible, was Tigre, pillow clutched to his chest, face buried in it.

Palin started down at Tigre for a moment or two, trying to figure out why Tigre was where he was. He was sure he'd sent Tigre to his own room after their play the night before; besides, when Tigre slept with him, they shared the bed, and their bodies, properly.

For a moment he wondered if he was imagining things. He nudged Tigre softly with his foot. No, real enough. He nudged again, trying to wake Tigre this time.

Tigre made a sound between a growl and a whimper, body curling tighter. Before he had a chance to nudge again, those liquid brown eyes popped open, blinking over at him, face vaguely confused. "Eiba."

"Tigre. W-w-what are y-y-you d-doing?"

"Sleeping, Eiba. This vala is sorry, Eiba." Tigre crept off the end of the bed, eyes down.

"N-not v-vala -- Tigre. S-s-sit." He pet the bed next to him, wondering what was wrong.

Tigre moved up with unusual speed, sitting close, clutching his pillow. "This va... This Tigre did *not* mean to wake the Eiba."

Palin frowned, sliding his hand along Tigre's arm. "W-why h-h-here?"

Tigre looked down, sighed. "This Tigre was frightened, Eiba. Frightened of things that came through the walls and eat Eibas and valas all up. This... this vala did not want to be alone if they came for him."

He was more confused than ever. "Things that c-come through the w-w-walls? W-what are y-y-you t-talking about?"

"The things, Eiba. The things from the vidfeed. The horrible things." Tigre's eyes were dark, stressed, head shaking. "This vala does not like those things."

"The v-v-vidfeed... Oh! Tigre -- d-did y-y-you w-watch a s-scary m-m-movie?"

"No, Eiba. This vala watched the vidfeed. The Eiba said the time was free, the feed was free." Tigre shook his head. "Just the vidfeed."

"Tigre," he corrected absently. It was obvious the feed had been one of the old movies people used to watch to frighten themselves.

Tigre nodded. "Tigre, Eiba. This Tigre is sorry, Eiba, but the things frighten this Tigre because if they come for the Eiba or come for the vala and they came through the *walls*, Eiba."

"They w-weren't r-real, Tigre. J-just a s-story t-to frighten children. And v-valas."

He continued to touch Tigre, fingers gentle. Tigre had to be really scared to come into his bed without permission.

"A story?" The look on Tigre's face slowly morphed from fear to hurt. "To frighten vala? Why, Eiba? This vala was *not* bad. This vala followed the rules."

"N-no, Tigre. N-not t-to frighten y-you specifically. J-just t-to frighten -- s-some p-p-people l-like that."

Tigre frowned. "Why, Eiba? Why frighten vala?"

Palin shrugged, not really having an answer. He didn't like the movies himself, so he stayed away from them.

"I d-didn't frighten y-you, Tigre. Only the feed d-d-did. It w-wasn't d-d-directed at y-you, b-but anyone." Palin could see from the look on Tigre's face that he still did not understand.

He didn't want to start monitoring what Tigre watched, Tigre had a point -- the feeds were free, Tigre's time had been his own.

"It w-was j-just a s-story, Tigre. N-not r-real."

"Not real. No things through the wall coming to get the Eiba?"

He shook his head. "N-nothing c-coming through the w-wall." He opened his arms, silently inviting Tigre into their circle.

Tigre came immediately, arms wrapping around his waist, hair sliding all around his body, face buried in his shoulder. "Eiba."

He slid his hands up and down along Tigre's back, holding Tigre close. "Y-you are s-safe, Tigre. I am s-safe."

"Yes. The Eiba is safe. The Tigre is safe. *No* more bad stories, Eiba. This Tigre worries." Tigre settled with him, relaxing, purring in his arms, Tigre's faith in him complete.

He allowed himself a grin, now that Tigre was settled again. There were times when Tigre displayed an inordinate innocence for one so ill-used.

He kissed the side of Tigre's face. "B-better?"

"Yes, Eiba. Thank you, Eiba." Tigre nuzzled into him, snuggling and warm.

"W-will y-you s-sleep n-n-now?"

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre hugged his waist tight, then moved to the edge of the bed and reaching for his pillow. "Good night, Eiba."

"Oh. I m-meant h-here. W-with m-m-me."

"Oh!" Tigre beamed and Palin found his arms full again of a warm, close man, held in strong arms.

He smiled, humming happily. "M-maybe y-you aren't ready t-to s-sleep j-just y-y-yet?"

Dark eyes twinkled at him, happy and quiet. "Maybe, Eiba."

Leaning forward, he brought their lips together, Tigre's warm and soft and fluid beneath his own.

Tigre's lips parted easily, fingers warm and easy on his back. "This Tigre can touch, Eiba?"

"Oh, y-yes, Tigre. P-p-please t-touch."

A soft, happy moan was offered to him and Tigre's hands gathered him close, sliding and stroking over his skin, lips kissing him again and again. His own hands were busy, sliding along the warm, hard muscles he loved so much. Tigre's body was beautiful, and he never tired from touching it.

They moved together without worry, without heat as much as warmth, care, sweet pleasure and intimate knowledge of each other's bodies. Eventually his body was hard and aching, eager for more intensity. He wriggled and shifted, pressing his erection against Tigre's lips, even as his own mouth took Tigre's hard cock in.

"Eiba!" His cock was enveloped in Tigre's mouth, lips pulling and tugging, hands wrapping around his hips and holding him close.

He hummed around Tigre's cock, happy and horny and full of growing pleasure. Tigre encouraged his hips to move, pulling him deep into that welcoming throat, that clutching heat. He did, thrusting slowly at first and then harder, faster as Tigre took everything he gave him. It felt so good, and he sucked harder, wanting Tigre to feel the same heat and suction and goodness. Tigre moaned, the vibration surrounding his cock, sliding over his balls, spreading over his skin.

Pushing his hips faster, he slid his hands around Tigre's hips to his ass, encouraging him to move as well. Another moan sounded, Tigre pulling harder, hips slowly beginning to push that hot, hard cock over his tongue, again and again. It was almost better than the suction on his own cock, Tigre giving himself like this, letting himself want and need. He moaned and worked one of his fingers between Tigre's cheeks, searching for Tigre's hot hole.

Tigre shifted, whimpering around his cock, thighs parting. The suction on his cock became faster, fiercer. He matched it, finger pushing in deep, giving Tigre the two sensations to rock between. Tigre did, rocking with low cries, hands sliding up and down his legs, stroking him. Touching him.

He pulled harder on the cock in his mouth, using every bit of his strength and his will power, encouraging Tigre to move, to feel, to come. Tigre began keening, entire body shuddering, lips fastened tight around his cock as Tigre came, seed splashing hot and salty down his throat.

Palin swallowed as he came, shouting around the flesh still pulsing in his throat. So good, so hot.

Tigre's mouth held him gently, soft moans still vibrating around his cock. Sweet shudders and shivers moved through him, pulled out by Tigre's intent care. At last he let go of the cock in his own mouth with a sigh, nuzzling the heavy balls with his cheek.

He felt his cock slide from Tigre's lips, his lover's steady breath warm and soft against his inner thigh.

He placed a kiss on Tigre's softening cock and settled more comfortably, Tigre's thigh his pillow. He was sleepy, sated and satisfied. "Tigre c-can s-s-sleep n-now?"

Tigre gave a sweet, affirmative noise and a sound that might have been "Eiba" in whatever dream Tigre was having, hugging his thighs.

Perhaps watching scary movies wasn't so bad as long as you had someone to hold when they were over.

Still smiling, he gave into the heavy embrace of sleep.

He was watching a film when he heard the noise.

It was coming from the kitchen. It echoed through the apartment, strange and low. Once, then twice, then again. A cough, perhaps? Was Tigre ill?

He stood, frowning, wandering down the hall into the kitchen area, following that strange sound.

Tigre was on the floor, cross-legged, before a plant that Palin had purchased for him on Market Row. The plant was... well it was alive, covered in dozens of bright butterflies, spreading and trying their wings as they pushed from their cocoons.

One was crawling up Tigre's arm, another landing in his hair.

And the noise?

Tigre was laughing.

Eyes shining, body relaxed, beautiful and strong and... happy.

Tigre was... beautiful.

"B-b-butterflies!" He couldn't help but laugh a little himself, but because of Tigre's happiness, not because of the strangest seed pods he'd ever seen.

"Eiba!" Tigre looked over at him, face alight. "Oh! Eiba! *Look!*"

The huge hands moved, the butterflies taking flight for a moment and then settling. Then that happy laugh sounded again.

"Show m-m-me again." He wanted to hear that laugh again.

Tigre waved and the butterflies flew and then that laugh came, warm and deep and wonderful. Then dark eyes found his and Tigre smiled. "So good to this Tigre, Eiba. *So good.*"

"I d-di -- y-y-you're w-w-welcome." He had bought the plant for Tigre after all; just because he hadn't known there would be butterflies didn't mean he was willing to give up that laugh.

Tigre held open his arms. "Does the Eiba want to sit and watch? This vala has found a lap and a magical tree all for the Eiba!"

The smile was open, free, happy.

For him.

He didn't even correct Tigre's words, letting Tigre get away with calling himself "this vala." He moved to Tigre's side, careful not step on any of the fluttering insects.

Tigre laughed as he settled down on the warm lap, arms wrapping around him. "This Tigre would ask a favor, Eiba."

"Y-y-yes, Tigre?"

