

OBEDIENCE TRAINING

Mya

LooseId®

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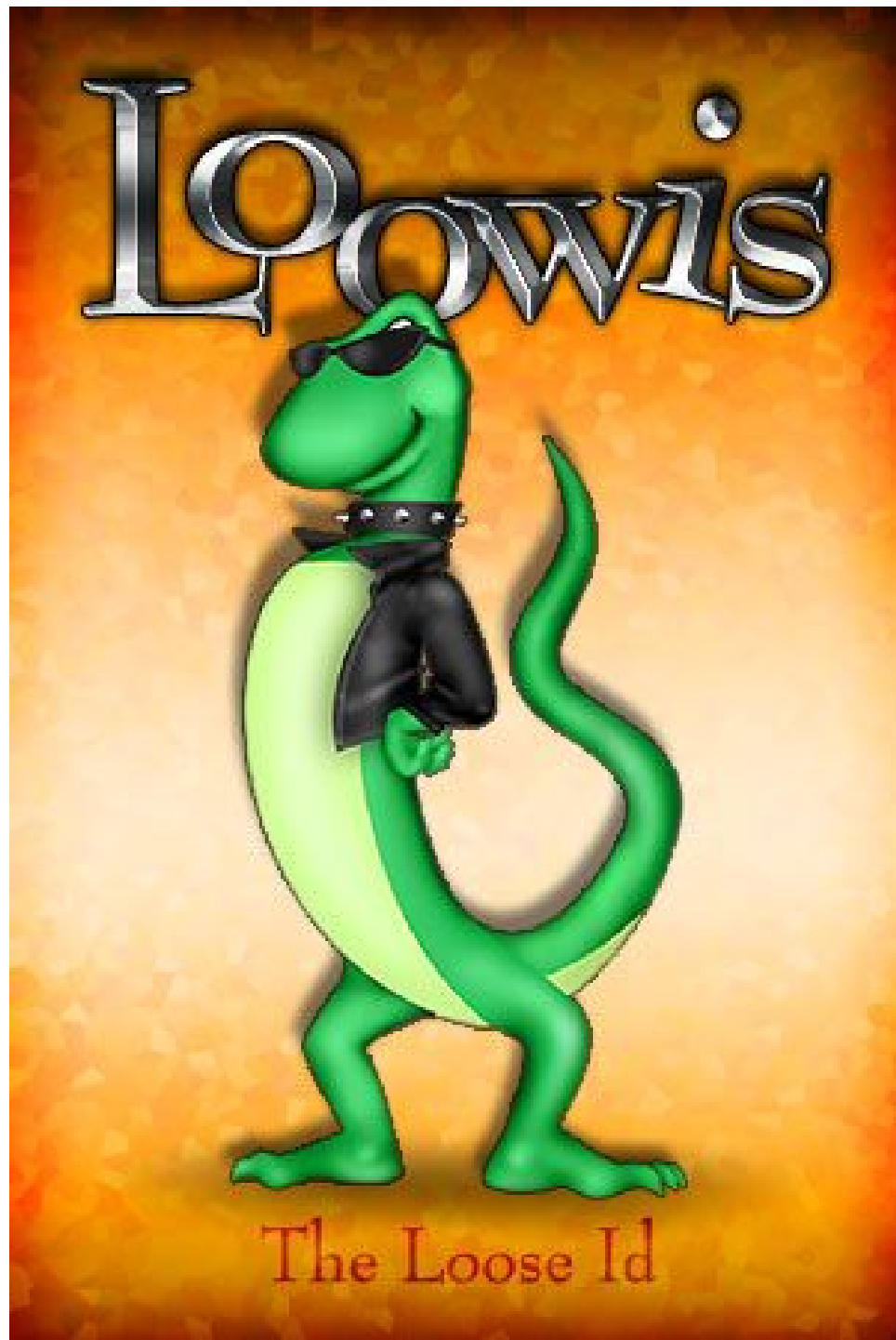
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Prologue

In the front yard of a shabby rambler on land worth several times the amount of the house, four siblings enjoyed the warm summer sun. Two teenaged girls sat on the porch. The elder girl was buxom, tall, and muscular, even in a sundress. Though her dark auburn hair was her most feminine feature, she might have appeared more feminine without her permanent brooding. The second girl was lighter in build, her hair light brown streaked with blond. She seemed more cheerful than her elder sibling, but no less dangerous.

They were not the sort of girls that randy young men sought to charm or woo. They were strong, edgy, and wicked. Their hazel eyes shimmered like those of predators.

The green-gold eye color was a trait that they shared with the two younger teens wrestling in the grass at the base of the porch. The fifteen-year-old girl had her younger brother pinned against the ground, her forearm at his throat. Using her large build to keep flailing limbs down, the chubby teen laughed. "You're no match for me, pup. Why don't you quit squirming and give up?"

Struggling wildly, the young boy refused to give in to his sister's brawn. Red in the face, he snarled and hissed in spite of his lack of oxygen. "Get off of me, you bitch!"

"Damn right." Accepting the name with pride, the husky girl pressed her arm tighter against her brother's windpipe. Releasing her brother's wrist, she landed a vicious blow against the boy's rib cage. The boy gasped with the shock of the blow. "That's *beta* bitch to you, squirt!"

Looking up from a bag of beef jerky, the eldest sister, Jada McAllister, heard her brother's sputtering gasps. She didn't seem worried, but was irritated at the sight. "Pummel him, but don't snap his neck, Skye. He might not heal from that."

Skye considered her sister's words before releasing the pressure. "Fine, fine ..."

Ian McAllister used the opportunity to twist and scramble away. Panting like a bellows, he grasped his bruised throat. He felt the healing began instantly, and that was a good thing as his opponent rose from her knees.

Brushing the grass off of her shorts, Skye had a dark, mocking sneer that fueled Ian's rage all the more. Her beckoning hand gesture was just the icing on the cake.

"I'm going to kill you," Ian sneered, his voice giving no hint to the damage it had just received. Hands balled into fists, the thin, lanky boy unfurled sharp claws rather than human digits as he advanced towards his sister.

Skye met her brother with a set of her own claws. Scratching, tearing at each other with ferocity more reminiscent of wild beasts than siblings, it didn't take long for the battle to return to the grass. While Ian was faster and landed more blows, Skye simply ignored the pain. Confronting Ian with brute force, Skye barreled into her brother and knocked him over.

The ground was her territory.

Jen reached over into Jada's bag and pulled out a strip of jerky. "I've gotta give him an A for effort, an A for heart, too ..." she commented plainly. "It's really kind of inspiring. I could write a book, *The Little Omega That Could*."

Although it seemed to pain her serious demeanor, Jada laughed. She couldn't help it as she watched Ian sink his canines into Skye's forearm. "You *would* do something like that, Jen. First, you spur them on, and now you want to write a book ..." Jada shook her head before considering the mess before her. "Skye, quit it. Mom will be home soon."

Skye was too busy trying to keep her brother in a headlock to worry about the future. "Not till I teach this fur ball with balls about his place. At the bottom of the pack."

Fighting harder at the hurtful, yet true statement, Ian elbowed his sister in the stomach two, then three times. It caused her grip to lessen some. "I'm going to tell. I'm going to tell Mom on you," he spat.

"You would. It's just the sort of thing omegas do. They tuck tail and crawl under an alpha the first chance they get. Go ahead. I'll just beat you up even more next time!"

Ian knew that it was true, tears forming at the corners of his eyes. Of all the rotten luck, he was the youngest of the McAllisters and the smallest. It wasn't as if he didn't try to put on weight. It was difficult when his sisters were bigger, got to eat first, outranked him, and were far more aggressive than he was. While he knew not to expect special treatment just because he was a male, Ian had seen how human males seemed to be born with an advantage.

His human friends had fathers, stepfathers, or common-law paternal figures -- they had strong males in their lives. Instead, he had Jada, Jen, and Skye, three females who might as well have had balls and baseball caps. His mother often told him that she had not borne an omega; she had three betas and a gamma. It didn't

help that she also called him "her precious boy," spoiled him with treats, outfits, and set food aside for him.

His older sisters knew all about her special treatment, and with the exception of Jada, who carried a vendetta against the world rather than just him, Jen and Skye tended to make him pay for their mother's attention.

Ian dreamed of the day when he would be strong enough to hold his shoulders back and his head high in front of sisters. He looked forward to getting respect from them. Most of all, he looked forward to beating Skye to a pulp.

As she used her weight to flatten him against the grass, Ian vowed to have his revenge. "You won't always be bigger than me, you ... you, pussy!"

"What did you call me?" Skye's demeanor went from bad to worse at the insult. Grinding her sharp teeth, she fortified the arm hold and choked him far tighter than before.

Ian gave up. He didn't want to, but he was just so tired, so sore. Everything in his field of vision was a shade of emerald, and it was beautiful. There was no noise but the humming in his head, no scent but the mint of wild earth. He felt nothing.

Then in a rush as abrupt as it was unexpected, all of it was gone. The surreal state of a green universe was yanked away to reveal a reality of yellow dandelions, blue sky, and brown wood. Pain returned to in his head, throat, and back, making him feel nauseous and disoriented. His hearing came back as well.

Ian heard his sister crying beside him. Worst of all, he could hear Jada's threatening roar. "Skye! What did I tell you about those fucking choke holds?"

Chapter One

Ian McAllister found that any expression of his wolf nature was difficult. There were times when he felt wild and out of control. Sometimes all it took was the right breeze across his cheek, and his blood would rise.

Most of the time, Ian kept his impulses in check. While he knew a few werewolves, none of them had that special glimmer in the eye; none had the wildness that he sought. The alphas he encountered only cared for their packs and would only engage if threatened. The betas tended to be even calmer than the alphas where sport or play were concerned.

If he challenged the alpha, it would be the beta who guarded the cubs, females, and elders of the pack. If Ian challenged the beta, he often ended up with more problems on his plate than solutions. The alpha would not stand to let his beta fight alone, and Ian had found himself the focus of a group attack on more than one occasion. He often vowed to keep his hormones in check, to keep his desire for battle and blood repressed, but like a cork in water, it would only resurface stronger than before.

Good sparring partners were few and far between. Omegas were nearly as bad as humans -- neither worth the effort of provocation -- and the lone werewolves who he encountered tended to have dilemmas worse than wildness and the inability to conform to pack law.

One in particular, whom he called the Lunatic, was convinced that he had been "cursed" at birth, refusing to acknowledge the history of his species. His ritual consisted of the savage mauling of some animal during the full moon and then back to the church to pray for forgiveness and salvation.

Ian had engaged the Lunatic once, and while the fight had been a worthwhile siphoning of energy, Ian had no tolerance for the Lunatic's insane quips. "You're an abomination, brother! You need to pray for freedom from this curse."

The only thing Ian needed was sport.

Standing six foot six, Ian weighed just over two hundred and fifty pounds, slightly above average for a werewolf. His was the body of a wrestler who swam on the weekends, long and lean, but with broad shoulders, muscular arms, powerful thighs, and calves. He kept his light brown hair short, giving his features a tougher edge. Attractive, however, was the only compliment he would tolerate. In his book, handsome or beautiful were adjectives to describe gammas, the baby-sitters and the nurturing members of a pack.

Ian had no intention of being in a pack. Even if he wanted to join one, there was something within him that rebelled against being one of many. He needed one-on-one attention and sought it, even in confrontations. He didn't know what drove him to his bad reputation, but those who knew him kept their distance, and those who didn't learned quickly *to* keep their distance.

* * * * *

Throughout the week, he worked in construction, landscaping, and other blue-collar chores, competing daily with immigrant workers and welfare fathers for the day-labor slots. Sometimes he worked, sometimes he didn't. Being single meant Ian always had change in his pocket for a room, a few burgers, and a case of beer.

Every once in a while he would find a good lay, a biker who thought he liked it rough, or an insatiable housewife who did like it rough. An equal opportunity male was what Ian considered himself.

It was a cold winter's day, and the snow was packed high against the evergreens. It had been months since he felt the urge to roam the forest, to hunt rather than visit the local butcher for leg of lamb. He hungered for more than just roast by the measured pound, something with a gamey taste.

Shedding his clothes in his rented room, Ian stripped down and knelt in the center of the carpet. It was a good deal more erotic to transform on all fours rather than standing, so he was in no rush. Bones stretched and contorted, muscles twitched, and his fur grew in, soft and ticklish to his skin. He had long gotten used to the pain and had learned to cherish the sweet pangs of lengthening tooth and claw and tail.

He completed his transformation and stood as a wolf, a very large wolf. Half aroused, fueled by adrenaline, Ian padded to the window and nudged the curtains open with his dark nose.

Snow made the overcast sky glitter as it fell, and Ian was anxious to get out into the cold. With the scent of venison faint in the air, the brown wolf sprang over the sill and into eight inches of West Virginia snowfall.

* * * * *

The pursuit of the stag was beyond exhilaration, and the capture was sheer pride. Taking down the large male with teeth and claws was better than any stress ball or

drunken bender. It wasn't as good as hand-to-hand combat, but Ian wasn't complaining as he ate his fill of blood and flesh.

Far away from civilization and surrounded by nature, not even the smell of blood could cloud his senses. There were wolves nearby, two of them. They weren't close, but their scents were strong, which meant they were in the vicinity. They were no threat to him or his meal, but curiosity was always a motivation for Ian. He knew all of the werewolves in town, from Ira, the whitewater rafting guide, to Melinda, the owner of the town's deli. Whoever these two were, they were strange males, and that caught Ian's interest.

Leaving the half-eaten carcass for scavengers, Ian cleaned his muzzle in the snow and sought them out. Along the way, he marked several trees for effect.

The cabin looked warm and alive with smoke twirling from its chimney. A big male, much bigger than Ian, was outside splitting branches with claw and fist. Ian's heart sped up at the powerful display of strength. His body shuddered from nose to tail with excitement, and he didn't pause to think before he sprung from the snow mound and pounced. He landed on the giant's back, claws extended, striking powerful muscles, but gaining little purchase. Ian's canines sank deep into the stranger's neck muscle, drawing hot, succulent blood. Before he had the opportunity to enjoy his first draught, the big brute found Ian's ankle and yanked hard. Ian landed hard in the snow, but he landed on all fours.

The red giant had mere moments to pull off his jacket, rip up his shirt, and transform. Ian growled, but did not advance. His curiosity extended to what shape the werewolf would take. Instead of taking full wolf form, a man-wolf stood before him with massive teeth bared and barrel chest covered in fur, over-sized arms, and bent, canine legs, both ending in sharp claws.

Ian's adrenaline spiked immediately at the sight. He expected a fight and a very good one, at that.

The roar that sounded made all of Ian's seem like whispers. Automatically, Ian moved backwards. His heart racing, his muscles taut, he was curious as to how the first blow would feel. Strategies flew through his brain, plans of attack, yet he waited. The big red wolf took two steps toward him, salivating and anxious. He faked a forward motion, nearly fooling Ian. He didn't do it again. Lunging at Ian with a quickness that was definitely supernatural, he missed by mere inches.

Ian sprang to the right and fastened his maw around the big wolf's hind leg. His teeth never even struck bone. With the big wolf's head bashing into Ian's flank, he couldn't maintain a hold and ended up thrown back into the snow.

Red was on him before Ian could right himself, pinning him down with a strength that was more than Ian could challenge. He bore his teeth into Ian's collarbone; his knees sought to hold Ian's waist. Yet, agile in his wolf form, Ian twisted and landed a heavy paw across the chest of the big wolf.

The red wolf hit the ground with a shower of snow, giving Ian the opportunity to scramble away. Every part of him that had met with the beast ached, but Ian stood his

ground. One, perhaps two more engagements, and he would flee to savor his wounds. He would mark Red as one damn good opponent and savor the memory, he thought. Not a victory or even a draw, but a damn good opponent.

Ian wasn't about to delude himself with plans of grandeur or victory. Still, he could try, and he could enjoy the battle. It was worth it.

Red moved towards Ian, ready for round two. Both of them had a hard-on, both were panting like bellows, and both were ready for another pass.

Then the whip cracked, drawing their attention away from one another to the cabin.

A slender, handsome werewolf with midnight black hair, calm features, and skin like pearls stood by the cabin. In his hand was a bullwhip, long and black, like a serpent in the snow. He lifted the whip again, raising it high to his right with a limp wrist, before letting it fly with a quick snap.

It landed across Red's back, and a roar echoed from the beast.

Stepping back, Ian watched as the dark-haired man answered the roar with another snap of the whip. The second blow struck across Red's muzzle. As if remembering his place, the big were lowered himself, belly to the ground. He bowed his head, and outside of a sidelong glance at Ian, he submitted silently.

The dark one was like a lion tamer. He demanded submission without so much as a sign of nervousness. Completely calm and unafraid, he advanced.

Ian couldn't move. Not only would his limbs not allow him to run away, but his curiosity held him in place.

The black-haired were turned his attention to Ian, his eyes like cool steel. "Well, hello there, cur," he said. "Aren't you just the wildest thing?"

Chapter Two

"Come inside out of the cold. If there is a problem you think you have with me and mine, I am sure that it can be settled better by the fire."

Ian's paws were rooted in the snow. He was much too intrigued by the utter display of command, too curious about the ability of a man barely five foot eight to control a werewolf in full bloodlust.

Calmly, the dark-haired male wrapped the whip around his elbow and returned inside the cabin. Red followed behind, leaving the door ajar. It was a gesture of welcome if Ian had ever seen one.

Inside Ian sensed warmth. He could hear the crackling of a fire and smell the fragrant aroma of well-seasoned meat in the oven. It seemed warm and cozy, like a secret that he needed to reveal. He had to go inside, if for nothing more than to satisfy his own curiosity about the pair. Making the transformation from man-wolf to man, Ian crossed the threshold on two human legs. His gaze went immediately to his hosts, suspecting anything but casualness.

Red was much too involved in removing his master's winter coat than in the man he had been prepared to attack moments before. Big, furry claws that had drawn blood from Ian were now gentle where Dark-Hair was concerned.

Ian scoffed, eyes roving around to observe the quaintness of the cabin. It had a high, vaulted ceiling rather than being a two-story structure as it had appeared from outside. The kitchen, dining area, and living room were one expansive area; the floors were polished hardwood. A stone fireplace on the far wall of the living room seemed to be the focal point, with a wide-screen television to its right.

Beige, maroon, and dark green seemed to be their favorite colors, and there were several statues and paintings with a Middle Eastern flair. A hookah of green and gold with at least four hoses wrapped around it sat in one corner while a rather creamy oil

portrait of sand dunes at dusk hung on a nearby wall. Their choice in decorations didn't seem to suit them, but Ian didn't want to be presumptuous.

Ian noted the enormous beige-and-green dog bed located off to the right of the fireplace, and his mouth opened more out of awe than confusion. It was obvious which one would usually lie there, who enjoyed the enormous bone lying upon it ... just ready to be gnawed upon. He just couldn't picture Dark-Hair doing anything so domestic.

"What is your name, cur?"

Turning his attention back to the black-haired were, Ian saw what he had thought of as bulk had mainly been the padding of his winter jacket. Actually quite slender, the man was easily dwarfed by his auburn counterpart. Blinking his eyes in annoyance, Ian found the term derogatory. "Cur?"

"Your name, what is it?" Without a care to Ian's question or offense, the werewolf left the side of the giant and moved towards the kitchen counter.

Trying to seem as calm as his host, Ian cleared his throat. "My name is Ian. And yours?"

The scuffle between Red and Ian had interrupted the dicing of cucumbers, and Dark-Hair returned to it as if it were a labor-intensive craft. "You can call me Gray," he said before gesturing to the red were. "His name is Douglas. Speaking of which, Doug, you need to put on some clothes and get back outside. The firewood isn't going to cut itself."

Douglas didn't look like a Douglas in Ian's opinion. With his bulging muscles and impressive height, he looked like his name should have been something of either Viking origin or a nickname, like Killer, Hellspawn, or Odin. Anything but Douglas.

Staring at Ian with furious blue eyes, lips curled over jagged teeth stained with Ian's blood, Douglas moved, padding away down the hall that must have led to the bedroom. Ian resisted the urge to clap. It was a nice trick, something almost like telling a mutt to fetch.

Above the din of a knife rapidly striking a cutting board came Gray's voice, this time directed at Ian. "As much as I enjoy viewing your chiseled bulk, I'd prefer if you covered up, too."

A prudish werewolf was something Ian had never encountered, but then, it was Gray's house, his den. That and the knife he wielded influenced Ian greatly. "Would you happen to have a smoking jacket or a sweater, maybe a suit and tie?" Grinning, Ian found Gray's modesty humorous.

Gray wasn't amused. "I have some blankets in the chest by the couch."

The couch was a work of fucking art, large enough for Douglas to stretch out full-length and definitely wide enough for him to lounge upon. Located directly in front of the fireplace but at an angle for them to see the television, it could have easily doubled for a bed.

The cedar chest that Gray mentioned was on the side of the couch. Inside were several blankets and a quilt, but none of them caught Ian's attention like the black

leather collar rimmed with spikes located between the folds of one of the blankets. *The kinky fuckers*. Ian smiled to himself.

The collar had a D-ring in the center and was made to fit both the beast he had just scraped with and Douglas's human manifestation as well. Ian's imagination ran wild as he fingered the soft leather for a moment. The pieces of the puzzle quickly came together, Gray's orders and Douglas's servant-like behavior. Their demeanors were very much like a human with a pet dog. While he had heard that some werewolves had dog fetishes -- domestication fantasies -- to see the evidence so blatantly sparked his curiosity.

"Did you find a blanket?"

Half of a second away from bringing the collar to his nose for a sniff, Ian remembered his original purpose and let the ornament go. Choosing a soft, dark flannel, he wrapped its girth around his body and closed the chest.

Douglas came out dressed and in human form, looking just like a Viking with his red stubble. He took one look at Ian in his blanket, then began a low, threatening growl.

"You. Outside," Gray commanded. "Now."

Hesitant, Douglas had only to gaze at his master, and Gray had only to lift his head from the complex task of coring tomatoes for the command to be conveyed.

"Now!"

The growling stopped, and Douglas went like an obedient pup out of the cabin and into the snow.

Ian couldn't help noting with a smile, "That's a cute little thing. The way you tell him to do something, and he just does it. He obeys you so well."

Gray gave a short laugh. "If he didn't, make no mistake about it, you'd be dead." Turning his skill with a knife to a cluster of carrots, Gray had a sense of humor that was as dark as his hair.

Maybe, Ian thought. *Maybe I might have escaped or landed a lucky blow*. Going to the counter where Gray's heap of vegetables lay, Ian opened a plastic container of cherry tomatoes. Popping three of them into his mouth, Ian displayed his doubt. It was a bold move, overall. "Right. Sure."

"I love arrogance. I really do."

And Ian loved the way that Gray looked. Gray's long, black locks called to Ian's fingers with promises of softness. He might have dared to touch them if he wasn't wholly certain that his next encounter with Douglas wouldn't prove fatal because of it.

"So, you were looking for a fight? Something to burn off the wildness?" Gray's question was purely rhetorical. "You should find a mate and breed some cubs. That should help. I know of a few packs with wild, gamma females. Perhaps you'd like a referral?"

"What?" Ian balked at the insinuation. While he liked a female every once in a while, his preference was for males. Not that it should have been Gray's concern. "No, thank you. I'm not really in the market for settling down. Just hunting at the moment."

"So, it's only males for you, then." Nodding as if he had expected as much, Gray continued, "There are two packs that I know of who cater to brute behavior, war games, and sodomy --"

"What the fuck are you, some sort of agent? I didn't come here to get set up on a date by a --"

Gray's head snapped up, and he looked harshly at Ian. "You came here hoping to satisfy your baser instincts, to taste an opponent's blood, and to set your adrenaline ablaze. I don't think that winning or losing mattered as much to you as savoring the experience, but *that* is why you came." Gray snatched the tomato container out of Ian's hand and dumped it into a large colander of sliced vegetables. "You came for scars that would take a bit longer to heal, and maybe sex, and you came because there's really no one else within miles who will sate that need."

His words struck Ian hard, not just because they were true, but also because the observation came from a stranger. "You think you're really smart, don't you?" Ian asked with a minimum of contempt. "Whatever ... you lick your balls just like all the rest of us *curs* ... and while the thing with the whip was interesting, I'd be willing to bet a stiff cock would suit you just fine."

Gray put down the knife. He considered Ian from the chest up. "And maybe you think that yours is stiff enough?"

"I'm nothing like that freakish bull-wolf outside, but maybe you don't want a baseball bat." Grinning, Ian stepped around the corner and adjusted the blanket. He let it slide off his shoulders and slip open just enough for Gray to get a full examination. Silver eyes took their time caressing muscles and lengths, contours and lines, warming Ian in the process. He was still at half-mast from the fight. With Gray's eyes lingering around his cock, Ian swelled further. "Maybe you just want a nice Coke can instead?"

"Maybe, but I prefer baseball bats."

Pretending to take no offense, Ian quickly folded the blanket back around himself. *Just my luck to run into a size whore.* "Figures. That's probably how you've managed to train Fido outside. You probably promise to give him a piece of your narrow ass in exchange for behaving. With that monster dick, you'd be extra cherry even if you weren't."

"Wouldn't you like to know how I keep him in line? I saw how you looked at Douglas's collar and at my whip. I'm sure you've noticed his dog bed by the fireplace, even his bone. Say whatever insult you may. He's happy. I'm happy. But you are not."

Ian shook his head. He had no words to refute the truth, none to side step it or deny it, either. So he said nothing at all, simply fumed.

Starting in on radishes, Gray made no mockeries. "Would you like to stay for dinner? We're having ribs and salad tonight."

It took Ian a few moments to get rid of the awkward feeling in the pit of his stomach, a mixture of embarrassment and intimidation. Less than a half an hour earlier, his life had been fine. A few direct words and a rejection from Gray, and Ian felt hollow.

He needed to know why Gray affected him, so that he could prevent it from ever happening again. Trying not to sound too anxious, Ian replied, "Sure."

Chapter Three

Seated at the table while Gray tended to the food on the stove, Ian stared at the piece of paper in front of him. It was a quickly scribbled note from Gray concerning a different sort of invitation.

Gray had asked him to be Douglas's playmate for the weekend.

The fact that werewolves had exceptional hearing when they chose to focus might have been the reason Gray chose to write the request rather than explain it aloud. Then again, Ian pondered as he stared at the note, it might have been the nature of the request. He could see Douglas just outside the window, casting suspicious glances inside between swings of the axe. Gray did seem to have control of the great beast, though.

Nonchalant, Gray returned the pen and pad to the counter caddy and continued rinsing the salad ingredients. "If you're not game, then you should leave after dinner. I don't need any interruptions when I reward my wolf for being such a good guard dog."

Reward? Well, that was one way to put it. Mind astir with all sorts of erotic scenarios, Ian tried to imagine if and how they might play fetch, sit, and most importantly, roll over. He also wondered if he'd be the stick or the chew toy for Gray's good dog.

The offer was tempting. Actually, it was beyond tempting and seasoned with danger. They were strangers with strange tastes. His fear, however, came more from his own curiosity. Between Gray's delicate handsomeness and Douglas's brutish good looks, Ian couldn't deny that the idea of being a "playmate" suited him better than watching television, scratching his balls, and drinking beer all weekend.

"Think very carefully about whether you can handle it or not. Your life may depend on it. I'll not have Doug unnerved or humiliated by anyone other than myself."

Gray spoke about Douglas as if he were a fragile creature. Ian thought the idea of anyone making Douglas unnerved was foolhardy. Sure, the giant bent to Gray's whim,

but Ian doubted anyone else could be so successful. Skeptical, Ian shrugged. "Where would the fun be in that?"

"Doug's very talented, and there are many tricks he can do. If he were unnerved, you wouldn't reap the benefits of his talents. So again, is there a problem?"

Ian shook his head. "Oh, no. We're all wolves. Communal beasts. Just watch it with the whip, and I'm game."

Gray pulled a large, clear bowl from a cabinet. He gave the colander a few shakes to free the remaining water before dumping the salad into the bowl. "No need to worry. I'd have to love you to use the whip or any of my other toys on you. As it stands, I don't even know you."

The offense he felt came as a surprise to him. "But you know my name."

"That I do, Ian," Gray answered without a hint of humor. "So. Would you like to play?"

"Sure, but would I get to ... you know ..." And if he didn't know, Ian sure did. He knew exactly how long, how deep, and how wild he wanted to turn Gray out. "... to fuck you?"

Gray added bacon bits and some fragrant seasoning to the salad. "No. Douglas wouldn't stand for it. That's the one other thing that would make him forget his place, and besides, I prefer baseball bats, not Coke cans. Doug is tighter than I am, anyway. His ass cheeks alone can bring you off when he flexes them around your prick."

Ian couldn't help but moan at that.

"You like the thought? That's good." Lifting the salad bowl, Gray handed it to Ian and gestured to the table. "We'll have a great night together, then."

* * * * *

There was something about the sight of a man on all fours that drew Ian's attention, even if that man was larger, stronger, and somewhat more intimidating than most. His meal abandoned on his plate, Ian was hungry for more than just food.

Ian couldn't get over the shy way Douglas had asked for permission to retake his wolf form, or the definitive "no" he had received from Gray. Gray did, however, give the red wolf permission to strip naked and show off that gorgeous, massive body. Douglas's cock seemed to get harder from the denial. And while it didn't make sense to him, such a brute showing such a submissive nature, Ian was captivated all the same. His shaft hardened as well, especially when Douglas got down on his knees for dinner.

Douglas's bowl lay beside Gray's chair, the sort of bowl that Great Danes or Mastiffs might have even found too big. Roast beef, potatoes, wild rice, and a roll fit neatly inside. Despite his apparent shyness, Douglas wasted no time in eating.

Gray was feasting, nonchalantly, on a salad decorated with beef, croutons, and some red vinaigrette. The food was good, but Ian had nearly forgotten there was a plate in front of him. Reviewing every contour of Douglas's naked frame, Ian felt sure

that Douglas had the biggest thighs he had ever seen on a man or a were. *Talk about tasty, firm meat ...*

"So, Ian. Do you live around here?"

"In town." Ian's head turned towards Gray long before his attention did, his appetite finding the plate before him still moderately warm. "I come out here to hunt, to exercise, for sport sometimes, but I've never scented you two before."

"We're just on vacation. We come here when we want to get away from things. It's quiet, beautiful, and much more relaxing than where we live."

Debating whether to use a fork or his lips for the succulent roast, Ian decided on using the fork. After all, Gray was using one with his salad. With a hearty portion of beef on his plate, Ian fully intended on devouring his food with less composure than Gray. The meat was so tender and tasteful that Ian shivered beneath his blanket after the first mouthful. "Where is that, and what is there to get away from?"

"Our pack is based in Michigan, Gogebic County. It borders Wisconsin, and while it is as beautiful there as it is here, the worries of the pack warrant a vacation more often than we can take one."

Rushing a portion of potato down his gullet, Ian blinked in surprise. He didn't take Gray and Douglas for pack animals. "You're the alpha?"

"No, I'm the omega. Douglas is the alpha."

Ian's eyes bulged at the thought. Gray certainly behaved like an alpha, and Douglas certainly looked like the type of brute enforcer that an alpha would have.

"Do you have a problem with it?" Douglas's deep baritone sounded from the floor.

"Did I tell you to speak, cur?"

Douglas scowled, but held his tongue.

Calm and casual as ever, Gray took a sip of water with his food. The turn of his head and the squint of his eyes asked Ian the same question.

"Well. That's ... different. He rules the pack, and then you rule him." Ian blew out a breath he hadn't been aware that he had held. "If you don't mind me asking, you two practice Domestication ... or something, right?"

Gray returned back to his meal, content with Ian's enthusiastic responses. "We have to live among humans and order is needed. Now, more than ever. It helps to tamp down the primal urges that cause *some* of us to seek danger."

Ian knew it didn't take a calculator to arrive at the sum of Gray's implication. Just eating dinner with Gray and Douglas was calling out primal urges deep within him. He took into account Douglas's nudity and Gray's beauty, and the fact that no wolf he knew would pass up the opportunity to be wild with them. It wasn't exactly a fair statement. Ian tried to redirect. "You didn't answer my question."

"I don't have to. You're not stupid or blind. You know exactly what's going on here."

Ian wasn't deaf, either. He had heard as plain as day the obvious condescension in Gray's voice, and while he had ideas about what was going on, he didn't feel as if

asking for an explanation was too much. *A fucking omega giving sass? Who had ever heard of such a thing?* "But to, um, play the pup, so to speak ... Could you explain?"

Gray shot Ian a suspicious glance before complying. "It's as simple as reigning in those wild urges that could get you into so much trouble about deriving pleasure and affection from service."

"But if Douglas is an alpha and leads a successful pack, he shouldn't have a problem with wild urges. As for the whole service issue, he would have others serving him. So why would he need to roll over and beg ... or fetch," Ian asked. "Why would he even want to?"

"It's exciting for one." Casting his blue-silver eyes at Ian, Gray gave the man a glare that was a hundred-and-one-proof seduction. "Right now, you're excited. That blanket is really starting to annoy you. You really want to do something or having something done to you ... immediately. Right now, Douglas is more than just excited. His cock is just as hard as yours is from wanting to do something wild, decadent ... animalistic. As an alpha, Douglas could have almost anything he wanted. He wouldn't have to ache with arousal because he'd have who and what he wanted and be done with it. That can become so boring, though."

Maybe, maybe not, but there's nothing wrong with instant gratification, Ian thought. "It is the way of the wolf, though. That is what we are. We are not domesticated dogs."

"Domestication appealed to some of our ancestors, so much so that the contemporary dogs emerged from the family tree," Gray stated. "It was a powerful fetish then, and it is just as powerful now. Douglas is a fine alpha, he bears his responsibility well, but as an alpha there is something he needs and wants that only I can give him. Would you like to know what that is?"

Ian truly wanted to know. "Tell me."

Reaching down to comb his pale fingers through Doug's red hair, Gray replied, "He needs to be ... wants to be a good boy."

Chapter Four

Every time he heard the words “good boy,” it had been in relation to dogs and some feat that they had performed well. Ian could understand that there were tricks that Douglas did well, but why such a term would motivate an entire fetish remained unclear.

While Douglas cleared away the dishes, washed, and dried them, Gray invited Ian over to the couch to watch his favorite crime show. Ian sat down, but not too close, careful of the red wolf’s attention. When Douglas had finished, he joined them. He came around the couch and took off Gray’s boots and socks, then got on all fours and served as a footrest for slender feet. Beyond arousal, Douglas’s red prick was fully unsheathed. The simple act of touching Gray’s feet had garnered more deep sighs than Ian had heard from the beast all night.

Douglas bore Gray’s feet easily upon his naked back, while Gray informed Ian of the reasons why humans were the most brutal of species. While Gray ranted about guns being an extension of humanity’s primal side, Ian gave his best attempt at interest.

Ian didn’t give a damn about humanity or firearms. His attention was on Douglas, unmoving and sturdy. *Good boy*. What sort of pleasure was there to be gained by being a footrest? Even still, what sort of pleasure was there to be had in acting subservient when you weren’t?

When the ending credits began to scroll on the television, Gray lifted the remote and snapped the screen to black. Lowering one foot off of Douglas’s back, Gray leaned over to scratch Douglas’s shoulder. “You’ve been such a good boy for me, so patient,” he crooned. “Would my cur like a treat? Hmm?”

While his tail bump showed, Douglas did not wag it, which Ian had fully expected him to do.

Douglas nodded. “Yes, M.”

M? He had expected to hear Sir, Master, or Lord as freaky as the two wolves were, but Ian had to admit that he liked the sole letter. It was such a masculine way to admit subservience.

Douglas waited. His chest was heaving, but he maintained his position on all fours and was incredibly focused. Gray leaned back on the sofa and put his fingers on his belt, pulled it open, and then his zipper down. The strain was evident in Douglas's barrel arms.

With both Ian's eyes and Douglas's upon his every action, Gray reached inside his trousers and withdrew a treat. Gray's cock was a good length, pale and pink, with a length of foreskin that begged to be suckled. Just the sight of it made Ian want to join Douglas on the floor.

Gray moved his other foot off of Douglas's back, placing it between Douglas's thighs. Stroking his shaft with a slow and firm grip, he seemed well aware of his audience and his effect on them. "I suppose you deserve it. Come and have a lick."

The offer was not for him, yet Ian licked his lips. He held the blanket around his body with a death grip, determined not to interfere as Douglas rose up upon his knees and leaned forward. His tongue out and anxious, Douglas looked up to Gray as if making certain that the permission given was real. A nod was his answer.

Like a lollipop, Douglas ran his tongue from base to tip along the turgid shaft. He made sure that no centimeter remained untouched by the care of his tongue.

The adoration displayed by his tongue over the satiny flesh made Ian envious. *Good boys got very good rewards indeed*, he thought.

With a sigh, Gray gave himself over to Douglas ministrations. "Lick, not suck," he warned, his curved nails combing through Douglas's short hair.

The red wolf had closed his mouth on the crown of Gray's cock and was down to the short hairs. The loud slurping sounds indicated that Douglas was trying to do both lick and suck ... at the same time.

Gray frowned even as his hips pushed upwards. Only his lips, moist and ravaged, revealed how much he really enjoyed the back of Douglas's throat. One hand went to Douglas's shoulder, and the other landed a sharp blow against the auburn stubble of Douglas's cheek. "Don't be greedy and forget yourself, cur," he half-moaned.

Douglas obeyed, pulling back with apology in his eyes. "Yes ... yes ... M. I'm sorry." As if to prove his sincerity, he followed up with a series of short, quick laps.

Domestication, Master and Servant ... Hell, whatever the two were into, Ian was sure he wanted to join them. So hard and aching, it took him a moment to recall his own nudity beneath the blanket. Just a few strokes, just a bit of attention was all that he needed. *He'd been a good boy, too!*

Ian had just gotten his hand through the maze of folds in his blanket, had just touched the skin of his stomach before Gray turned his head. He could see the desire thick in Gray's eyes, pupils so large that they seemed trimmed in passionate silver. Before Ian could even get fingertips down and through his pubes, Gray reached over and tugged at the blanket covering him.

"Take off that blanket. We're all curs here. There's nothing at all to be modest about."

Shucking the blanket with a push of his elbows, Ian showed Gray's curious eyes how much he agreed with that statement.

Wanting so much to be a part of their bizarre coupling, Ian moved closer, shoulder-to-shoulder with Gray. He tried to put his arm around Gray, but a narrow-eyed shake of the dark head discouraged that. Still, he was close enough to smile down at Douglas, close enough to rub his leg against Douglas's shoulder and his thigh against Gray's. Close enough to feel every shiver, twitch, and shudder.

Jerking his cock to the timing of Douglas's tongue, Ian yearned for anything, some acknowledgement that he wasn't just a spectator. He wanted to kiss Gray, run his fingers through his silky, black hair. Ian wanted Douglas's furry ass, with that beautiful reddish tail growing at his rump, wanted to caress it with his hand.

"Doug? Douglas," Gray repeated, grasping a handful of Douglas's hair. He pulled the big were to attention. "I want you to lick him. I want you to lick our new friend."

Douglas turned and looked at Ian as if he'd rather just gnaw his head off.

Ian struggled to keep the word "please" from escaping his lips. It was lucky for him that Gray was on his side.

"Don't be bad now," Gray warned. "Do it."

"Yes ... M."

Douglas moved from between Gray's legs to Ian's, and while Ian considered that the idea might not have been so good, he kept his mouth shut. The giant werewolf grabbed Ian's blanket and pushed it all the way off, pushed Ian's knees further apart, and grasped his thighs firmly.

From the very moment Douglas's rough tongue touched his dick, Ian realized that he was out of his league with the two wolves. The gentleness Douglas had shown with Gray was a thing forgotten. Encircling the base of Ian's cock with a firm grip, Douglas ran his tongue from the base to the slit of Ian's erection. His broad shoulders held Ian's thighs apart while his tongue sought to tease Ian to madness. Using his fingers and saliva to provide a slick suction, Douglas ignored the squirming rhythm Ian sought to speed things along.

Head resting on the back of the sofa, eyes resting in the back of his head, there was just something inherently powerful about licking, both in wolf form and in human, Ian felt. It was how wolves showed affection, how they introduced each other, and certainly how they showed respect.

Doug's rough attention was both a gift and a curse.

"So good. You're doing wonderfully," Gray praised his wolf.

Ian felt Gray shift and opened his eyes as much as he could.

Panting, Ian watched as the slender male joined his lover on the floor. Gray placed a kiss upon Douglas's massive shoulder, moved his hand to Doug's ripped abs and lower.

"You're so well behaved, my good, good cur," Gray crooned. "If you want you can suck him. Go ahead."

Ian's brain was much too muddled to fully comprehend the words coming from Gray's mouth, but the word "suck" stood out well enough once Doug's lips closed over his crown.

If the licking was good, the suction was a hundred times better.

There was no doubt, no reservation in the way that Doug's throat swallowed around his length. It was nothing Ian could even pretend to hold back against. Burning and yet damp, his heart racing, Ian measured time in the slow, firm pull of Douglas's lips. The brute was born to suck cock in Ian's opinion, knowledgeable about the proper ways of flicking his tongue over foreskin, about teasing the sensitive, thick vein on the underside of his shaft, and tickling his piss-slit. "Ohhh yeah," Ian murmured. "He's a good cur alright."

Gray laughed. "He's damn good. Good and hard."

Ian's head lolled to the side. Eyes half open, he noticed Gray with his hand in a bevy of short, dark red curls. He was caressing the wide, arching sex of his pet.

"He's so patiently aching. Aren't you, my cur?"

"Mmm-hmm," Douglas sounded with a vibration that had Ian's hips staggering.

"But you're not going to come until I give the word, until I tell you that you can. You're going to work our new friend over until he comes, though, aren't you?"

Another mind-numbing growl sounded, one that made Ian want to release then and there. *Oh, it wouldn't be long.* Ian couldn't take much more. Douglas's hands -- no, paws -- held his thighs firm and strong, keeping him from doing anything other than sparking like flint. Back arching against the couch, Ian's skin tingled as his arousal triggered his fur. Against all reason, but in favor of all that he needed, Ian reached down and gripped Douglas's head.

"Finish him," Gray hissed. "Make him come."

Douglas did as commanded, sinking down to the base of Ian's cock until the head was firmly lodged in his throat. He then growled.

The vibrations were too much. It was nothing he was used to, the resounding sensation that struck his very core. Ian came loud and hard as a train wreck.

Drowsy and in need of more than a moment to reestablish his place in the universe, Ian heard Gray praise his were. Ian wanted to praise them both, but rest was a more pressing endeavor.

He didn't mean to nap, but the food, the fire, and the blowjob had turned Ian three ways to a warm wind. When he awoke, he found himself alone in the living room. Someone had placed the blanket back over him, arranged him sideways, and placed a pillow beneath his head. Neither of the possible suspects was in the room, however.

Curious as to where his generous hosts had gone off to, Ian got up from the couch. His senses told him that they were close, down the sole hallway. While his sensitive ears heard little in the ways of movement or conversation, Ian could still smell

them. He could smell leather, latex, wine, and cherry lube, all of which struck his imagination with rich hypothetical scenarios.

What were those two crazy wolves up to?

Ian had to know.

Chapter Five

The snarling started even before Ian reached the door. It was definitely Douglas's voice, but the aggression seemed marred, tainted by stress and pleasure, almost a sigh. Having seen too much of those beautiful males, Ian was far too intrigued by them to fear a simple wooden door. Turning the brass handle, he eased the door back and stepped within the room.

If he hadn't already had a hard-on before, Ian surely felt one arise at the sight before him.

There was nothing really wrong with the idea of a werewolf chained up to bed, wearing a collar, but something was wrong with Gray's and Douglas's positioning. While Douglas was transformed into his man-beast form, Gray was not. He was, however, naked. They both were. Douglas was on his back with his legs spread to accommodate Gray's kneeling form. It might have appeared as if they were fucking if Gray's knees had been on the outside of Douglas's thighs. They weren't.

Gray was hunched down. *Probably fingering the Were*, Ian told himself. *Fucker has got to have some nice fingers by the look on Douglas's face.*

Gray turned. "Did you enjoy your nap, Ian?"

"What?" Blinking back his awe at the beauty before him, Ian determined that long ebony locks were perfect draped across Gray's shoulders and back. Gray's alabaster skin, covered in a fine down of black hairs about the forearms and legs and chest, wasn't feminine at all. "My nap ..." It was definitely nothing he wanted to talk about. More intrigued by Douglas the great red werewolf with the eyes like darkness encased in sapphire, Ian held no fear for growls and chaining pulling.

Gray was quick to reprimand. "You break those fucking chains again and our game is over for tonight, understood?"

With a rolling look of frustration, Douglas closed his eyes. His claws unfurled, and his wrists went limp in the manacles.

"Your nap," Gray repeated. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Yeah. I did." Moving closer to the bed, Ian's curiosity motivated him. "Enjoyed what happened before that as well." Douglas seemed to be straining to remain still while Gray seemed the bastion of patience. As he drew closer to the bed, Ian discovered why.

Nonchalant with a gloved hand hidden inside Douglas's body, Gray tossed his hair back with a subtle flick of his head. "Good. I enjoyed watching it. Both before and after. I can't let Douglas get that carried away with me, not when he's supposed to behave."

Gaze moving back and forth from Gray's calm façade to Douglas's staggering look of concentration and bliss, Ian could only imagine the intensity of having something as large as a male's fist within him. To be stretched so was unimaginably arousing, yet foreign. Confused, yet aroused by the sight before him, Ian struggled to keep still. It had to hurt. It had to be beyond intimate. It had to feel like the definition of vulnerable, and it had to require the utmost trust.

"Would you like some tea? There's some freshly brewed over there." Motioning to the bedside table and the teapot resting on a ceramic tray, Gray turned his attention back to Douglas. "Mint. He loves it after our sessions."

Ian could barely open his mouth, and when he did, the words came out staggered and dry. "T ... that's what you call this?"

Gray did not answer, preoccupied by a look into Douglas's eyes. Something unspoken passed between his eyes and Douglas's blue eyes for a long while. Ian felt sure that it was the two of them doubting that he would or was even capable of understanding. What they didn't know was that he really wanted to understand.

"You know," Gray started suddenly, almost solemnly. "Last summer, two cubs from our pack were killed by humans. Douglas was furious, beyond furious, actually. He wanted blood. Even Ryan, the beta of our group, wanted revenge, but Douglas held his ground. He saw to it that we found a new home, set down new guidelines for the bitches, and encouraged the adolescents to mix with and learn the human ways. It was during those times that he needed me most, and not to be arrogant, I gave him focus."

Ian couldn't fathom how. "Focus?"

Gray withdrew his hand mere centimeters before giving a slight push back. Douglas's eyes rolled upward, he showed his teeth.

"Focus as in a way to channel his rage into something positive." Gray's hand moved forward with a slowly rocking rhythm.

Wrists hanging limp, knees lying open and lax, the only thing working overtime were Douglas's lungs and his heart, both of which had to be racing if the rise and fall of his chest were any indication. It reminded Ian of how he felt after a long, exhilarating run, of how his muscles felt like jelly.

"All of his anger meant nothing to me," Gray continued. Leaning forward, he braced his free hand on Douglas's meaty thigh and thrust to a mildly faster beat. "After all, I was the lowest of the low, a cowardly omega. I knew *all* about submitting myself

to the higher purpose and about serving, about being proud of defeat and cherishing pain. Swallowing it down even."

Gray was wholly focused upon Douglas, and when the great werewolf dared to look, they locked eyes again. It was the nearest thing to love Ian had ever seen: watching Gray fuck his lover, watching Douglas peak higher and higher.

"I tolerate his bitches, his lieutenant wolves, his cubs ... everything that keeps me from him, because I know that he is mine."

Resisting the urge to stroke himself during Gray's emotional tale, Ian moved closer. He didn't know if it was a wise move, but he had been lucky so far. All he wanted was to join them on the bed, to join their connection in some way. He knew that Douglas was going to come soon. He could smell it, he could see the proof in the quivering of Douglas's abs. Hot and eager to do the same, Ian's palm rushed to his own aching sex, plied it in time to every thrust of Gray's hand.

Douglas broke the eye contact with his master, sputtering and growling roughly.

Gray took hold of Douglas's big, beautiful prick, pumping it hard from tip to fur, and it took its toll. Douglas's head arched back on the pillow, his sharp teeth ground shut. Flailing and failing fast, both Douglas and Ian exploded mere seconds apart.

Ian came in an arching white splash across Douglas's thigh. Douglas burst in pearls across his own belly. It was messy, beautiful, and well-earned, Ian felt. Winded, he gave over to the white expanse of Gray's shoulder, kissing it as he had yearned to do earlier and laving praise onto that solitary inch of skin.

Gray pulled his shoulder back and away from Ian's kisses. "You should have knocked, but because you were curious ..."

Awkward and near abandoned, Ian affirmed, "I am! I'm curious about you both and what you have."

"I know you are, Ian, and I like you. You're actually very lucky. I don't share my cur's pleasure often."

Gray removed his hand ever so slowly. The care he showed with Douglas's body made Ian realize that he wanted the same kind of care. It wasn't the pitiful care of a swooning devotee, but the care and respect shown by big cat trainers to their very dangerous beasts.

