

The background of the cover is a photograph of a shirtless man with dark hair, looking down. His face is partially obscured by a semi-transparent, reddish-pink image of a wolf's head, which is superimposed over his chest and abdomen. The wolf's eyes are glowing red. The title 'SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES' is at the top in large, bold, sans-serif letters. 'SHIFTING' is purple with a white-to-purple gradient, and 'PERSPECTIVES' is red with a white-to-red gradient. Both have a black drop shadow.

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

**T.A. CHASE • FIONA GLASS
EMILY VEINGLORY**

Aspen Mountain Press

Shifting Perspectives
by Emily Veinglory, T. A. Chase, Fiona Glass

Aspen Mountain Press

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WARNING

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Understanding Forgiveness

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Understanding Forgiveness

T.A. Chase

Chapter One

"I'm going to die."

Mason Richardson came to terms with that fact four blocks back when the natural humans had spotted him. He wasn't sure how they figured out he was a shifter or even if they knew, but they saw him walking alone on the deserted street and the chase commenced. He'd already taken a knife in the ribs when one of them caught him in an alley. A feral smile graced his face. That one would never stab another shifter.

He skidded around the corner and ran into another group. Shit, one of his pursuers must have radioed ahead and they were waiting for him. He fought the grasping hands, but he was caught. A fatalistic laugh bubbled from his lips. He'd managed to survive ten years on his own since he escaped from the lab. Now he was going to die at the hands of a bunch of redneck yokels.

He thought about shifting. No. Why give them another excuse to kill him? Mason doubled over as a steel-toed boot connected with his stomach. He felt a rib break. Not even his advanced healing capabilities would let him survive this.

"Make peace with your maker," one of his assailants growled at him.

He couldn't help the hysterical chuckling. Make peace with his maker? His maker was a psychotic scientist and Mason didn't want anything to do with the fucker except kill him. Another knife cut across his arm. He was lucky that one didn't hit an artery. Fists were pounding his flesh with each swing. His superior strength didn't mean anything against the mob.

He was losing blood and weakening. It wouldn't be long for him now. He took a swipe at the nearest man, feeling his knuckles crunch the man's nose. He wondered why he was fighting. Life didn't mean much anymore. Struggling to survive in a world that hated him hadn't been a picnic. A baseball bat connected with his knee and he went down.

How had they known he was a shifter? He'd escaped the lab before they could freeze brand his number on his forehead. When he had stopped running for a few days, he'd dug out the micro-chip the assholes had planted in his wrist. It had hurt like a bitch, but he didn't mind pain.

Darkness started to descend over Mason's vision. An odd sense of peace washed over him. It would be time to stop fighting soon and maybe then he could rest.

* * * *

Heinrich Gunther stepped from the darkened doorway into the mob. He touched the shoulder of the attacker nearest him.

The man screamed and dove away from him.

Heinrich did nothing more than grimace. He'd gotten used to how people reacted to his touch. Each time one of the townsmen caught sight of him, they ran. Touching each man

at the elbow, he soon stood behind the leader of the mob who was about to deliver the killing blow.

"Billy, I told you what would happen if you attacked another stranger without provocation." Heinrich's voice sounded harsh as if he'd smoked several packs of cigarettes a day.

The older man stiffened and stepped back from the unmoving creature at his feet. Billy turned with his hands out from his sides, trying to look non-threatening. Not that the natural human could actually hurt Heinrich.

"He's a stranger, Doctor Gunther. We can't be too careful with all those monsters running around." Billy's gaze rested at Heinrich's feet.

"Ah, yes, monsters. But Billy, not every stranger is trouble for the town." Heinrich knew the people of Haven, New Mexico sensed something else lived beneath the exterior of Heinrich Gunther's mild mannered appearance, but none of them were willing to risk agitating him to see it unleashed. It was bad enough they ran from his touch and wouldn't look him in the eye.

"He ran."

As if that were proof of his guilt. Heinrich shook his head, taking a deep breath while gathering his strength. "You were chasing him with violence on your mind. I doubt our battered friend is stupid. He knew you would kill him if you caught him and tried to get away from you." Heinrich gestured in the direction Billy's friends had run. "Go join your mob, Billy. Never do something like this again or the punishment will fit the crime."

Billy nodded and dashed off. Heinrich didn't expect him to stick around. He took a few steps to stand over the crumbled body. An unhappy hiss issued from his lips. Even bruised and bleeding, he could tell the victim was a shifter from the amount of damage the man had sustained and still lived. If he had to take a guess, probably a member of the genus feline.

"Zev, come join me."

A tall dark man emerged from the shadows. Zev, his friend and bodyguard, had been keeping an eye out to make sure none of the locals circled around to attack again. Heinrich's lips moved in a wry smile. Zev didn't understand how much they feared Heinrich. He gestured to the stranger. "We have to get him back to the ranch."

Zev's nostrils flared as he bent down to pick the man up in his arms. "A cat?"

"So it would seem. I hope you'll treat him as an honored guest, my friend." Heinrich led the way through the alley to where the Lexus was parked.

"Another of your strays?"

Heinrich knew Zev didn't understand why he expended energy he couldn't afford to lose and risk being discovered himself for strangers. He glanced over his shoulder, fighting back the surge of envy at the effortless way Zev carried the stranger. It didn't pay to be jealous of things he'd never been able to do. He stumbled, reaching for the car.

"Be careful with him. His wounds will begin to heal, but I don't want to cause him more pain." He opened the back door so Zev could place his burden on the seat.

"Yes, doctor." Zev set the man down and then slid behind the steering wheel. "Will you sit up here with me or keep an eye on the cat?"

An odd urge to curl up beside the feline shifter threatened to overwhelm Heinrich. He knew any sort of kindness from him wouldn't be appreciated. He climbed slowly into the passenger seat, wincing as his back protested the bending.

"Why are you taking him to the ranch? It would have made more sense to allow the townspeople to kill him. Less likely to be discovered as a shifter." Zev kept his eyes on the road.

Heinrich stared out the side window, watching the sparse desert vegetation swirl by. "The same reason why I took in one lone wolf a year ago."

"Penance."

Heinrich thought about the word. Penance meant he took in shifters to help assuage the guilt he felt for his part in what happened to them. He wasn't sure if his actions were caused by guilt or not. He only knew each shifter he saved or gave sanctuary was one more that might live to an old age. He was one of the reasons they existed, so it was possible he wanted to make sure they continued to live without harassment.

"Maybe."

The pain shot through his head and he groaned, leaning it gently on the head rest behind him. Shutting his eyes, he let the pain wave through him. The pressure would build until he got home and took his medicine.

"How did you know he was in town?" Zev's hand took his and held it tight though the shifter's attention didn't waver from driving.

It always surprised him when Zev touched him. It had been years since anyone chose to do so. He knew how painful his touch could be.

"I'd asked some of the homeless to contact me when there were strangers because I knew how Billy and his gang can be. I didn't want to run the risk of them actually attacking a shifter and biting off something bigger than they could handle." His grip tightened around Zev's and the wolf grunted. "It looks like they were lucky. This shifter didn't seem inclined to hurt them anymore than he needed to achieve freedom."

"I hope he's sane. If he's not, I'll terminate him before he can hurt you." Zev snarled.

"Thank you, Zev, but I don't think he'll pose a threat to me. Or at least he won't find me a threat to his well-being." Heinrich glanced back over the seat at the unconscious body behind them. "Maybe we can give him some peace."

Zev snorted. Whether in agreement or disapproval, Heinrich didn't know and didn't really care.

Chapter Two

Mason opened his eyes and groaned as a bright light shot through his skull. Shit. He must have really tied one on last night. He tried to shift his body and the broken ribs protested sharply.

"Fuck." He pressed his hand against his left side, encountering bandages. "What the hell?"

He forced his eyes open again and tried to remember what had happened to him. Staring at the dark tan walls with Old West paintings on the walls, he wondered where he was. It didn't look like a hospital. He gave a weak laugh. No hospital would keep him once they got a look at his blood tests. Hard to hide the feline cells floating in his veins.

With a cautious push, he managed to lift his back off the bed. He sat up, leaning against the headboard. He was covered with a dark blue comforter. He looked underneath. "Shit, where did my clothes go?"

Bruises covered his body from his chest to his feet. His cheeks felt sore so he imagined he had marks there as well. He began counting his wounds when it clicked. He remembered what had gone on the night before. Strange, the last thing he remembered being sure of was he had accepted he was going to die.

The door opened. A huge man with dark hair and yellow eyes stalked in. The stranger wore a black t-shirt and jeans. The smell of dog filled his nose. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. A shifter and a wolf at that. Whatever this

place was, Mason didn't want to stay. The wolf took a step towards him and Mason tensed. He was ready to roll out of bed and make a dash to the door.

"I hope you don't plan on leaving for a few days."

The wolf's lips hadn't moved, so who had spoken?

Mason's eyes widened as a pale man stepped around the other man and approached the bed. The smaller man barely reached the hostile wolf's shoulder, meaning he would be an inch shorter than Mason. Deep grooves bracketed the man's plump lips as if he were in constant pain. His big dark brown eyes focused on him. He saw pain and sadness swirling in them. Used to hostility, Mason didn't expect a hand held out for him to shake, but the slender man offered a trembling hand.

"I'm Heinrich Gunther. This is my friend and employee, Zev Braidton. As you can tell, Zev is a shifter like you."

Mason stiffened, his gaze shooting from Heinrich to Zev. There was no way he'd trust these two. Ignoring the hand in front of him, he grunted, "Mason Richardson. As soon as my ribs heal, I'll be out of here."

Heinrich's hand dropped slowly to his side and he nodded. "I understand, Mr. Richardson. You're more than welcome to stay here. Do you need help cleaning up?"

Zev glared at him over Gunther's shoulder. "Nice way to repay the man who saved your life. The least you could do is shake his hand."

"Zev, shut up." Gunther didn't let the shifter continue.

Mason got the feeling he'd hurt the slender man. How could the man be upset that he wouldn't shake his hand? He

didn't know these people. Who was this man that he would be willing to touch a shifter?

"I don't think so. It might take me a little longer, but I can do it myself." He shrugged.

"Of course. When you're finished, Zev will be waiting out in the hall to escort you to the dining room." Heinrich made his way out of the room with slow and steady steps.

After he'd left, Zev and Mason stared at each other. The wolf gave him a nod, and then turned to leave. "I will warn you once. Don't bite the hand that feeds you. Doctor Gunther will give you anything you want, but if you chose to hurt him, I will kill you. He doesn't see us as monsters."

"Why should I trust you?" Mason clenched his hands into fists. "How do I know you haven't kidnapped me to do experiments on me? I've heard the rumors."

Zev froze, a deep growl issued from his throat. Quicker than a blink of an eye, he'd pinned Mason to the mattress. His hand gripped Mason's neck, claws pricking his skin.

Zev pressed his face close to Mason's and snarled, "Gunther would never do anything to harm you. Every day he suffers more pain and loss than you can ever imagine. How dare you judge him when you don't know him." Zev squeezed his throat tighter. "I will kill you before you hurt him."

Mason's lungs started to burn, Zev's hand around his neck prevented any more air from getting in. He thought about trying to hit the wolf, but it wouldn't do any good. Zev was there until he chose to climb off.

"Zev, please let Mr. Richardson go. We can't expect him to trust us when he's just met us. This country has never

treated shifters well." Gunther stood in the doorway, his brown eyes staring at them with understanding.

Zev pushed away from him. The wolf moved to stand behind the younger man, stating without words he supported the man.

"I'd like to take a shower." Mason shoved the blanket aside and sat on the edge of the bed, not bothering to cover his nakedness. Before he'd escaped the labs, he'd never had clothing, so he'd learned to ignore the stares of others.

"Certainly. The bathroom is across the hall. You are our only guest in this wing. So you don't need to worry about being bothered. I hope you will join us for dinner. If not, then let Zev know and I'll have our housekeeper, Mrs. Chatwell, bring you a tray." Gunther weaved and his face grew paler.

Zev caught him, lifting Gunther up as if the man weighed nothing. As skinny as the doctor was, Mason shouldn't have been surprised at the ease with which Zev carried Gunther from the room.

Shaking his head, Mason made it to his feet. There wasn't time to wonder about his host. He needed to clean up and get somewhere he could shift. The worst wounds would heal during the shifting process. Then he'd be able to make his way to some other town and hopefully find a way to live without looking over his shoulder.

* * * *

With detached interest, Heinrich watched his trembling hand trying to lift the glass of water. He'd stayed up all night

to ensure their visitor hadn't suffered any lasting damage causing his own strength to weaken.

Zev entered the room glaring at something behind him over his shoulder.

Heinrich gave a wry smile as the object of Zev's glare walked through the door. Mason paused inside the room, checking all the corners and marking the exits before focusing on Heinrich, his bright blue cat eyes tracking over Heinrich's face.

An unfamiliar stirring moved in Heinrich's chest along with an unusual hardening of his cock.

Mason's hair gleamed silver as the light of the chandelier hit it, making Heinrich wonder what kind of cat had silvery fur. The jeans Zev had found for the shifter fit Mason's thick thighs like a glove. Mason's chest strained the seams of the white t-shirt he wore.

Mason's body was slender and muscular, like a cat's. Even though his body still had to be sore from the beating, the shifter glided through the room with grace and certain arrogance. Shifters might not be treated as equals in a majority of the country, but Mason gave off the aura that he ruled any small section he found himself in and Heinrich's body reacted to that confidence.

"Please, Mr. Richardson, have a seat. I'm glad you're willing to join us for dinner." He set his glass down and gestured to the chair across to him.

Mason sat, staring at the empty plate in front of him.

Heinrich smiled at Zev as his friend sat at his other side. The dark man shrugged his shoulders and started to fill his plate.

"Fill your plate. Mrs. Chatwell gets upset when guests don't eat her food." Heinrich set his glass down so his trembling wouldn't be noticeable. "After you eat, if you wish, Zev can take you out in the desert behind the house and you may shift. I own a thousand acres going up into the hills, so you don't need to worry about anyone seeing you. None of the townspeople will risk my wrath by trespassing."

Mason stabbed one of the steaks and dropped it on his plate. "What would you do if they did?"

Heinrich wasn't insulted by Mason's question. He didn't look particularly scary or intimidating. He was the last person anyone would be afraid of if someone went by appearances alone. He was the stereotypical geek, but lurking underneath the skinny pale exterior was a monster far deadlier than the shifters the townspeople feared.

"I've proven I shouldn't be taken lightly."

Zev chuckled. "Remember Doctor Gunther talks softly, but carries a wicked sword."

"So he uses you as his punisher." Mason sounded disgusted. "Letting the animal be true to his nature."

The wolf growled. Heinrich touched Zev's hand, and then shaking his head he caught Mason's wary gaze. "I don't need Zev to be my enforcer for me. Touch my hand."

Holding his left hand out, he ignored the shaking and focused on not letting the power get away from him.

Mason reached across, tentatively at first. He brushed Heinrich's fingers with his own.

Heinrich felt the energy that surged between them down to his toes.

Mason snatched his hand away, his eyes widened in surprise. "What the hell is that?" Mason sat back, rubbing his hands together.

"That's why he doesn't need me to enforce his rules. Though I do watch his back." Zev's warning was clear.

Heinrich chuckled softly. "I've never figured out why you're so protective of me, Zev, when you know I can take care of myself."

Mason returned his attention to his plate, shoveling his food in, giving Heinrich an idea of how long the man had gone without food. Zev tossed another steak on his own plate and set the last one down in front of Mason. The shifter's eyes focused on the meat, but he didn't reach for it.

Mason tilted his head, his cat eyes curiously looking at Heinrich under heavy lashes. "You haven't eaten anything."

"I've already eaten." He pushed the plate closer to Mason. "You can have it."

"That's why I protect you. You have no sense of self-preservation. You make yourself vulnerable. Why? Is it really guilt? Or do you wish for death?" Zev's growl held exasperation.

Heinrich rose slowly to his feet. It was caution born of many falls making him take his time stepping away from the table. "I'm not a child, Zev. My reasons are my own and I've told you before to stop questioning me about them. My body

may be frail, but my mind is not." He nodded at Mason. "After dinner, take Mr. Richardson out and show him where he can shift and run. I'll be in my study. I don't wish to be disturbed."

He moved through the dining room, placing each foot with care. More than once, the mere nap of the carpet had caught a careless footstep and caused him to fall. He shut the door to his study and sank into the chair resting before the fireplace. Pulling out a handkerchief, he dapped at the sweat on his brow.

Anger welled in him and he swept his arm over the end table where Mrs. Chatwell had placed his nightly glass of cabaret. The glass shattered, leaving a stain on the carpet. He stared down at the glittering pieces and ignored the pain in his hand. He began to shake. He hated being weak. The experiments he'd undergone when he was still in his mother's womb left him a freak, unable to touch anyone without hurting them and without the strength to do anything about it.

A howl drifted in through the window. He pushed himself to his feet and made his way to the French doors leading out onto a patio. The bright moonlight bathed the back acreage of desert and he saw Zev standing just off the patio stones. The wolf nodded and headed out.

A grey and white streak followed behind, but it paused at the edge and was caught in the stream of light coming from the moon. The cat turned back and stared at Heinrich.

A gasp escaped from his mouth; he hadn't known Von Mertz had experiment with those genes. The cat whirled, its striped tail flicked as it ran off.

Heinrich went to his computer and pulled up his search engine. He searched through pictures of big cats, trying to find the right one. He wanted to be sure his hunch was right. Finally, he came across a picture that confirmed his thoughts. Heinrich stared at it.

"So this is the cat Mason shifts into." Poor dear was out of his element that was for sure. He traced a finger over the picture, what a magnificent beast though. It seemed his newest guest was an *Uncia uncia*, a snow leopard. A beautiful large cat that lived its life in the Himalayas, the snow leopard had a coat of grey and white with brown rosettes.

Heinrich's fingers itched as he thought about running his hands over Mason's fur. He smiled, knowing that touching the shifter was out of the question. Not only because Mason wouldn't allow him to do it, but because he tried not to touch anyone.

