

the
**Wolf
Queen**



Sierra Dafoe

Changrins Press

Call of the Wild 2: The Wolf Queen

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In the world of the Shumani, there is only one female per pack. She is their umma Shumani, their queen. But with the privilege of being protected by the handsome wolf-shifters who love her comes the responsibility to keep the pack intact -- and when Sarah Hartwell encounters Kar, the dark, savage son of the renegade Hunt, it's a responsibility she's not sure she can live up to.

The way he watches her as if he wants to eat her alive sends tingles down her spine. At the same time it frightens her, all the more so because she's never seen him assume human form. But Sarah is determined to find a way to bring Kar into the loving circle shared by herself, Larak and Kam...

Chapter One

They were coming up the slope toward him, their laughter strange and muffled in the cold, still air. Although he could hear them, Kar's vision was obscured by fat, heavy snowflakes falling from the iron-gray clouds, and he could see little but the stony slope directly beneath the ledge.

The narrow track that ran alongside the creek was still empty and the creek itself, chuckling and roaring as it tumbled down from the heights, was the only thing which seemed to move in all that vastness. But soon -- all too soon for the tension roiling in his belly -- Kar saw flickers of motion among the trees below, and caught snatches of comments passed back and forth.

This'd be easier on four legs, you know.

"Well, I haven't got four legs, have I?"

So that means Kam and I have to suffer too?

The ground was already white with snow. Kar heard one of the two Shumani slipping in it, a deep grunt of exasperation, and again the pealing laughter of the woman.

The human woman.

Sarah.

He'd only seen her the one time, when Hunt had led him to the clearing down by the lake to attack her. Why his father wanted her killed hadn't been a question Kar had concerned himself with -- the moment he'd seen his brother lying dead at Larak's feet, everything else had ceased to matter. But the woman had confused him, her scent ripe and heavy in his nostrils even as he'd sought to tear her throat out. She'd fought him, holding him at bay until Larak had come to her rescue.

Rak, Larak's father, had been killed by Hunt who had seized control of the Shumani. That much, at least, Kar had known -- but what he hadn't known was that his own brother, Kren, had helped Hunt kill Larak's den-brother, Dal. The gentle gray wolf had been Kar's only friend, and in his rage over Dal's death Kar had stood aside as Larak had battled Hunt, finally throwing the massive black wolf from the very ledge where Kar now lay, forty feet above the forest.

Not for the first time, Kar eyed the empty air below him, considering the plunge. It would be painful, but it would also be quick. And what, truly, remained for him here? He wasn't one of the pack, not really -- he was the son of an interloper, gotten on a simple wolf bitch Kar could remember only as a cringing shadow who'd nursed him, flinching every time Hunt had come near. He'd always known that, but it hadn't been until the night Larak had beaten Hunt that he'd discovered how different from him they truly were.

They were Shumani, able to take the shape of humans, while he... he didn't know what he was.

Late autumn color still blazed in the leaves, peeking from beneath the damp, clinging snow. The lake itself, five miles distant, was no more than a sullen gray flatness beneath the lowering clouds. The snow was tapering off now, fading to an occasional flake here and there, and Kar watched it, trying to get a handle on his growing nervousness and sense of dislocation.

He'd never known the others could change shape. It was like seeing a tree turn into a turtle, or watching a cornered hare sprout wings and suddenly fly away. It made him even more of an outsider than he'd been before -- and turned the pack he'd known all his life into something so foreign he could hardly grasp it.

They came into view at last, scrambling up the last steep stretch of the path to emerge, puffing and panting, onto the broad granite ledge looking east toward the lake. Larak dropped the sack he was carrying and straightened, his broad chest rising and falling as he inhaled deeply, catching his breath.

His hair -- as gold and gleaming as his amber eyes -- tumbled halfway down his back, and Larak pushed it back absently as he gazed out over the rolling vista. Behind him, the woman helped Kam, still limping from the wounds inflicted by a wolf trap, up onto the ledge. Kam, too, was in human form, strong and clean-limbed with a fall of silken hair as black as Kar's own fur.

Tension knotted tight in Kar's belly at the sight of them, a wave of tangled emotions hitting him like a slap -- and beneath it, something that felt disturbingly like envy. But the woman bundled in her strange, bulky coverings seemed even more foreign than they, as different a creature from the two naked men as Kar himself.

Unlike him, though, she was completely at ease with the two Shumani. Her movements were smooth and self-assured, her smile warm as she laughed at Kam's complaints about her assistance. "I don't care, Kam. If I'd let you go and you fell, I'd just have had to climb back down to get you. The only thing hurt is your pride, so quit bitching."

Grinning, she turned toward Larak -- and then checked abruptly, her smile fading into uneasiness at the sight of Kar.

Black and silent, Kar held himself motionless, his eyes narrowed to slits as they studied each other.

It's all right, Sarah. Kar's not going to make any trouble. Larak took a step toward her, sliding a reassuring arm around her waist -- but even as he did he gave Kar a hard, warning glance. Are you?

No, he wasn't. However much his world might have altered, some things remained true -- and the truth was that Larak was now the alpha. He'd challenged Hunt openly and defeated him. Kar had watched that fight -- watched it, and refused to interfere at his father's command -- and he knew in his bones he was no match for Larak.

Besides, what would be the point? Unlike his father and brother, he'd never had any desire to control or humiliate the pack Hunt had taken over... which made him, he supposed, as different from Hunt and Kren as he was from the two handsome Shumani.

With a heavy sigh, Kar dropped his head to his paws, his gaze shifting again to the long, empty drop beyond the ledge.

Interloper. Outcast. Half-breed. Cold and silent, he stayed where he was as Kamuk, Kam's father, appeared from the small opening in the cliff face, coming out of the den to greet the others.

The old wolf limped haltingly, much as his son did, but his rheumy gaze rested on Sarah with a quiet satisfaction. The time has come again. Good. I am glad you are here, human daughter.

The tension in Kar's gut clenched even tighter as Sarah knelt down by Kamuk, caressing his ears and graying muzzle. He could smell Larak's scent on her, and Kam's - they'd mated with her, obviously. The thought should have revolted him, but instead sparked a heaviness in his loins which disturbed him even more than Kam's and Larak's unfamiliar appearance.

Battered by unfamiliar sensations, he retreated into contempt, sneering inwardly at Kamuk's obvious pleasure in Sarah's caresses. Were they all to become dogs now, those pitiful, debased descendants of wolves, cringing and fawning beneath a human's rule? But his ridicule couldn't ease the hollow hunger inside him, a hunger which only grew as he watched the woman and the tired old wolf. They were so easy together, so comfortable, accepting each other in a way that Kar himself had never been accepted, not by his father who had despised him for being soft, not by the Shumani...

Only Dal had ever treated him with kindness. Dal, who had been both Larak's and Kam's den-brother. Dal, who had treated him with the same easy affection this woman, this human, was now bestowing on the old wolf.

A pain he'd never fully acknowledged knifed through Kar, and he turned his head away, unable to watch any longer.

Well, he heard Larak say, I'd better get the rest of the supplies up here before it gets dark.

"I'll come with you."

Kar looked back to see Sarah straighten, but Larak shook his head, taking her in his arms. It's all right. Kam will stay with you.

Kam raised an eyebrow, his gaze flicking from Larak to Kar who narrowed his eyes, suddenly angry at the other's obvious mistrust. I could have helped Hunt that night, Kam. I could have helped him kill Larak.

I know. Kam watched him steadily. Larak told me. So why didn't you, Kar?

Does it matter?

The two of them were speaking quietly, their words meant only for each other, but Larak turned from Sarah to look down at Kar, his amber eyes thoughtful. Yes, he said slowly. Yes, I think it does, if you want to stay. Then his gaze sharpened, the unspoken threat in them obvious to see. I'll trust you, Kar. For now. Don't disappoint me.

Turning on his heel, he headed back down the slope, his long, strange, human legs swinging in firm, measured strides.

Kar shifted on the cold granite, uneasy in both body and mind. Did he want to stay? At that moment, he honestly couldn't tell. He felt jumpy, unsettled, unable to sort out the emotions tugging at him.

Glancing back at Sarah, who had knelt again to put her arms around Kamuk's neck, Kar felt his lip curl back in an involuntary snarl -- but the restless heat in his loins flared higher each time he looked at her.

And that disturbed him most of all.

Chapter Two

Snuggled warmly against Larak's broad shoulder, Sarah smiled into the darkness. The dry leaves coating the floor of the den rustled slightly as Kam shifted behind her, pressing closer against her back with his arm around her waist.

The den had proved to be a spacious cave, with more than enough room for three humans, two wolves, and the supplies she'd liberated from the cabin before burning it. While Larak had toted them up from the lake, she'd investigated her new home and discovered a fissure in the back wall leading upward, creating a natural chimney, which was good -- unlike her new pack-mates, she couldn't avoid the cold by turning into a wolf.

Tomorrow she'd build a hearth, and with fire and the foodstuffs she'd brought for the eight months she'd planned to spend studying the wolves, she'd be as comfortable here as she would have been in the cabin.

More so, actually. She'd never counted on the comfort being snuggled between two gorgeous naked men could provide. Sarah sighed deeply, warm and content. Soon the snows would deepen, locking the empty, rolling wilderness of northern Manitoba in a world of white. Five months of storms and bitter cold and darkness -- the lantern she'd taken from the cabin would run out of kerosene long before winter was over.

But even if she could have still gone back, she wouldn't. She was needed here. More than needed -- she was loved.

Her smile broadened, and she felt Kam shift again. His hand trailed lazily over her belly, just brushing the underside of her breasts. It sent a tingle through her, a tingle deepened by the hardness of his erection against the curve of her butt. She held herself still, a curious throb of arousal beating in her crotch as he pressed tighter against her, his shaft nudging between the cheeks of her ass.

Her hand rested on the warm expanse of Larak's chest, and she realized suddenly he wasn't asleep, either -- his breathing was a little too shallow, a little too fast. She moved nervously, and her hand sliding downward brushed against the velvety fullness of his cockhead. Hurriedly, she jerked her hand back up, cursing herself -- why oh why had she ever agreed to sleep naked? Even under the blanket she'd pilfered from the cabin, she felt horribly exposed. Tense in a way she hadn't been with them before.

But before, they'd been alone. Now, try as she might, she couldn't shake her awareness of the two wolves lying not eight feet away.

Old Kamuk's breathing was deep and rather loud, with a slight whuffle to it that might almost be called a snore. But the other one -- Kar -- was utterly silent. Silent as he'd been since she'd arrived. He hadn't spoken a word to her, much less taken human shape as even Kamuk had done briefly to hug her. In comparison, Kar had barely seemed to acknowledge her existence -- and yet she'd been intensely aware of his presence, like an uneasy prickle at the back of her neck the entire time.