Dark eyes looked at the floor and then up. "This Tigre would kiss his Eiba. Thank him."

"Oh! I w-w-would l-like that."

Tigre's lips met his immediately, and Palin gasped at the hunger and pleasure and desire that simple touch of lips and tongue communicated. He made a soft noise and slid his hand along Tigre's cheek, fingers automatically tracing the tattoo. Tigre rumbled, kiss deepening, the offer of passion and love free and genuine. He opened his mouth wide to Tigre's kiss.

Another warm, happy noise sounded and Tigre murmured something into his lips, tongue pressing deep, tasting him.

The butterflies flew around them, landing on his cheeks and tickling, making him chuckle into the kiss. Tigre's laugh twined with his, feeding his soul, his pleasure. He closed his eyes, floating on the unique pleasure of Tigre's kiss, freely offered.

The kiss ended, became another and another. Each one was different, some soft, some playful, all real and sweet and gentle. All flavored with his Tigre.

He didn't try to take it anywhere, didn't order Tigre to do more or stop or anything at all. He just enjoyed the kisses, the sweet, warm touches of Tigre's lips and the fluttering, tickly touches of the butterflies.

Tigre's eyes were soft, full when their lips parted. "Thank you, Eiba."

He smiled, feeling Tigre's happiness inside himself. "You're welcome, Tigre."

Tigre's cheek rested against his, the arms around him warm and loose, relaxed.

Laughter filled the air again and again -- sometimes his, sometimes Tigre's, sometimes theirs.

It was a good day.

Palin woke to the sound of grunting and moaning.

He blinked. He was in his bed, curled up with Tigre, the vidfeed on. They'd been watching a documentary on the hills of Asia and he must have fallen asleep.

He blinked again, focusing on the vidfeed. Oh my. He didn't think it was possible for a man to have a penis growing from *there*.

Tigre was wrapped around him, snoring softly, huge body defending and protecting, even sound asleep.

He stroked his hand along one arm, watching the vidfeed idly. The scene switched to two men, equally matched, who were sucking each other's cocks. His body began to respond to what he was seeing and he wondered suddenly what Tigre might think of watching such a thing.

He nudged Tigre. "Tigre?"

Tigre growled, muscles rolling against him. "Yes, Eiba?"

"Sh..." He stroked Tigre's arm, hips moving almost of their own accord, pushing his cock against Tigre's warmth. "Easy."

Tigre's growl softened, body shifting and rocking towards him. Those melted chocolate eyes blinked slowly, warm and happy, full of trust. "Smell good, Eiba."

"H-hungry, Tigre."

Huge, gentle fingers brushed his cock, stroking him. The touch was confident, sure. "Yes, Eiba. So hungry."

He nodded toward the vidfeed where the two men were sucking each other noisily. "Are y-y-you h-hungry, t-too, Tigre?"

Tigre watched, tilted his head, then grinned. "The men look bored, Eiba. If... if this Tigre was doing that with his Eiba, this Tigre would *not* look almost asleep."

He laughed, delighted. "This Tigre sh-should sh-show m-m-me."

"Yes, Eiba." The words were almost chuckled as Tigre shifted, sliding around until those warm lips were sliding over his shaft, suction strong and eager.

He moaned happily, taking soft, hungry swipes at Tigre's cock. Tigre tasted good and strong on his tongue.

He looked down, noting that Tigre did indeed not look almost asleep. No, his Tigre looked like there was nothing but pleasure to be taken from this. Certainly he could vouch for the pleasure given.

With another moan, he took the head of Tigre's cock into his own mouth, eager to match Tigre's pleasure to his own. Tigre's rumbling vibrated all the way to his balls, the rhythm speeding as heat sparked between them.

He closed his eyes and just felt, just sucked and was sucked, the pleasure moving between them. Tigre moaned, tongue sliding over the tip of his cock again and again, feeding from him. He continued to suck, holding tight onto Tigre's legs, beginning to shake as he got close. Tigre began to rumble, entire body vibrating, purring against him.

He cried out as he came, sound choked by Tigre's flesh, reminding him to keep sucking. Tigre took him in, drank him down with a happy sound that heralded the pulse of seed that poured over his tongue. He swallowed a little of it and let the rest spill from his mouth.

Tigre licked and sucked, keeping him floating and warm, muscled thigh relaxed under his cheek.

The vidfeed behind him was still making noise, the men in it grunting and groaning, not having come yet.

He chuckled. "Y-you w-were r-right, Tigre. Y-y-you d-didn't look b-bored."

Brown eyes twinkled at him. "That is because this Tigre has his Eiba and it is good."

He shifted, curling into Tigre's arms. "V-v-very g-good."

"Yes, Eiba." He was held close, caressed and stroked. "Very good."

He reached past Tigre and turned off the vidfeed, settling back in Tigre's arms. Yes. Very good.

Chapter Twenty

He hungered.

It had been a long night of odd, twisting, twisted dreams, struggling through the nightmares until his Eiba had sent him away, shut him away with strict instructions not to touch himself and sleep.

He'd managed not to stroke himself, but he'd paced silently until the door opened, his Eiba pointing him toward the shower without a word.

His hunger had grown steadily, exhaustion and frustration leading him to focus on the soft, familiar sound of his Eiba's stutter, letting the sound act almost as a touch as the finely-dressed people came and left. It soothed and aroused all at once, that voice, and he ached to hear it raised and smoothed in passion, the bitter-salt of pleasure poured upon his tongue.

They were alone at the moment and there was an almost inaudible click and the red light came on over the door. His Eiba sighed and took off his turban, leaving it on the small table as he stood and wandered to the window.

It was overcast, the sun hidden behind clouds, but it was still bright, the light shining around his Eiba's body with a soft glow.

He almost missed the softly spoken order. "Come here, Tigre."

He stood, cock throbbing hopefully, and he silenced it. He had disturbed the Eiba's sleep with his dark, restless dreams; he would see no relief today. The best he could hope was the ability to please, to touch.

He knelt without a sound, watching the floor, awaiting his Eiba's will and words.

"Stand next to me. Admire the view."

He stood, looking out at the buildings, tall and silvery, reaching up and out forever. The cars whizzed by, people talking and laughing and going so fast along. It was stunning, but not as beautiful as the potted plants in his Eiba's kitchen, green and bright and *growing*.

"Touch yourself."

His Eiba turned and gave him a small smile. The robe was removed and rolled up, placed on the small table and his Eiba sat on the cushion, watching him expectantly.

He shuddered, turning slightly so that his Eiba could see and placing his hands upon his stomach, on either side of the chain that linked nipple to groin. Moving downward, he rolled over the

muscles, pushing deep, massaging them awake, not pausing the motion until his fingertips slid into the wiry curls at his groin.

His Eiba licked his lips, the soft voice husky when he spoke. "Lean your ass against the window, legs spread."

He leaned against the cool window, thighs spreading, balls swinging low between them. Trembling shivers took him, skin reacting to the chill as he waited, fingers curled toward his hard cock.

"Oh, yes. Just like that. Now touch yourself. You may come, but take your time."

Oh... He fought to hold back the grateful groan, his balls tightening desperately. His fingers moved to tug them slightly, lessening his desperation and tightening his control.

He began to stroke himself, long, easy strokes that made him shiver, eyes focused on his Eiba.

His Eiba shifted, sitting on his heels, legs spread. Tigre could see the slender cock, long and hard, could watch as his Eiba took hold of himself and began to copy him, stroke for stroke.

His whimper echoed the need within him and he spread his thighs wider, hips beginning to push into his fist, the way growing slick as the first, clear drops of seed snuck out. His Eiba was desire itself, eyes and body sure and firm.

Rising to his knees, his Eiba's hips pushed his erection through his hand.

So good. So hot. His head dipped, body sliding against the glass, hips pushing harder, faster. Tremors rocked him, need filling him and making him groan.

His Eiba's answering moan filled the space between them.

Pleasure was fast becoming overwhelming, body insistent and desperate, thrusts losing their rhythm.

"Eiba? Now?" The words tumbled from him, almost growled, so need-roughened and lost.

"Yes, Tigre, now." His Eiba's voice was also thick with passion, with need.

He came with a sob, heat pouring over his hand, sweet sensation flying through his body, tension releasing.

"Beautiful..." The murmur was soft, like a caress, followed by a sharp cry, the scent of his Eiba's seed suddenly strong in his nose.

He panted, working to focus, to ready himself for the next request. Pleasure and grateful joy and soft, sweet, honest exhaustion battled within him, all bound and waiting for his Eiba's need.

"Come here."

He stood, skin clinging for a moment to the glass, and walked to his Eiba's side. Kneeling, he bent his head and waited, hands -- one still slick with seed -- resting in his lap.

His Eiba took his hand and brought it up to the sweet lips, licking him clean, making soft noises of pleasure.

His breath caught in his throat, his spine and soul melting with tenderness. His Eiba honored him so much.

A last kiss was pressed into his palm.

"Now you clean me."

"Yes, Eiba." He leaned forward, tongue lapping out first to slide over fingers and hands, sucking each finger dry, before turning to remove any trace of seed from the sweet cock and balls.

His Eiba's legs spread for him, sweet noises raining down on him.

He suckled gently, laving and loving the soft skin, intent on nothing but his Eiba's will and his Eiba's pleasure.

A soft hand stayed his head and he looked up to find his Eiba smiling at him. "Rest with your head on my lap, Tigre. Sleep."

