



U N T A M E D H E A R T S

*Bear
Combustion*

JAMIE HILL & JUDE MASON

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Untamed Hearts

BEAR COMBUSTION

Jamie Hill and Jude Mason

Dedication

To wildlife lovers, and those who know just how to keep the home fires burning.

Chapter One

Tarek's heart pounded with pure joy for the first time in months. He watched his muscular companion race across the clearing and up a hill. Bright sunlight danced off his long raven hair and beautifully browned flesh. Long legs leapt deadfall easily, and when he landed in the soft loam, he was so light-footed he barely made a sound.

His whoop of excitement made Tarek laugh and shake his head. Inuka was a free spirit, full of life and laughter. It'd been a long time since Tarek had the luxury of feeling that way. He felt slightly guilty, lounging and relaxing this way in the warmth of the morning sun. As the leader of the bear changeling tribe, Tarek had responsibilities.

He'd been dealing with the grief of losing his mate, Skye, in a tragic hunting accident. The blow had been hard to recover from, but Tarek's clan needed him, and they wouldn't allow him to wallow in self-pity or mourn for too long. Slowly, he'd dragged himself up from the depths of despair. Life was finally returning to some sort of normalcy, though it had taken what seemed like forever.

He grinned as Inuka wiggled his luscious brown arse towards him. The loincloth he usually wore had been tossed aside, giving Tarek the pleasing view of his glorious, naked form. Inuka reached his goal and turned. Arms crossed over his wide chest and his feet spread shoulder width apart, he smiled down at Tarek from the top of the low bluff.

Tarek paused, and his gaze went from the chiselled features of his face down the man's smooth chest and flat stomach and then moved lower. It came to rest on his obvious arousal, and Tarek's own shaft throbbed in response. A sparse mat of sleek, dark hair surrounded Inuka's thick cock, but left his balls nearly hairless. Tarek's mouth watered.

"Come on, you lazy bruin," Inuka's deep, booming voice chided. "I thought we were going for a swim."

Tarek gazed at the man who was blatantly trying to seduce him. Ever since Inuka had joined his clan not long ago, there'd been a spark between the two of them. He'd tried to

tamp it down before finally realising there was no need. Skye was gone. Tarek had loved him with all his heart, but several seasons had passed, and nothing was going to bring him back.

Eventually he'd taken solace in the arms of Raven, another member of his clan. Hours spent with the oft-times too serious man were never planned. More often they found themselves alone together when a primal instinct took hold. Their coupling was heated and intense, always satisfying and passionate. *Convenient. Comfortable.* Raven gave him the affection he'd been desperately missing in his life and he gave Raven mind-blowing orgasms. Tarek smiled. *Not a bad trade-off.*

Inuka, on the other hand, held the promise of something more. When Tarek had stared deep into his golden-flecked brown eyes that morning, he'd seen lust tinged with another emotion, one he wasn't prepared to name. Their relationship was too new, too fragile. They hadn't even fucked yet. Then Inuka had suggested they go swimming in the river, and Tarek was sure they both knew what was implied. He sensed Inuka wanted it as much as he did, though he wasn't exactly certain what he offered. *A quick, one-time roll in the hay?* Or possibly something more? Tarek was open to possibilities.

He started up the hill, shedding his loincloth on the way. His cock thickened and rose to full erection. Climbing was a torment, his heavy shaft slapping his thigh with every step. Pre-cum anointed his flesh.

He'd reached the top and was within arm's reach of Inuka when the man turned and raced for the line of trees.

"Fuck!" Tarek raised his fist, playfully shaking it after him. "You're going to get it when I catch you."

Over his shoulder Inuka called, "Maybe that's what I was hoping for." Laughing, he turned and clambered over a pile of boulders between himself and the darkness of the forest.

By the time Tarek got there, the beautiful man had vanished. A growl in his throat turned to a deep chuckle. The excursion was making him hornier, and by the way Inuka behaved, it was doing the same to him. When he got his hands on the playful man, Inuka had better watch out.

Tarek was desperate to touch him, to show Inuka how much he could please him. He swallowed the flood of saliva filling his mouth, hungering for a taste of the man. The teasing was driving him mad. Raven had never put him through such torment.

He growled deep in his throat. Just what he needed, thoughts of the two sexy bruins that sent his blood pressure soaring and his erection to near bursting.

Gripping his cock, he caressed the enormous head and slowly eased his fist down the shaft. The mighty staff pulsed and jerked in his hand, reminding him of how long it'd been since he'd had the time to use it at his leisure. Right then, with Inuka obviously so willing, seemed the perfect opportunity.

He dropped to his knees and sniffed the air. A scent, musky, heady, the smell of his prey inhaled and savoured. He tightened his fist around the base of his staff, not quite reflexively, but he knew that if he didn't slow down, he'd wind up shooting into the brush.

Releasing himself, he got to his feet and scrambled towards the tree line a dozen paces away. Once he entered the dimly lit forest proper, the temperature dropped a few degrees and helped cool his ardour.

A noise to his right took him that way at a jog, his cock nudging against his thighs at every step. Each wet slap made him grunt, but he enjoyed the distress. Truth be told, the torment was nearly as much fun as the chase.

There, a smell, a noise, he wasn't sure, but he turned towards a lighter patch of brush and moved carefully that way. Not into the deeper woods, but in the direction of the river he knew well. He'd fished from its banks and swum in the brisk rapids when he had time. Being here with Inuka made the place even more special.

A flash of skin darting through the leaves made him smile. Again he gripped his erection and held it, more for comfort than to excite himself. He jogged towards the movement and chuckled when Inuka raced for an opening between two bushes.

Dappled sunlight flickered across the beautiful, light brown skin as the man raced for the water.

Tarek followed, his darker flesh also touched by the sunlight when he stepped into the open.

"Hey, baldy!" came Inuka's cheerful voice.

Tarek's head snapped to where Inuka balanced on the edge of the riverbank. The incredible beauty of the man took his breath for a long second. The erection jutting towards him made his mouth water, and he ignored the cheeky comment for the moment. He took a step towards him and growled when Inuka suddenly turned and leapt.

The river swallowed him and Tarek raced to the shore, eyes peeled for his emergence. The rapids swirled around rocks. His heart slammed in his chest. Was he hurt? Perhaps his swimming abilities weren't good enough. Refuse of the winds of winter, tree trunks covered in moss, branches slick with river slime hugged the banks. He looked upstream then down, panic threatening. Finally, he spotted the man surfacing. Inuka turned and smiled up at him.

"Hey, I thought you'd never get here." Inuka treaded water to hold his place against the current. Lifting an arm, he motioned for Tarek to join him.

Relieved, he took a breath before speaking. "Not going to take off on me again, are you?" The heat of the day seemed lessened by his nearness to the cold water, and Tarek shivered.

"Me?" Inuka gave him an innocent look, but the twinkle in his eyes made it impossible to believe him. Winking, the lovely, sexy man teased, "Would I do such a thing to the mighty leader of our entire tribe?"

Tarek chuckled, picking up the playful tone. "So this is how you treat your clan and tribal leader? You've been leading me around by my cock...err...nose, for weeks."

Inuka beamed. "For some reason I thought you enjoyed the teasing and tormenting. I wouldn't treat just anyone this way. Only the adorable lug who's suddenly become the centre of my world."

Heart lurching, Tarek savoured the words. *Could it be true?* Did Inuka have the same feelings that he'd been harbouring these past weeks? He shook himself, almost afraid to hope. "Yeah, maybe I do enjoy it." Tarek took a step closer to the edge, readying himself for the shock of the icy water. Not wanting to appear as desperate as he felt on the inside, he teased, "Or maybe I just like getting your attention."

"Hmm, you definitely have my attention now." Inuka winked up at Tarek then lowered his gaze to the big man's enormous erection.

"I'm coming after you," Tarek roared and dived into the water. His body knifed through the frigid liquid that touched and caressed, sending shivers of cold through him. He held his breath for as long as he could, all the while searching through the clear water for Inuka's darkly tanned body.

In the swirling pool he saw long, muscular legs sweeping back and forth. Between the man's thighs, his cock bobbed innocently, and that's where Tarek's target lay. Coming closer, he leaned in and took the very tip of Inuka's cock between his lips. A rush of heat suffused his face as he gently suckled the delectable mouthful. Smooth as satin against his lips, the bulbous head stretched his jaws wide. Inuka shuddered, and Tarek knew he'd done the right thing.

Inuka's hands cradled his head. The man's fingers stroked his bald pate with a tenderness he knew he'd want more of.

Sliding his tongue over the fat cock head, he pulled his mouth off and, when the fingers dug into his scalp, he lapped at the slit before taking it into his mouth again. Suckling, he felt the throbbing pulse and tried to synchronise the movements of his lips. He used his hands on the beefy thighs that kicked gently against the flow of the river, caressing from knee to groin and then around to cup the glorious, tight arse. Massaging the fleshy cheeks, he took more and more of the enormous cock into his mouth, using the muscular bum to pull him in.

When he was desperate for air, he reluctantly withdrew his lips and climbed the man's body to the surface. Gasping, he smiled when he saw the expression on Inuka's face. He was gasping and panting, his skin was flushed, his eyes unfocussed. A flock of geese could have flown by and Tarek was sure Inuka wouldn't notice.

Taking in a deep breath, he rose a little higher and hesitantly, hungrily, pressed his lips to Inuka's. Sliding his tongue out, he gently licked the man's teeth before slipping in deeper, tasting the rich, manly flavour of him. Light-headed as he was, the musky essence nearly overwhelmed him.

Something niggled at the back of his mind—kept him from fully immersing himself in the pleasures of the moment. A hint of smoke tugged at him, a small knot of heat where the talisman touched his chest, but when he opened his eyes, the sensation vanished.

What the hell was that?

Peering around, he couldn't see a thing. He returned his attention to the raven-haired man before him.

"Come to the shore, before we both drown," he urged and turned that way. A dozen strokes later, his toes brushed the bottom. Behind him, a splash of water told him Inuka was right there.

Heat – intense, burning. Then it was gone.

He reached out with his mind, trying to figure out what was happening.

Arms enfolded him from behind. Hands caressed the large muscles of his chest and slowly worked their way down. He shivered with pleasure, allowing the unpleasant sensation of heat to fade. The attention of the man holding him was much more enjoyable.

He turned and faced Inuka and again pressed a kiss to the softness of his mouth. Their cocks rubbed against each other, the sensitive head of his own sending a shiver up his spine. He thrust his hips forward and groaned when the slick pre-cum eased the glide. The excitement was staggering. Touching this man, rubbing their cocks together, breathing the exhaled breath of him, it all made his thoughts reel.

Hands cupped Tarek's arse and pulled him hard against the smoothness of a taut, muscular belly. The men spread their feet, both straddling each other's thighs. Like lover's hands embracing them by the arse, the water kissed them in a truly sensual way as they humped and ground against each other.

Tarek bit at Inuka's lips, hungering for the taste of him. He pulled his mouth away only long enough to say, "I want to fuck you. Need to."

Inuka growled his response. "I want that too. I need to feel your cock inside me. Come to shore."

Stumbling after Inuka, Tarek felt another rush of intense heat engulf him. He pushed it away, but less easily that time.

Something was happening.

The amulet around his neck grew warm again.

It must be the heat of the sun. He focused his attention on Inuka's arse. The smooth, muscular glutes drew him ahead. When they got to a grassy area, Inuka dropped to his knees and looked over his shoulder. "Here. Now. Fuck me, please."

Tarek's blood raced. The sight of the man so ready for him, asking to be fucked, took his breath. He ached to oblige and slide his cock deep inside the offered hole, but something stopped him.

That wave of heat came again, tearing a growl from him before vanishing.

"Something's wrong. The clan. Heat, I don't know." He shook his head then turned his face to where he knew the clan resided, and listened. Nothing came to him, but he sensed grave danger.

Inuka was instantly on his feet and at his side, also facing the direction of the clan. "What is it?"

"I don't know. I sense heat, intense heat. That's all I can pick up." Even as he said it, he knew there was more. *Much more*. "There's fire somewhere. We have to get back. We have to warn the clan."

"Come then, shift." Inuka dropped to his hands and knees.

Tarek joined him, the excitement of their intended fucking forgotten, fear of fire burning foremost in his mind. A groan from beside him, and then his own in reply, accompanied the change. His bones condensed and he growled in sweet, painful pleasure. The experience of morphing was sexual in its own way, eliciting feelings of arousal. But it was always tinged with discomfort. Shifting from one musculature system to another in a matter of minutes had to cause a few aches. Tarek accepted them, relished the sensations, as part of who he was.

His face twisted, his chin thrust out, his forehead drew back—the sensation knifed through him. He wanted to cry out, but his voice was gone. Skin, once free of hair, sprouted it from his toes to the top of his head. Hands and feet burned as they morphed into the pads and claws of the bear.

A grunt came from his almost-lover, and then it was done.

The glorious brown beast watched him, waiting for a signal. Tarek rubbed a bulky black paw across his snout, taking a moment to acclimate himself to his animal form. He stretched, revelling in the change. Muscles bulged against his furry pelt.

The amulet tied around his neck with a leather thong glowed, hinting at the danger. The changeling talisman, crafted of ornate gold filigree encasing a deep blue gem, showed

the head of a bear within the stone. Tarek had always understood the responsibility of wearing the charm. At that moment, he realised the scope of its power. A low growl rumbled deep in his throat as intense heat tore through his system once more.

Glancing at Inuka, a sudden wave of regret washed over him. He'd craved the man for weeks. To have to stop when they were so close to enjoying a day of lustful sex was a shame. Hopefully there'd be another opportunity—*soon*. He turned and bolted towards the camp and their clan. His heart thudded in his chest. He had no doubt the entire tribe faced impending danger. Racing across uneven ground, Tarek picked up speed.

Heat-infused winds ruffled his pelt. Wispy tendrils of white floated through the air. *Smoke?* His heart lurched as he imagined how quickly the fire must be spreading. *How stupid I am, I should have figured it out. Fire!* From the corner of his eye, he made sure Inuka was close behind. The beautiful brown bear raced through the brush with incredible grace and speed. Other forest animals had learned quickly—despite the size of the massive beasts, bears moved swiftly.

After inhaling, Tarek forced out one last burst of energy. They reached the edge of their encampment of six elkskin-covered tipis. There were no signs of activity. The smoke hadn't reached them yet, and Tarek slowed his pace, breathing deeply.

He caught Inuka's eye and they began their change at the same time. Low growls became human groans of pleasure as their skeletal systems realigned, sinews elongated and muscles shifted. Tarek's skin prickled furiously when his black pelt morphed into the smooth, ebony skin he wore when human. His flesh itched, having just gotten used to the fur.

"Fuck." Inuka scrubbed at his arms. "I hate shifting again so soon."

Tarek rubbed his hands over the brown man's muscular biceps, relieving the irritation. "I do too. Uncomfortable as Hades, but did you see the smoke? The fire's moving this way."

Inuka returned the affectionate scrub, hands brushing over Tarek's naked neck and back. "I saw. Thank the gods you had the talisman—and the intuition to know what was happening. I had other things on my mind."

"I did too." Tarek kissed him quickly on the lips. "Right now, we have work to do. Once we get our clan taken care of, I need to check on the others. There are half a dozen bear

clans in the territory. They all have responsible family guardians, but if any of them were caught unaware..." He gazed into the eastern sky. "It's hard to tell how much time we have."