Chapter Three

Mason stood in the darkness several feet behind the house, his broken ribs healed from the shifting. As he pulled on the clothes he'd left in a pile before he changed, he thought about what he should do. Gunther had offered him a place to stay, but could he trust they weren't just trying to lure him in so they could turn him in to the marshalls? He had escaped before the scientists could do much experimenting on him. He knew he was unusual. None of the other shifters were like him, not even the other felines.

Zev stalked towards him. Mason tensed, waiting for the wolf to attack him. The man stopped and turned back to look at the window of the only room with lights on.

"If you wish to stay, you can go back to your room the way we left the house." Zev's voice held no emotion.

"What would you like me to do?" Mason wasn't sure why he was bothering to ask. Zev hadn't made it a secret how he felt about Mason's presence.

"It's not you personally I have the problem with. Gunther gives so much of himself and each day it seems he has less to give." Zev's eyes glowed yellow in the moonlight.

"What's wrong with him? Why does his touch burn?" Mason didn't think Zev would answer him.

The shifter shrugged. "I don't know why his touch hurts. He's never told me why he is the way he is. Every time he expends energy, he has less to give. Gunther shouldn't worry himself about people like us. He should be relaxing on some

tropical island, resting and living, but instead he offers us a refuge." Zev sighed. "I fear his strength will give out and where will that leave us?"

"Us? I'm not part of your little zoo here." Mason took a step away.

"Do you think you're the only one he's offered asylum to? Is there something special about you that would make him risk all the rest of us?" Zev pinned him with his gaze. "I could smell the arousal coming from him when you walked in the room. He's attracted to you. But trust me when I tell you, he will never do anything about it."

Mason felt his cheeks burn with a blush. Shit. When had he started getting embarrassed that some guy was attracted to him? As exotic looking as he was, he was used to men and women chasing him. Yet he thought about the pale man who had held a hand to him, knowing what he was, but not caring. Those dark brown eyes held so much knowledge and so much hurt.

"I don't care. I'm not interested in anyone, especially some sickly geek." His voice was harsh. He winced. God he sounded so heartless. He straightened, meeting Zev's glare.

"Good because I wouldn't allow you to hurt him."

"Are you a couple?" He wanted to bit his tongue. What the hell? He really needed to think before he talked.

"No." Zev walked away.

Mason studied the house. It was a sprawling ranch style home with a wraparound porch. The yard was bare for several hundred yards in any direction. Was that so no one would be

able to sneak up on them? He admitted it was the best place he'd stayed at for years.

Movement from the left of the house caught his eye. He shrank back into the shadows when Gunther stepped out on to the patio. The man stared up at the night sky. The silver moonlight bathed the doctor's slight body in a pale light and Mason felt like he'd been hit in the gut.

His groin tightened at the sight of the doctor. He'd never reacted to anyone as if he wanted to jump him and fuck him into the ground. Since he'd escaped the lab, he'd been too busy trying to survive. He hadn't expected the first person he would want to be male though.

Gunther's dark brown hair was gilded with silver and Mason wondered if it was just the moonlight or was Gunther going gray. An orange spark gleamed in front of Gunther. He looked down at the man's hand and saw sparks dance from fingertip to fingertip. He bit his tongue to keep the gasp inside. How was it possible?

He gave a silent laugh. If Gunther was a scientist, who knew what kind of experiments he'd done on himself to create the phenomena? Scientists were willing to go to extraordinary lengths to defy the laws of nature. Look at him; he was living proof of the god-like mentality of scientists.

Mason moved closer to Gunther, staying in the shadows.

The moonlight glistened on the doctor's cheeks and Mason realized Gunther was crying. His sparking fingers clenched into fists. Pain and sadness danced across the man's face, his fist pressed against a forehead.

Mason didn't realize he'd moved until he caught the man in his arms as Gunther fainted. A shock of electricity raced over Mason when his body came in contact with Gunther's. Whatever power the doctor had wasn't relegated to his hands.

Gunther was lighter than Mason imagined, he'd almost tossed the man over his shoulder, trying to lift him up. He stared down at Gunther and frowned as the heat of arousal caused Mason to break into a sweat. He gave in to the urge to bury his nose in the brown curls of Gunther's hair and breathed deep. Mason's cock stiffened and the need to mate swamped over him.

He jerked back, barely managing not to drop Gunther in the process. Fuck no. Sex never meant anything to him except as a physical outlet and never with a guy. Some natural humans swore shifters were no more than animals; unable to control their baser needs. Mason tried hard to prove them wrong.

"What the hell happened?" Zev growled as the wolf stalked out onto the deck.

Mason handed Gunther over so fast there should have been burn marks on the shifter's arms. "I don't know. I was coming back to the house when I saw the doctor standing out here. I didn't want to disturb him, so I was looking for a different way in when I saw him fall. I caught him."

Zev checked Gunther. "Too much excitement. I told him he shouldn't worry about shifters. We don't need him to take care of us." The wolf shook his head. "Guilt is a powerful drug."

"What does the good doctor have to feel guilty about?"

Zev grunted as he stood, Gunther limp in his arms. "If you stay with us, I'm sure you'll find out."

The wolf turned, heading back into the house. Mason knew he'd been dismissed, but he never could leave well enough alone. "Before he fainted, Gunther did something with his fingers. It looked like sparks were coming from his hands. What's that all about?"

"Sparks? I don't know what you're talking about."

But the tone of Zev's voice told Mason the wolf did know the truth. "Yeah, right. Keep whatever secrets you want, I don't plan on being here for long. Once I've rested, I'll be gone."

Zev didn't answer him and disappeared into the shadowed room.

Mason had the urge to throw one of the potted plants at the wolf's head. He hissed under his breath.

"Zev often makes me want to beat him into a bloody pulp."

Startled by the feminine voice, Mason whirled into a crouch to face the danger.

A small natural human stood behind him, her hands hanging non-threateningly by her sides. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail and her smile held understanding.

"Who are you?" Mason shot a glance around him, trying to see if there were any other people he needed to worry about.

"I'm Lisa, the vet." She stepped back, giving him more room.

"The vet? Need one to take care of the animals, huh?" he sneered.

She shrugged. "Some of the shifters we get through here are so damaged that they don't revert to their human form. I take care of them. We don't lock anyone up unless they've shown they're a danger to themselves and others." Lisa sighed. "Doctor Gunther brought me here to help them."

"Do you?" Mason wasn't sure why he asked.

"Sometimes. Most of the time, all we can do is give them space and let them run if they want." She gestured to the forest behind them. "We have a tiger, two lions and a leopard that don't change at all. Several canine species, the most unique of which is an Ethiopian wolf. Not sure why Von Mertz made one of those."

Mason growled low in his throat at the mention of the scientist who had started the illegal genetic experiments. Those experiments created the shifters, making them outcast among the natural humans. "Why are you here? Doesn't working around all these monsters scare you?"

"I've met more natural human monsters than shifters. I'm safe here." Lisa stepped closer. "You remember where your room is?"

"Yes." He took her question as a dismissal. The lady didn't feel like talking about herself. Fine with him.

"If you're up and feel like it, you're more than welcome to join us for breakfast," she offered as he walked away.

Socializing with people early in the morning wasn't really his idea of a great way to greet the day, though they might be able to shed some light on Gunther.

He paused and looked back at her. "I might." It was the closest he got to a promise.

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Lisa acknowledged his hesitant commitment with a nod.
"Good night."

He ignored her comment. There'd never been a night he'd labeled 'good' in his entire life. Mason returned to his room, stripped naked and climbed under the blankets. He hoped he would sleep through the night.

Chapter Four

Mason woke the next morning, refreshed and alert. It was the first time he remembered ever making it through the night without waking up in a terror-induced sweat from nightmares. Laughter filled his room and he realized he'd left the window open. Climbing out of bed, he padded over and looked out.

The scene greeting his gaze puzzled him. Two picnic tables were set up in the backyard where the early morning sun could warm the people sitting at them. Neither Gunther nor Zev were there, but Lisa was dishing out pancakes.

The aroma of bacon and sausage wafted in on the breeze and his stomach rumbled. He decided to go and join the group. It seemed the best way to find out if Gunther's ranch would be a good place to stop and rest for a month or so.

As he pulled on the clothes he'd found hanging in the closet, he ignored the voice in his head, telling him to stay at the ranch forever.

* * * *

When Mason approached Lisa, she glanced up and smiled. He nodded back.

"What would you like to eat?" She waved a hand at the table covered with steaming pans of food. "We have meat, all types if you want to indulge in that. For the herbivores, we have grains and grasses. We can't forget those who like fruit

either. Drinks are over there." Her eyes widened as he filled his plate with a selection of everything.

"Living on the run ensures you're not a picky eater." He grabbed a mug of coffee and moved to an empty table.

The buzz of conversation had quieted when he arrived. He silently counted the seconds waiting for someone to get the nerve to approach him. Five minutes later, someone sat across from him.

"Hi, I'm Basil."

Mason looked up to see a thin young man sitting in front of him. Shooting a glance over his shoulder, Mason saw Lisa watching them with a worried expression. He wondered if she was afraid he'd attack or hurt Basil in some way. Mason frowned. Being isolated from human or shifter contact made him gruff and unable to deal with idiots, but he still knew enough to be polite to people when he needed to be.

Basil's shoulder length hair gleamed black as a raven's wing. Bright shiny black eyes stared at him with curiosity. Those eyes combined with the prominent nose and tilted head conjured images of a crow.

"Mason." He didn't offer his hand. Basil looked so fragile, Mason was afraid he'd break a bone by shaking hands with the man.

"Right. The new one Zev and Doc brought in." Basil's head bobbed.

"Guess so. Where are they?" He wondered why they weren't eating with the rest.

"Zev stopped by earlier. He doesn't like all the noise. Too many people. Too much talking." Basil shrugged. "Doc had a

rough night. We won't see him until lunch or maybe even supper."

"Rough night?"

Basil leaned in as he was sharing a classified secret. "He's sick and sometimes he has bad nights because of it."

"Sick? What illness?" Mason thought of how he'd breathed in the doctor's air last night. Shifters were pretty immune to most diseases, but he didn't want to risk catching anything.

"No one knows, but it isn't communicable. At least no one's gotten sick since coming here." Basil plucked an apple from Mason's plate. "What kind are you?"

"Kind?" Mason felt a hiss rise in his throat. He didn't like sharing, but he fought the urge to rip the apple out of Basil's hands. There would be more food. He wouldn't starve and the man didn't know how possessive Mason was.

"Animal? Breed? Species?" Basil pointed to himself. "I'm a raven."

"I'd never have guessed that," Mason said with a slight smile.

"It's pretty obvious. Jess, over there, is a monkey."

Mason looked over to where Basil gestured. A brunette woman nodded to them both as she grabbed a bowl full of fruit. Aside from the fruit though, there was nothing to hint at what she shifted into. A petite woman pulling wiggling bugs from a pan and swallowing them caught Mason's gaze. He gagged.

"Yeah, it takes a while to get used to watching Fern eat." Basil lobbed the apple core at Fern.

The woman flipped them the finger as she stuck a cricket in her mouth. Mason turned around before he lost his appetite.

"Fern's an amphibian. Hey, what kind are you, Fern?" Basil yelled at the lady who calmly flipped them off again. "Fern's not much of a talker. Oh right, she's a green tree frog."

"A tree frog? What the fuck was Von Mertz smoking when he mixed those genes?"

Mason turned to his right as a huge man sat down next to him. The stranger stuck his hand out and said, "I'm Boris and I'm a bear."

"Yes, I can see you are." Mason shook the large hand and managed not to whimper as Boris squeezed his bones together.

"Boris, you're doing it again." Basil tapped Boris on the arm.

"Oh sorry. Sometimes I forget." Boris released Mason's hand.

Mason wiggled all his fingers, making sure they all worked. "No problem, man. What are you doing here? I can't see a lot of naturals messing with you."

"I don't have any control over my change. When I get mad or excited, I tend to shift and then things get nasty. It's easier here. Less pressure and if I make a mistake, my hide's not likely to end up spread out in front of someone's fireplace." Boris' moustache twitched as the man chuckled.

Mason couldn't believe how brown and hairy the man was. It looked as if the bear genes almost overrode the human genes in Boris' body.

A thin hand shot in front of his eyes and pushed his bangs up. Mason jerked away from Basil's touch and snarled. The crow perched quivering on the bench, ready to take off if Mason went for him.

"Don't touch me without warning me first," Mason cautioned Basil.

"Right. Sorry. I was just wondering where your brand is. The rest of us are branded. Why aren't you branded? I mean it's really odd that you claim to be a shifter, but you don't carry any numbers." Basil babbled.

"I'm a snow leopard. Or at least that's what I think I am. I had to look up pictures online to find out what animal I turn into." Mason held out his hand and thought about a paw. Slow agonizing seconds passed as his hand and arm shifted into a large paw covered in long grey fur with brown rosettes. He flexed his paw and claws popped out.

Basil squawked. Boris chuckled.

Mason allowed the shift to flow away, leaving his hand normal.

"As for the brand, I escaped from the compound before I was old enough to be branded. The night I fled, I was only fourteen. Been on the run ever since." Mason finished his food, wondering if he should go and grab some more.

Boris stood up, gripping Mason's shoulder hard. "I'll get us each another plate. Doctor Gunther doesn't begrudge us food."

"Thanks." Mason looked back at Basil who watched Mason out of the corner of his eye. "Who is Gunther? Is he really a

doctor? Why would he allow shifters to stay at this ranch? Doesn't make sense considering how other naturals treat us."

Basil ran a hand over his gleaming hair. Mason imagined if the skinny man were in bird form, he'd be preening his feathers to calm himself. "No one really knows except probably Zev. He calls Gunther doctor and none of us have thought to question him. I mean really, he's a wolf. Don't want to annoy him." Basil pulled out a shiny button and started twirling it on the table. "We'd all been running since we got free. No place wanted us and we couldn't settle anywhere without getting killed or beaten up. Then a rumor started circulating around the shifter underground."

"Shifter underground?" Mason asked as Boris set overflowing plate in front of him. He didn't think he'd be able to eat all of the food, but he'd just give what was left to the bear.

"You've really been isolated, haven't you? Yeah. The underground is a way for shifters to talk to each other without gathering in one spot or making naturals suspicious. I'll tell you more about it later." Basil flapped his hands. "Anyway, a rumor started making the rounds about a ranch in New Mexico where shifters could live without being killed or imprisoned. I was curious so I flew here. Met Doc the first night I got here. He took care of me without ever commenting on my shifting or anything else for that matter. He treated me like a person and for the first time in my life, I felt safe. There were already a few others here. Jess and Fern were two of the first ones to show up. Now there's over fifty of us and Doc's willing to take more in."

"I had contact with one guard and two scientists at Von Mertz' compound. I didn't even see other shifters. They kept me in a cage at the far northern end. I was fourteen and I knew all life had in store for me was use as a guinea pig." Mason pushed his food around the plate. "I knew the branding would come soon, but I was determined to escape. Then one night, my guard got called away and he forgot to lock the cage door." His pulse raced, remembering the fear and panic he'd felt while sneaking out of the compound that night. "I waited a while and then when I figured out he wasn't coming back any time soon, I ran."

"Do you remember the date?" Boris rumbled his question.

"Sure do. July 31, 2021." Mason would never forget the first day of freedom.

"Ah, yes. Liberation Night." Basil and Boris both nodded.

"Liberation Night?" Mason's eyes narrowed as a thought hit him. "You mean the rest of you escaped the same night?"

"Yes. Your door being left open wasn't an accident. All of the cages were unlocked and the guards disappeared on that night. We left by twos or threes, not wanting to draw attention to ourselves. Basil's mother carried him out in her pocket. Those of us who could shift without problems shifted and made our escape that way. For years, we all thought Von Mertz knew he was about to get raided by the federal marshals, so he allowed us to go free instead of having his research destroyed." Large forkfuls of food disappeared into Boris' mouth while the man spoke.

"But he didn't?" Mason hadn't looked back when he left. He'd run for days heading north to the Maine-Canadian

border, hoping to be able to cross over and lose himself in the forests of Canada. Unfortunately, he ran head first into the wall the Canadians had built to keep Americans from crossing over during the Mexican-American war of 2010.

"No. From everything we've been able to figure out there was someone else high up in Von Mertz's organization who allowed us to go free. Whether it was because of the raid or a sudden attack of conscience, we might never know." Basil rocked back and forth on the bench.

A memory niggled in Mason's mind, but he couldn't get a hold of it. Letting it go, he knew he'd think of it before too long. He got half way through the food and then pushed the plate over to Boris. "Here, you can finish it."

"Thanks, man." Boris slapped him on the back and almost sent him face-first into the picnic table.

"Richardson," Zev's voice sounded across the yard.

Mason stood and turned. "Yeah?"

"Come with me." Zev whirled around and stalked towards the main house.

Mason looked at Boris and Basil. Both men shrugged. He hurried, catching up with the wolf as Zev entered the house. Mason glanced at the rooms as they walked past them. The décor was simple and tasteful. Even though Mason figured Gunther had money, it didn't show in the furnishings.

"Where are we going?" Mason didn't think Zev would answer him, but the silence was getting to him.

"Doctor Gunther wants to see you." Zev's disapproval sounded in the clipped tone of his words.

"I thought he wouldn't be up and around until at least lunch time." Mason's palms started to sweat. Why was he suddenly nervous about seeing the doctor?

"You'll be meeting him in his suite of rooms. When he's recovering, he usually stays away from the others. He doesn't want them to worry, and they at times can be a little higher energy than he can deal with." Zev stopped in front of an elaborately carved wooden door. The wolf faced Mason and sighed. "For whatever reason, Doctor Gunther likes you."

Mason protested. "We just met two days ago. How could he know enough about me to like me?"

"My question exactly, but he's the boss and if he wants to spend time with you, I'm not going to argue. Well, not too much anyway." Zev opened the door.

"Aren't you going to issue some dire warning like you did last night?" Mason whispered as he walked by the wolf.

Zev shook his head. "No. You know how I feel and what will happen. There's no use beating a dead horse. Be kind to him. He hasn't had much kindness in his life." The wolf moved farther into the room. "Doctor, Richardson is here."