He blinked up, surprised, but his body was already moving, head sinking, muscles relaxing, as his mind refused to lose this closeness, this care.

He gave the tip of his Eiba's cock a soft kiss, eyes closing. "Thank you, Eiba."

One hand began to stroke gently over his head. "Tonight I will use you well enough that you will sleep without dreams until morning."

Oh... He nuzzled close, giving a soft, pleasure-filled hum. "Yes, Eiba, as you wish."

The soft stroking continued, encouraging his sleep.

His dreams, as he fell, were peaceful, his spirit cradled within his Eiba's hands.

Chapter Twenty One

The song of the whip was sweet this night, leather and flesh working together to bring pain, to bring peace. He floated with Tigre in a place where there was only their heartbeats, where the scent of their sweat and Tigre's blood was all around them.

Palin had no concept of how long they stayed there, he and his Tigre, wrapped together. He only knew that eventually he noticed that one scent was missing.

Whispering softly, he released them both into pleasure. "Come..."

Tigre moaned, body jerking as seed splashed, Tigre slumping in his bonds, shudders sliding over the abused skin.

Tigre's strength amazed him anew every day. He himself was trembling from the effort of wielding the whip, barely able to stand, but he knew, were he to ask it, Tigre would carry him to the edge of the city and back.

Quickly, before he lost his energy, he undid the cuffs, freeing Tigre from his bonds. He found a small patch of unbroken skin and placed a soft kiss there.

"Thank you, Tigre," he murmured, signaling the end of the session.

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre's voice was hoarse and as torn as the broad back and shoulders. Tigre stood still, waiting for instruction, for his will.

"The b-bathroom. Sp-spray f-for y-your b-back. W-what do y-you w-want? B-bath or m-making love f-for r-reward?"

Tigre gave him a long, silent look, eyes surprisingly sharp. "A bath, please, Eiba."

Nodding, Palin took Tigre's hand and led him from the Room, into their living quarters.

The sun had set hours ago and the view out the glass was of the city, lit up, artificially bright. Even hurting and exhausted, Tigre's eyes were caught, and they twinkled. Tigre liked the colors, the sparkle. Still, Tigre's body never slowed, steps never faltering behind him.

Once in the bathroom, he took out the spray, applying it liberally to Tigre's back. It would dull the pain and help knit the flesh -- allowing Tigre to go into the water.

As soon as he was finished, Tigre started the water and turned to him, silently stripping away Palin's clothing, breathing slow and deep.

Raising his hand, he stroked the tattooed cheek, thumb sliding along Tigre's lips. "Are y-you w-well, Tigre?"

Tigre nuzzled into his touch, a soft purr sounding. "Yes, Eiba. This Tigre is well."

"G-good." He nodded toward the bathtub, encouraging Tigre to get in.

The huge body slid in, Tigre hissing as he sat, the water licking his torn skin. Once he settled, Tigre held a hand out to Palin, offering his support and strength. He took it willingly, leaning on Tigre's strength as he climbed into the oversized tub. He settled in, back to Tigre's front, with a soft sigh.

"This Tigre can wash, can touch?" The words were familiar, warm, soft. Necessary.

"Y-yes. P-please." He loved it when Tigre touched him, Tigre the only person who seemed unafraid to do so.

Huge, unbelievably gentle hands moved over his skin, easing his muscles. One of Tigre's songs -- random and tuneless, but odd and comfortable -- filled the air as his body was cared for, cleaned, loved.

Time after a session was supposed to be for Tigre, but he always felt that he got the better end of the deal. Still, it was always Tigre's choice and he would not question Tigre by questioning his choice.

Finally, Tigre had cleaned him and he was settled against warm, relaxed muscles, Tigre's heart beating slow and steady.

"W-what c-can I d-do f-for y-y-you, Tigre?"

A long silence answered him and then Tigre murmured. "Would the Eiba tell this vala the story about finding him, about choosing him, about why?"

"N-not v-vala -- Tigre," he corrected automatically.

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre's response was just as automatic. "Would the Eiba tell Tigre the story of why?"

He nodded. It was a favorite story of Tigre's. "I w-will t-try."

Settling back more comfortably against Tigre, he closed his eyes. "I s-saw y-y-you in m-my head f-first. I s-saw y-y-you in a client's m-mind. I f-felt con-nected t-to y-y-you."

"Did it hurt the Eiba, seeing Tigre inside?" Fingers stroked over his temples.

He nuzzled into the soft touches. "N-no, n-not at all. It f-felt... right."

"Right." Tigre nodded, satisfied with that answer. Fingers began stroking his face and neck in long, relaxing strokes.

"Once I h-had s-seen y-y-you, I w-went d-down t-t-to g-get y-y-you."

Tigre shivered, made an unhappy noise. "At the House with the Owner, yes, Eiba?"

He pet Tigre's arm. "Y-yes, Tigre."

"This vala was not the Eiba's Tigre then. This vala ached inside, Eiba."

"I kn-know." He sighed and turned, hands finding the muscled stomach and petting gently. "D-do y-y-you still ache, Tigre?"

"No, Eiba." Tigre shook his head, eyes dark and serious. "This Tigre is home. This Tigre is with the Eiba. This Tigre is *good*."

"G-good." He stroked Tigre's muscles some more, for emphasis. And because he liked touching Tigre.

He shifted again, putting one leg to either side of Tigre and lying his cheek on the wide chest.

Tigre's arms wrapped around him, massaging his spine, holding him close. "This Tigre was *not* good when the Eiba brought him home. This Tigre was scared."

"Y-yes. Y-you d-did not know."

"The Eiba knew this Tigre would learn, yes?"

"Y-yes." He had known, Tigre was right for him and he for Tigre, any problems they had were surmountable.

He could feel Tigre's relief, the hands on his skin pushing deeper, stroking him. "This Tigre belongs with the Eiba."

"Y-yes. W-we b-belong. B-both." He closed his eyes and gently stroked Tigre's belly, seeking to ease his lover.

Tigre hummed, muscles shifting beneath his hand. "Yes, Eiba. Yes."

He sighed and all but melted against Tigre, feeling settled and relaxed down to his bones.

The tuneless humming continued, Tigre keeping the bath water warm and comfortable. Keeping him safe and happy. Holding him.

The song of the water was sweet this night, flesh and oils working together to bring harmony, peace. He floated with Tigre in a place where there was only their heartbeats, the scent of Tigre rising on the steam.

Palin had no concept of how long they stayed there, he and his Tigre, wrapped together. It mattered not.

Chapter Twenty Two

The program on the television was silly. It was making him giggle and snort and laugh out loud. Tigre sat on the floor, looking bemusedly from the television to Palin's face and back.

"I kn-n-now it's silly," he told Tigre, "b-b-but funny, t-too!"

Tigre shrugged and gave him a smile and that made Palin laugh all the harder and he flung himself off the bed into Tigre's lap, aiming a kiss at the full lips.

Tigre caught him easily, kissing him back with one of those fascinating, happy non-verbal sounds that spoke of the big man's joy. He fit easily into the circle of arms, leaning into heated strength that supported and protected without hesitation and with the utmost care.

He deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue into the warm mouth, hands wrapping around Tigre's neck, laughter turning to passion in seconds.

Tigre's mouth was hot, flavored with minted hot chocolate and cream, a treat coveted fiercely by the big man and enjoyed on quiet, peaceful nights like this, where they were free to sink in the passion and warmth between them.

He broke the kiss only to pull his shirt over his head, tossing it on the floor. Pressing their chests together, he moaned softly into Tigre's mouth, enjoying the sensation of flesh on flesh, the slight rub of the chain against his skin.

Tigre's hands stroked tentatively over his back, warm and strong, cradling and tickling as they slid down his spine and massaged his shoulder blades. The touches grew steadily more confident as he let his pleasure show.

He slid his hands into Tigre's hair, fingers tangling there as he undulated, pressing back into Tigre's touches and forward to bring the skin of their fronts together again. The thick mass curled over his fingers, his arms, untamed and wild.

Another soft sound was offered to him, slid into his lips so quietly that he almost missed it. The dark eyes looked at him, warm and melting, full of a silent pleasure and endless loyalty.

He pulled back, raining soft kisses over Tigre's face, showing his own pleasure and devotion to Tigre.

"Y-you m-m-may do as y-you w-w-will, this n-night."

Tigre looked at him for a long moment, then brought them back together again, lips covering his in a chocolate-sweet kiss, tongue teasing his lips apart.

Slowly and carefully, he was lifted, placed upon the bed and then drawn into Tigre's arms, held close and warm in the strong arms, kiss never breaking.

He pressed even closer, his jeans in the way as he tried to rub against Tigre. He let loose of Tigre's hair and tugged at the buttons. Tigre wasn't helping, warm hands cupping his buttocks, thumbs rubbing in slow, distracting circles, kisses becoming breathless and heady.

A shudder went through him and he gave up on his jeans, pressing close and rubbing and holding on to the solid warmth of Tigre, opening his mouth wide to the plundering tongue.

Tigre murmured softly into his lips, more nonsense sounds of need, the big brown eyes reflecting the warm tones of the bedspread, the muted lights softening the squared edges of his features.

There was something special about times like these, as if the night was out of time itself, their roles set aside to celebrate the care and devotion shared between them. Tigre was kissing him, not because he had to, but because he wanted to. Palin moaned again, a shiver working through him at the thought.