I'm dangerous, too. Tend to me, Ian almost said, yet he kept that thought at bay. Gray motioned for him to move, so he got up and backed away from the bed.

Gray moved off the bed and stood. He left a drowsy Douglas long enough to go into the bathroom to toss the used latex into the garbage and wash his hands.

"Would you pour Doug a cup of tea? Otherwise, he'll just fall off to sleep," Gray yelled from the bathroom.

Looking at the big wolf, transformed back into the brutishly handsome Viking, Ian rolled his eyes at the contentment written all across Douglas's features. It looked as if he knew how lucky he was and how pathetically unlucky Ian was.

Ian poured the tea, anyway.

Gray walked back into the room with only a towel draped over his arm. Ian's muscles tightened -- all of them -- before they remembered they still needed rest.

Gray moved past Ian to release Douglas from the restraints, providing Ian with a perfect view of his behind. Two pale peaches tempted his fingers. Gray's tail bump was a dark nub at the base of his spine. Ian wanted to rub it, and nearly did, hand and forefinger outstretched.

Turning around with the knowing look of the supernatural, but also just tipped off by Douglas's growl, Gray motioned towards a towel or blanket on the floor. "Thank you, Ian, but if you'll excuse us, there is something private that my cur needs."

"Private?" He had just witnessed Gray with hand buried to the wrist buried in Doug's most intimate of places. Asking for privacy seemed more than absurd. "You need privacy *now*?"

Gray released the last steel cuff around Doug's ankles, rubbed the flesh as if it wouldn't heal after several minutes. "Yes."

"What could you give him? What else could he need privacy for?"

Gray moved up and into Doug's open and welcoming embrace, no longer weakened by exhaustion. Before Douglas rolled them over, to feast upon that perfect throat or those pink nipples, or caress those soft furry thighs, Gray exhaled. "Me."

* * * * *

Ian gave them their privacy. Seething with jealousy, he backed out of the room with all the courtesy that his frozen heart could muster. Outside of that room, with the door between him and the sweet sounds of a male's surrender, the growls of a beast's hunger, the creaking of a bed that would know sweat, exhalations, and musk, Ian began to go mad.

There was no choice left to him. He had to run away.

Not once did he stop to think why he felt so angry and abandoned. Not once did he consider that he really didn't want to be alone.

Ian didn't even realize that he held the blanket loaned to him by Gray in his hand with a death grip. He took the blanket as far as the front door before letting it go and putting his hand to the knob. Ian considered taking the blanket, not just out of spite, but for remembrance. It was a particularly long string of passion-tinged curses from Gray that gave Ian the courage to open the door. He didn't want to remember that.

Hitting him like a lash, the cold felt good to his feverish body. It calmed him and helped to clear his mind. Ian walked out in the snow as a man. The chill of his human flesh became a biting ache before his nature called for the change. It wasn't the change of the man-wolf that he needed, however. It was the full change to wolf. No logic, no jealousy, no deep, inner contemplation, his nature would demand simpler things.

Wolves felt longing just as strongly as humans did, but it mattered less when running at speeds up to thirty-five mph.

Chapter Six

Six months passed before Ian saw Gray and Douglas again.

He didn't seek them out and certainly stayed as far away from the cabin as possible. He didn't ask any one of his werewolf contacts about them or their pack. As far as he was concerned, what Douglas and Gray had was strictly between them, and as much as he had wanted to be a part of their dynamic, he couldn't. Gray could only focus on his lover, and Douglas could not bear distraction, it seemed. Ian could not bear the longing.

After that fateful night with Gray and Douglas, his mood was hot, vicious, and flammable. Friends, tricks, and strangers alike caught his wrath. A side-glance, a murmured comment, and he needed to feel his fist hitting flesh, bone, *something*.

It was merely coincidence that when they found him, and it was in the middle of a fistfight.

Everyone in The Portside Galley and Bar knew that Ian was equal opportunity -- willing to fight anyone -- everyone except for the poor fucker clinging to the asphalt outside the back door. Not that it really bothered Ian to be called a *fairy*, but it had upset the naïve young piece of ass that he was two seconds away from escorting to a bathroom stall.

It was Douglas who prevented Ian from completely pounding the human's imprint into the street. He grabbed Ian's arms and pinned them behind his back, which only enraged Ian further. However, the sight of black hair and porcelain skin in his peripheral calmed him down.

Gray had that effect.

"Ian. I see you're still playing the bully," Gray said, looking damned gorgeous in a short-sleeved black shirt. He looked almost butch in equally dark pants. "But fighting the handicapped is low for even you. He isn't even a quarter of your equal." Glaring at

the two hundred and seventy-pound human, he shook his head. "Maybe you'd like to go a round or two with Douglas?"

Struggling within a hold of iron, Ian's exertions had little effect on the big guy. If anything, it brought his ass and Douglas's rock hard thighs closer. Tempted far too greatly to acknowledge what had to be another dream, Ian said nothing.

"I'll take that as a no." With a nod of Gray's head, Douglas set Ian free.

Stepping away from the trained bodyguard, Ian had every intention of giving Douglas the contemptuous stare he had rehearsed a million times in his mind. In a light gray shirt that showed off every ripple and curve of his six-pack, his boulder pecs, and broad shoulders, all that Douglas got from Ian was a bit of lip moistening.

Gray cleared his throat, breaking Ian from his trance. "Would you like to come back inside with us? We were just getting ready to go in for a drink, and I have to meet someone."

What were the odds? While his body was willing, his hurt psyche decided a moment's worth of pleasure wasn't worth the aftertaste. "No. That's okay," he declined, glaring all the while at his young trick's covert attempt to flee. *There goes the easy lay.* Ian couldn't blame him for not wanting to be an outlet for frustration or loneliness.

"You still hold a grudge?" Gray nodded as if he expected as much. "It's okay, Ian, I understand. Douglas's alpha female screams as loud as banshee and then gloats for a week straight. So does his beta female. I won't discuss his gamma ... but still you should join us for a few beers. My treat. Please," he added with a smile.

Ian thought about how weak he would look to them if he declined. When compared to how weak he had already acted when he ran away from them, Ian knew that a second flight was not an option. "All right. Maybe one."

Douglas nudged Ian with a friendly demeanor that was neither expected nor familiar. "Great, then. Come on, butch boy," he growled.

Butch boy? What was it with the name-calling? "Cool it, Erik the Viking ... or is it Thor?" Ian snapped back, bold for something a brawl couldn't satisfy.

"It's Thor."

It's Cocksucker, actually, or it will be later tonight. Shaking his head free of such hope, Ian told himself to expect nothing more than free drinks.

Leading the way past a nosey but yielding bouncer, Gray entered the back door of the Portside Galley. "You two can fight later on." Addressing Douglas and Ian, he continued. "It's going to rain tonight, and there will be mud. You can fight, then. It'll be hotter to watch."

Douglas moved to follow, and Ian was right behind him, as happy as a lark and twice as wired. He wouldn't even allow himself to contemplate the afterwards. He was with Douglas and Gray for the moment, and that was all that mattered.

* * * * *

Douglas and Ian guarded the booth while Gray left them to talk to a foxy brunette in desperate need of a boob job. Ian had noticed her earlier, before he had noticed his trick, but then a classy vampire in a dive like the Portside was hard not to notice.

Although the hostess had given Ian a wary look upon his return, she seated them in a secluded booth and gave them menus. There wasn't a word uttered about the fact that she had been the first one to scream when he had dragged his victim out moments before.

Instead, she stood with pen in hand, smiling nervously as Ian ordered four Guinness stouts, two baskets of mild wings, and chili-cheese fries. Douglas ordered tonic water for Gray.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"For now." As Ian watched the waitress return to the bar, it struck home that he was seated next to Douglas, the same werewolf who had given him a damn fine licking, the same one who he had fought and nearly lost to. More importantly, Douglas was one of the wolves that made him hard as hell.

Neither were said anything. Ian pretended to bob his head to the rock song coming from the jukebox, while Douglas kept a sharp eye on Gray across the room. Even after the food and beer arrived, the silence loomed. Douglas ate with two hands, gaze still on Gray. Ian, on the other hand, separated his interest. Eating a spicy wing, he noticed the brunette hand what looked like a stack of magazines to Gray. "Who's that he's talking to?"

Doug chuckled as if Ian had told a joke. "Samantha Emerson. She's a vampire with a home-based business."

"Like Avon or Mary Kay?"

A big paw grabbed the last chicken wing, which left both baskets empty. "Yes and no. Samantha sells toys."

What kind of toys would a vampire sell? Blood dolls, toy fangs, maybe a Bat-in-the-Box ... Ian found the whole idea humorous. "Toys? Real toys?"

Douglas looked into Ian's eyes and raised his brow. Motioning to the empty basket, he asked, "Do you want another basket of wings? They don't give you enough in my opinion."

It wasn't the answer Ian had expected, but six wings really weren't enough, and he had eaten his share. The fries had gone rather quickly and stealthily as well. "Sure. Oh, and another thing of fries, too."

Flagging down the first girl with a nametag, Douglas circled a finger over the empty baskets. "Excuse me, miss. Two more baskets of wings and another basket of the chili fries, please."

"You boys have some big appetites. Another round of beers, too?"

Nodding, Douglas said, "Sure."

Ian waited until the waitress left the table with two baskets of bones and two empty platters that had once held fries, chili, and cheese before returning to his line of

questioning. "Toys? Like what? Like your ... um, dog toys?" Nervous enough, he kept his voice low enough to seem reverent.

Douglas had no such reservations. "No. Like my handcuffs and the butt plug I'm wearing now. Those are the kind of toys that she sells."

That would explain why Douglas seemed to be squirming ever so often, Ian thought. Assumptions about how uncomfortably pleasant it must have felt flooded his mind and seared his cheeks on the way up. "... Oh. Okay."

As if werewolves did not have a powerful sense of smell, Douglas took hold of his beer and cast an appraising look at Ian. "Makes you hot does it? Just thinking about it does it to me sometimes. I think it took Gray five miles outside of the pack compound before he pulled over and made me put the cock cage on. I'm wearing one of those now, too."

"What's a --"

Douglas didn't even wait for Ian to continue revealing his naiveté. "It's a leather and steel-ringed contraption that traps my erection. It keeps my cock harder than it needs to be and more patient than I want it to be."

The waitress returned to the booth with their drinks, and Ian was never thirstier. His mug didn't even touch the table. It went directly from the waitress's hand to his and from his hand to his lips. Ian drank half the glass in two gulps.

"So," Douglas drawled. "We didn't get much of a chance to talk before..."

Ian nearly choked. "I didn't think you were allowed to, and I definitely didn't think you *wanted* to talk to me."

"I didn't."

"So what's changed?"

"I understand wanting something and not knowing what it is or how to get it."

How could you ever? Ian wanted to ask. There was no way the luckiest fucker in the world could understand his plight. Speaking on the first notion to come into his head, Ian set his glass down upon the table. "If Gray is your omega, then he was always yours."

"You think it's that simple? It's not. I always liked him, even when we were growing up, but I was a bastard to him and so were my brothers. Especially them." Taking a strong pull of his own drink, Douglas's voice dropped with sarcasm. "One day, my older brother Scott catches Gray sniffing one of the females and loses it. Gray comes to me pleading for help in front of the elders, hell, the entire pack! He dropped to the ground and showed his belly to me, not my brother, not even to my father who was the pack alpha at that time, but to me! My great-grandmother told me that it is the omega's choice who will rule, and sure enough, it came to pass."

It sounded like a fairy tale to Ian, a love story involving destiny and magic. He didn't believe in any of that bullshit, but it caused his breath to become shallow. Gray had chosen Douglas to be the pack alpha, was supporting him, and loving him. In return, Douglas was his slave.

Ian hated the world at that moment for not being Douglas. "Was your brother ... Were your brothers pissed?"

By the wince Douglas gave, Ian could tell that the answer was positive.

"Oh, yeah, all of my brothers were. They hated Gray for years because of it, but they respect my power. I was the biggest, the strongest, and Gray showed them all how to show me respect." Not appearing overly prideful, but certainly not looking ashamed, Douglas cast a fond glance across the bar at Gray. "And of course, he showed me how to be humble."

"He continues to," Ian couldn't resist adding his two cents. "Does your pack know about your vacations?"

Douglas looked as if Ian had said something both humorous and ironic. "Everyone knows we love each other, but not everyone acknowledges or believes in that love. We don't flaunt it. There are the pack rules, and I *am* the pack alpha."

"You ever think about running away together after your reign?"

Raising his head, Douglas stared straight ahead. His look was one of seriousness, devotion, and longing. Ian turned to see what he was looking at and noticed that Gray had finished his business and was getting up from the table.

"Every fucking day," Douglas answered the question.

Returning to the table with a large glossy black bag in hand, Gray gave a toothy grin. He picked up the tonic water and downed the contents in three swift gulps. "I hope you greedy curs enjoyed your outing, but it's time to go home."

"I thought you were going to join us," Ian frowned. "You didn't want something stronger than tonic?"

With a look that made Ian's balls furrier and his tail lengthen, Gray replied, "No, I need to be crystal clear tonight."

"Planning on something serious tonight are you? How do you know I want to come along?" Ian dared to ask.

"We may be rude sometimes, but Douglas and I are also very generous. I think you like the generosity."

Ian didn't have to answer. When Douglas stood up from the table, Ian stood up as well. Like was much too tame a word.

Chapter Seven

Gray picked up the tab, despite Ian's arguing to the contrary. Having worked a few day-labor commissions, it wasn't as if he didn't have money. It wasn't as if he didn't mind the charity, either. Nobility was not Ian's strong suit. Neither was humility, until he got out into the parking lot and laid eyes on their ride.

A dark green SUV that looked like money trimmed in chrome, it actually looked big enough to seat even Douglas comfortably.

"Nice truck."

"I'm glad that you approve." Voice drenched in sarcasm, Gray went to the driver's side door and unlocked the vehicle. "In the back, both of you."

Douglas's chin dropped a bit at the declaration, but like a good dog, he got in the back. Ian had already figured that the back seat was where he'd be riding so it didn't really come as a huge surprise. Between Douglas's and Ian's bulk, they were thigh to thigh in the back seat as Gray turned the ignition and started out of the parking lot.

Elated by the potential of the night, Ian had forgotten all about being the outsider, all about the jealousy. It wasn't even a twitch in the back of his mind. All that mattered was that they were leaving civilization and that he would soon be alone with two hot weres.

Relaxing back on the leather seats, there was little that Ian could do to avoid rubbing knees with the big guy. Douglas looked worse than miserable and a shade less than being high at the same time. The plug and the cage must have been agony, especially as Gray was an intense driver over the due-for-repaving roads.

"I am so digging the chauffeur treatment."

Gray's eyes met Ian's in the rearview mirror. "That's good, Ian. I'm glad you like to be ferried, but could you do me a favor?"

"Sure." So eager to do his part, Ian leaned slightly forward as if he didn't have superb hearing. "What do you need?"

"I *need* for you to lean over and unzip Douglas's pants. I want you to take out his cock and lick it. He's been staring at me a bit too boldly, and I'd like him to suffer a bit more."

Ian sat back against his seat, unsettled by the impromptu request and its motive. It wasn't as if Douglas hadn't done the same and more for him. Still, there was the opportunity to engage the mysteries of the wolves head on, to be involved with Gray's command.

It also meant that Gray thought of him as a submissive, not just in the act of giving head, but of following his order.

"So you're going to order me on as if I was a puppy, huh?"

"Yes. I am." Eyes on the road, Gray didn't raise his voice. His tone was assured and confident. "Get on with it, Ian. This is a thirty-five minute drive, and I want him hissing by the time we get home."

If someone had insulted him with contempt or in a threatening manner, Ian would have known how to react. If someone had made a snide, sarcastic comment, he wouldn't hesitate to rip into them. But when someone spoke in a calm tone of voice with what they felt to be a truth, his instincts shut down.

Ian looked over at Douglas and caught the big guy nervously chewing his lip. He looked as if he didn't want Ian to obey.

"Don't make me repeat myself, Ian. I'd be awfully disappointed. Then I'd have to drive all the way back to drop you off."

Ian didn't want that. He didn't want that at all.

Putting a hand on Douglas's thigh, he felt the warmth of desire even through the denim. Telling himself that he was not inventing the wheel, Ian swallowed his nervousness and moved his hand over the even warmer bulge. Never before had a zipper seemed more complicated, more stubborn to find or to pull down. Fitting his hand down within the trousers, Ian's fingers brushed against metal, leather, soft fur, and musk nearly palpable.

Ian's own cock throbbed to be released, stimulated wildly due to circumstance, environment, and command. He used its discomfort as an excuse to slide down. Easing the weight of Douglas's sex outside of his jeans, Ian found it just as impressive as he remembered. Adorned in the leather and steel-ringed contraption, the head glistening nearly as red as the curls at its base, it reminded him of weaponry. Ian bent low and ran his tongue over the bulbous head, slick with salty pre-come.

The big werewolf squirmed against the seat as Ian's curiosity bloomed into full-blown enthusiasm. He could tell that Douglas wanted more, that he wanted the depths of Ian's throat.

Teasing the silky, hot flesh wherever the cage would permit him, Ian was rewarded with a broken groan. He cherished the sound. Yet wanting more of such signs of power and praise, Ian played his tongue across Douglas's foreskin, pushed his tongue into the slit. Closing his lips around the crown was merely instinctual.

Douglas shoved up hard and twitched downwards slowly. A guttural, long hiss sounded against the splatter of rain on windows. It resonated like a melody combined.

Ian's jaw shifted easily, but getting the werewolf's cock down his throat was no easy task. Leaking steadily, the juice of Douglas's balls made Ian's palate sing and his stomach hungry for more. Out of greed, Ian drew on the big wolf with pursed lips, twice, three times, and more. The leather and steel mattered little as Ian opened his throat for the lengthy shaft.

The long sigh that came from Douglas's lips was a dead giveaway.

"Ian. You *do* know the difference between licking and sucking, so I won't remind you." Gray sounded firm and with an edge of warning in his voice.

Sulking like a scolded pup, Ian backed off with a pop and a kiss. He did as Gray said, licking Douglas, but only with a quarter of his previous enthusiasm. What good was sampling a delight when it could be consumed, drawn upon like a fount for the thirsty?

It wasn't nearly as fun.

Deciding to make his own joy, Ian allowed his free hand to wander down into his crotch. He found the lengthened pole to be heavy behind the zipper, rubbing his sex in time with his licking. His mind filled with images of Gray on his back with his legs in the air, keening and wailing as Ian drove his cock in and out of a tight, pink hole. It was a difficult image; one Ian warred with, both for its hotness and its inconceivability. He couldn't sustain the vision of Gray so submissive for long, but what little he could imagine made his balls lurch.

Douglas continued to moan, but not as loudly, not as desperately. Ian's own moans -- there were many with every movement of the automobile -- might have sounded obscene if they hadn't been muffled.

By the time they arrived at the cabin, Ian had come inside his pants.

* * * * *

"You can leave him be, Ian. We're home." Gray parked the SUV and turned off the ignition. Turning around to gaze at Douglas and Ian, his eyes reflected a silver-blue shimmer.

Despite every nerve in Ian's body telling him to buck against authority, he rose up onto the seat. Douglas was panting, leaning against the door, and shivering so, that Ian felt almost guilty at having achieved his release while Douglas was waging war against his own. "Sorry, big guy."

Gray smiled wickedly at Douglas before scrunching his nose and scowling at Ian. "You came."

Offended by Gray's near condescending tone, Ian balked. He was not some trained dog, even if the Lord of the Red Wolves beside him liked to play one. "What? Was I supposed to wait for your permission?"

Shaking his head, Gray replied with a sarcastic chuckle, "No. You're *nowhere* near trained for that."

To say that he felt small would have been putting it mildly. No one liked to be told they were a novice, even if they were. Gray's words cut him like claws. Worst of all in Ian's mind, it made him want to aspire to *be* trained.

Gray directed his attention back to his werewolf. "Douglas?"

"Yes, M," Douglas stuttered.

Leaning between the front seats, Gray held out a long-fingered hand, two fingers pointing towards Douglas's lips. "Open your mouth and get my fucking fingers wet."

Between his heavy breathing and the were's beside him, Ian didn't know which one of them was more excited -- Douglas to do as told or him just watching the erotic display. Douglas parted his lips and moved forward.

Ian listened to the suckling, the greedy sounds, and watched how Douglas closed his eyes and devoted himself to the task. Absolutely breathtaking.

Gray allowed Douglas only moments before withdrawing his saliva-slick fingers. Ian's eyes followed those glistening digits as they traveled down to pinch the ruby crown of Douglas's sex. A simple circular motion, a teasing feather of a touch was what it looked like to Ian, yet it must have struck a trigger with Douglas. The big guy struggled to keep his eyes open, to return Gray's intensive stare.

"You want to come, I know. You've been so patient and well-behaved, and you know how that pleases me, don't you?"

Douglas gave his master a reply with overeager nods and trembling hips.

Using the two wet fingers and his thumb, Gray surrounded the girth and stroked very firmly. "Come on, then, cur," Gray demanded. "Show me how strong you are and how much you love me. Come for me."

Still nodding in an almost compulsive manner, Douglas unlocked his sharp teeth and sighed. Before he could draw another breath, there was a choking sound. Panting. On command, Douglas shook.

It was an amazingly hot moment for Ian to see.

Gray moved his palm down just in time to capture the white spurts of cream. "Good. Good cur. So damn good."

Speechless, Ian might have verbally agreed. He might have even dared to breathe had Gray not lifted his palm, glistening with seed, to his lips. Like milk to a kitten, he took small laps.

Exhausted and lying back against the seat, Douglas kept his eyes on Gray. A minute, maybe two passed with Douglas staring at Gray, Gray staring back at him, and Ian staring at both of them.

Chapter Eight

Gray suggested that Ian and Douglas go for a run while he prepared the house and examined his purchases.

Inside the truck, Douglas began shedding his clothes immediately as Ian tried to convince himself that it wasn't out of any need to obey that he complied as well. The rain would do his hot blood good.

Gray collected the abandoned shirts, pants, wallets, and Ian's underwear, as Douglas wore none. They left their shoes and socks in the truck before stepping out into the rainfall.

Ian dropped to the damp earth and transformed immediately. Weak from his recent orgasm, Douglas took much longer to become fully wolf. Waiting patiently, Ian watched Gray step out of the truck. Umbrella springing open and with bags and clothes in hand, he strode off to the cabin without even a backwards glance.

Douglas moved to Ian's side, a great ferocious beast, he gave a long, toothy yawn.

They set off together, Douglas and he, running side by side into the very same woods that had first introduced Ian to Douglas. Ian led for the first ten miles, setting an easy enough pace for the larger, yet more exhausted beast at his heels.

It wasn't until Douglas caught his strength that Ian fell back. Douglas's stride was much bigger; his muscular limbs handled the muddy terrain far better. Content just to keep up, Ian's mind wandered past direction, obstacles, and slopes and into reality.

Running behind Douglas, Ian senses were assaulted by the pungent fragrance of cleansed earth. There was nothing that made him happier at that moment. Happy was a word that didn't even belong in his vocabulary. Just being around Gray and Douglas had made Ian happy.

What would it be like to have someone who could not only calm him down, but to have someone whom he could trust enough to allow them to that? Ian wondered. *What would it be like to not think, not be the one in control?*

Douglas seemed to crave Gray's commands, punishments, and especially his praise. Whereas "happy" might not have been one of his usual emotions, envy was quickly becoming a staple.

By the time they arrived back at the cabin, complex thoughts were replaced by the scents of dinner, dirt, and rain. Rejuvenated, Ian was anxious to step inside of the warm cabin.

They took their human forms under the awning for the door. Douglas went in first, and Ian followed, ready for whatever Gray had in store. The ebony were had had two-and-a-half hours alone, and Ian was sure he had been up to something. He also knew that Gray had included him in those plans.

Ian thanked the moon for small mercies.

* * * * *

They were met by Gray holding two of the largest, fluffiest towels Ian ever had the pleasure of folding around his limbs. Placing a towel over each man's shoulders he gave Douglas a salacious look before walking away.

Douglas rubbed the towel over his head and face, then quickly over his body before casting it aside. He seemed anxious to join Gray beside the fire. Naked, muscular flanks shifting, he left Ian's side. Not one to be shy, Ian finished drying himself and set his towel on a nearby chair. With the fire crackling with life, the cabin was warm enough for him not to miss clothing as he headed over to join the party.

Six large bowls and several small plates rested on a blanket along with a six-pack of bottled water, which Doug went for the second he sat down. Ian smelled short ribs, goat cheese, shredded pork, and cocktail sausages, cheeses, and breads as well. His attention went to the meats, but he ended up sitting next to the cheese plate.

Douglas finished his water with a few strong pulls before stretching out lengthwise beside Gray's hip. Smiling, Gray was ready with a sausage pinched between his fingers to feed his male. "Help yourself, Ian," Gray said. "I know you two earned it out there on the terrain. I would have joined you, but *someone* had to tend the den."

"True. True." Ian reached for the bowl with the shredded pork. The food was good, despite the Susie Homemaker arrangement, and he ate without hesitation while Douglas seemed to be content to be fed from Gray's fingers. Just watching the two of them made his stomach feel heavier than the food did.

It was sickening in that "too sweet" way, even more so as Ian pretended not to notice the snake awakening against Douglas's leg. Everything they did his psyche found enticing, erotic, and envious. Sure that they breathed just to make him jealous, Ian nearly choked on a slice of cheese as Gray fed Douglas one sausage from his own lips.

Narrowly escaping Douglas, who sought more contact, Gray slapped his lover's cheek, hard. Ian saw the smile Douglas tried to suppress.

Looking at Ian as if he might understand how it felt to have a greedy lover, Gray took some food and drink for himself. Even as he tended to his own hunger, Gray didn't forget about his lover. A short rib in one hand, Gray toyed with Douglas's nipple with the other. "Do you think that I should apologize for Doug and myself, for our selfishness last winter?" he said.

Hell, yes, was the first thing that popped into Ian's head. It took a bit longer to arrive at an audible answer. "Well, you only get a few vacations a year, I take it ..."

"So the answer would be no?" Gray didn't seem to buy Ian's reasoning.

"You don't have to apologize for anything. I know the policy of the lone wolf and how pack wolves treat them. I was interrupting ... your thing."

"Lone wolf, huh? Werewolves weren't meant to live alone, without the security and affirmation of a pack. You have no one?"

"My mother lives in Maryland, my sisters, too. But they do their own thing. It's not really my speed."

"No males to rough house with," Gray supposed aloud. "No one to work your aggression out with."

Ian shrugged. His sisters were fierce in their own right, especially his eldest sister Jada, but Ian wasn't ready to admit his family was a matriarchy just yet. "Something like that."

"I would offer you acceptance within our pack, but somehow I don't think you'd be happy with that situation, either."

Just about fed up with the psychoanalysis, Ian continued to eat, although he was nearing his fill. He had eaten half of the pork and a surprising amount of cheese, olives, and shrimp, but having another one of the soft bread rolls, Ian had a theory of his own. "Why, because *you're* not happy with it?"

"This isn't about me," Gray laughed. "I am just fucking thankful to have him. It's like turning a frown upside down actually. You're not even frowning so there's hardly anything to work with. Besides, I know it bothers you that Doug and I are in love."

"What you two have isn't love."

Gray's face betrayed a hint of confusion, but only for a moment. "No? You don't think so?"

Ian had seen lovers before. He knew what love smelled like, what it tasted like on a man. He had never been the one to be madly in love, but that didn't make a damned difference. The level of need, caring, control, and depth between Gray and Douglas was something he couldn't fathom. "I'm sure of it," Ian said. "Love isn't that fucking strong."

Gray looked just as suspicious of that statement. "Does it bother you?"

Another stupid question, Ian thought. "You know that it does." Spying the strawberry halves and banana slices covered with shaved nuts, he figured it was time

for the last course. The dessert course. His fingers and eyes found their way to the bowl with jaded intent. "Anyway, what's with the *hors d'oeuvres* and bowls?"

"I'm just that much of a fairy."

Ian heard the sarcasm, but would not acknowledge it. He really didn't want to agree, so he kept his head down and opened his mouth for dessert only. He felt that there should have been ice cream, whipped cream, or chocolate with the fruit and nuts, but it wasn't bad. He ate it so he didn't have to look at the lovebirds.

"Ian, would you like some ice?"

"What?"

Gray reached for one of the larger bowls, lifted it to show Ian the ice cubes filling it.

"Um. No."

Gray shrugged before setting the bowl back down in front of him. He chose a cube from the pile and held it up for his riveted observer. "Douglas?"

Douglas got up off the floor and onto his knees. He moved closer to Gray and nodded.

Ian had a handful of the trail mix dessert in his hand, but it never made it to his mouth. It wasn't that his mouth wasn't open; it was because Ian couldn't move. Right in front of him, Gray took the ice cube and placed it against Douglas's pink nipple.

Douglas closed his eyes and hissed, his cock filling and rising before Ian's eyes. Gray moved the ice cube around the bud, bringing out a rosy glow, stimulating the nipple to hardness. Douglas shivered, visibly enjoying Gray's stimulation. Gray moved the ice cube across muscled pecs to Douglas's other nipple, shocking it into the same salute.

The ice cube didn't last long, but left a glistening trail down the ripped abs of the beast.

Ian could feel his own skin tingling as he watched the growth of red fur shimmer over Douglas's limbs.

Before the ice completely dissolved, Gray put the cube into his mouth. He asked again, "A piece of ice, Ian?"

His mouth moved, but nothing came out. Not "No," "Hell, yeah," or even "Maybe." Nothing.

Gray nodded "You know, sometimes we don't know what we need, or we figure that life has dealt us a bum hand. It doesn't get any worse than being an omega, right? It doesn't get any worse than being alone? So, we don't demand anything, and we don't dare ask for anything. But the truth of the matter is that we should. Douglas could take my body, and he did whenever he felt like it ... but he wanted more. He wanted what he couldn't take as well. He wanted my happiness and my pleasure, and he wanted intimacy. So I *demand*ed devotion and am very pleased to say that I have that. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement. I'm thinking you might *want* something. If that's the case, I'd like to hear it."

He wanted *something* all right, but Ian wanted that something to be nonverbal and gratuitous, like things should be between males. "Can't we just ... *do* stuff?" he snapped. "All this talking, all these games and words. Fuck, you sound like a human. Can't we just --"

"What, Ian?" Laughing, Gray held up his hands. "What *stuff* do you want us to do? We're not performers! Do you want us to do 'stuff' to you? Do you want to be serviced in some way?"

Looking to Douglas for help against the verbal tirade, Ian figured the red were would understand his need for action instead of psycho-evaluation. He was wrong. Head bowed, Douglas was no help.

Like a wolf on a wounded animal, Gray continued, "What. Do. You. Want? Be a fucking were and ask for it! Sitting there with your cock as hard as stone and your mouth open ... You can't beat me into giving it to you. You can't pity me into it. Fucking ask!"

On the spot, upset by the confrontational tone, Ian didn't know where to start. The first thing that came to mind was insults. He wanted to ask Gray where the hell he got off on talking to him as if he were a cub. The fact that Gray was right just pissed Ian off even more.

Gray was patient, sliding his arm around Douglas's thighs, gingerly caressing the firm tree trunks. They kissed before, filling their time with gentle, pecks, and Ian wanted to say "THAT! That's what I want!" Instead he said, "I want to be calm."

Chapter Nine

Ian was anything but calm.

Chained face down to the bed, naked, and vulnerable, his heart couldn't beat any louder. He could have changed, evoked the wolf's strength to easily snap the steel, but he couldn't concentrate long enough to do anything more than shiver with the growth of fur.

Claws raked his shoulders and back, not enough to break the skin, but hard enough for him to squirm. Hands groped and squeezed his ass cheeks. The claws belonged to Douglas, and the hands belonged to Gray. The nipple clamps attached to him belonged to no one.

Ian could stop none of it, and he didn't want to. Humping the mattress with half of his excitement, the rest of it was emitted from his lips. Moaning against the pillows, Ian told himself that giving up that much control was foolish, that relaxing even further would *be* foolish.

Then lips touched his skin. "Ohh, yeah," Ian hissed. "Oh, hell, yeah."

Ian was sure sex between males wasn't supposed to be so...leisurely and attentive, that what Douglas was doing to him couldn't possibly be manly. The kisses went down Ian's spine, along his sides, making him shudder and sigh like a willing bitch. "How in the hell is this supposed to make me calm?"

"Does it feel good?" Gray asked.

"It feels great, but I'm nowhere near calm."

Laughing Gray slapped Ian's ass. "This is nothing. Douglas, show him what 'something' is."

Something was Douglas's warm, wet tongue on Ian's ass cheeks and between them. Intimate and damn good, there was nothing that brought a smile to a wolf's face faster than ass worship, except the long, sweet licking of his balls and hole. "Oh. Oh, that's ..." There were no words for the shivering, sweet bliss that enveloped him.

"It's good. Yes, I know. It's just not good enough to get you to relax. You're too tense to really enjoy this, but it's okay. Rome wasn't built in a day."

Eyes closed, ass raised, Ian wasn't anywhere close to being calm.

Douglas spread his cheeks wider, giving Ian more delights with his tongue. Ian's cock ached, seemingly curious as to why his hands had abandoned it. Although the mattress beneath him provided good friction, Ian wanted more. He opened his eyes and his mouth, twisting around to get a glimpse of Gray. He wanted to beg, but the words wouldn't come. Nothing but broken sighs escaped his lips as Douglas pushed his tongue inside of him.

"I should tell you that you're a lucky cur. This kind of attention is very premature for such a blank slate like you. You've done nothing to earn it," Gray said.

The old Ian might have felt offense at that statement, but chained to the bed, a prisoner of luck, he wasn't about to complain in the slightest. Hell, he wanted to agree.

Gray stretched out beside Ian and put a firm hand on his waist. He seemed fascinated by Ian's expressions, caressing him like a spooked filly. Ian leaned forward, hoping for a kiss, but Gray evaded him with ease and a smile. In that moment, specifically and intrinsically, Ian despised him.

"Not a damn thing have you done, and you want something," Gray hissed.

He made it sound so unreasonable, made it sound like Ian didn't want to use his lips to return the favor to both of them. "What can I do?"

"Oh, eagerness. I like that!" The offer suited Gray to a tee. Showing his growing white canines, Gray looked as if he had been waiting for Ian's offer all day. Instead of giving him an order, he commanded over Ian's back. "Cease, Douglas. Get the gel."

Douglas's tongue left Ian as he left the bed. Curious, Ian tried again to twist around and spy.

Gray tapped him on the shoulder. "You wanted to know what you could do. You can rise up on your knees. Put that ass up high."

It was awkward to get to his knees with his arms outstretched and linked to the rail, but Ian managed it. "Like that?"

"Yes," Gray affirmed. "That's perfect. That's good, Ian."

Praise was something he wasn't used to. He had heard Gray praise Douglas, but the significance of receiving his first praise was immense. The feeling was purely narcotic. He wanted more.

More became the center of his universe as the bed shifted with Douglas's returning weight. Moving directly against Ian's furred buttocks, Douglas's huge hand gripped Ian's hip.

A cool, hard plug, slippery with lube, teased his hole. Opening himself to the intrusion of the toy, Ian dropped his head and tried not to swoon. He failed as he felt the grasp of slender fingers around his cock. The grip on Ian's cock from base to tip was tighter than any pussy or ass he had ever fucked. Gray's hand was divinity and stimulated from both ends, Ian was religious enough to know.

Douglas wiggled and twisted the plug all of the way inside of Ian's body, stretching his channel wider and wider. He pushed and pumped, fucking Ian with the toy. It was pain wrapped in pleasure. Just when he imagined it couldn't get any better than that moment, the butt plug was gone. Despite his best efforts to retain that wonderful full feeling, Ian was empty.

Douglas's hips moved up against his, and the sun rose again in Ian's eyes. Looking at Gray for some hint as to whether he would finally receive what his fantasies hoped, Ian found him gazing back at Douglas. He was smiling.

"It's time to see what he's really made of."

Ian wished that he could have seen it, but seeing anything was impossible. His world only consisted of the searing, hard intrusion of the biggest cock he had ever had. Douglas gave him no quarter, spreading his muscles as easily as firm fruit. Ian's roars filled the room.

"Another gift," Gray teased, close to his chestnut, furry-tipped ears. "Doug's cock is like a drug. It'll make you want to howl. Lucky you, that I'm even allowing you a sample."

Oh, yes, Ian agreed passionately in his mind. They were past being intimate. They were one. Ian's sweet spot didn't stand a chance.

"Hell! He's tight as a virgin bitch," Douglas snarled.

Ian was too busy seeing stars to deny it. Gray's hand left Ian's cock, but he hardly realized it. His cock ached with the beautiful sensation that preceded orgasm. It was going to be the fucking king of all comes, and he welcomed every thrust of that monstrous shaft.

It surprised even Ian, dangling on that precipice called "Nearly There," when he heard Gray's voice. "No."

Douglas pulled back, all of the way. It was the second time Ian had been had been left open, alone, and beyond vulnerable. Throbbing, empty, Ian didn't dare look at Gray. He knew Gray wanted him to beg, to see him devastated or frustrated. Douglas was kissing Ian's spine, but it wasn't helping to soothe him like before. "This is fucking irritating ... I don't understand."

"You will, Ian. Want more?"

"Yes, damn it!" He held nothing back after that outburst. "Yes, I want more! I want a kiss. I want you in my arms, and I want Douglas back inside of me. All you want is to tease me, break me down, and drive me fucking insane!"

"Whoa." Hands held up in mock offense, Gray seemed to think Ian's plight was humorous. "We've created a monster, D. And he has demands!"

Ian clenched his teeth to trap every vile retort that yearned to be spoken.

"Ian. If you want something, you have to *give* something. Hogging all of the pleasure for yourself ... that's not how the game works."

"Not at all," Douglas cosigned with nip of Ian's wiggling ass. "He's a greedy pup."

Ian disagreed with all of it, but somehow he knew a verbal denial would only lead to more frustration.

Gray got up from the bed and moved to the oak dresser on the other side of the room. He returned with a broad leather paddle, perforated with holes. Even if Ian was furious, his wild emotions weakened at the sight of it. Werewolves were no weaklings, and Ian had never shirked any battle, but just plain masochistic, he was not. "Y-you're going to paddle me?"

"Of course not. Douglas is."

Ian watched in the mirror as Gray handed the paddle off to Douglas. Stepping before Ian, the black-haired demon smiled as he undressed. Once again Ian was treated to the lean, swimmer's build, the decoration of black fur on white, white skin. "You are going to service me," he said. "You're going to give me the best licking a cur ever gave, and you are going to do your damndest not to be distracted. Got it?"

Watching Gray's hand drop between his legs, watching fingers weave through dark curls to clasp a thick, glistening erection, Ian was already distracted. As Gray stroked himself, it was all Ian could do to remember to breathe.

"Ian? Do you understand?"

Ian's eyes moved up from Gray's cock to his wicked grin. Courage and bravado aside, Ian nodded because he wanted to at least try.

Douglas laughed, cracking the paddle against his palm. Loudly.

Gray found the key to Ian's handcuffs and released his wrists. Ian supposed it was Gray's way of giving him a break, but realized his extended arms would be a hindrance.

Putting his knees upon the mattress, Gray moved in front of Ian, placing that beautiful cock right at eye level. He reached out his long claws and grabbed a fistful of brown hair. Bringing Ian's nose flush into his musky curls, Gray urged him on. "Come on. Show me what a good dog you are, Ian. Lick me. Suck me ..."

Gray's hips fit easily into Ian's hands as he moved to obey. Ian barely recognized the eager part of himself that engulfed Gray from tip to base in an instant. Gray hissed. His hands dropped to Ian's shoulders with a difference in finger padding, sharper claws. Ian ignored the nails raking his shoulders and focused on the heady, male scent before him. Gray tasted like silver; sharp and pure was his pre-come. It suited Ian's palate to a tee.

He drew back to the tip and flicked his tongue across the head while Gray swore above.

Dizzy with Gray's growing scents, Ian grew bold. His fingers wandered around narrow hips to clutch soft, downy globes. Cupping Gray's ass in the palms of his hands, Ian brought the lithe were closer than close, sucked his way back down to the root. So consumed with Gray, Ian had forgotten about Douglas. A swoosh and a crack reminded him rather quickly.

His right ass cheek burned as the paddle struck home at the most inopportune of moments. Nearly choking, Ian bucked forward in shock.

"Watch those teeth, cur," Gray drawled far too dreamily to be truly opposed to the idea of a little pain.

Ambition curbed, all of Ian's plans for making Gray come as swiftly as a green cub were out of the window. Nothing like the sting he had expected, each blow of the paddle with Douglas's great strength behind it made the room spin, and the holes in the damn thing only made the fire burn hotter across Ian's skin.

Douglas alternated his blows from left cheek to right cheek, then again in a different pattern.

Ian brought his hands away from Gray's ass, needing one to brace his jolted body and the other to hold Gray's cock straight for his lip's wet kisses. At the onset, it was all he could do to kiss and lick and bear every blow. *Failure was not an option*, he told himself as another blow threatened to break that resolve.

"He's got a beautiful design ... Red half-moons, M," Douglas added with another hard thwack. "Gonna be hot."

Raking Ian's shoulders with his claws, Gray caused a different sort of pain, a different sort of arousal. As much as Ian did not want to call it that, it was indeed arousal. Yet, it was like no arousal Ian had ever felt. His body sang in its entirety, his face flushed with effort, his lungs pounding for air, his cock so swollen, and there was no way "calm" was even at his periphery. Tears of exertion were at the corners of his eyes.

Gray's hand cupped the back of Ian's head, urging him to concentrate, coaxing him to focus.

Douglas struck again with the paddle, and Ian shuddered in mock orgasm. Throbbing all over, the separate blows ceased to register. With sensations occurring in ebbs and tides, Ian rediscovered his focus. Covering his fangs with his lips, Ian opened his throat to the prodding shaft. Slowly and carefully, he descended, beginning the suck and pull on salty, satin flesh.

"Good boy. Good cur ..." Gray murmured as he stroked Ian's head in praise.

Air was such a moot point as the paddle struck home again. He knew that Gray was sincere. The power of that knowledge was an epiphany that Ian could not deny. He wanted his praise. Swallowing around Gray's penis, Ian felt him begin to twitch.

Bowed over, hair hiding his face, Gray's voice betrayed his unsteadiness. Stuttering, he waved his hand over Ian's back. "Douglas Leave off with the ... just stop. Put your cock back in him. He's earned --"

Blast after blast of Gray's nectar flowed into Ian's throat. It was too fast for him to savor, so he pulled back to capture the last jets of come upon his tongue. While Gray shuddered and cursed above him, Ian drew upon his tip, thirsty for more. Nothing deterred him, not even the hard pressure of Douglas's prick finding its way back into Ian's feverish, sensitive body.

Despite the burn of invasion and the weight of fullness, Ian was focused upon cleaning Gray's prick from base to tip, licking the softening shaft with waning, nervous

motions. When Ian moved to do the same for the furry sacs beneath, Gray stopped him.

With Ian's chin between his fingers, Gray soundlessly urged Ian to look up. Ian found himself captured by blue-silver eyes. Trapped between sensation and emotion, the sensation of Douglas taking him like a bitch and Gray's appraising stare, Ian was in awe.

Gray bent down and fastened his lips upon Ian's. Eager and receptive, Ian's lips were already parted. He had wanted Gray's kiss and Gray's tongue for so long, yet even as he received both, he was far too overwhelmed to do anything but submit to the werewolf's dominance.

Gray kissed like a whirlwind, his tongue coiled around Ian's, pushed and prodded in ways that had Ian whimpering. His hand moved down over Ian's belly, to close over the jutting prick between brown-furred thighs.

It took no more than four tight pulls to take Ian from euphoria to nothingness. The way that his body seized and shook, the way that his vision blurred and his strength depleted was like no orgasm that Ian had ever felt.

He had been shocked once in life, a faulty lamp with a metal cover had been carrying a wild current from a frayed wire. Luck and an old man with a board had saved him from dying. It would have been a strange death, one that involved the paradox of currents and paralysis, fear and peace, leading softly to the darkness. Ian recalled the fading pulsation as he flooded Gray's hand with seed.

Douglas pulled out of him, as Ian and Gray continued to kiss. From the corner of his eye, Ian saw a pale hand beckoning. He saw Douglas answer that summons, moving behind Gray like a great shadow.

Gray broke from the kiss, his moist red lips spread wide as Douglas entered him. Massive, muscular arms pulled Gray back and away from Ian, leaving him free to collapse upon the bed. There was nothing Ian could have done to prevent it, no anger behind the loss, either. Douglas held Gray prisoner, tight to his chest. Ramming his prick deep into that lithe, pale body, Douglas sank his canines into Gray's shoulder, red rivulets swirling down his chest. The ebony-haired werewolf hardly reacted to the brutality with which he was taken. Cock hardening again, Gray reached up and behind him to stroke red locks. They were beautiful and right together, even more so than before, but Ian was much too tired, content, and vulnerable to be jealous.

Chapter Ten

Something smelled delicious. It summoned Ian from his deep slumber. *Food.* Opening his eyes to the dim light pouring in through the window, he assumed it to be early morning.

Gray was beside him in the bed. Although it stunned him to think he had slept underneath the same covers, Ian made no move to touch pale nakedness.

Ian left the king-sized bed in search of the male who had taken up the majority of the bed. At least, he assumed so. He had slept like a vampire in torpor, heavy, still, and dreamless. Yet, somehow Ian had passed being well rested and returned back to weary.

He found his boxers and pulled them on. Just raising his leg seemed like a chore, especially as his ass and hips recalled their harrowing abuse.

While the past night's pain murmured through him like the after effects of drug, Ian was grateful for his accelerated healing ability. A look back at the bed suggested Gray would think the same when he awoke from his slumber.

Leaving the room with soft footfalls, Ian found Douglas in the kitchen wearing plaid pajama bottoms and a black leather collar. *God, but that is a sight I wouldn't mind seeing every morning,* Ian thought.

Walking up to the big Were, Ian peered into the crock-pot he was tending. It was corned beef and cabbage, something far too old-fashioned and matronly to be frequent in his loner existence. "Oh. Now that smells delicious."

"It's Gray's favorite. He's half-Irish and half-Russian, so if it has potatoes, cabbage, or boiled meat, he's into it. He really likes sausages and sauerkraut, but they didn't have his favorite sausage in town."

"They've got a good bakery, though."

"That would be for breakfast tomorrow. Orange-cranberry muffins." Motioning to the top of the refrigerator, Douglas commented about the cake box.

"Tomorrow morning?" Looking over at the clock on the wall, it occurred to Ian that what he had assumed as dawn was actually dusk. "You've got to be kidding me. It's nearly eight?"

"Did you have something you needed to do today?"

It had been years -- hell, he'd had been a cub the last time he slept so long and peacefully. It *was* a Saturday, though. Not that it mattered much to Ian. Day laboring had no set schedules. "No, but --"

Sampling a slice of beef that Ian's stomach growled for, Douglas leaned over the pot. "Well, then, a bit of rest is not going to kill you. You needed it, anyway."

Ian combed his fingers through his hair, hoping it didn't look that bad. "I'm just usually a light sleeper most the time."

Douglas snorted. "Well, you slept like a babe last night *and* this morning *and* this afternoon."

"So. Gray is still asleep."

Deeming the food ready, Douglas switched the pot to simmer. "I took him twice last night, and he took me once this morning. He needed the sleep, too."

Ian was sure Douglas didn't *mean* to make him feel two feet tall, but the thought of them having sex that he hadn't witnessed and that had occurred right next to him caused Ian to frown. Of course, there was the unspoken, yet implied part about him being a lightweight that disturbed Ian as well.

Douglas noticed the sour look on Ian's face. Opening the liquor cabinet, he pulled out a bottle of expensive scotch. He chose two tumblers from a different cabinet and gestured for Ian to join him at the breakfast bar. Pouring two inches of brown gold into the tumblers and handed Ian one. "Here you go."

Ian knocked back the scotch with one swift motion. Candy never burned so sweet, he felt. "Can I have another?"

Douglas obliged. "Feeling a little off, huh?"

"That's one way to describe it."

"Yeah. I understand."

Ian didn't think that Douglas really understood, not truly. "You're his lover. He's your lover. You have him, and he has you. How can you understand? I'm a guest in your den, in your experience. A guest! Nothing more." As soon as the words left his mouth, Ian regretted them.

Douglas raised his tumbler and took a sip, understanding written all over his face. "Yes it is a shock when you realize how good it is to submit."

Ian's prepared defensive rant sank before it even lifted. "It'd be stupid for me to deny it."

"Don't look so depressed about it, Ian. It's not a death sentence by far."

Holding out his glass for more scotch, Ian was not convinced. "Can I have another drink?"

"Sure."

The third shot went down a little too warmly, a little too easily. "I like ... I like you guys."

"Gray and I both like you. If we didn't, we would have never shared ourselves, our secrets with you."

"... Yeah, but I just ..."