"Thank you, Zev. You may leave now. Come into the other room, Mr. Richardson." Gunther's voice was weak and hoarse.

Mason shot Zev an uneasy glance and the shifter nodded. No help there. What did he know about being nice to people? He'd never encountered much kindness in his own life. He took a deep breath and stepped into the other room.

Chapter Five

Heinrich watched Mason move into the room as if the man faced a firing squad. His laugh caught in his throat and he started coughing. He reached for the glass of water Mrs. Chatwell always left on the night stand for him.

Mason raced to pick up the glass and hold it for him so he could drink from it.

Well, Heinrich's attempt to make the man relax backfired. He breathed deep, opening his lungs a little more as he leaned back against the pillows. "Thank you." Heinrich gestured to a chair pulled close to the bed.

Mason checked him with his gaze, making sure he was okay before he set the glass down and sat. "No problem. Glad I was here to help."

"Yes. So am I. I could have rung for Mrs. Chatwell, but she's on the other side of the house, so it would have been a few minutes before she got to me." Heinrich ran his fingers over the soft cotton comforter covering him, grateful that it hid his naked form from the shifter.

"Zev said you wanted to see me." Mason slouched in the chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him and his hands resting at his waist, drawing Heinrich's attention to the nice bulge behind Mason's zipper.

Mason shifted and Heinrich ripped his gaze away. He felt his cheeks heat, praying Mason hadn't noticed where his eyes had been resting. There was no point in risking rejection or worse by advertising the fact he found the shifter attractive.

Heinrich had no way of knowing whether Mason would be willing to accept his interest. Besides, if the shifter ever found out who he was Mason would run as far away from him as possible.

"I wanted to make sure you were feeling okay after the attack." He managed to hide the lust in his voice and was happy the comforter covered his erection.

"A few bruises here and there, but the broken ribs are healed. The cuts are healed as well, just scars now." Mason rolled up his shirt to show a large purple bruise extending from below his armpit to the top of his hips.

Later, Heinrich would swear it was the shock at seeing the bruise that made him reach out and stroke a trembling finger over the abused flesh. He didn't know if the in-drawn gasp came from him or Mason. All he knew was the flesh under his finger was warm and smooth.

Mason leaned into his touch, swaying in such a way that Heinrich's hand brushed over Mason's flat stomach instead of the bruise. Heinrich didn't know what to do. Should he pull his hand away because he knew what prolonged exposure to his touch could do to someone? Or should he keep it there, trusting Mason would tell him when to stop?

"Your hand is so warm," Mason murmured, stretching under his touch, like a cat being petted.

"Tell me if it gets too warm. I can't tell and if I'm not careful, I can burn you badly." Heinrich teased a circle around Mason's bellybutton.

At Mason's moan, Heinrich grew bolder. Though he wanted to move his hand down, his courage wasn't strong enough, so

he headed north to rub his thumb over Mason's dusky brown nipple. Heinrich leaned closer to Mason and lost his balance. Scrambling to keep from landing on the floor, he grabbed Mason's thighs and found his face buried in Mason's crotch. He fought the urge to press his mouth against the bulge growing beneath him and tried to push away from the shifter, but his arms were too weak.

Mason's strong hands wrapped around his arms and lifted him back onto the bed.

Heinrich's embarrassment was so deep; he couldn't lift his eyes from the comforter. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't paying attention," he apologized.

Mason's laugh was soft and warm. "I was busy paying attention to something else as well or I would have noticed your predicament."

A large square hand appeared in Heinrich's line of sight, catching his chin. He allowed Mason to raise his chin so he had to look the shifter in the face. Mason moved to sit on the edge of the bed. Heinrich held his breath as Mason brought their mouths together in a gentle kiss.

Their lips molded to each other as if finding the perfect fit. Mason's tongue traced the crease of Heinrich's mouth, begging for entrance. Little shocks of pain pricked Heinrich's scalp as the ragged skin on Mason's fingers caught in Heinrich's hair, causing him to gasp.

Mason slid in to taste him.

Oh god. Heinrich's mind shut down. Truth be told, he'd never been kissed. Not really. A quick thank-you peck after giving a stranger a hand-job in a nasty bar bathroom didn't

count. His mind went blank as Mason laid him back on the pillows.

Heinrich had schooled himself to not touch anyone without their permission because he understood what he could do with his hands, but they had a mind of their own and tangled themselves in Mason's curls. He tilted his head, giving the shifter a better angle to take the kiss deeper.

Mason settled over him, pressing their chests together. The soft brush of Mason's t-shirt on his naked skin made Heinrich's nipples harden. Mason stroked the tip of his tongue over the sensitive roof of Heinrich's mouth.

Heinrich shivered, lust chasing down his spine. He'd never been so turned on by just a kiss.

Mason nibbled with sharp bites on his bottom lip and his tongue followed Mason's back into the shifter's mouth where he sucked on it.

Heinrich arched into the kiss, wishing they were naked. He wanted to feel Mason's skin on his. He trailed his hands down the shifter's back, testing the muscles under the t-shirt.

Mason hissed and pulled away. His hazy blue eyes stared at Heinrich while the shifter's body shook with heavy pants of arousal. Heinrich's thoughts raced. What was Mason thinking?

Heinrich dropped his hands to the blankets, afraid he might have hurt Mason with his careless touch.

A puzzled frown appeared on Mason's forehead.

"I'm sorry," Heinrich murmured, looking away.

Mason cradled his cheek, turning his face back and brushed a kiss over his nose. "Don't apologize. I'm not sorry."

"But you looked confused and I don't want you to think I expect this from you." Heinrich sighed. There were so many things he was confident about, but relationships and sex weren't two of them.

His only experiment at a relationship ended badly and he'd never had the courage to risk his heart again.

Mason eased to his side, keeping an arm around his waist and leaned on his elbow. His cat eyes glowed with an intriguing gleam. "I am confused. I've never been interested in anyone. Life's been too complicated and dangerous for me to form any sort of attachment. That's bad enough, but suddenly the first person to catch my eye is a man. Never thought that would happen."

"So you're not gay." Disappointment flooded him.

Mason shrugged. "Never thought about it. Men and women have wanted me and if I was willing, I could have sold myself to survive. Just couldn't bring myself to do it. Female or male, it didn't make a difference. I didn't want any of them." Mason rested his forehead on Heinrich's. "This whole attraction and relationship thing will take a little getting used to, but if you're willing, I'm game to see where this could go."

"The offer of a place to stay isn't contingent on having a relationship with me. I never planned this either. Most of the time, I avoid people. There not much left of me as you can tell." Heinrich waved a negligent hand towards his wasted body. "And with the heat in my touch, not many men want to risk sex with me."

"I never thought about offering to pay you for the room with my body. Hmm ... what could I have negotiated if I had

realized you wanted me?" Mason winked at him, and then sobered. "Will you tell me why your touch burns?"

Heinrich closed his eyes. Did he really want to get into the details? Mason would walk away if the shifter learned the truth of Heinrich's past and the secret he hid. Heinrich rubbed his forehead. He'd suffered the consequences of telling the truth and had the scars to prove it. Opening his eyes, he settled his gaze on Mason and saw the shifter studying him.

His hands shook. Heinrich wished he could blame the exhaustion, but he knew he was scared to say anything about his past. The last time he spilled his guts to someone, that person had tried to kill him. Of course, when he thought back on that experience, he realized that his former lover had always known who he was and tried seducing him to get closer to Gunther's father. When that plan failed, the man tried killing Gunther.

Was Gunther willing to risk Mason freaking out and killing him? Pain surged through him, causing him to grit his teeth and ride the agony. At the moment, dying didn't sound all that bad.

Their attraction could be nothing more than pheromones and chemical compatibility. Yet what if it wasn't? What if there was more to their lust than simple chemistry? For them to grow closer, he had to tell the truth and see how Mason dealt with it.

"Please, go sit in the chair. I can't tell you when you're touching me. My mind shuts down and I need a clear head to open my past to you." Heinrich reached down and stroked a quick hand over Mason's arm.

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by Emily Veinglory, T. A. Chase, Fiona Glass

Mason grunted, but the shifter climbed out of bed and sat down on the chair, pulling it so close, his knees pressed against the mattress. "Tell me."

Chapter Six

Mason fought the need to take Gunther's hand in his and try to reassure the doctor. He'd never wanted to touch a natural. Too easy to let his guard down and wind up imprisoned again. He watched Gunther as the doctor plucked at the comforter covering him. How could this thin pale man touch a part of Mason's heart he thought didn't exist? It was more than the sparks he felt when Gunther touched him. He never believed in mating for life or even a soul mate and he wasn't about to say Gunther was his. Why did Gunther's touch burn him? Did lust really feel like electricity running all over his body?

He didn't want to feel it. Mason wanted to continue living his solitary life. Easier than worrying about someone turning him over to the marshals. Yet Gunther hadn't caged him. He wasn't locked in a room or in a cell. The doctor had his chance to hurt Mason and hadn't taken it. The other shifters seemed to believe Gunther was on the up-and-up. Maybe this once he should take a chance on a human. Who knew? This ranch just might be the place he'd been dreaming about when he hoped for a place to stay and make a home.

Gunther sighed and looked up, his brown eyes filled with worry and sadness. "I never knew if my father loved me or just saw me as another of his experiments."

Mason didn't know what to say. He never had a father, so he didn't know anything about whether a father had to love his kid or not. He nodded, encouraging Gunther to continue.

"One of the first research projects my father was on involved electricity. He needed a test subject, so he seduced my mother and got her pregnant." Gunther pointed to a small framed picture on the night stand. "She was a runaway and Father took advantage of her desperation. Once she figured out what he was doing, she had no where to turn. Mother did what she could to protect me, but after I was born, Father didn't need her anymore and she disappeared."

"Your father was a complete bastard." Mason picked up the photo and studied the woman. "You look like her."

"Yes, I was lucky in that regard. Any way, I remember wondering why no one would touch me when I was younger. I knew there was something wrong, but didn't understand until my father sat down with me and explained that every living thing has an electrical current running through them. Most of the time, it isn't noticeable unless you get shocked by static electricity or something. Father used low level electrical shock on my mother while I was in the womb. He wanted to see if he could raise the level of the energy that is an intrinsic part of everyone. It seems to have worked. I got more than my fair share. So my touch hurts people."

"Why don't you wear gloves then? Or is it more than just your hands that cause the reaction?" Mason nodded towards Gunther's hand.

"The shock comes from everywhere. My entire body is a lightning rod." Gunther waved a hand towards him. "You've felt it."

Remembering how the bolt ran through him when he touched Gunther's hand and when he felt the man in his arms

last night, he nodded. "It's strange. I've been shocked before, far worse than what you've done to me."

Gunther bit his lip and then asked, "At the compound?"

Mason stiffened, but answered, "Yes."

"My father was dedicated to research. He loved working out problems and finding solutions to them. I don't know if he had an altruistic purpose for anything he did but in the end, he developed a god-like complex."

A niggling thought teased at Mason's mind. He shifted in his chair, not sure he wanted to ask the question. "Who was your father?"

"Randolph Von Mertz."

Mason shot to his feet. "Fuck. That bastard was your father?"

Gunther nodded. The doctor started to reach out and then let his hand fall to the comforter.

Mason couldn't breathe. His gums tingled as his canines fought to extend. The stretching and tearing he felt when he changed flashed through his brain. He clenched his fists and the prick of his claws alerted him to how much he was allowing the anger to loosen his control of his body. "Why did Von Mertz create shifters? Was it because of you? Did he want to cure you?"

It would be so easy to run away. Instead, he paced, fighting the urge to leave. A small voice in his mind told him to listen to Gunther. Maybe the doctor could explain why Von Mertz never treated shifters as if they were human. *Why believe the man? It was his father who created you and*

treated you like you were less than human. Even less than animals for that matter.

Gunther tried to move so he could lean against the headboard. His arms shook and Mason knew the doctor was too weak to move himself. For a moment, Mason wanted to stand there and let him struggle, but a sense of fairness that Mason didn't even know he had flared up.

It wasn't Gunther's fault his father decided to mess around with the laws of nature. Von Mertz started his experiments before Gunther was born. It was difficult, but he had to give the doctor a chance.

He leaned forward, sliding his arm behind Gunther's back and lifting him so the doctor could lean back against the pillows. Before he could let go and move away, Gunther turned to thank him.

Their lips met and lightning flowed through him, heading straight to his groin. Mason moaned. It was strange to realize not only was he kissing a man, but he was totally turned on by the feel of those soft lips under his and the hard muscles he traced with his hands. Before his need overwhelmed his reason, he pulled away and sat back down.

"None of that until you finish telling me everything." Mason touched the back of Gunther's hand.

Gunther's cheeks flushed, but he continued. "Von Mertz kept me away from the labs at the compound. I was held prisoner, for lack of a better word, in the main house. I had no idea what he was doing with genetic research or anything else for that matter."

"What happened? Were you there when the marshals raided the compound?"

"I was sixteen when I figured out what was going on. My guards must have gotten fed up with Von Mertz or something because they took me for a walk. I followed them, not really paying attention to where we were going until they stopped outside a window. They pointed and told me to look."

Gunther shuddered. His eyes took on an unfocused glaze, letting Mason know he was remembering that night. "I looked. The scene inside broke my heart and disgusted me. Von Mertz had some animal hooked to electrodes and was shocking it. I don't remember what kind of creature it was. I just knew its screams tore at my soul and I began to understand what was happening. I ordered my guards to show me what else was going on."

Gunther closed his eyes and Mason watched a tear leak from the corner. He reached out, catching the drop on his fingertip. Lifting the digit to his mouth, he licked it off. The saltiness teased his tongue and he found he wanted another taste.

He moved to sit next to the dark haired man, his hip pressing against Gunther's and he wished there weren't blankets between them. Mason stripped his t-shirt off and picked up Gunther's trembling hand, placing it on Mason's chest over his heart. He jerked when the familiar jolt hit him.

"Take your time." He stroked his hand up and down Gunther's arm.

Gunther frowned. "Why are you taking this so well? I thought the moment you found out who my father was, you'd walk away from me."

Mason shrugged. "I'm not sure why I'm still here. Every instinct I have is screaming for me to run. If you're that man's son, you can't be innocent. Yet there's a small voice in the back of my head saying just listen to you." He smiled down at Gunther. "So I'm giving you a chance."

"The guards took me on a tour of the buildings by the labs. I saw the cages and the way the lab guards treated the shifters as animals, not humans. Deplorable conditions. Untreated wounds so Von Mertz could find out about their healing abilities. I begged them to take me back to my room. When I got there, I threw up and sat on the bathroom floor, crying. For weeks, I wandered around the house, trying to figure out what Von Mertz was doing and how I could stop it." Gunther looked as if he was going to get physically ill again.

"Why? You didn't have anything to do with the labs, did you?" Mason stroked his hand up and down Gunther's arm, trying to sooth the doctor.

Gunther closed his eyes and his body went limp. Mason touched his finger to a pale cheek. "Doctor? Gunther? Heinrich?"

Those beautiful brown eyes opened and an apologetic smile crossed the man's face. "Sorry, I was enjoying your touch. It's been a long time since someone's willingly touched me like that. Zev suffers my touch, but he doesn't think to comfort me."

"I like touching you." Mason wasn't about to tell the doctor that the little jolts were racing straight to his cock and he was beginning to ache from the constant stimulation.

"One night, I walked into Von Mertz's study. He was bragging to some of his fellow scientists about how well his experiments were going. He was manipulating genes and creating new shifters. The creatures' DNA was remarkable and could change the course of science forever. I went nuts, started screaming and throwing things at him. I was so angry. He didn't care that he hurt you. He didn't care several had died because of his tests. He had the guards restrain me and lock me in my room." Gunther pointed to the glass of water. "Can you hand me the water?"

Mason held it for him, letting him drink as much as he wanted. He kept his mouth shut, not wanting to interrupt Gunther when he saw how much telling the story took out of the man.

"One of the head guards, Paul, came to me. He wanted to help me get away because he knew the marshals were going to raid the compound. I wouldn't leave without insuring the shifters were given a chance at escape. I knew the government would come in and destroy you. So he advised his team to unlock all the cages and open the compound gates, giving you all a chance to leave. He helped me get away and brought me here to New Mexico."

"Is he still here?" Mason wondered about a guard who would turn on his employee, though he gave the man high marks for helping Gunther escape.

"He stuck around until the first group of shifters arrived. Then he left. I think he was an undercover agent with the marshals and he risked his career to not only save me, but to do what I asked and free you. He helped me buy the ranch. I was only eighteen and had no experience out in the world, so I trusted him to show me what to do." Gunther's voice held a hint of sadness.

An odd spurt of jealousy ran through Mason. "You miss him."

"Yes, like I'd miss an older brother if I'd had one. Paul left and Zev came." Gunther's other hand came up and cupped Mason's cheek. "I do feel guilty for everything that has happened to you and the others. It isn't fair the natural humans treat you like monsters when it is men like Von Mertz who are the true monsters."

"It's not important now." Mason bent forward, pressing his lips to Gunther's mouth. It really wasn't important at the moment. What was important was that he wanted to learn Gunther's body, taste his skin.

He braced his own hand on the pillow beside Gunther's head, laying the doctor's captured hand above his hand.

Gunther didn't protest, opening his mouth to allow Mason access.

Chapter Seven

Heinrich couldn't believe it. He didn't fight as Mason placed his hands above his head. He couldn't have uttered a word any way because Mason's tongue was thrusting into his mouth in mimicry of the act Heinrich yearned for most. He raised his hands and tangled them in Mason's hair.

A soft growl sounded and Mason pulled a few inches away. "Why isn't Von Mertz looking for you?"

Blinking, he tried to reorganize all the thoughts Mason had efficiently scattered. "He very well could be." He pulled his hand free to reveal a large scar running along his wrist.

Mason placed his arm next to Heinrich's and they compared scars. "You cut out the tracking device."

"Paul did. He said it was the only way to keep Von Mertz or the marshals from coming after me. We traveled for three days after we escaped the compound. Stopped at a hotel somewhere around Cleveland, I think. Geography isn't my strong suit. He took the chip out then and threw it away. Even without it, I worried Von Mertz would find me and drag me off to some other lab where no one would find me again. Not that anyone would be worried about me." Heinrich hoped Mason didn't think he was whining because he'd gotten used to the idea of no one being there for him.