"We'll get everyone to the river," Inuka said in a rush.

Tarek shook his head. "That won't be far enough. The closest section—the shallow fork—has nearly dried up. With a light wind, the fire will jump across that and burn anyone in the water and keep going. And the main branch, where we just were, is too deep. The young wouldn't stand a chance, nor would the elders. The current would swallow them."

Inuka's eyes widened. "You really think the fire will breach this part of the river?"

Quickly Tarek mentally calculated. "I do. And before long, the path we take to get there will be in flames. I think we should go to our winter caves."

"That's so far! You told me you'd never made the trek in one day. I might not know them all well, but I know some of the clan just wouldn't make it."

"We don't have much choice. The going will be faster as bears, and there isn't time to haul supplies."

Inuka scratched his head. "What if we put clothing and cooking tools in the river?"

"We can't waste time, Inuka. Whatever you can grab and take to the water, fine. But one trip only. We have to get everyone together and make a run for it."

"Agreed." He glanced around. "Where are they?"

"Fuck if I know. I'm sure the elders are in their tipis. Get them started gathering what they need to save. I'll track down Raven and the others."

"Will do." Inuka took a moment to squeeze his hand before dashing to the tents of the three oldest clan members.

Tarek watched him go, his lithe, naked form glistening with sweat and excitement. *Damn!* He allowed himself one final moment of regret then headed for a tipi at a flat out run. "Raven!"

The man wasn't in his tent. Tarek tore from one dwelling to the next but didn't find anyone. "Kira! Dawn!"

"Tarek?" A female voice responded, coming from the path that led to the shallow fork of the river. The taller of the clan's two females approached him, carrying a wicker basket.

She smiled at him innocently, her white teeth making her deeply tanned skin seem even darker.

Kira was a beauty with her long, black hair draped over one shoulder. Pert nipples sat high atop small breasts. Her only covering was a short loincloth.

Tarek had chosen her to mother his cub, and was constantly reassured he'd made a wise decision. She was a fine sow, with sole responsibility for parenting the young one. Though Tarek had sired him, and helped as much as custom allowed, cubs were managed by the females.

She gazed at him. "We were gathering berries. It's the salmon berry —"

"Fire on the horizon," he interrupted hastily. "We need to gather whatever we can carry and get it to the river now. One trip, that's it, then we leave."

"Oh!" She dropped the basket.

He grabbed her arms. "There's no time to panic. I need you to keep a clear head. Collect only the most important things. We're headed back to the winter caves."

"The caves? But —"

"The longer we delay, the worse it will be. Tell Dawn and the cubs to get ready."

"Dawn is in the forest." Her expression darkened. "And I haven't seen the cubs all morning."

"What?" he roared, more from fear than anger.

"I'm sorry! You know how they are this time of year. They go off exploring and return just in time for a meal and a bath before nightfall."

"Damn!" He paced back and forth, kicking at a mound of dirt. "Okay, Kira. Gather what you can. I'll find Dawn and the cubs." He took a step and looked back. "Raven?"

She shook her head and shrugged.

He'd have to find them all. *Fuck*. "Get moving."

Kira hurried off.

He entered the heavily wooded area on the far side of their camp at a run. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he called loudly, "Dawn! Raven!" *No answer*. Tarek raced on until he reached a clearing. Across the meadow, he spotted the clan's other female, a light-skinned

blonde beauty. More shapely than Kira's tall, thin figure, Dawn's breasts were full and round, her arse plump and fleshy. She was a flirt, regularly trying to entice him to her bed of furs. She was hard to resist, even though he'd never had eyes for a female, even one so lush. "Dawn!"

She smiled seductively when he approached. "Hello, Tarek. Isn't it a beautiful day? Look at that view. Just gorgeous." She gazed at the orange hued horizon.

"It might be, if it weren't that colour," he said breathlessly.

"What...?" Obviously confused, she looked at him.

"Fire, Dawn. Headed this way. Get back to camp as fast as you can. The others are there. Where are Raven and the cubs?"

Understanding and concern flooded her face. "Raven's back there." She pointed to the far side of the meadow.

"And the cubs?"

"Down by the hollow log, I'm sure of it."

"All right. Go back and help Kira. I'll round them up and meet you there. We've got to hurry, Dawn."

"Yes, Tarek." She took off at a fast jog.

He was pleased to see her taking the situation seriously. Dawn was playful and a tease but also a fine female and an asset to the clan.

Tarek hurried across the meadow, his long legs eating up the ground at a fast pace. He reached the spot where men from the village had cut several trees, leaving waist-high stumps behind. Raven was there.

One of his hands rested on the rough bark of a tree, the other was busy at his groin. With his hips churning and his buttocks rhythmically clenching, it didn't take more than an instant to figure out what he was doing.

Shoulder-length brown hair hid his face as he moved, but Tarek could hear Raven's explosive panting and grunting.

Tarek bit his lip. *Interrupt or wait?* Another time, he'd watch, stroking his own large cock which hung in a perpetually half-erect state. He might even have joined the gorgeous

man. He'd grown incredibly close to him over the past few months. He took a step forward to speak.

"Ah, yeah," Raven growled and thrust his hips forward. A stream of white arced high into the air. Shuddering, he held on to the tree as another geyser of cum spat out and he collapsed against the trunk. "Damn," Raven murmured.

"Hate to interrupt," Tarek said loudly. "We have a problem."

Raven glanced up at him, seemingly unruffled by the intrusion. "Hey, Tarek." He released his cock and straightened. "What's up?"

For a moment, Tarek marvelled at the gorgeous cock's length and thickness. He blinked to clear his head. "Fire. It'll be here soon. We're heading for the winter caves."

"Fuck!" Raven gazed into the sky. "What do you want me to do?"

"The cubs are missing. Dawn thinks they're down at the hollow log. Help me find them."

Raven stepped forward. "Is everyone okay? My uncle, Norak?" His handsome face was hard, lips pressed together. Loyalty to family and clan was obviously foremost on his mind.

"So far. We've got to get going."

Raven tossed his hair back. "Norak can't see for shit, and Minu and Gunnar will be bitching every step of the way."

"You're right. Plus we'll need to stop and check on the other clans as we go."

"Yeah, yeah, leader of the tribe and all that. All right, let's get moving. Blasted cubs. Never around when you need them, always around when you don't."

Tarek headed towards the shallow end of the river and the fallen hollow log.

Raven followed close behind, keeping up the fast pace.

"It's usually not a problem." Tarek looked up, once again seeing filmy white smoke drifting through the air in front of him. "The fire's going to reach this area first. We've got to find those little buggers fast and hightail it out of here." Glancing around the clearing, he called, "Boston! Lily!"

He paused to listen for a reply. Nothing. *Fuck!* He trudged onwards.

“Boston!” Raven shouted, breaking away from Tarek’s path and moving off through the trees. “Where are they? The hollow log’s just ahead.”

They shuffled through some dense brush and came out on the edge of the shallow part of the river. Smoke hanging in the air was thicker here, and black. Tarek looked around carefully for any signs of movement.

“Boston! Lily!” Raven shouted.

Nothing.

“Listen.” Tarek held up a hand, and both men grew quiet. Crackling and popping sounds came from the direction of the fire. “Son of a bitch!” he swore, stomping around the log. He investigated nooks and crannies then combed the surrounding area.

Raven raced from one clump of trees to the next, calling for the cubs.

“Any idea where else they play?” Tarek finally asked, pausing again to listen.

“They could be anywhere. They might even be back at the camp by now.” Raven looked at him hopefully.

Scanning the smoke-filled distance, Tarek spotted the first flash of orange flame. He caught Raven’s eye. “The fire is almost here. If they’re not back there...” Both men stared at each other solemnly. “We can’t take the chance.”

Raven rubbed his arms as the air grew thick with lung-burning smoke. “What else can we do? We don’t know where the cubs are. If they saw that,” he pointed to the grey cloud ahead, “surely they’d head for home.”

Tarek fingered his amulet, searching its depths for guidance. The young ones were in danger—he felt it. “Someone would have come after us if the cubs showed up.” He knew it in his heart as he spoke the words. “Inuka would let us know. The cubs aren’t home. They’re in trouble, Raven. I sense it.”

A tree cracked all too close and orange flames shot into the sky. The fire licked at the ground, racing towards the hollow log. Tarek’s heart lurched and he spun on his heel desperately. “Boston! Lily!”

Chapter Two

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Raven shouted as they skirted the fire to go deeper into the woods. "This can't be good, Tarek."

"You want to go back and tell Kira and Dawn we gave up looking for their cubs?"

"No," the man muttered. "But I don't want to die either."

"You're not going to die. Come on." Tarek grabbed his arm and yanked him along. The ground grew warm under his bare feet, and occasional sticks scorched him. "Damn!" He hopped off a glowing ember.

"We can't go much farther!" Raven yelled over the roar of nearby fire.

"Boston! Lily!" Tarek shouted as loud as he could.

Raven slammed his hand against a tree in frustration. "Fuck, Tarek! What—"

"Listen!" Tarek held up one hand. They paused.

Quiet weeping came from just ahead. Ignoring the hot spots, Tarek ran forward. "Boston! Is that you? Lily?"

"Help!" a small voice called. "Up here!"

He glanced up and spotted two frightened faces peering down at him from a tree limb. Tarek's heart soared with relief. "It's all right. We're here now."

Grabbing the lower limbs, he pulled himself up the tree with ease until he was just below the cubs. "Come on, Lily. Give me your hand." Reaching up, he pulled the young female into his arms.

She shuddered and buried her face in his chest. "We were so scared!"

Tarek hugged her with his free arm. "So were we when we couldn't find you. But you're just fine. Let's hurry, your mama will be going crazy until we get you back." He handed her down to Raven and reached up for the next cub.

Boston clambered into his arms and gave Tarek a big smile. "I knew you'd find us, Tarek." He hugged his neck tightly.

"Of course we found you." He squeezed Boston back. "We'll always find you."

"Come on!" Raven called nervously.

"We've got to move." Tarek looked into the cub's eyes. "Climb down to Raven so we can get out of here."

"Yes, sir." Boston moved down the tree swiftly.

Tarek leapt to the ground next to them. A burning limb fell off to their side, and everyone jumped. "Here we go." He scooped a cub under each arm and took off.

The men raced towards the river, Raven charging ahead while Tarek struggled along with the two cubs squirming under his arms. After only a few hundred paces, Raven must have realised what he was doing and he turned, calling out, "Give me the girl."

Tarek passed Lily over then resumed his race for the camp. The ground was hot and with each footfall he was sure the soles of his feet would be blistered by the time they got back to the others. Behind him the snapping of the fire came after them. Treetops exploded, sending showers of sparks all around them.

"Faster, or we'll never make it." Panic was strong in Raven's voice.

"We'll make it, we just have to keep our heads," Tarek roared back. They crossed a small clearing, the fire so close behind them his back burned with the heat of it. "Go to the right. We have to cut through the brush and get to the river fast or we'll be trapped."

Raven turned and ran the way he'd been instructed.

A gust of wind hit them from the left and Tarek could have cried out with pleasure. "Hurry. The wind is with us, but for god knows how long."

They ran on, crossing paths with other small groups of animals evading the fire. Two large wolves hurried by and Tarek paused when he saw a brilliant red talisman amulet around one's neck. He made eye contact with the wolf and they nodded at each other before continuing on. Tarek was immensely relieved to see the other changelings headed in the right direction.

Nearly at the camp, he prayed Inuka had managed to get the old ones and the others ready to go. Time was definitely short. His back was cooler, his feet no longer burned from the embers so he knew they'd outrun the fire, for a time. Little Boston squirmed. The cub knew they were nearly home and must have wanted to be free to rush to his mother.

Coming out of the forest and into the camp's clearing, Tarek saw Inuka and the reed thin, nearly blind elder, Norak, collecting clothing from one of the tipis. He ran to them, coming to a breathless halt facing the elder. "What are you still doing here?"

Inuka looked at him then down at the wriggling cub still firmly trapped under his arm. "Taking as much to the river as we can."

"I told you one trip. The fire's right behind us, we have to go, now!"

Clutching the armload of clothing to his body, Inuka stepped aside as Raven grabbed Norak with his free hand. Inuka turned to Tarek. "We're ready. The others are at the river. I told them to stay in the water, to get as wet as they could and wait for us."

"You've done well. More than was prudent, actually." He was pleased to see Inuka's concern for the elders and family. He'd proven himself a good man, a definite asset to the clan.

The selfless actions reinforced Tarek's decision to fuck Inuka's brains out as soon as the emergency had passed. The growing feelings he had for the man made him smile. Tarek set the cub down then gave his bum a slap to send him running for the nearby river and his mother.

Boston yipped but didn't turn, just raced for the shore. Raven put Lily down and she sprinted after Boston, her long hair streaming behind her.

Tarek lifted his nose and inhaled, trying to decide if the fire was coming closer yet, or if they still had time. He could smell smoke, but thought it was no worse. Still, they needed to move. "Let's get everyone going."

The path was rocky and Norak, the old bruin, stumbled. Tarek clutched him under one arm and Raven the other as Inuka dashed ahead.

* * * *

Standing on the ridge above the river, Tarek looked down at his clan. The three elders had again reunited. Minu, Gunnar and blind Norak huddled together in water up to their knees. The mothers and their cubs were busy splashing themselves, getting as wet as they

could. Tarek saw they'd piled rocks on their possessions, hoping to keep the fire from destroying them all.

He nodded and felt enormous pride.

"It's time to go," he called to them. He trudged down the slope to the water where Inuka and Raven splashed themselves and each other.

Inuka called, "Should we all shift now? Fur will hold the water better."

"Yes," Tarek scrambled into the river. "We'll be able to move quicker too." He watched the others get down on all fours, even the two cubs under the watchful eyes of their mothers.

Raven and Inuka murmured back and forth nervously. Tarek joined them, asking, "What's happening?"

"Norak won't be able to keep up," Inuka said in a quiet voice.

Tarek looked across the shallow river and saw the three elders on their hands and knees. Norak was between them, as was their normal position for travelling. But this was far from normal, and wrinkled, old Norak's milk-white eyes were sure to be a problem. He couldn't take the chance of them all being lost.

"True, he's going to have more trouble than the rest. Perhaps he should remain human and ride on my back."

"Tarek, you can't be the one," interrupted Raven. "You'll need to show the others the fastest way. You have to lead. He's my uncle, I'll see to him."

The amulet on his chest glowed with heat. He knew Raven was right, no matter how much he hated letting someone else take the greater risk. The blind elder would be a problem for whomever was with him, but as tribal chief, he had no choice. It couldn't be him.

Decision made, Tarek nodded and turned to Inuka. "Stay as close to the group as you can. Keep the cubs safe. They're our future. Kira and Dawn are good-sized sows, have them carry the cubs if need be. We'll all help with that if necessary."

Inuka nodded, and Tarek knew he understood speed was all-important.

Holding back his doubts and fears, Tarek moved to the elders and informed them what was happening.

"You should go on without me," Norak insisted. "I'm nothing but a burden."

“Nonsense.” Tarek squeezed the old man’s arm. “You are our past. You’re as vital to the clan as the cubs are to our future. Wait here and I’ll help you climb astride Raven.” He turned to the others. “It’s time to get moving. Shift.”