"You need time to get your head around everything. Don't worry. It takes time. " Finishing off his drink, Douglas capped the bottle and returned it to the cabinet. He went to a different cabinet, one that held dishware and glasses. "Ready to eat?"

Before Ian could answer, Gray stepped into the kitchen. "You know I am." He smiled at Ian, even as he headed straight towards Douglas. Kissing the giant at the center of his shoulder blades, Gray returned his attention to Ian. "I'm glad you're still here, that you didn't attempt to hightail it out of the window."

"I considered it." Telling the truth, Ian did his best not to sound jealous. "But Douglas was cooking, and there was scotch."

"Hard to resist, I know. He's a great cook and a great provider. He's a very good dog, aren't you, D?"

"For you, I am."

Wondering to himself, why the scotch had to be put away and whether good food was really worth the agony of being around lovers, Ian kept his tongue. He was too hungry to have to hunt on his way home.

Gray cocked his head, questioning Ian's glum attitude. He walked over to him and put his arm around Ian's broad shoulders. His lips touched Ian's neck, and instantly the were relaxed.

"We're going to a party tonight, a very special party. Would you like to be my dog for the night?"

Saying no was not a possibility, but yes came far too easily in light of Gray's interest in sucking the skin of his neck. Ian craned his neck to give Gray more room. Sure enough, the slender beast took advantage of it.

Gray's tongue traced the inner shell of Ian's ear, and Ian shuddered. "... I don't know. Around here? People know me around here."

Gray's teeth nipped his ear lobe. "No one will know you at *this* party even if they do know you." He followed the bite with the comforting swipe of his tongue, before leaving Ian entirely.

Leading the way to the living room, Gray was followed by Douglas with a serving tray in hand. They sat down on the sofa, and Douglas situated the tray on his lap while Gray reached for the remote. Ian watched them from the safety of the kitchen.

"So you will come, Ian?"

"I guess so," Ian answered.

"Good. You'll have fun, I promise."

Ian didn't doubt that he would. He didn't doubt that new wonders, pleasures, and jealousies would ruin him for their upcoming, unavoidable departure. Rather than gripe and brood about the future, however, Ian decided to accept the moment, to enjoy it without searching for his place and meaning within it. No amount of self-analyzing that would soothe him. The damage had already been done. He was more like a dog than a werewolf already, waiting eagerly for a command, for any attention. Douglas had his job and was feeding Gray from the plate in his lap. Ian wished he was in Douglas's place or that he had a job.

"Could you bring me a glass of ice water, Ian?"

Ian couldn't get to the refrigerator or the ice trays fast enough.

Chapter Eleven

The party was held on a farm in a house too lavish to belong to farmers. It was less than ten miles out of town, and true to Gray's words, Ian recognized not one soul.

For their entrance, Gray made both Douglas and Ian transform to their wolf forms. He had collars large enough for their thick, furry throats. Douglas wore a leather and silver collar; Ian's was leather and gold, the lesser metal. Still, the collar suited his brown fur well.

It was a security blanket, and it gave Ian a sense of belonging. It also said that he belonged to Gray. A badge of honor couldn't have shone brighter. Guests took notice immediately, and Ian's comfort magnified to full-blown pride.

Gray had fastened leather leashes to their collars, allowing the massive wolves to walk ahead of him. He kept a firm grip, however. Douglas led the way into the house, growling at Ian when he grew too interested in a female's cologne. Whenever Ian growled back, Gray yanked the leash for silence.

The spectators dressed both darkly and wickedly, loving the display. Their eyes followed the thin, pale man with the ebony hair walking two gargantuan wolves, one red and one brown.

The inside of the house was spacious, more so because what little furniture there was, was lining the walls. Modern benches made of polished wood lined the walls. A table sat in a corner with a young woman physically serving as a platter for a towering creation of fruits, cheeses, and breads. Servers walked around with trays of food, goblets of blood wine, whiskey, and champagne. Gray bypassed every offer.

A woman with icy-blond dreadlocks walked up to Gray and placed a hand on his shoulder. Ian considered growling, but noticed Douglas seated on his haunches, obedient and noble, so he did the same.

"Gray," the woman purred. "You know that I would pay a ridiculous amount for just an hour with your wolf, and you've gone and gotten another one. Perhaps you might like to consider six figures for a few hours with the brown one?"

Sarcastic and blunt, Gray responded, "No. I wouldn't."

"Oh, Gray, I hate you," she cried. "I absolutely hate you."

"And should I be upset by that?"

The woman pursed her lips before smiling. She shook her head as if she should have known the answer and walked away.

Gray tugged the leashes. Douglas came to his feet and so did Ian. They found an empty bench in the corner where Gray could sit and both weres could lie down. Still the center of attention and whispers, Douglas and Ian made the perfect guardians against any more offers.

"Don't worry, Ian. I would never whore a werewolf out to a vampire for any sum, especially one of mine."

One of his. Ian supposed that he was. On Gray's leash, at his feet, Ian was proud. Despite the whispers and stares, he felt like a prince at court. He felt like he belonged.

* * * * *

Ian had never considered himself an exhibitionist or even a voyeur. He didn't even *know* people who admitted to being such, so the party was indeed an eye-opener. As casual as conversation, couples engaged in sex wherever: on the floor, up against the wall, on and over benches. Most every occurrence had a cluster of observers, and in some instances, the observers joined those they watched.

Gray held court, talking to friends and assholes, as he called them, before walking Douglas and Ian out onto the patio, where a particularly interesting scene was occurring. Ian recognized the sound of the werecat before he laid eyes on him.

Werecats weren't unknown to Ian. He had met a female some years back, but she was nowhere as exquisite as the albino male before him. In mid-transformation, his alabaster skin was covered in downy white fur, his tail long and thin. From his forearms and knees down, he had the limbs of a cat. Ian could see his tail, white with pale gray stripes. He had short, spiky white hair and yellow eyes that Ian glimpsed briefly. The werecat could hardly keep his eyes open, but then Ian could see why.

Held prisoner by a red leather leash around his throat and by the arms of the golem beneath him, the widespread thighs left no question that the cat was trapped on a gigantic cock.

Golems could easily be mistaken for competitors in the strong man competitions that appeared on sports channels late at night. Clothed, they looked human enough. Without clothing, they were definitely different. Golems were said to have tree trunk-sized necks, long torsos, ridges down their spines, and a short stub of tail. It was also said that Golems had two sets of arms and that the lower set revealed itself during periods of anger. All he had heard about the race was simply gossip, whispers, and

legends. And while he had never met one before, he was almost certain that the creature before him was one.

The golem was of Asian descent, with long, fine, black hair glistening like oil. His golden skin contrasted well with the werecat's pale body. While his top set of arms was wrapped around a slender, pale chest, the lower set held apart the spread thighs of the werecat.

There was nothing left to the imagination. It was obvious that the golem's very large prick was inside of the werecat. It was also obvious that a lot of lube had been used and that the werecat was enjoying every slow thrust. The critter mewled low in a tone that no human could hear, but one that every animal and supernatural being could. It was a resonating sound that went straight to Ian's sex, reminding him of Douglas.

Ian's jaws hung wide, lolling tongue and drool inclusive. His cock felt like it was made of lead, and he almost dropped to his haunches to lick himself, before he remembered his whereabouts. Intent on watching the golem kiss the werecat's shoulder, play with the werecat's nipple rings, Ian barely registered the male that approached Gray.

Douglas didn't growl, so neither did Ian. The man seemed harmless enough, a tall Middle Eastern man wearing a turban ... a very muscular man. His dark olive skin was flawless, his amber eyes like honey. While he might have been mistaken for beautiful, Ian decided extremely handsome would suit him better.

He was a golem as well. Redirecting his attention away from the sultan-like figure, Ian noticed that Gray didn't reveal one ounce of disdain. In fact, the normally acerbic were seemed almost humbled.

The Arabian golem leaned down, taller than Douglas's human height by at least five inches. He took Gray's chin between his forefinger and thumb, and kissed the dark wolf as if the sweetness was a commodity owed. Douglas didn't even pretend to mind, which had to mean that the stranger wasn't a stranger at all. He had showed teeth at nearly everyone who had approached them, but for the Arabian, Douglas gave no more than a casual glance.

The kiss ended, and eyes of pure coal turned towards Ian.

Immediately, Ian got the impression that the Arabian was not a submissive by any means. Gray didn't seem cowed by him, but his lips and cheeks were rosy. Just having those warm brown eyes on him was enough to cause his body to shudder. He could only imagine what a kiss from that creature might do. Ian was extremely glad that the heat in his jowls couldn't surface beneath fur as he bowed his head and feigned interest in the ground.

"He's exquisite, Gray." The Arabian spoke in what sounded like more of a British accent than Middle Eastern, not that Ian really knew the difference.

"He has potential, and he's not *that* wild. He's strong and willing, and you know how good those two words go together."

Surprised by Gray's praise, Ian raised his head and panted. It earned him a scratch around the ears.

"Aye. That I do know." The Arabian gave Ian a smile and patted Gray on the shoulder. "You have the eye, Gray. I'm sure he'll turn out as fine and obedient as Douglas."

"More so, perhaps," Gray replied.

A look at Douglas told Ian that the red wolf didn't care one bit about the praise directed at him. He, too, received a good scratching from the Arabian, but never broke his calm façade.

Ian didn't want to seem overly proud, but in his mind, he was glowing with pride. Gray's words meant that something more was in store for him, that he had potential, and more importantly, that he would receive future attention. He had never doubted Gray and Douglas's connection, but he had never imagined that there could be a place for him within it, either.

Hope filled his gut just as surely as arousal had filled his loins. It clouded Ian's head and his senses just as surely as the werecat's howls grew louder. The golem had picked up his pace and was slamming his cock hard and swift inside the slender creature. His tail swishing, Ian felt that the critter *was* lucky, but nowhere near as lucky as he was.

* * * * *

"What do you think makes a good master?" Gray asked.

Back in his human form, yet still wearing his collar and leash, Ian fed Douglas slices of fancy ham and even fancier cheese, cream puffs filled with chicken salad. Douglas was also back to full Viking appearance. Doing as Gray had commanded, he jerked Ian off slow and tight, while Ian did his best not to drop another piece.

Under the supervision of their Master and a crowd of spectators, Ian carried out the task he had been given despite the addition of the distracting question. "I-I'm not sure."

Gray sat behind Douglas, so it was easy for Ian to feed him a few morsels as well as Douglas. Ian gave him a cube of cheddar and watched him savor it.

"I have a feeling that your criteria would be narrow," Gray said after finishing his cheese. "I think you would need someone hard, unrelenting, attentive, just a bit forceful, and highly intelligent. Someone physically overbearing, intimidating ... someone whom you would *never* entertain ideas of challenging. Unlike me."

Cocking his head in questioning, Ian couldn't figure out where that had come from. Douglas had his mouth open, and his hand squeezed Ian's shaft, reminding him of his task.

Ian hurried and placed a piece of ham in Douglas's mouth, while his eyes continued to seek an explanation from Gray's.

"I can see them in your eyes, the things you'd like me to do -- over or on what pieces of furniture, I can't be sure -- but I can see it."

Opening his mouth to disagree, Ian noticed a stern look from Douglas, daring him not to lie.

Directing Ian's attention to a short male with spiky brown hair and tanned skin, Gray obviously disliked the young Napoleon. "Denver over there is not a nice master. He holds no love for his slaves, submissives, or lovers, but any of them would walk in front of a train for him. Elise," Gray pointed out a flame-haired Amazon, "is a switch who just happens to wield a good whip, but her emotions open her legs too easily. She's always losing her lovers to stricter and crueller masters." Gray directed Ian's attention to an androgynous brunette. "Reva is like me. She has only one boy, and she'll switch for him, but only after he's suffered beautifully, right lover?"

Douglas swallowed the cheese Ian had just fed him. "Yes, M."

"Some dominate because they can. Others do it because they need to. Some are downright sadists, that vampire, Ladzo, for example."

Ian looked to a man that wasn't exactly beautiful. Striking nonetheless for his waist-length blond hair, the vampire was feeding on an older woman's breast. It looked painful, and not the good sort, by her expression.

"... Fucking sadist. Anyway, my point is that you need to choose your Master wisely. That is, when and if you decide to choose one."

Ian knew that there was some sort of significance to Gray's words. Gray's arms slipped possessively around Douglas and Ian was sure that that was significant as well. Douglas already belonged to Gray, but Ian had a choice to make. He had to make a sound choice and choose Gray. He had to ask, and even further, Ian had to make some sort of showing of devotion and loyalty.

"Remember, Ian, that the word 'submissive' has nothing to do with weakness. It is your gift to give, and you should never waste it on a weak Master."

"I don't plan to," Ian answered. Gray was definitely the one he wanted.

* * * * *

Anything and everything *except* weak, Gray brought the cat-o'-nine-tails down hard and swift against Ian's ass. Bucking against Douglas's hold, he looked up into dilated blue orbs and saw himself pleading. "Fuck. Oh, fuck, Douglas ..."

Douglas's cock lurched against Ian's stomach, smearing its slick fluid all over Ian's abs. Douglas held him up, braced him like a stone wall, while Gray drew back and delivered another group of stings.

"You're doing good, Ian. Damn good," Douglas growled in his lust-heavy voice.

"... 'M not sure. Don't know anything."

Douglas took in Ian's mindless state with a smile, hugged him tighter. "Yeah, and you've never been harder, have you? All these eyes on you, the sting, the power of the whip...Better not come till Gray says you can."

A Herculean task if ever there was one, Ian thought. Between the lashes and the friction of Douglas's furry body, between arousal and insanity, Ian didn't know what he was capable of. A glance to the side sent his already feverish temperature higher. Nearly half the people in the room were watching Gray whip Ian, trapped as he was in Douglas's arms. Some looked envious; others were visibly aroused and masturbating. It didn't matter how they were looking at Ian, the fact that they *were* made him shudder.

Gray stepped around to the side and brought the whip down over the back of Douglas's thighs. The blows that the big were received were harder, stung more. Ian could tell from the sound of Douglas's roar, yet he wasn't about to complain of easy treatment.

"Snarl all you want, both of you. Roar, but don't you dare fucking come," Gray commanded. "Either of you!"

It was no small favor that he asked. Ian could feel each of the nine braided cords when they struck him, their kisses having raised sensitive welts across his ass and thighs. The friction of Douglas jerking against him, Douglas's iron-tight grip, only ratcheted up the threat level. Adjusting his arms around the barrel waist, Ian thrust against the big were with every bite of the leather.

"What do I need to hear?!"

Ian had no clue, but Douglas answered, "Yes, M."

Gasping, Ian repeated the answer as best as he could. "Yes ... Oh, yes, M!"

"Good. Both of you." Moving to the side of his pair, Gray alternated between Douglas and Ian. Douglas was showing thicker fur, claws, and fangs. Ian did the same, with his tail was half extended. It was nothing he could control.

Downright euphoric was how it felt to be between wolf and man for Ian, like a wild dog trapped. He growled in a macho effort to avoid the swooning he wanted to do, yet several blows later, his strength was waning. Hairless with the depletion of his rage, the trembling weakness of an aching, blood-heavy cock, Ian barely noticed when the whip ceased to sound.

Douglas's tree trunk arms were the only things holding Ian upright. While Douglas was stronger, more used to pleasurable pains, Ian could still hear the wild thundering of the giant's heart against his ear.

Gray walked up and folded his arms around them both, guiding Ian and Douglas down to the floor. He showered kisses over Douglas's face, over Ian's. "Good. Very good. Such good dogs," he breathed.

Praise never felt so good or so refreshing to Ian. Floating on a cloud of happiness that no drug could duplicate, he felt Gray's hand on his thigh. It was nowhere near where he wanted it, but still intensely intimate. He looked down and saw Gray's other hand in the same position on Doug's thigh. Close to their cocks, but providing no direct stimulation, Gray gave firm, circular caresses.

"You two have made me very proud tonight. I just have one more request, though. Come for me, Doug." His voice as thick and alluring as honey, Gray leaned over and uttered, "You as well, Ian. I know you can do it on command. Show me that you

can bend, that you can be tamed." He pressed harder, drew his circles tighter on Ian's flesh.

Closing his eyes, Ian's focused on the circular motions, called upon the still-stinging sensation of his flesh. It was like searching a bed of diamonds for the one with the finest cut, trying to find that one trigger of brilliance when everything felt brilliant. Fucking brilliant.

Mouth open, Ian tried. He willed himself to let go, but it was not as easy as willing the wolf to emerge. Gray's lips touched his neck. His wet tongue trailed up to Ian's ear, and his knuckles brushed against the side of Ian's very erect prick.

Inspired, Ian began to shake, getting closer to his peak. It was all inches away, but somehow he still couldn't reach it. He looked at Douglas with creased, worried brows and trembling lips, but Douglas was preoccupied.

Douglas smiled as he came. With a rumbling, tight-lipped growl, he began to shake, and that took Gray's attention right off of Ian. Ian watched as Gray gave his kisses, his attention to Douglas's lips. His other hand was still on Ian's thigh, but the motions had stopped.

Such a good dog. Douglas took his reward with a French kiss that pushed Ian nearer to climax than the motions ever could. Listening to Gray moan into Douglas's mouth, to the slick suction of their connection, Ian's body began the tingling precursor. Throwing his head back as his breathing became more harried, more rushed, it took all of Ian's strength to focus, to *not* take himself in hand and hurry the tumult along.

The sound of woman moaning staggered his attention, and reflexively, Ian opened his eyes. The blushing woman, her mouth and eyes wide, was pleased by what she saw. Ian could have cared less. His concentration had been broken. Frustrated as doubts set in, he noticed the golem.

The towering Arabian leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes considered Ian intent and hot. So analytical were those honeyed eyes, so unimpressed -- yet their attention was all on Ian.

Douglas and Gray both turned their attention on Ian. Douglas's mouth attached to Ian's shoulder, and Gray's mouth sought his ear; still, neither touched Ian where he needed it.

Closing his eyes, Ian imagined what it would be like to have the attention of the golem, to have all four arms, hands caressing him, ass, thighs, cock, and back, all at once! The Arabian had skin that reminded Ian of smooth cinnamon. Ian thought of kissing such dark, beautiful flesh, being handled by the giant, and mostly, he thought of the Arabian's stare.

Thinking of amber, Ian came untouched for the first time in his life.

Chapter Twelve

On his side of the bedroom facing the window, the beauty of the sun filtered through the curtains and mesmerized Ian. That morning would be special. It would be the morning that he laid all that he was at Gray's feet, the morning that he truly accepted the fact that he would be second to Douglas.

It didn't bother him anymore.

It was the morning of want and need, two things that Ian didn't fear half as much as he had before.

Shifting under the heavy duvet cover, warm and comfortable with his nakedness, Ian was reluctant to get up. Ian still had the faint remembrance of smarting, ghosts of welts on his ass and thighs. It was the smell of sausages, onions, and peppers, of hot coffee, toast, and orange marmalade, which finally compelled him to rise. *Damn, that wolf knows how to cook*, he thought.

Pushing the spread off, he sat up in the bed. There was a plaid, flannel robe at the foot of the bed. Since Ian had seen neither Douglas nor Gray ever wear such a garment, he took it as a gift and fitted it around his nakedness. His stomach growled, and he came to his feet, promising it that food would come soon.

As he walked down the hallway into the living room, Ian's nose told him that something was wrong. There was a strong scent of spice in the air, and both Douglas and Gray's scents were faint. Frozen at the entrance to the kitchen, Ian caught sight of no werewolf.

"It's nearly noon, Ian. I take it you had a good night's sleep?"

"You?"

"Yes." The Arabian was dressed in a long, black shirt with matching linen pants. Standing at the stove, adding diced potatoes to the sausage, onions, and peppers already in the frying pan, the golem looked quite at home.

Going into the refrigerator for the carton of orange juice, Ian shook the container to sift the pulp. If the golem was going to be so blasé about intruding in another's home, the least Ian could do was pretend the same. "Did Gray and Douglas go out for a run?"

"No. They returned to their home this morning. There was some pack business that needed tending to."

The orange juice slipped from Ian's hand and fell to the floor. It took more than a moment for him to even realize it was missing from his palm. "But they ... they didn't say goodbye."

The Arabian bent down and picked up the carton. The top was secure, so nothing had spilled. "You were sleeping peacefully, and I told them not to."

Ian's temper surfaced with surprising speed. "What? Why? Why would you do that? Who the fuck are you to tell them that ... and what are you even doing here?"

Looking at Ian as if he was a cub throwing a tantrum, the Arabian looked down his long nose and smirked. "My name is Khalid Diya al Din, and this is *my* home. Gray and Douglas use it when they're in the area. They are friends of mine, very close personal friends. So that would be the reason behind my being here."

In just a few short moments, Ian's world had gone from one bright with hope and purpose to one of awkward reality. They had abandoned him, just as stealthily as he had left them. Ian felt hollowed by the realization. He would never be as close to Gray or Douglas as they were with each other. To make matters worse, they had left him alone with a stranger. "Oh ... I see."

Khalid rolled his eyes at the disappointment in Ian's voice. "Have a seat, Ian. Brunch is almost done, and I'm sure you're hungry."

The hospitality caught Ian off guard. "You don't want me to leave? I mean, this is your place, and I --"

"Sit. Down."

Khalid's voice had an authority that made Ian gasp. It might have been a threat or it might have been some mystical command, but Ian knew for certain that it wasn't a plea. So close, Ian could truly appreciate the intensity of Khalid's golden-brown eyes as he looked Ian over from his toes to his legs, from the open V of the robe and up to Ian's face.

When those eyes met his, Ian realized that being left alone with Khalid Diya-Whatever-His-Name-Was might not have been such a bad idea. Chiding himself about being so quick to cheat on Gray and Douglas, Ian shook his head trying to rid himself of compulsions. He sat down at the table and adjusted the robe around his morning-stiff prick.

Khalid walked up to the table and sat the orange juice in front of him. "Whether you wish to stay or leave is purely up to you, Ian. After all, we've never been formally introduced, and just because I taught Gray just a tad of what he knows, that's no reason for you to trust me. Understood?"

Ian understood everything, the sarcasm and all, quite clearly. It was beginning to make sense, all of Gray's advice, his hints, and his training. It was all beginning to have relevance. He didn't have to stay if he didn't want to, and he definitely didn't have to have to follow any lewd suggestion given by a hot, muscular Arabian. The choice was indeed his. "Yes, I understand," Ian answered.

"Good." Returning back to the stove, Khalid turned off the burners and divided the steaming contents onto two plates. He spoke while he worked. "Gray thought it was rather clever, the use of the letter M rather than Master. It has more of an intimate feel to it. When I instructed him how to tame his fiery wolf, I doubted that I would find a better student. Then again, werewolves *are* highly intelligent beings and sensual. To gain the loyalty, trust, and devotion of a werewolf is an honorable endeavor with numerous rewards. I had to gain it from both Gray and Douglas by respecting their union, improving it, strengthening it.

"I rarely train couples, but Gray had such a beautiful, raw talent for manipulating his alpha. It just needed a little honing. I don't consider myself arrogant for assuming that I know what everyone needs because there are times when I do not know. In those times, I thoroughly enjoy discoveries."

Listening to every word that Khalid spoke, the possibilities floored Ian. Caught between speculations and assumptions, the only thing he was certain of was that leaving was not an option. His heartbeat staggered as hope was reborn.

"When they approached me, I taught them about domestication. Gray thought it was absurd that a werewolf would behave as a common cur, would take to the collar and command. You should have seen him on a leash. For an omega, he made a very, very bad dog, the sort with a bottomless will and too much patience. Punishments never really got to him, but Douglas ... Well, he was brilliant, all needy, aching, and willing to serve."

Those qualities were his as well, at least the last three were. Ian longed to hear the word "brilliant" beside his name. He was especially interested in what sort of training and punishments this Khalid was capable of.

The golem brought over a steamy, fragrant plate and set it down in front of him. He was standing so close that Ian couldn't help but take in his scent -- exotic, alluring, and desiring all at once. It was a lovely scent. It reminded Ian of cloves. Gazing up at the tall male, Ian resisted the urge to smile. "I'm sure that your current partner is just as brilliant."

"I'm quite sure that he will be, or at least Gray seemed to think so. Would you like salt and pepper with your meal?" Khalid asked.

At that Ian did smile. "Yes, M."

Chapter Thirteen

Khalid was to be his partner. Or so Ian hoped.

At nearly six foot ten, Khalid was an impressive sight. He had bright amber eyes and waist-length hair with the gloss of liquid lacquer; his skin was a warm olive, his nose prominent and narrow, perfect for his chiseled features. Ian was particularly interested in Khalid's lips, which were wide and full, almost voluptuous. He held himself in a gentlemanly way Ian would have normally looked down on, but then it was hard to look down on a male who outweighed him, who towered over him.

It had been only three days since Ian accepted the invitation to stay with Khalid, and it was a hasty decision if ever a werewolf had made one. As he moved his sorry excuses for belongings into the cabin he thought he knew, Ian realized that he knew nothing.

His exploration of the cabin had only extended to the main bedroom, the kitchen, and the living room. There was a den, a large bathroom, and the guest bedroom he recognized from his trysts with Gray and Douglas. There was also a door that led to the basement, which contained the dungeon that Khalid presumed Ian had already visited.

Ian hadn't.

Ending the tour at the guestroom, Khalid motioned to the room that would be Ian's. "Do as you will with your room. It is your private space, and I will respect that," Khalid had informed him.

The room already was cozier than any place he had ever stayed in. The bedspread and linens were different, but other than that, Ian hadn't really noticed the details of the decor. It was hard to notice the walls when Gray and Douglas had been the focus of his attention.

A king-sized bed, a television, a chest of drawers, those were more important than the pale gray and dark green color scheme or the forest-like décor. A picture of a multi-limbed goddess hung on the wall beside the bed, and two large planters held slender

but leaf-pregnant trees. Ian had no plans of changing anything. He had no books, no knick-knacks, or paintings to adorn the walls. He felt comfortable enough with the room as it was.

It was the host that Ian was having problems with.

The word "soon" had become a mantra to Ian. He had expected Khalid to command him from the first day they spent together. There had been nothing. He had expected the hinges of his door to whine that first night. There had been nothing.

It wasn't that Khalid ignored him. The first day, the golem devoted himself to unpacking. His luggage -- two large wooden chests -- sat in the living room filled with things that seemed to need special handling. When Ian asked him if he needed any help, Khalid declined, taking his time unraveling each precious item.

Ian had never envied caftans, pressed-silver drinking cups, sculpture, or books so much in his life.

While Khalid explained to Ian the differences and similarities between India and Arabia, Ian was lost in daydreams. Seated on the couch, Ian watched and pretended to be interested. Much more fascinated by estimating the exact size of Khalid's arms, guessing how he hid his second pair of limbs, and what the man's torso looked like, Ian caught very little of the biography other than the fact that Khalid's people were nomadic.

It really didn't matter to him.

What did matter were the lessons, the games that Ian felt sure Khalid could play with him, the domestication game in particular.

By the second day, Ian had begun the lascivious glares, the extended stretching, walking around barefoot and bare chested. He asked leading questions concerning Gray and Douglas, their training and behaviors.

In a tone that seemed more clinical than seductive, Khalid answered that they weren't the best students he had. They weren't even the most obedient, but he felt their love of one another was what made them exceptional. He left it at that, before returning to some work he had in the den.

It was then that Ian's doubts began to set in.

* * * * *

Ian reached his fraying point shortly after a sumptuous meal. Whereas Douglas and Gray had been good cooks, Ian found Khalid to have an understanding of spices that bordered on alchemy. Stuffed lamb with some sort of grain and sausage, covered in a white sauce flavored by raisins ... whatever it was, it was damn good. Even the ice water was delicious. "Did you put something in the water? It smells like roses, but tastes so cool and clear."

"It is rose water. The taste, however, has to do with the silver cups. It is a tribute to how nothing can compare to this planet's greatest resource. In the desert it is prized more than gold."

Looking up from his meal, Ian gave his best shot at conversation. "Is it hard living out the desert, all of that sand?"

"For one who was not raised in sand, it would be deadly."

"Where were you born exactly?"

Khalid laughed. "Now I know for sure that you weren't paying attention to me. I told you that I was born in what is now called Saudi Arabia and that my people were nomads the first day we spent together."

Embarrassed at having been exposed for his wandering mind, Ian filled his mouth with food. *What am I supposed to be doing, writing notes?* he wondered.

"I suppose it is understandable, though. You are impatient for your training to begin."

Ian heard the word he wanted to, it was just the context that escaped him. "Huh?"

Khalid raised his silver cup and took a long draught. He refilled it and drained the cup again. "I love mango ice cream. They don't have it in town, and I really meant to have some shipped here before I got back. Mango, it is my favorite ice cream."

"Mango. It sounds good." Ian didn't even know that there were places that delivered ice cream, but he did know why Khalid had changed the subject so suddenly. It wasn't his fault that he couldn't concentrate in the golem's presence, however. *If he knows so much about werewolves, he should know how short our attention span is.* Promising himself that he would make an attempt at listening to Khalid, at having some measure of patience, Ian forgot even that after dinner.

He had hoped for something other than capping the night off in front of the television. He needed decadence, stimulation, and arousal. Instead, he sat beside Khalid, watching the nightly news.

Ian had had enough.

"I find that sighs don't release an ounce of the frustration that people assume they do."

"What?" Ian was unaware that any sound had escaped his mouth. Although it got a response from the golem, Khalid's eyes never left the fine print of the newspaper lying across his lap.

"You were sighing, as if you were bored. You can tell me if you are displeased with my company, you know."

Ian knew a trap when he heard one. All he had to do was complain, and the deal would be off. Khalid would demean him, probably set him out into the night. There was a method to impressing the man, and Ian was sure that whining was not it. "I'm fine."

Turning the page, Khalid said quite calmly, "You're lying. Werewolves, while able to smell the emotions of others, are extremely transparent themselves."

"Then you know what I want." It was the bluntness of Khalid's words that caused Ian to be even more transparent.

"That I *can* smell."

It was intriguing -- the whole aloof Dom thing -- but it was getting boring. It was time to put up or shut up. Folding his legs up on the couch, Ian figured that if he could physically contain himself, then emotional containment wouldn't be so bad. Determined not to get upset, he sighed again, intentionally.

"Sighing again ..."

"Yes. I'm really good at that."

For that, Khalid did turn his head. The smile he gave Ian was barely more than an acknowledgement. "Gray said that you were good at sarcasm."

"I'm good at other things, too."

Khalid returned his gaze back to his newspaper, fairly unimpressed. "I'll need better than good."

Jaw clenched, Ian thought of about a hundred responses that wouldn't sound venomous or bitter. "Then maybe you should train me."

"Is that what you really want?"

"Yes!" Ian exclaimed shortly. "Yes, that's what I want. I thought we had already established that." Perhaps he was being impatient, but Ian really thought that three days' wait was a bit much.

Ian's rant didn't seem to bother Khalid. His gaze was on the stock market report. "You don't think that you should get to know me before giving me that power over you? You don't seem interested in anything I say, it would seem, in your anticipation of my first move. It's a hasty approach, but I suppose it is understandable for a werewolf."

Khalid's words stung Ian in more ways than one. His shoulders sunk as the logic and sense of Khalid's words cooled his coals. Apologetic, Ian started, "I ... I just felt that --"

"That I was worthy the moment you met me, of course," Khalid interrupted. "Well, you could feel that way about any of my brethren, anyone with a commanding set of eyes, voice, and large bearing, anyone with a whip and a grimace."

Could I be any more the stupid, hormone-driven were? Ian doubted that he could. The golem had him pegged, but rather than admit it, Ian tried to lighten the dour mood that seemed to fill the gap between them. "Yours are more alluring than commanding. Your eyes. They are really are hot ... Somewhere between honey and amber."

Khalid folded up his newspaper and set it aside. He reached over to the coffee table and grabbed the remote. Off went the television, leaving Khalid and Ian with nothing to distract them. He turned on the sofa and gazed directly at Ian. "Since you've been just dying to get out of your clothes, and since you've been so patient, I want you to strip for me."

Put on the spot, Ian couldn't wrap his mind around Khalid's intent. It sounded like a real request, but the sarcasm made him think twice about being so eager. For the first time, Ian was truly nervous around Khalid. "Really?"

It was Khalid's turn to sigh. "Yes. Really."

Chapter Fourteen

Ian stood before Khalid, back straight and shoulders relaxed. Nudity meant little to him, and still, Khalid's full attention made him feel self-conscious and exposed.

Khalid's gaze met Ian's pride, and like the ante in a poker game, he called and raised one. Definitely uninhibited, those golden-brown eyes seared his skin just as easily as a caress might, a caress from head to toe. Ian's cock felt the appraisal as it awoke, warm and heavy between his thighs.

"You have a very nice body, Ian. Lean and muscular, furry -- you are absolutely exquisite," Khalid commented matter-of-factly. "But then, most werewolves are. They tend to have that hirsute swimmer look with variations from hulking to scrawny. You are a good median. Your cock is beautiful, long and thick. Your balls are ... very attractive."

And your voice should be bottled up and sold as liquid Viagra. Ian lowered his head at his own mischievous thoughts. He wasn't used to being on display, and he definitely wasn't used to being appraised, at least not by anyone as hot as Khalid.

The golem had stretched his upper set of arms out along the back of the sofa. He always wore loose-fitting caftans, and Ian realized why as contours arose under the dark muslin fabric. Before Ian's eyes, Khalid's second set of arms, just as muscular and long as the first, found their way through intended slits in the garment. They finally settled, almost casually, across his lap. It was the closest thing to magic that Ian had ever witnessed, and he couldn't help wondering what it would feel like to be held prisoner by those arms. He had always liked bigger males, and Khalid was oh-so-much bigger than he was.

"I wish to try you, Ian. Are you game?"

It took a moment for Ian to realize that Khalid had spoken, a second longer to decipher the words, but Ian was ready. All of him was. It was what he had been

waiting for. Curious at the miasma of emotions Khalid stirred within him, Ian felt nervousness and desire lining up behind anxiousness. "Yes."

Khalid's brow lifted expectantly. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, M."

"Good." Ian's response garnered him a low, rumbling sound that was neither a purr nor a growl, but something in between. "I assume that because you were in such a rush for us to begin, for us to get acquainted, that you might wish to just tell me what it is that stimulates you, gets you off, per se."

Ian winced at the thought of being verbal. A command was an action. He could deal with actions, but he had never been comfortable with the idea of voicing his kinks. In hopes of changing Khalid's mind, Ian recanted, "Oh, no. I didn't mean to give you the impression that I was in a rush. I just didn't --"

Khalid raised his lower right hand silencing Ian's explanations. "We'll start with your chest. Touch your nipples, and tell me what you like done to them. Do you like it when your lover bites them, sucks them, licks them, perhaps?"

Between Khalid's British-tinged accent and the images the words evoked, Ian didn't know what to say. Warmth spread throughout him, making him tense and unsteady at the same time. *I like it all, but I'm sure that I'd love anything you did.*

"Ian?"

Ian's head snapped up. Khalid commanded again, "Touch them."

Ian's hands rose, and his fingertips met the hard nubs. There was no containing the sigh that came from his lips at that first jolt of pleasure. Touching himself before had never been so intimate.

Khalid nodded for him to continue.

Ian unfolded his bottom lip from beneath a worrying fang. "I ... uh ... Well, I like it when a guy bites them, pulls them ..." It wasn't rocket science, but Ian felt that it was too broad of a concept to be narrowed into an explanation. With a deep sigh he concluded, "I like it when a guy makes them hurt a bit before licking them with his tongue."

"So you like it when they hurt?"

"Yes." The word came out long and sibilant. Ian could hear his own heartbeat. It beat louder after he dared to look at Khalid.

"Weights will be perfect for you," he commented merely in observation. "Your shoulders. Touch them. Tell me about them. Some werewolves like to be bitten hard on their shoulders. Do you?"

Ian nodded, lips moist and plump from his worried nibbling of them. "Yeah."

Khalid tutted. "Hands on your shoulders, Ian. That is how the game is played."

Moving to obey, Ian had just gotten used to the feel, to the small circular motions of his fingertips. He didn't want to stop, but he had the impression that if he did not, the game would end. That was the last thing he wanted.

He crossed his arms over his chest to grip his shoulders. Nails lengthening, hardening into claws, Ian couldn't resist teasing his flesh with a little pain. "I like to be bitten on my shoulders, especially when grappling. That's really hot. Claws and fangs, those are good, too."

"Your neck?"

Ian touched his throat, fanned his fingers carefully about the column as not to scratch with his claws. "I'm not crazy about my throat being bitten. Sucking, though ... That gets me real hot when someone is sucking on my throat."

"What is it about being bitten on the throat that you dislike -- the vulnerability of it, perhaps?"

Lips pressed closed, Ian flushed with a different sort of warmth, the warmth of irritation. Just as soon as he got used to one brand of stimulation, Khalid would redirect his attention to another limb. His claws brushed against the base of his neck, and he flinched.

Khalid nodded as if he had just discovered the obvious. "Being made to submit is one thing, but you ... well, taming you will be very intriguing." A wicked smile stretched across Khalid's lips. "Your ears ... touch them, Ian."

It was such a short distance, from his neck to his ears, but it seemed like leagues to Ian. Moving the pads of his fingers up to the lobes of his ears, Ian could feel the need to change coiling in his belly. A full-body shiver took him over as auburn hairs darkened his limbs. The pads of his fingers roughened with his body's fluctuation between man and beast. Confused fur appeared, then vanished, then appeared again with every wave of arousal. His digits passed over the inner lobe, and Ian's knees nearly buckled. "That's a very sensitive spot," he said, embarrassed.

"Oh, yes... I can tell," Khalid half-purred, half-growled. "What do you like done to them ... other than stroking?"

Pride be damned. Covered in fur, with a hard-on that could pound nails pointing directly at Khalid, Ian had no shame. "I like to have them licked and sucked. Touched and petted. Drives me fucking insane. All it takes is a wet tongue in my ears, and ... and I --" One of Ian's fingers slipped to the inner shell, and Ian saw stars. He tilted his head back and sighed.

Khalid waited until Ian's petite seizure had run its course before clearing his throat of a very tense breath. "Beneath your arms. Move your hands there. Do you like to be licked at the hollows?"

More willing to play the game knowing that his show was having an effect on the big guy, Ian was forthright and obedient. Tucking his hands under his arms, he replied, "Yeah, I fucking love that. That's one of the things I love, when a male is so desperate for my scent that he hunts for it in my pit. Licking is really good, wet, and hot especially."

"How about your toes?"

His hands warm beneath his arms, the next destination came as a surprise. "My toes?"

"You don't have to bend over and touch them, but do tell me about them." Speaking loudly and clearly, Khalid sat up and leaned forward, presenting a very alluring pose. "Some men like their toes licked or sucked. Are you one of them?"

Ian looked down at his toes, stretched slightly, claws out. He wiggled his toes out of sheer nervousness. "Never really had that before," Ian stammered. "I mean, it would be kind of ticklish, right?"

Giving no answer in the affirmative or negative, Khalid continued with his investigation. His queries concerned the palms of Ian's hands, the base of his spine where the first sign of a tail had formed, his thighs, and his belly.

Ian answered each question, but with less enthusiasm as he realized that there were certain parts of his body that had apparently been neglected. Khalid's questions seemed to concern all of the body parts he didn't use during sex. It wasn't meant to be an opportunity for seduction or performance, Ian realized. Khalid was both methodical and appraising in his observations.

Khalid came to his feet, his four arms looking more than threatening. He approached, and his presence bore down upon Ian like the shadow of a small building. The fine hairs on Ian's skin grew thick as he realized that he had given Khalid every detail of his carnal vulnerability.

For several minutes of heavy silence, Ian stood while Khalid walked around him, gazing at his body as if there was some secret yet unspoken. Anticipating the next question, Ian looked up and tried for bravery over the thunder of his heartbeat. "You haven't asked about my cock or my ass."

Stopping at Ian's side, Khalid raised his eyes from Ian's shoulder. "I don't have to. They are the easiest erogenous zones to stimulate, and I *know* what will set them on fire."

I bet you do. Khalid was so close, his scent even headier with his proximity to Ian. The spice of his smell, reminiscent of fiery earth, made Ian close his eyes. Inhaling, he prayed that the scent, Khalid, and his great arms would enfold him.

A shift in the air caused Ian to open his eyes. Jet-black hair swished as it moved with the easy gait of its departing owner. Heading to the hallway, Khalid left him standing in the center of living room.

"Tomorrow morning, I expect breakfast. I drink my coffee black, and I love fruits and cheeses. One piece of toast."

Ian couldn't believe his eyes or ears. Khalid was walking away, leaving him balls-heavy and tense. He couldn't begin to think about tomorrow, not when his need was so great in the present. Fury gave him bad ideas as he stared at the broad expanse of Khalid's back. Ian had to grind his teeth to keep from voicing any of the numerous ideas.

"Oh, and Ian," Khalid stopped and turned around, getting one long, thorough appraisal of Ian's body. "No jerking off tonight. If you're curious as to whether I am testing you ... I am. Make me believe that you have some sort of patience. That you

really are serious about being a submissive to me, otherwise a fuck buddy might be what you need."

It was the last thing that Ian wanted at that moment. He wanted Khalid. If that meant that he had to meet whatever challenges the golem set forth, so be it. Tight-lipped, Ian knew that he could get a fuck buddy anywhere, but he could not get the adrenaline or the anticipation from just anyone. In order for him to get that rush, he would just have to play the game. That game required strength. Chest heaving, Ian answered, "It's not, M."

"Good." With a knowing smile, Khalid left for his room. "Sleep well, then."

Ian waited until he heard the door close before grabbing his clothes off the floor and putting them on as quickly as possible. It was getting cold.

* * * * *

Although it was seven o'clock in the morning, there was nothing he had done purposefully to awaken so early. Ian had never been an early riser. Seven o'clock wasn't purposefully early, but it was abrupt when he had just managed to fall asleep at four-thirty.

Ian had retreated to his room after two cold beers and a few episodes of a court drama. He expected the beer and soft comforter to induce a quick, restful sleep. Instead, he tossed and turned in a bed much too comfortable for that nonsense, mulling over the choice he had made by living with Khalid, in taking something that could have been just a wild time with Douglas and Gray and striving for more with Khalid. With Gray, Ian had maintained that it was all just a game. Gray wasn't really an alpha dominant, but they could pretend. With Khalid, it was extremely obvious that he was in control. Ian felt like a cub toying with a rattler -- curious as hell and painfully ignorant.

Knowing that the golem's room was just down the hall didn't help much, either. At seven-thirty, he gave up altogether and decided to start on breakfast. He cut bananas, apples, peaches, and strawberries into cubes before adding some canned pineapples to the fruit salad. The coffeepot hissed with fresh coffee brewing. For himself, Ian decided on the Italian sausages that had more than likely been left by Douglas and Gray. They were browning nicely as Ian flipped them over. His nostrils were so full of beef, garlic, and oregano that he didn't detect the smell of spice.

"Good morning, Ian. Sleep well?"

Turning his head in the direction of the sound, Ian discovered Khalid standing by the refrigerator. Dressed in a floor-length black caftan, contrasting nicely against dark skin, the golem looked nothing short of divine. Only one set of arms showed, and still Khalid looked threateningly hot.

"No, I didn't. It was an awful night."

"I figured as much. I would have worried if you said otherwise. If you slept like a baby, then you wanting me would have been a definite lie," Khalid said as he looked in the refrigerator and took out the fruit. Starting in on the peaches, he cradled the bowl

in the crook of his arm. "Nice job with the fruit, but next time leave the skin on. I like the taste of modesty."

"I bet you do." Ian winced even as the murmured response slipped from his mouth.

"I wouldn't presume that you enjoy fruit." Khalid didn't even acknowledge the remark. Stepping up beside Ian, he peered down into the frying pan. "Mmm, sausages. Beef."

He wasn't going to be easy nor was he going to offer himself like an eager cub. Ian had been easy the night before, and it had gotten him nowhere. Still, Khalid was near, eyes closed, and with a look resembling sheer pleasure over his features. Ian had to ask. "Would you like some, M?"

"No, no." Khalid shook his head as if to rid it of a compulsion. Putting his fingers back into the fruit bowl, Khalid stepped back away from the stove. He took his fruit bowl to the table and sat down. "First it's one sausage, then it's a steak or three, then it's a whole human. It's like a fat woman with cheesecake ... a matter of compulsion. They do smell delicious, though."

"Right." Ian laughed uneasily.

Khalid didn't. "We'll be having two visitors today. Yesterday was the last day of my holiday, so it's back to work."

"Work?"

"Yes, work. I am a supernatural psychologist."

Putting two slices of toast down into the toaster, Ian grabbed the finished pot of coffee. He poured two cups of the dark, steaming brew and set one down in front of Khalid. *A supernatural psychologist*. While the idea wasn't wholly absurd, it wasn't something that Ian would have ever guessed. *A dominant who knew how to scramble brains. That can't be good*. "You're a head shrink?"

"Yes ... something like that. Does it bother you?"

"No." Ian took his sausage links from the frying pan and put them on a plate. The toast popped up, one for him, one for Khalid. Ian chose to give Khalid the first slice. Setting it on a saucer, he put it down on the table. Before he could draw his hand back, Khalid seized his wrist in an iron grip.

"You're lying again. Does it bother you, Ian?" Khalid was careful to enunciate each word.

Ian's first impulse was to jerk his arm back, but he quickly found it to be futile. Khalid's strength surpassed his easily. Heart stammering in his chest, his mind taunting him about being such a bitch, Ian met Khalid's eyes. There was nothing demanding in the amber pools, only compelling warmth. Ian got the impression that it really mattered. "Yes, it does."

Khalid nodded, pulling Ian slightly closer. "Why?"

Unable to maintain eye contact, Ian was unnerved by revelations he was sure that Khalid could see. His gaze landed on a bronze collarbone, lowered to where the robe

was open. From his vantage point, Ian could see one of Khalid's pecs, his dark, coffee brown nipple. It was large and pierced by a golden hoop. Ian licked his lips absently, imaging his tongue curling around flesh and metal, his lips closing on that firm nub and sucking ...

A tug brought him back to reality. "You should know why. You're the head shrink."

With a knowing smile, Khalid smiled, "Because you want me all to yourself."

Ian didn't have to answer; the growing swell in his boxers did it for him. Khalid released his wrist, and Ian let go of a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding. He went to the refrigerator and got the butter and the jam. He set his plate on the other side of the table, starting his breakfast, coffee first.

Khalid adjusted his robe, before continuing with his meal. "What are your plans for today?"

"I was going to check with some friends and see if I could get a job for the day. I know you said I could stay for free, but I don't want to be a burden ... I wanna pay my way, so to speak."

Khalid stopped in the middle of savoring a chunk of apple. His mood went serious and dark. "You insult me, Ian."

Ian squinted, trying to figure out if Khalid was joking. He smelled the scent of seriousness. "I don't understand --"

"What is it you don't understand, that I need you, but you'd rather serve someone else for money? I have money, pounds, dollars, lucre, yen ... You say that you wish to submit, Ian, but I am not so sure. It is a matter of trust and comfort. Is it the matter of your independence that concerns you? Perhaps there are secret things you'd like to do in your free time away from my scrutiny?"

"It's not like that." But it was, and Ian knew it. Seconds later with the wrinkle over Khalid's eyebrow, Ian remembered his statement about lies. "I just need time to process, to absorb everything."

"I have no intention of making you solely a pet, an errand boy, or catamite, Ian. I wish us to be equals, but in order for that to be achieved, we have to have a period of close interaction. You would have Fridays to yourself, and I don't plan on overseeing all that you do, but if you need eight hours a day to process ... well, then ..."

Ian dropped his head, not about to bother with an explanation. The preparation of breakfast had begun his tasks and should have been an indication. The part of him that longed for space enough to rationalize was outweighed by the part of him that wanted something more meaningful. More than his need for some independence, Ian was consumed with the image of Khalid's dark nipple and the decadent promises it embodied. He told himself he wasn't giving in out of weakness, but because of potential. Ian liked Khalid's idea of getting to know one another far too much to take their potential for granted. "I'm free today. Nothing on my schedule. What do you need done?"

Khalid paused, considering Ian for a long moment. He smiled, and Ian flushed immediately. He had done something right!

"Need is such a wonderful word," Khalid answered.

Chapter Fifteen

Khalid had given him a list, a black credit card, and the keys to his black luxury SUV -- a hulk of black chrome and steel that reminded him of Gray's. While Ian looked forward to driving the truck, he did not look forward to shopping. Used to buying food at the butcher or carryout counter, Ian was slightly intimidated at the thought of actually shopping for groceries and supplies for the cabin. Real men didn't shop; they just got what they needed and left. They went into a store and grabbed a few items and that was that, he felt. Unfortunately for Ian, Khalid had stipulations. All of his talk about freshness and ripeness, color and texture had translated into dirty connotations in Ian's mind. Without the golem near, however, Ian was worried that even with his heightened senses he wouldn't pick the choicest produce.

Damp from his shower, Ian walked into his bedroom using a towel to dry his hair. He was pulling out a semi-clean pair of briefs when he noticed the presence at the doorframe.