She doubted she'd ever forget the way Kar had lunged at her, snarling, or the way he'd leapt on her from behind when she'd turned to save Larak from Hunt's fierce attack. Her back still bore the half-healed scratches from Kar's claws, and she shivered at the memory of him holding her down, his weight pressing against her, his hot breath on her neck...

Cold? Kam whispered in her mind, drawing her closer as his hand slid up to fondle her breasts.

"Kam, stop that!" She slapped at his hand, and felt Larak's cheek move against her forehead as he grinned into the darkness.

I think she needs persuading, Kam.

Kam voiced his agreement in a low, wordless growl.

"Damn it, I'm serious, you two! We're not alone, here."

They're asleep, Kam murmured, nuzzling her neck. Larak, damn him, dipped his head down to brush his full, soft lips lightly over her own. The pulsing in her groin

ratcheted up a notch, and she let out a breathy moan as Larak slid his agile tongue into her mouth.

Behind her, Kam glided his cock up and down against her tailbone, the teasing drag of his shaft between her ass cheeks increasing the unfamiliar tension inside her. She felt hollow, empty in a way she'd never felt before, hungry for something she didn't know how to name. His hands cupped her breasts, his fingers tugging gently at her nipples, rolling them between his fingertips until they stood up, taut and aching.

Taking her hand in his own, Larak led it back down to the warm fullness of his shaft, his breathing deepening as she wrapped her fingers around it. It was big enough that her fingers didn't quite touch, thicker even than Kam's. Thick enough that having Larak inside her was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. She squeezed it, feeling the swollen rim of his tip against her fingers, and the throbbing in her groin spiraled up into heat at his deep, hungry groan.

His left arm was still pillowing her head, but Larak raised his right hand to her face, drawing it tighter against his as his tongue explored deeper, claiming her mouth with a thoroughness that left her light-headed. Sliding one leg over his thigh, she pressed the furred mound of her sex against his hipbone, rocking against it.

Behind her, Kam kneaded her breasts, his breath hot and harsh in her ear as he nuzzled her neck, his thrusts against her growing harder, more urgent. Then, unexpectedly, he grabbed her hips and lifted her up onto Larak so she was straddling him, leaning over his chest with one arm braced on either side of his shoulders. Larak bent his head forward, capturing one aching nipple between his lips as Kam, still holding her hips, rocked her back and forth along the hard, hot ridge of Larak's erection.

She could barely breathe, let alone think. The feel of Larak's cock sliding between her folds, mercilessly teasing her swollen clit, was almost enough to send her over the edge right there. Kam, moving to kneel between Larak's thighs, pressed her down against Larak until she was lying atop him, her arms wrapped loosely around Larak's neck. Trailing a slow line of kisses down the curve of her back, Kam kneaded her ass

cheeks, spreading them wide -- and Sarah gasped, a bolt of pure lust searing through her as she felt his tongue flick across her tight, puckered entrance.

She froze in shock, her pulse roaring in her ears. Nobody had ever done that before. Hell, it was nothing she'd even so much as imagined. Beneath her, Larak thrust upward, shoving his cock even harder against her clit. The pressure forced her up against Kam's lashing tongue, and Sarah moaned, slumping bonelessly, giving herself over to the exquisite sensation. Tiny, whimpering gasps spilled from her throat and she arched her back, wanting more, wanting... something.

Kam's tongue darted at her over and over till Sarah thought she might faint with the pleasure of it. Larak thrust against her mons, working his cock against her, then lifted her slightly, fitting his swollen head against her slick, ready entrance. Tossing her head in delirium, she pushed herself down against him eagerly, but he held her hips, teasing her with small, nudging thrusts that only increased her arousal.

You want that, Sarah? Larak's mind-voice held a deep, sensual chuckle. You want me inside you?

"Yes," she murmured, hardly able to form the word.

Or perhaps what you want is both of us inside you.

Sarah stiffened, fire rippling through her at the mere suggestion. Her inner muscles clenched, and she held her breath as Kam straightened behind her, sinking back onto his knees, his fingers playing through the wetness trickling from her folds around Larak's cockhead and spreading it up over her tight, sensitive opening.

Do you, Sarah? Kam's voice was hesitant, almost breathless with need. Do you want that?

God, yes. But somehow she couldn't say it. Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment at the idea of admitting to such a desire. Instead, she pressed her breasts tighter against Larak's chest, feeling the soft golden hair covering his pecs tickle her nipples, and raised her ass higher into the air.

Kam's fingers clenched on her ass cheeks, and she heard him groan harshly in sudden hunger. Gripping her hips, he worked her over Larak's cock, the thick, bulbous

head penetrating slightly and then pulling back out until she whimpered in need. Then Kam pushed her downward, hard and fast, and she cried aloud as Larak's cock stretched her open, filling her until her head swam with bliss.

Only then did Kam rise to his knees behind her, guiding his cock between her uptilted cheeks and pressing the tip lightly against her other entrance.

Sarah moaned, pinioned between them. She could feel Kam's hand moving, stroking his cock, and she closed her eyes, picturing it -- those long, agile fingers caressing his shaft, stroking it as he prodded gently against her. Beneath her, Larak rocked his hips lightly, his cock seated inside her all the way to the root.

Slowly, Kam.

I know. Kam's response was almost a growl, the need in it so palpable Sarah bit her lip in anticipation. Kam's other hand cupped one ass cheek, spreading it wide, and Sarah hissed lightly as he pressed his hips forward, working his cock slowly into her tight opening. Then she groaned as the head popped past her tight ring of muscle, a groan echoed by Kam as he froze behind her, his hand clamping on her hip. I... Oh, Sarah! Does it hurt?

She nodded, then shook her head. It did, a little -- but the sensation was intoxicating. "More. Just a little, Kam..."

She felt his fingers trembling as he penetrated deeper, one inch, two... Then he froze again, his breath loud and ragged in the darkness, and Sarah felt a first spurt of liquid warmth trickle from him.

Carefully, he reached between her thighs, gathering more of her juices and spreading them around where he stretched her open. He gripped her hips again, rocking her forward so her mons dragged across Larak's pubic bone, then back. Sarah cried out as Larak's cock speared her, and Kam slid another inch deeper into her ass. Again?

"Oh God, yes," she moaned. Her clit throbbed against Larak's groin. Her breasts were mashed against his chest. Kam's strong hands urged her forward, then dragged her back hard, slamming her down onto Larak's cock. It was huge, filling her utterly,

and the added pressure of Kam seated halfway inside her made white fire ripple along her nerves. She felt weightless, boneless, her body delectably trapped between them. Larak's breath was harsh and fast in her ear, his hands sliding between them to squeeze her breasts.

Take her, Kam. Take us both, den-brother. I'm so close...

"So am I," Sarah whispered. "Oh please, Kam."

She could picture Kam's stern, ascetic face clenched tight in concentration, could visualize the muscles in his strong forearms bunching as he worked her up and down Larak's throbbing shaft, his own cock sinking deeper into her with each stroke. Her pulse thundered in her ears, her orgasm hovering like a storm on the verge of breaking. She could feel Kam's tension in the grip of his fingers, the tremble in his hips as he fought to hold himself back...

She didn't want him to hold back. She wanted to shatter that iron control, to hear him crying out in abandon as he came inside her. Arching her back, she pressed her ass upward, increasing the pressure on her clit at the same time. "Fuck me, Kam," she said hoarsely.

He groaned, his grip tightening on her as he surged forward, filling her. The sensation of two cocks spreading her open was indescribable, and she cried out again and again as they both thrust inside her, hungry and urgent. She could feel her peak coming, lifting her up...

It shattered inside her, wave after wave of ecstasy singing along her nerve endings as her two Shumani lovers gave in to their own orgasms, their groans harsh with need as they pumped inside of her. Their cocks pulsed, spilling their seed in hot, liquid bursts, and she moaned against Larak's chest, her head lolling weakly as Kam collapsed atop her, panting.

For a long time they lay simply catching their breaths, slowly becoming aware again of the quiet cave around them. Then Sarah laughed as Kamuk's loud breathing deepened into a full snore. "He could sleep through anything, couldn't he?"

Yes. Kam's one-word reply was heavy with chagrin.

Sarah laughed again, then stopped abruptly as a soft rustle of leaves reminded her Kamuk wasn't the only one in the cave with them. She froze, her cheeks burning with sudden mortification at the sound of Kar rising from his place near the wall and slipping out into the night.

Kar had been awake the whole time. She was sure of it. Oh God, how was she ever going to face him in the morning?

Chapter Three

In the morning, though, Kar still hadn't returned. Emerging from the den, Sarah breathed a sigh of relief to find only Kamuk on the ledge outside. The old wolf was sprawled in a patch of snow, enjoying the warmth of the rising sun.

He turned his head, his amber eyes smiling. Is my son still asleep?

Sarah nodded. "Him and Larak, yeah."

Lazybones. Come and sit with me, human daughter.

Carefully, Sarah lowered herself to a seat on the ledge, looking out over the scene. The morning was calm and clear, the new snow sparkling in the sunlight. In the distance the lake was now a flat patch of white, surrounded by hills that still blazed with autumn colors. Even as she watched, a heavy load of snow slid from a tree below her, falling with a muffled whump to the forest floor.

Kamuk's words had seemed to imply that he wanted to talk to her, yet the old wolf said nothing, merely turning as she had to enjoy the view. Not that Sarah was enjoying it, exactly. She kept finding herself scanning the trees, looking for a flash of black or a sign of movement. Finally she asked, "Have you seen Kar this morning?"

No.

Gone all night and still not back? "Maybe he's left, then."

Perhaps. Perhaps not. Kamuk looked up at her cannily. Would you prefer it if he was gone?

Yes, she would. But she didn't want to admit that. Even just thinking about the black wolf made her writhe in embarrassment, imagining him lying there listening as she and Kam and Larak made love. Her tension made her answer somewhat tartly, "It's not really up to me, is it?"

Kamuk blinked in surprise, then studied her thoughtfully. How much has my son told you?

“About the Shumani, you mean? Or about Kar?”

Both. Either.

Sarah paused. Not a whole lot, now that she thought about it. Of course, at first Kam had been pretending to be simply a wolf, just as Larak had been pretending to be simply a man. By the time she'd learned the truth, Hunt had attacked them -- and she hadn't had a lot of opportunity since then to ask questions. She shrugged. “Not much.”

Kamuk nodded, a motion which still looked distinctly odd to her on a wolf. Then he settled himself more comfortably on the ledge, his gaze scanning the distance as he spoke.

Long ago, the Wolf Spirit came to a young Cree maiden. Moved by his strength and his wildness, she chose to lie with him, and that, it is said, was the beginning of the Shumani. She became the umma Shumani, the Great Mother of our people.

Even now, that is the way of it with us -- like the Great Mother before her, it is the umma, the mother, who chooses. Who to mate with, who to keep with her... Unlike our wolf brothers, it is truly the female who unites the pack. She is the center of all, the one who says what must be done. So you see, Kamuk added, looking up at her, it is up to you whether Kar stays or goes. You are our umma Shumani. No one will ever question what you choose to do.