A soft mewling sound came from where the two cubs cuddled together, their tiny bodies writhing as the change transformed them. Black and mocha brown bundles of fur emerged from the spot where the two tykes had been.

Tarek peered around and watched the clan, each morphing into the guise of their bruin alter egos.

Satisfied that Raven’s transition was complete Tarek splashed him with water. Raven rolled in the shallow river, soaking his thick fur.

Tarek fashioned a leather harness for Norak to hold onto and helped the elder onto Raven’s back. “Best I can do.” He patted Norak’s hand.

“It’s good. Thank you, Tarek.”

The old man’s smile warmed Tarek’s heart.

Tarek retrieved four water skins from the booty they’d carried to the river and filled them all. That should provide the clan with enough water to last the trek, he hoped. He tied them in pairs by their leather straps, looped one set around his own neck and passed the others to Inuka. Satisfied, he dropped to his knees, then relaxed his muscles as much as he could. He brought on his own change and fought back the urge to snarl at the sensual, teasing agony tearing through his body. He stretched his arms out, spreading his fingers wide and watched, transfixed, as the bones thickened, the muscles swelled. His face ached for the span of ten heartbeats then sweet pleasure took hold. When the bones in his legs shifted, for a moment he thought his determination to keep silent wouldn’t hold. Like crying out during an explosive orgasm, he couldn’t always control his groans when morphing. His fingers turned into thick slabs of muscles, the nails into claws that could rend the bark from a tree in a flash. A gut wrenching stab tore at his lower belly, thickening his cock, and then he too was done.

Grunting, he bunched his shoulders then grunted again, content with the change. He joined the others in the water, wetting his coat.

Instead of shaking, which he usually did after his bath, he clambered up the slope and bellowed. The clan looked up at him and he rose up on his hind legs. Sniffing, he detected the smoke they all dreaded. He dropped his front paws to the ground then bounced from one foot to the other, signalling them to follow.

The cubs were the first to start their ascent and the rest quickly joined them. When they were nearly at the top, Tarek turned and bounded into the forest. The going was rough, the undergrowth thick and lush. Spring had been wet, encouraging the abundant and rapid blossoming of the local vegetation.

Tarek found deer trails to follow and guided his followers at as fast a pace as he dared. The other bear clans dwelled close to the river as his did, so he was able to check in with each group as they travelled. Confident each family had an evacuation plan, Tarek led his small band on towards safety. After an hour or so, they were forced to veer away from the river. It became obvious the cubs would need more assistance than he'd thought. The two youngest morphed back to human form to make carrying them easier. They all took one last dip in the frigid waters before heading into the deep woods.

The going became more difficult as the miles crept by. Thorns stuck to their hides, branches raked their eyes, their soft noses. And then the wind turned.

Behind him, Tarek heard one of the clan cough. Another sneezed a moment later. Inuka was right behind him and he slackened the pace long enough to allow the male to come alongside. He gazed at the bruin appreciatively, his cock thickening. *Oh, if it were another day, another place and time.* He imagined rising on his hind legs behind the crouching brown bear and mounting him. Inuka's muscular physique aroused him in bear form, as much as he did in his man's body. Either shape was appealing, and Tarek forced his mind to think of something besides fucking Inuka.

He nudged the bruin, indicating he should take the lead and which way to go. Then Tarek faded to the rear, wanting to check on the others.

Kira was struggling, her cub Boston clinging to her back as she scrambled to keep up. The young male coughed sporadically. When Tarek reached down and gently stroked him with his muzzle, he peered up at his leader with a determined thrust to his chin.

Tarek saw the youngster was suffering but he was strong and would have to endure more before they reached the safety of the caves. He nuzzled Boston and saw his eyes fill. Tears like small waterfalls streamed down the cub's cheeks.

'Little ones, Lily, Boston, take the flasks and offer water to the others. With whatever's left, wet yourselves down again.'

The two youngsters climbed down from their mother's backs and got the flasks from him and Inuka. They all halted while each of the family gulped down their fill of water and the cubs used the remaining water on themselves. It didn't take long, and when they were done, they were once again taken up and carried, while the now empty flasks were slung around their necks.

Boston's best chance to fight the smoke was to tighten himself against his mother's back and press his face into her fur. *'Bury your face, little one. Hide your eyes as best you can.'* Tarek was gratified to see the cub do as he'd instructed. He nuzzled Boston one more time and moved down the line.

Kira was followed by Dawn, the much stronger sow. Lily was in a good position, with her arms wrapped tightly around her mother's neck, face buried in her thick fur. Smoke billowed around them, but the two seemed capable of travelling for a long while yet.

Next came the two elders, each stubborn, each wilful, but so far keeping up fairly well. They grumbled, and Minu sent her thoughts to him about the pathway being rough. She mentally complained about the younger ones going before them. *'It's just not right. We should go first. We are the honoured ones of the clan, are we not?'*

Tarek focused in on her thoughts. Changelings were gifted with the ability to communicate without words, although some animals mastered it better than others did. He'd seen some cougars and wolves who could only minimally share thoughts. *'Yes, revered one,'* he sent back. *'Of course you are. The fire is close, though. We want the cubs to have the best chance at clean air. You are tough, whereas they may not be, yet.'*

'Understood,' she sent, mollified for the moment.

Bringing up the tail end of the group, Raven laboured under the old man's weight.

Tarek nudged his nose against Raven congenially. He wished there was a way to ease his friend's burden.

'Go and take care of the sows, the cubs. We will see you at the caves.' Raven shifted the elder on his back, struggling to increase their speed.

'Be well, my friends, be safe.' Tarek turned to the ragged line of bears and hurried forward. He didn't look back, afraid he'd see Raven falter.

On the return journey to the head of the group he saw how tired they all were, but refused to slacken their pace. They were hours away from their destination and the smoke grew thicker by the second.

The band fled just ahead of the fire. Cubs were passed between adults, elders nudged along by those who could muster the strength to do so. The hills loomed ahead. The safety of the rocks called to them.

Tarek looked up. The nearby caves were nowhere near liveable but might provide temporary shelter. The clan was exhausted. *Do we stop and rest, or press on?*

Glancing back, he saw flames dancing from treetop to treetop. The decision made for him, he ducked through the final twenty paces of foliage and came out at the base of the rugged stone wall that would lead them to safety.

Behind him, trees exploded. Like thunder, the tops of the evergreens went off like skyrockets, sending burning embers down on the fleeing clan. Patches of fur burned only to be slapped out with paws by their fellow clan members as they raced for the safety they knew loomed near.

'Hurry, we're almost there.' he sent with the last of his mental strength. With Boston clinging to his neck, he clambered up the rocks. Smoke choked them all. Coughing, scarcely able to breathe, he pushed himself upwards. He released the cub and gripped the rocks with one paw, using the other to reach down. He locked claws with someone and Tarek pulled. A whimper touched his heart, but he drew the female up and pushed her ahead of him. Again he reached down, his claws encountering those of another bear, another clan member dragged to the safety of the rocks. Twice more he pulled stragglers up onto the ledge, and each time his heart rejoiced in their safety. The females were there, the cubs, and two of the elders.

'Tarek,' an inner voice called.

Inuka! The last time Tarek had seen the soot grimed face of his companion, he was helping Minu and Gunnar. They had arrived. He had not. He cocked his head, silently asking for a clue to Inuka's whereabouts.

He peered through the wall of smoke and blackness. There were no signs of movement. Reluctantly he turned away from the empty trail, glancing at the frightened, fatigued faces of his family huddled near a rock wall. *I must get the clan to the caves.* Then he'd go back for Inuka, Raven and Norak.

He climbed the last few steps and motioned the others to follow. The mouth of a cave finally came into view. Tarek got the clan, exhausted and nearly ready to collapse, inside. He paused to inhale a deep breath before heading back out.

At the ledge he skirted the path back down to the trail when a movement caught his eye. Inuka appeared first and then Raven with Norak clinging to his shoulders. Inuka glanced up at him, looking more drained than Tarek had seen him before.

He roared with delight, then extended a paw to heft the old, blind one up to the ledge. Inuka and Raven followed, their breathing laboured.

Tarek took a moment to nuzzle each of their necks then motioned for them to follow. He assisted Norak to where the others waited, stretched out on the cool cave floor and beneath any smoke that had drifted into their safe haven. After settling the old man next to Minu, he nosed around each clan member, checking for injuries.

'Save your strength. Don't morph yet.' He looked each bear in the eye, making sure the message was understood.

'Couldn't if I wanted to,' Minu grumbled, resting her head on Gunnar's back.

Tarek smiled at the old sow and returned to Inuka. *'You and I need to transform. Do you have the strength?'*

'I take my strength from you.' He buried his face in Tarek's furry pelt.

Pressing his cool nose against Inuka's, Tarek willed whatever energy the talisman offered him to the man. They stood touching for long moments until Inuka finally pulled away.

He nodded and changed.

Tarek's bones ached and creaked, resisting the morph after such a rigorous journey. He pressed on, forcing the transformation, biting back groans of pain tinged with euphoria as his body shifted. His jaw altered, his teeth shrinking back to human size. Legs, short, heavy-set as the bruin, stretched the bones and sinews, another pain endured to become a man. His hands and feet were the last to change, the tiny bones elongating by the dozens as sinew, muscle and flesh morphed. Finally the tingling sensation subsided and he allowed a single groan to emerge.

Across from him, Inuka dropped from his hands and knees to the floor, lying in a panting heap.

"Are you okay?" Tarek hurried to his side and ran a hand up the man's smooth flank.

"I think so. A couple of small burns, nothing big. Mainly, I'm beat. That was one hell of a trip." He looked around the small, dark cave. "This was a good idea. Not sure if we could have gone much farther."

"I hope it was a good idea," Tarek murmured quietly. The others watched them and he didn't want to alarm anyone, but the danger from the fire was far from over. "We need to find food and water. That and a good night's sleep will do wonders."

Kira scrambled to her feet and went to where Dawn lay curled in a ball of exhaustion. Bending, she tugged something from around the sow's neck. She grabbed the leather thong and pouch in her mouth and approached Tarek.

"Excellent!" He took it from her and peered inside at the healing powders it contained. "You were wise bringing this, both of you." He cupped Kira's furry face and caressed it then smiled at Dawn.

The curing ability of the powders was a mystery, but Tarek had yet to see a wound they couldn't mend. Having them at hand was the key – when bears returned to human form they were naked except for small things they wore around their limbs or neck, like the talisman.

"Good thinking," Inuka agreed. He sat up. "Perhaps you should check the clan for burns. I know I could use some of that powder right here." He pulled his long hair away from his shoulder.

Tarek spotted a nasty red welt. "Damn. I'll take care of you first."

"Thank you." Inuka grimaced when Tarek sprinkled a little of the powder on his burn.

"Sorry, I know it hurts worse before it gets better." Tarek rubbed the flesh around the burn gently. He massaged Inuka's shoulders for a moment, enjoying the visceral contact, wishing he could alter his touch to a more arousing one. The memory of their morning's play brought a smile to his lips, albeit a tired one. Soon, he hoped they'd find the time to continue their game.

"It's okay." Inuka inhaled then breathed out. He turned back to gaze into Tarek's eyes, and a spark flickered between them. He smiled tiredly. "I'm good. Or I will be in a minute. I'll go look for food and fresh water."

Raven stepped forward. *'You'll need help. If we find a stream, I can catch fish.'*

"Thanks." Inuka nodded.

"Let me check you first. Are you injured anywhere?" Tarek smoothed his hands over the dusky pelt. Raven flinched, and Tarek inspected his leg. "You have a burn here. I'll treat it before you go."

A low growl escaped Raven's throat when the powder hit his wound.

"That should do it. If you discover any other injuries, let me know." Tarek patted the bear's haunch.

"Let's head out. We'll be back as soon as we're able." Inuka took the empty water skins then looked at Tarek longingly.

Tarek watched them go. Unspoken words were left hanging between them, but it wasn't the time. "Be careful," he finally murmured.

"We will." Inuka climbed out of the cave, followed by the massive bruin Raven.

Tarek turned back to the group. "Food and water will hopefully be here soon. Now, let me check you for injuries." He squatted in front of Lily. "Anything hurt?"

"My back." She squirmed as he ran a hand carefully over her skin.

He found the burn and treated it. "You cubs will be more comfortable if you morph back to bear form. The night air will be crisp, and the cave floor chilly."

He treated a small burn on Boston's leg, then watched as the cubs shifted, staying close to their mothers. Tarek assessed each clan member in turn. Minu might have used the

remainder of the powders with her long list of ailments, but Tarek handled her gently, soothing both her pains and concerns.

The cave they occupied was small but serviceable for the night. Tarek tried to investigate the surrounding area but the smoke outside remained thick. Before long Inuka and Raven returned, carrying the skins now filled with water, and enough fish to satisfy all.

"Nice work." Tarek watched the others enjoy the meal. "I think once this is consumed they'll be asleep in no time. Everyone is pretty well exhausted." He chewed on a chunk of fish.

Inuka made a face as he ate. "This would be better if it was cooked. I only enjoy raw fish as a bear. But I'm not complaining, I've seen enough fire for one day, thank you."

"No kidding. Raw works for me. Were the fish hard to come by, or do you think we can catch more before setting out tomorrow?"

"The stream was stocked. Even the fish are swimming away from the fire."

"Maybe." Tarek rotated one shoulder, the day's travails wearing on him.

"I found something besides food and water out there." Inuka's eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Such as?" He raised an eyebrow with interest.

Inuka lowered his voice. "Another cave. Smaller, just around the bend. Might offer some privacy for two guys who could damn well use some."

"Privacy, eh?" Tarek smiled. "Thought you were beat."

"Got my second wind. Actually, it's all I've been able to think about since I spotted it. If you're too tired —"

"Oh, I don't think so." Tarek glanced at Inuka's brown cock, half-erect. His own shaft stiffened, rising in response to the arousal of the man he desired.

Inuka shifted in his seat, keeping one eye on the others as he spoke in a low, seductive voice. "Actually, I've been thinking about it all day. Ever since you drew my cock into your mouth at the river. I'll admit the timing is bad, but damn it, I want more of that."

Tarek watched the others as he too spoke quietly. "I want that too, and more. All day I've imagined fucking you in a variety of positions, wondering which we'd choose first."

A slow smile spread across Inuka's face. "If it were me, I'd lay you down on your back and kneel in front of you, then press your knees forward so I could fuck your tight black arse. My shaft would sink in deep. Every time I pounded into you, my balls would slap against your bum. In that position, I could play with your cock at the same time. You'd shoot all over my stomach when I emptied my load in your slick, hot channel."

Tarek groaned. "Not fair, getting me all excited when I have nothing to wear. I'll have to sit here until this erection passes. But when I get you alone, you'll pay the price, I promise you that. I'll spread your gorgeous brown cheeks wide and spear your hole with my tongue. When you're begging for it, I might let you have my cock. And you want to talk about shooting? You'll coat the ground with your cream while I fill your arse."

"Fuck." Inuka rubbed his shaft. "You're evil, you know that? Now I've got a woody that won't quit."

"You started it." Tarek grinned widely. "I just went along. Believe me, I know how to play your game."

"Oh, yes you do. And knowing that makes me even harder. All right, I give in. Change the subject so we'll be able to walk out of here."