"Add new underwear, white or gray boxers, to your shopping list," Khalid commented. "A few undershirts, too. That rugged, yet fragrant musk of yours is for me alone, not for the rough trade that you might have attracted in the past."

Ian bit his lip. Comments about his hygiene were foreign to him, comments about his garments even more so. Offense was the least of his worries, however, as Khalid came into the room, his eyes scrutinizing the Ian's underwear. They had two holes in them and a come stain that was dry.

Khalid checked as well, placing a finger on the spot.

Ian sucked in his breath. Khalid's finger rested on the head of his prick, slanted to the side as it was. Blood changed flow quickly, heading due south. Ian raised his head, ready to go commando if Khalid was so displeased.

He didn't seem to be. Khalid's eyes were like caramel as he bade Ian, "Make sure that they're cotton, one hundred percent, okay?"

Ian remembered that he could breath. "Okay."

Removing his finger, after just one stroke, Khalid reached into one of the folds in his caftan and revealed a black box. He pressed the box into Ian's chest. "This is for you. You are to wear it."

Accepting the box, Ian lifted the top off. He had an idea what it was, but it was much too small to be anything like the collar that Douglas had.

Instead of a dog collar, a black leather cord rested on the velvet cushion. At the center of the cord hung a golden scorpion. Ian didn't need to ask if the gold was real.

Khalid turned to go.

Ian took the choker out of the box. "Aren't you going to put it on me?"

"No. The first one you put on yourself. The second -- the one that you earn -- will be placed on you by me."

Hesitating only long enough to figure out the closure, Ian fastened the necklace about his throat. Heavier than it looked, the weight reminded him of his choice. In the mirror, the black and gold ornament looked vicious, giving him a tougher, edgier look.

Ian liked it.

He finished dressing, gathered his things, and prepared to begin the day. He made it as far as the kitchen before he smelled the first of Khalid's patients approaching. Ian opened the door before the selkie could even lift his knuckles.

A slender albino, perfumed by the sea, gazed at Ian with obvious questions in his eyes, envy as well. His-rose colored eyes went straight to Ian's throat. "I'm here to see Khalid."

Ian smiled as he opened the door. With his chin raised high, he stepped past the merman and headed towards Khalid's SUV. "He's inside."

* * * * *

Shopping in itself wasn't so bad of an experience. He had gotten the underwear, candles, and cleaning supplies that Khalid had asked for from one of the massive supermarts first. Catching more than a few stares from men and women alike for carrying his wares in hand, he realized that he needed a shopping cart somewhere around the second aisle. Those who knew him smiled wildly, gossiping in low tones about the handyman's new job as a hired shopper, or so they assumed.

An older woman, Mrs. Hutchins, whose house he had painted a spring ago, confronted him as he looked through the towering aisle of dried goods. Advising him not to shop for edibles in a supermart, she took several minutes explaining how the bargains advertised sometimes weren't. She advised him not to be lazy, but to go to the grocery store instead of buying food just because the supermart had it.

"This rice is over-priced, and the selection is rubbish, son. And I would never buy cheese here," she harped, and Ian listened. If anyone knew what she was talking about, it was Mrs. Hutchins. The woman made apple pies that should have been called the cure for insomnia, and she knew her way around a kitchen.

It took him nearly ten minutes to put back the groceries he had in his cart, but when he arrived at the grocery store, he found her advice to be true. While the supermart had been convenient, it didn't have half of the variety or low prices as in the grocery store.

Ian stood in front of a display of peppers, observing it with awe. Every few seconds, from a pipe running across the ceiling of the display, a mist of water descended. Yellow, green, orange, and red peppers glistened like fat jewels, looking more than ripe. They looked perfect and edible, and they smelled delicious.

His mind swam with wonder at the creations Khalid meant for so many fresh vegetables and fruits. Just wandering around fresh produce was an intriguing experience. Sights, smells, and stimulation were all around him, not in that heavy narcotic way of the butcher's shop, but seductive in the way that fresh flowers had been when he was a pup. Khalid had asked for several varieties of fruit, but Ian ended up getting more based upon their color and display.

The last stop on his shopping excursion found Ian at Melinda's. The renowned and always well-stocked deli was owned by Melinda Archam. A short, voluptuous werewolf, Melinda wasn't as prematurely gray as her youthful looks would indicate. She was a gray wolf. She wasn't as jovial and friendly as her twinkling hazel eyes and cherry lips might have suggested, either. Melinda also didn't extend favors to kin.

His first week in town, Ian had come to her store with no money and an empty belly, expecting to find charity. Instead, he got a job referral.

He tried to avoid her store on principle. She reminded him too much of his sisters and mother, alpha females with too much authority and not enough softness, but the choice steaks, lamb, and wild game had him dropping by now and again for a cut or two. With Khalid's credit card in hand, Ian had plans on more than just one cut of meat wrapped neatly in white paper.

"Leg of lamb, pork loin, T-bone, four Cornish hens ... Someone has some money it seems. Tell me that you didn't rob anyone, Ian."

Ian growled before he recalled that there were humans in the store shopping as well. "Of course not, Mel."

Melinda shrugged as she wrapped up a side of ribs. "I was only joking. I know that you've found a wealthy ... backer."

He didn't need to sniff to smell the sarcasm. "What's that supposed to mean? He's a friend."

Skeptical of Ian's description, Melinda rolled her eyes. "He wouldn't give a *friend* the kind of jewelry you're wearing."

Consciously, Ian raised his hand to his throat, fingering the scorpion. While he should have felt proud to have the collar, he didn't feel right about Melinda knowing what it stood for. He also didn't like the fact that she knew things about the golem. True, Melinda had lived in town for much longer than he had, but then Ian actually shared space with Khalid. That she probably knew more about his host than he did was disturbing to Ian.

Khalid had been right to chastise him for being so hasty. Instead of anticipating, he should have been asking questions, or listening. His jaw tight, Ian replied. "Maybe we are more than friends."

Melinda finished with the ribs, wrapped them, and added them to a brown paper bag. "Ian, dear, there are people, human and supernatural alike, who would love to be more than friends with The Psychiatrist, even more who would like to have him as an alpha."

"He's not my --" Ian started quickly, hotly, and stopped just as fast. Melinda cast a quizzical look at him as if she knew he was about to tell a lie. Chest tight, Ian rolled his eyes. "Well, I guess I'm lucky, then."

"Lucky doesn't begin to describe it. Even I would show belly to a golem like him."

There really was no reply that Ian could come up with. What he had believed to be a secret, something personal and private, was not. It wasn't that he had always thought of himself as an alpha, but that he never considered himself as an omega. The term "showing belly" was a direct reference to an omega. Any other rank showed "respect."

"Need anything else?"

Needing nothing more than fresh air, Ian shook his head and handed over Khalid's credit card.

* * * * *

Ian returned to the cabin and unloaded the groceries from the truck. Depositing his many bags in the kitchen, he took up the initiative of putting away the food. Melinda's words had echoed in his head since he left the deli, namely the ones about his luck and subservience. Using the solitude of the kitchen, Ian reminded himself that it was his choice, not his nature that dictated his behavior. Ranks didn't matter.

Gray had been an omega, yet with Douglas he was an alpha. Douglas was an alpha who submitted to the omega. He doubted either of them gave a damn about what other people thought. Their history and love surely defied such pettiness.

On the other hand, Ian wasn't sure if he would ever have such a relationship with Khalid. The fear and respect was there somewhat, the desire was certainly there, but Ian wasn't sure about anything past those.

One thing he decided needed to be done. He needed to get to know the golem much better. He needed to listen, to ask and to actively remember.

Khalid's scent told him that the Arab was in the basement. There was but a trace scent of the selkie, and a hint of a succubus who must have also visited for a session, so Ian knew that Khalid was alone. What he didn't know was what exactly Khalid was doing.

The guests' scents had been strong in the den, but as Ian drew closer to the basement door, they grew faint. He heard sounds, gusts of air in short fast division. Ian smelled earth, acrid and much more loose than normal. He also smelled fire.

His curiosity led him to open the heavy wooden door and brave the wooden stairs. There was sand at the base of the stairs. The fire that he smelled was actually a series of torches that lined the stone walls. He hadn't known of the basement, but should have. Khalid had showed him the door. He should have at least explored it, Ian chided himself.

Had he explored he might have had the opportunity to browse the whips, the crops, the manacles, and all of the other gear secured to the walls. He might have rolled in and tested the sand, or tasted the water in the wall basins. There were a lot of things that Ian might have done, but none of them would have been more necessary than witnessing Khalid in his element.

The golem's long black hair was tied back in intricate knots at the base of his neck. Nearly naked save for a tan loincloth, Khalid's skin looked like bronze. The flames' hue highlighted every well-defined muscle of the handsome beast's form.

All four arms were outstretched and clutching great curved swords. Guided in fluid arcs, great sweeping thrusts, and oscillating twirls, the razor-sharp blades never touched, never clashed against one another. Khalid's bare feet moved through and across the sand with steady accuracy, his body moved as deftly as if attacking and feinting away from an attack from several directions. It reminded Ian of a martial arts film, of a warrior practicing before a climactic showdown. Most amazing was the fact that Khalid's eyes were closed.

It was an awesome sight. Pressed up against the wall, Ian held his breath and watched. He didn't have long to enjoy the show, however. Moving slowly across the sand, almost as if giving Ian the opportunity to run, Khalid came directly towards him.

Ian didn't move. He didn't fear the blades, but he did fear the creature wielding them.

Chapter Sixteen

Ian had a sword to his throat, a blade so sharp that a hiccup would be painful, and he was harder than he had ever been. The tip of a second blade was at his thigh, a third at his shoulder, and the fourth was at his ankle. "Damn. That's amazing ... fucking awesome, what you just did," Ian stammered softly. "I would have chopped something off ... definitely."

Khalid opened his eyes with no thoughts of practice. His gaze caressed the trembling lips that his fingers could not. "I've had a sword in my hands since birth ... since before you were a fur ball nursing from your mother."

"I can imagine." His mind occupied with everything but Khalid's early training or history, Ian began to question the change in the golem. What he had hoped for -- some fire in Khalid's eyes -- had come suddenly. The brown orbs glistened with specks of red and gold that spoke nothing of the civilized gentleman that Khalid had been in prior days.

Ian wanted to know why. The information might prove useful. "Did you have a rough day?"

Khalid shook his head. "I can assure you that there is very little either of my patients could have said that would warrant this sort of stress release."

"So it is stress?"

"Oh, yes. It is."

Getting the impression that he might be the cause, Ian swallowed and felt the warning of the blade at his throat. "I ... I'll admit I was kind of an idiot, kinda in a hurry before, but I don't think I fucked up that bad ..."

Withdrawing his body and his blades, Khalid shook his head indicating that Ian was looking in the wrong direction. He placed his swords on the wall mounts, among weapons that looked familiar to Ian and others that he had never seen in his life. All of them looked deadly, and Ian didn't doubt that Khalid was well-skilled with each one.

Able to breathe again, Ian let out a long sigh. While he didn't think that Khalid would have harmed him, he wasn't ready to proclaim aloud the rush he had felt at the thought of it.

"You've been stressed as well." Turning back to face Ian, Khalid crossed his upper arms across his broad chest. "Would you care to spar with me? Release some of your tension, perhaps?"

Ian paused to think. Had it been with anyone other than the golem whom he had just witnessed practicing with his eyes closed, Ian wouldn't have given the idea a second thought. While the idea of fighting, tussling with the bigger male had him ready to drive nails with his cock, the fresh memory of Khalid's skin warned him that he truly didn't know what he was fucking with. For the first time since he was a whelp, Ian paused before leaping, "I don't know ... you'd kick my ass."

"Undoubtedly, but that's not the issue. The issue would be how *long* would it take for me to kick your arse."

"I don't think it would be that long, but I do have some skill."

"I believe that. Gray told me that you like to be physical, that you attacked Douglas for sport. Douglas is not a small wolf, or a weak one, for that matter."

No, but at least he is a werewolf, Ian thought to himself. Even filled with doubts, Ian's fingers went to the hem of his shirt. Baring his chest, Ian tossed the garment aside. The air upon his skin was a summoning to the beast within. If it had to be David versus Goliath, then there had to be a small chance he wouldn't end up a pulp. Starting in on his belt buckle, Ian hesitated. "Got another loincloth?"

Ian's humor caused Khalid to smile, to look less like he wanted Ian with a side of mango chutney.

"Off with your clothing. I've already seen your shoddy knickers and your stiff prick, Ian. There is no need for modesty between us."

Feigning offense, Ian toed off his shoes and socks, and got rid of his well-worn jeans. Tattered boxer shorts were the least of his worries with the size of his tent pronouncing perversions. Ian stuck out his chest and fought to channel his humility into aggression.

Khalid may have been bigger than he, may have weighed more, and had probably practiced fighting since the dark ages, but Ian knew he had to have a weakness. Everything did, or at least, was supposed to.

Hands balled into fists as Ian glared and sized Khalid up. If he could just stay away from those arms, maybe he would stand a chance. Maybe speed would give him an edge. Take him down hard and fast, pray ... those were his only options, and they weren't bad ones.

Khalid's arms dropped his sides, all save one. Gesturing for Ian to come forward, he said, "Give me a good fight. Don't hold back a thing. Teeth, claws ... give me everything, cur."

Ian glared at the larger male as his canines lengthened, as his fur grew in thick and warm. Limbs shifted, elongated, and took shape. Through it all, Ian kept his eyes on Khalid. *I'll be your fucking cur, all right.*

The change took less than a minute, fueled as it was by adrenaline. When Ian padded forward on bent legs, his tail swishing back and forth and his claws extended, he meant to give Khalid exactly what he asked for.

Khalid stood his ground even as the snarling werewolf paced around him. To the left, then to the right, Khalid's eyes stayed on the beast ready for an attack from any angle.

Knowing that he had to stay out of the range of Khalid's arms, Ian had devised a plan of attack -- he had to get behind the golem, some how, some way. Khalid was too dangerous standing and even more dangerous head-on. If he could unbalance Khalid, it would still put him in the range of those arms, but if he fell, Ian would have the advantage.

It was a risk he had to take.

Springing forward low, Ian dove for Khalid's ankles. Using the full weight of his shoulder, he tried to take Khalid off of his feet. Khalid fell forward, but before Ian could take advantage of the situation, the golem tucked and rolled back to his feet.

Damn, he's quick. Didn't know they could move that fast. Faking a move toward Khalid's legs again, Ian sprang up a second before connecting. He sank his fangs deep into the shoulder of the golem, using the taut muscle for leverage. Claws from all four paws went up against the bronze pecs as Ian did his best to climb up and over Khalid.

It was a foolish move. Holds like fortified steel clamps grasped him under his legs and yanked him away. Thrown against a far stone wall, Ian blinked in disbelief at the distance separating him from Khalid.

"You can do better than that. Come on, Ian!"

Enraged, humiliated, Ian got back to his hind feet. Wasting no time with calculations, he roared forward.

Khalid sidestepped at the last moment, catching Ian's muzzle with a downward jab of his fist. Following up that blow with one to Ian's ribs, Ian fell to the sand again. Dazed, but not down, Ian reached out with his claws and took hold of the golem's ankles. With a hold that would have snapped any human's leg in two, Ian yanked with all his strength. The golem fell backwards, giving Ian an opportunity.

He scrambled up, attempting to turn Khalid over onto his side. Ignoring two right elbows, coming down hard against his side, Ian wedged his knee under Khalid's thigh and pushed. Khalid hit him again in the ribs, this time with one of his left fists, refusing to turn. As if his life depended on it, Ian held fast. Taking hold of both right arms, he raised the knee beneath Khalid's, forcing the golem to arch his back. *Come on and flip, you giant, arrogant fucker!*

Khalid turned the way Ian wanted, but before the werewolf could enjoy his victory, he felt his leverage on Khalid being challenged.

The golem slipped into the firm sand as easy as a dolphin might submerge into the ocean. Caught by surprise, Ian didn't realize his grip had lessened until Khalid's fingertips were the only things in his possession.

Ian sprang to his feet, heart thundering inside his chest. The sand looked as smooth, felt just as firm as when he had first stepped onto it. There was no indication that the golem lay beneath its surface.

Ears attuned to every sound, all Ian heard was the flicker of the torches, the structural yawning of the house, water from the fountain ... everything but movement in the sand. Contemplating a mad dash to the stairs, Ian came up with an idea. Walking across the sand would not be an option, but the walls were made of sturdy enough wood. Bending his legs, Ian pushed up off of the sand and hit the ceiling, his claws finding purchase on the wooden beams. Upside down, he found his route to the stairway free and clear.

He had scurried no more than a few lengths before a thick spray of sand shot forth from beneath him. Four arms wrapped around his waist, pulling him off the ceiling. Snarling and snapping wildly, Ian twisted his neck around and sank his canines into Khalid's collarbone. With skin much tougher than it looked, the golem did bleed sweetly and profusely. That brought out the savagery in Ian. Single-minded, he focused on breaking the very bone.

Khalid's upper hands went to Ian's throat, while the lower set caught Ian in a bear hug. Ian was unable to maintain his hold. Pulling away from the bloody wound, Ian valued air more than his attack. He lashed out at Khalid's face and neck with his fore claws, at Khalid's thighs with back paws. It only made the golem squeeze tighter.

His strength waning quickly, Ian went lax. His own limbs wouldn't obey him, and even the beast within ceased his rage. His fur withdrew, leaving sweaty, pale skin in its wake. Ian's bones shifted back to their human shapes, and his tail shrank. He might have said "submit," or whatever it was that sporting fighters said when they had had enough, but Ian couldn't even gather the breath for that.

His blood seemed to cower in only two areas: his head and his cock, both pounding with fullness. It didn't matter to Ian. Nothing mattered but the safety behind heavy eyelids.

"Oh, no you don't. You're not going to sleep yet."

Ian felt very sure that it was already too late for the warning. Khalid released his hold, and Ian fell onto the sand with a jolting thud, the force of which awakened him immediately. Eyes wide, Ian saw Khalid move toward him.

Getting up was not an option. His legs were far too weak, and in his human form he was definitely no match for Khalid. Turning to scramble away, Ian barely crawled two feet before his capture. Pushed face first into the sand, Ian gave up. It was worthless, trying to fight. Khalid held him prisoner.

Shoulders to the sand, Ian's arms were pinned behind his back. There was no escape from the body heavy atop his, not from the heat, not from the muscle, and definitely not from the male. *His Master.*

Ian heard the sounds of leather tearing and then felt the thick sex of the golem pressed against his ass. It was nothing that he could ignore, firm and thick, damp and hot against his skin. Ian wished that he had had enough strength to grow his tail, to shield the vulnerable core of his body, but even that was impossible.

"I ... I give up. I submit," Ian stammered.

Leaning forward, Khalid took the lobe of Ian's ear between his lips and sucked the bit of flesh to wetness. "I know, but we are past that, aren't we Ian?"

No. Not the ears ... Ian's response was a moan of a yes.

"We are past whether or not you can submit to me, actually, and I believe that we have moved on to how *well* you can submit ... don't you think so?"

Ian could barely recall his name. Providing Khalid with an answer was even further beyond his capabilities. Moaning was his only answer.

Ian's weary limbs were sparked by Khalid's words. What he had dreamed of days before was right at his back. He arched his back and pushed back against the golem's cock. It was a sign of submission.

"I need you, Ian. Now."

Ian felt Khalid's weight move off of his back, one of Khalid's hands released him. He heard a slick wet sound and felt wet fingers invade the ring of his pucker.

Releasing a long breath, Ian gave a full-body shudder at the invasion. Three fingers tested him, stretched and pumped within him. Ian couldn't stop himself from gyrating to the inner massage.

Head dropped low, nearly to the sand, Ian's muscles were already relaxed from the fight, from the denouement of the battle. Open and easy for Khalid, Ian told himself that he was ready for Khalid's desire or decline. Khalid could have withdrawn his fingers and left him on his knees in the sand, and Ian would not have been disappointed. The golem found his sweet spot quickly, rubbed the bundle of nerves in a hard, masculine press.

Ian bit his lip and gurgled. He might have smiled if Khalid hadn't withdrawn his fingers.

"Mmm ... no," Ian muttered, not as ready as he assumed he would be for denial. "Please ..."

"Silence, my pet," Khalid warned with a growl. "I told you that / need ..." Khalid removed another hand from Ian's body. Ian heard the wet sound again. It was the sound of Khalid licking his palm, Ian realized. He also realized why as he felt the wet, thick head of the golem's sex pressing against his body for entrance.

Ian tensed at the sensation, the expectation of penetration. Before he even felt it, Ian knew that accepting Khalid into his body would be like nothing he had ever experienced. Damp palms returned to grasp Ian's ass, to spread his cheeks apart, presenting Ian's core for invasion.

Khalid paused and asked, "Will you sate your Master's tension?"

Ian took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, M." Ian was barely able to get the words out, before he felt the blunt head of Khalid's cock pushing forward, hard and relentless. There was nothing but sheer animalistic need in Khalid's drive.

Ian roared as his muscles bore the violence and the pleasure. Heat flushed throughout his body exceeding any that the change could provide. So full, fuller than he had ever been with a man's presence, the upper half of Ian's body, his face met the sand only for the briefest of moments. All four of Khalid's arms wrapped around him, lifted him up against the golem's chest and held him close.

Withdrawing nearly to the hilt, Khalid plunged back inside. Shaking profusely, Ian realized that he had no clue what being fucked really was, what being full and whole truly meant. With every thrust, Ian fell deeper and deeper into the rough seas of bliss. Battering his nerves, leaving him no room for rest, Ian tried and failed to savor the narcotic-like pleasure running through his veins.

His cock ached, swollen beyond arousal, leaking all over his thighs with his pleasure. His balls felt like stones, and Ian knew he wasn't going to last long, against neither his impending orgasm nor unconsciousness.

The golem was merciless, and Ian loved it to the point of madness. It felt as if he were in the possession of two men. Fingers teased his nipples, stroked his cock, cradled his balls, and caressed his thigh simultaneously. His nerves were frayed, unable to process so much stimulation.

Khalid found Ian's earlobe once more, teased it and tortured it with both teeth and tongue. "You are so what I need, Ian. Built for my pleasure, my need..."

Ian's stomach cramped, his body lurched forward. Triggered by the wet heat, the sensual stimulation of his ear, Ian exploded into one of Khalid's palms with a choked gasp. Jet after jet. Ian didn't know what was happening to him, but whatever it was, it was exponentially good.

Khalid kept moving, unrelenting throughout and beyond Ian's orgasm.

It should have been simultaneous. It should have synchronous. They should have come together, Ian thought. Even as raw and vulnerable and as weak as Ian was, there was no escape from Khalid's appetite.

"More, more, sweet cur. I want more of you, Ian." Rocking his hips faster, pulling Ian's back into each and every thrust, Khalid's voice was thick with focus.

Ian wasn't sure about the word "more," nor was he sure he was even capable of granting Khalid's demand. So tired and near boneless, Ian could not deny the rough command. His blood built anew, with strength he didn't even know he had. So soon, so strong, his passions felt beyond supernatural.

Khalid's fingers were stroking him with his own fluids, smearing them all along his shaft. His other hands handled Ian more intimately and possessively than before as if trying to encourage Ian to be more responsive.

Ian wanted to be able to give Khalid what he asked for. He wanted to fulfill his Master's desires. Most of all he wanted to prove to Khalid and to himself that he was strong enough to submit with his pride intact. Like a gamma wolf that could take the

whim of an irate alpha, rather than a low crawling omega ready to roll over in an instant. Ian wanted to bear his submission with a sturdy, proud bearing.

But he was no match for Khalid.

Balls heavy and aching again were kneaded and coaxed by Khalid's skillful grasp, Ian couldn't give as much as Khalid could take. And Khalid easily took another, stronger orgasm from him.

Chapter Seventeen

The first thing Ian was aware of when he awoke was the smell of mint tea, hot and sweetened with honey. Its fragrance filled his nostrils and compelled him from the depths of a restful sleep. He was in his room, in his bed. The thought of getting up sent chills down his sleep-weary form.

Damn, that was some good dream, he mused. *Damn good*. Ian turned over and looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It read nine-thirty. Whether it was a.m. or p.m., Ian wasn't sure, but he was sure of the source of the wonderful smell. One of Khalid's ceramic teacups filled with steaming amber brew sat beside the dimmed lamp. It wasn't until he reached for it that Ian detected tension from his spread.

"You are awake." Twisting, Ian discovered Khalid sitting at the foot of the bed staring at him. "I was curious as to how deep you were under. It's only been about three hours since...since we played."

Ian sat up against the headboard and reached for the cup. He didn't dare address the sense of humor in Khalid's voice. His pride had been wounded enough. To have passed out like a swooning virgin was too much. Ian could not disguise the sarcasm in his voice. "Did you even come?"

"Eventually. In the shower, after I bathed you and put you in bed."

So it was possible for him to feel smaller, Ian lamented. Focusing on the depths and richness of the tea rather than his inadequacies, Ian took a sip, ignoring the burn of the hot liquid. He had made a mistake, had underestimated the role and responsibility of a submissive. "Sorry," he muttered.

Khalid shook his head. "What are you sorry for? I came thinking of you and how much you enjoyed getting fucked by me. I came thinking about my hands on you and your potential."

Even if he hadn't been naked beneath the covers, Ian would still have felt Khalid's words straight through. Processing the words was another story entirely. Ian didn't know whether to be flattered or not.

"Now that you know how my desires feel, you will be more prepared to handle them the next time I need you. You'll know what to expect."

Ian's eyes met Khalid's, and he saw the truth, that Khalid was not mocking him in any way. Swallowing back his nervousness, Ian was already thinking about the next time. His body was already hoping it would be soon, but his mind was more apprehensive. Ian dared a glance at the smug golem, handsome even in the semi-darkness, dressed in a caftan that begged to be pried off of him. With a sigh, Ian changed the subject. "You cheated."

"Excuse me?"

"When you burrowed into the sand, you cheated."

The smile that appeared on Khalid's features was sheer wickedness. "If you'd prefer a rematch, I can oblige. I promise not to go into the earth ... but to stand and fight. I would hate to be considered unfair."

Ian's bruises had all healed, but his memory of the fight gave him pause. It wouldn't have mattered if Khalid had promised to keep a set of his arms tied behind his back, Ian still felt like he would have lost. "That's ... it's all right."

Khalid nodded as if he had expected such a reply. "I cooked tonight because you needed the rest, but do not expect me to be so considerate all of the time. You will get used to the strains of my desires. You will stand in the kitchen, throbbing, warring with the wild emotions that a sound trial of the body evokes, and you will get used to me."

"Gray gave Douglas time after sessions ..."

"It's called aftercare, and outside of tonight, you will get that when you earn it. Lovers tend to give it freer than most, but from me you will earn that."

Ian spoke impulsively. "You don't think that maybe ... maybe we might ..." The look that he got from Khalid stilled his tongue. "Are you even looking for a lover?"

"You're already in love with me. The lustful sort. I can see that."

It was partially true. Ian didn't want to admit it, and he definitely didn't want to acknowledge how easily his emotions came, but it was true. He wanted to impress Khalid in ways he had never wanted to impress any other male. "But aren't you even a little ... with me?"

"You arouse me, you interest me, but I am not a hasty man when it comes to emotions."

"No, you're not." That Khalid didn't feel the same almost stung. Ian reached the bottom of the teacup and found it empty. He moved to set it back on the nightstand but Khalid's hand reached out for it. Ian gave Khalid the cup and the saucer.

Nodding his gratitude, Khalid stood up and walked to the doorway. "I'm also not going to serve you dinner in bed."

Hungry, Ian threw back the covers and tested the air, but didn't smell anything resembling meat. "What did you make?"

"A Mediterranean salad with chickpeas, cucumbers, tomatoes, red onions, and a sour cream dressing," Khalid replied.

"That's it?"

Disappearing into the hall, the golem laughed, "That's it. Perhaps tomorrow when you prepare dinner you might be more creative."

* * * * *

Ian was truly getting the hang of driving the big SUV. Returning from the dump, the post office, and the liquor store, his errands were complete. He pulled up in front of the cabin he thought of as home. Off in the grass, a silver sports car was parked. No doubt one of Khalid's patients, Ian assumed.

He unloaded a small crate Khalid had received from someplace called Marrakech, some random junk mail, and two handles of scotch -- Khalid had told him to pick up something he liked -- Ian headed to the side door. A wintergreen scent dominating a lighter scent of male musk stopped him mid-stride.

There was another male werewolf in the house.

Ian's nose wrinkled with aggression, his canines grew longer with jealousy. Why a male werewolf's presence inside his cabin bothered him so much was no mystery, just the reason for the wolf's presence.

Ian had to set the crate down and get his keys from his pocket in order to open the door. Standing in his kitchen, the kitchen where he had prepared a vegetable stir fry just the night before because Khalid wanted it -- was an ice-blond Adonis with sky-blue eyes.

"Hi. You must be Ian." The Adonis held out his hand in a gesture of friendship.

Ian looked at the well-manicured hand, the stonewashed jeans, and the impeccably white buttoned-down shirt. No werewolf would be caught dead looking so preppy or so neat. Nodding was his choice of greeting, and it was all that Ian gave.

Adonis shrugged with an air of comprehension. "You have no idea how lucky you are, how special ... How did you meet him?"

"I really don't think that that's any of your business, cur." Ian didn't mean to sound so nasty, but he couldn't help it. There was no way a pretty, stuck-up-seeming gamma was going to drill him for answers. There was only one male that he needed to answer to, and that one was no wolf.

Bristling with testosterone, Ian took his bottles of scotch out of the bag and carried them to the living room. He set them down on the cart alongside Khalid's exotic-looking liquors. By the time he returned to the kitchen, Khalid was escorting the Adonis to the door.

He handed the blond a milky white globe with gray swirls. "Here you are. I would spend at least an hour a day, the twilight hour in fact, gazing into it. It will help with your ... issue."

"I am indebted to you, Khal."

Ian almost choked. Obvious and pretentious, the werewolf had the audacity to call Khalid by a nickname. While he wasn't sure how long the two had known one another, Ian didn't think that the golem was the type to tolerate nicknames. It was only another of the small details about his lover that had Ian vexed, because he himself had not known it.

Khalid held the door open. "I'll see you again in six months, but I can assure you that moon globe will help if used properly."

Standing in the kitchen, Ian couldn't wait until the door closed, until the offending wolf was out of his domain. He went to the refrigerator and took out a beer. Using his extended claws, Ian popped the cap off.

Khalid was at his side in an instant and seized the bottle just as it touched Ian's lips. He took it away and set it down on the counter. The look of surprise on Ian's face seemed to be noted and dully disregarded. "You needn't feel threatened by James. My tastes don't run towards vanity."

Staring at the beer as if it were a fallen friend in need of aid, Ian crossed his arms over his chest. "I do *not* feel threatened by that pretty --"

"Stop." Khalid held up his hand and silenced Ian. "I sense a misdirection of the truth coming, and as I have a great deal of experience in counseling, I would just nod and shrug if I were you. You know how I dislike lies."

There was no malice in Khalid's tone, no condescension, either. Still, it took several moments for Ian to realize it. He had several scathing remarks prepared, several damning quips and accusations, but he swallowed them back. Giving a labored sigh, Ian found one truth that he could admit to. "But he's a werewolf. I just didn't think werewolves would be the type ... for therapy. We're a pretty non-complicated species. There are the rules of ranking and the basics of instinct. The time and the technology may change, but when you get down to it, we like to feed, fuck, fight, and find our place. That's it."

"If that was true, then you wouldn't be here."

There was no way that Ian had anything in common with the prancing wolf; no way that things were more complicated. He didn't allow them to be. To be compared to one of Khalid's patients was a definite cause for offense. Stepping up close to the tall golem, Ian glared hotly. "You know, I might be here because you're hot, because you're downright demonic during sex, because I count the seconds until you touch me next. I just might be here because I want you. That's simple."

Khalid raised an eyebrow as the air between the two males thickened. Ian smelled the arousal coming off of Khalid's skin just as sure as he saw it in his almond eyes.

Put your hands on me and prove me right. Silently daring Khalid to make the first move, Ian had the memory of Khalid's rough handling fresh in his mind. It had been two days ago that they had fought, that Ian had been laid senseless, and Ian felt brave.

Khalid squinted as if he had the slightest doubt concerning Ian's sincerity, then he smiled. Turning away from Ian, Khalid grabbed the bottle of beer. He walked over to the sink and turned it upside down, watching the amber and foam flow down the sink. "Flattering, very flattering, and what was extremely noteworthy, mind you was the amount of times that you used 'I' just now."

The combination of seeing his beer wasted and Khalid resisting him so easily was more than Ian could take. "Do you need anything?" His voice was rough with irritation.

"You needn't sound so pained to say that."

"I'm not!" Ian snapped. "It's just that you have no idea, do you? I want to please you, I do, and every time I think we're getting along, you pull my chain. I just thought that things --"

"That it would be simple?"

"Yes."

Khalid threw the empty bottle into the trashcan. "And you thought that why? Because you experienced the ease of Gray and Douglas? Did they not tell you of their sordid, strained past? That Gray is an omega, that Douglas is an alpha who thought that because of the simplicity of rank that he could control Gray's very core with force? Nothing is ever that bloody simple. If it is, it isn't worth an ounce, Ian."

"But it can be simple between us. I'm not an omega, but you are an alpha. The end. There doesn't need to be any deep, hidden mystery involved in it. Just because I submit to you, does that mean that I can't want things, that I can't demand things as well?"

Khalid dropped his head in pondering, and for a moment Ian believed that he had won at least one point in his favor.

Then the golem spoke. "Again, Ian," Khalid started, "If you wanted to demand things, then you can do that from anyone, any brutish sod or perfumed bird that crossed your path. If you want to demand anything from me, then you would do well to realize how."

"How?"

Casting a glance at the clock on the wall, Khalid turned to Ian and replied. "I have a half a few moments before my next appointment is due to arrive, and that is more than enough time for another lesson."

Chapter Eighteen

Arousal was a peculiar thing when Khalid inspired it. It was a state that Ian entered into often thinking of the golem, but once he was inside of it, consumed by it -- that disturbed him. It disturbed him that he was capable of such vulnerability, that even the beast within him was cowed at the intense emotions and sensations incurred by Khalid. That and he was frightened still of the potential that Khalid held to make that arousal burn brighter.

It was one thing to be able to transform, to be able to shift his bones between one state of being to another. Under Khalid's scrutiny, Ian had the notion there were other states that he might attain ... that of a liquid or gaseous form rather than just a wolf or man or combination of the two.

If he just held back something, maintained some sort of rebellion, then there was hope.

But it was so hard ...

Ian looked at the clock with hatred in his eyes. Wishing that he could control time, that he could force it to move faster, he was met with the menace of another minute. It should have been five, ten at the least, but it had only been two minutes since the last time he checked the clock.

Khalid was in a session with a vampire suffering from depression. The vampire, Schad Something, regretted a failed attempt to turn a lover. Guilt and loneliness had driven him to the extreme, and he had to deal with the pain of knowing that he had forced a decision upon someone who did not wholly understand the restrictions of such a life.

The details of the conversation had been so easy to listen to at first. With his supernatural sense of hearing, Ian could detect the monologues of the vampire, the singular responses and questions of Khalid.

The white noise of arousal had been low at first.

He was lying upon his back, naked on his bed. The throbbing burn of the nipple clamps didn't bother him for those first few minutes after Khalid left, shutting the door behind him. The sweat agony of the cock and ball restraint was nothing that a few thick swallows couldn't tamp down. Not even the butt plug, far too small to be anything but a teasing irritant, disturbed Ian.

"This will be a great demand on me, knowing that you are here aching, wanting, and waiting...demanding. Throughout my session, I will have to fight myself trying to remain focused when I can smell you, hear your labored breaths. Every second that you behave will unravel me, and you will behave," Khalid had told him.

"You will not touch yourself, you will not come...because you demand that I put out that flame burning inside of you. It will start as an itch and grow to burn, yet you know that I will not fail you. How can I fail such obedience...from such a handsome, willing, strong wolf...from my wolf?"

Ian had licked the golem's hand, his fingertips as they traveled from one cheek to the next. It was his form of a promise and trepidation when words failed him. The use of "M" was too fearsome to mouth then, as Ian knew it would send him closer to unraveling.

Checking the clock again gave him nothing but frustration as the small plug slipped and moved him further towards defeat. Surely Khalid had it backwards, he thought. The demand was greater on him than it could ever be on the golem. His very sanity was threatened, and he'd be damned if the clock wasn't laughing at him.

Just a few strokes, just a caress from his own fingertips, just a bit of gyration from his hips, and it could all be over with ... yet Ian fought.

His vision, useless in its blurred state, was hidden beneath closed lids. His lips, swollen and bruised from the abuse of his own fangs, and his fur, growing and retracting, were becoming too much.

With every passing moment, Ian warred with his thoughts and his sensations. Demand became a word he would both hate and love, especially as he experienced it full on. He was just lying upon a bed, just exposed and just stimulated ... it should not have been as difficult as it was, he told himself. *The air is not trying to undo me.*

Wondering how much more time he could take left up to his own honor, Ian doubted himself.

"Beautiful."

Ian thought he heard a voice, a growl. He hadn't heard the click of a door or footsteps. He hadn't been able to detect any scent but his own sex-thick musk. When he opened his eyes, he could see the silhouette of Khalid.

* * * * *

The first orgasm came so quickly there was no time to scream. Ian couldn't remember how the mechanics of a scream worked. With surprisingly nimble, swift

fingers, Khalid had the cock cage off. With even more skilled lips, the golem seized his swollen shaft.

To be engulfed so suddenly, so completely caused Ian's inner restraint to snap as easily as a sugar sculpture built too precariously. Folding in, stomach taut, Ian arched off of the bed and shot his seed, in bursts, into the depths of Khalid's throat.

With his sperm went Ian's strength, what little remained of it. Khalid was caressing his thighs, while squeezing the base of his cock, kneading his balls for more ...

Ah, the use of four sets of hands ... Ian marveled. They were glorious as they traveled up over his hips and across his tense stomach muscles. Best of all, they seemed to calm him down somewhat. At least to the point where he could breath again, could open his eyes, and see for himself that Khalid was only beginning.

The golem unbuttoned the navy-blue caftan he wore with one set of hands while the top-most pair were busy releasing thick ebony locks from the intricate chignons. "Did you wish to demand something of me, my well-behaved wolf?"

Ian thought about it, then he thought some more. Khalid had pushed his trousers down and had tossed them onto the floor alongside his shirt. The look on Khalid's chiseled features was something dangerous, feral, and intimidating all in one. A demand, any demand that Ian might have suggested was too singular, too small to even mention, when Khalid looked as if he was going to bring the very earth itself to Ian, upon a platter.

Ian had no reply as Khalid lifted the werewolf's legs and set them on his shoulders. Even though he knew what was coming, how it would burn and stretch him from the inside out, Ian wanted it. He couldn't help it.

Khalid's hands were all over his exhausted limbs, soothing away all the tension that the orgasm hadn't. Closing his eyes, he held his breath and waited.

Khalid stroked his palms up and down Ian's back and ass. "Don't close your eyes to me now. You wanted something, right?"

Ian opened his eyes as told, but speech was a more difficult command to follow. With his body in a position that he had only witnessed in bad European twink porn, Ian felt entirely too open and exposed to be conversant. *What a time to be shy.*

As if Khalid could read Ian's thoughts, he licked the fingers of one hand meticulously slowly. Taking hold of Ian's shaft, Khalid formed a tight grip, pumped it from tip to base, before catching hold of two swollen spheres. With just a few rolling caresses, Ian's scrotum went from being lightly furry to hirsute; his thighs from lightly dappled to dark.

"Your body is amazing. Getting fur for me ..." he growled. "You're too delightful not to subjugate."

Ian arched, writhed under Khalid's attention. Modesty ceased to matter as he locked his ankles behind Khalid's back, parted his knees wider, and raised his hips. Only his shoulders remained on the bed.

Reveling in Khalid's fascination with his perineum, the bud of his anus, and the column of his shaft, all at once, Ian was instantly transported back to the delirious state of yearning he had been in before Khalid had arrived. Times two.

Two of Khalid's fingers, wet with saliva, pushed into his body sending Ian higher onto his shoulders for balance. Pumping and twisting, stroking in ways far more dexterous than an organ might, the digits had Ian squirming nonetheless.

Khalid's attention was rapt. He licked his lips hungrily. "You think that you suffered, trying to behave here in this room? I had to stay focused knowing that you were in here, ready, burning, and needing me. It was no easy task, I swear to you. Everyone needs an ear to listen to them. Some just need to leave their guilt with someone else to hold. I need you to make me clean of it. All of it."

Such responsibility and demand weighed on Ian. It dueled with the ecstasy in his veins for recognition. Khalid wanted him again, and Ian was sure he would fail, just as he had before. It was no easy task, fulfilling the golem's need. Ian had learned that on the basement of sand. "Don't you ... did you think that I might fail?" he gasped worriedly as another stomach-clenching wave of pleasure coursed through him. *Damn him and his glorious fingers.*

"No. I did not."

Ian couldn't focus well enough to see the truth, and the rest of his senses were too muddled to be of any help, either. Fingers were too tight and scrumptiously warm around his shaft, his balls cradled just firmly enough, and those damn fingers ... "You're so sure of yourself," he snarled. "I'm not. You undo me ... I don't think --"

Khalid reached up and took hold of Ian's calves. He lifted them from around his neck and readjusted them around his waist instead. Their hips were aligned, Ian's buttocks resting just above the eager rise of his cock. "I'm sure of you. So much potential. You've done so well already."

Not for much longer, Ian worried. With Khalid rubbing the bulbous head of his thick shaft against his opening, Ian could easily anticipate the devastation. His heart sped up, and he clutched the sheets, knowing full well that he couldn't take the pounding he had before. He was already weak, yet his desire was ambitious. It told him that he could withstand it, that being fucked by the golem was everything and all that he needed. His mind told him the truth, which was that he would be unconscious and spent within moments, and he couldn't wait for it! "Please, M ... Master ..."

Cock in one hand, Ian's hips held between two, Khalid removed the fingers that had been snug inside of Ian's body. He replaced them with the head of his sizable penis and pushed. "Yes?" It was both a question and an exhalation.

Helpless to the invasion, welcoming the fulfillment, Ian had just one request from perfection. "Slow ... please, go slow." As Khalid pushed in as far as Ian's body could accommodate, Ian began to shake. Speech was difficult, but he tried regardless. If Khalid needed him, Ian did not want to disappoint. "I can't ... I want you to ..."

Khalid rocked back and pushed forward. Shuddering himself, Khalid took slow, measured thrusts. "What? What, Ian ... ?"

"Slow."

Khalid nodded, pulling his hips back to pump into Ian's body anew. Several times he drove in slow and straight to the hilt. "Slow? Like this ... ?"

Trading one pleasure for another was not going to work. Fast or slow, Khalid was still causing Ian to burn. Instead of one intense assault, Khalid drew out Ian's pleasure, placing it on the tips of well-spaced waves. "Mmm-hmm," he murmured, reveling in the hypnotic effect that Khalid's massage was granting him. "I just want to see you when ..." Ian felt sure that he could complete the sentence, if only he could concentrate for more than a few seconds. "... I just want to see when you come."

"See me or make me?"

Ian doubted that he could, but Khalid's head was down, covered by an ebony curtain of satin locks. Ian could see the strain, the sweat, and withholding in the limbs of golem. His brown skin gleaming, Ian observed Khalid for the first time, face-to-face. Ian could see Khalid's pleasure written all over his body. It gave Ian courage. Clenching his muscles, Ian attempted to push back, to participate. It was a paltry attempt, but Ian tried.

Khalid raised his head, throwing his hair back to meet Ian's gaze. The look in amber eyes gone dark, was hopeful to Ian, gave him the will to fight the spike of his own pleasure. "Both, maybe."

"So much potential," Khalid growled back. The three words started as a response, but ended up as a repeated mantra. Each time they were spoken, Khalid moved a bit faster, slammed into Ian's heat with a bit more greed.

Ian began to doubt himself more with the quickened pace, the harder drives. Khalid's praise went straight to bloodstream. His balls ached to spill again, his cock was so hard, and suddenly it was out of his control. Hot sperm came bursting forth, and in his bent position, it splashed against his chest, chin, and cheek. His chest heaved with the exertion, his hips twitched.

Khalid still moved within him, but not for long.

Although he didn't see it, Ian felt heard and felt it. When Khalid came, it was with a low, sonorous rumbling. The golem went as still as a board and then shook like a mountain. The shock of that moment, the rippling aftershocks, even, were disorienting, but not so much that Ian couldn't feel the hot cum filling his ass, dripping down his buttocks.

Khalid bruised Ian's hips with the grip of all four hands and sighed in denouement. He did not pull out or soften.

It wasn't exactly what Ian had wanted, but it was damn close.

Chapter Nineteen

Exercise wasn't something Ian did regularly. He didn't have to when most of the work he did was physical labor. Being with Khalid had changed that. While he did have some chores that required him to lift, saw, and hammer, the majority of his work consisted of ferrying things to and from the post office, shopping, and preparing meals.

He had prepared a fruit bowl, the one constant thing the golem seemed to require, for breakfast, with chocolate biscuits imported from a German bakery. That morning, Ian had sliced figs, de-seeded pomegranates, and mandarin oranges. Khalid loved the combination so much, he rewarded Ian with a kiss.

It was the best job Ian could hope for with the best sort of pay Ian had ever received.

As it was a Friday, Ian had the day to himself. Just as Khalid had promised Fridays were his own to do with as he pleased. Ian chose to run. He could have gone to a movie, hung out at any one of the old bars he used to frequent, but the truth of the matter was that Ian didn't want to. He wanted to run. Running was something that required and demanded little thought other than the next footfall. It was instinct and drive, motion and reaction, and it kept him from longing.

Just knowing that Khalid was in the cabin caused Ian to dwell on their interactions, to recall the hunger of the golem, and worse, to anticipate the next time that Khalid would need something of him. Ian liked to be needed, *loved* to be needed, and the thoughts of it drove him mad.

Khalid didn't seem to need him with any predictable time or day, even. A day would pass, there would be nothing; then a day would come, and Khalid would rend him senseless.

Ian ran long and hard, took in scents, and marked trees surrounding the cabin for several miles out. Covering the fading scents of Douglas and Gray with his own, Ian was surprised by the fact that he didn't really miss the other werewolves as much as he

had thought he would. He hadn't had the clarity to miss anything or anyone since he had met Khalid.

It was that same longing, grown brighter, that led him to return to the cabin after just under three hours. So much for free time, Ian thought.

The existence of an unfamiliar scent did not unsettle Ian as much as it once had. Khalid had a visitor of the female persuasion, Ian was almost certain. As he approached the cabin, Ian noted the perfume combination of cloves, berries, and a woodsy cedar-like scent before he saw the candy apple-red Mustang.

Wonder which offshoot of the supernatural family tree it is today? Heading to the carport, Ian transformed in the space between Khalid's truck and the wall. He had placed a pair of shorts on the hood of the Escalade when he left, just in the event of visiting clients.

Pulling on the tattered gray shorts, Ian headed in through the door. He pulled a bottle of water from the refrigerator and headed to his room. Hoping to catch a glance of whatever harpy, vampire, or were-shifter on his way past Khalid's study, Ian was stopped by the exit of a pale, dainty woman with bright red curls.

No taller than five foot four at best, the young woman smiled at Ian on her way out of the door. Ian immediately noticed two things: she had to have the perkier breasts he had seen in a long time, and her eyes were an absolute invitation to sin. They were a sort of smoldering auburn, more red-gold than brown.

She batted her fair lashes, smiled with her plump ruby lips as she stepped past Ian. Rooted in place, Ian could only nod and watch the swish and sway of her ass. Perfect as a peach, the woman left, and Ian stood in her wake.

"Down, boy. Mara's a fire witch and probably wouldn't hesitate to incinerate you while she's busy draining your life force. It wouldn't be an unfortunate way to die, but when you aren't human, it's less romantic and takes longer."

"Huh?" Ian blinked and shook his head as if he had been under a spell. Stepping inside the room, he focused on Khalid sorting what looked like crystals back into a wooden crate filled with hay. It was another of the golem's imported wares; Ian recognized the postal markings. "Really?"

"Really. You fancy redheads, hmm?"

"Only if the carpet matches the drapes."

Khalid looked up at Ian and rolled his eyes as if such a joke were older than the Sahara itself. "Is that what attracted you to Douglas, a curiosity concerning his upholstery?"

Grinning, Ian walked over to the desk where Khalid sat. "No. He was just the biggest son-of-a-bitch I'd seen in a while ... before you, of course."

"So, it's my size that turns you on ... that makes you grow fur?"

It was supposed to be his day off, Ian's free day. Khalid had given no indication that he would "need" Ian on a free day, but Ian wasn't averse to the idea at all.

Leaning on the desk with his hip jutting out, Ian couldn't disguise the flirtatiousness in his tone. "Is that insecurity on your part, or are you trying to psychoanalyze me?"

"Both." Khalid placed the top on the chest before sealing it away in a desk drawer. With a sigh, he sat back, crossed his fingers over his torso, and looked at Ian. "Please don't assume that because I advise those with troubles I don't have failings of my own. I suffer from repression, compulsion, and occasionally, I am covetous."