Mason trailed his hands down over Heinrich's palm. "Where is Von Mertz now?"

Thoughts scattered again as Mason brought Heinrich's hand up to his mouth and sucked on his fingers. "Umm ... I'm

not sure. He escaped the marshals' custody around the same time Paul left. I don't know if Von Mertz's in the country or if he got over the border into Canada." He moaned under his breath when Mason stroked the pads of his fingers with his tongue.

"What do you do to keep yourself and the others on the ranch safe?" Mason's blue eyes gleamed at him from under the man's bangs.

A shiver shook Heinrich's body and it wasn't from lust. Fear and uneasiness suppressed the passion. Mason's questions were strange ones to be asking while kissing and touching. He tried yanking his hand away from Mason's firm grip, but his weakness betrayed him. The shifter lifted Heinrich's hands over his head and pressed them into the pillow.

"Keep your hands above your head. No touching."

Heinrich shuddered at the commanding tone in Mason's voice. He threaded his fingers together to keep his hands from breaking Mason's order. Goose bumps rose on his skin as Mason trailed light fingertips down his chest and under the comforter. "What are you doing?"

"We're getting to know one another." Mason fastened his mouth to the tempting triangle of skin at the base of Heinrich's throat and sucked. Heinrich arched, moaning as arousal burst into life and his cock throbbed. The cold air of the room washed over him, cooling his ardor for a second. He glanced down to see that Mason had pulled the blankets off. He didn't want the shifter to freak out when Mason saw his erection.

Worried, he watched Mason straddle him, his cock rubbing against Mason's ass.

"You like that, don't you?" Mason rocked his hips, causing the fabric of the shifter's jeans to caress him.

"God, Mason." Heinrich closed his eyes, bit his lip and lifted his hips.

Calloused fingers tapped his mouth. "None of that. The only one allowed to bite is me."

Startled, he opened his eyes to stare at Mason. The shifter grinned at him. "I won't bite hard. I promise."

Confusion reigned in Heinrich's mind. "I thought you were freaked out about being attracted to a guy." He couldn't figure out what had changed Mason's mind about this encounter.

Mason licked a line down Heinrich's chest and a circle around his bellybutton. "Not really freaked out. I wasn't planning on lust hitting me this hard and it being a guy is just a little strange." The shifter's chin bumped Heinrich's cock and both men groaned.

Heinrich's hips arched. He wanted Mason to take his cock in his mouth and suck him, but he didn't know how to ask.

Mason rubbed his rough cheek along the length of Heinrich's shaft.

Heinrich cried out, "Mason."

His pulse raced and sweat popped on his forehead. Heat washed over him at the feel of the puff of warm air blown over the head of his cock. He held his breath, waiting to see what the shifter would do next. What was going on? He'd never experienced such wanton emotions before. He wanted

to spread and offer his body to the shifter. Strong hands cupped his balls and fondled them.

"Aren't you afraid Von Mertz will find you? How are you keeping yourself safe?" Mason whispered against Heinrich's hip.

Doubt grew in Heinrich's mind. Why was Mason asking all these questions? If Mason was as turned on by his body as he was by Mason's touch, the shifter shouldn't be able to form words, much less organize this interrogation. Fear swelled in him. Was history repeating itself? Heinrich remembered that his only lover used seduction to get him to talk about Von Mertz' experiments. God, he was an idiot. No one, not even a hormonal shifter, would want him. He was being used again.

He pushed against Mason's head. "Get away."

Mason eased off him to stand next to the bed, a frown marring his forehead, but those blue eyes didn't hold any true emotion. "What's wrong?"

Heinrich reached for the call button. He didn't say anything, just stared down at his trembling hands. When Zev stepped into the room, Heinrich waved vaguely in Mason's direction with one hand while pulling the blankets over his body. "Show Mr. Richardson out of my suite, Zev."

"Are you okay, Doctor?" Zev's yellow eyes gleamed with anger.

He knew the wolf would kill Mason if he said no, so he shook his head. "I'm fine. Simply tired." He lay down, turning his back on the men.

"Heinrich?" Mason's voice sounded hesitant.

"Doctor Gunther wants you to leave. I think it's a good idea." Zev's anger and suspicion rang in the clipped tones of his voice.

Out of the corner of his eye, Heinrich could see Zev step between Mason and the bed, clearly forcing Mason to back down. Zev landed claim to Heinrich's room with a low growl. Mason lowered his head and turned to walk out.

Heinrich closed his eyes, listening as the footsteps faded away. There was no way to tell if Mason had been attracted to him or not. The shifter could have been taking advantage of Heinrich's own attraction to dig for information. Maybe Mason thought he'd let something slip. He shook his head.

Was Mason an agent from the marshals or maybe a spy from Von Mertz? Could the beating have been a way to get Mason inside the ranch? Heinrich didn't allow naturals to enter the property without doing a thorough background check on them. He wasn't going to risk the shifters' freedom or his own. Had the marshals done their research and figured out he'd never turn an injured shifter away? It didn't make sense. His father would never use a shifter for anything. Von Mertz thought the creatures he created were beneath him. The marshals were more likely to shoot a shifter on sight than to recruit them.

He sighed and buried his face in the pillow. He didn't have the energy to worry about Mason at the moment. All he wanted to do was nurse his bruised pride. He should have known Mason would have ulterior motives for kissing him.

* * * *

"What the hell did you do to him?" Zev slammed Mason into the wall outside the suite.

Mason met Zev's glare with his own icy gaze. "I was giving him what he wanted."

"What was that?" Zev's hand curled around Mason's throat.

Mason couldn't swallow. He felt the prick of claws against his skin and he knew one false move would find him bleeding to death from the jugular. "He wanted sex. I'm willing to give it to him if it means he'll give me what I want." He hissed as Zev's grip tightened.

"What do you want?" The wolf's canines extended.

Mason placed his hand on Zev's chest and pushed. The wolf didn't budge. "I want to know why I should trust him. What precautions does he have in place to protect all of us?"

"Idiot. Did you really think you needed to exchange something with him to get him to tell you that? If you had asked without any of this seduction bullshit, Gunther would have told you. You hurt him and I told you if you hurt him, I'd kill you."

Mason concentrated on letting go of control and allowing his hand to shift. Claws tore from his fingers on the hand he lowered to touch Zev's thigh. "Before you can break my neck, I can slice open your femoral artery. You'll bleed to death before you can shift. Don't threaten me."

"Zev, let him go."

The wolf's hand dropped from his throat as Gunther's voice surprised them. They looked to see the doctor leaning on the door frame. Mason felt a twinge of guilt when he saw how

pale and frail Gunther seemed, standing there with the comforter wrapped around his waist.

"He was only trying to protect himself, the same as the rest of us. It's not Mr. Richardson's fault that I don't understand social interaction better. Tomorrow, I'll show you around the ranch. Maybe you'll find your answers then." Gunther weaved on his feet.

Zev moved towards him. Mason fought the urge to growl at the wolf to keep him from touching Gunther. Stupid really, since he had no right to be possessive of the doctor. He watched as Zev scooped Gunther into his arms and headed back to the suite.

Mason made his way out of the house and stood, staring at the scrub brush and stunted trees making up the area beyond the house's back yard. The need to run filled him and he let go of his worry about being seen. Shifting, he sighed. Maybe the dry desert air would blow the worries out of his mind. Before he left the boundary of the yard, he glanced back over his shoulder. Gunther stood, framed in the large window that made up one wall of the bedroom. The doctor pressed a hand against the wall and Mason saw the man's lips move.

As he shot into the desert, he wondered if Gunther was cursing him or asking him to come back.

Chapter Eight

Sunlight painted the walls of the room lemon yellow and faintest pinks. Heinrich rolled over on to his back, sighing at the sound of the people moving in the house around him. He'd slept most of the day yesterday after his disastrous encounter with Mason, getting up long enough to eat and take care of some business that no one else could deal with.

A knock sounded on the door of his bedroom. "Yes," he called, pushing his body up so he could lean against the pillows. He felt better today.

Rest helped, but the biggest cure was the large amount of physical contact he had with Mason and Zev. The electrical current bled off through touch. When it wasn't building up in his body, it didn't eat his energy.

"Are you ready to get up?" Zev stepped in.

Heinrich felt his mouth drop open when he saw Mason follow the wolf in. He glanced down to make sure his groin was covered. He didn't want Mason to know the attraction he felt for the shifter still existed. No matter how humiliated he felt from what had happened between them.

"If I'm not, are you here to drag me out of bed?" He gave them both a half-hearted grin.

"Yeah. Lisa wants to talk to you, but she insists you need to come outside and get some fresh air while you chat." Zev shook his head. "She's worse than an old lady."

"Don't let her or Mrs. Chatwell hear you say that. They'll hunt you down." He started to throw the covers back, and then caught himself. "I'll meet you in the other room."

"You okay to get dressed by yourself?" Zev gestured to Mason. "Richardson can leave."

Mason nodded. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable. I'm sorry for yesterday."

Heinrich studied the shifter's face. Mason did seem remorseful about what had gone on between them. Of course, he could have a good poker face and Heinrich would never know if the guilt was true. The shifter had told Zev, he'd give Heinrich anything to insure Mason got what he wanted. Did Mason think Heinrich wanted him to feel guilty about yesterday? He'd never spent much time with people and shifter, so he'd never really learned to grasp unspoken emotions. He shot a look at Zev who shrugged at him.

"Don't worry. You're not making me uncomfortable. I feel better than I have in a while, Zev. I like to be as independent as possible on the good days." He waved them out of the room. "I'll join you in a little bit. Please ask Mrs. Chatwell to make up breakfast for us."

"Yes, Doctor. We'll get the food and meet you outside." Zev grabbed Mason's arm and pulled the shifter away.

Heinrich waited for the door to shut before he threw off the blanket and climbed slowly to his feet. He made his way over to the closet, pulling out a blue buttoned down shirt and a pair of jeans. He dressed, but didn't waste time buttoning his shirt or putting on shoes.

Brushing his hair and teeth in the bathroom, he stared at his reflection in the mirror. He was what would be described as rail-thin, no muscle definition or muscle really anywhere. His affliction hadn't allowed him time to spend in the sun, so his skin was pale. He shrugged. He wouldn't win any beauty pageants, but what did he care about that? Heinrich splashed some cold water on his face and headed out to the porch in back.

Mason must have been watching for him because the shifter met him just inside the sliding doors leading out to the patio. His foot hit the threshold of the doors and he tripped. He put a hand out to stop his fall. Mason caught his hand and slid his arm around Heinrich's waist.

The very fact Mason didn't flinch away from touching him softened the disappointment he'd felt yesterday.

"Is this okay," Mason asked, helping Heinrich outside.

It seemed strange Mason would be unsure. A shifter who had survived in the natural world for ten years didn't lose his confidence that easily.

"It's fine. You're being nice to me because you feel guilty about what happened yesterday, aren't you?" Heinrich stretched a little so he could whisper into Mason's ear.

Mason nodded and gave him a sheepish smile. "Yes and no. I do feel bad about what I did. I'm not used to coming right out and asking questions because I don't expect people to give me truthful answers. I thought if I distracted you with other things, you might slip up and tell me the truth." Mason shrugged as he helped Heinrich sit down.

The shifter pressed his lips to Heinrich's ear, causing him to shiver when a warm burst of air bathed his skin. "I do regret one thing more than any of the other stuff."

"What?"

"I didn't get to finish what I started." Mason pulled back and gave him a wink.

Fuck. He didn't need the image of Mason bending over his cock dancing through his head while he talked to Lisa. Heinrich slugged the shifter in the arm and laughed.

Turning back, he saw Lisa and Zev staring at him with surprise in their eyes. "What?"

"It's been a while since I've heard you laugh like that." Lisa smiled.

Grinning at Lisa, he pointed to the food on the buffet table at the edge of the patio. "Eat your breakfast."

Heinrich started to stand up, but Mason squeezed his shoulder. "I'll get yours."

Should he allow Mason to wait on him? He frowned, wondering if he should say something, but when Mason gave him a bright smile, setting a plateful of food in front of him, Heinrich didn't have the heart to say he couldn't possibly eat all of that.

"Thanks." He moaned as he bit into the French toast drenched in maple syrup. Another bit and then he took a sip of orange juice before looking at Lisa. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Lisa set her fork down and waved a hand in the direction of the building where they put the shifters who couldn't

function as a human or were sick. "Alana is getting worse. I don't know how to help her."

He sighed. He hated losing one of them. It was like losing one of his family, even though he figured a majority of them wouldn't want to have anything to do with him if they knew who he really was. "What species is she?"

"Humboldt penguin."

Mason spit out the sip of coffee he'd taken. "A fucking penguin? What the hell kind of drugs was Von Mertz taking when he thought up some of these shifters? I would have thought he'd stick to the usual suspects when it came to shifters."

"Von Mertz suffered from a god complex which is why he'd put any type of genes together just to see if it would work." Heinrich ran a finger around the edge of his plate. "Did she have a mate when she arrived?"

"No. She was pregnant and we lost the baby shortly after she got here. She's never spoken of anyone, but since then she's declined." Lisa stabbed her eggs. "She had bruises as if she'd been severely beaten, so it's possible her mate was killed by her attackers."

"It would explain why she hasn't gotten better. Humboldt penguins mate for life." He stared at the desert surrounding his house. "It's strange how some traits transferred from animal form to human form with certain species, but didn't in others."

"What should I do about her?"

There wasn't any way Lisa was going to like his answer, but Heinrich could think of only one answer. "You have to

leave her alone. She's pining away because her mate is dead. We can't heal a broken heart, dear. I wish we could, but no scientist yet has found out the formula for that."

Lisa dropped her silverware and pushed her plate away from her as she stood, walking away. Zev started to stand. Heinrich reached out and stopped him.

"Don't. Let her work through it on her own. She hates losing even one and Alana has become a friend as well." His plate was half full, but he looked at Mason. "Would you like to take that walk now?"

Mason studied his plate as if judging whether or not Heinrich had eaten enough. With a nod, the shifter stood and offered him a hand. Heinrich took it, letting Mason support him as he climbed to his feet.

"We'll be back later," Heinrich informed Zev, moving off the patio towards the outlying buildings.

"Fine. You know how to get a hold of me if you need me."

"I'm sure Mason will take care of me."

* * * *

Mason couldn't believe Gunther was willing to talk to him, much less go anywhere alone with him. He placed himself close enough to the doctor to help if the slender man needed it, but tried not to seem too protective. "Where are we going?"

"You wanted to see what our precautions were to ensure no unwanted visitors stop by." Gunther gestured to a small building set away from the others. "I'm taking you to our security center."

"Umm ... I shouldn't have asked."

Gunther glanced at him over his shoulder. "Why not? Granted the timing of your questions wasn't the greatest, but you have every right to know how I plan on keeping you safe. That is if you decide to stay at the ranch."

"I wasn't sure I'd still be welcomed." He'd admitted to himself that Gunther's acceptance was important to him.

"I was hurt yesterday. I'm not going to lie to you, but instead of pushing you away, I should have stopped you and made you explain why you were doing what you did." Gunther glanced down at his feet. "When I was sixteen, I met another boy. I'm not sure how he managed to wander the compound free. He must have earned the guards' trust. He was good at making people trust him."

Mason could tell it was hard for Gunther to talk about this boy. "Did Von Mertz kill him?"

"No." Gunther grimaced. "We met one night while I was out walking. He was the first person I'd met who let me touch him. My affliction didn't seem to bother him. Of course, he was a good actor. He'd always known Von Mertz was my father. He used me to get close to Von Mertz. When he realized that Von Mertz didn't care if I existed or not, he turned on me. After he escaped, I thought my attempted murder was because he couldn't deal with who I was. It was more he thought killing one of us was better than neither of us."

"Why are you willing to trust me after I admitted to seducing you?" He was puzzled by Gunther's willingness to open up to him again.

"You could have killed me at any time after I explained who I was. It isn't like I can stop you. After you left and I could think straight again, I realized you've never been able to trust a natural would tell you the truth if you asked him. How can you learn to trust me if I don't give you the benefit of the doubt? I'm just grateful you chose seduction instead of beating the answers out of me."

Gunther's smile told Mason the doctor was teasing him.

"So you're not going to kick me off the ranch."

Gunther stopped, turning to face Mason. He tried not to flinch when Gunther cupped his cheek and smiled up at him.

"We accept anyone who needs shelter. I was hurt for a while yesterday, but then I thought about it and realized you have less reason to trust me than most people. Besides Zev, you're the only one who knows who I really am. It'd be easy for you to see this ranch as just another way for me to capture shifters. I mean you have nothing but my word that I want nothing to do with Von Mertz. I've already decided if he ever came after me, I'd leave here and make him follow me. I wouldn't allow you or the other shifters to get taken."

Stretching, Gunther gave Mason a gentle kiss.

The forgiveness in the kiss rocked Mason to his feet. He settled his hands on Gunther's bony hips and chased after the man's lips when the doctor broke their contact. He fastened their mouths together, demanding entrance. When Gunther gasped, Mason slipped his tongue in, tasting the sweetness of the maple syrup Gunther had for breakfast.

Gunther's hands slid over Mason's shoulders and tangled in his hair. Mason pulled their groins tight together and groaned

as their erections rubbed against each other. Lust shot through him and for the first time since meeting Gunther, he didn't think about the person in his arms being male or female. He just thought about how sexy Gunther was.

The electricity Gunther sparked throughout Mason's body caused his skin to tingle and his hair to stand on end. It loosened his control. He felt his claws extend. Stepping away from Gunther, he took a deep breath.

Gunther's stunned expression made Mason grin. "Wait. It almost got away from me." He frowned, forcing his hands back to normal. "Anyway, I don't think you wanted to start anything right here in the middle of your backyard."

The doctor glanced around and blushed. "You're right. I'm not into voyeurism. Let's go."

Mason held Gunther's hand as they walked to the security building. "Are you really a doctor?"

"Yes. After we arrived here in Haven, Paul suggested that I go to the university. Luckily I could take all the classes over the 'Net." Gunther looked down at their hands and smiled up at him. "Why? Did you think Zev just called me that to throw the others off?"