"But this is so much fun. Is that pre-cum on the slit of your crown? If those cubs weren't here I'd lean down and lick it off."

Inuka choked on a piece of fish and tossed it to the ground. He took a drink from one of the skins and glared at Tarek accusingly. "You win! Enough already! I bow to your prowess, leader of the bear clans."

"That's right. Don't forget it." He leaned closer. "I can't wait to be alone with you."

Inuka's smile warmed Tarek's heart.

He replied, "I'm looking forward to it too. Our wait will be brief. Look, the cubs and elders are asleep already. The others will be soon."

Tarek glanced at his clan. The rough meal consumed, they were ready for slumber after the gruelling day they'd just endured. He was proud of each of them. They'd risen to the challenge and handled themselves marvellously. Tomorrow's journey would be much easier. In a few hours time they'd reach their winter caves, where they could hole up for a few weeks if necessary. Eventually they'd need to get back to the river and the summer runs of

salmon. They needed to store fish and berries for the coming winter or there'd be famine. But the caves contained sufficient supplies to hold them for a while.

Erection finally deflated, he stood and moved through the cave. Boston had fallen asleep with fish bones covering the front of his belly. Tarek brushed them off gently, patting the rear of the cub snuggled next to his mother.

Lily slept curled up by Dawn, and the three elders slumbered in a heap. Only Raven watched when he approached. "Inuka and I are going to check out the surrounding territory. I want to make sure the wind hasn't turned and shifted the fire this way. We'll be back shortly."

Raven merely blinked at him through heavy eyes, but his thoughts came through loud and clear. *'Check out the area, eh? Not sure I believe that.'*

Tarek crossed his arms over his chest. "We shouldn't be long."

The brown bruin closed his eyes.

They'd sleep for hours, no doubt about that. Yawning, he moved towards the cave entrance. Sleep sounded good. Being with Inuka sounded better. "Let's go."

"Right behind you." Inuka followed him out into the smoky night air. White wisps lingered but there were no more crackling sounds of fire. The flames had passed them by – or so it seemed. He grasped Tarek's hips and moved him onwards. "Get moving, buddy. Time's a wastin'."

A cave opening appeared on their left and Tarek stepped into it. He glanced around. It was a small space with uneven walls and not much more. A couple of rock pigeons scolded the intrusion and flitted out.

"Sor-ry," Inuka murmured.

Tarek smiled. "They'll get over it. They can have their cave back later. I believe we're finally alone."

"You sure?" Inuka grinned, backing away from him. "Might be a couple of squirrels or rabbits hiding in here somewhere. Maybe we should check...or not."

"They're going to be treated to a show. I've been randy for you all damn day. I put it out of my mind for a while, but the feeling's returned in full force. Back away from me all you like, my Dark Warrior. When I catch you, you're mine, and I intend to prove it."

Inuka tossed his long, black hair over his shoulder. He pressed his backside against the rock wall, an expression of pure lust on his face. Stroking his thick cock up and down, he raised his chin stubbornly. "And just how do you intend to do that?"

Tarek dropped to his knees. He studied the erection bobbing at eye level and licked his lips. Pressing his hands to the wall on either side of the naked body before him, he leaned forward, flicking the bulbous brown crown with his tongue. "I'll prove it by the way your body reacts to mine. Your shaft hardens and weeps when I look at you. It fits in my mouth like it was made to be there."

"Please..." Inuka shoved his hips forward suggestively.

The banter had affected him, as Tarek knew it would—his cock begged for the attention Tarek intended to bestow.

With one smooth gulp, he swallowed the thick length of the erection. The head nudged the back of his throat and Tarek moaned. The brown cock filled him perfectly. He could spend hours laving and worshiping it, although he knew it would erupt before that much time passed. Grinding his face into the nest of dark pubic hair, he sucked with vigour and the shaft throbbed.

"Fuck," Inuka growled and grabbed Tarek's head with his hands. "Hair on your head would be helpful. I'd fist my hands in it and hold you tight to me."

Tarek chuckled, his mouth still pleasantly full. He loved his smooth, perfectly shaped head. But he agreed there were times hair would be useful. Clutching Inuka's thighs, he nuzzled the man's brown balls with his chin. Every time Inuka thrust ahead they slapped him, and he felt the orbs tighten and draw up.

"I'm close. Damn, that feels good."

Tarek grunted, continuing his ministrations. His reward would arrive soon.

"Yes! Now!" Inuka pressed a hand to the back of his head and the other against the wall as he came. His shudders rocked them both.

A warm stream of cum shot down Tarek's throat. He savoured every drop, relishing the feeling, and swallowed quickly, preparing for the next taste of his lover's seed. The second filled his mouth, followed by the third. He suckled the last few droplets from the slit of Inuka's cock and licked his lips, content.

Long moments passed, and Inuka finally rubbed Tarek's head. "Fuck that was good. I could live in your mouth."

Pulling back to chuckle, Tarek planted kisses on the flat brown stomach before he rose. "I wouldn't complain." Face to face, he pressed a kiss on the full lips that smiled at him. "The taste of you is sweeter than the most precious nectar of the gods."

Inuka ran his wide hands over Tarek's chest. "Take heart, knowing you can taste me whenever you desire. I'm yours, to take whenever and wherever you please." He opened his mouth and they kissed deeply.

Tarek finally pulled back. "I desire to take you right here, right now." Clasp ing Inuka's hands, he turned him to face the wall. He ran his own down the smooth-skinned waist and again dropped to his knees.

Pressing the dark arse cheeks apart, he admired the puckered rosebud before plunging his tongue in. The tight outer ring of the sphincter gave way and Tarek sank further into bliss.

He reached around, slid his fingers over Inuka's cock and stroked it back and forth. A bead of lingering cum oozed out, and Tarek spread it on his fingers. He pulled his tongue out and replaced it with one slick digit.

His hands clutching at the rock wall, Inuka's arse bucked against him. Though they hadn't been together before, he recognised that movement. The insatiable arse desired more.

Plunging another finger in, Tarek stretched the opening. He wanted it nice and pliant and knew it was almost there.

I'm almost there, too. He reached down and stroked his own shaft. The one thing that would satisfy the greedy, gaping hole before him was throbbing and ready for action.

With a growl of pleasure, he removed his fingers and drove his tongue in deep, one last time.

"Ah, you're killing me," Inuka mumbled at the wall. His hips moved as if with a will of their own, thrusting, trembling.

"You're a big boy, you can handle it." Tarek grasped Inuka's cock again, squeezing more slick lubricant from the tip. He rose, greasing his shaft with the sticky nectar. "Let's see if you can handle this." He pried Inuka's arse cheeks apart and nudged his cock forward. The

tip rubbed against the crinkled hole then slipped in easily. He thrust forward, the whole head popping inside. He stopped and basked in the sensation of tightness holding him. He took a deep breath and pushed again until half his shaft disappeared. "That's it, take it all."

"Yes! Give it to me." Inuka groaned and Tarek obliged.

Once past the sphincter, his cock slid in to the hilt. He paused to savour the snug fit then drew out slowly.

"More..." his lover moaned.

"That's my Dark Warrior. Just as your cock was born to fit my mouth, I do believe mine was born to sink into your slick hole. What a glorious feeling." He thrust deep and pulled back.

"There's none better. Fuck me, Tarek. Damn, I need it."

I need it too. He clutched Inuka around the waist with one arm and pushed against the wall with the other. The cave resonated with the sounds of their heated, intense coupling. Flesh slapped flesh and both men grunted as Tarek bore down full tilt into his release.

Just as his orgasm began, he gripped Inuka's cock and pumped it. Warm cum coated his fist and he smiled, clinging to his lover in order to remain standing.

His quivering eventually subsided but he stood with his arms around Inuka for a long time.

"That was perfect." Inuka turned his face sideways for a kiss. Mouths touching, he murmured, "Worth waiting for. I knew you'd satisfy me in ways no one else could." He leaned his head against Tarek's chest.

"Ah, my Dark Warrior. Let's go back to the others and curl up together. Sleep beckons."

"It definitely does—now that we've gotten the important stuff taken care of." He grinned.

Tarek laughed and eased his bulky cock out. He was still half-erect, but he had a feeling Inuka would always do that to him. Wrapping their bodies together in sleep was what he needed.

They stumbled their way through the darkness back to the bigger cave. A shard of moonlight lit the room, and Tarek glanced around. The three elders slept peacefully, Minu

snoring like a moose as usual. Raven had stretched out in the centre of the room. Kira and Boston slumbered peacefully, next to Dawn. “Where’s Lily?” he murmured.

Inuka rushed to the back of the cave, squatting and closely examining the sow. So little a bundle of fur might have been overlooked. “I don’t think she’s here.”

Tarek circled the cave quickly but thoroughly then stepped back to the entrance, peering into the darkness. “Where could she be?”

Chapter Three

Tarek stepped forward. The night was starless but, with the fire still burning in the distance, they could see to some extent.

"She's not in here," Inuka whispered urgently. "She's got to be out there." He turned and looked through the cave's opening.

Tarek thought quickly. *You and I can handle this.* "Don't wake the others, they need their rest."

Inuka nodded and together they left the relative safety of the cave.

Just beyond the entrance and the hearing of the clan, Tarek stopped and turned. "We'll search the nearby brush first. She may have just wandered off. A call of nature perhaps. She's also a sleepwalker. Let's hope if this is one of her spells she doesn't go far."

Inuka inhaled deeply then exhaled. "We can't afford to lose our young."

Tarek smiled at him, pleased and thankful at how quickly he'd become a loyal member of the clan. "We won't. The fire is far away now, we'll find her."

The man leaned into his arms and kissed the crook of his neck. Pulling away, he replied, "Thank you. You always have the right answers. Let's find the cub and get her back to her mother. And get us some rest. That rendezvous tired me out."

Chuckling, Tarek pushed him away but only to arm's length. "Travel along the wall. We'll go one way for two hundred paces and, if we haven't found her, we'll go the other way. She's small and tired, she shouldn't have gone far."

Inuka followed him, the length of a man's body from the wall, scanning the underbrush as they passed. Tarek searched the crevices in the stone. Anywhere big enough to hold a child, he investigated diligently. Pulling brush from deep in one, he thought he saw movement and fell back when a family of rabbits skittered past him, racing for the forest.

"Bloody hell." He chuckled. "Be careful, my Dark Warrior, we're liable to run into all manner of wildlife hiding from the fire."

Inuka glanced into the night sky. "The wind seems to be carrying the inferno further away."

"Yes, let's just hope it keeps up. We have a ways to go yet." He trudged ahead, lifting brush, pushing it aside with his leg and searching for the little bundle of fur named Lily.

Going around a large finger of rock, Inuka stumbled over a burnt log, just as a deer sprang from a small opening in the wall. The animal vanished into what remained of the underbrush and Inuka pulled himself to his feet, muttering at his clumsiness.

"You all right?" Tarek bit back the chuckle he knew would embarrass the man.

"Yeah, just fucking clumsy. Sorry." Brushing off his thighs then his bum, he took a couple of steps forward and stopped. He sniffed the air and said, "She's been here."

Tarek's heart lurched. Lifting his nose, he took a step, inhaling. *Yes, the faint, rich scent of cub.* "It's her. If you hadn't stumbled we might have missed this altogether." He carefully moved ahead, keeping his nose on her smell. As humans they could very easily lose it and lose her, if she'd hidden herself too well.

She hadn't. They turned the next corner and there she was—curled into a ball and fast asleep just inside a small hollow in the rock. "Got her," Tarek said quietly, relief making his voice soft, a little rough. Now that they'd found her there was no need to startle or even wake her.

Bending down, Tarek slipped his hands under the soft ball of fur and lifted her into his arms. She stiffened for an instant but quickly snuggled into his chest, murmuring soft, cooing sounds.

Inuka stood beside him and touched the cub's face gently. "What a relief. You frightened me, little one."

"Let's get her back to her mother before anyone knows she's gone." Tarek turned and headed to the cave. Smoke still hung in the air but not nearly as strong as it had a few short hours ago. He thought, hoped, they'd made it through the worst.

Beside him, Inuka lifted branches or pushed brambles out of the way, shielding the cub from being snagged or slapped. It didn't take long to return to the safety of the clan.

Once inside, Tarek strode across the small chamber and knelt beside Dawn. He laid Lily down, then smiled when the little one snuffled and moaned then curled into her mother's body. Dawn, still asleep, drew her close.

Rising to his feet, he turned and said to his lover, "Come on you, it's time we got some sleep."

Yawning, the beautiful hunk nodded. "Yeah. Big day tomorrow too."

Tarek eyed the corner where the old ones lay, two bears and a man curled around each other. Minu complained, but he knew she was a strong old bird once they got her moving. Gunnar was the same but with less complaining. He was a huge asset to the clan. Norak worried him. The day's travel had been hard. Not surprisingly, the old fellow didn't complain.

Sighing, he turned and went into Inuka's arms. After planting a soft kiss on his lips, Tarek led him to a piece of bare floor near Raven. Still in human form, the chill of the night air made sleep a distant jewel, much desired, difficult to obtain. "Spoon with me," he murmured into Inuka's ear and pressed his back against Raven.

Inuka turned away from Tarek and snuggled against the hard muscles ridging Tarek's belly.

With an arm under his head, his back against Raven's warm fur, and his lover held close, Tarek was at peace. His clan was safe for the time being and that was all he could do. Tomorrow would take care of itself. "Thank you for helping me find Lily," he whispered.

"Of course," Inuka murmured back. "I want to help you every chance I get. If I'm part of your family clan, that means helping the others too."

He's a good man. Tarek had known that about Inuka, but his actions constantly confirmed it. Strong, quick-thinking and loyal, Inuka was a splendid addition to their clan.

He thought of their earlier play and his cock thickened, nudging its way between Inuka's thighs. *And fucking sexy!* Just being next to Inuka made him hard.

"You're insatiable," whispered his lover, who didn't move away but instead reached down and stroked his shaft.

"Yes, and I blame it all on you." Pushing his hips forward, he found the snugness of Inuka's thighs created a lovely pocket of heat for him to fuck. His gentle rocking back and forth soon had him breathless with desire.

He reached down and took hold of the enormous erection jutting from Inuka's groin. A sigh and a shiver told him how much his lust meant to the man he spooned. Gripping the cock tighter, he worked the skin from base to tip, running his thumb over the plump, round dome. Pre-cum oozed over the head, supplying lubrication for a smooth stroke.

"I thought you were tired," Inuka whispered.

"I'm exhausted," he replied, a playful note in his voice.

From behind him, Raven's gruff thought broke in. *'If you two are so damn tired, why don't you get some shuteye?'*

Chuckling, Tarek replied, "Sorry, my friend. Go to sleep and we'll behave."

He resumed fondling Inuka, gently twisting and turning his fist on each upwards stroke. He stopped his own thrusting, simply allowing his cock, as hard as a granite spear, to rest between his lover's thighs.

Gasping, Inuka whispered urgently, "Tarek, stop or I'll come."

"Then come. I want to feel you spend."

He stroked and toyed with the hefty shaft, kissing the man's neck and shoulders, feeling him tense at the moment of exquisite torment.

Inuka grunted and Tarek knew he was lost. He spewed a stream of cum across his fist and onto the cave's floor. Inuka's arse clenched, squeezing Tarek's shaft, driving him near to losing control himself. Each spasm caused him to clench again, milking the cock pressed so tightly between his cheeks.