Since the golem was already being so open, Ian couldn't resist pressing for more information. He felt anything that could aid in the demystification of the golem was information he could use. "Can I ask about your last relationship, then?"

"You can."

Having expected Khalid to turn him down or turn the conversation back around, Ian paused before speaking, "Okay, what kind of guy did you date ... train or whatever before Gray, Douglas, and myself?"

Khalid's eyes rolled upwards, and he chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

Sitting up in his chairs, Khalid realized that Ian was completely serious, not privy to the source of his humor. "Nothing," he coughed. "Before you three, I trained a female."

Ian had been expecting something along the line of a different species. "What?"

"Werewolves aren't the only ones with a substantial bi-population, besides, Amerie is one of the best tops I've ever trained."

Ian had to sit. The idea of Khalid with a female didn't sit well with him. There were no chairs in the room, but there was an ornate futon covered in ornate pillows. No doubt, they were shipped in as well, he thought. "Is she a were?"

"No, she's a golem like myself, quite intimidating, very large and curvaceous, but a warrior in every way."

Moving away from the desk, Ian plopped down on the futon. It was exceedingly comfortable and wide enough for him to stretch out lengthwise. "Hmpf."

Khalid's eyes narrowed, focused on Ian's reclining form. "What, you don't like the idea of a female in combat?"

"No. I don't." Completely honest, Ian had had his fill of warrior females. "I like a woman to be soft and submissive, warm and earthy. If I want a male, then I'll take a real one."

"Well ..." Khalid drawled.

Ian picked up what he thought of as condescension. He turned his head to Khalid wondering what the golem had to say about his choice in women. "Well, what?"

"It's been a while since I met a chauvinist."

"I'm not ..." And truly, Ian didn't think that he was. Being opinionated and entitled was how he saw it. "It's not that I think that women should be barefoot and with cub or anything. Women who fight are fine by me. I just don't make it a point to lie with them, is all."

Khalid stood up from his chair and joined Ian, sitting on the edge of the couch. His fingers played across one of Ian's bare ankles.

"I shouldn't have mentioned anything about being barefoot, should I?"

"Don't worry. I'm not that into humiliation or role-playing, at least to a certain extent, I'm not."

At that moment, Ian didn't care what Khalid was or wasn't into. He just hoped that Khalid wanted to touch more than just his ankles.

"Turn over onto your stomach."

Ian was in the process of doing as told. He had rolled over, but before he could stretch out and settle down, he felt Khalid's hands around his waist. They pulled down his sweat shorts to his thighs, exposing his ass to the air and his cock to the silken pillows. Looking over his shoulder at Khalid, Ian failed to hide the smile at the corners of his lips.

Burying his smile in an ornate pillow, Ian shivered as Khalid kissed an intricate series of patterns across his neck, back, and shoulders. Additionally, the feel of Khalid's warm, broad hand mapping the curve of his ass was just as glorious.

"Do you want to know what I'm going to do to you?" Khalid murmured against the sensitive shell of Ian's ear.

Ian had several ideas, but they all vanished once the golem stuck his tongue inside the shell of his ear. Only once Khalid returned to kissing his shoulder, could Ian muster up the strength to babble, "I don't know. Put your fingers in me?"

"Eventually, but I want something else first."

As Khalid's finger dipped into the crease of his ass, Ian purred. "Whatever you want. You know that, M."

"I do. I know that you are willing to be reigned in, given guidance, or to be taken. I know that you will give me your very best should I decide to try you, Ian."

Ian knew a few things as well; namely, that Khalid's hand fit perfectly around his ass, felt superb massaging and caressing him. Ian didn't know that Khalid was going to bring that hand down hard upon his right ass cheek. "Whoa!"

"Hush." Soothing the burn with the palm of his hand, before adding to it with two heavy, open-hand slaps. "You have a beautiful arse, square and hard like a male's should be with just a hint of feminine roundness where it meets your thighs ... Male or female, I do like a fine arse."

Chewing his lip, Ian found himself anticipating the next blow, the flare of heat and with the roughness of pain, the aftereffect of throbbing -- it all translated into fuel for his arousal, swollen against the pillows beneath him.

Two more blows fell upon his left cheek, another to his right; combined with Khalid's teeth nipping upon his shoulder blade, Ian was in heaven. Raising his hips off of the futon, Ian begged wordlessly for more. The very air stimulated his bruised ass and made him shudder. It was close to how he felt on the inside, when Khalid bruised

his insides with that gigantic prick, as close as he could come without blacking out, orgasming, or both.

His cock leaked as if he might, his balls were just as tight as if he were on the cusp, and Ian wasn't surprised by any of it. Vulnerable in the light of Khalid's skill and power, Ian's emotions grew soft, pliable to anything Khalid wanted of him. As the golem resumed the soothing caresses to the throbbing flesh of his behind, Ian had an idea what exactly Khalid might have wanted.

"Have you ever taken a woman from behind, Ian? They're quite willing once you convince them. They'll open both flowers if you but ask nicely."

Ian sighed, "Not interested in any of that at the moment. I just want you." Thrusting against the fabric beneath him, Ian made his willingness obvious.

"What if I'd like to see you with a woman, one of those frilly types that you say you like? What if I'd like to see her hold you down for me? What if I'd like to see you lapping at her cunt like a good pup?"

The idea of having to share Khalid with anyone male or female left a sour taste in the back of Ian's throat. While he knew that plenty of werewolves enjoyed a group coupling now and then, those weres tended to be bachelor males with heavy balls or wanton females. It was the way that Ian liked it that left no room for females -- rough, desperate, brutal, and greedy with no strings attached. Oh, he knew females who were as brutal and greedy as males, but that meant little. Females brought a certain complexity to things in their gift for carrying cubs, their knack for domestication and nurturing. He didn't want to compete with one for Khalid's attentions, no matter how intriguing the scenario was. "No."

"No?"

Ian repeated himself with only slightly less venom. "No."

"Ahhh," Khalid sighed. "Does this have anything to do with your problems with women or just your posturing with men?"

It took Ian more than a few moments to emerge from the pool of desire he had been drowning in. It took even longer for Ian to turn over onto his side and focus his vision on Khalid's quizzical look. "Is this whole psychoanalyst thing that you do ... is it supposed to apply to me as well?"

"Who do I need to know if I don't know you, Ian?"

Don't get excited. Don't get upset. He's just trying to get to you. Ian knew what Khalid was up to. He was being tested again, like dough for pliability. He had to keep his impatience and irritation in check if he was to have any hope of continuing what Khalid had started. "You need to know that I'm hot for you, that I'm willing to do things for you I wouldn't do for just anyone, but even I have my boundaries." As comely as a diplomat could be with a hard cock and a bare ass, Ian sat up and put his arm around Khalid's waist. "I know that you can respect that ... my boundaries."

Stiff and not buying Ian's attempt at distraction, Khalid replied, "Boundaries are a fascinating concept, ones that I use often with my clients, Ian. Do you want to be my client?"

"No." Moving closer, close enough to breathe upon Khalid's neck, Ian reveled in the warmth and scent of him. In such a short time, the golem had managed to break through to him in ways that no other had. Khalid had given him the brutality he craved, the restraint he needed, and had instilled a fascination in him for the future. A little honesty wasn't too much. "I'm just not comfortable" Ian started and finished within the curve of Khalid's shoulder.

Khalid raised his hand behind Ian's back and rubbed. "I need to know your boundaries so that I can respect them. You don't have to speak on them now, but eventually I would hope that you do feel *comfortable* enough with me to discuss them. In the meantime ..."

Shuddering as all four of Khalid's hands revealed themselves and enfolded him within a tight embrace, Ian felt as if the only thing keeping him from falling apart was Khalid. Ian also knew that if he did pool into nothing, only Khalid could put him back together. As if he needed proof, one of Khalid's hands crept between them and found his cock.

Ian didn't stand a chance.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Ian awoke to find that Khalid had left the cabin entirely. The nap had drawn most of the emotional weight off of his shoulders, but Khalid's void threatened to bring it back on.

Even the truck was gone.

Ian took a long shower, which consisted more of standing beneath a hot spray than it did of cleansing and soap. He dried off and dressed in a long-sleeved sweatshirt and pants, needing the cotton to warm him in ways that had nothing to do with temperature.

He took a beer from the refrigerator and went into the living room with hopes of whittling away the remainder of his free day in the mindless consumption of television. It was a good plan, and it only took ten minutes to find distraction in the LCD screen.

Khalid returned shortly after nightfall. Although Ian felt comforted, he was strong enough not to show it.

"What are you watching?" inquired the golem on his way into the kitchen with a bulging bag of ripe, sweet-smelling fruit.

"*Clash of the Titans*." Ian sighed from his reclined position on the couch. On his fourth beer, Ian felt relaxed enough to add, "It has something to do with my fascination with you, not the whole stone part, nor the beak. You're definitely better looking than the Kraken."

"Why, thank you."

"Just trying to be more open." Ian's tone contained more truth than it sounded. He imagined what Khalid would like in a pool of water, wet, with droplets sparkling all over his broad chest.

Parceling fruit between the refrigerator and the fruit basket on the kitchen counter, Khalid selected a pear for his immediate enjoyment. He took it with him into the living room, joining Ian by the side of the couch. "May I sit with you?"

Ian sat up and swung his feet to the floor. He scooted to the side, making ample room on the large couch. "You don't need to ask."

"Of course, I do. There might be a chance you don't want me to do something." Sitting down, Khalid started in on his pear.

Ian's interest switched from the television to the male beside him. Pears were more fascinating than Greek mythology, anyway. "You could always make me do it. You have ways."

Khalid looked at Ian as if there was too much honesty in the air. "I'm being serious, Ian. Strength isn't just about how much pain you can take, or how long you can take it. I want you to think of a special word, something that will let me know that you need me to stop. When you need a breather, time to think ... if you think I've gone too far, I need you to say this word, and I will break off immediately."

The only word that came to mind was "coward," and Ian definitely didn't want to offer that as a suggestion. "I don't need any word."

"Ian. It is a serious requirement, and you must be serious. You must take *us* seriously. Now, think of something unique and not related to carnal actions. "

Ian thought about it while Khalid made short work of the pear. "How about Kraken?"

"No. Golems are often confused with them. You could just be calling me a pet name."

No, a pet name for you would be something along the lines of "Daddy". Cheeks rounded with held laughter, Ian had to exhale slow and long to release the pressure. "How about Perseus? No, I've got it ... Hera."

"Is it what you want?"

"Yeah. I'd never scream that out in the middle of fucking."

Khalid blinked, the line of his jaw seemed firmer from the statement. For a moment, Ian thought that he had said something wrong. Then Khalid's face softened, and he focused in on the television. Ian did, too. On the screen, a warrior and his companions battled giant scorpions. Both Ian and Khalid watched attentively.

It was Ian who broke the silence. "So you went for groceries today?"

"Yes, groceries. I also visited a nearby coven for afternoon tea. There were three females and two males. They served me orange tea and little cucumber sandwiches. Cookies, too. They wanted me to meet their new coven member and analyze him. I did. He was good-hearted, with little talent for the craft, but a great love of magic ... Would you like to know anything else about my day?"

Listening to details, Ian heard none that would raise any jealous thoughts. "Did you miss me? I missed you."

Khalid glared at Ian for a moment. He nodded and smiled. "Would you like some popcorn? Another beer or something?"

His latest bottle was empty. "Yeah, sure. Popcorn would be nice, too." Only after Ian thought about it did he worry about the beer being poured over his head or the popcorn. Sure, it was his day, but Ian didn't expect Khalid to wait on him hand and foot or tolerate his buzz.

When Khalid returned to the couch with two bottles of beer and a bowl brimming with hot, salty popcorn, he set them on the coffee table in front of Ian. He sat back down beside Ian and relaxed with a sip of his own beer.

Ian took up his bottle and smiled. "Are we having a movie night or something?"

"Sure. We can watch *An American Werewolf in London* next."

The smile on Khalid's face put Ian at ease. Although his humor was a rare and dry thing, Ian felt as if there was something normal in their crazy coupling.

Chapter Twenty

The Arabian Nights inspired his fantasy, the imagery of a sultan observing a captured warrior. In his dream, Ian was the warrior, and Khalid was the sultan. It wasn't the most creative fantasy, as it didn't deviate from stereotypes Ian had already established, but it was a colorful fantasy to have.

Ian imagined being on his knees, shackled to the floor with nothing but air shielding his naked body from the sultan's gaze. In his fantasy, the hand around his cock belonged to one of the sultan's bodyguards. It wasn't his hand at all. The imaginary guard had been commanded to display all of the charms of the captured warrior for the sultan's view.

Ian, the imprisoned warrior, fought against the crackling embers of arousal. Before him was his enemy the sultan, and he could not give in. He had his honor, his pride, and surely if he clung to them both, he would not spew cum like a green cub.

The sultan gazed at him, like a falcon staring unbiased and foreboding at its prey. Far more handsome than any man of power had a right to be, the only sign of his arousal was his wet and parted lips. It was more than enough to shake Ian to the core.

He had heard stories of sodomites, about what they did to men. Stories of seduction and acquired appetites had been whispered among his soldiers like curses alluded to by wary grandmothers.

They say that they can steal a man's virility, make him softer than the gentlest dame. They can make warriors into whores with the slightest touch.

Ian imagined himself as being too brave, too virile, and too strong to fall to such nonsense. Sure, the sultan was attractive, his eyes were candied amber and those ebony locks rivaled that of any maiden he had ever courted. More alluring still was the sight of the sultan's chest and the sole golden ring that adorned the right nipple. The loose-fitting trousers the sultan wore did nothing to steel Ian's resolve, leaving no

mystery to the sultan's intent. With every passing second, Ian realized that he was not brave, not virile, and definitely not strong enough to oppose the sultan. In any way.

"Stop."

Ian's hand stilled upon his shaft, and he hissed one long sound. "Mmmm."

"Breathe. Just breathe," Khalid commanded from the couch. Gazing down at Ian's kneeling figure, the golem was the very essence of composure. "You're doing good, so good. I told you that you could."

Ian still wasn't convinced. He was doing better than he had the day before, and that was the only thing that Ian could attest to. Of course, the circumstances were slightly different; Khalid wasn't so close, so within arms' reach. While he was certain that he wouldn't pounce on Khalid, coming was still a threat.

Already on his third intermission, Ian relaxed back upon his haunches and did as told. In ... Out ... Ever so slowly he breathed and thought of toads ... he hated toads.

"It's not so different from the sensation you're dueling with now. It's no different from entering into fisticuffs. In a battle that same sort of rage can cost you. Control is of the essence, and you cannot always depend on brute force. That thing in your chest is unfocused, chaotic, and chemical. I don't need that now. I need you to be calm."

Ian didn't need Khalid to stand up, but the golem did it, anyway. He stood up and walked up to Ian. When he knelt down beside him, Ian felt the aforementioned chaotic tension. His pulse, which he had just managed to get some control over, spiked anew at the proximity of delectable male musk. Ian inhaled deeply before he could stop himself.

Khalid leaned even closer, testing Ian's reserve. He placed a hand on Ian's chest, into the soft, copious fur, directly upon Ian's fiercely beating heart. "Shall I tell you something about force?"

Ian closed his eyes and nodded. It would not be a distraction ... as long as he didn't focus on how sexy Khalid's voice sounded while he said it.

"You only use force when you are sure of your opponents' submission or your pet's readiness. Anyone can be a brute, but dominance requires willing submission, untainted by fear, by selfishness, or by opportunity." Brushing a finger across Ian's nipple, Khalid seemed to sense all three in Ian. "Begin again," he said.

Ian didn't want to. With each time, his cock ached more, and the sensations took him harder. The strain of holding back was becoming too much. The little breaks Khalid gave him didn't help in the least, especially not when the man's scent was so strong. Ian could smell the lust on Khalid.

With shaking fingers, Ian took himself in hand, pumped his cock from base to tip ever so slowly. It wouldn't have made any difference if he had jerked his cock any swifter or harder, it was still delicious, fucking torture to him.

"I want you to become familiar with arousal, true arousal, not the itch, but the true power of it. I want you to know it and see past it. Any one could steal your attention from me if you are unable to conquer the needs of your prick."

Don't say prick, and please, don't come any closer. Grinding his teeth, Ian was tense with focus. He had his hands full ignoring the clenching in his gut, the flooding of his senses, and the nearness of the one male worth holding back for.

The day before he had fucked up, had tried to steal a kiss from Khalid only to be turned down. The game had ended then and there with Ian spilling upon Khalid's trouser leg. Ian had felt awful.

It was to that memory he held onto for strength. Ignoring the wetness dripping down the underside of his cock, the lead weights that seemed to fill his balls, Ian set his mind on one thing alone, pleasing Khalid. He could be strong, he could be loyal, and he could stay focused. *Dead frogs ...*

"Stop."

Ian could have screamed with joy at that one beautiful word.

Taking hold of Ian's shoulders, Khalid kneaded and rubbed at the tense muscles. "Breath it out, let go of it. I'm so proud of you, Ian. Five times is no small feat."

He would have agreed, but Khalid's deep massage was working wonders. At first he fought against leaning back, allowing himself to relax too much. He may have managed five times, but dreading a sixth was enough to keep him rigid. Even as Khalid placed a kiss against his neck, Ian held fast.

"I am going to reward you greatly. You are really going to enjoy tonight."

"Tonight?" Ian was more interested in a more immediate reward.

"Yes, tonight. We'll be hosting a small party. We'll need to prepare a few things. You will serve the guests and be on your best behavior."

Ian's dick was still rigid, still leaking, and Khalid was talking about rewards to be given hours away. He might have been upset, but his wires were all crossed, confused between wanting to fall into the security of Khalid's embrace and wanting to climb all over him.

He felt his back meet with the smooth, hairless chest of Khalid. "I ... I don't know."

"I do, and I am extremely confident in you, Ian. You performed well for Gray. I know that you can do it for me. Right?"

Gray didn't make me want to come on sight. He didn't torture me and own me like you, and he certainly didn't smell as wicked as you do. It didn't help that Khalid held him tightly, nuzzling against his chin as he waited for Ian's reply.

"Right, Ian?"

Ian nodded as he finally came to the conclusion that Khalid's hands really weren't going any further than his chest.

* * * * *

Ian rarely forgot a face, or a scent for that matter. Samantha Emerson was the vampire's name, a brunette with long legs, excellent cleavage, and lips redder than

fresh-spilt blood. Holding the door open for her and her entourage, Ian thought that he was showing a lot of skin, but witnessing Samantha's male servants in less than nothing made him look warm in comparison.

They entered the cabin carrying large black suitcases with downcast eyes. Ian's eyes followed tight buttocks defined by strips of leather as they moved past him. The two men were as different as night and day, one with chocolate-colored skin and the other as pale as the moon. Both wore matching thong bikinis made of leather underneath full-length leather trench coats.

Clearing her throat, Samantha made it known to Ian that she was still in front of him. Ian apologized before closing the door and meeting Samantha's eyes.

"You were with Gray and Douglas?"

"Yes, I'm Ian."

"Samantha." Her smile was bright and toothy, like a wicked Girl Scout. Tossing her heavy, chocolate mane back over her shoulders, it didn't seem to be a seductive measure in as much as it was a matter of necessity. Her eyes narrowed at Ian in scrutiny. "I can't say that I knew you'd find such a powerful Dom, but I *can* say that I am not surprised. Khal has excellent taste when it comes to subs."

"So I hear." The reminder held a sour taste for Ian, but he smiled regardless. Directing Samantha with a nod of his head, Ian figured she probably knew her way around the cabin better than he did. "Everyone is in the living room. This way."

Four and a half-inch heels struck the hardwood floors with purpose. Ian followed behind them as if their sound was a command.

Inside the living room, her minions were already hard at work. Trench coats were cast off, suitcases opened, items and catalogs on a scale rivaling a storefront were set up on the coffee table. They needed very little instruction or supervision for that matter.

Samantha sat beside Khalid on the couch and engaged in introductory banter. Like a king holding court, the golem made the vampire look small in comparison, yet she held her shoulders back and kept her eyes on Khalid's. Ian came in and took his place by Khalid's side, noting the glossy magazines, the colorful candles, and sex toys that the two servants had set out for display. They'd even set out edible treats.

Ian was fascinated. He'd always thought he'd done well to find a town with a werewolf butcher, but apparently supernaturals had a deeper, more monetary presence than he'd ever assumed.

His gaze seized on a catalog that dealt with suspension devices. Ian couldn't get over the brown-skinned werecat posing in a swing on the cover. It wasn't something he could find at the local newsstand, but it definitely had the same glossy production value.

"Ian, could you get the pitcher of rose water for our guests?"

"Yes, M." Remembering he had promised to be on his best behavior, Ian recalled he had chores of his own that needed to be done. Before Khalid, even before Gray, he might have thought twice about working from something akin to commands, but not

any more. Khalid hadn't threatened him, didn't bribe him overly much, but Ian moved with purpose.

He went into the kitchen and got the metal tray that Khalid had set out for him. On it were Ian's favorite metal cups. From the refrigerator, he retrieved a metal pitcher with matching ornate designs. He set it in the center of the tray and brought it out into the living room.

On his own impulse, he served the fruit and cheese, figs, the seared tuna strips, and raw Kobe beef. It had all been purchased at a store, but Ian served it with a grin, as if he had made it himself.

Ian served Khalid first, not privy to any other etiquette. Since Khalid said nothing to the contrary, he served Samantha next. Samantha's slaves were on their knees beside the table having finished their set-up. After a nod from her, they accepted pinches of nearly everything that Ian brought forth.

He caught brief snippets of the sales pitches while serving. Both curious and hopeful, Ian trusted in Khalid to select items to use on him. It was more motivation than a paycheck for Ian to be an agreeable host. Not that anyone asked for anything, but Ian was there to provide.

Khalid put a stop to Ian's nervous movements between the kitchen and the living room. "Come, Ian, sit down. I am sure that our guests are satisfied."

Setting down a tray of smoked salmon, Ian sat down beside Khalid on the sofa. Khalid put an arm around his waist and pulled him close. With a close-up view of the restraints catalog Khalid was perusing, Ian hoped that his cheeks weren't as red as they felt.

"I'd like the passion ribbons," Khalid called out his first order. The dark-skinned servant had a pen and a pad ready to record the information. Fascinated by the glossy pictures, Ian barely realized that Khalid was stroking his side. Not one to be prideful, at least not overtly so, Ian relaxed and let go of the nervousness that having company inflicted upon him. The envy in the two males' gaze was more than palpable.

"May I see the Wolfen Staples catalog?"

Samantha looked through the small stack of catalogs on the table and handed the correct one to Khalid. "Certainly."

The magazine Khalid rummaged through siphoned Ian's attention. He was totally blown away. The idea that supernaturals had such flourishing mail-order businesses was both fascinating and insightful. The catalogs looked like gothic art photography books. There were no prices or even order numbers, but Ian would never have known where to get such materials.

Wolfen Staples was a catalog devoted to domestication toys, things similar to Douglas's possessions. The main model was an albino Newfoundland, just a foot shy of a short werewolf. Dog beds, water bowls, leashes, collars, even chew toys were on display. Khalid pointed to a circular-shaped dog bed; it looked cozy and thick. The Newfoundland seemed to adore its spaciousness. He showed it Ian. "I was thinking you might like one of these."

Samantha perked up. "It's extremely cozy and durable, and the cover is removable for washing. It comes in several shades, blue and green, maroon and silver, white and black, and pink and red."

"I'd like to get something like this for you. I can keep it at the foot of my bed, for you to use whenever you please. Would you like it?"

Ian smiled, more so because Khalid suggested placing it at the foot of his bed.

"Every wolf should have a warm cushion to lie upon." Samantha was all pointy teeth and a wide, ruby smile. "Which color?"

"Maroon and silver."

* * * * *

Ian looked at the item Samantha had handed to Khalid. It was distinctly different from the dildos, the nipple clamps, the whips, and the weighted ball restraints that she brought out for actual display and handling. Khalid cradled the item in his hands, examining it closely. There was no mistaking its purpose.

Carved from ivory, the tiger claws looked every bit as sharp and deadly as any his own when transformed. More so.

"Those are one of my newer items, and already it's proving to be a top seller. For those who don't have claws, but who have lovers that enjoy the sensation of them. Those tiger claws are all natural, sharp as metal, and very easy to clean and sanitize."

With a nod of appreciation, Khalid turned over the contraption and pondered the leather finger straps. He slid the fingers of one hand into each of the harnesses and gazed at them anew.

Feigning an interest in a sweet-smelling lube, Ian tried to stay focused on the fact that Khalid didn't seem to own any lubricants. Khalid didn't have claws, either, and the way the golem admired the contraption, Ian was certain that that was going to change.

The idea of Khalid having claws was enough to make Ian nervous. It wasn't that he suspected Khalid of misusing them, of harming him. Instead, Ian was worried the golem would know exactly how to use them. *Why not a feather duster?* he wondered. Hoping to distract Khalid's attention from the claws, Ian raised a bottle of dark red lubricant. "M, what do you think of this?"

Khalid didn't acknowledge him, but Samantha did.

"Oh, now that is a hot item. It's self-warming lube: edible, all natural, with just a hint of venison blood mixed with wild raspberries and blackberries, crushed evergreen. The scent is called *Forest Sangria*."

Ian had sixty dollars saved from his life before Khalid. He had never needed it, but if Khalid wasn't going to purchase it ... He felt that he should at least ask again. "M, I'd like to get this."

"A case of the Sangria," Khalid muttered. He took off the claws and set them beside their twin on the coffee table. "And I'd like the box for those."

"Oh, well ... actually," she began. "Those are simply the display item. I can have a pair or two delivered as early as three days."

"I wish to use them tonight. Would I have to pay extra to get those?"

Samantha met Khalid's gaze as if trying to gauge his seriousness. She didn't have long to wonder or to consider her response.

"A few hundred more? Double?"

"Oh, no, of course not," she smiled nervously. "For you anything. They're yours." Snapping her fingers at her fair-skinned servant, she commanded him to find a velvet-lined box and wrap them up.

Despite the dog bed, the crate of lube, several toys, and a harness, Ian could only think of one purchase -- Khalid's.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ian couldn't believe more than a month had already passed since he first agreed to live with Khalid. The days moved so swiftly, permeated as they were by tasks, chores, and debauchery. He had learned well what pleased his host and what did not. Routine, a word that didn't exist before Khalid came into his life, was something Ian had also learned quite well.

Ian learned that while golems loved meat, too much of a good thing usually induced a greater need for tension release in Khalid. It made him wilder, more demanding, and definitely more hands-on. There would be less structured play and more of their animalistic frays, and while Ian enjoyed both equally, the aftereffects were what encouraged him to be moderate in his cooking. Whether he served beef burgundy or pasta salad, all depended on whether Ian wanted to be conscious after a session with Khalid, or whether he wanted to feel like a frail weakling.

Stretching as he pondered the day's breakfast, Ian had learned a great deal about the culinary arts. Whereas before Khalid, a half rack from the local barbeque pit might have been sufficient, Ian now had someone else to consider. Not only did he have to think of Khalid's needs, but the fact that he had a bigger budget and access to so many exotic ingredients compelled him to learn more about cooking.

If Khalid had an addiction, surely it was to mail order. More than three days couldn't go by without a trip to the post office to pick up freeze-dried fruited, smoked seafood, or spices that Khalid said were gifts from friends and clients. Khalid said it didn't matter if he were spending time at the cabin, in Paris, or in the Sahara. He simply liked the idea of the post.

Ian's stomach certainly didn't seem to mind the variety or the exotic flavors.

The plan for breakfast was simple enough: pancakes with butter and orange marmalade, halved strawberries with yogurt and nuts, milk, vegetarian sausages for Khalid, and beef sausages for himself. Having lain in his comfortable dog bed, pondering pancakes over waffles, Ian came to the conclusion he did not want to deal

with the waffle maker. He was still exhausted from the night before, and although the cane marks had healed, he was still dizzy from the remembrance of them.

Ian stretched and climbed quietly out of his bed, a fearsome brown wolf with perhaps too bulky of a build. He made his transformation quietly as not to disturb his master sleeping in the bed behind him. Khalid had offered to share his room, and Ian deemed it an honor not to be taken likely.

"Ian."

Halfway to the door, Ian turned around and found almond eyes set on him. No matter how many times Ian saw the golem in his king-sized bed, his light-brown skin looking like perfection, all four arms showing, that golden nipple ring mocking him, Ian could never deem it casual. "Yes, M?"

Khalid patted the bed with one hand. "Come here."

Approaching the bed as if it might bite him, Ian found a space close to Khalid's side and sat down. While there was little hope of hiding his morning erection, Ian did his best to look like he didn't want to push the heavy duvet aside, climb all over Khalid's limbs, and have his way. "I was going to make you pancakes, those harvest nut ones you like."

Such things seemed not to matter to Khalid as he reached for Ian's waist.

Ian found himself flush against cool, succulent skin. He couldn't control the urge to move closer, wrap a leg around Khalid's.

Khalid didn't mind, smiled in fact. One of his hands shaped itself around Ian's ass, the other around his hip while the other two held the naked werewolf close. Nuzzling Ian's throat, he growled, "So thoughtful, thinking of your master and on your day off, too."

"Well, I try. My master takes such good care of me." Ian knew that he had said the right thing as Khalid squeezed him tighter, pressed his hard, shaft into Ian's stomach.

"Does it please you to make him happy?"

"It does. It really does." Babbling as Khalid suckled his earlobe, Ian wove his fingers through the giant's soft mane. If there was one thing that could trigger his submissiveness, it was Khalid's attention to his ears. It didn't hurt that the golem had two fingers delving into his opening.

Capturing Ian's chin with the fingers of one hand, Khalid brought Ian's attention to his face rather than the ceiling. He leaned in and kissed parted lips with a strictly possessive brutality.

Ian didn't like to moan -- it was something he attributed to weakness -- but there was little he could do about the matter once Khalid captured his tongue, sucked on it as if it were his own. There was no cooperation, no kissing back, just a dizzying assault that deserved a much bolder name than a French kiss. Kisses were never as wet, as strenuous, and as oscillating as they were with Khalid, and Ian's lips never throbbed as much from any other's kisses.

Khalid broke away from the kiss, pleased by the gasping fits of his flushed lover. "We work well together, eh? Creativity in the kitchen, keeping my schedule ... budgeting ... guarding me ... I've grown quite fond of your special attention. "

"Don't forget stress release."

"Of course not. Speaking of which ..." Giving some slack in his embrace of Ian, Khalid took one of Ian's hands. He guided Ian's hand to his cock, and together they both squeezed the wide shaft. "Ahh, yes ... You're very good for that."

Jerking Khalid off in slow, tight strokes, Ian felt Khalid's embrace loosen. With every downward stroke, Khalid relaxed more and more. He allowed Ian sole rein. Ian kissed Khalid upon the jaw. The golem was too busy arching back to avoid it. "I'm good for a whole lot of things. Lie back."

Khalid did as told, easing back onto the pillows. "Just because today is your day you want to order me around, huh?"

"Can I?"

"Yes. You can do as you will. I can be your pet today."

Christmas had never meant much to Ian, but the gift Khalid had just given him made him smile like it was the holiday. With Khalid's body laid out for him like a present, Ian straddled the golem. He let his eyes take in the view, his hands mapping the contours of shoulders, pecs, belly, and throat.

He memorized every hiss and exhalation that Khalid made, what caused them, what made the golem breathe faster, and Ian formulated his plan. He went for the throat first, using his lengthened claws on Khalid's shoulders. Ian scraped gently with his teeth, grazed gently with his claws. He wanted to tease Khalid for every time the golem had made him hold off an orgasm, every time that Khalid made him beg, whimper, and mutter.

Revenge would be a bitch.

Aligning his ass directly over Khalid's cock, Ian intently rubbed against the golem's erection. By reaction, Khalid bucked, and Ian held him down by the shoulder, the best he could. His fangs pierced the thick column of flesh that was Khalid's neck. Ian tasted blood like sweet wine, thicker and richer than any flavor belonging to a human.

Khalid's moans grew louder, his hands clutched into fists. Ian's mouth traveled from one side of his throat to the next, feeling the groans of ecstasy from both sides. Ian's tongue, his fangs found Khalid's nipple, pierced with a ring of gold, and the sound that came from Khalid was something Ian had never heard.

On top of him, Ian was covered in fur, his chest, arms, belly, and legs. Ian's tail swished back and forth, purposefully teasing Khalid's thighs. Khalid's free hands found their way Ian's hips, holding them steady as his own hips pushed drove upwards.

Ian knew what his lover and master wanted, but it was not the day for Ian to be taken so hastily. "Behave," Ian snarled. "Like I behave for you."

Releasing the set of arms he had been holding, Ian shoved the other set away from his hips. For a moment he thought Khalid might challenge him, but once he was sure Khalid would not, Ian returned to his feast. His fascination with Khalid's nipple ring and the flesh that surrounded it had Khalid squirming, but Ian didn't care. He could do what he wished for as long as he wished.

Khalid began to swear once Ian moved his exploration to his armpits. As golems didn't have a great deal of body hair, the golem nearly bucked him off as Ian found the sensitive, bare flesh and tasted.

"Bloody fucking hell!" It was half-shouting, half-hissing.

Ian had never heard Khalid swear so much. He rose up just to see the golem's face and discovered that amber had turned to dark crimson. Khalid looked practically demonic, two obsidian horns protruded from his crown. Ian wondered why he had never noticed them before. *Probably because he's never had any of his own medicine*, Ian thought. "M, I want you. I want to have you."

Khalid's lips curled. "You want to fuck me, yes?"

"Yes!"

"How?"

Before Ian could even decide on a position, Khalid had twisted his body to the side. He reached for the nightstand and found what had become a staple in their relations, the Forest Sangria lube. He pushed it into Ian's hand. "You'll need this."

Ian moved off of Khalid, staring at the bottle as if there were instructions written on the side. He felt the bed shift, dip, and then shake. When he raised his eyes, Ian discovered Khalid on his hands and knees. The sight was more than surreal, and it chipped away at whatever confidence he had believed he had.

Having fucked dozens of men, women as well, Ian should not have felt as if his heart was going to jump out of his chest. He shouldn't have felt like a fumbling virgin, and worse, he shouldn't have felt fear ... but he did.

Moving behind the golden flesh, the arched back, and the tree-trunk thighs, Ian opened the bottle of lube, poured the cherry-colored liquid into the palm of his hand. Using the lube to coat his cock first, Ian had more than enough to prepare Khalid. In his anxiousness, he had poured out too much ... or so he thought.

Oh, hell. Khalid was tight, the muscles of his ass were much stronger than Ian had imagined. The moment he managed to wedge two fingers inside, Ian knew that he wouldn't last long in such tight, satiny heat. Khalid's muscles closed around his fingers with a pressure that sent a full-bodied shiver through Ian. "You're so tight."

"Yes ..." Over and over, the golem accepted the thrust and twist of Ian's fingers, thrust back for it. "Don't keep me waiting, Ian."

He didn't have long to wait. Ian's need got the best of him despite his inability to stretch Khalid. Withdrawing his fingers, Ian replaced them with the head of his cock. It took more than one push, more than using his hand to guide his shaft inside the vise of Khalid's body, it took patience. Khalid was tighter than any one Ian had ever been inside of. *Fucking virginal!*

Fully seated after what seemed like an eternity, Ian remembered that he could breathe. His shoulders felt heavy, his blood rushed downwards, and Ian could swear that his left foot was twitching. Khalid's body was all heat and hardness, and Ian couldn't resist molding himself to the golem's back. *Slow your breathing, or this will be over real quick*, Ian told himself. *Nice and slow*.

"Mmm, Ian. It feels good."

That's an understatement. Waves of pleasure coursed through Ian with every second that he remained still. Every time he moved, even an inch, the room seemed to spin. Allowing his hands to drift around Khalid's waist, Ian was content just to be surrounded by his lover. A stroke of bliss and a sigh to recover was all that he could take.

It wasn't until Ian became greedy, trying to fit two strokes into one that the world truly crashed in on him. Once he started, inertia would not let him stop. His hips would not obey him and slow down, not when the tight walls of Khalid's body pressed down on him. His groin tightened with the push towards release despite Ian's attempt to hold back. "Oh, oh , fuck no ..." Ian muttered against Khalid's spine, but no amount of denial could stop the jets of come from spilling from his balls. Ian closed his eyes, hardly able to enjoy his orgasm. Every aftershock was simply another awkward reminder that his stamina needed serious work.

Khalid said nothing as Ian pulled out. He turned and embraced Ian, dragging the sulking werewolf down upon the mattress.

Preparing all sorts of apologies, Ian opened his mouth, but Khalid was there to kiss away his insecurities. Softly, their lips played. Khalid's hands soothed tense limbs, and Ian folded himself anew around the golem's form.

A shift of Khalid's hips brought their cocks into alignment, softness against rigid flesh. Although spent, it still felt exquisite to Ian, just lying with Khalid, thrusting, grinding.

Khalid seemed to enjoy the leisurely pleasure as well. Ian pushed a hand between them and took the golem's cock in hand, eliciting a vibrating groan that stirred Ian anew. Khalid found Ian's shaft, and together they stroked, finding a powerful, demanding rhythm.

Their kisses became more desperate, rougher, and in mere moments, Ian was back at a fever pitch, and gloriously, so was Khalid. Focusing solely on his master, Ian pumped and twisted. He fought tongue-to-tongue with Khalid for dominance, and in the end, Ian won.

* * * * *

"Because it is your day, I won't complain about your sulking."

Sitting at the kitchen table, Ian should have been in a better mood but the truth of the matter was that he didn't really enjoy his personal days. They were unstructured and boring in comparison to every other day of the week.

On Fridays, Khalid wasn't his master. He was Ian's lover. After a morning of intimate and awkward sex, an afternoon of napping entwined, Ian had gone for his usual Friday run. Khalid was busy preparing a lavish meal when he returned.

The kitchen was *his* place. "I'm not sulk --" Ian shook his head and rephrased his reply. "I was just thinking."

Khalid stopped tenderizing the lamb to check on a fragrant curry sauce. "I would ask you about what, but at the risk of you thinking that my profession gives me special privileges, I'll refrain."

Watching Khalid doing something that he had gotten used to, Ian couldn't shake the feeling of inadequacy swirling in his gut. From Saturday to Thursday, Ian was in charge of meals, errands, and appointments. He went out his way to study cookbooks, books on supernatural races, history books anything that would make him more capable to serve Khalid, and yet he couldn't even manage a sound fucking. "Passive-aggressive ..." It was a term that Ian had grown to know and recognize around Khalid.

"While I am horribly guilty of that, at some point, I suspect, I'll go too far and incur your wrath."

Ian laughed at the idea. "Yeah, well, it's not like you couldn't put me back in my place in, oh ... all of about three seconds. It'd be like a mad squirrel to a grizzly -- cute but edible. So any angst I might be suppressing is really moot."

Content with the consistency of his sauce, Khalid laid down his spoon and returned to the counter. Taking a fistful of rinsed herbs, he began tearing the plants into tiny pieces over the meat. "It would be. Of course, that would mean that our being together is just as ... moot."

Ian cursed himself for not realizing that Khalid would draw that card. "Why won't you let me just pout?"

"I am not stopping you, Ian. It is your day and your pity party."

And you are fucking ruining it, Ian wanted to say. Finding it hard to believe that Khalid felt no disappointment by his failed attempt at topping and finding it harder to believe that they could be so normal after days of lessons and decadency, Ian realized that he hated Fridays because they gave him time to think about all the times he had believed he was in love. He had thought that he was in love with Gray, once with a demure girl in grade school, and once with a gamma with self-destructive issues.

He had been wrong. He had to be wrong because nothing made him happier than serving the golem, than curling up next to his feet while he watched television or serving him tea or being chained to wall with Khalid deep inside of him. Nothing. "I hate you," Ian muttered finally.

Khalid showed no sign of surprise. "Say it with more conviction, Ian."

"I. Hate. You."

"Right." Stoic and aloof, Khalid kept his eyes on the food. "Would you be interested in accompanying me to the continent? I go every year. It's how Gray and Douglas get the cabin to themselves. If you wish to stay with them, it's perfectly fine,

but I'd rather have you at my side. Besides I think you'd love the scenery. Eastern Europe has some beautiful forests for you to explore."

Ian sighed as Khalid disregarded his grand and bold statement. They never fought, at least, not verbally. It was the only time Ian had truly stood up against a golem, and even that was diminished by Khalid's skill at mental dissection. *He's got your number, wolf, just face it.*

"Haven't you ever been loved before, Ian?"

"This isn't love. It's not even that crazy thing that Gray and Douglas have," Ian snapped. "I'm fine when I'm servicing you, obeying you. When I'm not, all I can think about is 'what the fuck does he see in me?' What's it going to be like when you're finished training me, and how will I stand it when you no longer need me? I thought that falling in love with you quick and dry would be less painful, that it would give me time to get over it. A little servitude, a little humiliation, and lots of wild sex, and *bam* -- the desire would fade. Well, that fucking backfired."

"Expectations ... What can I say," Khalid looked up from his culinary work. "I'm not disappointed. I knew you wanted more than training when I took you on. It is needless to say that I wanted more as well. Despite your worries, you are turning out to be all I imagined. This morning was nice. Lovemaking with you is nice, and worrying is natural."

Easing back against his chair, Ian's subconscious mind seemed to be lulled a great deal easier than his conscious mind. "Yeah, says he who is the bastion of control and calm."

"I'm not just a psychologist. I am a golem, one of the berserker races. I understand more about madness and more about being out of control than you will ever know. Undoubtedly, I have killed more humans and supernaturals in an age than you have thought about in all your years. I have had masters who made me feel as if I couldn't breathe unless I was in their presence and slaves who really couldn't unless they were in mine. You think just because I play the master and you play the slave, that I am in control. You could easily stop me with a word. Because of you, my days are controlled. It is my responsibility to earn your obedience by being thoughtful, creative, intelligent, and calm. These are traits that do not come easily to a golem," Khalid stated. "I'm fond of you, Ian, and it may be premature on my part, but I do favor you. No bells, no whistles, no grand futures or promises, but if you couldn't tell from earlier, I don't often submit."

Ian's ire cooled as he listened to Khalid. It wasn't so much that his issues paled in comparison to Khalid's, but that Ian could see his special purpose. Ian still wanted to be the one in the kitchen adding meat into the wok, turning it over an open flame with garlic and onions. He wanted to be the one putting on a pot for rice, and if he were dressed in only his trousers and a cock cage, like he was on normal days, that wouldn't have been bad at all. It was only one day. A special day. "I really was honored, too honored, I think ... Earlier. You make a really hot bottom," Ian smiled nervously.

"Being a good bottom has little to do with offering you my arse, love. You should know that by now."

Ian did. He knew for certain that it had a great deal to do with wanting to be supportive, in the kitchen and outside of it, in the office, in bed. His prowess may have been lacking, but his creativity wasn't.

Getting up from the table and from his funk, Ian walked into the kitchen. He moved to Khalid's side and slid an arm around the broad waist of his lover and Master. Ian dropped his hand slightly, fitting it around the curve of Khalid's linen-covered bottom. "So, about Eastern Europe ..." he began. "Tell me how beautiful it is again."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ian's Sunday schedule allowed him three more hours of sleep than any other day besides Friday. Rather than having to wake up at seven, he could spend the extra hours recovering from Saturday, usually the busiest and most stimulating day of the week.

That Saturday had been no different. Endurance had been the game, and if Ian could have been arrogant about it, he was actually getting quite good at it.

Khalid had wrapped him in passion ribbons: around his shoulders, his ankles, his wrists, and his throat. The purple ribbons were made of tightly woven satin. While a human might have had problems snapping them, Ian had discovered quickly that the amorous inhalation or movement of a supernatural caused the ribbons to shred. If the ribbons snapped while on him, the game was over.

The game didn't stop, however. Not while he made bold attempts at sucking the golem off. Not while Khalid taunted his skin with feathers and clothespins. Ian had kept his calm through Khalid's fascination with both his earlobe and asshole at the same time.

No easy fucking feat, Ian told himself. Many a night he had failed at keeping his calm, but he hadn't the night before, and a long, slow fucking had been the reward for his victory. It was what kept him glued and heavy in his dog bed, an exhaustion not even rest could dissipate.

It didn't occur to him that Khalid was not in the room with him until Ian caught scent of raspberry and lemon tea stemming from the kitchen. The scent of tea wasn't the only thing that Ian caught scent of.

"He didn't take human form until he turned five," said a familiar female voice. "We thought for a moment that maybe he couldn't. You know every once in a while there is the odd one who doesn't want to shed his fur. But I think it had something to do with where my mother kept the rawhide -- on top of the refrigerator. He couldn't leap up

there on two legs. So imagine my surprise when I come home from school and see a furless, redheaded boy sitting on the countertop feasting out of a bag.

Ian's breath stuck in his throat as he listened to his sister speak. She was there. In his kitchen. How didn't seem as relevant as opposed to why. To add fuel to Ian's full-blown panic, Jen was in the kitchen with his lover.

Khalid replied, "How interesting ... Three girls you said?"

"Yes. I have an elder sister and a younger and then there's Ian. He's the baby."

"And your father?"

"What about him?"

"What did he think of Ian?"

Ian sat up in his bed. He would have to leave Khalid's room and move down the hall, naked in order to get to his clothing. Unless Jen was standing up and looking down the hall, she wouldn't see him. It was a risk he was willing to take before Jen spilled more of his family business.

"He loves him. Da loves all of us. He doesn't live with us, but he always brought us presents. Sometimes Mama would let him sleep over, but well ... we never did without. It looks like Ian's doing fine here, though. How long has he lived here?"

"Nearly two months."

"Better than that shack above the bar where he was staying. Pardon my asking ... but are you two ... you know, together? It's okay, werewolves tend to be bi by nature."

Ian tiptoed down the hall and into his bedroom, making haste to the drawer that held his sweat pants and T-shirts. He threw on the first of each that he could get his hands on.

After her monologue concerning the free spirit of most werewolves, Jen continued with her original question, "It's none of my business ... but he *is* my little brother."

Ian made it into the kitchen just in time to witness Khalid's answer.

"We are intimately involved." Khalid smiled.

His gaze was only on his sister. Ian was not fooled by her stylish look nor by her smile. Jenna was the more studious of his sisters and definitely the only one that had ever had a subscription to Vogue. Her hair was completely blond, dyed, of course, and she reeked of expensive clothing and perfume. She had changed from a gawky young girl into a sophisticated woman, but Ian knew one thing had not changed. Jen still had acid for blood. "Jen. What are you doing here?"

Bright hazel eyes took in Ian's disheveled state. "Ian. Whoa, someone had a wild night. What's up, bro?"

Ian rolled his eyes, not about to play the embarrassment card. Khalid certainly wasn't playing the befuddled host, so neither would he. Khalid looked relaxed in his housecoat, but Ian wasn't fooled. He knew that the golem's curiosity was growing by the second. Deciding that tea was much too mild for his frayed nerves, Ian headed to the coffeepot. "Nothing. What do you want?"

"I couldn't just drop in and say hi? I mean, just because you've forgotten where you were raised doesn't mean that we've forgotten about you."

"Right. So you've found me, what do you want?"

Jen took a sip from the tea Khalid had prepared for her. "I don't want anything. Ma does. She wants to see her favorite cub."

Ian tried to keep a steady hand as he spooned coffee into the filter.

"You know you are her favorite. Our mother could care less about us girls. It's her boy she wants to see."

"And when the queen howls ..."

Ian's muttered reply didn't sour Jen's mood in the slightest. "Right. So I'll let her know you're on the way. I hope you don't mind, Khal --"

The response was dry, but courteous from the golem. "Khalid."

"Yes, Khalid. It'll just be a week. You're welcome to come, too, of course."

The idea of Khalid meeting the brood was too much for Ian. They would take one look at Khalid, his size, his bearing and breed, and immediately the chatter would begin. "Look, Jenna. I'm kinda busy. Couldn't you just tell Ma that --"

"You don't even want to go there, Ian," Jen hissed. "And you need to be glad I'm here instead of Jada, okay?"

With coffee mug in hand, Ian focused on the dark drip of the coffee. He would have a lot of explaining to do once Jenna left. Even if Khalid was sitting at the table appearing as if he were unflustered by the family dynamics, Ian knew better. His psychologist lover had probably dissected, discerned, and diagnosed issues Ian preferred not to think about.

"Khalid. May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

Ian's grasp around the handle of his mug grew tight.

"What are you? You don't smell like a human."

The handle broke off cleanly, and Ian turned to face his sibling. All but snarling, he met his sister eye to eye. "Jen. It's none of your business, really. Tell Ma I'll be there within the week."

"What day?"

"I don't know!"

Jen scoffed. "No need to yell, bro. Am I bothering you that bad? Your friend doesn't look like the easily bothered type, nor does he look like the sensitive type, if you catch my whiff. What harm is there in me asking his breed? I don't care if you're into the interspecies thing or not, so pipe down."

Ian was beyond furious. *The sensitive type?* He could feel his claws extend at the thought. Behind him, he heard the last hisses of the percolating pot. He turned around anxious for a cup of java and realized that all he had in his hands was the porcelain handle of the mug. Exhaling, he got another cup from the cabinet and poured his coffee

to the rim. The last thing he needed was sugar or cream. "Right. Well, you've delivered your message, and you've got my reply."