"Something like that. You seem pretty young to be a doctor." Mason rubbed his thumb over Gunther's knuckles. "Since you know this stuff, why do you think I can absorb so much of your electrical charge? Your touch doesn't seem to bother me as much as it does everyone else."

"Maybe I am, but when you have nothing to do, it's easy to take as many credits as you need to graduate." Gunther frowned at the question. "I'm not sure. You mentioned

something earlier about the shock treatments Von Mertz exposed you to while you were at the compound. I wonder if those experiments raised your own level of tolerance. If it ever gets to be too much, tell me. I don't have control over it and can't tell if I'm hurting you unless you tell me."

"Don't worry. I'll say something. I'm not into pain." Mason winked at him.

"Good. Neither am I. Here's the main security system," Gunther said as they entered the building.

* * * *

Heinrich sighed as he sat on a large log. After the tour of the security center, he led Mason on one of the trails leading out into the desert. There was a small grove of trees just a few yards down the trail. Heinrich figured it was time to rest. He'd never felt this energetic in his entire life. It had to be the almost constant contact with Mason, helping drain off the excess electricity. No one had ever wanted or allowed him to touch them for long enough periods of time to drain off the build-up of electricity. He glanced up at the shifter who stood next to him, studying the area around them.

"So do the security measures satisfy you?"

Mason looked at him and Heinrich knew his companion's mind wasn't on anything they'd seen that day. "Sure. It was stupid of me to even worry about them. You don't want to go back to Von Mertz anymore than the rest of us do."

The shifter squatted next to Heinrich, reaching out to touch his cheek. "Can you really forgive me for treating you like that yesterday?"

Heinrich covered Mason's warm hand with his own, pressing it tighter to his face. "Yes, I can. Do you forgive me for not setting you free earlier? It still haunts me. How many died before I could gather the courage to do something? Why did it have to take Von Mertz's compound being raided for me to help you escape?"

"We're even. None of that matters now." Mason smiled at him. "I guess the one thing I've learned while surviving these past ten years is you have to let go of what happened yesterday because today is tough enough. I've never had reason to take that advice until I got here."

Heinrich didn't answer, just leaned forward to kiss Mason's thin lips. The shifter met him halfway and the spark generated at the contact didn't have anything to do with Heinrich's ability. The kiss was about getting to know each other; what made the other man sigh or shiver. Their tongues stroked and teased. Heinrich slid his fingers up into Mason's silver curls, angling his head so the kiss could go deeper. Mason moved, his hands gripping Heinrich's waist and easing him to his knees in front of the shifter.

Their bodies came together from thigh to chest, erections rubbing against each other. Heinrich found himself drowning in sensations he'd never felt before. The tingling of his skin caused shivers to wrack his body as Mason's fingertips traced circles on his lower back under his shirt.

He became lightheaded and pulled back, breaking the kiss. Panting, he stared at Mason.

Mason swept his hands up and down Heinrich's back with gentle strokes, easing Heinrich's passion. "Breathe deep. It's okay."

"It's all so new," he murmured, resting his forehead on Mason's chest.

"I know. Maybe we should take it slow. It's easy to get caught up in the feelings and lust, but I'm planning on staying around for a while. We've got all the time in the world to see where this will lead besides your bed." Mason winked.

Heinrich trailed his fingers over Mason's eyebrows, down the slope of his nose to rest against those kiss-ravaged lips. He thought about Mason's suggestion. Though he'd never had a real one before, he knew this had the potential to be a serious relationship and he didn't want to rush it or ruin it. "You're right."

He brushed a kiss over Mason's lips and stood, holding out a hand to the shifter. "Let's head back and see what the others are up to. We have time to build a stronger relationship and trust."

Heinrich knew the ranch's security would give them the time they needed; the time to learn how to develop a lasting relationship

The End

Feathered Friend

Fiona Glass

Five, six, seven ... nine ... twelve. Charlie counted the last one in and closed the trap, shutting off the patch of darkening sky. Outside it was a chill late April afternoon but inside the loft it was warm and dim. The newly-woken street lights cast orange stripes through chinks in the walls; the flapping of many wings caused mini dust devils to caper and whirl; and the air was full of the scratchings and tappings and contented chesty coos of sleepy birds.

They had every right to be sleepy, having found their way back from the release site in France the previous day. Charlie had barely beaten them back himself, traveling by jet, which gave some idea of the speed and endurance of the birds. He never ceased to be amazed by their skill, or to feel the thrill and satisfaction of counting them all at home. No matter how far away he released them—across the mountains, over the sea—they always found their way back. Every single preened and petted one of them. It was so routine he hardly needed to check.

He always did, though. He'd never had an injured bird yet, but his father, who'd introduced him to the sport, told tales of pigeons attacked by hawks, or those that flew into windows and knocked themselves out. So after every race he waited until they'd settled before softly picking each one up to check for scratches or other signs of hurt.

Today he had the feeling that something wasn't right. There were twelve pigeons, but something odd or different had caught his eye. He stepped closer to the wire, counting in his head, mentally sorting the birds into individuals rather than flutters of feathers and wings.

And ... there!

That one, on the furthest perch, wasn't one of his. He could see from a glance, because his birds were all Janssens and this looked like a Kipp. He'd never kept Kipps in his life, and besides, there was something about the behaviour of the bird, the way it was keeping itself to itself, that jarred. Opening the aviary door he stepped in, carefully, and lifted the feathered lump off its ledge.

It was used to being handled, and gentled in his hands, the warm bundle of feathers soft in his palms. He stroked its back for a moment, then reached for the leg with the ring. Even in the loft's dim light he could see that the bird wasn't his. The eyes were a paler red; the tail feathers were all wrong; and although it was too dark to read the numbers he could see that the style of ring wasn't one he used.

"Well, well, who do you belong to?" he murmured, and reached for one of the carrying cases he kept just inside the door. The pigeon went in without complaint and he closed the lid, listening to the rustles as it bedded itself down in the straw. Only when he'd reassured himself that the other birds had survived their headlong flight did he take the strange one off to the kitchen to have a proper look at that ring.

Back indoors he set the carrying case on the hearth in front of the old black range while he plugged in the kettle for

a cup of tea. He busied himself with tea bag, sugar and milk, keeping one ear open for sounds of distress, but all was quiet. The strange pigeon, worn out by its exertions in flying to the wrong loft, had probably gone to sleep. He turned to put the tea caddy back on the shelf, and froze, feeling the blood leave his face and hurtle towards his feet.

Sitting at the farmhouse table with his legs stretched out and his ankles crossed, cool as the proverbial cucumber and munching on a biscuit, was the prettiest young man he'd ever seen. He had long, greyish-fair hair, a sharp little nose, and two enormous grey eyes that were fixed on Charlie's face with a mixture of mischief and lust.

Charlie tore his gaze away and remembered to breathe. Pretty or not, the young man was a crook, breaking and entering and stealing biscuits without a second thought. Schooling his features into a severe expression, he said, "Okay, who the hell are you and how did you get in here?"

The young man stared at him as though he was a fool. "Why, you brought me here," he said at last, his voice as soft as a dove's.

Oh brilliant—a nutter, was Charlie's first thought. He hadn't picked up a bloke in months and in any case he'd been too busy with the race to go out on the prowl. No, the chap was clearly deranged, which was a pity because he was very easy on the eye. "Follow me in, did you? When my attention was distracted by that new bird?"

The young man smirked, although Charlie couldn't think why. His eyes strayed to the carrying case on the hearth; there hadn't been so much as a cheep from it since he'd

brought it indoors and he was fretting to check that the bird was still all right.

It seemed he needn't have worried. The case was open, and empty of all but straw, and a single long grey feather that lay on the floor at its side. Charlie began to have strange and inappropriate thoughts. It was almost as though ... but no, that was ridiculous, and impossible to boot. "What have you done with that bird?" he asked instead.

This time the young man grinned. "Haven't you guessed?" he said.

The grin became a grimace and he wriggled his shoulders, before setting his latest biscuit aside and reaching inside the collar of his shirt. He scratched for a minute before bringing out another feather, which he glared at and then cast aside. It floated down like gossamer on a summer breeze to join the other one on the floor.

Charlie swallowed. Was this some kind of joke? He opened his mouth to ask, and left it open as the young man helped himself yet again from the packet on the table. Chocolate digestives, no less—Charlie's favourites, and the pack had been a treat for the end of the race. Now he'd be lucky if there were any left. "Do help yourself to the biscuits," he said with a flamboyant wave of his hand.

The sarcasm was lost on the young man, who finished his third and reached for a fourth. "Thank you. They make a nice change from grain. I mean, grain's all very well most of the time but it's so small and when your only tool is a beak it can get tiresome. Peck, peck, peck, one grain at a time. These are much nicer. My name's Avery, by the way. Who are you?"

"Charlie," said Charlie, who for an odd split second thought the stranger had said 'aviary'.

This was getting weirder by the minute, and he began to eye the distance to the phone and wonder which of them would reach it first. He hadn't read about any escaped axe murderers in the papers today, but you could never quite be sure.

"Nice to meet you, Charlie," said Avery, and held out his hand.

In the absence of anything else to do, and not wanting to seem rude, Charlie stepped forward and took it. It felt perfectly normal—warm and soft and smooth, and rather nice lying acquiescent in his own. "Er, nice to meet you too," he said at last, after clearing his throat. "Although I don't really know who you are. Or why you're here."

"Would it help if I told you?"

Charlie noticed that Avery hadn't taken back his hand. He scraped his throat again. "Er, yes, I think it would."

"That's a shame, because I'm not going to," said Avery with a twinkle that wasn't so much mischievous as malevolent.

Charlie had seen that exact same look in his pigeons' eyes from time to time, usually right before they tried to peck him or escape through the door. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind. Avery was not, repeat not, a pigeon and he himself was not going insane. There was a proper, logical explanation for all of this, and if he could just have a few minutes' peace he could work out what it was. Assuming the

bird man of Alcatraz here stopped smirking at him long enough.

"Why me?" he thought, and realized too late he'd said it out loud.

The smirk turned into a full-blown grin. "Because I liked the look of you," Avery said, and squeezed his hand.

Charlie's knees sagged at the seams. Odd or not, the stranger was very attractive, and it was a long time since he'd had sex with anyone, let alone someone as gorgeous as this. Not since Stefan the Slug last year, and look how that had ended. He shuddered quietly, forgetting that their hands were still linked.

"I didn't realize I was having such an effect on you," said Avery, turning his hand palm-up and rubbing small circles into the skin.

"You're not ... that is, I don't...." Charlie realized he was tangled in half-finished sentences, and drowning in a pair of pretty grey eyes. Eyes that were slate on the surface, but reflected a strange red glow when he stared into their depths. The pale red of a Kipps, if he wasn't much mistaken.... He shook himself, blinked the vision away and nervously licked his lips. The stranger was pulling on his hand now, trying to drag him close, and he resisted in spite of himself. "I don't do one-night stands."

"That's all right, neither do I. A bird is for life, not just for Christmas, you know."

"Well, yes, but...." There it was again, that peculiar reference to birds. Charlie began to feel ever-so-slightly sick.

"I only sleep with humans," he said. "Breeding pigeons is a hobby, nothing more. I'm not into that sort of kink."

Avery laughed, a soft cooing chuckle that grated on Charlie's nerves. "So, what kind of kink are you into?" he asked, and pulled so hard that Charlie ended up on his lap.

"Nothing. I mean, I'm not. I don't get off on feathers or anything like that."

"Are you sure?" A single long grey feather appeared in Avery's hand and he brushed it down Charlie's cheek and over his lips, before following its path with his lips. Tiny kisses rained down on Charlie's skin, the contact so small it was almost like the peck of a beak. The thought made him shudder again and he shied away, trying to find leverage to clamber off Avery's lap.

But Avery tightened his grip, holding him round the waist and running a hand through his curly brown hair. "Don't worry," he whispered into Charlie's ear. "I'm not a bird. Not in this form. When I change, I change completely. I'm a man now. A very beautiful man, just the sort you like. You do like me, don't you?"

Charlie stopped struggling to get away and turned. He saw the pale skin and the soft, greyish-fair hair and those pretty grey eyes, and he sighed as if he knew he was already lost. "Oh yes, I like you," he said, and surrendered to the embrace.

This time the kiss was wet and deep. Charlie opened his mouth wide, dueling with Avery's tongue and following its tempting trail back inside Avery's mouth. Their lips met and moulded; Charlie was sucking Avery dry even as Avery tried

to bite his lips. Heat surged through his veins at the wildness of the kiss and his cock began to lift and fill, pressing urgently against the underside of his zip. Avery noticed and allowed a finger to trace its length, and Charlie gasped.

"You like that?" said Avery, smiling, and did it again.

Charlie writhed in the stranger's lap, helpless in the grasp of strong arms and a stronger desire. "Oh, please," he said, without really knowing what he was asking for. The wriggling was having a luscious effect: beneath his arse he felt the sudden rise and jab of an erection pressing into his cheeks. "You as well?" he said, and squirmed a little more.

This time it was Avery's turn to moan, a small soft sound from the back of his throat. Charlie took that as his cue and began to rock back and forth, pushing down every time he passed over the lengthening bulge. At the same time, he took Avery's hand, unzipped his fly and guided the fingers inside the gaping zip.

Now all that separated hand from cock was the thin cotton of Charlie's pants and he moaned, wanting more, wanting to feel Avery's fist fretting his skin and his fingers tease the head. But they were in the kitchen, with a tall sash window that looked out over the street. "Not here," he managed to gasp, and struggled free of Avery's embrace.

The young man pouted and flung out an arm to try to prevent his escape. "Don't you want me?"

"Yes, very much, but if we do it here the neighbours will see. Come upstairs to bed."

Avery was reluctant at first, but suddenly he grinned. Leaping out of the chair he grabbed Charlie's jersey and hauled it straight over his head.

"Hey!" Charlie yelled, and retaliated by capturing Avery's belt. They chased each other, laughing the length of the hallway and up the stairs, shedding clothes as they went and trying with increasing desperation to touch each other's skin. Charlie managed to grasp a bony shoulder, only to have one buttock rudely pinched. By the time they reached the bedroom they were hot and short of breath, and tumbled in a twist of limbs on the bed.

"Oof," said Avery, unhooking Charlie's leg from his chest.

"Hrr-mmm," said Charlie, half-strangled by a careless arm.

They sorted themselves out, kissing and nipping as they went. Charlie paused to lick the back of Avery's knee, and had his belly button (which had always embarrassed him by sticking out) nibbled in return. It tickled, and he squirmed and laughed, and Avery promptly swooped. Charlie found himself lying on his back with his arms pinned above his head and his friend straddling his chest, and made a half-hearted effort to break free.

"Now, now," said Avery, shaking his head and wagging his eyebrows. "You don't really want me to let you go, do you?"

Charlie grinned. "I can think of worse fates. Come here and let me kiss you."

But Avery clearly had other things on his mind. Surging forward, he released his grip on Charlie's arms, only to fold them down at Charlie's side and hold them in place with his knees. This freed his hands and with a glint of pure mischief

he wiggled his fingers in Charlie's face. "I seem to remember you were ticklish," he said, and reaching behind his head to pluck a feather from thin air, he set to work.

Charlie was in heaven—and in hell. Avery's arse was pressed against his chest and his balls rested on Charlie's throat. If he lifted his head he could just about reach to lick Avery's cock, and watch it twitch. But apart from that he couldn't move—his arms were pinned by his sides and Avery was too heavy to dislodge. And his friend was using that feather to wreak terrible torture on Charlie's soul.

First he ran it down Charlie's nose, the tip just barely brushing his skin. Then he outlined Charlie's lips, the barbs catching on the bristles either side of his mouth. Shuffling his bottom backwards, but still keeping Charlie's arms well-and-truly trapped, he applied the feather's point to first one nipple and then the other, and grinned as Charlie squawked.

Charlie felt the skin of his nipples pucker and a shiver run the length of his spine. "Oh, God, that's horrible. Do it again!"

Avery grinned and obliged, teasing the feather's vanes against the hardening nubs, and Charlie felt the sensation go straight to his groin. Blood hammered into his cock, lifting and straightening it until it reared into the air. He couldn't see it because Avery's body was in the way, but he could feel it aching and seeking a place to plunge home. He wanted to flip Avery onto his back and eat him alive before ramming himself into the depths of his arse. But that would have to wait, because Avery wasn't finished yet.

Scooting down until he was sitting on Charlie's legs he began to sweep the feather down his chest, over the flat plain of his stomach and into the valley between his legs.

Charlie bucked and nearly threw him off. "Stop! Stop, oh, please," he gasped, twisting and turning to escape the diabolical touch.

But the feather was everywhere—on his thighs, his balls, whispering against the very tip of his cock—and there was no escape. His hands might be free now but Avery was like quicksilver, ducking and weaving just out of reach. No matter how often Charlie tried to grab the instrument of his torture, he always missed.

Finally, he tried a different approach. Instead of targeting the feather, he wrapped a hand round each of Avery's slim legs, just above the knee, and pushed. There was a slither and a shriek and Avery toppled sideways to lie laughing on the bed. Charlie took one look at him and pounced, covering the narrow chest with his own and grinding his cock against Avery's bony hip. Nipples grated on chest hair, sweat pooled in the few gaps between them, and he groaned as the pleasure hit him in the balls.

Avery was suddenly acquiescent. "Need you," he murmured, and fought his legs clear to hook them over Charlie's shoulders, presenting his arse to Charlie's cock. Charlie needed no encouragement. Blinded by sweat and lust he scrabbled one-handed in the bedside drawer for condom and lube, before preparing them both in a breathless rush. Then he lined his cock up with Avery's hole and had the urge to push so hard it would come out of Avery's mouth. It was

hard, so very hard, to be patient with Avery making little sobbing cries of need and his balls so tight they hurt, but he held back and eased himself gently in, and had his reward when Avery groaned. "So good."

He hung onto Avery's arms for dear life, bucking and surging as the tight glove of Avery's arse squeezed the juices out of him. "Oh, God," he moaned, feeling the head of his cock catch and drag against Avery's ring, and the muscles massaging him almost like a hand. "Too much, too much, I can't take it any more."