Tigre's fingers slid around to stroke his belly, hands moving in slowly widening circles, trailing over the bulge in his jeans and up over his nipples, almost petting him, just sharing the gentle touch. He groaned softly. He better than anyone knew Tigre's focus, knew that Tigre could kiss and touch and caress for hours, just enjoying the warmth and emotion between them.

He broke the kiss, just holding on tightly and trying to catch his breath, to calm himself so that he could enjoy what was between them as well without the edge of need pushing him too fast.

Tigre's lips moved to caress his neck, fingers moving to carefully unfasten his jeans. The kisses eased, tongue sliding with a lazy rhythm, tasting his skin. Gasping, he let his fingers trail over the skin of Tigre's back, finding and tracing the long spine.

Tigre shivered for him, almost laughing against his throat, the sound extremely rare and precious.

"Are you happy, Tigre?"

The heavy head lifted, eyes dark and rich. "Yes, Eiba. Very happy."

He could feel his own smile down to his balls. "G-good."

"And you, Eiba? You are happy?" The question was asked almost too quietly to hear, Tigre whispering low.

He took the beloved face in his hands. "Oh, y-yes, Tigre. V-v-very happy."

He smiled and touched their lips lightly together. "Y-you m-m-make it so."

"Oh."

The smile he received was stunned and proud, so gentle and full of pleasure that it made him ache inside. Entranced, he simply stared at Tigre, absorbing the look, the aura of happiness that flowed between them.

Tigre's hand began to move again, the caress chaste and easy, not distracting from, but adding to the pleasure that they shared. Palin's own fingers slid once more along the broad back, offering soft touches.

Heavy lids drooped, pleasure written clear upon the marked face. From this distance Palin could see the design inked into even the most delicate skin that shielded the dark eyes, curls and swirls entwining together like ivy.

Leaning forward, he began to lick at the tattoo, tongue following the patterns. Tigre caught his breath, eyelashes fluttering against his tongue before settling with a soft, sweet moan. He smiled and rubbed his nose against Tigre's before going back to what he was doing. Tigre didn't taste any different here, but it felt different, licking the flesh that bore the symbol of his position.

Tigre was beginning to gasp, hands stuttering against his skin. Over and over his tongue traced the indigo pattern, swirling, twirling, twisting, making him feel dizzy.

Tigre's hands slid inside the fabric of his jeans, cupping his ass and pulling him close. He gasped, almost surprised, he'd been so lost in the swirling patterns of Tigre's tattoo. He was hard, Tigre was hard and it felt so good.

"Eiba..." Tigre's groan was fierce, hot against his skin. Hands smoothed the denim down, freeing his cock, fingers caressing his balls with careful strokes.

He whimpered, pushing into the touch, lips pressing against the inked cheek.

Slowly, steadily, Tigre began to rock them together, slick heat sliding along slick heat, fingers stroking and grasping and holding, one sensation piled atop another. Palin just held on, letting Tigre set the pace, do the work, luxuriating in being passive and not having to decide anything.

Tigre's forehead dropped to his shoulder, lips sliding over his skin with gentle hunger. The thrusts of their bodies together quickened, grew in heat and intent.

It was hot and hard and sweet and soft at the same time. His breath started to catch, little hitching gasps that sounded so needy.

One huge hand wrapped around their shafts, thumb moving to slide over the tips again and again. Tigre's tongue lapped over his skin, searching and hot, leaving a shivery dampness behind.

He was shaking now, trembling and needy, soft wails joining his gasps.

Steady and relentless, so focused and sure in this, Tigre drove them higher and higher, grunts and growls pressed into his skin.

So close, he was so close, hands clutching Tigre, holding him close.

"Eiba." The word was soft prayer, a hymn.

"Tigre!" Palin shouted the name as he came, the word echoing around the small room almost as long as the sweet shudders and shivers continued to shake his body.

Tigre panted against him for long minutes, the heavy cock still throbbing with the aftershocks of its own release. As he collapsed deep into the mattress, Tigre licked a line down his body, tongue cleaning their combined seed from his skin.

He murmured happily, fingers finding Tigre's hair again and playing with it. It would be badly tangled by morning, but that just meant he could brush it out and braid it back up as their night out of time came to an end.

In the meantime, he just closed his eyes and enjoyed the closeness.

Chapter Twenty Three

He was hot and he was tired and he still had three clients left to see before he could take off his stupid robe of office and the even stupider hat. It had been a ridiculously busy week. A dozen clients on a quiet day, as many as twice that on a busy one. It was beginning to wear on him.

Just three more clients and he was done for the weekend. As soon as the last one left he and Tigre could take a swim together, maybe make love, and then have something delicious delivered in. After a good, solid night of sleep they could play hard for two days before another long week began.

A knock came on the door, signaling his next client. Smiling fondly over at Tigre, he took a deep breath and then pressed the button opening the door.

Sahib Anoyast was a new client, referred to him through the Office of Information. There had been a lot of new clients lately; the world was growing dangerous and everyone wanted any advantage they could find.

Anoyast was a big man, his dark business suit stretched across broad shoulders, the black briefcase seeming small in his hand.

Palin inclined his head and indicated the pillow across from him.

A strange, low sound filled the room. It took him a second for his mind to recognize it as a vibrating growl, threatening and full of latent violence. His body, though, understood immediately, hundreds of years of civilization unable to erase the wariness brought by a leopard's growl or the hum of a swarm of angry bees.

Tigre stalked across the room, snarling, growling, fury and threat obvious in every line of the muscled body. Tigre stopped before Anoyast, between him and his client.

Threat and deadly anger poured from Tigre, filling the room.

"Tigre!"

He was shocked by Tigre's behavior, and his client took a step backward, clutching his briefcase like a shield.

Tigre did not acknowledge him, didn't turn or flinch, just took the step his client had given up. In a fighting stance, Tigre pushed the frightened man backward, herding his client towards a corner. Palin had forgotten how massive Tigre could be, how threatening, how deadly.

"Tigre -- stop this right now!"

Tigre's hand shot out and the briefcase slammed to the ground, the sound sharp. He could see the muscles of Tigre's back rippling and tensing, that horrible growling rising in intensity.

He shot up and nearly tripped over the table as he heading for Tigre and the client. "I said stop that!"

As he drew closer, he could see the panic in his terrified client's eyes. "Please, please! He's going to kill me! Call him off! Call him off!"

Tigre pounced, slamming the man into the corner, hands cupping the man's head and lifting him off the floor. As Palin watched in horror, the man's body began to jerk, convulse, and then Tigre released him, letting him fall to the floor in a heap.

The silence in the room was deafening. He stood in shock, staring at Anoyast's crumpled body, his mind refusing to process what had just happened.

Tigre watched for a moment and then stepped away, turning to face Palin without a word.

His first instinct was to take Tigre and run as far and as fast as he could. He needed Tigre. He loved Tigre. If they took Tigre away from him, put Tigre to death, it would kill him.

But he didn't know anything about running and if Tigre would no longer obey him, then Tigre was dangerous and it would be wrong to bring him out into the world.

He bit his lip to keep from crying. He didn't understand. "W-w-w-w-why?"

Tigre gave him an utterly confused look, kneeling at Palin's feet. "Why, Eiba?"

"W-w-why d-did y-y-you --" He pointed to the man and then went over to the crumpled form, gingerly placing two fingers on the man's neck. He wasn't dead.

Relief surged through him. He could salvage this. He could. He would tell the authorities that the man had threatened him, that Tigre had attacked to save him. Once the authorities had been dealt with, he would work with Tigre until he was sure that Tigre was again obedient to his will and not dangerous.

"Go to your room."

To his utter disbelief Tigre took his hand and pulled. "Come, Eiba."

He was too stunned to protest, letting Tigre lead him from the Room. As they came into the bright greenery of the kitchen, his mind snapped back into order. He would get Tigre settled in his room and call Security from the kitchen.

He let Tigre lead him through the doors until they were in the grey room at the very end.

"Think on w-w-what y-you've d-done."

"Stay, Eiba. Stay. Please Eiba, not in the Room. Stay."

Tigre had a deathgrip on his hand, brown eyes intense and pleading.

He could understand Tigre's fear -- Tigre had almost killed someone, had disobeyed him *twice*. He tugged on his hand. "I h-h-have t-to c-call Security. I h-h-have to d-deal w-w-with this m-m-mess. L-let g-go of m-m-me."

"Eiba." A tear rolled down Tigre's cheek, his lover's voice devastated. "Please, Eiba. Not with the man. *Not* alone with the man, Eiba."

"The m-m-man y-y-you attacked w-w-without p-provocation! I have t-to g-g-go r-r-right n-now!"

He was almost shaking, confused and angry and more than a little scared that Tigre was irrevocably broken. He had no idea what he had done wrong to cause this breakdown in Tigre, and if he couldn't figure it out, how could he fix it?

Tigre began to shudder, tremors rocking the huge form, head shaking. Palin received this unbelieving, shocked look and then Tigre's hands dropped, followed by his shoulders and eyes. "Not with the man, Eiba. Please."

"I h-have t-to call Security. I'll d-d-deal w-w-with y-you w-when I'm through w-w-with them."

He turned and let the door close behind him, hitting the lock for the first time in months.

His heart was heavy as he called Security to report the incident.

Eiba.

Oh, his Eiba was out there with the man -- Tigre pushed against the door, knowing it wouldn't open. His Eiba was out there with the man. Alone. Even though Tigre had warned him.

His Eiba was angry with him.

Disappointed.