“But doesn't Kar have a choice?”

Yes, Kamuk replied. And no. He can choose to leave, yes. Every Shumani has that right. But we are not a people given to solitude, human daughter.

“Couldn't he...” Sarah broke off, unsure what to say. “Couldn't he find another pack?”

Perhaps. There are not many of us though. Your people hunt us, just as they hunt the wolves. He would have to travel many miles, and then there is no certainty another pack would accept him.

“He frightens me,” Sarah whispered.

I feel sorry for him.

She looked at the old wolf, startled. "Why?"

Kamuk shrugged. Because he is not truly one thing or the other.

"What do you mean?"

His mother was a wolf Hunt had captured for pleasure, and gotten on her by force.

"Oh, my God," Sarah breathed.

Kamuk nodded again. Yes. She had no words as we do, but we could all hear her fear. Remembered fury burned in the old wolf's eyes. She died soon after Kar and his brother were born. Her spirit was broken, and she had nothing to live for.

He sighed, his grizzled head slumping, and Sarah wondered briefly what ancient griefs of his own he'd been reminded of. Then he resumed his tale.

I remember how Kar used to be as a pup, always tagging along after Dal like a second tail. His brother and father had no interest in us -- no interest beyond torment and humiliation, at least. But Kar was always curious, always following, always wanting...

Staring down at the forest, Sarah murmured, "Always wanting to belong."

She knew a little something about that. More than a little, if she were honest with herself. Growing up, she'd always been too tall, too gawky to appeal to the boys around her -- so she'd put on a scowl, convincing herself she just wasn't interested. And she'd never been able to act like the girls around her, silly and giggling and helpless. For years she'd pretended to despise them, hiding her envy and loneliness, convinced she simply lacked whatever essential component it was that would make her "feminine" enough to be attractive.

Well, Larak and Kam had definitely put paid to that idea. She couldn't help smiling fondly at the thought, but at the same time it dawned on her how much her newfound self-assurance had to do with simply being accepted. Being loved. Belonging.

She thought of the dark, silent presence who'd watched her yesterday on the ledge, silent and wary, always keeping his distance...

He watches to see if you will accept him.

As well he might, Sarah thought tartly, considering she still bore the scars from his claws on her back. And yet it was easy to imagine the way Kar might once have

been, a dark, shy, awkward wolf pup with the same unspoken hunger in his heart she herself had lived with for years.

She gazed down at the trees below her and gnawed her lip. The morning was bright and warm around her, full of the trickle of melting snow. The sound made her lazy, the warmth of the sun adding to the lassitude she felt after last night's lovemaking.

She didn't really want to go after Kar, but...

Unlike our wolf brothers, it is truly the female who unites the pack.

Sarah nodded to herself. She didn't want to, but it was her job. It was the responsibility she'd accepted when she'd joined the pack, even if she hadn't known it. She spared a moment's pique at Larak for not explaining things more -- but even if she'd known all it entailed, Sarah knew, she'd still have chosen to come.

Then she clambered to her feet, brushing snow off her butt as she did. "All right. I'm going to go talk to him. If I can find him."

Kamuk nodded in obvious approval. It shouldn't be hard. I suspect he isn't too far away.

Chapter Four

That all depended on how one measured far, Sarah mused ruefully as she paused to lean against a tree, panting. On the one hand, the tracks she followed never wandered more than a few miles away from the ledge. On the other, Kar's meandering path had looped in all directions -- south, west, twice toward the lake, then off north for more than a mile before switching back on itself -- until she was cursing roundly and sweat was dripping into her eyes. Judging by the burn in her calves, she must have hiked a good ten miles. Most of it in circles.

Aggravated, she frowned down at the prints crisscrossing through the damp snow before her. What on earth was that damn wolf doing? Was he purposefully trying to throw her off his trail?

No. That made no sense. It presumed that Kar knew she would come after him -- which was pretty far-fetched, considering she'd had no intention of doing anything of the sort. But in that case...

Grimly, Sarah pushed her sweaty hair back, peeled off her parka and tied it around her waist, and doggedly started following the tracks again.

* * *

Four miles away, Kar nosed at the charred wreckage of the camp by the lake, feeling foolish. What was he doing here? What did he hope to find? The tang of creosote stung his nostrils, overpowering everything else, and he sat back on his haunches to gaze around.

There -- over by the tree line. That was where he and Hunt had first attacked Larak and the woman. Kar hunched his shoulders, remembering how she'd whirled to face him, her eyes both frightened and blazing with determination. And he... He'd done his best to kill her. If it hadn't been for Larak, he would have succeeded.

Guilt prickled inside him, but he did his best to ignore it. His brother's body was gone, dragged into the trees and picked apart by scavengers, most likely, or perhaps Kam or Larak had slid it into the lake. Kar turned his head, gazing out over the frozen water hidden beneath its thin mantle of snow.

There was nothing to be seen, no knowledge to be gleaned from either that flat white surface or the fire-blackened logs before him. Nothing except maybe proof of how thoroughly the human female had committed herself to the pack, erasing every trace of where she'd gone and any hope of turning back.

The human. The woman. Sarah.

Every time he thought of her, the unfamiliar heat in his loins flared up like a fire in the wind. Listening to the three of them making love in the darkness had been torturous -- her high, ecstatic whimpers, the heavy breaths and deep, hungry groans of his pack-mates as they'd found their own release. He'd held himself motionless, pretending to be asleep until at last he'd been unable to bear it any longer and had stumbled out into the night, arousal beating like a hammer in his groin.

Even now it pulsed inside him, goading him, making him edgy. His balls ached with a steady, throbbing fire. He'd meant to leave -- he should have left -- but every time he'd tried, something had dragged him back to stand beneath the ledge, staring up at the blank face of the cliff above him and imagining the three of them inside it, still making love or else sprawled entangled in the exhausted aftermath.

He wasn't one of them. He could never be one of them. Trapped in wolf form, he had no way even to relieve the hunger savaging his body. It consumed him, turning his gaze inward till he didn't see the snow or the lake or the charred remains of the camp -- all he saw was the blackness inside the den, all he heard were the small, panting sounds of Sarah's arousal, all he smelled was the warm, cloying scent of her, strange and irresistible and utterly intoxicating...

"Kar?"

The world snapped back into place around him so swiftly it was like being hacked by a knife. He almost whined aloud at the pain lancing through his groin, his

shaft hard as iron against his belly as he whirled, his hackles rising... and saw her standing there, her face flushed with exertion, her tangled hair falling down around the smooth skin of her neck. Sweat dampened the T-shirt she wore beneath a flannel shirt, making it cling to the full, ripe curves of her breasts.

Silently, Kar groaned, fighting down a fresh throb of arousal. Stupid, stupid! Why hadn't he left? He could have been twenty miles away by now, safe... safe and free of this maddening need that made the world swim around him as she walked closer, her soft brown eyes watching him warily.

"Kar, what on earth are you doing down here? I was looking for you."

Why? he asked, although his belly sank in sudden apprehension. He knew why -- she was going to tell him to leave. Of course.

But why should that upset him when he'd intended to leave all along?

Unexpectedly, though, she smiled, her lips curving slightly as she looked down at him. "It's about time you talked to me. For a while I was wondering if you even could."

Cursing himself, Kar slit his eyes. He should have stayed silent. There was nothing good that could come of talking to her. He watched her narrowly as she came closer, seating herself with a weary sigh on the charred logs of the camp. She flapped her shirt, giving him a flash of her smooth belly as she forced cool air up under the fabric, then brushed her sweat-dampened hair back out of her eyes.

She was so close he could practically lean over and press his body against her thigh.

What do you want? He didn't even try to keep the snarl from his voice, and saw her stiffen slightly. Good -- he wanted her to be scared of him, to pull back, to leave so her maddening presence didn't torment him so, didn't confuse him...

"I wanted to talk to you. To get to know you better." She paused, biting the inside of her lip, then plunged ahead. "I wanted to see if there's some way to work this out."

Work what out, human?

"This. You. I mean, this is your home, Kar. I don't want to drive you out of it."

As you did last night? He stared at her, and saw her blush with embarrassment, her gaze shifting away. For some reason, the sight excited him further -- it was way too easy to imagine her naked before him, her eyes downcast, her cheeks pink with mingled desire and mortification... Biting back a groan, Kar dragged his unruly thoughts back to the present.

"I... I'm sorry about that, Kar. I mean..." Her words faltered, and she sat silent a moment. Firmly, Kar kept his own silence -- whatever she wanted, she could say it with no help from him. "I know it must have been... uncomfortable for you."

Uncomfortable? That was putting it mildly. It was taking all his concentration to control the trembling in his limbs, to fight back the urge to throw her down in the snow, right now, and mount her...

"I just... Kar, are you all right?"

All right? he snapped in disbelief. His entire world had fallen to pieces and there she sat not four feet away, reeking of sex, utterly unaware of how thoroughly she'd pushed him out of his own life. He was trembling, he realized with helpless fury. He didn't seem able to stop it.

"What is it? Are you cold? Here." Quickly, she untied her parka from around her waist and, sliding to her knees in the snow beside him, she draped it over his back. Her hands brushed his sable fur and he stiffened, electric fire zinging along his nerves. She froze, almost as if she felt the contact spark between them, her eyes widening as they stared into his, slow comprehension dawning in their soft brown depths.

"It isn't the cold, is it?" she murmured. "Oh God."

Her voice was thick with shock and what sounded to Kar like dismay. Turning his head away, he gazed blindly at the snow, conscious of nothing but the scent of her, the fabric draped over his back redolent with it, still warm with her body heat. He heard her move -- rising to leave, probably. Good, he thought fiercely, ignoring a sudden wrenching sense of loss -- but instead she knelt in front of him, her hands buried in the thick ruff at his neck as she lifted his muzzle, forcing him to look directly into her eyes.

“Is that it, Kar? Is that the problem?”

The tremble in her voice wasn't dismay, he realized. She swallowed nervously, her eyes wide and frightened but also... Heat roared through him like an inferno, and he held himself rigid as her hands slid through his fur. Her touch was slow, exploratory, hesitant. Her fingers trembled. Kar closed his eyes, swallowing against the pulse of agony in his balls.

She leaned forward, and her full, ripe breasts brushed against him as she spoke softly in his ear. “It's all right, Kar. I understand. It's all right to want --”

She broke off abruptly as he surged forward, tumbling her to the ground. She hit it hard, her breath knocked from her in a small, surprised “Oof!”, and her eyes widened in sudden fear. Bristling, Kar stood over her, his paws planted on either side of her shoulders, trapping her beneath him. It was so very easy to imagine ripping the clothes from her body with his teeth, to imagine hearing her breath speed with mingled fear and longing, holding her immobile as he plunged into her warm, waiting sex...