"You don't have to be an ass about it."

"And you don't have to pretend like you give a fuck about what I'm up to."

Jenna scoffed, "Of course, we give a fuck. It's you who wants to pull all of this lone wolf crap. Hell, you hardly see your damn nephews or niece for that matter."

Ian paused trying to figure out which of his sisters had bred most recently. He knew Jada had a set of twins, but he barely remembered them. It dawned on him slowly that it might have been Skye. Although her sexual door tended to swing more one way than the other, Ian supposed he hadn't allowed for any drafts.

Nodding as she saw the realization on her brother's face, Jen replied, "That's right. Skye had twins nearly three years ago, and let's not forget about Jada's cubs who hardly even realize that they have an uncle."

"Do they realize that they have fathers? A grandfather, maybe? Why just worry about an uncle?"

Wincing, Jenna paused and threw an excuse of a smile towards Khalid. "Look Ian, it's not just about you and your unresolved issues with Dad or your manhood."

"I don't have any unresolved issues with Dad or Ma or you, Jada, or Skye. I have my own life!"

Shedding all pretenses of calm, Jenna crossed her arms over her chest and snapped back. "Yeah, and it ain't like it's any different from --"

"Goodbye, Jen. You can show yourself out." Cutting his sister off at the pass, Ian took his coffee mug and headed for the awning that led to the hallway. He gave Khalid his sincerest look of pleading, of apology. Hoping that his lover would understand, Ian needed to be alone in his comfort zone and with his coffee. "Tell Mom, I'll be there in a few days. No later than Friday."

* * * * *

Sitting on his bed, Ian stared at the empty coffee mug. The black brew had been long gone, even the warmth in his belly had departed. He had expected Jenna to leave, for Khalid to have found him already. He expected questions, maybe even an accusation or two, but what he hadn't expected was to be left alone.

He knew the moment his sister left. It was ten minutes after he had told her to leave. She had probably stayed to finish her tea ... and to continue the interrogation of Khalid. Maybe she had left because Khalid had ordered her to. Either way, Ian had waited for the knock on the door, the whispered inquiry, anything from Khalid. Nothing had come.

Watching the clock as its red digits shifted with time, Ian came to the conclusion that Khalid wasn't going to come to him. He picked up his empty coffee mug, swallowed his pride and went to the door. He found Khalid in the kitchen where he had left him. Only instead of just tea in front of him, Khalid had the newspaper and a glass

of juice. His breakfast, a bowl of fruit, cheeses, and black bread covered in butter sat beside him. Ian's shoulders fell. He should have been the one to set those things in front of Khalid.

Casually perusing the finance section of the newspaper, Khalid commented, "Your sister is very intriguing, extremely insightful as well."

Ian's response was a muffled groan. He chose the chair beside his lover at the table, steeling himself for a reprimand that never came. Instead, Khalid shared his breakfast, nudging the bowl over for Ian's consumption. Picking a slice of bread, a few chunks of melon, and some strawberries, Ian filled the silence in the kitchen with sounds of succulent enjoyment.

"I take it that you do not wish for me to discuss the estrangement in progress. So do you think that you'll be able to get through today or would you like to have the day free for your arrangements?"

"Wha ..." Confused in his preoccupation with breakfast, Ian had believed that Khalid was going to ignore the morning's events. He should have known better, he told himself. "Oh, no, I'm not making any arrangements. Hell, the only arrangements I plan on making is to Austria like we planned."

Khalid looked away from the stock market index. His eyes ran over Ian's nervous countenance. "Ian?"

"M, I apologize for my sister just dropping by, but they really don't understand me. Not like you do. I'm not ashamed of anything we do, or my role in what we do." Ian rambled on, "But my family ... well, I come from a matriarchy, and they've never given me the respect I deserve, and I refuse to play into their rule --"

With an upraised hand, Khalid put a stop to the emotional ranting. "Get the glass plug, your special lube, and the suction cups."

Befuddled, Ian wasn't sure that he had heard Khalid correctly.

"You heard what I said. Get up from the table and go into the bedroom and get the items that I requested."

Ian nodded. He finished chewing his bread and got up from the table. Part of Ian was pleased that Khalid found no interest in the petty insecurity over his past. It was much, much bigger than the part of him that wanted to curl up against Khalid's leg and have a nervous breakdown.

Ian made haste, returning with everything that Khalid had asked for. He presented the items on knees, but a wave of Khalid's hand brought Ian back to his feet.

"Set the items on the table and get undressed."

Only too eager, Ian pulled off his shirt, the sweat pants followed, both of which he neatly folded. With his hands behind his back, Ian held his *ready* position while Khalid finished his breakfast. Chest rising and falling, his cock swelling with the anticipation of play, Ian let all thoughts of family and conflict fade. Before him was his purpose, not nieces and nephews, not a chain of command at which he occupied the last rung.

Khalid wiped his mouth with his napkin before standing up from the table. He took up the suction cups. "Ian, you know that you can discuss anything with me that you wish, right? Appointments can be rescheduled."

With a nervous swallow, Ian's eyes were on the clear cups in Khalid's hands. "I'm ... I know. I'm not fine, but I want to be yours today."

"I can cancel my appointments."

Ian shook his head. "No. Please, don't. Can we just have something regular?"

"Very well." Licking the under-rim of one suction cup, Khalid placed it over one cinnamon and rose-colored nipple. With the other, Khalid went for a more direct approach, licking Ian's nipple before placing the cup on it.

Ian tilted his head back and sighed as his world focused inward to divinity.

Khalid took him by the shoulders and helped Ian to lean over the table. Taking the glass plug in hand he unfastened the leather straps that would hold the plug in place. "Bend over for me."

Doing as he was told, Ian leaned over and braced himself on the table. He could smell the familiar fragrance of the Forest Sangria, could hear Khalid pouring it into his palm and coating the smooth glass surface. Still, the intrusion of the slick plug caught him by surprise when it pushed into him, lifting him onto his toes.

Leaning back against the strong, sure frame of his lover, Ian felt as if the kitchen were spinning around him. He was moving, but not nearly as fast as he assumed he was. Khalid guided him around until his back was at the table, and Ian was again facing his golem.

Breathless, Ian knew well how to hold the plug within his body even as Khalid knelt to fasten the harness straps around each thigh. It was no accident that as the golem arose, Ian exhaled with an emotional string of gratitude. "M ... Oh ... Oh, M ..." Attempting to stand on his own, Ian reached out for broad shoulders to steady himself.

Khalid took Ian's hands in his, kissed the heavy, furry claws. Running his second pair of hands up and down Ian's back, he managed to calm the werewolf from the tense, wiry being he was moments before. "Ssssh. We only have two visitors today. Prepare the tea for my morning appointment and make us lunch. Later today, you and I shall have a proper date, ok?"

"Yes, M." Ian didn't care what they did as long as they did it together. Thoughts of his biological family were shelved away in favor of plans for tea, greeting, and serving his alpha as a beta should. *To hell with being a cute omega to a bunch of broad-shouldered gamma females*, Ian thought.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Is there something wrong with your meal?"

Ian's world expanded beyond his plate to the restaurant and the handsome man before him. Their date was really just that, a dinner date to a Middle Eastern restaurant. It was nearly two hours away from the cabin, but it was Khalid's favorite, and the drive had been pleasant. They spent most of the time discussing the places that Ian wanted to visit in Europe and the places Khalid recommended that they visit.

The restaurant itself, The Sapphire, was extremely beautiful and smelled of spices and exotic plants that stimulated Ian's heightened senses like wildfire. Statues and portraits of Hindu, Indian, and Asian gods decorated the place, and the soft strings of some foreign guitar-like instrument filled the space. "No. Everything is perfect. I especially love this ... um ... lassi." Holding up his glass, Ian took a sip of the yogurt drink.

"Yes, the mango one is much more preferable than the strawberry. How is your lamb?"

"It's really good. I like Indian food."

"So do I, but that's not really saying much. I love cuisine from the world over."

The weight of Khalid's eyes reminded Ian that he was skirting dangerous territory. Khalid had not pried, and Ian was not ready to discuss his sister's visit, he vowed to be a better dinner guest with conversation. "And you've been all over the world. You're kinda like those posh vampires they're always showing in movies, but without the arrogance. It's like the difference between blue bloods and wannabes. With them, it's all flash and pomp, but with you, you're more laid-back, like you've known luxury all of your life."

Khalid looked up from his meal for a moment, and for a moment, Ian assumed that his excuse for small talk had faltered. "Well," Khalid said. "Vampires do tend to express a great love of luxury, business, and hedonism."

"It reminds them that they are alive."

"Something like that." Khalid did not look amused with Ian's fledgling psychology, but he wasn't totally aloof, either.

"You know I've never been outside of the states. I can't wait to go Austria with you. I've never even been on a plane."

Seemingly unsurprised, Khalid shrugged. "You'll like it. There's a rather pleasant charter service that I use. They are extremely prepared for handling large cargo and supernaturals. They even have in-flight movies and spacious seating."

"I hear you get peanuts and drinks on flights."

That got a smile from the golem's features. "You can if you want, but you can also have steak, wine, peanuts if you wish. Personally I will look forward to enjoying you on the flight, providing..."

Providing he got his focus back, Ian assumed Khalid's words. Every time his mind slipped into thoughts of home, Khalid's attention seemed to fall on him. All day, Khalid had been casting suspicious and near judgmental looks, and he was casting one at Ian across the dinner table.

"Is your collar bothering you?"

Ian blinked out of his trance and found himself toying with the scorpion charm on his collar. It was something he did when he was nervous, a developed habit that Khalid had pointed out once before. Just the mention of it and Ian felt exposed. "No. It's not, M." The truth weighed on him, but Ian had learned that it was tons lighter than a lie. "I want to talk to you about it, you know ..."

"I know." Giving a sympathetic nod, Khalid set a serious stare on Ian. He set his fork down and gave Ian his full attention. "I know that you will talk when you're ready, and I am prepared to be patient. You are brave, you will sort it out."

Ian heard both sympathy and pity, two emotions that he loathed. "You think that I'm a coward?"

Khalid met Ian's agitation with utter calm. "I didn't say anything of the sort."

"I'm submissive. There's a difference," Ian huffed.

"Of course, there is. And I believe, I've told you countless times that being the submissive means being supportive, it means being the strength and the foundation for whatever it is you perceive your master to be. I find nothing that you do to be weak or cowardly. However, if you did, I'd be very worried."

He'd be worried enough to declare their relationship a farce or worse, Ian assumed. Gathering himself together, Ian sought the words he could say, the truths he could admit to. His chest felt full, and instead of his collar, Ian rung a napkin within his grasp. "It's complicated ... I don't want to go back. I don't hate them, but really, there is no place for me there. The girls, my sisters ... my mother held them to a different standard."

"Tell me about them."

Ian winced but complied. "Jenna. Jen, the one you met already, she's the second eldest. She was always the book-smart one. Guys seemed to think that she's the prettiest, too. What she is is a pain in the ass. You think when you meet her that there couldn't possibly be a more man-hating cur in the world, but then there's my sister Skye, whose balls are probably bigger than mine." Laughing at his own joke, Ian relaxed just slightly, released the napkin he had been clutching compulsively. "She doesn't really have balls, but Skye made it her business to use me as a punching bag, pretty much throughout my teenage and young adult life. Hell, I'm sure she can *still* kick my ass ..."

"And your oldest sister?"

Looking at the glass filled with some concoction of non-alcoholic mango and yogurt, Ian really needed to be drinking something stronger. "Jada. Yeah. Well, let's say she and you have a lot in common."

One of Khalid's eyebrows rose, doubtfully. "Oh, really? She's a golem?"

"No, but she could pass for one." Easily conjuring up a vision of his eldest sibling, Ian hunched slightly, as if she were before him with her ice-cold stare. "With her it's not even a matter of size or intimidation. She is my mother's right hand. She is my mother's enforcer. When my mother wasn't around, Jada was the parent. She told us when to brush our teeth, when to take our human shapes, and when to behave. Hell, my mother is the alpha of our family, but I suspect that next in line is Jada. She is the only one that Skye and Jen even think about listening to after our mother."

"And that bothers you?"

Ian did more than nod. He reached for his drink and drained it. "I'd be lying if I said it didn't. People were more afraid of my sisters than they were of me. Other werewolves, males, they came to our door with their tails between their legs. And don't even get me started on my father. I swear the man must have orgasmed every time my mother roared. She let him into the house, into her bed once a month, sometimes twice. He gave her his check every payday. He wasn't a bad father, but he could have stood up to her every once in a while. It got to the point where I hated to see him coming."

"You hate to see males prostrating themselves in front of powerful women."

Any comment he was going to make regarding Khalid treating him like a patient dissolved in the humor, that he was indeed treating Khalid as a psychologist. The truth was the truth, and it went both ways. Grinning at the irony, Ian recalled Khalid's words about the limitless boundaries of their relationship. "Why would I hate it? I see it every time I go home. I do it myself." It was the most honest statement he had ever made. "You've seen how they summon me, how they find me and summon me to fucking court."

"Really Ian. Would you visit them casually if they didn't?"

"No!" Ian exclaimed. Looking around the restaurant, sparsely occupied and dark as it was, he was still worried about causing a scene. Khalid didn't seem to be, nor did he seem to be disturbed by Ian's tone. The night was going so smoothly. Why he had

chosen to divulge his past in the midst of their date, with the possibility of hot sex looming on the fringe of their return, Ian didn't know. What he did know was that if he didn't get himself under some semblance of control, that there would be no sex, hot, steamy or otherwise. "I wouldn't. It's their den, and really, I'm fine with that. I'm a lone wolf ..."

"A lone wolf is very rarely a sane wolf, and you are not alone right now."

While visibly Ian would never have been able to tell if the golem was upset, he knew that something was off about his lover. Khalid was reaching for meat, rather than the vegetarian fare he had ordered. Ian placed his hand over Khalid's brown one. "What I meant was that I have a home elsewhere, a different pack to concern myself with."

Khalid looked at their hands, intertwined his fingers with Ian's. "You're laying it on extremely thick, cur. Don't think I've never encountered flattery from a handsome patient before."

"I'm not your patient. I'm your lover and your submissive, and if you're going to be handling me tonight, I'll be requiring something a bit more controlled from you. I've admitted things to you that I've never told anyone. I'm feeling a tad sensitive, if you catch my meaning. Something in the order of the harness, maybe a massage and a spanking?"

Pulling his hand away from Ian's, Khalid closed his eyes and sighed.

Ian could see that the offer was appealing to the golem. "I won't let it affect us, Khal, if you don't let it."

Khalid's opened his eyes only slightly. Ian knew that his lover was suspicious. Ian had never called Khalid by a nickname. It was only ever M or Khalid but that was due to change. Khalid had given him power before, and Ian knew that he would do it again. While he doubted that that night would be one where the golem gave up control, Ian realized that even on his knees, he had some pull over the big guy.

"I knew you were a wicked wolf when I met you."

"Of course, you did. You're a psychologist, and you will help me to get over my issues with females, with my mother and sisters and even my father," Ian gripped. "You will help me to get over all of that bullshit. In time."

"Hurry up and eat," was Khalid's only response to Ian's honey-tinged words.

* * * * *

"Here you go." Khalid set a slice of chocolate cake down in front of Ian and took the empty soup bowl away.

Ian watched his lover move to the sink. The golem had waited on him hand and foot, and Ian intended for Khalid to do even more. Wrapped in only a blanket, his body still tingled from the kiss of the whip, from the intensity of Khalid's hunger. He had welts that tingled as they healed. Ian had hickeys in odd places, his balls were sore and empty, but Ian had never felt better.

Beneath the thick flannel, his cock stirred. Just remembering Khalid, sweating, growling, pulling, and squeezing him was causing him to twitch. Yet Ian was sure that he couldn't go another round. There was hardly any seed left within him. Four times in one go was pushing it, but Ian had enjoyed every nerve-wrecking peak. It wasn't out of revenge that Ian asked for two scoops of ice cream with his cake. It wasn't out of emotional instability that his fingers clutched the flannel. Ian had no need for security, for safety or for pettiness. He was much too busy enjoying his aftercare.

Khalid returned to Ian's side with the tub of ice cream and a scoop. Two perfect spheres sat atop the cake on the plate. Starting in on his dessert, Ian eyes followed the sway of Khalid's black robe as he headed to the refrigerator to replace the tub. Happy beyond reason, Ian didn't regret for one second the life he had chosen or the alpha he had accepted. Ian recalled his earlier admission of love to Khalid. It had been premature then, but Ian was certain he had not been hasty at all.

"You look happy, my wolf."

Grinning with a mouth full of sugar, Ian sensed Khalid behind him. The feel of a strong, masculine palm cupping the back of his head, made him swoon. "So happy, I could howl. I made you come. Twice."

"That you did. You're stamina is improving. Pretty soon, I'll be able to eat a whole steak."

It wasn't quite the response that Ian had been looking for, but it was a compliment.

Khalid took up the chair next to Ian's. He looked relaxed, nothing like the ravenous beast he had been when they arrived home. Despite his own warnings, Ian had shared some of his lamb with Khalid. It brought out a hunger in Khalid that took no more than two very intense hours to sate.

Ian loved both, the gentleman and the beast, but he couldn't help the feeling there was something else inhabiting that gorgeous body, something far more primal than anything he had yet to seen or feel. Something that Khalid kept repressed.

Ian didn't want his lover to be repressed in any way. "You were pleased, weren't you, M?"

Rolling his eyes as if Ian's question was an absurd one, Khalid gave his response. "Ian, careful," he said. "Don't look at me that way. I'll need you again."

"I'm not some frail human. You can take what you want from me, M. I love you. I've never felt so sore in my life, but if you want me now ..."

"Eat. Your. Dessert."

Cocking his head to the side, Ian lifted his fork, deposited chocolate cake dripping with vanilla bean ice cream into his mouth. "Are you hard again? Does taking care of me after you've had your way, after I'm all sore and aching and tired ... does it get you hard or something?"

Khalid didn't seem amused, nor did he give a response.

Pushing his empty dessert plate aside, Ian had the opportunity to pay full attention to the giant at his side. He turned in his chair to face Khalid, reached over and gave his knee a jostle. "Come on. Answer me."

Khalid did not.

Ian was not one to be put off by warning stares. He sought the opening of Khalid's robes, the bare flesh of Khalid's knee. Rubbing the soft, hairless skin, Ian marveled at muscles beneath. "Lamb Vindaloo and some red wine ... if that's what my master likes, I should really learn to make it. I should serve it to him naked."

Pushing Ian's hand away, Khalid closed his robe back and stood up. "Right. Well, I'll just get ready for bed, and you can clean up that plate."

"Yes, M." Before Ian could even get the words out, Khalid was headed out of the kitchen and was moving down the hall. *Perhaps I'm not as sexy as I thought.* As he stood up, Ian reconsidered his prior notions. On his feet, he was still unstable, more exhausted than he had assumed he would be. The plush, round comfort of his dog bed would do him well.

He took the plate and silverware to the sink and washed them along with the soup bowl already in the sink. Blanket clutched tight, he turned off the lights in the kitchen and headed in the same direction as Khalid.

The golem was sitting on the side of the bed, waiting for Ian as he broached the threshold. His robe was cast aside, and the only thing covering Khalid's shoulders was the obsidian blanket of his hair. Ian looked at his bed and then looked at Khalid's. His preference was clear.

"You finished that heaping mound of sugar?"

"All done."

"Come here. I have something for you."

Still wrapped up in his blanket, Ian padded towards the bed and stopped short of Khalid's knees. "Hmm, really. What is it?"

"This." Khalid reached under one of the many, fluffy pillows at the head of his bed and pulled out a beautiful collar made from black leather and gleaming, sterling silver. At the front of it were two stunning scorpions, facing the D-ring in the middle.

Ian felt weak and went down upon his knees, immediately at the sight. Eyes fixed upon the collar as if it were the entrancing celestial body herself, Ian gasped, "M ... By the moon, it's beautiful."

Khalid displayed it for Ian to see, front and back. "It is yours, if you wish it. It is a sign of my love for you, my need to have you near, and my handicap without you. It needs no ceremony, no witness ... it needs nothing but your consent. If you wish to keep things casual, if you wish to wait, I will understand. I will not love you any less."

It was the only thing that could have stole Ian's attention away from the collar. Looking up at warm almond eyes, Ian squinted as if he hadn't just heard what he thought he had. "You love me?"

"I wouldn't be giving you my collar if --"

Ian was not about to accept anything but an admission. He squeezed Khalid's legs warningly. "You love me. Say it again."

Breaking out in a grin of his own, Khalid admitted, "I do. I love you, cur."

White fangs showed as Ian's joy blossomed. He shrugged off the blanket. Pouncing on Khalid's broad frame, Ian knocked the golem back upon the bed, straddled the larger male. Bouncing up and down, Ian demanded over and over. "Put it on me! Put it on!"

Revealing his second pair of arms, Khalid used them to steady Ian's bouncing form. His upper set he used to reach up. "Yes, my wolf."

Ian leaned down to make it easier for Khalid to wrap the collar around the thickness of his throat. Once it was set in place, there was little doubt that the sight of ebony and silver against the pale peach of Ian's body, the warm brown of his furry chest, aroused the golem.

Beaming with pride, Ian twisted and looked at himself in the mirror on the far wall. *Damn hot, if I say so myself!* Fingers stroking the soft leather, Ian smiled at his reflection. No longer was he just a playmate wearing a chain. He had graduated to a real submissive wearing a real collar. More importantly, he had a Master, one who was grinding his thick shaft beneath Ian's bottom. Ian rocked back, shuddering as the width of Khalid's cock rubbed against his perineum. *One more time wouldn't hurt anything.*

Ian had to lean and stretch to reach the dresser where the lube was kept. Khalid had grown fond of the Forest Sangria, much to Ian's pleasure. Ian pulled out the bottle and popped the cap open. "Allow me to thank you, M."

"Certainly. Prepare your body for me. I need to see it."

"Still needy, huh? I knew it." Ian grinned devilishly, poured the dark red liquid into his palm before reaching behind himself. His tail had grown long, full, and furry. He had to raise it just to get at his opening. Sensitive still, Ian had to concentrate in order to sheath his growing claws.

It used to embarrass him, the sounds, the intimacy of having to stretch and coat his own channel, but Ian was far past those days. He knew that Khalid loved it and made a slow, sensual show of it. He rose and fell upon blunt fingertips, enjoying the stimulation, making the show more than wanton. Beneath him, Khalid shifted between jealousy and impatience. Both emotions displayed clearly across his features.

Ian teased his lover as long as he could, yet not even three of his fingertips could compare to the width and heat of Khalid's shaft. Expectation got the better of him, and Ian had to cease. *Teasing be damned*, he thought as he removed his fingers and found Khalid's cock. Guiding the bulbous head to his center, Ian sank down upon the girth. The sore, inner walls of his rectum had barely recovered from the fierce fucking of an hour before, but like a good pain, they welcomed the heat of the golem's muscle once more. "We'll do this slow, okay?"

"Okay, what?"

On top, he could control the depth and the rhythm of their movements. Bracing his hands against Khalid's shoulder, Ian looked down into the eyes of the male that he

loved. While broad hands caressed his back and thighs, played upon his tail, Ian moved within a shell of bliss. "Okay, M ... Khalid ... Khal ..."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ian waited, a giant brown wolf resting at Khalid's feet, on chain and collar, but neither of Khalid's clients -- a human or her merman husband -- seemed to have anything to say to the golem regarding the upbringing of their child.

"Well," Khalid prodded. "There's been much mention of your son, and yet, not a lot concerning this tension that I detect between you. I'm sure the child detects it. Children are extremely perceptive."

"There's nothing wrong with our relationship, just her treating my son like a landwalker."

"That's not true," the woman snapped. "Khalid, we have been having problems ..."

"Sharon." Her husband half-whined, half-pleaded. Ian could tell the merman didn't want her to speak another word.

Khalid sometimes allowed him to sit in on sessions. Ian knew that it helped his lover to have him near, to be able to reach down and scratch him, to have him near. Ian loved to be at his master's feet. His collar was flexible enough to fit his neck in both wolf form and human, and Ian wore it in both. For the most part, the inner peace he felt at Khalid's side negated any juicy bits of conversation from clients.

Sometimes he fell asleep, other times he daydreamed. As the wife went into detail about lackluster antics in the bedroom, failed attempts at romance, and the suspicion of her husbands' jealousy concerning their son, Ian rubbed his muzzle into the plush carpet. He closed his eyes, planning just a short nap as Khalid continued to query the couple.

With a head full of Austrian forests, Transylvanian peaks, and Saharan sand dunes, Ian reveled in his new obsession -- Khalid and his upcoming trip. Just a few more days and they would be on a plane, on a new adventure, and supplied with a bounty of exotic scenery in which to make love.

Khalid worked in both hemispheres and had patients the world over. Ian gathered that there were problems that he solved physically as well, although Khalid only alluded to such instances vaguely. It didn't matter that there would be work to do on their trip, that he would meet others who knew the golem far better and longer than he.

It would not always be so.

Passports had been obtained, arrangements had been made, and Ian was ready to go. In his mind he pictured the cargo jet, imagined being up in the air and making love to Khalid in his seat next to a cabin window littered with sky.

The scent of wolves was the furthest thing from his mind.

Ian raised his head to discover Khalid looking down at him. "Ian? I'm not expecting guests. Are you?"

Able to hear the crunching gravel from the approaching vehicle, able to smell a group of wolves all too familiar, Ian was sure the horror he felt within was both visible in his eyes and positive enough of an answer.

"Excuse me, Milton. Sharon." Khalid reached down and unfastened Ian's leash. "Go and welcome our guests, Ian. Shut the door behind you as well, luv."

Ian hesitated, stuck in a mire of disbelief and shock. He knew the scents well. What he didn't know was why they had come, or what he was going to do about it.

A pat on his flank from Khalid snapped him out of his trance and sent him to the door. Using his nose and teeth to turn the door handle, Ian opened the door and slid out of the room. A nudge of his shoulder sealed the door behind him.

He moved quickly to his room and transformed back into his human form. Grabbing the first pair of sweats that he could find, he heard the V8 engine of their vehicle cease. With a dirty shirt from the top of the hamper in hand, Ian raced down the hall and to the front door. He was just in time to see the door of the minivan open and four pups scamper out.

Two were larger than the other two; three of the four were redheads. Ian saw his sisters next. Jada, had driven, Skye had ridden shotgun. A sleeker, luxury car pulled up behind the minivan. Driving it was Jenna, with a wicked "I-warned-you" grin on her face. In her passenger seat was Anna McAllister, Ian's mother.

Ian felt faint.

Mouth agape, he stood near the cabin, watching the group assemble. The cubs walked behind their mothers who walked behind his mother. Ian swore he could hear the cracking of knuckles and low snarling. When he tuned his ears to the approaching gang, however, he heard nothing. *What the fuck?* Aloud he muttered, "What are you all doing here?"

"Hello, Ian." The soft almost deceptively gentle voice belonged to his mother. "This is a nice place you have here."

"Uh ... Mom," Ian muttered.

Anna McAllister was just as calm as Ian was stricken. "This is a nice place. Lots of land, fresh air, and beautiful scenery ... I even picked up the scent of a nearby stream."

"Yeah, it's nice. What brings you all the way up here?"

Jenna was swift to answer that question. "You could have called like you said you would. You could have come. We have answering machines, you know."

Ian blinked. "I was going to --"

"You weren't," Jen snarled. "I can smell that lie!"

"Enough, Jenna." Anna did not even need to raise her voice to gain her daughter's obedience. Her bright hazel eyes fixed upon Ian. "Are you going to invite us in? Jen tells me that your roommate is quite interesting, even for a supernatural."

"Well, he's working right now. He works from home."

Walking past her son, Anna led the pack past Ian and to the door. She stopped just short of turning the knob and letting herself in. "We won't be a bother. I could use something to drink. Your golem friend wouldn't deny us a little refreshment, would he?"

"Of course not." *But I would.* Moving to the door, Ian took hold of the handle. It was slicker and warmer than usual. "Come on in."

* * * * *

Insanity. It had to be insanity.

Four healthy wolf cubs sat side by side, quiet and obedient as soldiers. He recognized Glenn and Justin as Jada's cubs. Both were big and strong with auburn fur. Rather than the hazel eyes of the McAllisters, however, their eyes were dark brown, almost black. They were kind eyes. Skye's twins had kind eyes as well. Smaller than their cousins, Lily and Peter were absolutely adorable, but just as regimented. Peter was the only one who showed a hint of rebelliousness in his bright hazel eyes. He reminded Ian a lot of himself.

Ian made sure he served his mother a glass of peach tea first, after which he set the pitcher down on the table. Setting out three glasses for his sisters, he had no intention of serving them. To the cubs he gave saucers filled with hazelnut cream. It was a treat his mother used to give to him when she had coffee in the morning, and the cubs absolutely adored it.

"Your golem is rich. I always knew one of us would meet a man with money."

Inside of the refrigerator, Ian put the creamer back on the door and contemplated getting a beer for himself. Instead, he grabbed a soft drink. "Somehow I doubted it would be you, Skye."

"You're right, I'm not as delicate and alluring as --"

Clearing her throat, Anna interrupted her squabbling children. "I hear that he's of Middle Eastern descent, your male."

"His name is Khalid. He's half-Indian, half-Arabian. He's a golem, one of the ancient races, like gargoyles. He's nearly 700 years old, and his favorite color is brown."

His mother didn't seem interested in those details. "And just how did you meet such a rarity?"

"We met at a party." His mother didn't need to know what type of party it was, but sure enough, Anna was suspect.

"What sort of party?"

"A mixer for supernaturals ..."

Jen snickered. "I've been to a few of those. They're really interesting, to say the least."

"Right, Ms. Jetsetter," Jada spoke up, her voice low and gravelly, but definitely female. Out of all of his sisters, Jada was the one that Ian liked most. It wasn't her fault that she had very few feminine traits. She was the oldest and the strongest, and she didn't need to flaunt it.

"Oh. Don't act innocent, Jada. You've been to more than your share of bonfires."

"I'm not interested in your shameless conquests, girls." Anna held up her hand and silenced Jenna. "I'm interested in Ian's."

Skye, sitting closest to their mother, leaned in and whispered, none too discreetly, "Mom, I don't think Ian's the conquering type. He's the one wearing the collar. He's the conquered. He's probably into that. You know domestication stuff. They wear collars ... and leashes. They pretend to be good doggies."

Anna smiled. It was something Ian rarely saw. It stung that it was at his expense. "You did not come here to insult me. Tell me that you didn't, Mother."

"I didn't come here to insult you, Ian. You know you're my heart, but I did not raise you to surrender yourself to *any* supernatural, no matter how rare and powerful he might be."

"Mom, you don't understand ... Our relationship --" Ian paused as he heard the door to Khalid's study open. Turning to look at the hallway, he watched as his lover escorted his clients to the door.

The McAllister women watched as well, curiosity and apprehension in their eyes. Quiet as church mice they were as Khalid said his good-byes. They were even quieter when the tall, exotic male arrived in the kitchen.

Ian lifted the can of soda to his lips. He needed to hide the madness of his grin. Khalid was wearing a collar very much like Ian's. The only difference between the collars was that Khalid's was accented in gold. Ian had never seen the item, didn't even know that Khalid had one. Ian had never even seen the golem in jewelry other than the nipple ring. *He must have put it on in the office knowing they'd harass the hell out of me. Take that, Skye!*

Khalid strode across the floor and walked directly up to Anna. He bowed before extending his hand. It easily dwarfed the woman's hand. "You must be the McAllister matriarch. It's so wonderful to finally meet you. My name is Khalid Diya al Din, but you may call me Khal."

"Nice to meet you ... Khal. My name is Anna McAllister. Call *me* Anna."

"Anna. Ian holds you in quite high regard, and I can see why -- three beautiful, strong she-cubs, four grand-cubs, none of them with human taint. You are very lucky."

"I am indeed. I am also very lucky to meet one of the ancient races, and I suppose, to have my son enamored by one."

"Your son could have anyone he wished. It is I who has the honor of his attention." Khalid looked at him, and Ian hoped his cheeks weren't as bright as they were warm.

"Yeah, right." It came from the side of Ian's mother, clearing the room of any romantic speculations. "Ian's lucky to have you."

"You must be Skye, the youngest of the sisters. Ian's told me a lot about you as well." Khalid stressed Skye's age in a way that made her eyes seek the floor. "Jenna, I've met. It's nice to see you again. And then there's Jada. Ian has a great deal of reverence for you."

Jada gave only a nod of her head as acknowledgement. As if compliments mattered not to her, the tallest of the females stood. "Ma. I'm going to take the cubs outside." With a posture that refused to be threatened but a glance that displayed respect, Jada asked Khalid. "Is it okay if we stretch our legs a bit in your woods? We won't kill or maim anything."

"I don't mind, but that would be Ian's decision. Ian?"

The attention of all within the kitchen went directly to Ian, and while he was grateful for Khalid pretending to be his equal, Ian hadn't known just how far the charade would be carried. "Of course. It's fine."

Jada only had to look at her cubs, and they were on their feet. Going to their mother's heels, the two wolves wagged their tails. The remaining cousins looked at their mother, but received no recognition. Ian took the initiative. "Hey, sis. What about the other two? They look like they want to go, too."

Jada tilted her head at her sister. "Skye?"

It looked as if it pained Skye to concede, but she did. "Go ahead."

Following the lead of their bigger cousins, the cubs followed Jada out of the kitchen and out of the front door. "They really are cute," Khalid said.

"They are our future. So many males, too." Pride was written all over Anna's features as she spoke of her grandchildren. "I'm sure there will be more once this one decides to settle down."

Jenna balked as if the very idea was hideous. "Don't forget Ian. He's bisexual, or at least, he was. He might end up with cubs before me. Hell, he might already have a few."

Skye chuckled.

"Right. So, Mom you wanted to see me?" Ian's voice was terse and definitely not amused. While there was a possibility that he might have had an accident or two, the idea of discussing it around both his lover and his mother seemed foul. "You came all the way from Maryland to see me?"

"Yes, I did." The look on his mother's face was one of deep contemplation as if she were wondering how to pose her dilemma. Ian could see from his sister's faces,

could tell from the sudden scent of anxiety in the room, that his mother's words would be nothing that consoled him.

"Mom, it's not that he won't, but that he can't help us," Skye blurted out. "He can't. Hell, one look at Davius and Ian will be lifting his tail. He's not strong enough. No offense, Ian."

Mouth open, Ian was too confused to feel offended.

Jen added her solution. "Mom, I was thinking that the golem, I mean, that Khalid might be able to help us."

"Now that sounds like a good idea. A damn good idea, cause --"

"Girls!" Anna snarled, raising her hand to silence her daughters. "I have faith in my son."

Sucking her fangs, Skye crossed her arms over her chest. "So do I ... Maybe Davius will take Ian instead of us." Gaining hisses and gasps, Skye was swift to add, "I love my brother and all, but, no offense, I know what golem's are packing, and if Ian can take that kind of equipment --"

"You are a foul bitch."

Skye wasted no time cutting back at her sister. "You brought that fucker down on us. You insisted on that macho, fucking, alpha fiend, and you're calling *me* names?"

Blinking back his confusion, Ian felt as if he had just found himself in a whirlwind. He turned to Khalid and discovered him equally as baffled.

Ian knew that there were clues, hints in his sisters' arguing, but he couldn't make sense of any of it. He knew that somehow they doubted his worth, that they were belittling him in some sense, but why. "Would someone please tell me what the fuck is going on?" It was both a question and a furious demand. It was enough to silence both his sisters, enough even to cease his mother's consideration of their madness.

Anna looked up at Ian with an almost apologetic air about her as she announced, "Ian. My son. I want you to seriously think about it. You don't have to accept, but ... well, I think that it's time you became the alpha of the McAllisters. The alpha male."

Chapter Twenty-Five

"It would mean that you would represent our family proper. That you would give your approval for your sisters' mates, that you would council the cubs and spend time with them. You would be the final word, so to speak."

Ian was definitely speechless. So was everyone else in the room.

"Well? Son?"

Sitting his drink down, Ian pursed his lips. His mind raced. Everything he had thought he had wanted was being offered to him on plate. He would outrank his sisters and stand in equality with mother. Ian wasn't foolish. He knew strings would be attached, that stipulations came with his mother's offer, but he also knew he had conditions and questions of his own. It was not as simple as a yes or no answer.

Ian looked at Khalid. His lover's eyes held the same look of expectancy as his sisters. "What else would it mean? How did it even come to this, Mother? You're not weak, you're not old ..."

"Ian, as dangerous as you assume I am, there are others who are more. Davius Winter for example."

"One wolf," Ian balked. "You're here for one wolf?"

"I am not. I'm here for one alpha. Davius's pack is much bigger than ours. He will not accept a one-on-one challenge with me, and our pack is too weak to challenge his full-on. We have cubs to consider. Putting my pride aside, we would lose in a full battle."

Jen spoke up. "Ian. We have tried negotiating. I will hold my own, but his numbers..."

"So you want me to fight him? You don't even know if I'm good enough to fight him. You hardly know anything about me!"

Rolling her eyes at her son's emotional outburst, Anna replied. "It was your choice to run from us, son. It doesn't matter to me who you lie with. You are of my blood, and I know that you are no weakling. I didn't bear any omegas, not one."

Ian burst out in laughter. "No, you didn't."

"You never once let your sisters overpower you. You stood up to them and challenged them --"

"And they kicked my ass every chance they got," Ian intervened.

"You were young. You're much bigger now."

"Mom, Jada's still bigger than me, and Skye isn't much --"

"Haven't you been listening, stupid? He won't fight a female," Skye interrupted. "And just because Jada can beat most men, that doesn't qualify her as a man!"

"What about the father of your cubs?"

Skye opened her mouth too quickly. As she fully comprehended Ian's question, she shut it.

"The father of Jada's cubs and the father of mine, they're not fighters, and if Miss Silence had just done the same --" Skye gestured to her sister. "-- everything would have been fine."

Jenna scowled at her sister, refusing to be the scapegoat. "Please. Just because I wanted a male with a backbone, you can't put this all on me. I didn't know that this would happen. I didn't know that he would demand everything!"

"No, all you knew was that he had a flashy car, money, and big cock! A fancy fucking wolf who thinks he's a vampire!"

Pushing her chair back from the table, Jenna snarled with sharp fangs framed by ruby lips. "Just because I want something more out of life than a sniveling male, yelping pups, and woods to run through, you think that I'm wrong for it. Why should humans have the benefit of modern life?"

"Spoken just like a vampire."

"Fuck you, Skye."

"No, fuck you! You'd be perfectly fine whoring yourself out to Davius. You're just pissed he that he wants to add me and Jada to his harem!"

Ian could smell the aggression in the air and knew that what was coming would not be pleasant. With a low growl, Jenna raised her hand and slapped her sister across the face, screaming for her to shut up. Skye was not one to be bullied and answered her sister's blow with one of her. In an instant, a chair was destroyed, clothes were torn, and the room filled with snarls.

For a moment, Ian wondered why Jada wasn't there to break up the fight. He wondered why his mother was sipping casually at her cup of tea and why Khalid was looking at him. "Stop it, you two," Ian snapped. It seemed like the only logical thing for him to say but it had little effect. Skye had Jen by the throat. Always a fast transformer, Skye was covered in fur, an upright wolf in a dress, her tail whipping wildly. Jenna was

merely fur-dappled. Ian could barely believe his eyes. It was both a familiar sight and an absurd one.

"Stop this fucking shit," Ian repeated much louder, more forceful.

Neither sister let up.

Ian had no choice. Khalid's home was his home, and his family was causing a scene. It was up to him to stop the women grappling on his floor. Moving up to the fray, Ian grabbed Skye by the scruff of the neck. "I said stop it!"

Teeth sank into Ian's arm as Skye twisted and lashed out instinctively. Ian had instincts of his own, and they advised him to move hard and fast. Bringing his other fist down hard across Skye's nose, Ian stunned one sister and knocked the other one away. Forcing himself between them, Ian made sure that both of them got the message. "I said stop it, and you will! I don't care what happened to cause this mess, but we will work it the fuck out. We're a family damn it!"

Skye's eyes narrowed. "Get your hands off of me, pup. You aren't alpha yet, and even if you were, you'd have to earn my respect."

"What would it take? I want to know," Ian demanded. "Me beating the shit out of you, or me helping you? You're strong, I know it, but you will listen to me. You need my help, and I don't give a damn whether or not you respect me."

"Neither do I," said Jada, entering the kitchen. Surveying the mess, her sisters and her furious brother, the big female looked at her mother and nodded. "I would stand behind him."

"He has me as well," Khalid spoke to the McAllister matriarch.

Anna smiled for the first time since entering into cabin. Eyes twinkling, her usually stern features softened for only a moment. "That was all I needed to hear," she said.

* * * * *

Regretting whatever impulse of bravado had led him to offer the cabin to his family for the night, Ian felt the weight of responsibility already plaguing upon him. His mother, his sisters, and their cubs sat in the living room watching television, bellies full of the hearty chili and cornbread Khalid had prepared.

Skye was still scowling, Jen was still pouting, but everyone else seemed to be enjoying the visit. His mother assured him that they would be leaving in the morning, but Ian was certain that he would be dead of nervousness before then.

Sidling up next to Khalid, Ian placed the last of the empty dishes into the sink where Khalid was already scrubbing out a glass. Remaining at his lover's side, Ian picked up a dishtowel and began to dry the dishes already in the rack. "You know how I hate psychiatry," he said.

"I know that you don't necessarily like it when it's applied to you."

Ian had no argument. Every opportunity he had to discuss his past, his desires, and fears with Khalid, Ian had declined. He regretted it. He wished he could have

prepared Khalid for the dynamics, but then Ian himself had been unprepared. "M, about the scene today ... I'll replace that chair and the --"

The sound of a plate slipping back into soapy water was heard as it clinked against another plate. Khalid slid his soapy hand over Ian's, caressed the werewolf's pulse point with his fingertip. "Ian, relax. Breathe. Everything will be fine."

Not with you touching me, Ian wanted to say. Resisting the urge to fold himself against Khalid's larger frame, Ian inhaled. He exhaled long and low. Such a simple thing it was for Ian to be aroused by Khalid, to concentrate on his scent, and let it pull his thoughts away from family. "It's too easy, taking orders from you."

"It's not so bad, taking orders from you," Khalid grinned.

"This was not supposed to be happening. We were supposed to be getting ready to go to Europe."

"Europe can wait. My clients there can wait. You need my attention, and you my need my help."

"Boy, do I. My mother is sitting in there as pleased as a bear with a wolf in its belly, and my sisters are looking at me like they're *concerned*. You would think that me having your help would put them at ease, but even still, the way the talk about Davius and his pack ... I don't know."

"You fought Douglas."

"I didn't win," Ian confessed heavily. "I didn't plan on winning, either. Did you know that Jada just asked me if I wanted to spar as if she knows he's going to kick my ass." Shaking his head, Ian wondered why he had declined her offer, but then felt it had had something to do with Skye staring. "From what Jada says, this wolf is as big as Douglas, and I would have to take him on alone? By the moon ..." he lamented.

Khalid took hold of Ian's wrist firmly and squeezed. "Size is not always a sign of prowess. You have speed."

"And it worked so well against you."

"It's not how well it works with me, unless this Davius has an ancient on his side, which I highly doubt that he does. You have nothing to worry about and everything to plan for. He has set down a reasonable request, and as long as he honors it --"

"Reasonable? What's reasonable about trying to bully my mother into giving up my sisters? I thought usurping packs were a thing of the past."

Khalid gave Ian a look that made Ian feel ten shades of naïve. Releasing Ian's wrist, Khalid returned his attention to the dishes. "The modern world is fascinating with its illusions of civility, but the old ways are just as prevalent now as they were centuries ago. I am old enough to know. In the old days, there would have been no offer, no challenge, and no negotiations. This Davius would have been perfectly within his right to capture, dominate, and breed each of your sisters. He would have the right to slay your nephews and niece, and no one would judge him for it. In the old days, that was werewolf law."

Ian didn't doubt Khalid's words, but he didn't like them, either.

"Werewolf packs need to be much larger, much stronger, and more wary than ever. Vampires seek them out for day slaves, warlocks seek them out for guards, others seek them out for sport --"

"And some seek them out for sex."

Ian turned to find his mother standing in the doorway with a cup, her gaze dead set on Khalid.

Khalid didn't turn around, did not address Anna with his attention, but he did respond. "That is also true. Werecats and werewolves make incredible lovers, but I am most certain that Ian's prowess and skill extend well beyond the carnal. There is a vast difference between the words lover and slave."

"You have a collar on my son's neck." Anna balked as if there really was no difference.

"I'll tell you up front that I don't like the idea of my son engaging in Domestication. He is not a turnbelly or a --"

Khalid interrupted. "I know what Ian is and is not, and I assure you, Ms. McAllister, that cowards and turnbellies couldn't put up with half of the trials I put your son through. They definitely wouldn't be strong enough to follow my command."

"Apples and oranges," Anna scoffed.

Finishing off the last of the dishes, Khalid set the last plate into the drying rack. He took a dishtowel and used it to dry his hands. "An alpha must know and sympathize with every rank in his or her command. Betas are the enforcers. Gammas are the protectors. Deltas are the young. Epsilons are the elderly, and the last ones in the pack ... Omegas are those who revere and reaffirm only true alphas, thus ensuring a strong pack structure. But I don't have to remind you of werewolf hierarchies or roles."

For the first time he could recall, Ian watched his mother's usual air of superiority vanish. With the casual ease of explaining the color of the sky, Khalid had done what Ian had once believed was impossible. He had put his mother in her place and Ian at ease.

Ian caught his mother's stern hazel glare and gave his best impression of aloof. "Would you like some dessert, Mom? We have pie. Apple."

Rolling her eyes, Anna turned to leave the kitchen. "What, no orange sweet rolls?" she muttered.

* * * * *

Running as a pack was something Ian's family had rarely done. The first time had something to do with Jada's birthday party. She insisted on not paying homage to sweets and senseless piles of wrapping paper, but preferred something more feral. Another time, their father had actually suggested it. His mother was in one of her rare romantic moments and had actually agreed. There had been other times, but those were the two that were most memorable.

When he ran with the pack, Ian experienced the rare sensation of joy, non-sexual, free-flowing joy. There had been no animosity, no inter-pack politics, just the ease of one paw in front of the other. It was his decision to turn off the television and go outside.

As he led his mother and his sisters through the woods he had claimed as home, thoughts of coming battles, current doubts, and complexities floated away like clouds. They hadn't wanted to come along. Only the pups had thought it a good idea.

It was Ian's first decision as an alpha. He believed it was going to be his last until Jada stood up. "We should run. It'll be good for everyone to relax after all that's occurred today." Sure enough, his mother and sisters agreed.

Taking to the woods on all fours proved to be exactly the salve needed for his frayed family. Ian took the lead mainly because he knew the terrain. The cubs were unable to keep any real sort of pace so for the most part, the pack trotted more than ran.

Leisurely, they traveled the forest surrounding the cabin, toured the river, and weaved through brush. They stopped whenever one of the cubs grew fascinated with a rock, a toad, or some other woodland wonder, and they played whenever the cubs wished, drank and howled when the cubs needed.

There were no feuds, no doubt, and no skepticism amongst the pack, just the instinct to be together. The cubs led the pack, and that was how it should have been, Ian realized.

It had been a good idea.

* * * * *

Ian was stalling, micromanaging in order to avoid the inevitable. From the time his family had arrived, Khalid had been nothing but the perfect, helpful gentleman. Not once had Khalid made a lurid suggestion. He hadn't touched, caressed, or even demonstrated that his and Ian's relationship was anything but tame equality. When Ian and his family returned from the woods, the golem was most certainly waiting for Ian behind the closed door of his bedroom.

His mother and Jen had his room. Skye and Jada had the living room. All four cubs used Douglas's dog bed, fitting comfortably inside with room to spare. Ian knew where he would be sleeping -- in a room whose walls were nowhere near thick enough to hide sound from a wolf. Scent would be another hurdle if Khalid was lying in bed wearing nothing as he always did.

Khalid had started a fire in the fireplace, provided fluffy, clean blankets. All that Ian really needed to do was to nuzzle his nephew, his niece, and to show Skye how to switch from the television to the DVD player so that she could watch a video. Relieved that his lover kept the pornographic videos in his room, Ian waited until Skye chose a DVD from the media rack.

He opened the case and put the silver disc into the player before taking the remote control over to the couch. Sitting down beside his sister, Ian instructed. "You have to turn it to channel three, then press the 'Line' button."

Looking at him as if she was bound to forget every word, Skye frowned. "Technology is the bane of my existence."

"It's not as complex as it seems."

"Easy for you to say. You have tons of free time to learn these things."

"It's not rocket science, Skye." As if to demonstrate, Ian found the frequency for the DVD player and pressed play. Bright colors filled the television screen as the introduction for the action movie Skye had chosen appeared.

"Don't pay her any mind, Ian. Trust me when I tell you that Skye has free time."