'Are you bloody done yet?' Raven's grumbling thought came.

Tarek detected a note of jealousy and realised what he'd done. He'd been a fool to be so inconsiderate. He wouldn't continue the play in front of his friend. Releasing Inuka's shaft, he ran a hand over his skin and settled it on his stomach.

"Fuck," gasped Inuka.

"Shh," Tarek murmured. "Get some sleep."

Inuka relaxed against him, his breathing quickly falling into an easy rhythm.

Tarek turned his head towards Raven. "Good night, my friend."

The bruin nuzzled Tarek's neck as Tarek nestled next to him to settle in for sleep.

* * * *

Sunlight in his eyes woke Tarek the next morning. The snoring of the bears around him was like soft music, and he lay there for a while, simply listening to them.

"Time we got them up." Inuka twisted in his arms. Facing him, the brown-skinned man said, "You were amazing last night. Thank you."

Leaning forward, Tarek pressed his lips against those of his lover. Still touching mouths, he whispered, "You were pretty amazing yourself."

From the corner where the elders sprawled together came the snippy thoughts of Minu, *'You're both bloody amazing, now when do we get something to eat?'*

Inuka looked at him and Tarek saw the corners of the man's mouth twitch. It was too much and he broke into laughter. Inuka joined him and soon the entire clan was wide awake and staring bleary-eyed at them.

"Minu," Tarek said between chuckles, "We'll get you something to eat right away, ma'am."

'Ma'am. Don't you ma'am me, just feed me. These old bones need nourishment if you expect me to go racing across the countryside again today.'

"Raven, do you think you could go with Inuka and get some breakfast? Fish and water is fine. Inuka, if you see any berries along the way..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, you like berries."

'We all like berries,' came Minu's annoyed thought.

Raven gazed at him for a moment before heading out with Inuka into the morning light. Tarek knew it wouldn't take them long to return and wanted to check everyone's injuries before they began their trek.

The two cubs rolled around on the dirt floor, wrestling and nipping at each other's paws. Neither suffered any trace of injuries from the previous day. Kira and Dawn also fared well, small scabs were the only sign they'd been injured at all. Gunner seemed no worse for wear although he was known to suffer in silence. He'd require watching later.

Minu's complaints had been numerous but minor. When he ruffled her fur, she groaned as if in great agony, but the flesh showed pink and healthy.

'Ow!' Her howl echoed throughout the small cave. *'Be gentle, you great oaf. I'm delicate, you know, not some hulking sow you can manhandle.'* She rolled over and dragged herself onto her feet as if it was the last ounce of strength she had. *'Check my back. I know I felt some horrible burns there. I bet I'm covered in scars and welts, and...and...'*

Dutifully Tarek checked her back from her bum to her ears and found only four or five small patches where the fur had been burned away. She bore no other marks from the race through the woods. How to tell her without angering her, that was the tricky part. "It's amazing. Kira, come and look," he said, and turning, winked at the she-bear.

Kira came to join him and stood staring at the grey streaked brown fur of the old sow's back.

Gunnar must have realised he was pulling something on the old girl and came to peer down at Minu.

'What, what... What's the matter with me?' Minu's mind-voice was frantic.

Even the two youngsters stopped their play to see what all the kafuffle was about. Little Boston peeked from under Tarek's arm, looking at the sow's back then up at his leader's face, mystified.

"Nothing, honestly," he beamed happily. "But that's just it. It's amazing, Minu. You should bear burns and scars from the torturous journey. Your strength and endurance are a testament to you. Of us all, you have healed the best. You're amazing. Simply amazing." He leaned down, gave the old girl a hug and kissed her squarely on the wrinkled black snout.

She backed away, apparently confused. What could she say? What could she do? She couldn't complain, not after he'd praised her so highly. She slumped to the floor, defeated for the moment.

Tarek had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Kira looked at him, and she too appeared as if another word would have been her undoing.

From behind her, Gunnar's thoughts came. *'Who'd have thought it? Minu, the amazing.'*

Tarek had to turn away then as did Kira and the elder. She had truly been silenced for a little while, at least. He knew somehow she'd get them all back later and he looked forward to her trying.

The old woman taken care of, Tarek went to check on Norak's wounds. He had the worst injuries and was the weakest of the clan, and his blindness was a great handicap for him. Yet the old man was stubborn.

"How fare you today, Norak?" he asked gently when he crouched beside the old man. Patches of skin were charred by embers and sparks. The flesh was healing, but slowly.

"I am well, youngster, well enough."

"May I check to be sure the powders have done their magic on you?"

"Of course. Thank you, Tarek." Norak groaned when he shifted his weight, turning so his back was fully exposed, his feet tucked beneath him.

His back would heal, if given time. The powder was doing its magic, but his age and the amount of damage done would slow the healing process.

"Kira, would you get me the powder?" he called.

A moment later it was in his hand, Kira beside him looking at the ravaged back of the elder. Tarek opened the stopper and sprinkled a mist of powder onto each of the wounds he found then asked Norak to lie on his side. "I'd like to see your feet now. I know you had some bad burns there yesterday."

Grumbling, the elder rolled to his side and poked his feet out.

Tarek sprinkled more of the powder on the old man's feet then leaned down and touched his shoulder. "I'm going to try to keep a closer eye on you today. We need you well, old one."

"Thank you, Tarek, you're a great leader to remember an old, blind one."

"As you would if the roles were reversed. Now rest, food will be here very soon."

He turned away just as Raven and Inuka entered the cave. The two water skins hung from Inuka's shoulder and his arms were full of fish. One broad leaf, folded over, lay on top. It smelled of berries.

The clan ate well and drank their fill. Strength returned and the aches of their race the previous day eased as they moved around. When they'd consumed their meal, Tarek turned to Raven and asked, "Are you all right to carry Norak for the last stint of our journey? We don't have far to go."

Raven looked up at him and, with a great shrug of his wide shoulders, he nodded.

"Thank you. Inuka, can you make sure the cubs and the other elders are all right during these last few hours of travel?"

Inuka looked over at Raven, nodded then replied, "Of course, we'll both do our parts. We're almost there."

"Are you ready?" Tarek dropped to his knees, gazing at his new lover.

Inuka followed him and both men shifted. Pain and pleasure tore at Tarek as he knew it did Inuka, their limbs burning as if from an internal fire that heated the bones and sinew, stretching it, shaping it. Their transformation complete, they lay gasping, once again great, furred beasts.

They left the caves, one behind the other, Tarek in the lead, Norak and Raven bringing up the rear. They travelled slowly at first, warming up aching limbs. The weather was good but, after only a few hundred paces, the wind picked up.

The clan trudged along through brambles and trees and around rocks big enough to hide two men behind. Their normal route between the winter caves and the river was in the path of the fire, so this was an unfamiliar trek.

If I could just find an animal trail or path, the going would be easier. Tarek glanced from side to side, but the underbrush loomed thick in both directions.

The breeze shifted and an uncomfortable odour drifted past. Tarek raised his nose in the air. *Smoke?* Why was the acrid scent suddenly so strong again? He grunted over his shoulder and paused, the others stopping behind him.

Rising up on his back paws, Tarek scanned as far as he could see in all directions. Murky, filmy smoke wafted along the path from the direction they were headed. *What the fuck?*

Inuka rose to full height behind him. *'The winds have shifted. The caves are that way, correct?'*

'That's right.' Tarek glanced at him uncomfortably.

'The caves will be fine. If they're like the winter cave I used to inhabit, there's little brush around them, and they're well secluded.'

'I'm not worried about the caves. I'm worried about getting to them. If the fire's in our path –'

'Should we turn back?' Raven joined them. *'The way ahead appears unsafe.'*

Tarek growled. *'Turn back? Flames still burn in spots behind us. The area where our tipis once stood must be a charred ruin and dangerous. With all the vegetation, the fire could reignite at any time.'*

'We go forward then.' Inuka moved closer to Tarek.

'You said yourself, the winds have shifted. We're supposed to march blindly into the line of fire headed this way?' Raven began to rise then apparently remembered Norak on his back. He returned to four paws and growled angrily. *'We must go back!'*

'There's nothing to go back to! Don't you understand? Forward, to the winter caves, is our only chance.' Tarek glanced into the distance where it seemed the smoke had grown thicker while they stood and argued. His heart thudded in his chest. He'd never imagined they'd run into more trouble today.

The amulet around his neck still glowed with warm heat. The same way it'd glowed since he'd first detected the fire. He realised now the warmth hadn't ceased, he'd just grown accustomed to it. *Fuck!* He stared back at the thick, moving, grey clouds then turned to his clan of bears. *'We have to get moving.'*

'I think we should go back,' Raven insisted, his thoughts burning into Tarek's mind hotter than the fire.

'We're doing what our leader says,' Inuka snarled, his fear and uncertainty evident.

Tarek raised a paw. *'I feel we have no choice but to go forward. But in fairness to all, if there's doubt, perhaps we should take a vote.'* He looked pointedly at Raven.

'I vote we go back to the river.' The bruin looked at him defiantly.

Tarek sensed his fear but admired Raven's fortitude. He glanced at Inuka.

It was a needless gesture. *'I'm with you, Tarek.'* Stubbornness seeped out, even through his thoughts.

They turned to the clan. Dawn and Kira glanced at each other nervously. *'We should stay with Tarek, I think.'* Dawn's thoughts came through first.

Tarek nodded and looked at the elders. *'Minu? Gunnar? Your thoughts?'*

'The fire ahead concerns me,' Gunnar thought.

'I don't know! I just don't know!' Minu's worries blanketed them all.

Norak's thoughts wafted clearly. *'Tarek is correct – the tipis and everything by the river are gone. The water is shallow, much too shallow to cover us and where the water is deep, our young would drown. We know that. We don't know what lies ahead. It might not be as bad as it appears. We should stick with Tarek and proceed forward.'*

'Forward, it seems,' Inuka agreed.

'Onward.' Tarek gave one last look over the members of his clan and dropped to four paws. He pushed through the brush and headed for the security of their winter caves—cautious of whatever lay between promised safety and the small group of apprehensive bears.

* * * *

Tales of ancestors, many times repeated, whirled through Tarek's thoughts as he trudged onward. Manuk, the first bear to own the brilliant blue talisman, came to mind. A massive, hulking creature, legend had him greater in stature than any who'd come before or after. His mate and one true love, the pure white sow Belle, bore him many offspring during their lives together.

In those years, and the hundreds previous, the changeling clans had been at war. Tearing each other apart, each small family group seemed to need more territory and game. Their numbers rose and fell at alarming rates. Not only bear clans were affected, but cougars and wolves as well.

The world of the changelings was one of constant turmoil and bloodshed.

One day Manuk discovered a nook in a rock wall not far from his clan's winter cave. Tucked in the crevice he'd found an amulet of ornate gold filigree encasing the most amazing blue stone he'd ever seen. Upon further inspection he saw the delicate gold was twisted into the shape of a bear's head.

When he picked it up it warmed his palm. The gem had spoken to Manuk, telling him of a plan set in motion to end the conflict—a way to live in peace for all the tribes. Each of three stones had been given to the race indicated by the delicate threads of gold. Among those races only one could hold the talisman. That one must have a life mate who would stand with him through everything. He must also have the good of all the family clans of his breed in his heart. Only those the amulet deemed worthy could hold the charm, and only those who were mated for life could keep it for long.

Manuk accepted the duty proudly, restoring honour to the changelings. A kind, intelligent leader, his wisdom was enhanced by Belle, his exceptional mate, standing at his side.

With his guidance and direction, the clans soon found peace.

There had been peace for many generations since then, the talismans going to new owners when the old passed on. Tarek was the latest in a long line of clan leaders to accept the responsibility of the charm. Though his chosen mate had been male, their bond had been strong and he'd assumed he'd been mated for life. With a responsibility to keep the species alive, Tarek had coupled with Kira to produce Boston and would likely sire more cubs in the future.

What he'd do about a mate now was uncertain. Inuka's adventurous spirit excited him. Yet there was something about Raven's straightforward demeanour that made him attractive as well. Tarek growled. If he didn't get them through this emergency, choosing a mate might be a moot point.

The weight of the amulet around his neck reminded him of the scope of his responsibility. With the talisman he had the power to do much good for them all. He saw danger before it arrived. All bears had poor vision, so it was a great boon to find that with the amulet, his was like that of an eagle and his other senses were magnified five fold.

Perhaps most importantly, the other clans followed whomever held the amulet. They knew the holder was worthy of their trust and loyalty and would do what was right for them all.

Bears were solitary creatures, preferring small family groups to large ones. Tarek's clan of ten swelled to its biggest size with the new cubs and ancient elders. Eventually they would once again number about six, the usual size of a changeling bear clan. He loved each and every member and was in no hurry to see anyone go.

Larger clans meant greater responsibility. More mouths to feed, more young – and old – to care for and protect from the numerous dangers of the wilderness. Men generally steered clear, but that wasn't always the case, with a village not far away. Occasionally hunters from Newburgen wandered into the territory predominantly known for bears, some by accident and others out of sheer bravado. Tarek advised those in his counsel to stay away from men whenever possible. *Live and let live.*

It didn't always work. Men could be very wilful and some were just plain stupid. It shouldn't have been such a surprise that in a battle between man and bear, the bear usually won. As a changeling who spent time in the guise of a human, Tarek avoided those violent confrontations at all costs. But he'd do whatever was necessary to protect his family.

He very nearly buckled when a hunter's bullet took down Skye. Tarek had been more concerned with tending to his mate than catching the shooter. Once it was over, thoughts of revenge haunted him for a long time. Tarek knew Skye wouldn't want violent retribution and deep down neither did he. So he steered clear of the village territory and the temptation to avenge his lost mate.

He glanced over his shoulder. The air was again thick with smoke taking a toll on the weary travellers. His family members coughed and wheezed but pressed on.

A deer trail made passage a bit easier. They'd finally reached a familiar clearing just below the rocks leading to their winter caves. *Not much farther.* A steep jaunt straight up led to the opening of the secluded hideaways. The climb was usually no problem for well-fed, properly rested bears in autumn. It could provide a challenge for some of them now.

On smooth, grassy terrain, Tarek sprinted towards the rocks. He didn't like the sound of the flames headed their way, nor the feel of the embers whipping through the wind. They had no choice now but to run for it. The rocks were in sight. Safety was moments away.

He skidded to a halt at the base of the stone ledge. Burning grass licked at his paws. Tarek roared and nudged Lily up the precipice. She didn't need to be told twice. Scampering as quickly as her short legs would carry her, she ascended the cliff in no time, Boston hot on her heels.

Dawn and Kira climbed faster than Tarek had ever seen them move. Gunnar manoeuvred awkwardly but made it. Inuka and he unceremoniously shoved Minu. With great effort, the two bruins managed to force her up the cliff and deposit her safely at the top despite her protests and whining.

Tarek glanced back for Raven and Norak. They were nowhere in sight.

'Come on!' Inuka's thoughts urged him.

He glanced up, concerned. *'Raven and Norak haven't arrived yet. I've got to find them.'* Flames whipped his bum and he jumped.

'You can't! The fire's too close!'

'They're my responsibility,' Tarek insisted. He choked back a fit of coughing as smoke curled around them.

'I'll go.' Inuka half-slid down the cliff towards him.