Scared.

His Eiba was scared of him.

He crawled over to the corner, pulling his pillow over and sitting, his blanket in his lap. He hurt inside -- he hadn't fought here, never fought here. Never fought a not-vala in front of the Eiba.

He wasn't sure what he'd done wrong, only that he had done wrong. That he had replaced the fondness in the Eiba's eyes with fear and anger.

He traced the lines of the blanket that smelled like him, that the Eiba had given him. It had colors like the Eiba's eyes. Dark blues and light blues and bits of silver and...

He didn't know what would happen now. If the Eiba would just leave him here. If the Eiba would just leave. If the Eiba would take his name away, his home away.

If the Eiba would send him back.

It wasn't fair. He'd followed the rules. He *had*.

He chewed on his lip, biting hard enough to hurt, and just waited, telling himself it didn't matter. He was vala. He had no beginning, no needs, no wants, no name, no life unless given to him.

He was vala.

He waited and watched the door.

Palin had given Security the briefest of details -- only that Tigre had knocked out a man who'd come into his apartment. The ambulance and security men had arrived at the same time and he'd been able to get away without being questioned while they worked on getting his client to the hospital. A collar around his neck, vitals taken, they decided it would be safe to move him. Then the questions would start. He still wasn't sure what he would say, what would stick.

What really had him worried though, what had been eating at his stomach for the last twenty minutes had been Tigre. Why had Tigre suddenly attacked this man?

He could tell Security that Tigre had been defending him and the men would believe him, even if the client later denied it, but that didn't solve the problem of Tigre's aggression and disobedience.

The man was moved onto the floating bed, the ambulance men taking him away.

"Hey! What's that?" The two men from Security had drawn their guns and were pointing them at the floor, at the handle of the briefcase which had been hidden beneath the client's body.

Palin went to move forward, but the smaller of the two men put out his arm. "Don't step any nearer -- that's a cell-tazer. It can kill a man with barely a touch. 'Course that takes days -- at full power it's immediately fatal."

"I've never seen one up close before." The other Security man was crouching, poking at the tazer with the edge of his gun. "You're lucky your vala got this guy before he got you."

The men were still talking, working at collecting the tazar for their report without getting stung, but Palin wasn't paying attention. He was trying to stay standing.

A weapon. The client had come to attack him, to kill him, and Tigre had saved his life.

And in return he had punished Tigre, locked him in his room.

He couldn't wait for Security to leave. He needed to get to Tigre, needed to apologize for what he'd done, for punishing Tigre when the man was only doing what he'd been told to do.

He'd been worrying about what he would have to do to recondition Tigre when it was he himself that needed reconditioning. He should have trusted Tigre as Tigre trusted him. If there were any ill effects over this incident it would be entirely his fault. He was a fool.

The men from Security left, promising to keep him informed and promising to increase vigilance in the building -- the man should never have been allowed in with that kind of weapon on him.

As soon as they were gone, Palin locked the door behind them and hurried to Tigre's room.

Knocking, he opened the door tentatively, he hardly had a right.

Tigre was sitting in the corner, his blanket held tight in the huge hands, comforting himself in the only way he knew. He'd told Palin once that it helped him hold onto his home, good vala found a home. Without even looking up, Tigre simply placed the blanket on the end of the bed and knelt, head bowed.

He went and sat on the bed, looking down at his hands. "Y-you s-saved m-m-my life."

"If someone tries to hurt the Eiba, this vala stops them."

Tigre's voice sounded hollow, lost and confused with a strange hint of resignation.

"I kn-know. I d-d-d-didn't see he w-w-w-w-" Palin made a soft noise of frustration. "I d-d-didn't see he w-w-was h-hurting m-m-me."

Tigre's breath caught for a moment and then he nodded. "This vala understands, Eiba."

Palin turned and looked at Tigre, hand coming out to stroke the inked cheek. "N-n-next t-time I trust y-y-you."

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre didn't pull away from the touch, but he didn't nuzzle close either. Through the touch, Palin could feel the tiny tremors, the tension that vibrated each muscle.

Tigre was hurt and confused and it was all his fault. And he wasn't sure how to fix it, his own faith in himself as shaken as Tigre's had to be.

First though, he had to show Tigre that the man was gone, that the threat was gone.

He stood and held out his hand, hoping Tigre still had enough faith in him to come without a command.

Tigre stood without a word and slipped his hand into Palin's, holding on.

Oh, Tigre was so strong, strong enough for both of them. He turned and beamed at Tigre and then led him back through his room and the kitchen to the Room beyond where they worked and played.

"He's g-gone. S-security has the t-tazer. S-safe n-now."

Tigre released his hand and walked through the room, looking, nostrils flaring. Finally, a huge amount of tension faded and Tigre ended back at his side. "More work, Eiba?"

He shook his head. "F-finished until M-m-monday."

He'd cancelled the last two clients, already shaken before he'd known he'd come so close to being killed.

He received a silent nod and then Tigre spoke, so low he almost missed it. "This vala would not hurt the Eiba."

"I kn-know, Tigre. I d-do."

He went over and wrapped his arms around Tigre's waist, burying his face in the broad chest. "I n-n-ever thought y-y-you w-would hurt m-m-me."

"This vala followed the rules and this vala does not want to be sent away. This vala *did* follow the rules, tried to follow the rules, Eiba."

Tigre's hurt and worry flowed out, proving to Palin that again, Tigre was strong enough to trust him, to give this to him, even now.

"I w-will n-not send y-y-you aw-way, Tigre. I c-cannot."

He hugged Tigre to him, fingers stroking along his lover's spine.

"This vala hurts inside, Eiba. This vala..." Tigre sighed and then those strong arms wrapped around him and held him. "This is right? This is good, Eiba?"

"Y-yes, Tigre."

He nuzzled against Tigre's skin, trying to figure out how to set things to rights between them. His confidence was shaken, he didn't trust himself to make the right decision.

But Tigre trusted him.

And that would be enough.

"Don't move," he whispered, sliding down to his knees.

He looked up at Tigre and nuzzled his cheek against the thick cock before turning and swiping his tongue across the tip.

Tigre didn't move, but his shaft did, twitching and beginning to fill.

He continued to nibble at the flesh, licking and nuzzling and encouraging it to burgeon. When it had grown hot and hard, he looked back up into Tigre's eyes.

"I trust you."

With that he circled Tigre's erection with his lips and took it down as far as he could, sucking strongly.

Still and solid, the only indication of Tigre's arousal were the quickening of his breath, the brief flashes of flavor that hit Palin's tongue, and the tightening of nipples, one following another as the tugs on the hard cock pulled the attached chain.

He grabbed Tigre's buttocks, holding onto the muscled flesh as he slid up and down Tigre's erection. There were a thousand ways Tigre could kill him without a single weapon, one would be to choke him to death with this thick cock, but Palin knew that Tigre would not do that, knew that Tigre would not ever hurt him, that had never been a concern. He hoped this would help convince Tigre of his trust in that.

Soft, almost silent moans filled the air, Tigre's arousal and need erasing the violence and anger that had marred the Room.

It felt good to be doing this, to be proving his trust, to be the one bringing pleasure rather than taking it this time.

He hummed softly, a happy sound.

Tigre moaned, thick cock throbbing on his tongue. The muscles of Tigre's stomach rippled, body straining to be still.

He continued until his jaw was aching from the stretch and the sucking and then he looked up into Tigre's face again and willed his lover to come.

Tigre's eyes widened, so dark, so rich and loving and trusting, and then hot, salty seed poured into his mouth.

He took it all in, swallowing quickly, feeling it hit his empty stomach and fill him with Tigre.

He continued to suckle Tigre's flesh gently, licking and nuzzling and finally letting it go.

With a soft sigh he leaned his head against Tigre's thigh, the solid muscle warm and real beneath his face, like Tigre's love and trust.

"Eiba." The whisper floated down, soft and relaxed and sure.

He placed a soft kiss on Tigre's shaft and then stood, smiling up at his lover. "Tigre."

He raised his face for a kiss.

Tigre's lips were soft, warm, salty with tears.

"Mine," he whispered fiercely.

"Oh..." He could feel it, almost a snap in the air when he hit the right thing and put the jumble of Tigre's worries to rest. "Yes, Eiba. Yes. Yours."

"You are strong and good and mine, Tigre. And today, even when I was confused, you did what was right. Name your reward, my Tigre."

"Want to sleep with the Eiba, food and water and-. Want things just to be *home*, Eiba. Just home and normal." Tigre's eyes pled with him to understand. "This vala just wants *home*."

He gave Tigre a stern look and poked gently with his index finger. "Tigre," he corrected firmly.

Tigre's cheeks heated and he got an embarrassed, but so-pleased grin. "Tigre wants to be home with his Eiba, please."

He smiled and nodded. "Tigre is home."

He held out his hand. "Come. Supper and a b-bath and b-bed. T-together."

Tigre's hand slid into his. "Yes, Eiba."

Looking down at their joined hands, he smiled. Yes, they were both home and home was someplace between their palms, held close and together.

Chapter Twenty Four

Palin didn't like performing.

What he did with Tigre was private, between the two of them. But Sahib Favila had been incredulous that he had not returned Tigre after a few days and then a few weeks and then a few months, and had asked him to come and demonstrate with his vala.

He had declined, but Favila refused to let the matter drop and had issued a challenge through formal channels.