You are mistaken, human, he snarled, putting every ounce of disdain and contempt he could manage into his tone. There is nothing here I want.

She jerked as if he'd slapped her, the blood draining from her face. The hurt flickering in her eyes both eased and exacerbated the rage inside him. For a moment he stood, torn between conflicting desires. Then he wrenched himself around and dashed into the woods, knowing he was running away and not caring.

And this time he wasn't coming back.

Chapter Five

Sarah!

Sarah looked up wearily as she pushed herself up the slope toward the ledge. Kam was standing atop it, his lean, chiseled frame tense and watchful.

Where were you? he demanded as he reached down to pull her up beside him. Larak's gone to look for you. We were worried.

Sarah glanced over at Kamuk who appeared to be sleeping, curled in the same spot he'd been in when she left. Which was just as well -- she was more than a little reluctant to share her encounter with Kar. "Down by the lake." She shrugged. "I went for a walk, that's all."

You should have woken us. Larak would have gone with you. Kam's solemn amber eyes gazed into her own. Just because Hunt's dead doesn't make it safe for you to wander about by yourself.

"I know."

I'm serious, Sarah. There are bears, wolverines...

"Yeah, Kam, I know."

And I don't trust Kar. No one's seen him...

"Well, maybe he's left, then." Irritably, Sarah brushed past Kam and headed for the den. The last thing she wanted was to listen to him enumerate Kar's shortcomings. She already knew he wasn't trustworthy, for crying out loud. Hell, the first time she'd ever seen him, he'd attacked her.

So why then did the thought that he might really be gone upset her? Wasn't that what she wanted? Why should she care what he did?

And why in God's name had she offered to sleep with him?

It had never even occurred to her that he might want her -- not, at least, till she'd felt him trembling beside her. The contact shock as she'd touched him had been like nothing she'd ever experienced before in her life -- harsh, immediate, it had ripped straight through her, shocking her into a new understanding of his surliness, his anger...

He'd wanted her. She was sure of it. Wanted her with an almost feral desperation which had stolen her breath, hardening her nipples to aching points as she'd stared into those hot, hungry eyes.

She hadn't been wrong about that, whatever Kar might claim. He did want her, damn it. But instead, when she'd offered... A sickly sense of shame and embarrassment flooded her as she remembered his words.

You are mistaken, human.

No, she didn't want to talk about Kar. She didn't even want to think about him. She hoped he was gone, and good riddance.

Glancing back at Kam, she demanded, "So are you going to help me build a hearth or what? I want a bath, God damn it, and I'm not taking one in the snow."

Raising an eyebrow at her vehemence but staying mercifully silent, Kam followed her into the den.

* * *

Kar raced through the trees, anger and unslaked lust searing along his veins. How dare she? How dare she offer herself to him! Did she think he needed her? Did she think he would come crouching to her heel, begging for her favors like a dog?

Not hardly, he snorted to himself. Let Kam and Larak dance attendance on her -- it was all well and good for them. They were like her, or at least they could assume human shape...

And he couldn't.

That was the cold, hard fact beneath all his fury, the hidden shame which had made him lash out, rejecting her as cruelly as he knew how. Part of him wanted to

throw his head back and howl out his rage and grief. Instead, he pushed himself faster, whipping between the scattered trees like a wraith, a black-furred shadow.

Where are you running to, Kar? The voice inside his head was his father's more than his own -- the same sneering tone he'd heard for most of his life, calling him weak, a fool, a spineless worm. Unlike Kren, who'd invariably sided with Hunt against the Shumani pack they lorded over, Kar had never had any desire to see the others crawl. He'd never felt any satisfaction in the petty cruelties his brother had taken such delight in inflicting.

But he'd never taken a stand against it, either.

Maybe it hadn't been enough to simply not add to the abuse. Maybe he should have stood up to Kren and his father... And gotten killed for it. Right.

The lengthening shadows of the trees slanted across his path like bars. Lifting his head, he realized for the first time he was heading almost due north. Well, why not? North was as good a direction as any. It didn't matter where he went. He was an outcast... no, not even that. He couldn't claim to be an outcast from his own kind -- he had no kind.

Bitterness burned in him like poison. He hadn't asked for this. He hadn't asked to be what he was. Whether they'd ever accepted him or not, the pack was still all he'd known... and now here he was chased out of it, forced into exile while they built their little love den, all cozy and happy while they took turns mounting her...

That's not fair, Kar.

The thought intruded but, sneering, he turned away from it. So what if it wasn't fair? None of this was fair. Even if he could have gone back, he wouldn't. Even if Sarah would have welcomed him, treated him with the same affectionate kindness she showed to old Kamuk -- every moment would be torture, watching her, wanting her, longing for something he could never have...

The trees opened out around him, and suddenly Kar stopped short, his breath harsh and loud in the silence. Before him stretched a small glade, bathed in amber by the westering sun. And in the snow before him was a paw print, deep and large -- and

recent. Beyond it was another. And another, not in a straight line but staggering from side to side as if the creature which had left them was exhausted or injured. Droplets of blood dotted the ground, still fresh and red against the white snow. And at the end of the tracks, on the far side of the glade...

Frozen in shock, Kar stared at the enormous black wolf.

Hunt had been battered almost beyond recognition. His left ear had been torn away, and the entire left side of his muzzle was little more than a raw, mangled mass of flesh. One eye was gone, but the other burned with a lunatic fire.

Kar shrank back involuntarily, his mind numb with horror, wholly unable to accept what his eyes were telling him. It was impossible that Hunt could still be alive. Impossible that he'd survived the fall from the ledge, let alone dragged himself all this distance...

Still the coward, Kar? Hunt asked, his lips curling in a sneer. Yes, I see you are. Afraid of your own father...

Hunt's mental task was followed by a chuckle. His massive body was so wrenched and twisted it seemed inconceivable that he could even move -- but he lurched forward, one shoulder dipping grotesquely with each stride. Then he grimaced in sudden pain and stumbled, his body collapsing to the snow.

Hesitantly, Kar approached, his brain still whirling as he tried to assimilate Hunt's sudden reappearance. The enormous black wolf lay on his side, his rib cage heaving with each labored breath. Dropping his head, Kar nosed at his father's wounds. You're hurt. What can I --

Ivory teeth snapped together inches from his face, and he leapt backward as Hunt snarled, Of course I'm hurt, you fool!

Kar stood quivering -- another four inches and Hunt would have torn his throat out. He could have been dead that quickly. The shock of it made him feel queasy.

His father eyed him, cold amusement dancing in his yellow eye. Don't be so nervous, Kar. I'm not dead yet. And I can still help you.

Help me? What do you...

With the human. Kar froze, and Hunt smiled in satisfaction. You want her, pup, don't you? You want her, and you think you can't have her. Kar eyed him warily, keeping his silence, and Hunt's expression shifted to one of profound disgust. You can, of course. I shouldn't need to tell you these things. You should have just taken her. Taken her and be done with it.

The way you took my mother?

Hunt laughed. Oh, Kar. You always were a soft-bellied fool. Then he grimaced again as he shifted, trying to stand.

No, just lay there, Father. I'll...

You'll do what? Get help? Hunt sneered, panting in pain. Learn this now, pup, since you never did before -- no one helps you. Not in this world. No one gives you anything. The weak perish, and the strong...

Clenching his jaw, the massive black wolf heaved himself upward, and Kar shrank back as his father rose over him, so huge he seemed to blot out the very sky. His ribs were broken, his body shattered and yet he was standing, standing when it should have been impossible for him to stand, impossible for him to be alive...

The strong survive. His father stared at him, considering. Are you strong, Kar? Or are you still just the weak-minded fool I always took you for?

No, Kar whispered, almost paralyzed by horror. Had he really believed his father could be killed so easily? All his life, Hunt had alternately dominated and ignored him. He'd lived every day under the shadow of Hunt's cruelty, doing nothing, saying nothing...

And now when he'd finally thought himself free, Hunt had returned -- in a form so gruesome it made Kar tremble just looking at him. His gaze wandered to the tangled, bloody flesh where Hunt's left eye had been, and he swallowed hard.

Good. Watching him, Hunt smiled slowly. Now go. Go back to the den -- I will join you there. When I do, we will kill them. Kill them all, and take the woman.

Take the woman. The words sent a throb of anticipation through his aching balls. Kar despised himself for it -- but he couldn't deny it was there. Baffled and angry, he

stared at Hunt, feeling trapped. And will you hold her down for me, Father? The way you held Dal? he snarled. But Hunt merely laughed.

Hold her down yourself if the thought excites you, pup. But together you and I will build a new pack. Our pack. Now go!

Hunt roared the command and, shaken, Kar spun and darted out from under the dark shadow of his father, running from the clearing as if a demon was after him.

As he ran, he considered going on and not stopping. Head north, forget about Hunt and the pack and the disturbing effect Sarah had on him. He'd meant to leave anyway -- was it his problem Hunt had come back? Larak had beaten him once, he could do it again...

Except Kar wasn't sure he believed that.

It seemed impossible that Hunt could even survive the trek back to the den, let alone a fight against Larak. He would die of exposure, or blood loss, or exhaustion long before that.

But he never should have survived the fall from the granite bluff, either. There was something so terrifying about the fact that he had. It made Hunt appear almost supernatural. Uncanny. He'd always seemed more like a raw force of nature than a mere animal -- and now it was impossible to say anymore what he could or couldn't do.

Could Larak defeat him, alone and unforwarned? Kam was still injured, and Sarah...

Kar hesitated, remembering with a sickly sense of guilt the way he'd launched himself at her, ready to kill her on no more than his father's command. She'd defended herself viciously, managing to hold him at bay -- but she'd never survive against Hunt. Deep in his bones, Kar knew it. The specter of her, solitary and defenseless against Hunt's vicious size, made his gut knot in fury and apprehension.

Why did everything about her have to confuse him? He'd attacked her -- and she'd forgiven him for it. He'd insulted her -- and she'd offered herself to him.

And even now, when he could simply have walked away, the thought of her in mortal danger had him racing through the snow so fast his lungs burned with fire.

He'd go back to the den, yes -- and if Hunt died before reaching it, good. Maybe then he could leave, finally escape the way his emotions roiled at Sarah's mere presence.

But if Hunt didn't die, Kar would be there. And he'd be waiting.

Chapter Six

Briskly, Sarah rubbed an old T-shirt through her freshly washed hair, reached for the fresh clothes she'd set out and then changed her mind. It was pleasantly warm in the den, with a low fire burning in the hearth she and Kam had constructed out of gathered rocks, and the Shumani had not the least self-consciousness about nudity. She still did, but that was one more thing she was determined to get over.

Squaring her shoulders resolutely, she left her clothes where they were.

Kam was seated near the fire, resting his healing leg after the day's exertions. He glanced over, his gaze tracing her curves appreciatively but with none of the lascivious attention she'd expect from a human male. Even old Kamuk, who'd roused long enough to come in at nightfall and curl up near the cave's entrance, merely raised his head briefly, smiled, and went back to sleep.