'No! Get back up there, now!' Tarek held his paws up to stop him. *'I won't allow it.'*

'Blast it, let me go!' Inuka skirted a patch of burning grass. *'Your clan needs you, get up there!'* He raced back in the direction they'd come from.

Tarek's heart lurched as the strong, brown bear disappeared into a cloud of smoke. He knew going back for Raven and Norak was his responsibility, yet at the same time he knew it couldn't be him. The clan needed him. All the bear changeling clans relied on his guidance. Turning back to the cliff, he growled and made his way up.

Moments later Inuka returned, climbing swiftly. *'It's all smoke and flames, Tarek. I couldn't see to go on.'*

They peered down over the ledge. Inuka had been correct, nothing was visible due to smoke except orange flames devouring the spot where they'd just stood.

Rubbing the back of one ear against Tarek's sooty pelt, Inuka's thoughts tumbled out. *'They'll never get through that.'*

Tarek watched the mouth of the trail for movement. He could be down the cliff in an instant if he spotted signs of life. *'They will. They have to.'*

Chapter Four

The following couple of hours dragged and seemed unending.

Everyone was exhausted. The two cubs were uninjured so they were instructed to shift to human form, then set about the task of bringing water to the others. Lily dragged a large jug of it from the storage chamber at the back of the main cave. Boston found a cup and helped her take offerings of fresh water to everyone.

Gunnar was fine. When Tarek checked him over, all he found were a couple of minor scorch marks on his shoulders. Minu had a cut over her eye and one foot was blistered where she'd stepped on embers.

The two sows were also in good shape, just too tired to sit upright. They cuddled together and simply lay waiting for Raven and Norak to arrive.

As time passed, mumblings of worry circulated. The elders wondered if Raven could have been right. The river might have been the safest place to go.

Tarek paced at the mouth of the cave, peering out into the inferno. Flames licked at the base of the cliff. Smoke billowed all around him, seeping in and making it almost impossible to breathe.

Inuka nuzzled against his side, but the offer of comfort went unheeded. He turned and faced the small group of bears, his heart heavy with concern. He tried to keep up a cheerful front but it wasn't easy.

'We're here now. We're safe. When you're strong enough, morph.'

The sows were the first to change, their groans almost a welcome sound. When their transformation was complete, they each scooped a cub into their arms.

Tarek looked at Inuka and nodded. He watched for a moment as Inuka's body writhed, the morphing process beginning. The man's shoulders shifted, the muscles along his back twitched and moved, realigning themselves around bones suddenly moved into new positions.

His own transformation took his mind off the fire and everything else for a few moments. Tingling pressure tore at him, his legs and arms elongated, the muscles stretched. His face heated, his hands shifted from claws to fingers. Brief moments of pain mixed with an intensely pleasurable sensation, causing him to shiver. Finally, the itching of fur being taken into flesh.

A few moments later, he shuddered, the change complete. Looking over at his lover, he tried to smile. But when he saw Inuka's reaction, he knew his attempt had failed.

Climbing to his feet, he reached down and pulled the beautiful brown man up to join him.

"They should have been here by now," Inuka whispered, voice wavering.

Tarek stroked his back. "Yes, I think so too." He turned and looked out into the late afternoon, and all he could see were smoke and flames where his clansmen should be. "Maybe I should go." He took a step towards the opening only to be dragged back by Inuka.

"You know you can't. The clan needs you. Raven will manage."

Frustrated beyond endurance, Tarek swung away and stomped to the edge of the rock shelf beyond the cave's opening. Acrid smoke engulfed him, but he remained and searched the only clear route left. *Raven is strong. If anyone can get Norak through this, it's him.* But if they didn't return—a sharp pain burned in Tarek's chest. The idea of losing either one of them was terrible, but the thought of never seeing Raven again wounded him deeply.

Behind him he heard a groan. Someone else was morphing.

He didn't turn. He needed to see when the two clansmen arrived.

From the edge of the brush, near where the way was clear but still in the danger zone, he saw movement. From that distance he couldn't be sure, but it looked as if one shape emerged, and it wasn't big enough to be both a man and a bear. He waited for the next form only to be disappointed. The figure stumbled a few steps then seemed to gather itself and run for the rocks.

It was a bear. In no time he identified the big burly form as Raven's, and a pang of relief shot through him.

"Inuka, Raven's there," he called and bounded down the side of the cliff. He fell once, scraping his thigh along the rough rocks, but was up and running as soon as he hit dirt.

Smoke billowed around him. Fingers of flame reached for him as he raced towards Raven, his mind whirling.

Dancing around a wall of fire, Tarek heard Inuka coming behind him. They reached Raven at the same time.

Tarek was shocked at the burns he saw along his back. The bear limped forward, favouring his left front paw, obviously burned there as well. He smelled of smoke and something else.

Reaching him, Tarek bent to give him a hug.

Raven's thoughts exploded with rage. *'Get away from me. Just get your filthy hands off me!'* He turned away and limped towards the cave.

Tarek stopped dead in his tracks. He felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. *What the hell just happened?*

Inuka glanced after Raven, a shocked expression on his face. "Raven, where's Norak?"

'He's dead, all right? Norak is dead!' Raven's thoughts hit like a ton of bricks.

"Dead?" gasped Tarek, at first unable to comprehend what the word meant. When it sank in, he wondered how Raven could lie like that and why he'd say such a thing.

"Where is he, Raven?" He hurried after the wide, retreating back of the scorched bear. "Why didn't you bring him?"

Raven whirled and reared up on his hind legs. *'He's fucking dead. The fire got him. There was nothing I could do. I tried...'* A great sob came from the bear and then he roared his pain.

For an instant, Tarek thought the injured bear might charge him. Tears streamed down his black furred face, and the sorrow he felt was like a mask of doom surrounding him.

Inuka stepped between them. With his arms spread wide, he moved towards Raven. "Come, my friend, the clan will need to know. We must prepare them for mourning."

Raven dropped to all fours and allowed himself to be led to the climb up to the caves. Over his shoulder, Inuka said in a soft, soothing voice, "Let me take him. He's hurting too much to deal with you right now."

Tarek nodded, beyond speech for the moment. He climbed the rocks, out of harm's way, then walked some distance along the ledge, away from the entrance to the cave,

needing to gather his thoughts. *Dead. Norak was dead.* He'd thought of how much work it was to care for a larger clan and the next thing he knew, its numbers decreased by one. Had his reflection been a foretelling? Or was it just misfortune that the elder was taken from them?

He turned and raised his arms to the smoke-filled, grey sky. Closing his eyes, he felt a tear make its way down his cheek. The weight of his loss was like the weight of the world sitting squarely on his shoulders.

He knew he'd been right. To stay by the river would have been certain death for them all. The water was much too low, it would never have been able to cover them. Further upstream, the river was much too deep and fast flowing. The young would have been swept away, the elders drowned for sure. Either would have been a horrible death.

But Norak was gone. Norak, the old, blind one who'd needed more help than the others, hadn't made it. How could he ever forgive himself?

A cry of anguish bellowed from deep inside him, echoing off the stone walls that rose behind and beside him. The mournful, wailing howl of grief went on and on until his breath ran out. He gulped air and fell to his knees on the rock ledge.

He sobbed and growled his anger and pain, knowing in the depth of his soul he had to get past this. He had to pull himself together. The clan and especially Raven needed and depended on him.

Sagging forward, he rested his forehead between his hands. The rocks were warm, reminding him about the nearness of the fire.

He prayed the death had been quick.

The amulet dangling from its leather cord touched his lips. The heat of it sent a shiver through him. Strength and calm seeped from it and pushed his pain aside. He knew he'd feel it later, but for the moment, he let it go.

Time passed, enough for him to notice a darkening of the sky when he again raised his head and took notice of the world around him. The crackling of the fire had faded. The putrid air clung to the area. He looked around and sighed. The stubble of trees and blackened earth surrounded him, yet there was also green. Some trees had survived, some patches of grass still held colour.

"Tarek."

He turned and saw Inuka approaching. There were tears in the man's eyes.

As he climbed to his feet, he brushed off the worst of the soot from his hands and knees. "Yes, I'm here," he croaked.

Inuka stood still, as if he was afraid to move for fear of breaking something.

Tarek reached out and pulled the man into his arms. That Inuka came to him when he was hurting said much about the man, and the type of person he was. Tarek held him tightly.

Pain, so briefly set aside, tore at him again and he struggled to thrust it down. There was no more time for tears. The others needed him. Squaring his shoulders, he kissed Inuka on the neck before pulling away. "Is Raven all right, besides the obvious?" Raven's pain, and the idea that the man was so angry with him, both cut through Tarek like a knife.

Inuka, his eyes still wet with tears, replied, "He has a few burns on his hide and one foot that will need tending for a few days. If he can get over the loss, he'll be all right."

"He blames me, I know that." Taking a few steps towards the caves, Tarek began the journey home.

"Yes, he blames you. He's ranting. The others are mourning. They'll listen to him, for a while."

"We've got to get back there and try to counter anything irrational coming from him." Tarek needed to see him again—to do anything he could to dispel Raven's grief and rage.

Inuka's hand on his shoulder was all the reassurance he needed.

"You did the right thing. If we'd stayed at the river, we'd have been burned alive. If we'd stayed in the small cave, we'd have suffocated."

His words lifted Tarek's heart. Logically, he knew Inuka was right. Now all he had to do was convince the rest of them, and believe it in his own heart, as well.

"Come, we'd best get back." He trotted towards their winter quarters, Inuka on his heels.

* * * *

Stepping into the cave, Tarek readied himself for the ordeal to come. He was instantly cloaked in a feeling of sorrow deeper than he'd ever felt before—sorrow, and from one of the clan, anger. He was sure he could handle anger from one of the sows or the elders. *But from Raven?* Tarek's heart ached with a pain he'd never thought to feel.

Raven staggered towards him. He'd morphed as had the others, and the burns and welts on his flesh were angry looking. "Still think you made the right decision?"

Behind him, Gunnar and Minu huddled in the corner on a bed of furs, arms wrapped around each other as they wept their loss. Even the cubs were quiet, somehow understanding the gravity of the situation and unwilling to bring attention to themselves.

Tarek strode deeper into the cave, stopping only when he was within arm's reach of Raven, who still fumed with rage. He held out his hand and in a soft but stern voice said, "Raven, my friend, my brother, I would give anything if this hadn't happened. Norak was as dear to me as you are."

With tears streaming down his face, Raven glared at him. "You call yourself our clan leader, our *tribe* leader, and yet you murder one of the most important members of our family. Norak burned to death in front of my eyes. I'll never forget that sight. Or the fact that it was because of you we were there." He stomped around the cave. "I told you we should have gone back. The river, the water would have saved us all. But no, you had to show your power and your control. You and your precious talisman, you—"

His own sadness and anger rising, Tarek fought to control his voice. "Raven, it's your grief talking. When we can travel back to the river, you'll see how wrong you are. You acted valiantly trying to save our elder. With Norak's blindness, the task proved too much.

"I should perhaps have stayed behind and helped carry the old one, but I thought it best to show the way. I'm so sorry, my friend." He couldn't say any more, his voice was choked and tears threatened.

"It's your fault. You killed him." Raven drew his arm back and curled up his fist to swing forward.

From somewhere behind Tarek, Inuka emerged and stepped in front of him. He raised his own arm and took the blow on his shoulder. Before Raven could try again, he was in Inuka's arms, his hands held so he couldn't fight.

A shuffling sound came from the corner, and when Tarek looked that way he saw the two remaining elders.

"He's right, you know. We should have gone back." Gunnar had risen to his full height and spoke clearly. "Norak had no chance to make it this far, not with the fire turning as it did. We should all have stayed at the river."

Feeling as if his self-control would fail him any moment, Tarek raised his arm for silence. Looking over his clan, he thought about the next few weeks. How they'd have to get used to being a member short. How Raven would live with the horrible sight he'd witnessed. *How I must convince the grieving man that I only did what I thought was best.* Taking a deep breath, he said, "We're all heartbroken. We have to give ourselves time to think about this."

"I'd do anything if this hadn't happened. You know it in your hearts but you're too upset to think clearly. You're exhausted from the trip, the fire and smoke have taken their toll."

"Please," he gazed around at them all, making eye contact with each of them except Raven, who looked away. "Can we try to get some rest? Before you judge me, give yourselves time to think clearly about this horrible thing that's happened."

Gunnar turned and without a word strode to where he'd left Minu crouched in the corner. He dropped down beside her and pulled the old woman into his arms. Nodding, he very quietly said, "You're right, Tarek. I'm sorry."

He looked at the other members of the clan. "Tarek is right. We need to sleep on this. We're all tired." He curled his arms more tightly around Minu and cuddled with her on their furs.

Kira and Dawn scooped up their cubs and headed for the alcove they shared. At the doorway, Kira turned and called softly, "Raven, brother, join us tonight. Hearing others breathing will help you sleep."

The big man looked lost. His eyes had that haunted, confused look only one who had truly mourned a death could possibly understand. He shrugged.

Tarek nodded at his lover, and Inuka released his hold on the grieving man.

Raven stumbled after the two sows and their cubs, vanishing into the dark interior of their alcove.

Inuka followed Tarek to the entrance and they stared out. "You need sleep. Rest is the best thing for you now." He laid a hand on Tarek's shoulder.

"I won't be able to sleep." Tarek shrugged the hand off. "You go ahead. I'm going to sit here for a while."

Wrapping both hands around Tarek's waist, Inuka whispered in his ear, "I don't think I can sleep without you next to me. Come to bed. Things will look brighter in the morning."

He pushed the hands away. "I said *no*. Leave me be."

"I won't." Inuka grabbed him again and wrestled the large man into his arms. "Don't push me away, Tarek. We can help each other get through this. I understand your grief. I need your comfort to deal with mine."

"Damn it!" Tarek struggled for a moment then collapsed in his lover's embrace. He gasped for air, fighting to hold back another round of gut-wrenching sobs. "I can't let them see me like this! A leader should never break down. The clan—"

"*The clan* expects you to mourn our lost brother." Inuka cradled him and spoke softly into his ear. "They'd be more upset if you didn't. Grieving is a natural part of life. Even the little ones need to learn it's okay to feel this way—angry, frustrated and saddened beyond belief."

The soothing words calmed Tarek. A few tears fell but he was able to pull himself together with his Dark Warrior's strength. "I am tired. Perhaps we ought to try and rest. Tomorrow should prove to be another wearisome day."

"I suspect it will." Inuka led him to the front alcove, where Tarek's room and a soft bed awaited them. He settled Tarek into the furs on his back and climbed in next to him. His head on Tarek's chest, Inuka wrapped an arm around his waist and tossed a thigh over his legs. "You realise Raven's going to hurt for a long time. The others will come around quicker and understand we did the right thing. But what Raven saw..." he trailed off.

Tarek forced himself to breathe evenly. His chest heaved, his lover's arm a welcome weight, rising and falling with each lungful. "He witnessed something no one should ever have to."

Inuka rubbed his knee softly over Tarek's genitals. "It must have been horrible. Time will help. He'll survive and be stronger for it. We all will."

The gentle caresses soothed Tarek's weary body. Inuka's ministrations calmed him and Tarek nestled closer.

"Think you might be able to sleep?" Inuka ran his hand over Tarek's solid chest.