Skye cocked her head at her eldest sister curled up under a duvet on the floor. "Aren't you sleepy yet?"

"No. I'm not," was Jada's reply.

Skye rolled her eyes and sunk back against the couch. Ian knew that Skye wouldn't bait Jada. As always, she was on the prowl for some weaker morsel.

"Davius is the type of were that you need to go to town on. He's at least seven foot eight and three hundred pounds. What are you, two-thirty maybe?"

Casting a look of irritation towards his sister, Ian held his tongue.

"Fine. Don't answer that, but I'm trying to give you a heads-up. He will fight dirty, and he will not hesitate to hurt you. I mean, I don't know what you're used to but --"

"That's just it, Skye. You don't know anything about me," Ian interrupted. "I am not the furry punching bag I used to be. I've battled wolves before. I've battled a golem. If Mom wants me to stand for the pack, I will. I'll look forward to it even."

Skye didn't pretend to be convinced. "All I'm saying is that maybe you might want to brush up on your skills."

"I could start with you," Ian suggested.

Jada laughed from the floor. "You sure could."

Skye's face flushed red. "Fuck both of you. I have a plan that could and would work."

It was Ian's turn to be skeptical. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah, Skye was going to play the alpha. Go ahead, tell him what you wanted to do, Skye."

Ian looked from the floor to his side expectantly. He hadn't known that Skye was the planning type. More of a bully and a troublemaker, it appeared that his time away from the family had caused ignorance on both fronts.

"Well," Skye started. "Since Davius wants Jen and the everlasting beta there," gesturing to Jada, "I suggested that they go to him and kill his worthless ass. I would make sure that the cubs were safe and well hidden. Half of his gang are humans with

guns. They're so excited about being close to a supernatural that they will not care if he dies, and the wolves he does have will follow whoever kills the son-of-a-bitch.

Davius has a mansion that is well guarded from the outside, but not from the inside. He has a few wolf bitches inside, but they are waifs, I hear. With Jada and Jenna on the inside, Davius is more vulnerable. Even if he could beat Jada, he can't beat them both. Jen can seduce him, and Jada can tear out his throat. Me, my mate, Mom, Jada's male ... you and your golem, we can topple Davius without all the fucking pageantry."

As soon as Ian could work his mouth properly, he tried his eyes. Opening and closing seemed a bit difficult, while trying to process all that he had heard. On the television, a cop explained the ropes to his rookie partner, and in some way, Ian found the connection to his sister's plan almost as dramatic.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"Oh, she's dead serious." Still not asleep, Jada fluffed the pillow beneath her head.

"It's a plan."

Ian could agree that it was a plan, just not a good plan. "It's not that I don't think it will work, but it's just too risky. One on one is more our way. Clan battles are another thing entirely. Are you really willing to risk even one of the pack, in your operation?"

"We are not weaklings," Skye spat in defense.

Ian tried not to laugh. "You do not have to tell me that, Skye. I know what you are capable of, what Mom is capable of, what Jada and Jen are capable of ... I know that in your eyes, I am still a runt, but let me help you in this."

Skye turned her attention to the television, the air of agitation softened around her. Her eyes darted to and from Ian with consideration. "Ian, he might fight dirty ..."

"I like to fight dirty."

Skye gave Ian a doubtful look. "If you lose, the pups' lives will probably be forfeit." Her voice was peppered with emotion so thick it irritated his nostrils. Skye sounded scared.

Ian nodded, feeling more compassion for his sister than he had ever before and feeling the weight of responsibility even more. He looked over to the dog bed, filled with sleeping balls of fur. His heart clenched, and he felt both feverishly hot and yet cold at the same time, panicked yet numb. Worst of all, Ian felt weak.

Khalid always told him how strong he was, how much potential he had, and while Ian sometimes doubted it, sometimes he believed. Standing up from the couch with every intention of belief he could muster, Ian looked down at his sister and said, "I'll die before those pups breathe their last. I swear to you."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Stepping within the darkness of the bedroom, Ian was almost disappointed not to find the lights on, not to see the soothing gold color of Khalid's skin, nor the appraising almond eyes demanding calmness. He shut the door and turned, eyes adjusting quickly to the details of the dark spectrum.

Khalid wasn't in bed. Ian looked around the room, lifted his nose, and inhaled. Swiftly sorting through the scents of the bed, of Khalid's possessions, Ian found the stronger source scent coming from the bathroom.

"Ian. Come."

Ian followed both voice and scent across the room and into the master bathroom. Khalid sat on the side of the massive Jacuzzi tub, his hair tied up in intricate knots that Ian wished he could have witnessed.

All four of Khalid's arms were at rest, curled around the lip of the tub. Ian stared at them as he approached, silently wishing he had half of their strength or their muscle. He didn't have permission, and he didn't think to ask for it as he placed his hand on the breadth of Khalid's back, caressing the satiny, smooth flesh.

An arm came around Ian's waist to hold him, even as Khalid bent to turn on the spigots, releasing a torrent of hot water. Salts with the scent of pine and cranberry were added to the water, jets were turned on, as Ian watched his lover multitask. Patiently, Ian waited, content enough just to be at Khalid's side. Questions and worries plagued him, but in light of Khalid's calm demeanor, Ian held them to himself.

Fingers probed and found the fastenings of his pants. When Ian moved to help, he found his fingers brushed away. Another hand came as Khalid turned his full attention from the water to Ian, then found the hem of his shirt and lifted it above his stomach. For that, Ian was allowed to help.

All clothing was cast aside until Ian stood in nothing but his collar, wrapped in nothing but Khalid's very substantial, warm embrace. Khalid's face nuzzled the fur on his belly. He kissed the indent of Ian's belly button, while the waters in the tub rose.

Ian felt the tension drain from his body in the presence of Khalid's calming attention and the fragrance of the bath. The promise he had made to his sister haunted the back of his mind even as his fingers toyed at the soft black hair at the nape of Khalid's neck. He wanted to discuss, to seek advice and confess panic, but every time he made a sound, fingers found their way to his lips to silence him.

The water filled the tub, and Ian lost the hold of one arm as Khalid moved to turn off the water. He lost another for the activation of the tub's jets.

Khalid stood up and helped Ian into the tub. While it was large enough for them to sit facing one another, Ian allowed himself to be turned around. He rested his back against Khalid's front and was guided down to sit upon the golem's lap beneath the churning waters. Beneath his ass, Khalid's hard cock reminded Ian of his place.

Alpha or not, Ian had learned how to let go, how to submit to something greater than himself. He also knew how to withstand it.

Khalid's fingers stroked chest, ears, stomach, the inside of his thigh, and Ian simply enjoyed. His cock swelled beneath bubbles and foam, anxious for one of four hands to find it. With steam and the scent of the bath filling the room, Ian's musk was diluted. He wouldn't have to worry about curious noises and curious scents. He could let go.

"Quiet, cur. Not a sound."

Ian opened his eyes, surprised by sounds he did not know that he had made. He felt Khalid's tongue curl around the lobe of his ear and shuddered. Pressing his lips closed, Ian concentrated on the command.

Khalid called it the silence trial. The key to it was to focus inward. The goal of it was not to react, but to absorb. Ian had failed at it many times in the past, but he had been getting better. He missed the ball gag that was usually a part of it, though.

Hands sought out his nipples, pinched and caressed his thighs. Ian squirmed in the soapy waters, but made no sound. His own fangs punctured his lip as Khalid's fascination with his ears took to a more wicked turn. The wet muscle of Khalid's tongue pushed inside the shell of his ear, drawing forth and back in a motion as similar to fucking and just as riveting. It caused him to writhe against the golem's lap, ratcheting his desire nearly seven-fold. Ian looked to the white ceiling and tried to focus on the light in the center. He attempted to think about his family occupying the house. Surely that would help him, the fear of screaming out and alerting everyone.

But it did not, and Khalid didn't even try to hold back. He found Ian's cock beneath the waters, encircled it within his grasp, and began to pump from base to tip. Ian hummed, his growing claws gripping the thick musculature of Khalid's arms tightly. Khalid was moving beneath him, grinding hard, and determined. One of Khalid's hands found and tugged at his balls, providing a variety of lights and sparks for Ian to process.

Water usually distracted him from changing, but it did nothing to calm him with Khalid at his back. Ian's nose twitched, the bones beneath it wishing to elongate. His tailbone ached, partly from rubbing against Khalid's hips, partly from his growing tail. Most of all his legs bothered him, prevented from closing every time he tried, by strong hands. Ian growled, hissed, all with his lips pressed closed. His punishment was not a punishment at all.

Khalid clapped a hand over Ian's mouth and bit him on the shoulder. "You can withstand."

Nodding his head, Ian licked the palm of Khalid's hand to show that he understood. One lick became two, and two became a kiss as Ian channeled his focus from frayed nerves in ecstasy to the broad width of the golem's palm. Khalid moved his hands beneath Ian's thighs and lifted him. With his free hand, Khalid guided his cock between Ian's cheeks.

So used to the easy glide of lubrication, Ian had almost forgotten how intense, how extreme a sensation, taking Khalid dry was. Arching his body, Ian dropped his head back against Khalid's shoulder. Khalid's hand stayed pressed against Ian's lips.

Ian closed his eyes and concentrated on welcoming Khalid into his body, adjusting to the fullness of the heated muscle within him. Despite the pain, Ian was wildly aroused.

The golem had him trapped within his embrace, arms securing Ian's like the strongest of manacles. Khalid began to thrust, and Ian could do nothing other than take it. Even more than the physical pleasure, Ian reveled in the ease with which Khalid could dominate him and empower him at the same time.

It was no easy, quick fuck that Khalid hinted at; it was a slow, leisurely progression. "Not until I say," Khalid commanded as he took his time, savoring Ian's throat, shoulders, ears...him.

All of the tension within Ian pooled to his groin, filling it with every shove. Khalid found Ian's cock anew and began jerking him off in the same tempo as his thrusts. Ian bore it. He had little choice. Despite the spikes of pleasure that would have easily caused his balls to spill in the past, Ian fought.

Ian had to fight even harder when Khalid removed his hand from his mouth. Chest heaving, head buzzing with the effort of holding back, if he could have cried out, Ian would have. He would have screamed, shouted, swore, and grunted.

Khalid picked up the pace, began to move faster, thrust harder. Alive and shaking from the tips of his foreclaws to the ends of his feet, Ian twitched. *Permission, permission, permission*, he prayed.

It did not come.

Khalid squeezed him tighter, greed in his grasp and in his movements. Ian's eyes rolled beneath his lids. His orgasm threatened with every second, but rather than succumb, Ian waged war, squeezed his ass around the girth of Khalid.

It was Khalid's turn to growl. It was also the hiss of permission that Ian received. Khalid rammed home one last time. "You may," was all that he said.

Nearly afraid to after so long, Ian let go and released his seed into water and bubbles. Draining, harrowing, and divine at once, Ian opened his mouth, but didn't have the air for anything more than a choked gasp.

Khalid's hold slackened, and Ian was free to shake with the completion of his release. He felt the heated cream of Khalid's seed filling his bowels, felt Khalid tremble just as he had, but it barely registered in light of his own exhaustion.

Khalid whispered something about how good he was, how strong he was, but Ian heard little. He was already floating. The sound of the jet-stimulated waters was the loudest sound in the room. Ian had nothing left but peace, nothing left but utter calm. The day's anxiety and surprise faded to nothing as Khalid dragged a soapy sponge across his chest.

He couldn't talk, complain, or gripe if he wanted to, and he had a feeling that that was Khalid's intent.

* * * * *

He awoke the next morning to an empty bed and the scent of sausages. His pleasure-ried body felt divine, as if he could take on anything. His mind was quite clear, aided by the sight of Khalid feeding maple-cured sausages to little maws. Dazzling the cubs with all four of his arms, Khalid nodded a "good morning."

Seated at the table with his mother to one side, Jada to the other, Jen and Skye across from him, Ian had no reservations about the path he intended on pursuing. "We have two weeks before the next full moon," Ian stated. "I want every friend, every mate that you know summoned to the house the Thursday before. Saturday, I will meet with your so-called suitor. I'll offer him the opportunity to back down, but he probably won't. In which case, I have to do what needs to be done."

"But what if --"

Ian held up his hand, silencing Jenna. Normally more composed, Jen had been nervous all morning. Ian suspected that she was uncomfortable with the unspoken alliance between Skye and him. "If I lose," he continued, "then a modified version of Skye's plan will go into effect. Khalid will take the cubs, and we will fight until not a single one of Davius's curs stand. I don't give a damn about honor. What I care about is my blood, and I will not let you down."

"You have more friends than you know, Ian. None of them will let you down."

All eyes turned to Khalid, except for Jada who seemed fascinated with the contents of her breakfast. Even with all four of his hands occupied with the fur balls, Khalid radiated nothing but power and assuredness. Ian swallowed, made nervous by recollections of a night spent beside Khalid, resting in those powerful arms. It was then that Khalid promised to help him.

Anna McAllister threw a suspicious look towards the golem. "You will join us, Khalid?"

"Of course. I am as much Ian's as he is mine."

"Family is just a peripheral obligation." Jenna sighed. Already prepared to hit the road, she showed little interest in the breakfast platters that covered the table.

"Or a necessary evil, in my opinion," stated Skye.

Ian smiled, thinking the exact same thing. The McAllisters were not an easy clan to hide from, and they were even harder to deny. He was committed to standing up for his sisters' freedom, that of his niece and nephews. If Davius wanted to meet the head of the McAllisters, then Ian would do his damndest not to disappoint. "Jada, you will be my ears. Anything you hear, I want to know. Skye, I need you and Mom to get on the phone. We only need reliable friends. If you suspect they may not be reliable, then I don't need them. We will get through this," Ian promised.

"Until the next time Jen goes husband-seeking."

Ian agreed with Skye, but didn't say as much. "We will deal with that when it happens. Let me get through this first."

"You sound like such a leader." Jen sulked, her lips pruned to keep hold of words she could not say.

Smiling wide and proud, Anna chimed, "He sounds like our secret weapon. My precious boy ..."

"Mom, he's a grown man! And don't forget who has been holding things down before you decided to summon in the child prodigy."

Anna glared at her daughter fiercely, and for a moment, Ian believed that he would have to break up a fight between the two. Jada sat on a stool from the bar, because of the previous day's battle, and Ian really didn't want to have to replace another chair. Changing the subject, he sought his mother's deadlocked gaze. "Does he know about me? Does he know that you have an alternative?"

"No." She didn't turn her head. "Your sister told me that she did not mention you, either."

Ian looked at his sister, "Jen? Does he know about me?"

Sucking her teeth at the sudden attention directed at her, Jenna seemed offended for only a few moments. "I told him that I had a brother who I never saw, whom I never heard from..."

It was true, and maybe, if he trusted his sister's opinion of him enough, Ian would have an edge. "Right. So even if Davius does know that you've come to see me. He knows nothing about me. It will be to our advantage. He will come to present his case on our territory. That will be another advantage, Mom."

"Our advantage will be you as our alpha."

Anna faced her son. Her smile was genuine, almost approving, but Ian knew that he would only be alpha because she had deemed it so and by her terms. His sisters he could deal with, the matriarch he would not.

"It sounds like a good plan, son."

Ian smiled despite feeling like a marionette. He was no stranger to submission, at least not anymore. "Thanks, Mom."

* * * * *

Ian could scarcely believe that they were gone, the cabin was so quiet. The scents all remained, tucked into every pore of fabric and furniture that Ian passed, and it pleased him to be able to inhale them all. Why it should be that the cabin had a sense of home that ran deeper than before his family's whirlwind arrival was not a difficult question to answer.

His lover was in the kitchen, cleaning up after the smorgasbord that had been breakfast, while Ian cleaned the living room and his bedroom. His siblings weren't messy; his mother hadn't trained them to be, and so there wasn't much to be done. Only Jada and the cubs slept in wolf form, so there was a small issue of fur to be dealt with in the living room.

Cleaning out the dog bed was another thing entirely. Outside of the damp, drool spots, the nipped fabric, and the obvious scent of marking, Ian knew he would have to get a replacement. Douglas would never believe that another male hadn't put claim to his bed.

Cheeky damn pups. Ian smiled to himself. Three nephews and one niece -- they were all strong, all bright-eyed and healthy.

Part of him could understand why Davius would want his sisters to breed. It was after Jada had given birth that he heard how difficult werewolf pregnancies were to carry, how the lineages had been diluted so that offspring were either sickly, or human, and thus unable to make the change at all. His family was stronger than most, his lineage truer, and it was something he was almost proud of.

Lifting the dog bed off of the floor, Ian recalled that cover was washable. It would be easier to explain the scent of clean linen and pine than it would be a territorial pup, he decided. Still, he would have to discuss a new bed for Douglas with Khalid, werewolf idiosyncrasies and all.

"You miss them already?"

"Huh?" Ian blinked and discovered he was being watched from the kitchen archway.

"Your family," Khalid clarified. "They haven't been gone for more than an hour, and you miss them already. That's good."

"Bold little fur balls messed up Doug's bed. I'm going to order him a new one, if it's okay with you. Werewolves are very peculiar, and cubs are very possessive."

"If you like you can order extra beds for the cubs and have them shipped to your sisters' homes."

Ian frowned not knowing whether Khalid's comment was sarcastic. "That's okay. I'm sure my sisters have great beds for them. My family isn't as poor and old-fashioned as they pretend to be."

Shaking his head, Khalid disappeared back into the kitchen.

It took less than a moment for Ian to realize that Khalid was being sincere, but much longer for him to realize what made him suspect in the first place. With the bed in hand, Ian walked through the kitchen to reach the laundry room. He had already made one false move with Khalid and was nervous about making another.

Khalid's back was to him as Ian moved across the kitchen floor. At the sink, the golem didn't turn to acknowledge him, and Ian was keen enough not to press an apology. It would only lead to "the talk," or worse, "the understanding." After successfully avoiding them at every turn, Ian had gotten skillful at avoiding the psych couch, as he called it.

A run, a hot shower, and everything would be as close to normal as he could get it. Khalid knew him well enough to know he meant no malice. He had definitely listened to enough whining and complaining to understand him, or so Ian told himself as he unraveled the cover from the dog bed. He could always use it as a spare since Douglas was getting a new one.

If anything Ian had to look forward to, it was Khalid's appetite. If it was one person Ian could trust not to be so easily swayed by wild emotions, it was Khalid, his rock and his master. He would see Ian through and past the coming battle. For that, Ian vowed he would do his damndest to please Khalid in whatever trial he set forth.

Ian always felt clearer after a trial.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Khalid spent most of the day in his office on the phone. Ian tried to get his attention. After his run and shower, Ian made a point to walk around in nothing other than his collar. In human form, he approached Khalid with the most apologetic grin he could muster. Rather than a caress, a scratch, or even a lustful look, Ian received a shopping list and a handwritten list of chores, without Khalid even turning away from the receiver.

Ian returned with a chair, breakfast items to replace the generous amount eaten by his family, and a set of rolling luggage, which, Ian assumed, was for him. The entire list revolved around the trip he had dreamt about for weeks. He wasn't sure if they would still be going to Europe but figured that he would wait until Khalid spoke to him again to ask. Ian could tell that he was being avoided.

They had dinner together, in front of the television. Ian managed to get Khalid to watch *Gladiator*. He even managed to give the golem a foot massage, but as soon as he pressed for more, sliding his hand up a muscular calf, Khalid withdrew. Pulling his foot away from one of Ian's hands and his thigh away from Ian's other hand. Khalid then excused himself to put away the dirty dishes.

Ian sat in the living room and fumed as he listened to dishes being scraped, then tucked away into the dishwasher. If Khalid wanted to chastise him or put him in his place, Ian would have been prepared. He expected it. What he didn't expect were the sounds of Khalid's footsteps heading in the direction of the bedroom rather than back to the living room. Getting up, Ian turned off the television and headed towards the golem's bedroom. He was determined to get to the bottom of Khalid's angst. "M?"

Pulling off his caftan, Khalid stood next to the turned down bed. "Yes?"

Night had barely fallen, and Khalid wasn't the type that turned in early, yet Khalid was pulling his hair down for the night. Ian stood in the doorway and gaped. "You're tired?"

Khalid pushed his hair over his shoulders, using all four hands. "I am. Did you need something?"

"I was hoping that you did."

With a look that made Ian shiver, Khalid unlaced the ties that held his trousers. "I do need something, but it is nothing that I want to ask for. You have a lot on your plate, and I do understand." Removing his pants, Khalid didn't give Ian a chance to fully savor his nudity before climbing into the bed. "I have thrown out the net so to speak, made a few phone calls. However, until I know what your mother truly wishes your duties as alpha to be, I will not presume to set a schedule."

His mouth dry, it took Ian more than moment to process what Khalid had said. He was still stuck on golden skin vanishing beneath a maroon duvet. Moving one foot forward, Ian knew only one thing. The covers needed to come down. "You can tell that she wants something else, too." Absent and distracted, Ian moved another step closer. "She is so obvious sometimes and vague at the same time. It's weird. She's weird."

"Mothers can be that way."

"Yeah. My mother, the general ..." Stopping at the bedside, Ian gazed down at Khalid as if the new vantage point might reveal more than just his lover's shoulders. "I suppose I should be happy she needs me for something."

"And for something that you very much want to do," Khalid added.

Ian sat down on the edge of the bed, leaned over, and put his hand on Khalid's shoulder. "It is, but you do know that ... that I don't want to give this up."

Almond eyes noted the hand moving in circles across his skin. "Your caress is an indication."

"It is." Pushing his hand deeper, further underneath the covers, Ian followed the curve of Khalid's shoulder down to his pectoral muscle. As stiff and hard as Khalid was, the flesh was warm, and the nipple Ian found was divine. Toying with Khalid's nipple ring, Ian found himself salivating. "I never asked before ... but can we play with the paddle tonight? Please."

"No."

Ian glared at Khalid. He had already begged. Trying a tight pinch to the swollen nub, Ian refused to acknowledge the tension between them. "Something else, then?"

A hand seized Ian's wrist; another pushed Ian's bold fingers away. "How easily you trust me with some things and not others," Khalid said. "And you honestly think that I have continuous control. I know now that at this very moment you would do any and every task I laid before you. You would take any amount of pain, pleasure, or time that I set before you with relish. If I were foolish, I would take your obedience as devotion ... as love."

Ian's reserve snapped. "Khalid, I do love you! What's the fucking matter?"

Khalid gave Ian back his hand and pulled the covers back tight against his chest. "Hush, cur. Go to your bed and get some rest. Tomorrow we can spar if you like."

"This is about earlier." Ian hated to even admit it, but if it was an apology that Khalid wanted, then it was the least that Ian could do. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be an ass, I really did miss the cubs. They were so cute. Hell, they're my niece and nephews, and I hardly even know them."

Animated by Ian's confession, Khalid propped himself up on two elbows. "Yes, and if you recall that is what I asked you."

"I apologize. I apologized."

Khalid squinted with a look of disbelief. "Apology accepted. Now, I need my rest. Turn off the light."

Ian turned off the light and stood up. He shed his clothes, but rather than going to his bedroom or his dog bed at the foot of Khalid's, Ian pulled the covers back and climbed in with Khalid. Before the golem could react, Ian was sidled up next to him. "I want to sleep with you."

"Ian." A huff and a sigh came, despite the furry arm finding its way around Khalid's waist. "I'm sure that you want to sleep with your thoughts."

"You're a head witch. You know that's not what I want. I don't know why you're trying to psych me into feeling like crap."

"Topping from the bottom is what you want, alpha, and while it is fetching at times, now is not the time."

Ian tightened his grip. "Fuck this. I know what you want, you stubborn fiend. You just want me to start bawling and curl up on the floor like a head case?" Knowing full well that Khalid could put him out of the bed if he truly wanted to, Ian pressed his luck. Khalid had committed to Ian, to his family, and although it wasn't his way, and it wasn't natural, Ian knew that Khalid wanted him to open up. He knew it. It couldn't be anything else or anything more intimate. "You want something, and I've been an ass about it."

"Out of the bed."

"No. We should talk because we are not going to bed upset."

"I could throw you out of the bed."

Laughing, Ian could easily envision that. "I'd just get a hard-on, and you don't want that. I want to talk."

Khalid growled, but the sound had very little true malice. "You and your sarcasm are on dangerous territory, cur."

Disregarding Khalid's threat, Ian put his chin on Khalid's shoulder, his leg over Khalid's. "My sisters were always kicking my ass. Always," he stressed. "I fought back, but I was much smaller. My mother held them to a different standard. She nearly bit off Skye's head for cramming me into a trashcan once. She always gave the girls the hard chores, and the serious responsibilities went to Jada because she was the oldest. She worked all of the time, my mother, at the laundry at night, at the supermarket during the days. I used to ask her why it was she was so hard on herself and the girls, and do you know what she told me?"

Hesitant, Khalid asked, "What?"

"That nature is a female, and that she is as hard as she is fruitful. She said that if nature was too wild and lazy, elements would have their way with her, and we'd be damned. At the time I didn't understand, and in some ways, I still don't understand all of that mystical bullshit, but it wasn't until they arrived the other day that I saw my sisters and the responsibility they have. Sure, the cubs have fathers, but my father, their fathers don't understand responsibility."

"And you wish that they did?"

There was no couch, and Khalid was not sitting behind a desk, but Ian still felt as if he was in therapy. The odd thing was that he didn't really mind. The distraction of Khalid's naked thigh against his cock was enough to siphon the anxiety away. "I wish there had been someone to teach me the good things about being a male. I mean, I can't bear cubs, but I should at least know how to tend to them, how to be upright and maintain a life for them. The girls learned from jump how to keep the family tight ... well, at least Jada and Skye did. It's not that I think that Jen wouldn't fight past fur for the family, but maybe she is more like me than I want to admit."

Khalid shifted beside him, turned slightly to his side, providing a bit more ass and less hip for Ian to grind against. "How so?"

"We both were looking for the male we never saw, the strong, alpha male who was worthy of our respect, our allegiance, and our following. This Davius character, I can't fault him for wanting to extend his power. I can't even make him out to be sinister, but I won't let him have my family, even if I am a lesser wolf coddled by females. In the wild, it would be law for a dominant male to conquer a matriarchal pack."

"I know, and I believe your mother knows this as well."

Ian raised his head and looked down at Khalid, his features just as handsome in the night spectrum. "She should have been harder on me, then."

"You don't fault your father much, eh?"

He didn't, even though Ian knew that his old man should have been held accountable for more than just being nice. "My father was never as strong as she was, but he was always nice. He always came by on payday with his check. He'd bring flowers for her and jerky for us. Sometimes she let him stay, but most of the time, she didn't. She didn't want him becoming a bad influence. He drinks. A lot. Kind of carefree. She says packless wolves are like that. Drink, food, and a warm body are all that they're interested in."

"Weren't you?"

Ian shrugged before a wide, wicked grin spread across his features. "Yes, but I'm not packless. I have three sisters, four cubs, and I have you to look after." Dropping a kiss upon the smoothness of Khalid's cheek, Ian hoped his acknowledgement would make the golem more agreeable. "I have to be responsible and know what and how to provide for all of you, how to serve and be served."

Khalid turned into the kiss and met Ian's lips with his own. For a moment, they shared each other's breath. "Adding me to your cadre, eh?"

"Of course. I'm an alpha."

"You're an alpha who wears my collar," Khalid corrected, his wet tongue coming out to lash at Ian's lips. "But you are also my lover, and when you're nervous, anxious, excited, I hope that you feel comfortable enough to discuss it."

Ian agreed whole-heartily, his cock throbbing and eager to prove that one fact. "I am. I'm insane with nerves and doubts right now. And I'm also extremely horny right now." As if the moisture and the grinding weren't an indication of his desire, Ian reached down and discovered Khalid's shaft to be as full and as hot as his own.

Khalid shuddered from head to toe, his head tilted back to release a pent-up sigh. "Easy there, I told you that I'm in no mood to be dominant tonight."

"Mmm." Enjoying the reverberation of Khalid's movement, Ian felt bold. "You didn't say anything about being submissive, though. Tomorrow, you can be as dominant as you want. Tonight, I just need you to be my lover."

"I am so going to hurt you tomorrow."

The threat was like honey to Ian's nerves, saccharine sweet and mind-numbing. "I hope so. I need to be toughened up. I have responsibilities."

"Yes, you do," Khalid affirmed, pulling Ian down so that he could push his tongue into the werewolf's mouth.

* * * * *

The same being who had been so relaxed, so gentle beneath Ian the night before was a thing of the past. Khalid's submission to him was definitely a memory. In the light of day and in the expanse of the woods, Ian couldn't help thinking that the night before had been just a dream.

Picking himself up off the ground again, Ian shook the dirt and grass from his snout. In full werewolf form, Ian was still no match for the four-armed beast standing calmly before him. "I don't think this is a good idea." Ian's voice was several octaves deeper in bestial form. "You're a golem, and Davius is a werewolf."

"And all you have to do is to tear this flag off of my hip." Having agreed to spar, Khalid was just as diligent about what he deemed as another aspect of Ian's training. "Quit your whining and try again. Your brute force is nice, but it's not going to get you far if you plan to take a skilled opponent."

"Skilled?"

"Perhaps, skilled."

Ian wondered if Khalid had already gathered information on his opponent. Khalid had awakened before him and was on the phone when Ian got out of bed. "You don't sound optimistic."

"Neither do you. Now come, try again."

Ian flexed his claws, dropped low. Concentrating on the white flags tied to a belt around Khalid's waist, Ian knew a low attack was not his best option. Trying to go around the golem didn't seem to work too well, either. If Khalid were a werewolf, it wouldn't even be an issue, he thought. But Khalid wasn't a wolf, and as his prowess was indeed an issue, Ian had to think his way through the challenge. Every time he made a move for one of the flags, Khalid seemed to know which one Ian wanted and just how to keep him from getting to it.

"Why don't you try to deceive me," Khalid suggested.

"What?" Ian snarled, not understanding the command.

Khalid did not repeat his words; instead, he held out one hand and beckoned Ian forward.

Looking between the flags and Khalid's face, Ian formulated several different approaches. He wasn't sure what Khalid was suggesting, but he did know that direct tries for the flags were getting him nowhere. Moving with superhuman speed, Ian chose the flag at Khalid's hip. He made to snatch the cloth just to get Khalid's attention, but his real intent was an elbow that rocked the golem backwards at least a step.

Ian was so shocked that his strategy worked, he nearly forgot about the flag. He moved quickly to get it, but was too late. His pause was to Khalid's advantage, and the golem ended up catching him by the waist.

Ian was reintroduced to the ground and a tree, back first. When he picked himself up, Khalid stood before him, his topmost set of arms crossed over his chest.

"You understand the principle and how it could work if only you're not so surprised that it does, yes?"

Picking himself up off of the ground, Ian used the tree that had just dislocated his shoulder to realign it. "I guess."

"You know it. You must not be surprised. You must not pause, and you should always think through your attacks."

It was good advice, all of it, and Ian had every intention of remembering it as he headed toward the duffel bag that held his clothes.

"Where are you going? Your lesson is not over with."

Making his transformation back to his slighter, leaner human shape as he walked, Ian stopped before the bag. He reached inside and pulled out a bottled water, showing it to Khalid right before plopping to the ground. "Refreshment."

"Would you like a break?"

"Oh, no." Voice filled with sarcasm, Ian took the contents of the bottle in one draught. "After all, Davius isn't going to give me one."

They had been fighting for more than two hours, and Khalid had been a relentless trainer. Running, climbing, he had to spar with a tree three times his width. The longest that any of Ian's fights had ever lasted was best measured in minutes. His body, while enjoying the physicality of the training, was unused to the length of it.

Shaking his head, Khalid pulled his lower arms back inside of his body. He came and sat down beside Ian. "Sarcasm won't help you much, either."

"Well, you could pummel me some more. I'm sure that will be useful."

"If you can take my pummeling as it were, then you won't be bothered by anything Davius throws at you. Believe me when I say that I can help you beat him. My youth was spent in the fighting ring."

"Really? You never told me --"

"And I don't intend to at the moment. At lunch, we can discuss my early childhood." Khalid easily negated Ian's distraction ploy. He pulled a fresh bottle of water from Ian's pack and took some for himself. "There is still a lot more for me to teach you."

Rolling his eyes, Ian knew what that meant -- more meetings with trees and grass. "But I already know sit up, beg, roll over, and heel," he groaned. "I'm damn good at begging even."

Khalid grinned, albeit reluctantly. "I know. It's the attack command I want you to learn."

* * * * *

Ian had only used his safe word once with Khalid. *Hera*. He spoke it not because the ropes were too tight or because he couldn't bear another blow of the bamboo cane, the flail, or the whip. He had said it because he knew he was going to fail, because he knew that he couldn't hold on for another second.

They had one more day before they traveled to Maryland, and Khalid had let up only slightly on his physical training, and that day was no exception. Ian had plans to curl up in his bed in his bedroom directly after dinner. It had become a habit during his days of training. Eat, shower, and sleep. Supernatural or no, Khalid's training regimen usually found him asleep and snoring at nightfall rather than amorous and willing to please.

Khalid had other plans.

Lying on the floor, his body still throbbing and sore from the day's workout, Ian stared at the ceiling and prayed. His wrists were tied above his head, and his only command was to be still. It seemed impossible.

Khalid sat on the floor, supporting Ian's legs on his shoulders. Exploring Ian's weary flanks, Khalid's hands were gentle stimulants. If it were just caresses, Ian might have been able to withstand it, but the golem took down one leg, bent it and found interest in his ultra-sensitive toes.

Ian hissed as Khalid surrounded Ian's pinkie toe with his lips. His hips shuddered as the wet serpent of Khalid's tongue swirled about it. Suction and heat, the moisture of Khalid's attention, was not for one toe but each of them. Slowly savored, taunted, Ian groaned that such small extensions could radiate such powerful stimulation. He breathed through his nose, tried to pretend that the tongue around his big toe was not

equally as good as a tongue would be around his cock. When Khalid turned his attention to the sole, however, Ian yanked his foot free. Screwing his eyes shut at the involuntary disobedience, Ian waited for the reprimand.

Instead, Khalid retrieved the escaped foot, set it about his shoulder, and chose the other.

Ian was damned as Khalid began the same suckling treatment to his other foot. Writhing on the hardwood floor as the electricity of passion singed his nerves, Ian refused to be bested by such a minor sexual act. He had endured much more intimate, more internal stimulation, yet his cock was swollen to soreness, leaking from the attention Khalid lavished on his toes. It could have been classified as torture, he thought, yanking his foot.

Khalid held firmly, refusing to let Ian slip free a second time.

"Please," Ian whimpered, his cock twitching, begging to be taken in hand.

Unyielding, Khalid ran his tongue down the center of Ian's foot, then nipped at the heel. "This is easy for you, cur. Relax and let me savor you."

A groan was Ian's reply.

"You're doing well. You're such a good, strong cur. You can take anything I give you, anything I do to you, Ian." As if to demonstrate, one of Khalid's hands found its way to the hot crease between Ian's buttocks. He pressed two blunt fingers inside and listened to Ian's gasp of shock. "Anything, yes?"

No, no, no, Ian repeated inside his head as Khalid resumed his fascination with his toes anew.

There was a place of focus, of concentration inside of his mind, and Ian knew how to access it. It was a place that was nearly outside of himself, from which he could savor and examine the stimulation his body received. If he could reach it, he would be able to shield himself from the raw carnal abandon of being helpless, probed, and suckled upon like candy.

Exhaustion prevented such a feat. His body seemed especially raw, especially needy, as Ian tried the strength of his bonds.

Khalid gave a departing kiss to Ian's ankle, before moving both of Ian's legs down to the floor. Lying down between Ian's thighs, Khalid held his fingers inside of Ian's body. He used his free hands to pin down furry, tense thighs. They were to be the next targets for his tongue to sample. Trailing his tongue along the inside of Ian's right thigh, Khalid added his growls to Ian's. "Love the way you taste, your sweat, your fur, your skin. Tell me if you like it as well."

Khalid was so close to his cock. His hair brushed Ian's balls as he alternated from one thigh to the other. Ian tried to cant his hips, tried to use his body to say what was trapped inside of his throat.

"Tell me," Khalid demanded with nip to the inside of Ian's thigh.

The closest that Ian could come to a reply was a gurgle.

Khalid bit Ian's other thigh, curved the digits hiding within Ian's body. "Tell me in depth. I want details."

Ian bucked beneath Khalid's hold. The stimulation to his prostate was taxing his reserves.

You want me to fucking come is what you want, he thought. Eyes screwed shut, Ian didn't know what was more of a danger to his control -- Khalid's request or the simple sound of his voice.

"Tell me that you like my fingers in your arse, that you liked me sucking your toes."

"I liked it," Ian hissed finally, body threatening to shatter into a million pieces. "I like it all. I like your fingers fucking me. I liked you sucking my toes. I like anything, everything! Just ... please ..."

Khalid moved from between Ian's thighs and leaned over Ian's chest. Up close and personal, Khalid looked down into eyes that were far more purple than hazel. "Please what? I haven't even begun to try you, haven't even begun to have you, and already you're shaking, begging, demanding. Was today that tiring for my obedient slave?"

Sensing Khalid up close, feeling Khalid's breath upon his face and that broad, heavy frame atop his, Ian opened his eyes and beheld his lover. Khalid's hair hung down, jet black and silken. His eyes were pure caramel, and his features distinctly handsome, distinctly male. All that Khalid was fascinated Ian. His arousal took a back seat as another sensation took hold deep within his chest. "I love you."

Khalid smiled, nodded while pushed his fingers in and out. His cock pressed upon Ian's thigh. "I know. We love each other."

Ian shook his head. It had been said between them before, but Ian felt sure that he had never felt it as strongly as he did at that moment. Luck didn't even begin to describe Ian's fortune at meeting such a male as Khalid, and love seemed too small and insignificant for what had his heart staggering inside of his chest. It was the only word that he knew to describe it. Frustrated by his limited vocabulary and crazed from the stimulation to his body, Ian began to crack.

Khalid looked at him with concern. He withdrew his fingers. Ian was baffled as to why, until the smell of salt filled his nostrils.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know why..." Swallowing a lump in his throat, Ian muttered his personal word. "Hera."

"Hera?"

Ian closed his eyes and nodded. His emotions had run amok. Joy, sadness, humility, exhaustion, desperation, gratitude, and vulnerability were like a gang, bullying arousal to the side. He closed his eyes and pictured his first meeting with Khalid, that first glance. It had been so powerful that it wrested an orgasm from him with more authority than Gray could muster.

Ian recalled his first session with the golem, standing nude and somewhat defiant for the golem's queries. He had thought that he was smart enough to angle, to control himself before Khalid. He had been wrong.

Khalid wanted more than just a game, and Ian was so grateful for it. One lucky fucking wolf he was. Snapping the ropes that held his wrists, Ian put his arms around his lover. It was up against Khalid's collarbone that Ian truly allowed himself to cry.

"It's okay. It's alright, Ian." Embracing the werewolf tightly to his chest, Khalid came up to sitting position, supporting Ian as easily as he might a cub. "It's okay," he crooned softly. "It's all right. Come down, ease down, luv."

For a moment, Ian didn't believe that he could. The sobbing surged within him like a tide, pushing up, pulling back, and spilling over. Khalid's hands upon him, his voice, the repeated commands eventually took hold.

"Everything is fine. Breathe. Calm down."

Ian nodded, trying to focus on the commands. It took a while for him to comply but Khalid was patient. "Broke the fucking restraints ..." he sighed. Khalid was stroking his scalp, and it was a damn good distraction from his emotional crash.

"I won't hold it against you, for now, luv."

Incredibly thankful, Ian felt another wave of emotion threaten his composure. There was just something about the word, luv. "I don't know what came over me. I just ... I just couldn't handle it."

"What? Tell me what you couldn't handle, Ian."

He could have said everything or something, but he was not going to pull the silent treatment. "Thank you," seemed to be the only thing appropriate to Ian. It summed up exactly what he might have said after an hour of babbling.

"Ian, you don't have to thank me." Grinning, Khalid rested his head atop of Ian's, squeezed him just a bit tighter. "I am the one who should be thanking you. Such a magnificent mix of strength and sensitivity ... I have desired beings in the past, but they were nothing like you. Doe-eyed submissives, dominants who think they wish to be broken only to despise me for it. Perhaps I am being overly confident, but I feel right with you at my feet, and I think you enjoy it as well?"

His mood lightened by Khalid's confession, Ian had no idea what idiots Khalid had approached in the past, but he knew one thing for certain. "I do. I especially like it when you scratch behind my ears, pat me on my side ..."

Khalid did both. "I know," he said.

"That's why you're in charge."

"No," Khalid disagreed. Lifting Ian's chin so that he could look the werewolf in the eyes, Khalid informed Ian, "I'm in charge because you allow me to be."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It wasn't a long trip between the cabin in West Virginia to his birthplace, but to Ian it seemed to take too long. Anticipating landmarks along every stretch of the highway, he put his foot to the pedal, driving the big SUV as if it were a smaller, more maneuverable sports car. Khalid was quick to inform him to slow down at spots, to calm down, but Ian was excited. Running into traffic at the circular freeway that provided access to the metropolitan trinity of Washington, Maryland, and Virginia forced him to slow down some, but Ian was still beyond wired.

"Motherfucker! Can you drive?"

Khalid's attention snapped up from the book.

Ian leaned out of the window and snarled at the driver beside him. "Almost hit me. Get the fuck off the cell phone and drive you, son-of-a-fuckin --"

"Ian?"

The irritation in Khalid's voice drew Ian's attention back inside of the car. He had always had an issue with city driving. Yet to Khalid, he had only just revealed it. The golem looked at him as if he was losing his mind.

Ian had a good explanation. "He almost hit me. On the phone running his mouth, that guy was trying to merge into my lane with me in it. He could have hit us."

"He did not, though. Your reflexes prevented the accident, so there is no problem."

Ian rolled his eyes. It wasn't the solution that bothered him. It was the cause of the problem that annoyed him. He muttered, "I hate traffic."

"Point taken," Khalid replied. "Just try not to draw too much attention to us. I have a lawyer, but I do wish to avoid dealing with humans altogether. There are plenty who know we exist, and oddly enough, we're not that far from them."

"What? Is there is some secret government agency?"

"Yes."

Ian wanted to laugh, but there was nothing humorous about the look on Khalid's face. "Really?"

Khalid nodded.

"We never had a problem with them."

"And you won't have a problem as long as you stay in your sandbox, as it is. They probably don't know about you and yours. One needs to be particularly arrogant or particularly obvious to get their attention. Getting pulled over by a ticket-hungry cop however, in the state that you're in, would not bode well."

"They police us?"

"I wouldn't call it policing us. I would call it interruption. What they don't want is for breeds to battle in the streets. They don't wish to be ignorant of what we can do, and they absolutely do not wish to awaken one day and discover that the neat little existence that they have is about to perish. Blending in is good. Standing out and declaring yourself as a threat is not."

"You sound like you're scared of them or something."

"Ian, it is perfectly fine to underestimate the worker ants, but not the soldier ants, especially over something trivial, like road rage."

Beginning his start and stop again, Ian slowly committed the information into his brain. "You're right. I just want to get there already."

"We will." Khalid smiled as Ian admitted the real reason behind his irritation. Revealing one of his arms from beneath the loose-fitting fabric, Khalid placed it upon Ian's thigh.

Ian looked down and marveled as deft fingers went to work on the fastenings of his jeans.

"Keep your eyes on the road."

Finding himself on the verge of rear ending the car in front of him, Ian threw on the breaks.

He could see the woman in the car behind him swearing up a storm in his rear-view mirror.

* * * * *

Ian and Khalid pulled up beside the white and brown colonial amidst a host of other cars parked haphazardly on the front lawn. A beautiful country house surrounded by flowers and shrubs, it looked more valuable than the five-acre plot really was. Inherited land, the McAllister plot was no less stunning than it had been when he was a child. Ian was proud to have Khalid see it. All of it.

As he stepped out of the truck, Ian was bombarded with the scents of family, of home. He and Khalid went to the trunk to get their luggage and immediately they were greeted by a small boy and three mischievously happy cubs.

"Unk."

It took quick deductive reasoning, but Ian recalled Jada's son as being the oldest and most likely to have learned to change. "Justin?"

The ruddy-cheeked redhead nodded and grinned, "Justin is me, Unk Ian."

A proud uncle, Ian mussed about the cub's hair, while the other cubs nipped and jumped around his legs. "Leading the pack are you?"

"Yup." As if in demonstration, Justin scowled at his sibling and his cousins. A series of growls and yips were meant as a warning, but was scarcely heeded. While Khalid removed the luggage, Ian did his best to scratch and snuggle and welcome each of his little relations.

"You kids, let your uncle get unpacked." Coming from around the back of the house, Jada's commands held much more sway than Justin's. The cubs drew back as well as Peter, allowing Ian room to move. "Go on you guys, get moving. Around back."

"Go," Justin ordered.

The cubs gave their elder a precarious look, but went regardless.

Ian could barely contain his laughter. "He's your son all right, Jada."

"Yeah, he gets his looks from his dad, though. Khalid." Jada welcomed the golem and harped at him to set the luggage down. "Someone will get those," she assured him with a glance to Ian. "Thank you guys for the beds, the cubs love 'em. It solved the problem of getting mine outta my bed. Skye doesn't mind 'em, either."

"It's the least we could do," Khalid smiled. "And we were very happy to have done it. Ian is so fond of the cubs."

"He's more mature now, not so afraid of family." Looking at her brother, Jada gave him an appraising look. "You're here now, and you can spend as much time with 'em as you want."

Ian was distracted by the scents in the air. "And you're grilling. Smells good."

"Mmm, it does."

Jada responded to Khalid's appreciation. "Would you like me to fix you a plate? I've got some steaks done already."

"Uh. No. No, thank you." Doing a poor job of sounding authentic, Khalid looked to be at war between his stomach and his sensibility. Ian lowered his eyes and tried not to smile as Khalid confessed, "I'm on a specific diet."

"I would."

Jada rolled her eyes at Ian before pointing to the bags. "You need to get those bags inside and get unpacked before folk start to arrive. Khalid, you are our guest. Don't worry about that, Ian knows how we do things around here. Would you like a beer, something to drink, maybe? We have some scotch, wine, and my Dad brought brandy."

Things haven't changed a bit, Ian lamented. He assumed that some things wouldn't, but rather than letting his sister's command rile him, Ian lifted the bags. If Khalid had brought a guest to the cabin, Ian would have rushed to make sure that their

bags were taken, that refreshment was set out, and that they were comfortable. It wasn't servitude, or a usurpation of his role, it was hospitality.

He gestured for Khalid to follow Jada.

* * * * *

Ian was caught in a whirlwind. No sooner did he get into the house than he was bombarded with noises, smells, and people. He barely got his luggage up to his room before he was introduced to Skye's mate, a rail-thin, tall werewolf with a near androgynous look about him, reacquainted with an old friend of his father's, and chided by his Aunt Luci.

He managed to get some peace in his old bedroom before the cubs found him anew. Jen saved him, only to introduce him to two of her single girlfriends. He got caught by a cousin on his way down the stairway and two more relatives coming in through the front door.

Everyone was glad to see him, glad to welcome him home, and yet Ian's mind was on one thing: fresh air.

He chose the front door, rather than the back. Knowing that his mother was in the kitchen with Skye, Ian had no intention of getting caught in that trap without a moment of rest. Five hours on the road, a mind-blowing hand job, and the nervousness of being home had left him in need of comfortable seat and a beer, which he sought around the back of the house.

Lawn chairs and picnic tables were already set out. Coolers littered the lawn, strategically placed next to seats. It looked more like a party than a serious meeting over serious matters. Folk were laughing, smiling, reminiscing, and looking anything but dour and concerned.

Khalid was even jovial with a glass of red wine in hand, talking to an older, brown-haired werewolf with bright green eyes and a faint Scottish accent. Thin and short, the werewolf seemed like a dwarf next to Khalid. He had a cup in one hand, while the other hand waved about animating his speech.

Ian approached the pair with a heavy feeling in his stomach.

The werewolf turned his head and grinned proudly. "Son. How have you been?"

"Dad." Shoulders hunched over, Ian made sure to get a beer from a nearby cooler before choosing the open seat on the other side of Khalid. He preferred it to the seat nearest to his father, Sean Douglas McAllister, better known to friends and family as Dougie.

"It's been a while. You look good and strong, and Khalid has been telling me that you're quite the fighter. I always felt you'd be. You never let your sisters get the best of ya. He was such a scrapper." Pride was written all over rosy cheeks as Dougie spoke proudly of his son.

Ian cracked the seal on his can, trying not to show his awkwardness around Khalid. While he felt sure that Khalid had already garnered more than enough evidence

of his father's shortcomings to dissect with his psychological mind, Ian couldn't shake the creeping feeling that his father's sensitive nature would reveal things equally as soft about himself.

"No need to be shy, son. Your friend tells me that we have nothing to worry about. Not that I was worried, anyway, but hell, a golem, a real live golem ..." Gesturing to Khalid, Dougie wiggled his eyebrows. "You know, the closest I ever came to meeting one of the ancient breeds was a gargoyle. He was a big, big fella with a neck the size of a tree trunk. Grayish hair, eyes, and everything, scary type who could out drink me and my mates combined. He didn't have much of a sense of humor, barely knew English, but me and my mates took him under our wing. He ended up going west, said it was too cold around these parts or something. Anyway, a golem," Dougie exclaimed. "I'm impressed. He's a good friend to have."