He found Avery's mouth with his own and kissed him hard, and inside Avery's body his cock thrust one last time and came, showering seed into his lover's body and stars before his eyes. He held onto the moment as long as he possibly could, gazing into Avery's eyes and watching him as he came, and then he rolled off his lover and fell asleep.

Eventually Charlie roused from the depths and rolled awkwardly on the bed to watch Avery sleep. Propping himself on one elbow he reached to stroke the other man's hair off his face and dropped a kiss on his brow.

He still had no idea where his friend had really come from, or even what he was; the bird-man seemed to have dropped into his kitchen like a gift from the gods. And like most gifts, it was better to accept it without too many questions lest the giver be hurt. He gazed down on Avery's relaxed face with awe, finding it hard to understand that he could fall so completely in love with a stranger he'd met only hours before.

Bending, he kissed the man's brow again, then the tip of his nose, then covered the lush mouth with his own. But only

for a second or two. He didn't want to rouse Avery, because if he was going to accept this gift he had work to do.

Peeling himself reluctantly away he got off the bed and went to track down his clothes. They formed a trail along the landing and down the stairs, and he found his jersey in a heap on the kitchen floor. Dragging it on, he poured himself a stiff drink to shut his conscience up and began to search. Here and there, near the hearth and under the table where Avery had sat, he found feathers—long grey ones from the wings and tail, and small white fluffy ones from the breast. One lay on the mat just inside the door, another rested lightly on the carpet halfway up the stairs, a third and fourth spiralled down from a window-sill as he ran past. He gathered them all, even creeping back into the bedroom to pluck a handful from under the bed.

When he was sure he had every last one, he tied them in a bundle, put them in his grandmother's jewellery box and locked the lid, and then hid the key.

For the next hour or so he busied himself around the house, tidying Avery's clothes, washing up and cooking tea, and trying to ignore the irritating prickle of conscience that scratched at him every now and again. Eventually, when the chips were brown and the sausages were spitting in the pan he went to call Avery—and found his lover halfway down the stairs with a sad look in his eyes.

"I know what you've done," he said. "I could feel it hurting me—every time you picked a feather up it felt like you were ripping it out of my skin. They don't belong to you—give them back."

But Charlie's one thought was that pigeons had wings and could fly, and once they flew they might never come back. He didn't want to lose Avery so soon. He shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about—it sounds like you had a nightmare. Have some food—you'll feel better after that."

And no matter how much Avery pleaded, Charlie pretended not to hear.

A couple of months later they were up in the pigeon loft together, while Avery helped him with the daily chores. He often helped tend the birds, and seemed happier there than anywhere else in the house. He would sit for hours inside one of the aviaries, checking the birds after their latest race or simply watching them as they slept or pecked for grain.

Tonight he held Charlie's best racer, one cheek resting on its sleek grey back, and the pain in his eyes was clear for Charlie to see. The days of him munching biscuits and cracking mischievous jokes were long since gone.

"Please tell me where you've hidden them," he said, as a single tear crept down his face. "I need to feel the wind beneath my wings again, to soar and plummet and watch the surface of the earth thousands of feet below."

"I don't know what you mean," said Charlie, but felt the blood rush to his face even as he said the words. The more often his lover asked him, the harder it was to tell that awful lie.

"Yes, you do. My feathers. Please, Charlie, tell me where they are. I die a little every day that I'm apart from them."

But Charlie set his lips in a mutinous straight line. "If I do that, you'll put them on and fly away. And then I'll never see you again."

"Everything comes to an end," said Avery with a sad smile. He placed the pigeon back in its box with care, stood up and stepped in close to where Charlie stood.

Charlie felt his presence, the warmth radiating between them as Avery invaded his space. He swallowed, and backed up against the wall, but Avery followed, placing his hands either side of Charlie's head and leaning in until his face was only inches away.

"Tell me," he said, with an angry red glint in his eyes. "Tell me now, Charlie, before I lose patience and hurt your birds."

Charlie gulped. Surely not his precious birds? "You wouldn't," he said, but knew he sounded as uncertain as he felt.

"Try me."

Charlie looked from Avery to the pigeons cooing in feathery oblivion from their lofts, and from the pigeons to Avery again. It was hard ... so very hard. But the birds were his life—he'd been racing pigeons since he was ten and he loved them too much. He couldn't let anything happen to them, even if he lost the only other thing he loved. "The box," he croaked. "The carved wooden box on the back bedroom window sill. And the key's hidden inside a sock."

Straw rustled underfoot and feathers swirled in the air as Avery ran out. Charlie wanted to follow on his heels but had to take care for the pigeons, locking the door so they wouldn't fly out and escape. If only he could do the same for his lover.

If only Avery would change his mind, and leave the feathers alone, and stay.

He knew he was too late the minute he got back indoors. The back door was open wide, and papers had been flapped off the table onto the floor, so fast had Avery run. The trail of chaos continued up the stairs and into their bedroom, where the entire contents of his underwear drawer were strewn across the bed. Any last faint hope that Avery might not find the key was dashed the minute he saw the paisley sock on the pillow, telling a different tale. Heart pounding in his throat he barely dared tiptoe into the second bedroom where he kept his grandmother's box.

The box was open, his treasures dumped in a heap, and every last feather gone. Charlie almost gave up there and then, his shoulders slumping as his last hope fled. But then he saw the open window, and a single white feather that had drifted down to rest on the wooden floor. His heart leaped. Had Avery waited for him after all?

Dashing to the window, he flung it wide and leaned right out, desperately searching for any trace of his lover on the ledge or in the nearby trees. But there was nothing, nothing at all. No human could possibly perch on the narrow window sill and the branches were devoid of life. A small flock of pigeons wheeled suddenly high above his head, but it was impossible to tell if one of them was Avery or not. Like snow on a sunny day, his lover had gone.

Charlie sank to the floor, clutching the feather in one tightly-clenched hand, and rested his forehead on his knees. All he'd wanted was to keep the man he loved, but now he'd

failed. He'd kept Avery here against his will; now he'd escaped he wasn't likely to come back.

"It's just not fair," Charlie mumbled to himself, but he knew deep down inside that wasn't true. What he'd done to Avery wasn't fair, and now he'd got his just reward. Slowly he clambered to his feet, brushed a tear from his cheek, and took the feather to his grandmother's carved box. He piled all his treasures back inside, and laid the feather on the very top, and gently closed the lid.

That night he hardly slept. The bed felt empty without Avery by his side and he kept reaching out and touching air or the pillow rather than the warm skin and soft hair his hand instinctively sought. Every time that happened it jolted him from his doze, and when morning came he was tired and gritty eyed.

A lie-in might have been nice but the pigeons wouldn't look after themselves and he had no wish to turn his own hurt onto them. Hauling himself out of the wrinkled sheets he washed, dressed and trotted down the garden to see to their needs.

Being with the birds helped calm him. They seemed pleased to see him, in their own rather limited way, and pecked eagerly at the grain he tossed and the fresh water he poured into the troughs. One even fluttered down to perch on his arm and he stroked it for a while, thinking wistfully of the first time he'd held Avery in his hands. This bird wasn't Avery, though—he recognised it as Patch, a piebald racer he'd had for years. He sighed, and placed it carefully back in its straw-lined box.

Plodding back to the kitchen in search of coffee and toast, he saw the back door was swinging gently on its hinges in the breeze. The bad night must have affected him more than he'd thought, because leaving it open like that was silly and careless and could have let burglars in.

He peered cautiously into the kitchen and found he'd been luckier than he deserved. Sitting at the table, coolly helping himself to the cornflakes with a pile of feathers at his feet, was Avery, looking every bit as edible as he had before and not at all cross.

Indeed, he looked as though he'd never been away.

Charlie felt the blood rush first to, then out of, his face and couldn't bring himself to speak. Finally, after clearing his throat several times he managed to croak, "I never thought I'd see you again."

Avery just smiled and popped another handful of cereal into his mouth. "You forgot one thing," he said around the crumbs. "We pigeons are homing birds. We always come back to our loft."

The End

The Rat Burglar

Emily Veinglory

Chapter One

A tall man drifted through the gallery. Sandy watched him unapologetically; that was a large part of what a security man did most of the time, watched and was seen watching. The more obvious he was about watching, the better. It was only very occasionally that one was called on to really step in and *do* anything.

A lot of his colleagues put an emphasis on bluster and muscles; something a "little Jap" like Sandy was conspicuously short of. But Sandy wasn't bothered by their jibes—he knew that if you noticed trouble early on conflict could be avoided, the rest of the time a Taser X25C was a great equalizer.

Anyway, this guy was up to no good, which was a pity. The day was nearly over and he really didn't feel like dealing with any trouble. Sandy eased from his post and followed the suspicious visitor into the second display room. The gallery was dark and windowless; the only light was cast by the display cases that held hundreds of netsuke—tiny carved figures once used to attack a purse, called the onri, to a kimono sash. Dressed in black, the gallery's sole visitor carried himself like a handsome man, erect and self-assured but his face had strong uneven features, a large nose, thin

lips and small deep set eyes. Charisma gave his gangly form some kind of charm. Sandy felt it as an almost palpable force as the man turned, his eyes locking onto Sandy's. The man smiled.

"*Konban-wa*," he said.

"Sir, can I be of any assistance?" Sandy said flatly. Goddamn but he was sick of that. The netsuke pulled in every jumped up Japanophile, looking for a chance to display their erudition. "We will be closing very soon."

"From here it looks like 'we' already have."

In English his voice seemed to have a different quality, deep and rough. Sandy felt a shiver, a deep response to the power of its resonance. He resisted the urge to take a step backwards. His mind raced, trying to understand this sudden breathlessness in the face of an outwardly ordinary man—especially one so arch and presumptuous.

"Five minutes," Sandy said as blandly as he could. "If there was a specific piece you wanted to see I suggest you seek it out now."

"I was told there was a particularly fine piece in the shape of a ball, made, um, from rats."

The antique carvings held rather little interest to Sandy, but in making his rounds he had looked them over and was tolerably familiar with the entire catalogue.

"It is this way," Sandy took the lead, walking through the small, connected rooms of the gallery and over to one of the large display cases in which netsuke depicting various auspicious animals were displayed. It was one of the larger pieces including the both the netsuke and the intro. The box

was very plain by comparison with the intricate netsuke. Sandy had noticed it earlier and wondered how any craftsman who could carve a score of writhing rats over the surface of a piece of wood no larger than a walnut would attach it to an intro that was completely unadorned. Although as he looked at it the rich patina and the grain of the ancient fruitwood was more subtle than anything a human hand could create; perhaps a true artist appreciated nature above his own skills.

Remembering himself he looked up to find the man standing very close beside him and just slightly behind—leaning over his shoulder although the disparity in their heights meant very little *leaning* was actually called for to get a clear view. His tall, lean frame was a dark presence that almost seemed to blend with the shadows of the dimly lit room. His strong features were dramatically under-lit by the fluorescent bulbs of the frosted display platform before them. Sandy was struck by an uncharacteristic feeling that there was something, somehow *unnatural* about the man. But unlike his superstitious mother Sandy had little interest in the maunderings of myth and misled intuition.

As the man brushed, ever so slightly, against him a pang ran up through Sandy's body, tracing up like a tree through nerves and veins normally dull and dormant. He was startled again by the reaction which made no sense at all to his rational mind. He knew, *knew* that this man was up to no good; that he was trouble. Sandy had no intention of being like some giggling girl with a bad boy fixation. No, he was not that kind of fool.

"My name," the man said, as if he had been asked. "Is Rudy."

"Is it." Sandy was quietly pleased to be able to sound indifferent. The very epitome of rhetorical.

"So what do you do after work?" Rudy pressed.

"I go home."

Sandy had to step around Rudy carefully to get away from him—to make a space between them without coming into contact with Rudy again. Sandy's heart was beating fast and he was no longer even sure why because suspicion, attraction and slow swelling fear curdled together ambiguously in his stomach.

"You don't fool me," Rudy said, turning in place to watch Sandy as he went. "The world is not over-supplied, I must admit, with people that find me attractive. But you happen to be one of them. I can smell it."

Which was enough to break the spell for Sandy. Peculiar magnetism aside, this man was some kind of freak. It would be insane to have anything to do with him. "It is time for me to close up," he said tersely. "I am sure you can find your own way out."

As he returned to the small security station he had to fight the urge to look back and see what Rudy was doing and whether he was preparing to leave. Then again, maybe he should look. His first instinct that the man was here for some dishonest reason meant he should keep the man insight, not waste time worrying about what that attention might reveal about his own feelings.

Sandy ran through final checks, the camera, sensors and alarms, making sure everything was online and status green. The gallery did not have continuous night staff but Sandy had keys and a pager linked to the alarm and Sensei Security, his employer, sent a car to check the place over intermittently through the night. His hands shook as he flicked through the cameras on the multiplexor to have a good look at each view. As he changed the DVD for the CCTV he even wondered if he had somehow been slipped some kind of drug or he was ill. His skin was sweaty and he was even having trouble focusing his eyes. But something told him it wasn't anything so sinister—it was something even more arbitrary and destructive. Pointless, sourceless, senseless.

It was love at first sight.

* * * *

Sandy watched Rudy finally dawdle out the front doors. There was no doubt at all that he was taking his time; as though he thought Sandy was going to want to talk to him before he left. Finally he seemed to give up on that little delusion.

The only staff member still around that late in the day was Jessica a pert brunette who appeared from the back room only when she smelled money. With a specialist show like the netsuke there were more nerds and gawkers than walk-in sales. The pieces started at about ten thousand and went up to a hundred times that for a piece like the rat carving.

None of the gallery staff paid much attention to the security, cleaners and other such lower life forms. The only

exception was Kerry the conservation specialist who always dropped in to check out the new installations, record them and make sure the climate control was set just right. Kerry was all right for a self-confessed geek, not gay though—unfortunately.

Jessica headed out without so much as making eye contact. She was late and kept Sandy late waiting for her. Sandy was almost composed as he did a finally walk 'round and activated the motion sensors and window alarms. He cast one last look at the monitor and then headed out the side door before the alarm kicked in.

Sandy looked up and down the alley, and then tucked the master keys into the pocket of his hard shell backpack which was reinforced with metal mesh and locked with a combination padlock at the top. It would take a determined person with specialist tools to break into his bag in less than a couple of hours.

His scooter was parked in the alley. As he pulled off the bar lock, there was a movement at the corner of his eye. Rudy's dark, tall silhouette was instantly recognizable. He leaned against the garbage skip, leaning his elbow unfastidiously against the lip.

"I'll do you a deal," Rudy said.

All of Sandy's equanimity sublimed away. "Do tell," he snapped.

"You want to pretend you don't feel it, what is between us? You must have your reasons for that. But I find it a little hard to accept and anyone who knows me knows that I can be ... tenacious."

That didn't sound good. That last thing Sandy needed in his life was some manipulative pervert, some stalker. He dropped the bar-lock into his scooter's under-seat storage area, torn between making a quick escape and the realization that it might be better to face the fact that he did feel something for this peculiar man—even if he wasn't quite sure what. It was like an electric charge, static leaping the distance between their bodies. Visceral and irrational, but real.

"A deal?" Even saying that much was probably more than was wise.

"I'll leave it alone," Rudy said. "Really I will. I won't bother you ever again if you will just give me an hour of your time. Just give me a chance to show you what you are throwing away in ignoring what I know you feel."

Sandy was reaching into his pocket for the ignition key when he looked up properly. In the full light of day Rudy looked different. He was older than Sandy had realized, probably in his early forties. His clothes although stylish were shabby, hard worn or second hand. But he looked more real, he seemed more ... what, sincere? And certainly less threatening....

Just looking at the man made his heart lurch again. It angered him to feel so out of control, but the attraction was undeniable. Was it is simple impulse, or the beginning of a dangerous compulsion?

"One hour," he said. "I need to go somewhere to eat on the way home. You may come along if it will satisfy you. But after that I do not expect to see you again. Is that clear?"

"Most clear," Rudy said with a faintly mocking smile that suggested otherwise.

And oh, that smile. The expression transformed him again. This man was like walking through a landscape where every turn provided a different view, a different vista. Humor showed through and Sandy felt his suspicions waver. Rudy seemed like a man who acted on impulses. But he also seemed like someone to whom the law meant little, there was nothing to suggest that he could be taken at his word.

Sandy kicked the stand back and straddled his old Korean scooter. There was nowhere nearby where he could afford to eat and he was damned if he was going to go out of his way.

"Come along if you're coming," he said.

Rudy did not hesitate. He climbed onto the padded seat behind Sandy, putting his hands on Sandy's waist. Even with the backpack between them that simple touch through the thick cloth or Sandy's uniform slacks still sent a shock of hard arousal through him. His face flushed with embarrassment as his cock started to swell at such prosaic contact.

He leaned back cautiously first to one side and then the other, folding out the passenger foot pegs. Rudy's longer legs bent sharply as he put one foot up on each. His knees settled gently beside on Sandy's thighs.

"Ready when you are," Rudy said, a little archly to Sandy's ears.

With pursed lips Sandy turned the ignition and steered out into the street. He knew the little side streets well and soon had the moped roaring confidently along. Yes, he was rather hoping to scare his smug admirer but Rudy just slid forward

in the seat, his knees against Sandy's thighs, his one hand gripping firmly Sandy's hip and the other moving around to loosely settle across his stomach.

It was rather hard to concentrate on the road when suddenly all Sandy wanted was to feel that broad, presumptuous hand on his cock; the groin brushing against his ass seemed to promise so much more.

Sweat sprang up under his arms and above his lips, cool on his skin as they sped along. He barely had the presence of mind to pull in at the *Metropolis*, a café he often went to because it was on the way home and had a motorcycle parking area right out front. No doubt his little scooter looked ridiculous there beside the Hondas and hogs but since escaping his Dad's house Sandy had always prided himself on not giving a damn what people thought about him—only what he knew about himself.

Now, for the first time, he really wondered. What did Rudy want from him, and was it something he wanted to give?