"Sleep," Tarek repeated, fighting the stirring in his groin. "Doubt it."

"I might be able to help." Fingers trailed lightly down his abs and circled the furred patch surrounding the burgeoning erection.

"This isn't the time." Tarek attempted to brush the hand away.

"Shh." Inuka rolled on top of him and breathed into his ear. "It's the perfect time. We need to reaffirm that life goes on. Tragedy strikes deep, but the clan survives. We can remind each other of that." He nuzzled the firm ridge running along Tarek's neck.

"Your words tempt me, but I can't, Inuka. There's no way—" His heart went out to Raven. He knew the man needed to be held close, to feel alive and loved. At the moment, that just seemed so far beyond him.

"Enough." He pressed two fingers against Tarek's lips. "There's always a way. I need you, Tarek. As much as you need me, I need to be near you. Your strength and courage keep me going. Share it with me, my amazing lover."

The words made Tarek's heart soar. Inuka felt the same closeness he did. Weeks of teasing, innuendo and sexual torment had been followed by the most amazing encounter he'd ever experienced. Tarek wanted more of this man, as much as he could get. Once the current emergency had passed—he inhaled. He could barely imagine the pleasures they would share.

"Feed me, Tarek. Rejuvenate my soul." Inuka's words were breathy wisps as he kissed everywhere he could reach on the dark-skinned body.

Cock hardened beyond anything he could ignore, Tarek pressed up into Inuka, finding a sturdy thigh to push his shaft against. The pressure was intense and he ground his hips firmly into his lover. "Yes, Dark Warrior. I need you too."

Groaning, Inuka slithered down Tarek's body, kissing as he went. He rubbed his cock along a muscular calf as he worked lower, finally settling in the apex between two dark thighs.

Tarek's cock sprang up as soon as it was free. He thrust his hips upwards for more contact then sighed as a warm mouth enveloped him whole. Hands caressed his balls, spreading his legs further as one moved lower. A finger nudged his anus and pressed forward, mimicking the motions of the mouth rising and lowering over his shaft.

He drew his knees towards his chest, desiring deeper contact. When Inuka took the hint and added a second finger to his arse, Tarek moaned with pleasure. "Yes, lover. Good. So good."

His lover's response was to swallow the cock deeper, the head solidly pressed against the back of the man's throat. Mouth and tongue massaged his shaft, coaxing the salty essence, which already leaked in copious amounts. He wouldn't last much longer.

Tarek arched his back as the fingers reamed his anus. Delightful pressure thrusting in and out sent him over the edge. spurts of cum shot down Inuka's accepting throat. He swelled with ecstasy and let the climax carry him to a better place, if only for a while.

Drained and sated, Tarek fell back against the furs. *It would be so easy to close my eyes and fall asleep.* But his generous lover had known just what he needed and Tarek wanted to return the favour. When Inuka's fingers eased from his arse, he opened his eyes and tried to lean forward.

"Lie still," Inuka commanded, climbing back up. He straddled Tarek's head with both knees, cock in hand. "My offering to you. Relax and enjoy." Stroking his shaft firmly, he touched the wet tip to Tarek's lips.

"Mmm..." He opened his mouth, darting his tongue out for a taste. Before he could do more, a stream of warm cum coated his lips and his lover's fist. Tarek rose to catch the next torrent and it shot down his throat.

Inuka emptied his seed and stroked his shaft a few more times as his orgasm subsided.

Tarek took the opportunity to clean the cock and hand carefully, not wanting to waste a drop of the precious nectar. "That was perfect," he murmured, reaching out for Inuka to settle him into his arms. He kissed the brown forehead pressed against his chest. "You seem to know just what I need."

"That's what I strive for, my leader. My love."

Arms firmly wrapped around the man he adored, Tarek closed his eyes. *Raven will need this too.* He longed to go to the grieving man, but knew it was too soon.

* * * *

Tarek rose before anyone else the next morning. Daylight had barely broken, and a lingering red hue tinted the sky. He felt sure the fires were past, but knew they weren't completely out of danger. As quickly as yesterday's blaze had turned on them, a spark or ember could relight, sending what remained of the forest up in flames.

He shoved Inuka aside lightly and climbed out of bed. Tarek watched him roll over and burrow down into the soft furs, gently snoring. He was exhausted. They all were. But Tarek, laden with guilt and overwhelming sorrow, hadn't slept more than a few hours. He'd fetch some fresh water and see what he could put together for breakfast.

Without the luxury of the river close by, their meal consisted of a few berries he managed to find and a dozen or so Bulrush roots he spotted near a bog that was burned over. Game was still on the move, trying to find new grazing land.

He spotted a fox and her kits scampering through the blackened underbrush and several eagles perched high in the trees, waiting for their own brand of breakfast to show itself. Tarek cleaned the roots and hauled water a cumbersome distance from the nearest trickling stream. It was a task generally assigned to two or more, but he welcomed the physical labour and the distraction.

By the time he'd returned to the caves, everyone had risen and filtered out to the great room by twos. Kira and Dawn were preparing some of their stored supplies, dried fruit and jerky. Both glanced up at him sadly when he entered.

"Morning." Tarek nodded to them. He couldn't bring himself to say 'good morning'. It seemed highly unlikely that anything would be good that day.

Both females had covered themselves in loose fitting dresses. It was unusual for summer, but Tarek understood the sign of respect for their fallen comrade. He set the foodstuffs he'd brought on the front table.

"Morning, Tarek." Kira's dark eyes looked at him sorrowfully. She picked up his offering without further acknowledgement and proceeded to make breakfast.

Dawn never spoke, just went to work feeding the cubs, in faded overalls, who sat quietly at the back table.

Tarek glanced around the cave. Minu and Gunnar made their way to a third table away from him. The old bruin wore the traditional male loincloth, but Minu had donned a ridiculous, shimmering, silver dress and matching feather boa.

Tarek bit back a smile. The sow had a style all her own, usually punctuated by a floppy brimmed, straw hat. She'd apparently put on her finest, offering her own show of respect.

There was no sign of Raven, but Inuka appeared in the doorway of their sleeping alcove tying a loincloth around his hips. His eyes searched Tarek's face with concern. "Where'd you get off to so early?"

Motioning to the table, Tarek murmured, "Breakfast. There are flasks of fresh water outside as well."

"You brought water by yourself? Why'd you do that? Any of us would have done it, or helped you."

Before he could respond, Tarek heard a gruff voice from behind him. "Guilt."

He turned to face Raven, whose burns looked worse in the light of day. Ignoring the sting of the barb, he said calmly, "Hello, Raven. Those burns look nasty. Were you able to sleep?"

"I probably slept as well as you did, Tarek. Sorrow pierced my heart the same way guilt pierced yours. You killed Norak, which is something you'll have to live with for the rest of your life."

"Raven, stop it." Inuka stepped forward.

Tarek raised a hand. "It's all right. He's grieving. I understand that. Raven, if you won't let me tend to your wounds, please allow someone else to do it. You need the powders to heal properly." He wanted to offer comfort, and hated that Raven continued to push him away.

"Don't even think of touching me. I'm more than grieving, oh *wise leader*. I'm fucking furious that you listened to no one but yourself and marched us directly into the line of fire."

"I called for a vote. Norak agreed with my decision to go forward. He understood the risks we took for the good of the clan."

"Norak was so blind he couldn't tell his ass from a hole in the ground. To say he agreed with you is small comfort."

"Now hold on!" Gunnar exclaimed. "We won't have you speaking ill of the dead. Norak was well respected and much loved. He—"

"Is dead!" Raven lumbered around the cave, favouring one leg. "He was my uncle. You don't have to tell me how loved and respected he was. No one loved or respected him more than I."

"We all know how much you're hurting over what you saw." Tarek took a step towards Raven.

"Don't tell me you know how I feel!" the grieving man yelled. He waved a hand towards Inuka. "Perhaps if I take this one and choke the life out of him right in front of you. Or you can watch me throw him off a cliff. Then you'll know and we can discuss how I'm feeling."

"You're understandably upset." Tarek strained to keep his voice calm. "If I could do anything to bring back Norak, believe me, I would. I *do* know how you feel. If you recall, I had the agony of watching Skye perish. It's taken me a long time to get over that. Don't make irrational threats. Inuka has done nothing to you."

"But you have, haven't you?" Raven's eyes flashed wildly. "And the quickest way to get to you is through him. Revenge against you would be too easy. Revenge against your new lover would really hit you where it hurts."

It suddenly occurred to Tarek that Raven wanted revenge not only for what he'd been through but also because Tarek had taken a new lover. Perhaps Tarek had been the blind one. He'd looked upon their encounters as fuck sessions, quiet comfort in the dark of night. There'd been stirrings deep inside him, a caring which might have indicated the two were destined for something greater, but Tarek had never suspected Raven might feel the same. Evidently Raven had seen their encounters as something more too. He took another step forward. "I'm going to ignore your remarks. I suggest you leave for a while to clear your head."

The wild-haired man started to retort but apparently caught the tone in Tarek's voice and stopped. He limped around grumbling for a moment before darting through the entrance and taking off.

Glancing at Inuka, Tarek inhaled and exhaled slowly. He knew Raven was speaking through his own brand of grief and some sort of misguided rejection. When he could, Tarek would talk to him. He prayed he could make things right.

Inuka raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"Steer clear of him for a while." Realising he was the only unclothed person in the cave, Tarek strode to his quarters and retrieved a loincloth. He secured it at his hip and returned. "Let's eat, and then we'll take stock of what we have here in the caves, and what we need."

He took a seat at the front table, and Dawn brought him a small bowl of berries they'd all share, some jerky and one of the cleaned roots. "You don't think Raven is serious about hurting Inuka, do you?" she whispered. "He muttered a lot in the night and I heard talk of revenge."

"Raven's a good clansman. He'll work through this, he just needs some time."

"I hope so." She sauntered back to where Kira sat with the cubs.

"What was that all about?" Inuka squeezed onto the bench next to him.

Tarek took a bite of the Bulrush root and chewed, thoughtfully. "Raven was spouting about revenge last night. I seriously want you to stay away from him. He's not thinking clearly."

"I can take care of myself." Inuka bit off a hunk of jerky. "Besides, he's not going to try anything. It's his grief talking."

"I think so too, but we're not taking any chances. He was correct when he said that was the best way to get to me. I've become quite attached to you, my friend. If anything happened, I'd be devastated. I'm not sure what I'd do."

"I know what you'd do." Inuka chewed for a moment and then with a grin, said, "You'd rip the sucker to shreds, piece by little fucking piece. It'd be a sight to behold."

"Yeah, it would." Tarek shook his head. "Sadly, you'd be dead, so I doubt you'd enjoy it much."

"Oh, right." Inuka scratched his head looking mystified, then smiled mischievously.

* * * *

Tarek spoke with each of the clan members throughout the day, assigning tasks and delving into supplies to see what they had. Kira and Dawn were quiet and withdrawn. He understood their grief, but the glances they shared when they thought he wasn't aware were infuriating. No one looked him in the eye.

Gunnar remained stoic, helping with tasks but not saying much. Minu wasn't quite as tactful. "I just don't know how we'll get along without Norak," she bemoaned. "He knew this territory better than anyone. Even without sight, he could describe the land to the smallest detail."

"You're right," Tarek appeased her. "He was a good soul and will be greatly missed."

"I don't think he was correct, though." She gazed into the air. "We shouldn't have come to the caves. If we'd have stayed where we were —"

"We would have suffocated before the fire even reached us." Tarek raised his voice. He did his best to be patient, but the constant rehashing of his decision wore on him.

"The water flasks are running low," Kira announced to no one in particular.

"We'll go! We'll go!" Boston and Lily hopped up and down. They'd been cooped up all day and Tarek knew they were itching to stretch their legs, running and playing.

"You won't go alone." Kira brushed back her cub's hair. "But I suppose you can go with me."

Tarek nodded and watched the cubs scamper to the cave entrance.

"I'll help you." Inuka stepped forward.

"I'd appreciate it." The sow handed him an empty flask.

Hesitating, Tarek glanced at his mate. *My mate. Dare I think of him in that manner?* He pushed the thought aside and considered the situation at hand. Would Inuka and the female be all right? There'd been no sign of Raven all day. He'd probably kicked some rocks, yelled,

cussed and cried a bit, wearing himself out. When he returned, Tarek was sure he'd be repentant and most likely embarrassed by his earlier behaviour. "Go ahead."

Inuka grinned and ducked out of the cave. The others followed, showing more energy than they had all day.

Watching them go, Tarek had to smile. Inuka often had that same, impish expression on his face. Perpetually happy, easy-going and fun loving, the raven-haired stud never ceased to amaze him. No matter how bad things got, one look from Inuka had him smiling – and his cock stiffening. The more time they spent together, the more he realised how deeply he wanted Inuka in his life. He'd been serious for far too long. A little fun and happiness didn't seem that much to ask.

"You know, Tarek," Minu approached him. "We might have been okay if we'd stayed in the little cave. I don't think –"

"I know you don't, old, wise one." He bent down and planted a kiss on her forehead. "I'll be in my chambers for a bit. I need to sort a few things out."

He caught a glimpse of her gaping just before he walked out.

He normally had more patience for her rambling, but not today. Emotions were still running high, a thread of tension ran just below the surface of every conversation.

Tarek sat on the bed of furs and caught the intoxicating scent of Inuka. They were nearly done with the day's chores. Perhaps he and Inuka could steal away and find some alone time. Their winter caves were good, sturdy shelter but didn't offer much in the way of privacy.

He and Inuka had made quiet, passionate love in the dark of night but now he wanted to make noise. He longed to take his new lover in bear form. Hearing him grunt and groan would be extremely arousing, as would the feeling of fur on fur.

His cock pulsed under the loincloth and he reached down to stroke it. Inuka would be back shortly with the water. He knew it wouldn't take much convincing to get him alone. How best to spend their precious moments? He envisioned bending his Dark Warrior over a cool, flat rock and burying his face between Inuka's warm arse cheeks before burying his cock there.

A shadow loomed in the doorway and Tarek glanced up at Inuka. He smiled. "Good! I'm glad you're back. I've been thinking..." he trailed off.

Inuka wasn't smiling. He wore the strangest, most sombre expression Tarek could remember seeing.

"What's happened?"

Inuka's eyes were glued to Tarek's as he moved into their sleeping chamber.

Tarek inhaled when he spotted a hand gripping Inuka's arm roughly. Raven's eyes were wilder than ever. His partially burnt hair was dishevelled and he brandished a skinning knife in his free hand. The tip of the slender, six-inch blade was pressed firmly against Inuka's side. A trickle of blood streamed down his brown flesh.

Chapter Five

Tarek's heart drummed wildly in his chest, threatening to burst free at any second. His new lover, his future, held tight against a grieving clansman's chest and threatened with death, stood mere paces from him. There was nothing he could do. The razor sharp knife was normally used by the women when they prepared the winter meat. The trail of blood seemed so very red against the deep hue of Inuka's flesh.

He wanted to scream and leap at the man. But he dared not move. His eyes burned but he refused to close them for fear of missing that deadly stab into Inuka's body.

Could Raven really do it?

Would he?

"Raven, please, it's me you want to punish, not Inuka. Nothing will—"

"Yes, it's you who will pay. You, who kills and walks away. You, who fucks with abandon and then turns your back. You think you can ruin lives and be immune to suffering?" He slid his arm around Inuka's neck and pulled the Dark Warrior back tighter against his chest, then dug the blade into his side a little deeper.