Sure. No problem. She could do this.

Sarah smiled, enjoying the sensation of being naked. She'd thrown herself into the afternoon's labors, channeling her embarrassment over Kar's scathing rejection into sweat. Now she felt wrapped in a languid peacefulness, her muscles pleasantly sore. As she moved about the cave setting things back in order, she found her thoughts turning once again to Kar. What would he look like as a human? All that dark, powerful wildness... She could almost picture him -- he'd have black hair, of course, like Kam's, but his face would be harsher, harder...

The scrape of claws at the cave's entrance disturbed her musing, and she looked up, a strange anticipation fluttering in her belly. It wasn't Kar, though. It was Larak. Sleek and tawny in wolf form, he paused in surprise at the flicker of flames. His amber eyes gleamed in the firelight, and Sarah pushed all thought of Kar aside as she smiled at the handsome wolf who had brought her here, had given her a whole new life. As

Larak padded toward her Sarah knelt down to hug him, enjoying the feel of fur against her bare skin.

“Do you like it?” she asked, nodding at the hearth.

It’s too warm. Stepping away from her, Larak sank to his haunches and changed shape. Fascinated, Sarah watched, but as usual the transformation was so swift it was over almost before she could see it. Pushing his thick gold hair back from his face, he drew her to him, his full lips firm and delicious against her own as he kissed her, sending a flutter of anticipation along her nerves. Finally, with a sigh, he released her. I’ve been waiting to do that all day.

You wouldn’t if you’d been here all day, Kam teased from his seat. She was crankier than a grizzly in springtime.

Oh? Larak raised an eyebrow.

Sarah glared at Kam. “I was not, either.”

Kam chuckled, then sobered as he asked Larak, Did you find him?

Sarah tensed involuntarily -- but Larak was looking at Kam and didn’t notice her sudden alertness. No. I found his tracks leading northward, but... He shrugged. I think he’s gone.

No loss, Kam replied caustically. He’s no good, that one.

Sarah turned back to the fire, fiddling with a stick of wood as she tried to banish her sudden sense of disappointment. If he didn’t want to be here, that was his business. And it was probably better that way -- the cave would certainly be more peaceful without him.

But still, as she settled herself cross-legged before the fire, she couldn’t seem to stop picturing an awkward black wolf pup, always hovering at the edges, longing to be truly one of the pack... Sarah shook her head sharply. Really, it just didn’t matter. He’d left, and that was all there was to it.

And it wasn’t like she’d be lonely. She smiled to herself as Larak came over and stretched out beside her, lying on his back on the blanket she’d brought from the cabin with one arm folded behind his head. After a moment Kam joined them, seating himself

behind her and sliding his arms around her waist. Sarah leaned back against his chest, enjoying the warmth of the fire, the feel of Larak's hand gently caressing her thigh, the slow, lazy heat unfurling deep in her crotch...

She was warm. She was clean. She was snuggled between two gorgeous wolf-men who loved her. And she got to stay with them not for weeks or even months, but forever.

Sarah's smile deepened as Kam tightened his grip around her waist, pulling her more snugly against him. Her thigh tingled where Larak stroked it, his agile fingers slowly tracing up and down its length, each time coming a little closer to the part of her which was beginning to ache with a familiar hunger.

And if some small part of her couldn't help feeling a little guilty as she imagined Kar somewhere out there in the darkness, cold and alone, another part of her was determined to enjoy what she had. Nobody had told him to leave, after all. It was his own damn choice.

Turning her torso, she slid one hand around the back of Kam's neck, and drew his face down to hers for a long, deep, wet kiss. Larak, on the ground next to them, rolled onto his side and propped himself up on one arm to watch them. His hand all the while continued its teasing caress, inching closer and closer to her furred mound.

Sarah moaned as Kam cupped her face in one hand, deepening his kiss. His tongue glided against hers, tasting her with a thoroughness that made her pulse pound in anticipation. Then he released her lips to dip his head lower, nuzzling the sensitive skin of her neck.

Panting, Sarah laid her cheek against the solid warmth of his shoulder -- and stiffened as she saw Kar, standing like a black shadow just inside the cave's entrance.

His eyes were fixed on her with an intensity she couldn't read. They were wide, haunted... but underneath the haunted look was the same fiery hunger she'd seen earlier, like a barely contained inferno that might roar to life at any moment. The way he stared at her, as if there was nothing else in the entire world...

Sarah's heart gave a disconcerting jolt, her lungs tightening with an apprehension that wasn't at all unpleasant. She felt pinned beneath his gaze, unable to move...

Then he seemed to notice her nudity for the first time -- and the way she was snuggled up in Kam's arms. His eyes narrowed, and at the same time Kam, reacting to her sudden tenseness, turned and saw Kar.

Sarah felt Kam's chest rumble with a low, warning growl and immediately Larak rolled to his feet, poised and alert. Moving to stand between Sarah and Kar, he glared sternly at the black wolf. What are you doing here? I thought you left.

Kar's gaze flicked to Sarah again, and she hunched behind Kam, uncomfortably aware of her nakedness. Biting her lip, she tried to still her racing pulse as Kar finally deigned to glance up at Larak. Did she tell you that?

No. Not giving an inch, Larak towered over Kar. I followed your tracks.

Why is everyone suddenly so interested in my whereabouts? Kar sneered. I went for a run. I came back. Satisfied?

Not even close. What do you want, Kar?

Nothing. He spat the word vehemently. Don't let me interrupt you. I just came back to sleep. Unless I'm not welcome here any more.

He threw the words out like a challenge, his gaze cutting back to Sarah, his eyes boring into her as if daring her to order him from the den.

And why shouldn't she, damn it? Under his fiery gaze she felt her own anger rising. He ignored her, insulted her. He was like a thorn in her side, always scratching, always goading. And the way his gaze roved over her, both knowing and contemptuous, made her blush furiously.

Why in hell should she feel embarrassed? He'd rejected her. What business was it of his what she did with Larak and Kam? When Larak turned to her questioningly, obviously passing the decision on to her, she shrugged irritably. "Don't look at me. I don't care what he does." For a moment, she thought she caught a flicker of pain in Kar's eyes. Good.

Turning her back on Kar, she settled herself again before the fire. She wanted to reach over and pull on a shirt at least, but she wasn't about to give Kar the satisfaction. She had nothing to feel guilty about. To hell with him.

When Kam settled back behind her, she purposefully leaned into his embrace, snuggling close against the velvety warmth of his skin. Larak finally stretched out by her again, on his back with his torso pressing against her leg. Taking his hand in hers, she placed it back on her thigh -- but it was a sham, and she knew it. She could feel the tension thrumming through Kam's body behind her, and although Larak tried to keep his touch gentle, the tendons in his forearms were as taut as steel bands.

Oh, damn Kar, anyway! Sneaking a peek over her shoulder, she saw he had stretched out with his eyes seemingly closed. But she caught a brief glimmer of amber from beneath his lids, and knew the bastard was faking.

Not that it mattered. Even if Kar had been sound asleep, Sarah suspected she wouldn't be able to dismiss him from her thoughts. He was like a stone in her shoe -- trivial, unimportant, but continually annoying. It wouldn't surprise her if he'd come back solely for the sheer pleasure of aggravating her further.

Well, it wasn't going to work, she decided. If he wanted to lie there and pretend the whole conversation by the lake had never happened, fine. Whatever his problem was, she wasn't about to make it hers.

Deliberately, she grabbed Kam's wrists and raised his hands to her breasts. She felt him stiffen in surprise, but she didn't care. Cupping her fingers over his, she squeezed his hands over her full mounds, leaving him in no doubt of what she wanted. Glancing down at Larak, she saw him watching intently, his golden eyes shadowed and distant. He was thinking about Kar too, she could tell.

Not for long, she vowed. She was determined to make him forget about Kar -- just as determined as she was to forget him herself. Arching her back, she thrust her breasts harder against Kam's hands, reveling in the feel of his fingers cupping them, massaging them, then sliding up to seize the tips. Holding Larak's gaze, she closed her fingers over Kam's again, pressing until he tightened his grip even further, tugging and

pinching her nipples till she writhed at the edge of agony, her breath deepening as a warm, liquid pulse of arousal throbbed through her groin.

Larak's cock sprang back to erectness, and she saw his gaze move to the far corner of the den where Kar lay. "Don't," Sarah pleaded, her voice already hoarse with renewed desire. "Touch me, Lar."

Spreading her thighs, she draped one leg across Larak's broad chest. Then she ran one hand down her belly, parting the dense brown curls covering her outer lips to reveal the gleaming folds of her sex. Larak stared avidly, his pupils dilating as she slid one finger over her slick entrance. His hand gripped her leg, urging her thighs wider, and Sarah sighed and dropped her head back against Kam's shoulder as Larak rolled onto his side, his tongue darting at the warm wetness of her sex.

Kam slid his hands from her breasts to her hips, turning her body to face Larak more completely, and rose to his knees behind her. She could feel the nudge of his erection against her back, sliding gently through the silky mass of her freshly-washed hair. Gathering it in his hands, Kam pulled it back away from her face, letting it tumble down around his rock-hard shaft. Then he reached down to fondle her breasts again, kneading and caressing and tweaking until she was panting, a half-formed moan vibrating deep in her throat.

Seizing her breasts, Kam tugged her back against him, increasing the pressure on his shaft. At the same moment Larak's tongue found her clit, and he lapped it over and over, making it swell. Sarah could feel the juices gushing out of her, slickening her passage. Gliding his fingertips between her folds, Larak worked one finger into her, then two, thrusting harder as he felt her press her hips forward to meet him. He paused to glance up at her, his eyes hot and smoky with unrestrained desire -- then he clamped his mouth over her clit and suckled it till she cried out, throwing her head back as sharp, hungry spasms shot through her.

Kam went rigid, his breath caught in his throat as he stared down at her. She whimpered in longing and, responding to that wordless plea, he gritted his jaw and tightened his grip on her nipples till she cried out in abandon, a white-hot flare of lust

searing through her. Panting, she slumped against him, her head lolling with the force of her release.

She could see Larak's cock straining against his thigh, thick and rigid and practically throbbing with need. Kam's shaft still pressed firmly between her shoulder blades, and suddenly Sarah knew exactly what she wanted to do next. Carefully, she got her knees under her, turning herself around so she was on all fours, facing Kam. She tilted her ass up, and heard Larak's sharp intake of breath as he moved to kneel behind her, his hands spreading her cheeks.

She could feel the warmth of the fire all along her side, and knew it outlined her body perfectly. Glancing up, she took a moment to savor the sight of Kam's chiseled abs, the firelight glinting across his shoulders and chest, the laxness of his jaw as he stared down at her, swallowing in anticipation. Smiling lazily, Sarah raised one hand to curl it around the base of his cock and murmured, "Put your hands in my hair, Kam. Run your fingers through it."