Palin had no choice but to bring Tigre to Favila's flesh emporium and perform a half-hour scene. He had explained what was happening to Tigre and impressed upon Tigre the importance of complete obedience and he'd promised that as long as Tigre was obedient and performed well, they would be returning home together when the half hour was up.

Tigre had become even more quiet, nerves obvious in the twitches in the big hands, the restless dreams, the lines around the heavy-lidded eyes.

It made Palin angry that their lives were being disrupted like this and all because some big man with large and easy fists was threatened by the thought that a little man with a stutter might be a better dominant than he.

They would do this performance and then Palin would file a complaint against Favila, so that the man would not invade their privacy again.

As the aircar approached Favila's establishment, Palin put his hand on Tigre's leg and looked into the warm brown eyes. "We will show them that I am your Eiba and then we will go home and I will make everything right between us again. You are strong and brave and mine. Remember that."

"Yes, Eiba." The muscles beneath his hand were stone, the skin pulled taut, but Tigre's eyes were liquid, gaze clinging quietly to his face, begging silently not to be left behind.

"You are mine, Tigre. A half hour and then I take you home again."

The aircar pulled up next to the curb and Palin handed over his money-card, waiting until it was returned to him before exiting the car.

"Follow close," he ordered as he put up his hood.

He could feel Tigre's heat at his back, unfailing and steady, body positioned to protect him from any rear attack. Palin felt a flush of pride -- even frightened, even confronted with a nightmare, Tigre's focus was firm.

Sahib Favila and the council would see that he truly had Tigre's obedience and then they could go home.

They were met at the door by someone from the council, his red robe making him easy to identify.

"Palin the Far Seeing?"

Palin nodded.

The man looked from him to Tigre, eyes darting nervously, looking for some sign of confinement, of control. "He is not bound?"

"There is no need."

"We were led to believe by Sahib Favila that he was dangerous."

"He is. But under my control."

The council man looked nervous, but he nodded and indicated that Palin should follow him as he led them through the building. They went in the opposite direction of the room where Palin had first seen Tigre, heading for a room from which they could be watched, he assumed.

At last they came to a room and the man opened the non-descript grey door for them. "You begin in five minutes. The light above the door will be green. When it goes red, your time is up."

Palin nodded and entered, Tigre right behind him.

The walls were see-through, not even one-way glass to give them the illusion of freedom, of privacy. Seated beyond the walls were the council, Favila and his chosen guests, no doubt men he did business with, invited to watch the show, and a whole cadre of vala.

There was a dais in the center of the room, chains hanging from the wall, the floor, and a wide variety of equipment scattered in small piles around the room.

He nodded toward the dais. "Kneel and await my pleasure."

"Yes, Eiba." Without hesitation, Tigre moved to the dais and knelt. The long braid shone in the bright lights and the dark eyes were lowered and hidden. Still and silent, he almost appeared as a statue, stone muscle draped in the fragile fabric of skin.

Palin removed his robe and hung it carefully on the hook on the back of the door. He wore leather today, in deference to the performance: pants so tight that it was going to take Tigre forever to get them off him and a vest that exposed his arms and a long vee of skin on his chest.

Tigre had polished the leather until it gleamed and Palin had given Tigre a loincloth in matching leather.

"Take off your covering," he ordered as he wandered slowly around the room, looking each member of their audience in the eye. Favila looked away from his regard.

Without a word, Tigre unfastened the cloth and set it aside. Someone in the crowd made an appreciative noise, wolf-whistling at the finely sculpted form, bare now barring his rings and chain and the dark tattoo coloring his face.

Palin allowed himself a small smile. Yes, his Tigre was a fine form. By the time they were done, not a man watching would be unaffected, for there was nothing more arousing than Tigre in full submission.

He knew they were expecting him to chain Tigre, to hold the big man in place, but he was going to show them that he didn't need restraints or shocks to control Tigre.

He picked up a cane, testing its strength against the wall, holding back his grin as Favila flinched hard. Tigre had not even twitched at the sound.

"Hands and knees," he said quietly, watching Favila's look of disbelief.

No hesitation, nothing but grace and Tigre's acknowledgement of his will. He could see the signs of stress, of unhappy tension painted over Tigre, but only because he had grown used to the peace that had blossomed in Tigre's soul once Tigre had come to understand what home truly was, what strength grew between them.

Tigre settled, heavy on his hands, braid falling forward to rest upon the floor.

"No sounds."

He knew it would impress the audience, that with only words he could make Tigre obey, make him stay in place, silent and still despite the cane, chosen because they would be able to clearly see that he was inflicting pain, but more than that, his order was a warning, letting Tigre know the blows were about to begin.

He let the cane land across the broad shoulders, several of the onlookers gasping at the sound.

No sound escaped, Tigre's muscles rippling beneath the blow, thin stripe going almost grey before filling dark with blood.

He walked around Tigre and laid the next stripe across the fine ass.

Tigre's only response was the curl of the bare toes, the clench and release of the strong thighs.

Palin allowed himself a small smile, ignoring the audience now, concentrating on just Tigre. He let the cane fly again and again, taking his time, letting the tension build between each hit.

He continued for about fifteen minutes until the backs of Tigre's thighs, his buttocks, his back and shoulders were all covered in wide welts, the first few already growing dark. It was a testament to both his own strength and Tigre's.

His lover's head was bent, breath coming quick, but steady. The marked skin was jumping, twitching, almost appearing to vibrate, but Tigre had not moved, not so much as gasped.

He ran his hand over the bent head, hoping his touch would convey the pride he could not risk voicing in this place. He let his hand slide down over the marks, stroking them lightly, making Tigre quiver harder, but still Tigre remained silent.

"Knees only." He moved to stand in front of Tigre, undoing the laces of his leather pants. He was hard despite the audience, Tigre's submission and obedience an aphrodisiac. He also knew Tigre would know the gesture for the praise that it was.

Tigre straightened stiffly, face glowing with a fine sheen of sweat, braid swaying beside the fine gold chain connecting nipple to cock. The dark eyes never explored the grey room or the people watching and waiting in the rooms beyond. Instead they were focused and still, waiting for his will, his word.

He let his cock part the leather and stepped closer. "Suck me."

Tigre's lips opened, tongue sliding out to guide his flesh into the hot, sweet mouth. Tigre was hungry, as always, for him, sucking firmly, lips and tongue pulling with a heady suction.

He groaned, he couldn't have stopped himself, Tigre was just too good at this, the hot, sucking mouth and agile tongue working to bring him pleasure.

He let his hands drop to Tigre's shoulders, fingers digging into the abused flesh.

Tigre's lips tightened, breath vibrating with the need to groan. Taking him deeper and then deeper still, Tigre swallowed him down, throat closing around the head of his cock, nose buried in his curls.

Letting his eyes close, he blocked out everything but the feeling of Tigre's mouth around him, the sensation of hot, swollen skin beneath his fingertips. Hips starting to move, he fucked Tigre's mouth.

Tigre burned for him -- skin and mouth and soul, pleasure and pain all wrapped together in strength and submission.

Hands tightening on Tigre's shoulders, he swallowed his cry as he came, pouring his pleasure down Tigre's throat.

Tigre took him in, lips sucking softly, searching out his pleasure. He opened his eyes; Tigre's were closed, face relaxed, his Tigre taking comfort and peace in the action of giving him pleasure.

He stroked the familiar face once, silently praising his Tigre.

Stepping back he put himself away and then prowled the room again, noting the disbelief, amazement and arousal in varying degrees on the faces that lined the room. They were clearly impressed. He only had one more thing to show them and, unless he'd timed it wrong, only a minute or two to do it in.

He strolled casually over to the door and took down his cloak, settling it over his shoulders.

His eyes met Tigre's and he gave Tigre a soft smile and a single order. "Come."

Tigre's eyes widened and the full, swollen lips moved, mouthing one silent word. "Eiba."

Without any touch more than his voice, his will, Tigre shuddered, body arching as seed pulsed. Pleasure and need were offered up without question, Tigre's obedience complete.

There was nothing so beautiful as his Tigre submitting completely to his will. He couldn't wait to get home and reward Tigre for this effort.

In the meantime it amused him to hear the gasps from their audience, more than one man following his command, and most of them not the vala present to watch.

The light above the door turned red and he ordered Tigre to put his loin cloth back on and attend him before turning to address the council's representatives.

"I trust that you are satisfied and we may go."

"No!" shouted Favila. "I demand a blood test -- you must have him drugged!"

"I feel sorry for you, Sahib Favila, but even more sorry for your vala if you believe violence and drugs are the only way to solicit obedience."

He turned again to the men in the red robes of the council. "Make whatever blood tests you want to satisfy yourselves. My vala obeys me unfettered by drugs or shocks or violence. He submits to my will. I could ask anything of him and he would do it without question or complaint, solely because I willed it. Have we not just proved this?"

A red-robed figure stood. "You have. We shall test his blood for drugs, but if there are none in his system, you are free to go, the challenge more than adequately proven."

Palin inclined his head to the council members and went to stand by Tigre's side, his hand on Tigre's shoulder. He knew Tigre needed the connection, needed to know he would not be abandoned.

The blood test took only minutes, one of Favila's men supervising the withdrawal of blood from Tigre's arm and watching closely as the tester ran the sample through the portable machine.

"Clean -- not even alcohol, stimulants or over-the-counter depressants."

Palin shot a look at the men in red.

"You may go."

"Thank you," he answered sharply, his tone softening slightly as he ordered Tigre to follow him.