Friend? Ian was in need of another beer, when Khalid spoke up.

"Your father was just telling me how he used to go to school to get you out of trouble."

Before he could say a word in his defense, Ian's father burst out in laughter. "Oh, all the time, I was up at that school. Anna would have skinned me alive if she knew. He was always getting called to the principle for fighting, badmouthing his teachers, and bullying his schoolmates. Anna would have skinned him alive if she knew how much, but he got decent grades. Lucky for someone that his dad and the principal went back a ways."

Yeah, back to the pool hall. "You don't have to tell all of my secrets, Dad."

Dougie scoffed, "What secrets? Hell, if you want secrets, I could tell you about the time when I had to give my boy 'the talk.' Always a hit with the girls he was, but he didn't know what to do with 'em. He had one girl, though, pretty and quiet. Not the type you'd get anywhere with, if you catch my meaning."

The last thing that Ian wanted was for his father to utter another word on that topic. "Dad really ... You couldn't tell Khalid how good I was at sports or something?"

Waving off his son, Dougie assured his son that everything was fine. "Not to worry," he whispered low and covertly, "I know you two have a thing. Nothing to be shy about. Hell, I used to have a few male friends that --"

Horried, Ian really didn't want to hear another word. Coming to his feet, Ian had every intention of bringing himself up to a tolerable level of drunkenness. "Khal, would you like another glass of wine?"

Khalid raised his glass, half full as it was. His almond eyes flashed. "I haven't finished this one."

His father spoke up, "I need one."

Ian sighed. He had set himself up for that one. "What're you drinking, Dad?"

"Two parts whiskey, one part ice."

"Right." Taking the cup, Ian left Khalid with a sympathetic look.

The liquor was set up on a picnic table, and as Ian made the drink, he caught Jada smirking. *Just like old times all right.* He made the drink quickly, grabbed a beer, and prayed that his father had found a better topic. Returning to his seat, Ian gave his father a full cup.

Dougie paused his conversation with Khalid, only to accept his drink. "As I was saying, times are changing. Dogs are starting to get more ambitious. I mean, there was a time when a pack could be satisfied with a mate, some land, and food enough to feed the cubs.

"There were no politics, no negotiating, and more importantly, no gangs. This Davius fella, he thinks he's big time, rolls in with terms. He courted Jen only to get all three of my girls. Well, my girls aren't breeders, and they aren't docile omegas to stand for that shit. If he wants to have a brood of pure-bloods, then he needs to look elsewhere. We aren't in the Dark Ages. My girls don't have to abide that."

"No, they do not," Khalid agreed.

"We'll fight them to the fucking fur, send him away with his tail between his fucking legs for even thinking such a stupid thought. My boy will see to it!"

Ian sat back nervously as he watched his father upend the cup and demolish the contents with one gulp.

"He's going to be a damn good alpha, if Anna lets him take the lead. That stubborn woman ... She would fight Davius herself if she could. I've been telling her for years that she needed to contact you. Been battling suitors herself she has."

Ian lowered the can of beer that was on its way to his lips. "What?"

"Davus isn't the first, but he is considerably stronger than the others, him and his city entourage. Big connections he's got."

Ian hadn't thought it would be possible for him to lose more respect for his father than he already had. Yet right before him, his rosy-cheeked father was speaking as if it were okay that his mother was still engaging in combat. "Dad, Mom's been fighting, and you didn't help her?"

Responding to the anger in his son's voice, Dougie sat up and shook his head. "Ian, you know your mother. She doesn't tell me a damn thing. Jada tells me things after the fact, and Skye is her mother's child. Jen ... Well, she acts like she has a problem with me."

"She's looking for a *strong* male, Dad," Ian hissed, heated by years of disappointment in the man before him.

"Ahh, here we go." Hanging his head, Dougie seemed thoroughly defeated by blame. "Jen blames me. You blame me. Jada and Skye go out and find equally useless males as me. I'm not blind. You found an ancient one, and Jen finds a dominating son-of-a-bitch. I know where I fucked up. I should have just left you to your mother to raise you, instead of even showing my face. You all might have been better off."

"Dad, I didn't say anything like that."

"No, but it's what you're thinking, and I don't blame you. My father wasn't much in the bold sense, but thank the moon, you are. I love your mother and you cubs with all of my heart, you know that, Ian. I can't help what I am."

"And you never tried," Ian snapped.

Dougie looked at Ian and then at Khalid, who was silently observing. He looked down into his empty cup and shook his head. For a moment, Ian believed his father would break down in tears. His anger softened as his father sat with lips pressed closed.

"You're right. You are right, son," Dougie replied finally. "I didn't do right by you, by any of you. Sorry excuse for a father, I am."

Ian looked over at Khalid hoping for a validation, for a reprimand, or even for sympathy and came up with nothing. Ian would have given anything to be able to read the golem's thoughts. He might have felt like less of a shit if Khalid could only explain to him the feelings of regret that plagued his chest. "Dad, I would never say that. You were a good father when Mom let you come around." Looking at his son, Dougie's eyes shimmered despite the sorrowful look on his features. "You let us get away with murder. You spoiled us every chance you got."

"I could have been macho, could've demanded that Anna obey me ..."

And people in hell could demand ice water, Ian thought.

"Ian, Mom wants to see you in the kitchen!"

Ian turned to look at the back door where Skye emerged with a container of pasta salad. Humor in her voice, Skye relayed the rest. "She says that she's going to skin you alive for not coming in to say hi. She says you weren't raised by coyotes!"

Dougie gestured towards the house, "Go ahead, son. Try not to let her get to you. You're an alpha."

"For now ..." Ian didn't want to go. He didn't want to leave Khalid with his father again, but since there really was nothing more revealing to hear than what had already been said, he stood.

Skye walked up to them and set the salad down on a nearby picnic table. "Dad, Khalid, would you guys like some salad?"

Khalid spoke first. "Indeed."

"I'll have some with a steak, hon."

Denying his stomach's jealousy and even more his raging desire to pull Khalid to some crook of privacy for a pep talk, Ian straightened out his shoulders and headed to the house.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The McAllister kitchen was the biggest room in the house, and it tended to be the place where his mother held court. Ian assumed it had something to do with her not wanting to be far from the coffeepot as she gave out orders. Many days and nights he had sat at the kitchen table with his sisters, listening to what Anna expected, to what she wanted done, or who was in trouble.

It was in the kitchen, at the table, that Ian was prepared for the night's meeting. Introduced and reacquainted with friends and family alike. His mother made sure that if he needed something, it was brought to him. If he needed a plate or something to drink, Anna sent Skye or Jen or the nearest relative outside to get it.

While she herself moved between the table and the stove, Anna made sure that Ian knew the names and lineages of every being that passed through her home. Chained to the table by matriarchal ties, Ian told himself that he had been chained, bound, and immobile plenty of times. The context might have been radically different, but the principle was the same. He had to be patient, had to focus, in order to retain his sanity.

His sensitive ears picked up laughter several times, coming from outdoors, coming from Khalid and Dougie, and Ian longed to be out there with them. His father was a congenial guy, gifted with the ability to bring out a laugh despite his shortcomings. Nonetheless, when it came time for him to address family and guests alike as the new McAllister alpha, Ian was ready.

His first order was not to exclude anyone under beta status. His mother had wanted to leave the gammas, deltas, omegas, and children out doors. She had even gone so far as suggesting that the meeting begin without Khalid. Ian objected to that despite her scowl.

His second order was that everyone meet in the living room rather than the kitchen. It didn't go over well, mainly with two powerful alphas -- his mother, Anna, and his aunt, Luci.

His plan, as he laid it out before his family, didn't go as well as he thought it would, either.

"No offense, Ian, but you can't be so naïve." Rebecca, his cousin and his aunt's beta, sat beside her mother on the couch eyeing him nervously. "I mean, your plan sounds great and all, but what if Davius has some firepower on his side? What if he has an ancient one, too? You have to beat him. There is no other option."

Standing in the center of the room with all eyes on him, Ian replied, "I intend to, but we need a backup plan if I don't."

Marty, a friend of his father spoke up. "What if Davius has a backup plan as well?"

Skye had a reply for that. "This is *our* territory. What sort of backup plan can he have in *our* territory?"

A gamma expressed a doubt based upon something he had seen in a movie, and a shouting match ensued immediately with Skye calling several folk cowards and his mother scowling about allowing the lower ranks into the planning sessions. Several of the betas twitched with the urge to fight anyone and anything at that very moment, and his father and his father's best friend Cooda added refills to Dougie's cup from a pocket flask. Ian shouted for the group's attention and found himself ignored. Unnerved, Ian's eyes sought Khalid's in the back of the room.

Khalid winked, smiled in light of the chaos, and it was the exact dose of encouragement that he needed.

The next time he shouted for everyone's attention, he got it. "Look," he snarled. "I know it sounds risky, and it's going to be. Anyone who doesn't want to be involved is free to go about their fucking business! We don't have time to be snarling amongst ourselves, and my pack will not be bullied."

"Well, at least not all of you," his aunt quipped.

Ian turned his head to face the heavy-set woman, her hair a darker, fierier shade of red than his mother's. He had discovered earlier what Aunt Luci's views about Jen were. She felt his sister had showed the ultimate weakness by even entertaining the attention of a dominant male such as Davius. She didn't think much of Ian's own relationship with Khalid. However, he had always known his aunt's view on his father. Fangs showing, eyes narrowed, Ian spoke soft and dangerously. "Whether that comment was meant for me, my sister, or my father makes no difference to me. What we do individually isn't important, but what we do as a pack is important. If you feel like this is a lost cause, you can leave as well."

Thoroughly aghast, his aunt flashed a threatening glare. "Look, cub. I don't know who you think you're talking to but --"

"But nothing! The door is right there!" Pointing, Ian felt the warmth of his sideburns, grown in from triggered endorphins. The room fell silent as all eyes focused on Ian. Anna glared at her sister, sending a clear signal that extra comments were unnecessary.

Cooda was the first to speak. "You can count on me. I've known you and yours since you were pups, and I ain't gonna stand by and let some cur take your sisters. He

can't just blow in here and expect to pull what he wants from pack after pack. Shit, who the fuck knows what he'll want next. Folk like that look for weakness."

Ian nodded his agreement, looked around to see if anyone would make a move to the door. No one did.

"Ian, why isn't the golem going to join the fight?" asked a young gamma. "He'll be better at fighting than any of us."

"That's why he'll be in charge of the cubs," Ian stated. "If Davius gets his hands on them, he can break us. He mustn't be able to get near them."

Jonathan, Jada's mate had a suggestion. "Maybe the cubs should be taken away tonight, as well as the girls. Let Khalid return to fight with us, if we have to fight."

"There won't be a fight."

"There will be."

"There might be."

Ian listened to all of the speculations. "We should be prepared, regardless."

Rebecca, still steamed from the disrespect shown to her mother, chimed in. "Right, Jen. Anything you think we could benefit from knowing?"

"I've told you everything I know," she said, and Ian believed his sister wholeheartedly. It was something more than just her diminished bearing and the dull guilt in her eyes that told him that she was being honest. It was his heart that said so.

"What if he wants to negotiate?"

Fixing his eyes on one of the few humans in the room, Ian had an answer for those who did not understand the nature of werewolves. "The only negotiation we'll listen to is a fair fight."

"Can you fight?"

Anna looked at her sister. While Luci may have been bigger than Anna, there was no doubt as to who was more domineering. "My son can fight as well as any cur in here."

"Yeah, but can he fight as good as you?"

"I'm sure that he can, Luce."

Floored by his mother's championing, Ian could feel the aggression building between his mother and aunt. It wasn't a hateful thing; it was no more than a show of dominance, but to the humans in the room, it must have looked as if the two women were about to come to blows.

Ian was about to address the issue when he caught a familiar scent.

"We are sure that he can fight and that we will fight beside him if need be."

Turning around to face the doorway to the kitchen, Ian found two friendly silhouettes in the archway. His mouth fell open as he took in Gray looking as serious as ever, standing in front of a hulk of a werewolf. He went over immediately to welcome them. "Gray! Douglas!"

Gray extended his hand, his mouth curved in a grin. "Ian. Khalid mentioned you might need us."

Ian took the hand, shook it, and decided that the greeting was insufficient. Seizing Gray in his embrace, Ian hugged the slight, dark-haired were before doing the same with Douglas. "Damn good to see you both."

"Good to see you, even under these circumstances," Gray replied.

Ian was blown away, grinning madly. He felt there was nothing that could stand against him with the addition of Gray and Douglas at his side. If he couldn't have Khalid standing next to him while he battled, Gray and Douglas were the next best things. "Thank you so much for coming. You didn't have to come all the way down here to --"

Gray leaned over in the guise of giving Ian another hug and whispered, "I am not your M, and there is no need to say what we do and don't need to do."

"Okay." Telling himself that he needed to calm down a bit, Ian looked over at Khalid and smiled. It didn't matter that his audience had begun to whisper anew, the only thing that mattered to Ian was that he just increased his odds. "Okay, I'm glad you're here, and I appreciate you two coming."

"It was a long drive from Wisconsin to Maryland, you'd *better* appreciate it," Douglas joked.

Gray did not think it was humorous.

Ian smiled, knowing full well that had they not been surrounded by strangers, that Douglas's humor would not have gone unpunished. "You guys must be hungry, would you like something to eat? Something to drink?"

"A beer and a water if wouldn't be too much trouble."

"Skye. Get me a beer and a bottled water ..."

His sister had been involved in speculating as to identity of the two new arrivals along with just about everyone else in the room when she heard the command. "Excuse me?"

Ian made sure he spoke slowly, enunciated properly, and left no room for interpretation. "A beer and a bottled water from the kitchen. Get it."

Skye looked at her brother as if he had lost his mind. She did however make her way to the kitchen.

* * * * *

The plan was as solid as it was going to be. Four hours and only two instances of a threatening growl later, and Ian felt sure that they were as prepared as they could possibly be. It was nearly ten o'clock. While a few left, the majority stayed around to socialize, drink, and gossip. Outdoors, a few suspiciously large wolves were being chased and bullied around by a small boy and a pack of cubs. The ubiquitous group of smokers was chatting at a picnic table, and music played from the system provided by the family's stereophile.

Several people remained inside, namely his mother and her sister. Ian supposed they might be discussing him, but it was a fleeting care as he stood with his lovers beneath the tall, autumnal oak.

In the darkness of night, they conversed as casually as if it were day. Ian stood close to Khalid, something he had been yearning to do since they arrived. Khalid had his arm around Ian's waist, and they were as casual as they would have been at home.

"Honestly," Gray began. "I did not believe that you were Khalid's type, or that you two would get on so well. He certainly didn't tell me that he was even looking for well, more than a sub."

Ian shot Khalid a quizzical look. "What?" It had certainly seemed like Khalid was looking for a sub to him. The offers he made, the expectations that he had, Gray hadn't intended on them getting together. "I thought you had set us up."

Gray shrugged as if that wasn't his intention at all. Directing his attention at the golem, Gray replied, "When you and I spoke, I assumed that you would let him know when we were coming back so that we might hook up again, but well, I guess I was wrong."

"I had every intention of doing that, but if you recall, you said something about him being lost and unruly. How could I resist taking him under my tutelage?"

Gray rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on Khalid. This is more than tutelage, now isn't it?"

"Infinitely more."

Ian felt warmed by the pride and possessiveness in Khalid's voice, even more due to the hand squeezing his side.

"I had a feeling the two of them might hit it off," Douglas told Gray. "Khalid likes challenges, and Ian is nothing but."

"He *is* a challenge," Khalid replied to the surprise of Ian.

Gray leaned in and whispered, "He behaves?"

Pulling Ian close, Khalid looked down into hopeful eyes, eagerly awaiting a good evaluation. "Exceptionally when he chooses to. He still has a great deal to learn, and so do I."

Ian grinned madly, bracing himself against Khalid's chest. "Yeah, right. Flatter me now after you tricked me into thinking it was Gray's way of passing me off."

Lowering his mouth to Ian's ear, Khalid growled, "Really, cur? You knew what I wanted from you the moment I laid eyes on you."

And I know what I want from you now, Ian thought, grateful that Khalid held him and thus prevented him from feeling faint.

"At the cabin?" Gray asked.

"No. At the party, the night before," Khalid corrected the assumption. "You were showing him on the scene. He looked so innocent, so wild, and yet, so in need of attention."

Pausing in thought, Gray recalled the night. "You *were* there, but when I asked you if you wanted to a more formal meeting with him, you told me no. I told you he was staying at the cabin, remember? When I asked you if you were coming over to stay that night?"

"We had a nice, quiet introduction."

Khalid's tongue was toying with his ear, but somehow Ian managed a few low-spoken words. "Yeah, you were watching me in the crowd. It was the only introduction I needed."

"You had potential, performing for everyone."

Ian had to be truthful, Khalid's warmth and attention demanded it. "I was performing for you ... and Gray."

"Oh, I get it now." Laughing, Gray's questions ceased with the answers apparent before him. "Khalid, you demon you."

"What? I may be several centuries old, but I am as powerless as the next person when it comes to whom I desire."

"Yeah, me. I'm all that you need, M." Ian turned his head, seeking Khalid's lips, the source of such endearing words. Softly, Khalid's mouth pressed against his with light, leisurely pecks. It was just as erotic as if Khalid had pushed his tongue into his mouth and stolen his breath.

He heard Gray clear his throat, then a comment about the many opportunities he and Khalid had to be romantic without the presence of guests, but Ian disregarded them all. The autumn air felt so right against his warm face, against the warmth that Khalid instilled in him as the golem held him tightly. Ian blocked out the surrounding noises, the gasps coming from guests who had just noticed the two, the sounds of insects reveling in the night, even the song coming from the radio as he focused solely on Khalid and his merlot-flavored kisses. The screaming of his name was another thing entirely.

"Ian! Ian!"

Khalid was the first to pull away, releasing Ian from his hold.

Disoriented and not in a good mood, Ian turned in the direction of his name. "What? What is it?"

Eugene Crow, a Native American shaman who knew more about werewolves than most werewolves knew about themselves, ran up to him. Panting, out of breath, and unable to see well in the night spectrum, the shaman squinted up at him. "Ian?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

Eugene shook his head as if he didn't know how to put his information in words. Ian's sigh of impatience soon moved him to try. "Karen, my wife, she likes to sit on her porch and be nosey, you know. She likes to watch the cars roll by while she talks on the phone. She's like that, a veritable source of information. I told her -- not about you guys being werewolves or anything, I would never tell anyone about that -- but I told

her that you guys were having trouble with some Mafia-like fella, and well, I didn't know what else to tell her, but --"

Ian had no idea what Eugene was talking about, but whatever it was, Ian felt that it wasn't going to be good news. He smelled the fear coming off of the human in waves. "But what, Eugene? Get to the fucking point."

"Well, she just called, and she told me that she saw a bunch of silver trucks, a whole line of them, and that she thought it was strange because they were all silver with tinted windows and that they seemed to be following each other, and I thought it can't be good. I mean, I'm not sure or anything, but -- "

Ian raised his hand, silencing the rant. His mother's guard dogs barked. Trained as they were, it was definitely cause for alarm. Frozen in place, Ian didn't know what to do. It was too early to be dealing with Davius, and worse, the pack was unprepared. Completely. The cubs were running around, the females were in the house, and these were definitely not the conditions he had planned for. "Fuck. Me. Fucking ..."

Khalid took hold of Ian and shook him once. It was enough to get his attention.

"Ian, breathe. You can handle this."

Ian broke out in a nervous laughter. "Right. Right. How? How, M? I definitely didn't plan for this!"

Looking his lover in the eye, Khalid gave the simplest of replies. "With your pack behind you, that's how."

Chapter Thirty

There wasn't time to initiate any part of the plan. By the time Ian alerted everyone inside the house, the sound of tires crunching gravel on the driveway could be heard by every werewolf on site. Khalid and Skye gathered the cubs, both ones related and not, forcing their frightened and bewildered hides into the basement. Ian had several of the omegas stay inside of the house to watch the doors.

His orders were short and swift, and folk were too much in shock to dispute them. Rushing out of the front door and onto the porch, Ian was flanked by Jada, Gray, Douglas, and Jenna. The rest of his fighters, his mother and aunt, filed out soon after. As the silver cavalcade came to a stop in front of his house, Ian leaned against the banister, waiting. A gang of supernaturals and a few humans filled the porch behind him.

All together there were six silver SUVs, their headlights bathing the property in a preternatural daylight. One by one, the first to last of the vehicles emptied. Men in expensive suits, and a few females in outfits even more expensive, filed out. Most of Davius's group seemed to be half-breeds, werewolves with too much human blood to allow for transformations. There were a few pure-blooded weres, obvious by their light-reflecting eyes, shimmering in the altered darkness. Ian even counted half of the offenders as humans. They spread out in a half circle blocking the driveway as a means of escape or entrance.

Ian noted each and every one of the visitors, but the majority of his attention was directed to the last vehicle. Surely, he assumed, Davius was the type to let his bodyguards precede him.

Crossing his arms, Ian tried to tamp down the anxiousness beating in his breast. The combination of surprise, spoiled plans, and an ignorance of circumstance was more emotion than he had ever borne.

As the last SUV emptied, Ian noted three males and a female. He knew which one wasn't Davius. The three males were all very tall, very dapperly dressed, but one stood

out more than the others. Ian's gaze went directly to a muscular male with shoulder-length black hair. He had a presence and a bearing about him that suggested both power and intelligence. One look at Jenna told Ian that his assumption had been right. Her pale face and her posture hinted at embarrassment.

He led the three through the entourage, heading directly up to the porch. With a smile on his face, the werewolf known as Davius was lighter than Ian by at least twenty pounds, taller, but nowhere near as big and as intimidating as his reputation might have suggested. He reminded Ian more of a businessman than a warrior. It wasn't the best of associations, but it wasn't anything that had Ian truly unnerved.

He was far more worried about Davius's pack.

Davius came to a halt with what had to be his two betas at his side. Looking from side to side, he noted the house and its guardians. "There was a 'welcome home' party, and I wasn't even invited," he muttered to himself, before turning to one of his bodyguards with a less pity-filled comment. "Smell that in the air. Barbeque, liquor, beer, all sorts of food. I told you these rural weres really like to throw down."

Ian looked at the dark werewolf as if he had lost his mind. While finally setting eyes on Davius had relieved some worry, Ian refused to embrace the foolish urge to lower his guard around the wolf.

Dark blue eyes flashed as they struck Ian with their attention. "Hello. I am Davius. Davius Winter. You must be my future brother-in-law?"

Ian scoffed at the idea as he stepped down off of the porch stairs. Ian stood his ground as Davius separated from his guard and came up to him.

The two alphas met at a neutral distance for them both. From two feet away, Ian could understand his sister's initial interest. Davius was not unattractive in the least. His arrogance, however, left something to be desired.

Ian replied back, "You're early, aren't you? The full moon is still two days away."

"Small details. I figured, why wait for you to summon every wolf this side of the coast. Apparently, I was almost too late for that, but I wanted to see Anna's son for myself."

"Well, you've seen me." Ian's voice was dry and emotionless. Refusing to be taken in by the congenial tone of Davius's voice, he added. "And I've seen you."

"Yes, and I have to say you're about as hot as your sisters. Well-built, nice eyes ..." Davius licked his lips and sighed. "I do so prize red wolves. They are so rare. When I met your sister, I knew immediately that I had to have her. Sweetheart that she was, she introduced me to the family. It was like Christmas. There was Skye and then there was Jada, a fiercer female I've never met. You can't really blame me for wanting them all in my den, can you?"

In no mood for relating to Davius's need to lay claim, Ian replied, "Look, I realize that you are probably packless, an upstart orphan wishing to form your own brood, but here is not the place you want to seek that."

The dark werewolf was unfazed by the insult. "Oh, you are a fiery motherfucker. I like that! And I hope that my first cub takes after you."

"Well, if you sire cubs at all, I would hope that they don't inherit your hearing problem."

"Look. Ian." Showing the first sign of irritation, Davius's grin seemed diminished somewhat as he took a more serious approach to their introduction. "I know full well that your pack is matriarchal. By wolf law, that gives me the right to take them under my authority. It's nice that you've appeared out of the blue to champion them. It is. I'm not a luna. I would not have challenged your mother, even though she surely challenged me. I might have fought Jada, but then I still expect to do that ... and enjoy it. My point is this. We do not have to be enemies. I have more than enough money, enough power to provide well for your sisters. I am not a villain, and you should not judge me by human moral standards. We are supernaturals, and I have every right to stake my claim."

"And I have every right to deny it. My sisters have mates, and if Jen seeks a mate from this day forward, he will be approved by me."

Davius gave Ian a look that filled with skepticism. "It is really touching how your mother prepared you, cub. She gave me a similar line when I approached her with my proposition."

"I don't care what she said to you. I'm telling you now that you don't have my approval."

"Then we have to fight, you and I."

There really was no other option. Ian might have applauded Davius for his attempt at reasoning, but the blood pulsing through Ian's veins knew that there was no more cause for discussion, no more need for posturing, and no other option. "I agree. We will fight on the full moon."

"Why not now? I'd rather save the full moon for the conception of my cubs."

The thought of Davius conceiving cubs with his sisters was more of an insult to Ian than the cocky assumption that Davius would win a battle between them. "Take your humans, your half-breeds, and your mangy wolves, and get the fuck off of my property, you deaf-assed cur," Ian sneered.

Davius unbuttoned his suit jacket and tossed it back to one of his betas. Just as angered as Ian, he showed his fangs. "I don't think so. While it would be entertaining for me to wait and see what sort of trickery and deception you can muster, I'm not the most patient male. We can end this right now. You and I."

Ready to get out of his own clothing, Ian agreed. "You're right, we can."

* * * * *

It took only one engagement, that first exchange of blows for Ian to realize why Davius was considered a threat.

Both males made the transformation to werewolf, not total man or wolf. Both stood over seven feet tall each with an arsenal of fangs and razor-sharp claws. One was an auburn color, the other black -- the two beasts faced off. With an ear-piercing roar,

Davius moved at him with fluidity seemingly unnatural to such a large beast. The contrast of the sound he was making and his movement was unlike anything Ian had ever experienced. Staying true to Khalid's teaching, Ian was not hasty and did not swing wildly. Aiming a blow at Davius's mid-section, he hit nothing but air. Davius sidestepped him, spun around, and hit him squarely behind the shoulders.

Ian spun around, unflustered, but surprised nonetheless. He heard gasps and mutterings from the porch, but maintained his composure. Ian had been outmaneuvered by Khalid enough times to not be flustered by Davius. Recalling Khalid's lessons about deception, he made another approach. He appeared to go for Davius's head with a right hook, but instead caught the black wolf with a left to the ribs.

"Oh, you might be a challenge, or then you might not be." Davius staggered, but was otherwise unshaken. Making his first offensive move, Davius had a bit of deception of his own. He lunged towards Ian, but at the second before contact, dropped low to the ground and swept Ian off of his feet.

Before Ian knew what had happened, Davius was on top of him, snarling and tearing at him with his claws. Ian bucked, twisted, and fought back all in a flurry of movement. His adrenaline racing, he managed to twist over to his side. Davius was unseated, falling off, but not to the ground. He sprung back to all fours, ready.

"You'll need to do better than that," Ian snarled, rolling to his feet as well. They engaged again, both coming up to a standing position. Whereas Davius was indeed a more skilled fighter than Ian, Ian's aggression fed each and every one of his blows. Blood flowed freely as they grappled, Ian tore a chunk from Davius's thigh, and Davius ripped a gash on Ian's side. Ian's was a much more serious wound, yet refusing to acknowledge the pain, he came at Davius with the full force of his weight.

Davius braced himself, paws digging into the ground. Catching Ian's bulk, he lifted the red werewolf up into the air and slammed him back down.

If you can take my pummeling, as it were, then you won't be bothered by anything Davius throws at you. Ian recalled his lover's words as he got up off of the ground. Davius knew how to throw, how to evade, and how to rend, attacking with a defensive strategy. Offense came natural to Ian, but his training from Khalid gave the appearance that he was defensive as well. Combining both styles, Ian might not be Davius's equal in skill, but he was more than the dark wolf's match in endurance.

Davius, who had been calm at the onset of the fight, began to show signs of irritation, and with irritation, he also began to show signs of exhaustion. That was how he found his arm pinned behind his back and his snout in the dust.

Sneering, spitting, his chest heaving, Davius struggled to break the hold. Ian seized Davius's shoulder in his maw, securing a dominant hold on the struggling beast. Despite an elbow repeatedly jamming into his side, Ian held firm. His entire being focused on domination, Ian hardly heard the words Davius hissed out between clenched teeth.

"You should know that my men have orders. They'll turn this entire plot into dust. It's your decision."

Ian let up on Davius, his attention turning to the intruders littering his lawn. One of Davius's betas reached into his jacket, showing off a silver-hilted firearm. The werewolf grinned, gestured to those standing beside him.

Ian was about to denounce the whole lot of them. *The fucking cowards*, he thought to himself. Davius used Ian's distraction to his advantage, yanking free of Ian's hold and slipping from under him. Stunned by the implication of Davius's threat, Ian weighed bad against worse. If he lost, he might lose his sisters, but everyone from his mother and father to his friends and family would live. If he lost, Khalid would take the cubs away. It had been a promise between them. Davius would no doubt slaughter everyone for that reason alone. There was no easy answer than he could find, and suddenly, the benefits of winning dimmed.

"Ian! Look out!" Jada screamed to her brother to get him to turn around.

Ian turned but he was much too late to avoid the blow to the back of his neck. Lights flashed before his eyes, as pain exploded from his head down to the tips of his paws. Another blow came crashing down upon his ear, taking half of his hearing away.

For a moment, Ian didn't know where he was or what he was doing. Everything around him glowed light and muffled sound. Unable to even shield himself, Ian fell to the ground. Blood poured out from wounds that were not given time to heal. He could barely raise his arms, yet a stray glance and a few seconds of restored sight brought him at least some perspective.

His family was no longer on the porch. They were spread out in front of the house, holding a defensive line. Most were transformed, and even those who could not transform held an aggressive posture.

Davius stepped into his line of vision and hit Ian with a series of slashes to his face and chest. It was a level of violence Ian had never experienced, a level of brutality that he knew his species was capable of, but one he had never witnessed. All his play at being brutal melted to nothing as he bore a loss of blood and reality.

Davius drove his knee down into Ian's chest, grasped Ian's bloody throat, and squeezed. Panicked, Ian barely had the strength to swipe at his opponent, more or less, to break the hold of the claws squeezing the life from him.

"Don't worry," Davius advised his breath hot and sulfuric over Ian's face. "I won't kill the cubs, at least not until last."

Ian shook his head weakly. "You ... you won't ..."

"It's your decision, alpha. The few or the fucking many ... That is the sort of decision an alpha makes, but then you wouldn't know anything about that."

"Ian!"

The roar of his name caught Ian's attention, piercing through the pain and disorientation. Even the pressure at his throat ceased to matter as Khalid's voice came to him.

It was easy to break Davius's grip as the arrogant werewolf had actually been fooled into believing he had the upper hand. Half-mad, Ian was far more worried about the authority and the command in the tone of Khalid's voice than he was about Davius.

He didn't know if he was imagining Khalid's voice or not, but he wanted to be sure. He couldn't do that with Davius bothering him.

Shoving the black-furred arm back to its owner with one hand, punching Davius in the chest with the other, Ian caught Davius off guard. Stunned, Davius tried to scramble back onto Ian, but his advantage was gone. He hardly got within range of Ian before the crimson and auburn wolf knocked him back.

Ian got to his feet and stood. Swaying, but stable enough to remain vertical, Ian looked down at Davius. "An alpha puts the pack before himself." It was something Khalid might have said, and Ian very much wanted to see the golem. "He's as much of a servant as he is a leader."

Davius came to his feet, shaking off the dust and grass attached to his fur. He scoffed at Ian's words. "You are certainly welcome to serve them. You are welcome to die for them, with them ... whatever."

"It isn't what they'd want, though."

"And what would they want?"

Ian thought about it. Ideally, it would have been best if Davius just went away, but Ian knew that it would be too hopeful on his part. Wolves like Davius were the types to carry grudges and plot revenge.

The telltale sounds of guns being drawn and readied were heard. Ian also heard the snarls, the roars. His hearing grew clearer and clearer by the second. He could hear Jada's voice as she argued with one of Davius's pack. He could hear his mother roaring at them for being cowards. They were all beautiful sounds to his ears. Guns or no, his pack was unafraid.

Charging forward, Ian came to a stop directly in front of Davius. Having assumed that Ian would keep coming, Davius moved to the left and immediately realized his mistake.

Ian seized Davius by the waist and spun him around. He used one hand to pin Davius's arm up behind his back and keep it out of the way. Wrapping his other arm around the broad throat of the werewolf, Ian focused all of his strength in his hold.

Like a secret which needed to be conveyed up close and personal, Ian whispered what he knew in his heart to be true. "They would want you dead. Bringing your mangy curs and their guns here with not so much as an ounce of respect for the battle of alphas Oh, they would definitely would want your throat torn out, your balls ripped from your body."

"No," Davius was quick to gasp. "No, please!"

Ian tightened his serpentine embrace. "No, that's not good enough for me. You have shown me that you have no honor, so your words mean nothing."

Unable to reply in such a strong hold, Davius could do little more than gag. Ian felt the strength fleeing from Davius's body. Slowly, the black fur retreated back into pink flesh, malleable bones transfigured back into a humanoid shape. It was as clear a sign of submission as if Davius had screamed it himself.

Looking at Davius's gang, Ian had the majority of their attention. Unnerved and uncertain of what to do, they looked between Ian, on the verge of killing their leader, and the mob protecting the house and ready to attack.

Holding Davius, naked and human in his arms, Ian saw no reason to strangle the were any longer. He could have easily swiped Davius's head from his shoulders in the time it took for the male to even consider transforming back. Directing his attention to the only real remaining threat, Ian demanded to know. "Which of you is his second? His beta?"

Chapter Thirty-One

Ian was far too tired to appreciate his entourage. His only goal was to make it back into the house to see Khalid. It proved to be a difficult task with all of the congratulations and questions he received with every step. As he reached the front door, someone fitted a blanket over his shoulders to cover his nudity.

His pack filed in to the house behind him, whispering and muttering. For the most part, they didn't know what to make of Ian's decision. Ian didn't care. His attention was on the stairway and the golem emerging from the basement.

Khalid was followed by his own grouping, which seemed more than eager to be set free again. Bounding around the house, trying to make sense of all the excitement in the house, they too joined in the crowd surrounding Ian. He nearly tripped over one of his nephews in an attempt to move forward. Stopping to make sure that the little one was okay, Ian almost missed the sight of Khalid heading up the stairs to the bedrooms.

As much as he wanted to follow his lover, Ian's break in momentum allowed his family to fully surround him. Bombarded with attention, Ian had half a mind to tell them all to shove off.

His sister presented an irritated figure with her hands on her hips. "Look, Ian," Skye snapped, pointing at the two males and the female sitting on the couch looking out of sorts. "I don't know about letting them stay here."

"What is there not to know?"

"Well, they are...they're enemies," she muttered as if they couldn't hear.

Gazing back at his sibling, Ian wasn't about to retract his decision. Having stripped Davius of his three beta werewolves, Ian wasn't about to let them go. They had accepted him as their alpha with less drama than his own pack. With more knowledge of Davius's network than the black wolf had himself, they were trump cards that Ian

wasn't about to get rid of. It was a more powerful blow to his opponent than death would ever have been. "They are members of our pack now. They need to be near."

Making no attempt to lower her voice, Anna had her own opinion. "Well, they don't need to be in my house."

"We have more than enough room, Mother. They have pledged to me, so they are family."

"They swore allegiance to you, but they can sleep outside. Those fancy clothes that they're wearing don't make them special."

Brows knitted, teeth pressed together to prevent a number of expletives from spilling out, Ian tried to be calm. "They will sleep indoors."

"Well, they can sleep with the dogs, then."

Unafraid and past frustration, Ian wasn't about to put up with another battle, not even one amongst his own. "Mother," he snarled. "Make them places to sleep. If they need it, give them something to eat and drink. I don't want to hear another fucking word about it."

His Aunt Luci was quick to stand up for her sister. "Don't you curse at your mother, cub. You forget --"

"Do you wish to challenge me?" Ian asked.

Luci's face went nearly as red as her hair. "What?"

Ian squared himself, straightened his aching back. Despite his wounds and bruised bones, despite his bloodied and battered visage, Ian repeated himself. "I asked if you wanted to challenge me, because it sounds to me as if you do, Auntie."

A roll of her eyes was proof that she did not.

"Ian, I'm going to take the guys and watch the house tonight, just in case there are any other surprises."

"Right. You do that, Dad."

"Ian, I have some salve. It'll make the wounds heal faster."

Eyes turned up towards the stairs, where he wanted to be, Ian told Skye no. He told Eugene that it was okay if he and his wife wanted to keep an eye on the streets. He told his mother that Gray and Douglas would be staying as well, despite their attempts to defer to a hotel. He told Jada that he wanted all of the firearms that had been collected from Davius and his men unloaded and stashed. Orders were given quickly and without explanation, and still Ian kept looking towards the stairway.

"You must be hungry. Let me fix you a plate."

"No. Enough. I've had enough." Having had enough, Ian waved his hands gesturing for all that surrounded him to move back. "I am tired, and I need to rest. Now."

With his blanket clutched around him, Ian made his way through the crowd and to the stairway. With each step, Ian's weariness betrayed him more and more. He had to clutch the banister to keep his shaking limbs from giving way. He reached the top of the stairs and shuffled down the hallway to his room, passing one of his sister's friends

along the way. She offered to help him, but Ian waved her off. All of the help he needed was behind the door at the end of the hall.

Reaching the door to his room, he opened the door and stepped inside. Standing in the center of the room with his shirt off, his upper set of arms as well as his lower set crossed over his front, his master waited with a smile.

"Khalid."

"Come to me," Khalid demanded, stretching out all of his arms in a welcome that sent Ian to further depths of weakness.

Ian shut the door and locked it without so much as a side-glance. Unable to focus on anything but the handsome beast before him, he shrugged off the blanket and moved forward. Self-consciousness at his bruised and bloodied figure, his dirt-covered body, Ian stopped just short of touching Khalid.

Khalid seemed to care for nothing so trivial, enfolding his arms around Ian's body and pulling the werewolf tight against his chest.

Ian wrapped his arms around Khalid with the last reserves of his strength. Inhaling the warm, exotic scent of his lover was like peace for Ian's unruly mind, body, and soul, all at once.

Guiding Ian to the bed, Khalid pulled back the covers and laid Ian down. Ian shook his head as Khalid tried to release him. He tried to wrap his arms around Khalid's neck, worried for a moment that his lover would not lie down beside him, but the soft allure of the mattress and the pillows rendered his strength fully null.

Khalid grasped Ian's arms and placed them at Ian's side. "Easy there, alpha. You've done well. It's time for a well-earned rest."

His eyes half-slits, Ian scowled. "I'm not ready to rest."

"Sure you're not."

"I'm not. I'm fine." Ian tried to give proof, tried to raise himself up on his elbows. He failed and gained a cough of laughter from Khalid. "Okay, maybe not, but, M?"

"Yes, luv?"

"While I was fighting, I could have sworn I heard your voice. I heard you call my name. You were supposed to be watching the cubs."

"About to chide me, are you?"

Ian didn't know what to say. On one hand, he could understand Khalid's desire to see him, on the other, Khalid had to know how important it was that the cubs were taken care of. "You left them?"

Khalid shook his head. "No, I did not. I was in the basement with the cubs."

"Then how did you know I was getting my ass kicked?"

"I put my ear to the floor and listened. I can do more than just descend into the earth. I did as you said, but my curiosity burns just as bright as any other lover who wishes to know the fate of his brave hero. I did call you when I heard your heartbeat slowing against the earth."

His worries eased by Khalid's words, Ian tried to smile, but the thought that Khalid was worried about him caught his sensitive side. "I wasn't going to be upset. Well, not really. I mean, there were enough wolves guarding the house, and the plan had been for you to take them away, but really, if it wasn't for your voice, I don't think I would have made it."

"I didn't defeat Davius. You did, and fairly, I might add."

Certain that Khalid did not understand the depth of what he was trying to say, Ian sighed. "It's not that simple."

Khalid leaned over Ian, smoothed down the wild hair on Ian's forehead. "It's not as complex as you want to make it, Ian. Don't think I don't know the hold that I have on you, and don't think I don't respect it with all that I am."

"I don't. I know you love me." Trying to disguise a yawn in a smile, Ian tried to raise his arm again. He managed to get a hand on Khalid's shoulder before it slid down against the golem's thigh. It was good enough. His fingers still had some measure of strength, and they sought their way to the golem's inner thigh. "Now get undressed and lie with me."

Licking his lips, and obviously pleased with the proposal, Khalid gave Ian a kiss upon his cheek, one on his forehead, and another upon his nose. Easily avoiding every attempt of Ian's to capture his lips, Khalid was unable to evade Ian's fingers.

Massaging Khalid's cock through his trousers, Ian gave a wicked grin. "I may be tired and weak, but you can still have your way with me. Like before... You could fuck me to sleep."

Seeming to ponder the offer, Khalid took Ian's hand and removed it from between his thighs. "I could, but I won't. I want you get some rest. You will have your hands full in the coming days."

Ian yawned long and loud. "Jada ... Jada and my mother will serve as my betas. I want to go to Europe."

"We will."

Losing a battle against exhaustion, Ian closed his eyes. "I want to be at your side. I want to see new sights. I don't want me being an alpha to jeopardize us, your job, or clients, or anything. It's selfish, I know, but I had to mention it because I need you, and I'd like to think that you need me, too."

Khalid stood up slowly as not to jostle the bed. He tended to his own clothing, pulling his shirt up and off over his head. "Don't worry, Ian. Everything will work out. As a matter of fact, I'm sure that Maryland has a substantial enough population of supernaturals to support me alone."

"Oh, no, I like the cabin. We can't live too close."

"I'll keep that in mind, luv. Now go to sleep. That is a command."

Ian nodded his head, even as darkness enfolded him. By the time that Khalid slid into the bed beside him, Ian was snoring.

Epilogue

Grinning maniacally, Ian removed his face from the window for the first time since take-off. Khalid sat beside him, staring at Ian with a look of worry.

"What? I told you that I had never been on a plane before. This is wild."

"I'm glad you like it," Khalid replied.

Ian figured Khalid was so experienced with flight that it had ceased to excite him. Having had his interest fixed in a large, leather-bound tome called *Serpent-based Religions*, Khalid hadn't expressed the slightest interest in looking out of the window.

"No, I love it. We're over the water. It's fucking awesome."

Khalid turned a page in his book and continued to read. "It is."

"But not as interesting as serpent-based religions?" Ian asked.

"I have to provide advice and support for a tribe of serpentine shifters. It doesn't hurt for me to brush up on the lore, so to speak."

"Yeah, but this is my first flight, and that meeting isn't for another three days." Knowing Khalid's itinerary due to his help in arranging it, Ian had no intention of letting his lover off of the hook. "Are you going to read that book for the whole flight?"

Khalid raised his head, about to reply, when a stewardess approached their seats. "*Bonjour*, Monsieur Diya al Din. It is so nice to see you flying with us again."

By "us," the stewardess had to mean Duchamp Charter Flights, Ian figured. It was an airline devoted entirely to supernaturals with means and Khalid had informed him that it was the only airline he ever flew.

Speaking with familiarity, Khalid actually closed his book and gave the chipper blonde a smile. "Nice to see you as well, Amelie. All is well, yes?"

An attractive, tall girl with fine, almost translucent skin, Amelie seemed like the happiest person Ian had ever laid eyes on. Somehow her happiness made Ian feel

happy. Attributing it to something supernatural, he made a mental note to inquire about her species.

"Two mineral waters and a glass ice for you, sir, *oui*?"

Khalid nodded.

Amelie turned to Ian. "Sir, would you like a drink? We have cocktails, soda, mineral water ..."

Ian sat up in his chair. "Oh, yes. Can I get a scotch over ice?"

"Yes, you can. We have a variety of scotches actually. Any preference?"

Before Ian could even consider which brand he might want, Khalid cleared his throat. "He'll have a mineral water and a glass of ice as well."

Mouth wide with disbelief, Ian sought an answer. "Khalid? I can't have a scotch? It's my first trip."

Khalid gave no reply other than a smile at Amelie. "That is all we will need."

Ian waited for an answer. "M?"

"Don't worry, Ian. You'll have plenty of time to enjoy fine wines, liquors, and new cuisines. I'll serve them to you myself, but you remember what I told you I wanted of you during our flight?"

Ian thought back and recalled what he had believed to be fantasy. The plane wasn't carrying its full number of passengers, but then it wasn't totally empty, either. Leaning over in his seat, Ian could see a few heads several seats back. "I thought ... well, that you were ... joking or just talking dirty or something."

Khalid tucked his book away in the back pocket of the seat before him. "I can assure you that I was not."

"But the stewardess ..."

"What about her?"

"Nothing." Ian shook his head, looked out of the window hoping that he could shake the butterflies fluttering in his stomach. The sudden feeling of a large hand caressing his thigh helped somewhat.

Khalid leaned over. Pressing his nose against the line of Ian's neck, Khalid made it clear that shyness was not a worry of his. He parted his lips and kissed a heated trail up to Ian's ear. "Did I tell you that Andreas has a lovely, very old cottage you will absolutely adore? There is a forest for you to mark if you like, animals to hunt, and more importantly, there is a playroom."

Babbling, Ian forgot all about the ocean and the sky. "Playroom?"

"Yes. Twenty-some odd stations, benches, wheels, slings. There's an obstacle course, harnesses, and all sorts of tools for me to tame you with."

Ian purred aloud at the thought. "Sounds nice and kinky, M. Will I be able to try you on any of those? You would look hot chained to a wheel ... all four arms."

"What? Are you considering training to become a Dom?"

The only training Ian was considering at the moment was on how not to turn to gelatin at high altitudes. "There's training for that?"

"Of course, there is."

"I'd need a hell of a lot of it, though."

Khalid moved even closer, his tongue finding the inner shell of Ian's ear to be the most fascinating whorl. "Yes, you would. You may be an alpha were, but you still haven't finished training as my submissive."

Ian agreed eagerly, turning into Khalid's body. Meeting Khalid's eyes was all he permission he needed to capture the golem's lips. Just as hungry and as demanding as Khalid could be, Ian kissed his lover intensely.

"Monsieur Diya al Din? *Excusez-moi*, Monsieur Diya al Din!" Khalid and Ian were slow to separate and even slower to acknowledge the stewardess. "Your trays, could you put them down?"

Ian watched Khalid to understand what he was supposed to be doing. Unhooking the latch on the seat in front of him, Ian smiled as a dining tray dropped down.

Amelie set their drinks down on the trays along with a complementary basket of fruits, nuts, and dried meat. "From the Captain, as always," Amelie indicated.

"Thank you, Amelie and please tell Laurent that I thank him as well. We will need nothing else at least until dinner." Breathing a bit deeper and slower than he regularly did, Khalid opened one of his two bottles and poured the mineral water into his glass of ice.

Ian could feel Amelie's attention on him and looked up.

"I understand, Monsieur. Time alone." Giggling at the notion, Amelie winked, gave Ian a wink. "I shall pull the curtains closed for you."

Khalid nodded. "That will be fine."

Amelie moved down two aisles and pulled a thick, blue muslin curtain from one side of the craft to the other. Walking back past Khalid and Ian again, she couldn't resist grinning at Ian again. She pulled another curtain closed, leaving Khalid and Ian with their privacy.

Ian twisted the cap off of his bottle, contemplating a question that refused to go unasked. "You ask for a lot of time alone during flights? You bring along other naïve young men, do you?"

"Were you a virgin when we met?"

It wasn't a question that Ian wanted to discuss. "Well, there won't be any others flying with you from now on but me."

Khalid took a long draught of his ice water. "No one else to obey me, to strip down and pleasure himself for my enjoyment," he lamented.

Looking sidelong at his lover, Ian didn't buy Khalid's attempt at woe one bit. "No, no one else but me will handle those things for you."

"You know that they will include sitting in my lap, while I do wretched things to you and that it will also include being absolutely silent so that we don't alert the aircraft of our carnal play."

"It will include anything you tell me to do, M." Ian not only knew, not only understood, but also needed to be useful. Filling his glass of ice with mineral water, he took a sip and found the drink actually refreshing. Clean and pure, the drink had none of the emotional effects on his mind that alcohol might have.

It was a good choice, Ian decided, but then, so was his master.

 THE END 

Mya

Heeding her own muses rather than those that belonged to other writers and filmmakers, Mya enjoys crafting erotica and welcomes the opportunity to use her English degree for something other than covering a hole in the wall. She is an avid fan of Godzilla, werewolves and dragons. Mya also enjoys watching the Sci Fi channel while she writes about naughty things, paints, crafts, and plays video games.

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