The last of the calm watchfulness that was Kam's usual expression faded utterly at her words. His eyes darkened, and he slid his hands to her head, gathering her hair gently in his fists. Larak was kneading her ass with barely constrained impatience, his enormous shaft gliding against her mound as he rocked it between her thighs. Kam's cock bobbed against her lips as she whispered again, a first trickle of hot fluid seeping from its slit. "Now take me. Both of you. Make me yours."

Kam groaned, his fingers tightening in her hair as she lashed her tongue across the stretched skin of his cockhead. Larak was nowhere near so restrained. Grabbing her hips, he tugged her ass upward, spreading her thighs wide as he sank into her in one hard thrust. Sarah moaned in carnal satisfaction, and Larak slid himself back out, his cock stretching her wide. Then he thrust in again, twice, three times, each time filling her deeper until with one final shove he slammed himself home.

Kam stared down at her, his eyes wide and almost frightened as she closed her mouth around his shaft, letting her lips go soft and inviting. With her mouth full she

couldn't talk, but she whimpered instead, the vibration making his cock flex and stiffen even further. Sarah, are you sure?

Tilting her head, she gazed up at him and nodded. Swallowing again at the sight of her lips wrapped around his shaft, he tightened his fingers in her hair and rocked his hips forward.

Eagerly, Sarah stretched forward to meet him, sucking hard at his shaft as he groaned. Urging him on with hand and tongue, she relaxed her jaw as far as she could, and felt him quiver as his cock slid even further into her mouth.

Even without words, she could sense their reactions, the tension building deep in their balls. Larak was like a thunderstorm, massive and overpowering, his hard, steady thrusts pushing her forward onto Kam's shaft. Even now Kam was the gentler of the two, cradling her head in his hands as he stroked her hair back, guiding her mouth up and down his swollen erection with a sweetness that was nevertheless laced with taut, aching need.

The firelight flickered across her sweat-dewed skin, tracing lines of fire from her chest to her ass to her swollen clit, making her intensely aware of the fullness of her breasts, bouncing in time with Larak's deep, demanding thrusts, the curve of her ass cheeks, gripped tight in Larak's hands, the shimmering length of her hair, gathered in Kam's gentle fists...

No. It was more than her own awareness. It was a third presence, a consciousness as dark as onyx, as sharp as a knife. It lashed at her like wildfire, searing across her skin, hardening her nipples even more as she felt it, a wild, burning presence as hot as molten iron, so sharp it was almost like acid. Her nerves quivered under its touch, stoked to an almost painful arousal by the sheer, focused need pounding at her.

Kar. She stiffened, gasping, and felt Kam and Larak pause, concerned that they were hurting her. But it wasn't pain that made her gasp -- or rather it was a pain so mingled with pleasure it was like being flayed alive, like being pierced so deep it left her very soul exposed. For the first time she reached for the silent language of the Shumani, whispering frantically, No! Don't stop!

Glancing up at Kar, she saw his eyes widen as he heard her. Larak's hands clamped on her hips as he reared back, sliding out of her till only his tip was still buried between her folds. Quivering, she hung between them, pinioned on their arousal, her need -- and the knife-edge of exquisite agony that battered at her mind. Turning her head ever so slightly, she gazed past Kam's lean hip -- and into the desperate, ravenous fire of Kar's eyes.

Take me, she commanded, her mind reaching out to all three of them. Kam's fingers tightened in her hair, pushing her head down on his shaft as he surged forward, pistoning with unrestrained ecstasy. Sliding one hand around her hips, Larak rubbed her clit, his fingers moving in tight little circles as he hammered into her, filling her so deep she thought she might faint from the pleasure of it. She could feel Kar, his mind burning with images of her, his gaze flicking from Kam gliding in and out of her mouth to Larak's thrusting hips, his desire lashing her again and again...

Keening deep in her throat, she thrust her head forward, sucking Kam's cock hard as she peaked over and over, her whole body wrapped in coruscating bands of white fire. Larak cried out behind her, his voice hoarse and deep as he shoved himself in up to the balls and stayed there quivering, his cock flexing inside her. Sarah cupped Kam's sac with one hand as he groaned, swallowing hungrily each time his balls throbbed and tightened.

It felt like they hung there forever, their peaks shattering and splintering from one mind to the next, driven higher by their awareness of each other's orgasm... and still it wasn't enough. An unslaked frenzy whipped through her, making her whimper as Larak's fingers worked her clit, spilling her over into an even harder climax... and as she collapsed forward, Kam's cock slipping from her mouth as he cradled her head against his sweat-streaked torso, Sarah realized with a shock it wasn't her need she was still feeling.

Raising her head, she stared into Kar's burning eyes -- and was trapped by the wild lust flaming within them. He looked feral, almost rabid, his control pushed to a brittle, febrile thread...

Oh God, she thought, horrified. Oh, sweet Jesus, what have I done?

His teeth were bared, his muzzle wrinkled in a silent snarl. At some point he'd risen to his feet and now stood there bristling, every muscle in his body radiating a manic tension. He was poised to spring, his eyes alight with a nearly murderous intensity...

Dismayed, Sarah shrank back against Larak and felt his arms slide protectively around her as an answering growl rumbled deep in his chest. She doubted Kar ever even heard him. Just as she was sure he was about to snap he whirled away instead, turning away from her to bolt into the darkness outside.

"Kar!" Sarah shouted, pulling herself from Larak's grasp. Her shout roused old Kamuk, who startled awake and stared around blearily in confusion.

But as she leapt to her feet to go after the fleeing wolf, Kam grabbed her arm. Sarah, no! He's dangerous like this!

"I know that, damn it! Don't you think I know that?" And she knew exactly who'd pushed him to that edge too. Tears of self-recrimination sprang to Sarah's eyes, and she wrenched herself free of Kam's grip to plunge for the cave's entrance. "Kar!"

Chapter Seven

The shock of cold outside the cave was like a punch in the gut. It knocked the breath from her lungs, but couldn't cool the raging guilt inside her. Stung by his rejection, she hadn't wanted to simply forget him. She'd wanted to punish him -- in the most basic, hurtful way possible.

And she had. Oh, she had.

Hot tears burned her eyes, in sharp contrast to the knifing air. Angrily, she swiped an arm across her face, peering at the tracks careening from the ledge. A pale glow of moonlight trickled from an overcast sky, giving just enough illumination to see where Kar's prints disappeared into the trees below.

Damn it, she had to go after him. She couldn't live with herself if she didn't. The image that had sprung to her mind during her first talk with Kamuk, of a young, awkward wolf pup, was back to haunt her, making her cheeks burn with shame.

However he'd acted, however he'd behaved, it was no excuse for her behavior. How many times had she done exactly what Kar had done, scorning and belittling the girls around her -- girls who always seemed so popular and self-assured -- while at the same time secretly envying them?

Whatever the ostensible reason for his rejection of her, Sarah knew what was at the base of Kar's sullenness. It was fear, pure and simple. And instead of approaching that fear directly, she'd lashed out at him instead.

Naked, her teeth chattering, Sarah lowered herself carefully over the edge of the bluff, feeling for footholds with feet already numbed by the cold. Intent on her cautious descent, she was unaware of anything else around her until someone grabbed her arm and she gasped in alarm. Strong hands spun her around, and she scowled furiously. "Damn it, Larak! I have to do this!"

I know. His somber, guarded expression seemed to convey that he didn't know why she needed to, but was willing to accept it anyway.

No one will ever question what you choose to do. Old Kamuk's words came back to her, and the full force of them finally hit her. For all Larak was the alpha of the pack, not even he would try to override her decisions.

Then Sarah caught sight of the bundle he was carrying, and her shoulders sagged in relief and gratitude as he held out her parka. I know you need to, Sarah -- but this cold could kill you.

She shrugged into the coat and awkwardly tugged on her jeans as he knelt to slide her boots onto her feet. Looking up, she saw Kam standing on the ledge just above her with his father in wolf shape beside him.

Sarah, be careful. Kam's jaw was tight with apprehension, his face drawn and pale in the shadowy darkness. Don't go too far.

I'm here if you need me, Larak added as he rose, his gaze firm and intent. Just shout and I'll be there. Sarah nodded, grateful for his support. Looking at the dark forest, she gulped nervously, then started down the open slope toward the trees, following Kar's frantic flight.

* * *

Kar crashed blindly through the trees, neither seeing where he was going nor caring. His whole body burned with a fire that drove all thought from his mind. He couldn't slake it. He couldn't escape it. All he could do was run from it, or be consumed...

For a moment, he thought he heard Sarah shouting. But the sound was distant, meaningless, unable to penetrate the red haze that clouded his vision. All he could see was the torturous, enticing curves of Sarah's body lit by the ruddy glow of the fire, her back arching in abandon as she peaked, over and over, the mesmerizing, convulsive working of her throat muscles as she swallowed Kam's seed, the smoldering lust in Larak's face as he hammered into her again and again...

Howling in agony, Kar threw himself down on the snow, writhing in its soft coldness in an attempt to ease his need.

It didn't help. Nothing helped. Even the stinging touch of the snow only seared him further, bringing his arousal to an unbearable peak.

It had taken the last shred of his self-control to drag himself away. He'd been seconds from throwing himself at Larak, trying to tear out the Shumani's throat so that he might take Sarah for himself, take her as brutally and thoroughly as necessary to ease the frenzy within him. He imagined holding her down while he hammered into her, something dark and twisted inside him reveling in her cries, her humiliation, her fear, just as Hunt had with his mother...

Hunt! Shocked into sudden stillness, Kar froze on the ground, his body still lashed by unrestrained hungers but his mind slapped free of the madness which had clouded it.

How could he have forgotten? He'd meant to tell them, he really had. But the sight of her naked between Kam and Larak, smiling as she'd relaxed into their caresses, had sent jealousy flaring through him. Even then, he would have told them -- probably would have told them, Kar corrected himself.

If Larak hadn't been so hostile. So mistrustful.

And he had good reason for his mistrust, Kar admitted. He wasn't sure he trusted himself. He'd been within a hair's breadth of attacking Larak, willing -- even eager -- to rip his throat out and take Sarah by force. Exactly as his father would have.

Exactly as some part of him still wanted to do, even now.

Closing his eyes, Kar tried to push back the self-hatred which threatened to overwhelm him. He hadn't attacked Larak. He hadn't raped Sarah. And he hadn't agreed -- hadn't even considered agreeing -- to Hunt's plans.

But he couldn't pretend to himself he wasn't a threat, either. His control had held this time... barely. Who was to say the next time he wouldn't snap like a rabid wolverine, or the time after that?

No, he had to leave. Whether he wanted to or not was immaterial. He would have to warn them about Hunt, and then...