* * * *

He ordered the nachos, he normally did. It was the best value for money for a man who didn't bother keeping food in the house. The décor at the *Metropolis* ran to artistic grunge. Scuffed, hand-painted tables littered the small interior, the walls painted black and the floor bare concrete. The waitress, although they had never spoken beyond making and taking an order, raised an eyebrow to see Sandy, not on his own for once.

Rudy ordered a cappuccino and a cinnamon bun. Sandy selected a table near the front, the one he normally took so he could watch the street through the wide front window. He sat on the bench seat against the wall and Rudy took one of the chairs, spinning it so that he sat with his arms folded across the chair-back.

"So," Rudy said, leaning in. "Even if you don't believe that I can smell it, you can't really deny that you fancy me. Just a bit." He smiled, leaning his chin in one hand and glanced down as if to suggest he could see Sandy's restive cock right through the table.

So he'd noticed that, had he? And it wasn't that Rudy, gangly and quirky, was any kind of obvious stud. But Sandy looked at the man's large hands, long, blunt-ended fingers; he felt the strength beneath his eccentricities. Looking at those long, thick fingers Sandy mused ... no matter what he wanted in a person Sandy knew what he liked in sex. He liked to be fucked. He liked to be held down, touched, owned and fucked by a man who knew what he was doing. Surface flippancy aside he could feel that Rudy was just that sort of man, and it had been too long.

But no.

This was not a man who he was ever going to be able to get rid of once he let him in. The nachos finally arrived. Sandy checked his watch, wondering if the time they took to get here was counted as part of the hour but he decided to be fair. "Your time starts now," he said.

Rudy added sugar to his coffee, fastidiously shaking the paper packet, tearing and pouring, three sachets: two white

sugars and one off the special coffee sugar. For some reason the mixture of the two irritated Sandy. Who did that? Rudy stirred his coffee for what seemed like over a minute. Sandy started to eat. The crunching of the nacho chips seemed loud and crass in the silence between them.

"So?" Sandy prompted.

"When I talk you get defensive," Rudy said. "So maybe it would be better to let you get used to me. Without pressure."

"You have fifty-seven minutes left."

Rudy just laughed. He had a strange sort of confidence, this man. It was ... damn it, it was interesting. Sandy found he did want to know more about the man. He teetered, waiting and willing Rudy to say something to let him pull back. He didn't want to do this. He didn't want to go there. He didn't want this strange man breaking into his orderly life. But then again, he did.

"Okay, tell me about you," Sandy said.

Rudy's smiled broadened, he leaned forward. Both his hands lay on the table as if he was trying to bridge the gap between them. "What do you want to know?"

Which made it acutely obvious that the man was reading him like a book. Sandy leaned back, his appetite dulling. He picked over the plate, feeling his face freeze with disapproval.

"Oy," Rudy said with a sigh. "All right. So I get that you really are hard to get, not just playing. But I have a feeling you're worth it."

There was his warning sign. If there was one thing Sandy could not stand it was the almost patronising way some men got ... wanting not a lover but some sort of acquisition, a pet.

His own mother had spent her life trying to fill the role of the American businessman's Asian plaything—the woman who "knows how to treat a man". Her real personality had all but disappeared in the process and Sandy had never felt like more than the mongrel accident of a union that was never intended to be a family. He'd felt his father's disdain for the Japanese cultures as he tutored his wife in how to behave like a 'proper' wife; he'd felt that same disappointment directed at his own appearance, never anything like the proper blue-eyed sons his father's friends made with their own bottle-blond versions of the trophy wife.

That is why he left behind anything his father might have offered. Sandy was quite satisfied with the modest life he led; a life of his own. He sure as hell wasn't going down that path himself; not ever being another man's plaything. Whatever myriad mistakes he was going to make in his life, he would not make that one.

But when he looked up into Rudy's eyes he didn't see some stern patriarch or dilettante fixated on the Asian "flavor". He saw an honest, almost goofy, sort of interest. He saw a man whose discordant features fell together with a sort of dignity, quirkily handsome and spirited in the true sense of the word.

Some strange energy just thrummed inside Rudy and something in Sandy all but vibrated in response to it. He couldn't deny that. He couldn't deny that he wanted it, physically. But he would never make a commitment to more.

"Do you really think I could get to know you at all in an hour?" Sandy asked.

"I really think we could continue to surprise each other for the rest of our lives."

That really should have been a bit over the top, but somehow it wasn't.

"Perhaps we shouldn't spend the rest of the hour talking," Sandy said. He pushed down his feelings, skating on the surface of his impulses.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll give the balance of it at my place. But the deal still stands." Because there was one thing Sandy felt, really felt, now and that was that Rudy actually would be a man of his word. Sandy could have more, just a little more of this, of what he was feeling—and still be able to pull back.

Rudy took a moment, looking down at his hands. "You need to tell me your name," he said.

"Do I?"

Rudy looked up at him, all trace of humor gone. "You do."

"Sandy, my name is Sandy."

"Well, Sandy. I really wish I could do that but I know that I can't and I know that we shouldn't."

"Why the hell not?" Sandy had been surprised at his impulse and it stung to be rebuffed. He didn't cruise men all that often but he rarely got turned down when he did.

Rudy reached around, taking Sandy's hand, no doubt feeling his damp palm and the persistent tremor in it. He leaned forward with ridiculous chivalry and planted a kiss on the back of Sandy's hand. "Because we are more than that, and besides, I already have plans for tonight."

Shifting Perspectives
by Emily Veinglory, T. A. Chase, Fiona Glass

Sandy snatched his hand back and grabbed his bag. "Then I won't keep you from them," he said as he left the café all too conscious that he hadn't delivered on the full hour, leaving the door open to seeing this irritating man again.

Chapter Two

Rudy crouched on the roof. He was torn; he really should call the job off. Or he should stop thinking about Sandy, one of the two. But this wasn't an ordinary job; it could be the key to a mystery that had hung over his entire life like the sword of Damocles. The mystery of what he was.

The netsuke would only be on display for six more days and tomorrow a family moved into the vacant apartment across the road, one that overlooked this very rooftop. There was no question; if he was to get the rat onri before it disappeared back into an unnamed private collection he had to do it tonight.

But even as he fitted the three inch round cutter onto his cordless drill his mind was on Sandy again. The perfect symmetry of his refined features, his slender frame and even his bristly manner. A security guard, hardly the perfect partner for a thief but Rudy knew he could, and would, give that up after tonight.

It had never been a calling, just a way for a man with talents but few virtues to get by in life. This one last job, the only one he ever did for himself, would be enough.

What would he do afterwards? He didn't know. Rudy knew he was never going to settle down well to a nine-to-five schedule, but he had enough put away to be comfortable for a few years and figure that all out.

The drill cut through the aluminum roof leaving a neat round hole. He filed the sharp edge carefully down, then

reached through the insulation as far as he could and dug the end of a screwdriver into the ceiling tile levering it up to expose the gallery space below. He took the time to carefully clean the tools which he would be leaving behind. Then he stripped, partly unzipping the simple overalls he was wearing and letting them fall. Finally with a deep breath he prepared to do that one thing that set him apart, his mysterious gift.

With a shudder his body began to shift. His forearm and hand warped, dropping to the ground in their new form. In a cascade of queasy transformation his body changed and separated until all that was left was a score of large brown rats. His awareness spread across them, each having a certain separateness but also being a part of the whole. The rats flowed almost like they were still a single body, moving as a mass.

The first rat braced at the edge of the hole. Given the smaller mass of a rat's body a twelve foot drop onto the top of the display case was no real physical danger but it still had to push past the instinctive fear of falling. Limbs extended it leapt and dropped, landing with a thud, then shook its head and sneezed. The others followed falling with a succession of quiet thuds, landing and rebounding off each other.

They mobbed together gnawing at the timber seam. The panels were thin Perspex and once the seam was broken they pushed down the top and, one after the other, squeezed through the gap. Once the lead rat reached onri he had to struggle with the desire to gnaw it open. The myth of the rat onri suggested it was in there, the whole reason for the rat shape-changer, maybe even the spell that created their kind.

For there were stories of others of his kind, although he had never met one.

Instead he seized it by the cord; several of the rats grabbed other parts of it and scrambled up, lifting and pulling each other to clamber back up onto the top of the case. Most of them dropped down onto the floor and crowded together to form a solid patch of furry flesh. The last two grasped the onri and netsuke and leapt down to direct its fall.

The onri rebounded and toppled gently onto the wooden floor with a soft clunk. All the rats flinched slightly, but relaxed when they saw no damage had been done. He loved the feeling, the meshing of minds within his mind, serving his purpose.

The rats regrouped, moving as a mass and holding the valuable antique up off the ground. Their main hope was the mail slot. The onri should just fit through the two inch gap, as should each rat if only with some effort. Any hole they could get their heads through the rest could somehow follow. However at three feet of the ground it still represented a tricky obstacle.

Then, disaster.

There was a loud crash and the alarm immediately began to blare. The sound was so loud, an unbearable cacophony to the sensitive ears of the rats. Their animal natures welled up and at first the whole group froze in fear, then several of them darted for the cover of the nearest wall. Only with effort did the collective will gather them back in again.

With the galvanising energy of fear they surged forward. Several looked back. They could see how the display case had

collapsed, the top sheet falling in and the front face falling outwards to cross the motion sensor

The lead rat leapt up at the mail slot but the slot was narrow and he could not get purchase, falling back heavily. The others scrambled up each others' bodies and it was one of the lighter follower rats who reached the top first. With the others supporting him he pushed with his nose, but the metal cover over the letter slot stayed stubbornly shut. He scrabbled with his forelegs and pushed again, but the flap stayed closed. He sniffed again the tiny gap at the bottom of the flap, smelling the freedom of the air. Frantically others climbed up to help pull it open.

It was taking too long, far too long.

Pushing and clawing together they opened the flap just a sliver. Then bit by bit there was just enough room to jam his head through, although he had trouble pulling it back. The little follower rats held the flap up and two others went down to get the artifact, pushing. The rest of the pack slipped, struggled and climbed over each other in a tenuous mass. One after another they pushed through, dropping down into the alley. The lead rats pulled the artifact through and leapt out and the last few followed leaving only the smallest holding open the flap.

The one little follower rat, almost exhausted teetered, scrabbled and fell back into the gallery. The other milled uncertainly outside, waiting for him. The follower rat leapt but fell short. His legs were tired. He leaped again and again, just getting his paws on the sill of the slot but unable, alone, to pulled himself over the slick, rounded edge.

He heard sounds behind him, felt the vibration of footsteps across the hardwood floor. Then with one finally desperate leap....

A hand seized him around the middle. The rat squealed and twisted trying to bite but he was gripped hard, the air squeezing from him.

Hearing the heavy movements of humans inside the gallery the others bolted away from the door into the darkness. Only the lead rat kept presence of mind enough to grab the onri by the cord and drag it bouncing brutally over the asphalt. The whole group reached for the cover of an overhang of a fire escape attached to a building around the corner. His normal clothes waited, folded inside a plastic bag. The rats snuffled amongst themselves. They were missing the left hand rat; they could still feel him yearning toward them but held apart. Rudy's consciousness flickered dizzily between the group and the one left behind.

The lost rat's blurry vision showed an inquisitive face with piercing brown eyes and short cropped hair—Sandy. But immediately behind him followed two other security men in their uniforms. That dispelled any notion of trying to somehow cajole or force Sandy to return their compatriot.

Rudy had never before tried to reform while incomplete. For all he knew the lost hand would leave an open wound and leave him dead from loss of blood within moments. But he could not stay in rat form, the small creatures were far too vulnerable. Nor could he cross the city to his home like this and he could hardly spend the rest of his life as vermin here.

So they bundled together pressing and willing the change, quickly before the fear stopped him. His body coalesced, coldly, sick and flawed. But he was dimly relieved to raise his left arm to find it ended in a blunt nub just below the elbow.

"What have you got there?" a voice asked.

Rudy flinched, but it was not his ears, he realised, but that of the lost rat that heard the voice.

"Rat," Sandy said.

The other exclaimed with disgust. "Drown it."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Looks like the cabinet just collapsed," One of the men said. "One of you call it in and I'll reset the alarm. Go get rid of that thing."

Rudy fumbled his clothes on, his senses confusingly divided. The shifted rat-king mind was comfortable being many and one, but as a man he found it hard to even know who was feeling what. He got his pants and boots on, shirt and jacket and forgot about the socks. He couldn't button the shirt one-handed.

"We're first response, anyway," one of the men said. "There's nothing wrong here."

Sandy tried to protest, "We should...."

"We are the official night response, get the hell out of here and take that thing with you."

The big man sounded angry and Sandy backed down, heading out the side door. Sandy knew he shouldn't have arrived first; he wondered what these guys had been up to in the night car that they took so long to respond. The rat struggled convulsively, fearing death, hoping to break free,

but found itself thrust into darkness. Peering around the corner Rudy saw Sandy locking closed his hard-shell rucksack. He looked back towards the gallery and pulled a cell phone from his pocket.

There was a muffled conversation that Rudy heard from two vantages but still could not make out more than a few words.

"Still could be a robbery, Marta. But ... doesn't want me there. His scene so ... makes sure they check the inventory ... case the police need to be called."

Then Sandy sat back on the padded seat of his old green moped and kicked the stand back. Rudy had no idea how far away he could let the rat get before he would lose touch with it or what would happen then. But he did not dare call out and stop Sandy.

God, but he felt drawn to the young man beyond all reason but there was no way he could predict what Sandy would do—there was no trust, no familiarity.

As the moped whined into life and proceeded down the alley Rudy jogged after. Seeing which way it went he ran in pursuit. He could feel the tug of his ... part. A part of him, strained and out of phase.

The night air was cold against his chest as his shirt and jacket flapped open. He ran in pursuit, after few minutes he had to alternate jogging and walking trying to find a path through the streets. The sound of the two-stroke engine faded and finally vanished. But he could still feel the direction and, vaguely, the rat's alarm. He could feel the follower rat as a distant part of him, terrified at the novel sensation of being

pulled away and forced to think and act on its own. Even the strength of the emotion couldn't keep the connection; it started to faded, stretched thinner and thinner. Rudy's consciousness remained lodged in his human form and the single rat faded from his awareness.

His lungs burned as he kept on moving as fast as he could, exhaustion and fear making his legs weak and ungainly. The road dipped down into an area of apartment buildings, not such a good neighborhood. He fumbled, one handed, trying to get his clothes in order. The sense of the rat's presence grew again.

Rudy sagged against the wall, closing his eyes. He could feel the place, like a dot in the darkness to the side and up high, several stories up. The rat, what if Sandy treated it like some vermin, what if he killed it? The thought made Rudy feel cold and sick to his stomach. His vision blurred as the rat was seized and lifted out the dark bag.

Rat vision was never very good, just a few feet with any clarity. But the smells were encyclopedic, dust, food, paint, cleaners, Sandy himself. The smell more subtle now after the musky heat of their first meeting. Then a metal mesh rubbish bin was upended over him, held down and then he moved something to weight it down. The rat stayed afraid and frozen, waiting, seeking leadership and so unused to being alone.

Sandy peered in; his face up close came into focus his breath still smelling faintly of sour cream and spices.

"Now what do we have here?" he muttered.

Chapter Three

There was definitely something about the rat. Either that, Sandy admitted, or he was going crazy. But there it was, looking at him. Not sniffing around or scrabbling to escape, just sitting and looking at him. It was late, more like early now—almost three in the morning and he hadn't been thinking straight since the moment Rudy walked into the gallery. Now any chance of sleep was gone.

There was a blinking light on his answerphone. Sandy pushed the button and heard a tinny rendition of his mother's voice.

"Shin-taro, I must speak to you. It is an important matter, something I should have told you long ago. But now I think they are looking..." There was some background sound, muffled but probably his father's voice. The message cut off with a sudden click.

Sandy shook his head. He had told his mother that he would not speak to her while she stayed with his father and submitted to the way he treated her. Perhaps it was a mistake; perhaps the worst sort of betrayal of his name which she told him meant "faithful". But he would not go back on his decision now or it would all be for nothing. He knew he didn't need to worry about her. His father never hurt her, physically. But he wondered what she was calling him about, whether her strange fantasy life was spilling over into something more serious. Not that he was feeling quite sane and sensible himself today.

He lay back on the sofa and rested his head on the padded arm. The rat sat under the upended dustbin, weighted down with a couple of big hardback books. There was a connection somehow, between Rudy, the break in and the rat. He just couldn't see what it was. He lay still and let it work around and around in his mind, feeling that if he could just get the right angle on it the answer would come to him. Everything would fall back in place.

He must have lain like that for almost an hour, his mind distracted onto fuming over Reg and Smithy throwing him out of the gallery. They had seniority on the night shift and got to say whether the on-call guy was needed or not. But they were far too quick to put the whole thing down to some kind of accident—without even doing an inventory.

He caught a movement at the corner of his eyes, and without moving a muscle but for his eyes Sandy moved his gaze over to the rat. Its bright beady eyes were fixed on him quizzically. It pushed its nose though, looking at the inch or so of table top that extended beyond its makeshift prison. Pushing with its feet it could not budge the upturned bin at all.

The way the critter kept looking at him, peering like it couldn't see him very well, sniffing at the air. Then it shuffled back into the shadows and ... something changed. It was a different shape that crawled forward again. Something blind and ungainly. Any unmistakably human finger curled through the mesh of the bin, reaching, reaching for the edge of the table.

Cold shock and disbelief ran through Sandy. He rolled off the sofa, eyes wide and edged up to the apparition. It was a hand, ending bluntly in nub of smooth skin. It did not seem to sense his approach; it just keep on groping and pulling, edging the bin slowly towards the edge of the table. And it was a very familiar hand, at that.

Sandy put his hand down on top of the books that weighed the bin down, pinning it in place. The detached hand continued in its efforts a while longer. Yes, there was no mistaking it. It was a specific hand, one he had seen recently.

It was Rudy's hand.

It pulled back in a convulsive movement reshaped, reformed and there was the rat again. It peered up at him, toes spread out stiffly, crouched and frozen.

They stood like that a while, as Sandy let it sink in. Either he really was crazy, completely and totally hallucinating crazy, or the rest of the world was. He really didn't have any choice but to believe his eyes. The rat in the gallery becoming the hand of the man he'd seen, who was what?—scoping out the place?