"It will not last, vala. You end up here, eventually, or lower -- down in the darkness, where there is only death! You cannot stay strong forever and you will fall!" Favila's voice rang out, but Tigre's steps never faltered, his heart a steady, constant presence.

Palin turned to the man dressed in red beside him. "I wish to make a grievance. I do not trust Sahib Favila to leave my vala alone. I am a busy man and do not have the time to make these appearances on a regular basis."

The man nodded. "A mark will be put against him in his file. There will be no more challenges of any kind."

"Thank you."

Twice he had spoken those words now and twice it was not to the man who had earned them, Tigre, silent and obedient behind him. He ached to say them, ached to end the scene and offer comfort and pleasure, but he could not. Not here. It would be seen only as weakness and there was no place for weakness here.

He could feel the tension in the form behind him, the tremors shaking free from muscles that searched for the ability to rest. It was the cruelest part, in a way, that Tigre would suffer and not be allowed to float upon the endorphin release after, not be home and safe.

Soon. And then he would make it up to Tigre, let him have whatever he wanted, let him choose his own pleasures for the evening.

He resisted the urge to run, even when Favila's voice could be heard again, offering more threats and cuts. He did smile when the sharp tones of a council's representative silenced the man.

There was a car letting people out in front of the building and he dashed through the crowd to climb in, knowing Tigre would follow close.

Tigre was right behind him, his silent shadow. The big man settled carefully upon the seat without a whimper, hooded eyes fastened upon the floor.

He gave the driver his instructions and slid his hand into Tigre's, waiting until they got home to say thank you and give Tigre his reward. He wasn't sure that Tigre could keep it together if he finished it before they got home; he wasn't sure if he himself could.

Tigre just sat, not looking, not speaking, not doing anything, simply breathing and holding onto his fingers as if he were a lifeline.

The car ride seemed interminable, but at last they landed on the platform for his level and Palin paid the fare and then pulled Tigre out, not letting go of Tigre's hand.

Only moments later they were in the Room, the door to the outside world closed and locked behind them.

"Home, Eiba. Home." The words were almost sobs, shaky, but heartfelt.

"Yes, Tigre. Home. Thank you for your obedience and your trust. We should not have to do that again." He smiled and stroked one trembling cheek. "Thank you."

"Eiba." The trembling increased, Tigre nuzzling into his hand, tear-filled eyes closing.

"W-what w-w-will y-you h-have as y-y-your rew-w-ward?"

"A bath, Eiba, please. With you." The request was whispered, soft, Tigre's head resting against his hand.

"Oh, y-y-yes." Oh, Tigre always knew how to make him happy, even when choosing for himself.

He stroked Tigre's cheek once more and then took the big hand in his own and headed toward the bathroom. Tigre's fingers were warm, tremors stronger now that it was safe. It occurred to him suddenly that the last time -- the first time -- he had brought Tigre home from that place, he had washed Tigre. Of course, the similarities ended there -- now Tigre was confident, sure, *home*. Tigre's loyalty and obedience and affection were sure and steady, the threat of violence morphed into a fierce protection.

He turned the taps on to fill the tub and then took off Tigre's loin cloth, turning the big man so he could spray the welts that covered the broad back and firm buttocks with antibiotics and painkiller.

"S-so s-strong. B-brave."

"As you will it, Eiba." The strong back muscles relaxed, Tigre swaying slightly.

Running his hands along the unbruised sides, Palin sought to bring sensation to Tigre, softness and pleasure where before had been only harsh pain.

A low, sweet moan sounded, Tigre's head falling forward, thighs parting slightly. The stance was lovely, open and relaxed, his marks dark and right across Tigre's body.

Stepping around Tigre, he let his hands stroke over the muscled chest and down to the wide thighs. His fingers danced lightly over the Tigre's skin, fingertips playing with nipples and genitals.

The look upon Tigre's face was sheer, simple pleasure. Those heavy, melted chocolate eyes were still watery, but focused upon him, settled, the lines of sorrow fading. The heavy cock filled for his fingers, lifting from where it had rested near his thigh.

Palin tilted his head up, mouth opening for a kiss.

Tigre's mouth tasted of swallowed tears, hot and wet and just salty. Tigre gave him a soft, happy sound as their tongues touched, sliding together with more care and desire than passionate heat.

He didn't try to control the kiss or guide it, just let Tigre's mouth move on his as Tigre willed. At last he pulled away, breathless, cock once again pressing against his pants.

He chuckled ruefully. "Y-you m-might have to cut these off m-me."

Tigre sank to his knees, graceful in each measured movement. Strong hands unfastened the ties and began to slowly work the leather down, fingers almost rolling the material down his legs. Each inch of skin that was revealed was given a soft stroke, a gentle kiss.

"Oh..." He felt emotion roll through him, more overwhelmed by Tigre's gentle devotion than he'd ever been by any show of violence on his behalf; he knew Tigre would die for him, that was easy, but this gentle devotion was not and it meant so much.

Finally the pants were off, his ankles and feet kissed softly. Tigre was bent before him, cheek resting against the top of his foot, eyes closed.

The abused back was still, muscles calm, at peace, as was the familiar face. He had never seen anything so beautiful. "Tigre..."

"Yes, Eiba?"

"Y-you are m-mine."

"Yes, Eiba."

"And I am y-y-yours."

Tigre's eyelashes brushed across his skin as the dark eyes flew open. "Mine? My Eiba?"

"Y-y-yes. Yes." He repeated the word, not wanting Tigre to take his stammer as hesitation or uncertainty. He had been alone so long and he couldn't imagine that anyone but Tigre could fill those lonely spaces inside him. Surely he was Tigre's as much as Tigre was his, for light could only shine in darkness, sound was only heard in silence.

Lips pressed soft and warm against the top of his foot, followed by the splash of hot tears.

Palin dropped down, sitting to stroke over Tigre's hair. "Sh. It's ok-kay."

Tigre made a soft noise, head pressing up into his touch.

Leaning over, he turned off the water in the bathtub before it overran the edge and then tugged Tigre, trying to pull the big man into his lap.

Tigre moved close, face buried against his skin. The tears were slowing, sounds of pleasure now mixing with the silent sobs. Bending over Tigre, he continued to pet, one hand moving through the long hair, the other over warm skin.

Tigre finally relaxed for him, muscles loosening under his care, tension dissolving along with his tears.

"Bathe w-with m-m-me, Tigre. P-please?"

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre stood, moving slowly as the skin on his back pulled and stretched, and held his hand out to help Palin up.

He stood and let the momentum press him into Tigre's body. Tigre was so warm, skin like silk covering the hard muscles. He could understand why Tigre made people nervous. He was big enough to kill with his bare hands, but Palin had never feared him; Tigre had been made for him, he could feel it.

Tigre's arm wrapped around him, steadying him. "Eiba? Is the Eiba well? Is...is *my* Eiba well?" The last was whispered, so soft and careful.

"Oh, y-yes, Tigre. J-just w-wanting to touch y-y-you." He beamed up at Tigre; he liked belonging to someone as much as he liked having someone belong to him.

They moved into the hot water, Tigre hissing as the heat surrounded his marked flesh.

Palin stroked Tigre's shoulders and chest as he sank against the solid body. "Y-you w-w-were so good, Tigre. B-brave and ob-bedient. M-m-made m-me p-proud and happy."

"For you, Eiba. Your will." There was no hesitation in the hoarse voice, no doubt in those liquid chocolate eyes.

Perhaps the performance hadn't been all bad after all, it seemed that something good had come out of it, alongside the bad.

As he pressed close and relaxed against Tigre, he hoped that the bad would not come back to haunt them.

Chapter Twenty Five

It had been a week since the performance at Favila's flesh emporium. A week since he'd proved to the Council and Favila and everyone Favila had called in to watch that Tigre was his, that he had the right and the ability to be Eiba to Tigre.

Tigre had been on edge ever since. Nothing big or terrible, but Tigre was sleeping badly, flinching at unexpected noises and scratching unconsciously at his palms. It was time to prove to Tigre, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Tigre was still home, still Palin's.

And that Palin himself was still the man's Eiba.

He put plastic down on his bed and laid a soft sheet overtop of that. He took out the large pot of lubrication and set it on the side of the bed along with the brush, a towel and a large squeezable bottle of water.

He spent an hour centering himself, thinking about Tigre and their time together, the life they'd built together.

He was ready.

He knocked and opened Tigre's door.

Tigre jumped, eyes wild for just a moment before they warmed, softened. "Eiba."

The long hair was braided, trailing over his shoulder, Tigre's fingers playing restlessly with the clasp.

"Come. It's time to bring you home."

A worried look crossed Tigre's face, but he stood, walking over to Palin immediately. "Home, Eiba? Take this vala home?"

"Tigre," he corrected automatically.

To his surprise, Tigre knelt, the big eyes filling with tears. "Please, Eiba. Please. Eiba is Tigre's home. Please do not send this vala away. This vala is sorry. Please."

"Tigre..."

He sank to his own knees and took Tigre's face in his hands. "I s-said bring y-you home, Tigre. I am n-not s-sending y-y-you away."

He placed soft kisses over Tigre's face. "I w-want t-to p-prove it. M-m-make y-you believe it."

"Oh." He could feel the tension beginning to ease, Tigre pressing into the kisses. "Eiba is Home."

"Y-yes. H-home." He continued the soft kisses until Tigre was relaxed and then brought their mouths together, filling himself with the taste of Tigre and letting Tigre feast on him.