The depression flooding through him felt so familiar. He'd been feeling it yesterday, he realized, while he'd been lying on the ledge waiting for them to come up. But then he'd only been toying with the idea of suicide. He knew that now. The lost confusion he'd been feeling at the time was nothing, nothing at all compared to the leaden emptiness inside him now.

He was his father's son. He was a danger -- to Larak, to Kam... but most of all to Sarah. Sarah, who'd forgiven him even after he'd tried to kill her. Sarah, who even now hadn't thrown him out of the pack. He had heard her calling after him as he'd fled the den, her voice frantic and tinged with guilt, he was sure of it.

She had nothing to feel guilty for. She'd tormented him, certainly, displaying her body before him as she and the others had coupled, but he'd heard the invitation in her thoughts. The whispered entreaty. Take me.

And she still had no idea why it was impossible for him to do so.

She didn't need to know why, Kar told himself sternly. Keeping his secret was the last shred of pride he could cling to. He couldn't bear imagining the pity in her eyes if she discovered his inadequacy. If she discovered he wasn't truly Shumani.

Pride was a cold comfort, but it would have to do. Woodenly, he climbed back to his feet, determined to get this over with as quickly as possible. He'd tell the others about Hunt, and after that... Well, after that didn't really matter all that much, did it?

Buffered by the numb emotionlessness which seemed to have overtaken him, Kar started stolidly back toward the den. It was quite surprising, really, how little he felt at the idea of leaving. In fact, if he gave it half a try, he could probably convince himself he didn't feel anything at all...

At least until a terrified scream ripped out of the night ahead of him and shredded his numbness, sending his heart racing with sudden fear as he sprang into a run.

Sarah!

* * *

The silence of the night was almost uncanny. Other than the crunch of snow under her boots Sarah could hear nothing. Not the faintest gust of wind. Not the smallest animal rustling. In all the frozen darkness of the forest, she might have been the only living creature.

And yet she wasn't alone. She could feel it. Something lurked ahead of her, invisible in the shadows behind the trees -- a presence, taut and coiled, and trying to be quiet. "Kar?" she called softly. She could almost see the unseen shadow freeze, holding its breath in an effort not to be noticed. "Kar, c'mon, I know you're there."

Approaching carefully, she strained her gaze, trying to pick out his shape among the black, looming shapes of trees and rocks. With a rattle, a bird burst from a bush beside her -- a quail most likely, its wings whirring as it shot off into the darkness -- and Sarah rocked on her heels, her heart pounding. She flailed a moment, pinwheeling her arms for balance, feeling a sudden sweat slick her body. Her momentary fear made her angry, and she shouted, "Damn it, Kar! I'm sorry, okay? I messed up! I didn't mean..."

The silence seemed to gather close around her, thicker than ever. Daunted, she trailed off, whispering more to herself than to the unseen Kar, "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Yeah. She knew what he'd think of her pity. He'd reject it as forcibly as he had everything else she'd offered him. Anger stirred inside her again, and she shouted into the darkness, "Damn it, Kar! Talk to me!"

Oh, I think he wants to do much more than that.

Sarah spun in the direction the thought came from, realizing she'd walked right past its source -- and an inky blackness detached itself from the boulder by which it had crouched, gliding toward her against the faint grayness of the snow.

Her teeth were chattering, and the fear-sweat cooled on her body, leaving her clammy and cold. She didn't need the low, greasy chuckle inside her head to know it wasn't Kar. And it sure wasn't Larak or Kam. "Who are you? Where's Kar?"

Somewhere very close by, I'm sure. He couldn't possibly have done a better job of leading you to me.

Leading her to... Sarah froze, an uneasy doubt churning like nausea in her belly. But no, she thought, shaking her head in confusion, that made no sense. He hadn't lured her out here... had he?

Does it matter, human? You're here, and I am here. And now... He stepped closer, and Sarah finally made out the evil yellow eye, the ruined muzzle, the sheer, terrifying size of the black wolf before her... Now we finish what we started. Sarah screamed as Hunt lunged forward. He knocked her to the ground, his weight pinning her as he snarled, Silence!

Panting, Sarah stared up at him. Her mind raced frantically. Larak had heard her scream, she had no doubt of that. But how far was she from the ledge? A mile? Two? Hunt could rip out her throat in under three seconds.

She felt him shift, his hot breath easing away from her face. That's better. I don't want to have to kill you.

He didn't? But... "But" didn't matter. She was still alive. Letting herself go limp, she sneaked her hand down along her side, feeling the snow for something, anything... Her numbed fingers encountered the sharp protuberance of a stone and closed stealthily around it just as Hunt lifted his head, looking back the way she'd come.

Sarah tore the rock loose and swung it at Hunt's mangled head. With a snarl of pain, he staggered back. Fighting to get her feet under her, Sarah scrambled backward on the snow as Hunt shook his head and gathered himself to spring...

Something crashed through the trees off to her right. Snarling, teeth flashing, it threw itself at Hunt, bowling him back. With a quickness born of adrenaline and terror, Sarah sprang to her feet, still clutching the rock.

All she could see was a roiling knot of darkness, broken by momentary gleams of teeth and eyes. The snarling was hideous, murderous and fierce. On trembling legs she staggered backward, putting distance between herself and the two wolves who

wrestled and snapped, two black shapes rolling over and over each other on the trampled snow...

Kar! It was Kar! Weak with sudden relief, Sarah sagged against the tree behind her. He hadn't lured her out into Hunt's clutches -- he was fighting his own father to save her!

Fighting... and losing, she realized with a sickening lurch. There was a sudden high-pitched yelp as the smaller shadow disappeared under the larger one, and, distinctly, Sarah heard something snap. A moment later, though, Kar had thrown Hunt off him and surged to his feet -- but how long could he keep it up?

"Larak!" she shouted, putting her whole heart into it. "Larak!"

Immediately, Hunt spun away from Kar, and Sarah's voice died in her throat as she caught the gleam of madness in his one remaining eye. Cowering back, she hefted the rock -- but what good could a rock do against a monster like Hunt?

Still, it was all she had. She raised it, bracing herself to meet his charge...

It never came. Just as he sprang forward, Kar leaped onto his back, knocking Hunt sprawling in the snow. Sinking his powerful jaws into the back of Hunt's neck, Kar pinned him there, thrashing.

The rock, Sarah! Hit him! She could barely see. Hunt was thrashing around so, it was hard to tell where he ended and Kar began. Sarah! Now! I can't hold him!

Throwing herself onto her knees, she brought the rock down in a heavy arc -- too late. Hunt rolled beneath Kar, snarling as he tore himself from Kar's grasp. On his back in the snow, Hunt thrust his head upward, seizing Kar's throat.

Kar howled in agony and Sarah, breathing a silent prayer, smashed the rock sideways against Hunt's muzzle. It was a desperate gamble -- if the angle were the least bit wrong she could as easily have smashed Hunt's jaws together, sealing Kar's fate. But by luck or grace she hit square on the hinge of Hunt's jaw, shattering it -- and Kar ripped himself free, his lips peeling back in a grimace of pain, his powerful canines glimmering in the muted moonlight for a second before he plunged his head down and ripped open Hunt's carotid.

Blood spurted, black against the trampled snow, and the massive head lolled limply to one side. Panting, Sarah stared at Kar as he lifted his head. His eyes were wide and wild, full of a frenzy that made her flinch back in fear.

Something flickered in those amber depths -- pain, maybe -- but Sarah barely even saw it. Nor did she see the lonely wolf-pup Kamuk had conjured in her imagination. All she saw was Kar lunging at her, his teeth bared to rend, to kill...

Kar stared at her, an intensity burning in his gaze which seemed to spear straight through her, tugging at her heart even as she cowered back from him. He'd already attacked her once -- and he was, after all, Hunt's son.

No, I'm not. His chest heaved, his ragged breathing loud in the darkness. I'm not. I won't be!

Whirling about, he dashed into the night, leaving Sarah staring after him open-mouthed as Larak crashed through the trees and skidded to a halt at the sight of Hunt's mangled body. Who... What...

"It was Kar," Sarah whispered, realizing that tears were once again pouring down her cheeks. "He saved me. And I... I..."

Oh God. She wanted to hang her head in shame. She wanted to crawl into the shelter of Larak's arms and sob out her grief and guilt. For the first time, she wanted to run all the way back to Minneapolis just to escape the emotions lashing at her.

But she couldn't do that. She was the umma Shumani. The leader of her pack. And Kar had just risked his life to save hers...

Standing, she pulled her shoulders back and drew a deep breath. She looked down at the enormous tawny wolf standing beside her in the snow, his hackles bristling, and ran her hand briefly through his warm, silken fur.

You're still going after him.

Sarah nodded. "Go back to the den, Lar. It's safe now."

Are you sure about that?

"After he killed his own father to save me?" She stared at him and, abashed, Larak looked away. She knew how he felt. Even as Kar had slain Hunt at her very feet,

she had recoiled from him in fear. She wouldn't doubt him now. Not now, and not ever again. Firmly, with no hesitation at all, she strode off between the trees, following the way Kar had gone.

Chapter Eight

The sky was already pearled with pink by the time she found him. The low-lying clouds were streaked with amber and purple from the sun, still hidden behind the snow-topped mountains. It was bitterly cold, and Sarah had long since stopped trying to feel her toes, plodding doggedly after Kar's tracks with her hands shoved deep in her parka's pockets.

But when she finally saw him, she forgot about the cold.

She'd thought he'd be older, somehow. The image she'd had in her head had been almost brutal in its implacability, huge and powerful and deadly.

The man she saw instead was hardly more than a boy.

He was crouched, ironically enough, beside the log in the glade where she, Larak and Kam had first made love, his arms folded across his chest and bloodless fingers gripping the taut swells of his biceps. Black, tangled hair fell around a face that turned toward her as he heard her approach. There was a fierce, almost feral mistrust in his amber eyes, and he flinched away as she squatted down a few feet from him, keeping her movements slow and unthreatening.

Larak and Kam both appeared in human form to be somewhere in their mid to late twenties. Kar looked like he might have been all of twenty-one. Lean and coiled, he crouched naked in the snow, his body quivering now and then in a spasm of shivering. His eyes, staring out at her from under that mop of ragged black hair, were as wary and watchful as a wounded animal's.

Had she thought he would be handsome? He was beautiful, with a sharp, angular wildness to his face that stole her breath. He looked almost fox-like -- less human, somehow, than either Larak or Kam. It was impossible to imagine him in

human society. Unlike Kam or Larak, he'd have no hope of blending in. People would shrink away from him instinctively, their gazes shifting uneasily...

He looked away from her again and huddled in on himself, something so lost and wounded in his eyes it made her heart ache in sudden pity.

"Kar..."

I couldn't, Sarah. I had to leave. I couldn't stand watching them, with you...

"I know. I'm so sorry."

You don't... You don't understand. He lifted his head again, something naked and almost painfully vulnerable in his eyes. I'm not like them. I can't...

"You can't what, Kar?"