Then there was a knock at the door.

Sandy looked down at the rat, snaking his hand carefully as he lifted the bin and grabbed it. He half expected to get bitten but this time the thing seemed docile. Sandy knew one thing. He did not want it getting away and he had limited options for holding it securely. After a moments hesitation, he when into the small kitchen and thrust it into the refrigerator. It should be all right in there for a short while. Then just to be

sure he jammed a chair between the fridge door and the cabinets opposite.

He went to his work stuff, folded up and waiting for the morning. He hefted the heavy Taser in one hand as he unhooked the chain and opened the door. It wasn't really a surprise to find Rudy on the other side. His face was drawn; his shirt gaped with a few buttons haphazardly fastened. His overcoat hung askew with something bulky in one of the pockets.

And although his right hand was resting on the door frame his left jacket sleeve hung empty. Sandy took it all in and the only thing that really surprised him was how he felt. He felt a surge of concern. Rudy met his gaze without an apology but there was desperation in his eyes. Sandy felt an impulse to take him in, reassure him with promises of understanding, welcoming a near stranger with an embrace.

Sandy just stood back, holding the door and leaving some distance between them, showing the bulky barrel of the taser.

Rudy came in, shutting the door behind him. His eyes flickered to the kitchen. "They feel the cold quickly, you know. Small animals," Rudy said.

And how exactly did he know all about that unless him and the rat were somehow connected, somehow part of the same thing. It was ridiculous and incredible but also the only logical answer.

"Give me back what you stole," Sandy said. "And I'll give you back what you left behind. And if we don't meet again, I won't have anything identifiable about you, to tell the police."

"You don't know what you are asking."

"I know exactly what I am asking. You stole something, and I want it back. It's my job. And it wouldn't matter what I knew about you, it wouldn't change how it is for me. I have a job to do and nothing you say would change that. I just want everything back where it is meant to be."

Rudy reached into his pocket and pulled out a roughly wrapped object. He laid it on the table, rich dark wood contrasting with the chipboard furniture. Of course, the rat netsuke and its onri. Was that all he took? Just the one piece?

"I know it's hard to believe," Rudy said. "But I never needed to keep it. Just let me look at it. To look inside the onri. There may be something in there that is very important to me, to help me understand what I am, and what I am meant to do with it."

"I made a promise to myself once," Sandy said. "A promise never to compromise who I am, what I am for someone else. And it's never been all that hard to do. There's not a whole lot to me. I live alone, I do a job and I do it as well as I can. I'm only going to make the one deal with you and you've already got it. And only because I have to, to do my job."

And it was inexplicable, how it broke his heart to say that. It was true; it had never been all that hard to do. But it was hard now, it was almost the hardest thing he had ever done, the hardest thing since he talked to his mother for the last time and stopped returning her calls. But once you start giving up control, for whatever reason....

"What can it hurt just to let me open the onri, just to look at it?"

"It's not yours, and it's not mine. And whatever you mean to get from it, maybe it's not something you are meant to have. I have no way of knowing," Sandy said. "Now back up and stand flat against the door."

Rudy complied but his eyes flicked between the little box and Sandy. Sandy backed up. Standing in the kitchen doorway he kept Rudy in sight by using his foot to kick the chair out of the way and lever the door roughly open. The brown rat dropped onto the floor bounding across the room.

As soon as it got to Rudy his form seemed to crumple. Sandy's hand jerked on the trigger and he barely held back from firing as the man in front of him disintegrated in a tumbling cluster of enormous rats, every one of them larger than the one he had held captive. They crawled over and around the clothing, investigating their returned comrade before scurrying back and burrowing into his piled clothing.

Sandy half expected the creatures to attack him but instead they reformed. Within a few blurred moment Rudy was back, crouched with both hands pressed flat to the ground. His clothing tore as he reformed awkwardly within it. His skin sheened with sweat.

"Being ... apart, is tiring..." he said.

Behind him that was a sudden crash against the door. The whole frame buckled and splintered.

"Who the hell is that?" Sandy asked.

Rudy fell forward crawling away from the door. He was basically at Sandy's feet when another sharp crash pushed the door not so much open as completely free of its hinges. The whole door fell into the apartment and landed flat on the

ground, defining the small section of ground that separated the intruder from Rudy and Sandy.

Giving into to his instincts Sandy raised the taser, implicitly trusting Rudy who was struggling, but failing, even to get to his feet. The man at the door was a stern looking Asian man dressed in black his hands raised in a pose suggestive of some kind of martial arts. He eyed the Taser, addressing Sandy.

"I am here only for the Yokai."

Sandy wasn't sure if that meant the box or Rudy but he wasn't in a big hurry to give up either. And not knowing what the hell was going on was really starting to piss him off.

"Get the onri, Rudy," he said.

Rudy was recovering, slowly. He levered himself upright using the wall.

"This man knows what I am," he said with amazement.

"Given his way of knocking on the door, I don't know if having a chat about it would be a wise idea right now," Sandy commented.

Sandy kept the Taser up and circled around carefully you get the Onri for himself.

"But if you want to stay behind and talk it over with him," he added, "That's your call."

Sandy shoved the box inside his inside jacket pocket and backed towards the window. His duty was to return the onri and to report this chaos. But he was going to have to deviate from telling the strict truth. The only question was, how far.

The intruder watched him, seeming quite calm. He said something, a sentence or two in a fluid foreign tongue.

"He is asking if I am yours," Rudy said. "If you are my master. Because if I am not, I am his to *claim*—his to enslave."

Sandy kept an eye on them both as he lifted the sash window. "Well, I am leaving and it is up to you whether you come with me or stay here."

Rudy cast one long look at the stern face of the foreigner. Then he headed for the window. Clambering out onto the fire escape ahead of Sandy, who followed, hearing the neighbors starting to cause a fuss out in the corridor.

"You are making a mistake," the stranger said, but he made no particular move to pursue. "We laid this trap for the rogue yokai. And we mean to have him."

"Well, it's my mistake to make." Sandy backed away and scrambled down the ladder headed to his scooter .

Chapter Four

Rudy waited outside Sensei Security's office, straddling the old scooter. Sandy could see him just by glancing out the window but he tried to refrain from doing so.

"...The two night car men had secured the gallery so I spent about an hour or so searching the area just to ensure there was nothing the a potential thief had discarded when they fled. It was about three blocks away I found the onri and nesuke, which I recognized from the gallery. Not knowing whether there would still be anyone at the gallery I returned to my apartment with the intention of calling the office and asking them to notify the police."

Jessica from the gallery arrived with Kerry. He went to the table where the onri lay and immediately inspected the piece. Sandy was momentarily distracted as he opened the box and revealed a surprising complexity of parts and compartments inside, but there did not seem to be any actual contents to the box other than its own many pieces.

"Mr. Pierce," the office manager drew his attention back to the report.

"Sorry, ma'am. As I came into my apartment I was accosted by a man I had never seen before. I grabbed for my Taser and threatened him with it. Then my neighbors came out and distracted his attention long enough for me to get away and I reported back here immediately."

Mrs. Tate's manicured nails clicked over the keyboard of her laptop. "I appreciate you prompt actions, Mr. Pierce. The

owner of this piece has asked that we not involve the police and he had apparently made arrangement to ensure that the gallery owner is agreeable to this requirement. It is the position of Sensei Security that our client's wishes are paramount to us."

"Of course," Sandy said. But his mind whirled. If the onri had been left out as a trap for Rudy then had he gone to all this trouble just to deliver the thing back to the man he'd been pointing a Taser at less than an hour ago.

He had been so focused on doing the right thing, doing the job he was paid to do, he hadn't dared even think about whether the right thing was the wrong thing all over. Maybe his instinct had been right all along.

Kerry, the conservator, had taken pictures of every angle of every part before packing them away.

"In fact I believe he wishes to have a word with you personally," Mrs. Tate added. "Perhaps he'll offer you some kind of reward for your extra efforts."

"That isn't necessary, Mrs. Tate.

"Well, you always have been a most reliable employee Mr. Pierce. Please Take your shift tomorrow off. Come into the office at noon to meet with Mr. Sato."

"Of course, Mrs. Tate." Sandy saw that Kerry was packing up and heading out the door. "I'll be back here at noon."

Out in the corridor and caught up with Kerry and they got in the lift together.

"So what the hell is going on, Sandy?" Kerry said.

"I'll do you a deal, Kerry. I'll tell you what's going on if you'll send me copies of those pictures."

"Pictures, you mean of the onri and netsuke?"

"Yeah, the inside of the box especially. I have a feeling it all comes down to that thing. And I know just the person to ask about it. Give me half an hour or so and then send them to, lets say Sandy-one-zero-seven at gmail—you'll remember that?"

"Why not your normal address."

"Let's just say I'm feeling a little paranoid right now. So you do that and you'll either get a real good story or proof positive that I've been one of the quiet but very, very crazy guys all along."

* * * *

Not wanting to go back home Sandy called the apartment manager on his cell to make sure the place was secured. Then he went out to the scooter. It was just about dawn and in the space of one night his orderly life had been blown all to hell. As far as he could tell it was all because of this man. Rudy was waiting for him, it might have been simply if he'd taken the opportunity to flee.

"Have you got a place?" Sandy asked.

"You want to go there?"

"I have to go somewhere. And I need to get some sleep so I can think straight."

There was a sort of broken look on Rudy's face. It made Sandy realize how little reason the man had to help him. "There was nothing in the onri. But it looked like maybe there was some kind of marking along the inside of the case. A guy I know at the gallery, he's going to send pictures. That's all I

can do. So, we can go to some place with an internet connection and pick download the images."

"We'll go to my place," Rudy said. "You drive, I'll give directions."

There was a tentative sort of truce as Sandy stepped over and turned the key in the ignition. He was braced for it that a palpable, preternatural spark he had felt when the touched before.

Rudy directed him through the street and out over the bridge to the suburbs. They turned into the driveway of a surprisingly prosaic cottage surrounded by a tidy lawn and neatly trimmed hedge. Rudy stepped off, reaching for his keys. The warmth where they touched started to slowly fade and Sandy felt a deep urge to reform the connection. But with all that was going on...

Inside it was all dark wood and antique furniture. A laptop sat waiting on a mahogany desk. Rudy open the screen and tapped on the keys, bringing it to life.

"I'll make up the bed," Rudy said. "We can talk when you've had some rest."

He sounded not only physically tired but weary of grappling with his own tumultuous thoughts and feelings. Like he didn't think the pictures would answer his questions, or he didn't think Sandy would come through.

Sandy sat down and quickly registered the gmail address he had given Kerry as a new account using an imaginary name and address. Maybe he was being paranoid but it didn't hurt to be cautious. He left it open so Rudy would see the email as soon as it came in. He came through to the small

bedroom where Rudy was dropping a towel on the end of the bed and then went over to draw the curtains against the brightening morning.

"There's a bathroom through there," Rudy said, indicating the rather obvious door to one side of the room. If you need anything, give a shout, I'll just be out here." Sandy hesitated in the doorway and as Rudy was coming out they brushed closed together. "I pulled you into all this," Rudy added. "You don't owe me anything, you never did."

"And I'm sorry if I screwed things up for you, Rudy. I just ... I just don't know if I can trust *this*." He made a vague gesture to refer to everything that has passed between them in a few short hours. Let alone vague indication that Rudy was some kind of supernatural vassal that unknown, dangerous people were looking for.

Rudy stood so close Sandy could feel his breath.

"I don't know exactly what *this* is," Rudy said. He reached out one hand, touching Sandy gently on the cheek. "I don't even know what it is I am really or why I feel this thing between us. Maybe you are wise to be careful. But I, I am so tired of being alone. I have always felt like I was meant to be with someone, to belong *to* someone. But take your time now, and rest."

Rudy pulled himself away with visible effort, and went through the doorway into the darkened living room.

Sandy had been on a double shift and now had been up all night. The bed looked damned good even if he was a bit guilty about putting Rudy out. He just shucked off his shoes, jeans and jacket and slipped under the cool, clean duvet.

He felt wretchedly tired, but instead of sleeping he lay in a fugue. The bed felt cold and empty all around him. A bedside clock showed square red numerals ticking by minute after minute after minute. Whatever, whoever Rudy was the man was a way out of the crushing loneliness, the stifled life Sandy had been living. And deep down he had to admit, he trusted Rudy. He trusted him and he was drawn to him.

It was a very quiet sound over the bare wooden floorboards. A slight tug on the blankets, and a small brown head poked inquisitively over the edge of the bed. Without even thinking, Sandy laughed. "We don't you join me?" he said.

The rat lost its grip and dropped back down onto the floor. There was a cascade of other footsteps and tugs on the sheets. Small lumps budged up the blanket at the foot of the bed. There was a tickle of whiskers along side his legs, small clawed feet trooping up both sides of his body.

"I hate to tell you, Rudy. But this is so not sexy."

Then a wash of energy flowed over him like a warm, electric breeze and Rudy formed right over him, the blanket caped over his back, on all fours over Sandy. There was just enough light filtering through a chink in the heavy curtains to show his pale, lanky body, his intense yes.

"Better?"

"Better," Sandy agreed. "You look happier."

"That friend of yours came through. The pictures show writing all over the inside of the box. Old writing, it's hard to get more that the gist, it's faded and very archaic. But it's

about shape changers, rats, ghosts who obeys a family, a lineage. It's about what I am."

"What you are is *gaikokujin*," Sandy said. "I may not have all that much interested in my mother's people but she used to tell me bed time stories about men who became animals. I thought she was just playing pretend but now I wonder just how much she believed in the old folklore she told me."

"Yukio and spirits in flesh," Rudy added. "I've read about it a lot. They have an instinct to blend in, to become what is around them. I was a dumped baby, a ward of the state. I don't know where I came from and the only clue I have is what I can do. But I've always known there was a reason and now, thanks to you, I am that much closer to understanding what I am."

"Is it so important? Why can't you be what you are here, who you are *now* with me?"

Rudy leaned down; Sandy could feel the solid presence of his body, the touch of his cock long and hard. "What I am here and now is the best I have ever been, the happiest I have ever been. Tell me you don't feel it too, together we are something complete. Even if we don't yet know what it is. I just know somehow that I am meant to be with you, and only you."

Sandy felt Rudy's cock nudging his stomach. "I don't think..." he wanted to say something about how this while strange magical thing didn't have anything to do with him. But he was having trouble hanging onto that thought. "I'm hoping you have a condom in here somewhere."

Rudy leaned down on one elbow. "Thanks to you I've learned new trick," he said.

He lifted his free hand out of the blanket. And with a shivering motion it dropped free. A small brown rat dropped down onto the sheet.

"Damn," sandy exclaimed. "That's going to take some getting used to."

The rats leapt nimbly onto the nightstand and pushed the top off a small wicker container. It returned with a string of half a dozen noticeably dusty condoms in their foil wrappers. The creature merged back into Rudy's body, leaving him holding the condoms between thumb and forefinger.

"Do me a favor," Sandy said. "No more rats just for the next little while, okay?"

"I think I can do that."

Rudy tore the packet with his teeth and reached down. Sandy felt every inch where their bodies touched, a whole long swath of Rudy's warm skin pressing against him from just at his left nipple, down his side and stomach, and Rudy's eager sheathed cock rested against his hip.

"This is something that is meant to be," Rudy said.

"Why don't you convince me?"

Rudy gave a devilish smile, apparently relishing the challenge. He slid one knee between Sandy's legs and stooped to kissed him hard, with a thin, probing tongue. Sandy's sense was swamped by his body's response like an electric shock convulsing him with sweet pain. Rudy pinned him down, holding his shoulder, exploring his body with firm fingers and tongue.

Sandy reached up for him, feeling his soft skin over long lean muscles and that long cock sliding, pushing against him. It was like Rudy needed to touch and trace every inch in his body, claiming it for his own until little else remain but....

Spreading his legs Sandy invited Rudy in, raising his thigh and gripping his knees around the man's long, lean torso. It had been a long time, a long time but even now Sandy knew this would be different.

Rudy reached down, positioning himself. He slid in so tight but so easy, so perfect. Sandy moaned. He released the last of his reservation like a handful of balloons, floating away on a tide of pure, uncanny pleasure the likes of which he had never felt before. With each long, thrust his body parted and sparked with waves of wet, warm pleasure.

It was as if everything he'd ever yearned for from sex was suddenly, tangibly possible. Rudy possessed him, sure and careful, hitting a deep sweet spot inside him that made him so hard he trembled to come. He would never have believed it was possible to feel this way, and he knew he would do anything not to have to give it up.

They coupled together long and slow and building until Rudy jerked and came with what sounded like a exasperated hiss. He pulled free, groping down until his hand settled on Sandy's hard cock. He stooped down and settled his mouth over it tight and very slick.

Sandy clutched at the mattress as he came so hard it felt like it came from some place a mile beneath the earth not just from his own meager body.

* * * *

Rudy lay in the darkness. Sandy's slight form lay beside him breathing the long deep breaths of sleep. Even after years of study the words inside the old onri were too obscure for him to decipher immediately but he looked forward to the challenge. He believed he already had the gist of it.

The old family, the descendent of the swan princess had as their servants the spirits, the demon rats. He had seen references to it already here and there and had feared the implications. Was he meant to be little more than the pet or servant of some privileged fool?

But finally, slowly he had realized, it was Sandy. He was the one. And it seemed he didn't even know it himself. It was just right. It was perfect. He could belong to this man without a moments hesitation of regret, in fact he welcomed it. For all that Sandy might take a little more convincing.

He looked down as the dim light described the subtle planes of Sandy's symmetrical face. His own swan prince, so sweet and honest, strong and sincere. And maybe there was darkness all around them. It was too much to be a coincidence, the onri coming out from hiding and Sandy standing right there in the room with it when he was drawn in by it.

Someone out there had some very definite plans not only for Rudy but for Sandy too. Someone who knew so much more about what was happening. The odds were not very good that they were going to get a nice, peaceful happily ever after, at all, and certainly not soon. But somehow he knew

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they were meant to be together, and together they would be strong enough to face whatever the future might bring.

The End

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