Tigre's lips were hungry, tongue sliding deep. The kiss continued until he heard and felt the soft, vibrations of the moans, Tigre's pleasure given voice.

He ended the kiss with a soft touch of their lips together and then stood and held out his hand.

"Come. It's time to bring you home."

Tigre's huge hand slid into his. "Yes, Eiba. Home."

Tigre stood, watching him intently.

He smiled and led Tigre into his own room. "I'll redo your hair first," he said quietly, pointing to the spot on the floor where Tigre knelt whenever they did this.

Tigre nodded and offered him a soft, gentle smile before settling easily on the floor.

He let his hand trail over Tigre's shoulder as he moved to sit on the bed behind him. He placed another kiss on the top of Tigre's head and began to undo the messy braid. Brushing was next, and he used long, even strokes, letting his breathing match the strokes of the brush.

Tigre fell into his rhythm easily, the familiar setting and scenario sending Tigre into a light meditation, a space where the only thing Tigre need do was listen to his voice.

He bound Tigre's hair back into a loose braid and let the end drop over in front of Tigre's shoulders.

"On the bed now. On your back. Get comfortable."

"Yes, Eiba." Tigre stood and settled down on the bed. The tan skin and inked face looked so dark against the beige sheets, the gold chain glinted in the low lights as it rested upon the rippled belly.

He let his hands slide over the smooth skin, fingers loving the touch of it, like heated, shaped silk. "You are mine, Tigre. And today I am going to show you that so you will always know it."

"Yours, Eiba." Tigre moved for him, muscles shifting and bunching easily beneath his hands.

"Yes. Mine." He pressed a kiss on Tigre's chest, just above the heart, his hand sliding down to circle Tigre's cock and stroke.

Tigre sighed, arching up into his touch, eyes closing. Tigre moved beneath his hand, so responsive, so eager.

He spent some time giving Tigre the gift of his touch, knowing Tigre would cherish each stroke, each soft kiss. They were matched, he and Tigre, both starved for the feeling of another against their skin.

Languid and undulating, Tigre melted against the sheets, almost purring. The dark eyes watched him, warm and caring, the silent weight of them almost physical as they trailed over his face, his body.

He pressed a last, soft kiss to the tip of Tigre's cock, collecting the drops of pre-come with his tongue.

He slid his hands along Tigre's thighs, massaging the thick muscles. "Open for me, Tigre."

The heavy thighs opened easily, eagerly. The heavy balls and sweetly curved ass were offered to his gaze, his touch, without hesitation.

He moved to kneel between Tigre's legs and smiled at Tigre. "All mine," he whispered, bending to kiss the tip of Tigre's cock again, and then the base, then Tigre's balls and, lastly, the soft-skinned pucker.

"Y-yours, Eiba." Tigre's voice was rough, raspy, body shifting just slightly beneath his lips.

He pressed another kiss to Tigre's opening, letting his tongue circle the wrinkled flesh and just barely press inside, curious at the taste. It was Tigre, stronger than his come, stronger than the sharp, salty taste of sweat. He slid his tongue in further.

Tigre gave a short, sharp cry, almost a gasp, and the muscles tightened around his tongue, squeezing. He could feel the muscles in the strong legs clench, drawing Tigre's knees up, hips unconsciously tilting into his touch.

He hummed happily and continued to press into the tight passage, fucking Tigre with his tongue.

The effect on Tigre was lovely -- a gentle rain of moans and soft cries poured over him, Tigre trembling, focused only on the sensations he offered.

He kept up the intimate caresses until his jaw grew tired.

He placed another kiss on Tigre's balls and on the tip of Tigre's cock, rubbing his index finger against the loose opening.

Tigre's face was a study in pleasure, relaxed and easy. His breath came quick, full lips open as he panted. "Eiba. Thank you, Eiba."

"You're welcome, Tigre. Though we've only just started." He smiled as he let his fingers slide into Tigre, body accepting the single digit easily. Hot and tight, so soft, Tigre's body gripped him. Easy and relaxed, Tigre waited, watched, focused on his face, his need, his desire.

He coated his fingers with the lubricant and pressed two inside. Tigre was tight around his fingers, but it was still easy. He slid a third finger in, twisting and curling them to press against Tigre's prostate.

"Eiba!" It was fascinating, the way the muscles rippled, rolling and jumping with each tiny move of his fingers. Tigre's hands floated above the bed as if unsure where they belonged.

"Hold your legs, spread yourself wider for me."

He pressed a kiss to each knee and pulled his fingers out, going back for more lubrication. He made sure his hand was well coated.

Tigre reached for his knees, catching them and pulling them up and out. The pose was erotic, wanton, and so giving, Tigre offering all of himself to Palin without hesitation.

"So lovely. So strong." He stroked Tigre's belly as he explained what he was about to do. "I'm going to put my whole hand inside you, Tigre. Own you inside and out."

Tigre's muscles clenched beneath his hand as Tigre stilled. The dark eyes watched his face, nervousness warring with trust. A long second passed and then Tigre whispered, "Yes, Eiba."

He smiled gently. He loved this man, this vala named Tigre who was now his, who gave him everything and then found more to give. He could offer no less than the same in return.

"It will be good, Tigre, I promise. And once I have held your heartbeat in my hand, you will know, deep, deep inside you, that you will always be mine, always take your home in me."

That earned him another of those sweet, soft smiles, so rare, so honest, belonging only to him and offered freely. "Yes, Eiba. Home."

He slid his hand along the muscled belly, stroking softly. "Relax, my Tigre."

The slicked hand he rested at Tigre's entrance, teasing with the tip of his middle finger. The wrinkled opening clenched, flexed, muscles responding to his touch. The strong muscles beneath his other hand softened, tension melting away, Tigre's trust in him stronger than fear.

He kept his eyes locked with Tigre's as he wrapped his fingers around his thumb and pushed slowly in.

Tight and so hot, Tigre's body accepted him easily until he reached the knuckles, then Tigre flushed, breath coming heavy, body tensing. "Eiba..."

He stroked the tight stomach muscles gently, fingertips dancing over skin. "You can do this, Tigre. My brave, amazing Tigre, there is nothing I would ask that you cannot do. Let me in, let me hold your heartbeat."

A single tear escaped the dark eyes fastened to his face. "Yes, Eiba. Yes." Then with a deep breath and a low groan, Tigre's body relaxed and took him in.

It happened so suddenly, he almost fell against Tigre, his body swallowing up Palin's hand, almost pulling him in. One moment it was pushing against Tigre's resistance, the next his hand was buried inside Tigre to the wrist.

He looked down, amazed and moved beyond anything they'd ever done to see Tigre's opening closed tight around his wrist.

"Oh, Tigre..." He slid the fingers of his free hand along the stretched skin, needed to feel as well as see to believe.

"Yours, Eiba." The words were whispered, gasped. Tigre's muscles were fluttering against him, gripping him so tightly.

"Mine."

He looked back up at Tigre, his own eyes wet. His breathing was coming quickly as if it were he who was being penetrated. He slowly closed his hand into a fist.

Tigre rolled up, shoulders and head curling towards his knees as he gasped, tears streaking the marked face. The tension around Palin's hand grew for a moment and then eased, Tigre falling back towards the bed.

Wrapping his free hand around Tigre's cock, he began to stroke slowly, moving his buried fist with the same slow-motion movements.

He could feel the pulse of Tigre's heart around his fist, through the throbbing shaft in his hand. His vala -- his Tigre, *his*, completely and totally -- sang for him, unconscious little moans and cries and whimpers of need that were pressed out by his touch.

His own heartbeat matched Tigre's, thumping in time, forging them together.

Bending, he wrapped his lips around the tip of Tigre's cock, mouthing soft words against the hot, hard flesh. "I love you, Tigre."

The pulses of bitter-sweet liquid on his tongue were accompanied by a quiet, needy moan shaped in the sound of "Eiba." Tigre's body throbbed around him, holding him tight.

He swallowed Tigre's come, taking it into himself before placing a soft kiss on Tigre's cock.

He looked up into Tigre's eyes. "You are home."

Tigre nodded, gasping. "Ei... Eiba is home. Tigre's home."

"Yes."

He stroked Tigre's belly again, waiting until the flesh holding him so tightly relaxed. With reluctance he pulled his hand out, letting Tigre's muscles push him away.

Tigre groaned, eyes falling closed, soft shudders rocking his body.

He cleaned his hand and Tigre's skin with the towel and then gently pulled Tigre's legs back down.

Tigre blinked at him, eyes glazed and so honest. "Eiba. Home."

"Yes. You believe it now." He stretched out on top of Tigre, fingers tracing the indigo tattoo.

The latent tension that had been crawling beneath Tigre's skin had disappeared, focus and stillness settled back into Tigre's bones. The slow tears that leaked from Tigre's eyes were not sad, simply the only response to utter relief Tigre knew.

Huge hands, trembling and gentle, came up to touch his face, the strokes tentative but full of love and caring. "Eiba."

He smiled down at Tigre, feeling loved and relaxed and right, as if he were the one who had gone through the intense experience. His lips brushed against Tigre's, passion muted in favor of simple touching, sharing breath between them.

His eyes met Tigre's, the brown irises holding tiny flecks of green, almost hidden, like buried jewels. For a moment those eyes seemed to grow, to hold him tight, Tigre's faith and trust and love wrapping around him in a breathless embrace.

Now they were both home.

End.