He scowled, an expression which made her think suddenly that maybe she could see him in ordinary society -- as a delinquent dressed in leather, a hoodlum propped against a wall watching the world through slitted eyes. Then the scowl crumpled, letting her glimpse into a well of loneliness that seemed to have no bottom. I can't change, Sarah. I can't... I'm not Shumani. I don't know what I am.

Sarah sat back a moment in consternation, gazing at the smooth, powerful lines of his limbs. For all his leanness he was corded with muscle, as graceful and beautiful as if carved out of marble.

But he wasn't marble. Even from here, she could feel the heat radiating off his body -- heat he was losing far too quickly into the frigid air. He shivered again, seeming wholly unaware of the movement. "You can't..." she started, and then trailed off in sudden comprehension.

His eyes seemed to lose their focus, and he looked away from her again. I'm so cold, Sarah. Why am I so cold?

"Kar," she asked, her voice as gentle as she could make it, "did you ever try to change before?"

He shook his head. I didn't know how. Bitterly, he added, I didn't even know they could. I just knew I was...

Different. Sarah felt her throat clench, thinking of that solitary wolf pup. "Kar," she said softly. "Kar, look at yourself."

His brow wrinkling in confusion, he glanced down at his folded arms -- and yelped aloud in surprise as he sprang back, stumbling over the log and pitching full-length in the snow. Immediately, he rolled to a crouch, his head slung low and his eyes narrowed to slits. What did you do to me?

"I didn't do anything to you!" Sarah snapped. Of all the stubborn, pigheaded, insensible... "You did it yourself, Kar. You were like that when I got here!"

Slowly, his eyes widened as suspicion gave way to wonder. I... How did I do that?

"Hell, I don't know. I don't know how any of you do anything." Impatiently, she dismissed the question. "The only thing I do know is you're going to get frostbite if we don't get you back to the den and get you warm." Stepping over the log, she held out a hand to help him up. Instead, he yanked against her grasp, tumbling her down on top of him. "Kar!"

I can think of better ways to get me warm, he whispered, a sharp, smoky light kindling in his amber eyes.

This was crazy, Sarah thought. He was lying in the snow -- how could he be lying in the snow and barely seem aware of it? Five seconds ago he'd been shivering uncontrollably, but now the heat radiating off him was strong enough to penetrate even her down parka, and his lips cut off her protest as she started to mutter, "Kar..."

His mouth closed over hers with a hunger that seared straight through her, and she remembered with a suddenness that made her squirm the way he'd stared at her last night, as if he would do anything, anything at all to have her right then...

Yes, he murmured as he slid his mouth down the curve of her throat, his tongue darting over her skin. And I will have you now, Sarah. Right now.

Oh God, the things he was doing to her! He slid his hands underneath her parka, his cold fingers trailing over her hot skin, moving them up to cup the fullness of her breasts. Her thighs were wrapped around his hips, and she could feel the solid ridge of his erection pressing against the inseam of her jeans. He flexed his hips, pushing

himself against her impatiently, and with a small gasp Sarah tugged down the zipper of her coat, giving him free access to her naked breasts.

Make love in the snow. In twenty degree weather. Sure, why not? It was crazy. Insane. Completely stupid. They were both going to freeze to death.

Then Kar lifted her higher on his hips and urged her down over him. As he closed his mouth hungrily around one taut, aching nipple, a white hot fire splintered through Sarah's core. Moaning, she arched her back as he sucked greedily at first one tip then the other, his hands squeezing her breasts with a barely controlled urgency -- and Sarah found she wasn't even remotely cold any more.

Awkwardly tugging her arms free of her coat, she let it slide to the ground. Kar groaned, running his hands over her exposed skin. The contrast of cool and hot made her quiver like a plucked harp string, and Sarah stared down, panting, at the coal-black hair falling over Kar's intent face as he nuzzled her breasts, his tongue lashing out to circle the nubbed pink tips. He devoured her breasts with a mindless intensity that had her squirming above him, rocking her hips against his until he hissed suddenly, and Sarah froze. "What is it?"

Your... These, he explained awkwardly, running his hands over her jeans-clad thighs. Sarah blushed, realizing she must have been rubbing him half raw. Quickly, she slid off him, sitting on her parka as she tugged off her boots, then her jeans. Sunlight angled through the trees, pale and clear, but the air was still sharp enough to make her shiver, goose bumps springing up on her exposed skin.

Then she looked at Kar, and found she no longer cared about the cold or anything else.

He'd risen to his knees and was watching her with the same desperate hunger she'd seen in the cave, an almost feral need blazing in his amber eyes. Sarah, he murmured with an edge of warning in his tone. Lithe and taut and looking thoroughly dangerous, he raised himself over her, pushing her down on her back atop her outspread coat. Automatically, she slid her arms around his back, feeling the bunch and spring of his muscles as he braced himself above her.

For a moment he stayed there, doing nothing but staring down at her out of those molten amber eyes. His gaze flicked to her mouth, then her breasts, and Sarah felt her nipples tighten harder under his entranced scrutiny. Then he looked again into her eyes, pinning her with that smoldering gaze and holding her there until Sarah was squirming below him, aching, needing, wanting...

Pressing his hips down against her, he slicked his erection back and forth through her sodden folds. His cockhead nudged against her entrance, and she saw his eyelids grow heavy, his sharp, fox-like face taut with need. Tell me, he growled, his voice harsh and urgent. Tell me to take you, Sarah.

"Oh God," she moaned, wrapping her thighs around his waist. "Take me, Kar. Please!"

He slammed his hips forward, piercing her with a roughness that was both painful and almost unbearably exciting. Drawing back, he thrust into her again, even deeper, and Sarah heard a cry spill from her throat as she raised her thighs higher, wrapping them around his lean waist and opening herself to him completely. Gritting his teeth, he pulled himself out so far she whimpered with a sudden sense of emptiness -- and then he surged forward, spearing her straight to the core, throwing his head back as he howled at the sky. Great Mother, Sarah! I never thought it could feel... Oh, Sarah!

Panting, he hung above her, his body taut as a bowstring. He pressed his cock into her, his full, heavy balls rubbing against the sensitive space just below her sex. His pubic bone was mashed against her clit, and every time he rocked inside her, Sarah felt herself pushed even closer to the edge...

I... Oh, Sarah... A look of such intense hunger flared in his eyes that Sarah gasped and quickly swallowed the saliva flooding her mouth. Sarah, I need you.

"Then take me," she whispered, wanting to close her eyes to savor the feel of his rock-hard shaft inside her and at the same time not wanting to miss every shift of expression on his beautiful, wild face.

His eyes widened at her words, and in them she saw a look of such love and gratitude it made her heart tighten. How long had he felt himself utterly alone? How many years had he wanted nothing more than to be accepted, to be part of the pack?

And he would be. Now, and for as long as she lived. Sliding her hands up the hard swell of his chest, she stared up at him as he drew himself back, panting as he did so. He was so close to the edge, she could see it...

And so was she. As he thrust into her again in one hard, deep stroke, her passage clenched around him and Sarah arched her neck, whimpering under the onslaught of sensations. She was trembling, greedily pushing her hips up to meet his strokes, feeling the fire in her groin tighten and flare higher, teasing along her overburdened nerves...

He roared aloud, tossing his head back as he slammed himself home once, twice, the pressure on her clit sending her climax shattering through her, an ecstasy so sharp it was almost pain clenching deep in her body, making her cry out deliriously as he stroked inside her, his cock pulsing and throbbing as he flooded her cunt, groaning hoarsely every time her passage squeezed him tight.

He seemed to climax forever, and she stayed right there with him, bliss blazing through every inch of her body. Then he slumped above her, his head dropping heavily to her shoulder. Sarah wrapped her arms around him, holding him close.

Sated and half-asleep, it took her forever to notice the cold stinging at her thigh where it touched the snow. As soon as she did, though, she became aware of a myriad of small discomforts -- the hardness of the ground beneath her back, the dense heaviness of Kar's solid body above her. She shifted slightly, and he raised his head, his eyes both warm with an affection bordering on worship and more than slightly anxious.

You are uncomfortable? I did it wrong?

Sarah laughed. "No. I mean yes, I'm uncomfortable, but no, you didn't do it wrong. Not even close to wrong." Playfully, she kissed his nose. "But you're heavy, and I'm getting cold lying here on the ground."

Then I'll lie on the ground this time, he said, grinning.

"Kar..."

But before she could protest he slid his hands under her ass, holding her tight against him as he rolled onto his back. The motion drove his cock deep inside her, and Sarah realized in awe he was still completely erect. “Kar, c’mon, I’m serious. The others will be looking for us, wondering where we are...”

I don’t care. He growled, flexing his hips, and Sarah felt a renewed burst of excitement at the determination in his voice. Tonight I’ll make love to you with Larak and Kam... Sarah swallowed at the sudden smoky lust that coiled inside her at his words, and Kar smiled wolfishly, following her thoughts. You like that thought, don’t you? All three of us taking you, mating with you at once?

“Yes,” she answered faintly, transfixed by the very idea.

Kar’s grin spread even wider. Good. But today... He thrust up into her, hard and deep, and she gasped in wonder at his length and hardness. He looked up at her from under heavy lids, and for the first time Sarah realized how thick his lashes were, so dark they rimmed his eyes like kohl.

Today I will not share you with anyone, Sarah. His possessive growl sent an unexpected thrill through her, and she stared at him wordlessly, feeling anticipation prickles along her skin. Not until I’ve had you in every way Larak or Kam have. Not until I’ve tasted every inch of your body. Not until I’ve made you as desperate and horny as you made me last night. The danger was back in his eyes, a flicker of warning that made her shiver in excitement. Is that clear?

“Yes, Kar,” she breathed as he pistoned smoothly, feeling a peak already building again inside her.

Oh God. Not two Shumani to love her, she thought breathlessly. Three. Three beautiful wolf-men to love and build a life with. Not a life, she thought with a sudden smile, remembering old Kamuk’s words as he’d greeted her. A pack. She was building a pack.

It was a heavy responsibility -- she was their umma Shumani, for better or for worse. And there were times, she knew, when she might make mistakes... in a world where mistakes might well equal death.

But the rewards, she thought even as her climax burst through her, making her cling to Kar as he thrust deeper, harder... The rewards were sheer heaven.

Sierra Dafoe

Sierra Dafoe published her first erotic romance with Changeling Press in May of 2006, and hasn't stopped since! Named a Rising Star of Romance in July by Love Romances and More, she received three 2006 CAPA nominations including Favorite Erotic Author (a fact which still has her stunned!)

Sierra lives in northern New Hampshire's White Mountains with her incredibly tolerant hubby, her thoroughly obnoxious cat, and her twelve-year-old puppy. Visit her at www.sierradafoe.com for free stories and monthly contests, and join her yahoogroup at http://groups.yahoo.com/The_Sierra_Club -- she loves hearing from her readers!