When Tarek saw the blood flow increase, he took a step forward and reached out.

"Fucking stop or I'll stick him," snarled Raven.

Tarek immediately halted. Looking into Inuka's eyes, he saw the pain there but also a determination that warmed Tarek's heart. If only he could talk the bereaved Raven into releasing him. He needed to look deep into Raven's soul and find the man he'd lain with.

Raising his hands, he blurted, "Please, don't hurt him."

Raven's eyes had madness in them. A madness born of loss to be sure, but even so, Tarek knew both he and Inuka were in grave danger.

The red-rimmed eyes met and locked with his and Tarek felt his blood run cold. There seemed no hint of compassion there. *Has the man lost his mind from his grief?*

"Please," Raven mimicked in a singsong voice as if it was all a game and he was the game's master. *"'Please', you say, and expect me to kow-tow to your whim. I spread my legs for you and you were willing enough. I'm good enough to fuck, but when it comes to loving someone, you don't even see me. You're callous with people's lives, Tarek. Old, blind Norak, you just tossed him away."*

Guilt and anger rising, Tarek growled, "You know that isn't true. You loved your uncle but I loved him too. And I'll always treasure what you and I shared. "

"Yeah, sure." He twirled the blade against Inuka's side but didn't press it into the man's flesh again.

Inuka remained still. His eyes were half closed and seemed to be focused on something over Tarek's shoulder.

Raven scowled. "If that's how you love someone, maybe I should just turn Inuka loose. You'll wind up murdering him too, sooner or later."

It took every bit of Tarek's willpower not to snap back a response. He knew the man wasn't right in the head, but he was dangerous and Tarek had to stop him before he hurt someone. He glanced towards the doorway, making sure the cubs were still off doing whatever cubs did to amuse themselves. If one of them wandered in, he wasn't sure what Raven might do.

The coast was clear and he breathed a little easier. "I know you're grieving. There are no words to express how sorry I am —"

"Liar!" Raven roared and flung Inuka to the floor. He hit with a hard thud and groaned. With the knife raised over his head, Raven leapt at Tarek. "Liar. Murderer!" He slashed down with the blade.

Shocked, Tarek fell back, barely escaping the razor sharp edge. He dodged to the side then bent towards Inuka. Blood seeped from the wound in his side, a crimson trail trickling to the floor.

"Look out!" Inuka shouted, and leaning forward, dragged Tarek down.

Raven roared and lunged again, but his feet tangled in Inuka's, and he fell flat.

By the time Raven had sorted himself out and tried to rise, Tarek was on his feet. He bent and quickly ascertained Inuka's injuries were light before cautiously approaching the

grieving man. "Raven, you know me. We've argued, we've disagreed, and we've comforted each other in the most amazing way. You have to know I'd never, ever want to hurt you or Norak."

Lunging to his feet Raven glared at him and raised the blade. His chest heaved and when he exhaled, a guttural sob emerged. "But you killed him. Someone has to take responsibility for what's happened. I can't just let it go as some quirk of fate."

With his heart near bursting, Tarek replied, "When the embers from the fire are gone, we'll go back to the river and we'll both see how badly the fire burned. We'll pass by the cave and see how close the fire was to it."

"No!" Raven scrambled to his knees and cringed when blistered skin scraped over the rough stone floor. "Norak couldn't have died for no reason. He..."

"He was a great man. And you're a hero who valiantly tried to save him. He was brave and smart and so are you, my friend. You're a trusted and valued member of our clan."

The look of gratitude Raven graced him with told Tarek he'd finally found the right words.

"Yes, he was the bravest of us all," said Raven in a voice gruff with emotion. He straightened his back and lowered the knife to his side. Then looking up into Tarek's eyes, he added in a terribly weak voice, "I couldn't save him. I don't know how to live with that."

Inuka took the opportunity to scoot forward and pull the knife from Raven's hand. He pushed himself to his feet then bent and whispered to Tarek, "I'm fine. The blade didn't cut deep. I'll have one of the females tend me. You take care of him."

Tarek nodded and took a deep breath of air. Catastrophe averted, Inuka would be fine. Even as he watched the wounded man slip out of the room, he saw the blood had stopped flowing.

He turned his attention back to the big brute of a man on his knees a mere pace away from him. Great scabs were forming on his face and shoulders, his back no doubt bore more of them. His hair was half gone and what he still had was matted and soot-filthy. He needed a bath, but then so did they all.

He reached out and ran his hand carefully along Raven's arm from his shoulder down to his elbow. The flesh was warm. "You'll live by being the kind of man that Norak would have been proud of."

Raven looked up, his eyes shining with tears, his cheeks wet with them. "Yes, I have to do that. I have to make him proud."

"You always have, my friend. He cared deeply for you. As do I."

"You can't," Raven whispered. "You're fucking Inuka. I've been here for you all this time. I saw you through your grief when Skye was killed. You used me, Tarek. And then someone new comes along, and off you go."

"I'm sorry you see it that way. I appreciate your being there for me. I truly never thought you would want it to amount to more than that." Tarek scooted a little closer and put his arm around Raven's muscular shoulders. "I'm sorry I didn't see how you felt. But I see now. Burned and blistered, you're in seriously bad shape, Raven. Let me help you."

Raven blinked at him and then lowered his gaze, nodding.

Tarek moved so he sat against the wall, pulling Raven with him. The amulet around his neck glowed softly, and surprised, Tarek touched it. The heat reinforced the thought that his connection with Raven was right. He didn't always understand the messages, but knew it was a puzzle he'd have to solve before much more time passed.

They sat side-by-side, Tarek comforting the grieving bruin. With him in just a loincloth and Raven naked, their skin rubbed together and inevitably his body reacted. His cock shifted and pressed against the soft interior of the hide cloth. It wasn't the time, but his ardour was something he couldn't always control. Clan leaders were chosen, in part, for their intense sexuality.

"I need your help," mumbled Raven who apparently noticed the stirrings Tarek fought. His hand dove under the loincloth and encircled Tarek's shaft. "I love you, Tarek. I always have."

"I love you too, Raven." The forcefulness of his words surprised him, but Tarek realised he genuinely meant them. He allowed the man to stroke his cock for a moment, then pulled his hand away. "We'll figure this out."

Raven sobbed, words lost in the heart-wrenching wail that suddenly emitted from deep inside him.

Tarek held him close, the man's face pressing against his chest, his arms wound around his neck. Raven heaved piteously, and Tarek comforted him as best he could. Running his hands over the blistered skin of his back, Tarek cringed. The pain must be horrible. Raven needed treatment soon or he'd be in danger of infection.

When the wracking sobs turned to soft whimpers, Tarek eased him away gently. Raven's eyes were red from crying but his face was more at peace. The mourning would begin. His acceptance, hard as it might be, had already begun.

"Tarek," he said and, as if unable to look his leader in the eyes, he lowered his gaze to the floor at his feet. "I'm so sorry. Where is Inuka?" He glanced around, suddenly frantic. "I hurt him. The knife. Where is he?"

Tarek ran his palms over the man's arms and then with the fingers of one hand lifted his face. Forced to look him in the eyes, Raven blinked back the tears that still trickled. Tarek smiled and said, "Inuka is fine. Your blade marked him and he bled a little. But you relinquished your hold on the knife to him. He's gone to have the wound tended."

"I-I could have killed him." Raven's eyes widened, obviously thinking of what he might have done, might have lost.

Tarek released him and took up the talisman from where it rested on his chest. Holding the blue stone up for the man to see, he said, "No, you wouldn't have. You've followed the holder of the talisman too long to do such a thing. You are too good a clansman to injure the tribe." Even as he spoke, Tarek felt the stone grow warm in his hand.

He watched Raven's eyes clear. The man took a deep breath, and it somehow seemed to give him strength.

Raven looked at the amulet and nodded. "Yes, I will always follow the holder of the talisman." Raising his eyes, he looked into Tarek's and said, "You're a good leader, and I will follow you."

Tarek patted the man's back. "Will you allow me to tend your wounds now?"

Raven nodded and climbed to his feet. He walked towards the doorway.

Before he got there, Inuka poked his head in. "Are you all right?" He glanced from Raven to Tarek and back again.

Raven nodded and stopped in front of Inuka, who looked a little pale in Tarek's opinion. "I will be. And you? Did I injure you?"

"I'm fine. Kira put some of the powder on my side. The pain is leaving me."

"I am so sorry, my friend. I could have done so much damage. I owe you so much."

"You owe me nothing, Raven. Your sorrow was speaking, not the man who we know and care about."

"I'm going to tend his wounds now." Tarek faced his mate and added, "Would you get me some of the powder?"

Nodding, Inuka vanished for a moment but reappeared with a pouch half-filled with the healing medication. Holding it out, he asked, "May I help?" And to Raven he said, "You've got quite a bit of blistering and many open sores on your back."

"Yes." Tarek motioned for Raven to lie on the hides.

The scruffy-looking man lowered himself carefully onto the furs and onto his stomach. He sighed and laid his head on his hands, crossed under his cheek.

Inuka knelt on one side and Tarek on the other. They worked the powder carefully into the wounds. One of the cubs peered in for a moment, but at one glance from Tarek, quickly retreated. They were again left in peace to minister to their friend. From experience, Tarek knew the pain was intense as he was sure Inuka did too. They treated him as gently as possible, still Raven squirmed in agony. His brow beaded with sweat as they continued to apply the medicated powder.

When Tarek finished treating the wounds, he ran his hands lightly over Raven's unmarked flesh. He saw Inuka do the same, pushing the man's long hair off his face.

The agony apparently ceasing, Raven sighed and closed his eyes. Soon soft snoring filled the chamber.

Tarek sat back and closed the medicinal pouch. Looking across the prone body, he caught Inuka's eye. "I think we should leave him here in our bed. He's finally resting."

"I agree. If he wakes during the night, we'll be here to comfort him."

Their eyes held. Tarek knew his new lover read the meaning behind his words. They wouldn't have any time to be alone that night.

"I'd thought about going to the spring and attempting to wash off some of this grime." Inuka raised his eyebrows. "Care to join me?"

"That sounds like a great idea." Tarek stood, his cock twitching again under his loincloth. They went to the main chamber where the rest of the clan waited nervously. "He'll be fine," Tarek assured them. "He had much to exorcise from his system. Inuka and I have treated his burns and Raven is resting comfortably. Kira, would you listen for him, please? We're going to bathe in the spring."

"Absolutely," she agreed. "Could you take Gunnar with you? Dawn and I took Minu when we bathed with the cubs. Poor Gunnar has been so patient."

"He stinks!" Minu muttered and nudged her partner.

"Old fool." Gunnar waved a hand at her genially. "But I could use a wash."

"Of course." Tarek glanced at Inuka as he helped the old one to his feet. His mate's expression surely matched his own—a mixture of amusement and disappointment. There'd be no *alone time* tonight. "Let's go, my friend. Cool water will feel good to us all."

The elder shuffled along with a man at either side. Tarek glanced around as they followed the long path to water. "The fire has finally passed us. In another few days the embers should extinguish as well."

"We should go back to the river," Gunnar mused. "If there's anything left of Norak, we must give him a proper burial."

"You're right. Doing so will also help bring closure for us all." Tarek dreaded the return trip, but they had no choice. "We have enough dried food for a while but the sooner we get back, the sooner we can begin rebuilding our supplies. We'll be playing catch up to get enough to last the winter."

"It'd be so much easier to hibernate." Gunnar made a face. "Go to sleep for months, living off our body stores. The very idea is pleasant."

"If we weren't changelings, it would be." Inuka reached the spring first and helped Gunnar disrobe. "Our bodies aren't as strong as natural bears. We'd never survive a long hibernation."

"I know." Gunnar sighed and stepped into the shallow, running water. The spot was narrow so they were forced to bathe one at a time.

Or two, closely entwined with each other. Tarek gazed at Inuka longingly then tried to push the thought from his mind.

"It will be difficult rebuilding our summer dwellings, but if we take some supplies from here we can do it." Gunnar raised his face to the waterfall at the edge of the stream and let it pour over him.

"Of course we can." Tarek looked away. When the sight of the old one's naked body caused him to become aroused, he knew he was truly desperate. His mind wandered to the scenario that might have played out.

If they'd been alone, he'd have washed Inuka's hair, untangling it with unending patience. With no hair of his own, he'd take great joy in tending to his mate's. Once that task was complete, he would smooth his palms over Inuka's fine, muscular torso and grip his clenching arse. Tarek would drop to his knees and wash his lover's beautiful cock before pulling it into his mouth.

"Want to go next?" Inuka's words snapped him back to reality.

"Hmm?" Tarek gathered his bearings. Gunnar had climbed from the spring and was shaking droplets from his skin.

"The water. Would you like to go next?" Inuka smiled at him.

Whether Inuka realised Tarek had a rampant erection under his loincloth or not, he couldn't tell. He knew he was in no condition to get naked. "Go ahead, my love. I'll help the old one untangle his hair." He stepped around the body he adored and muttered, "I surely can't watch you. *That* would kill me."

Laughing, Inuka stripped and stepped into the water.

* * * *

The night was interminably long. Raven slept in fits and starts, moaning his pain and grief frequently. Tarek wasn't sure about Inuka, but he felt like he'd never truly fallen asleep.

By the next morning, the man's burned skin had healed considerably and Raven was finally able to rest peacefully.

Tarek was wide awake and in a foul mood. In the great room the only other bruin up that early was Minu, who started in where she'd left off the previous day.

"Norak knew this land like the back of his hand. We'll be hard pressed to get along without him."

"You're right," Tarek placated her while he dug through their supplies for some jerky.

"This area is so large and with the village of Newburgen close by, if we wander off course the clan is doomed. I'm not sure we aren't anyway."

Tarek clutched the amulet around his neck. "The clan will be just fine, Minu. We have the talisman, which makes us luckier than most. I expect to find a great many dead creatures on our way back to the river."

She eyed the necklace suspiciously. "I wonder about that as well. Perhaps you weren't the best choice for amulet bearer. Someone more clear-thinking would have —"

"Care for some jerky?" He offered a strip to her, hoping desperately she'd lose her train of thought and change the subject.

"Don't we have anything else? My teeth aren't as good as they used to be. If there were some berries or roots —"

"I'll go find more roots." He strode to the cave entrance, the piece of jerky gripped tightly in his hand. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"But Tarek —" The old sow started to voice another complaint.

He moved swiftly to distance himself from her and the others. Her words stung him as bitterly as sparks from the fire. Perhaps he *hadn't* been the soundest choice to be leader of the bear tribe. There were many others wiser than he was. He hadn't seen any other way to escape from their dire situation, but maybe someone more knowledgeable than he could have brought them all through it safely.

Tarek pulled the knife from the sheath on his hip and began chopping at roots with all his might. Grief, anger and frustration welled in him as he worked, throwing all his energy into every stroke. The morning sun sweltered and beads of sweat formed on his brow. After working a while longer, he was drenched.

"Look at you!" Inuka's voice from behind startled him. "Chopping enough roots to feed us all for a week. Take it easy there, big boy. We won't be able to clean and dry all you've gathered. We'll have to carry it all back to the river with us." He stepped next to Tarek, his smile turning to a look of concern. "What's wrong? Has something happened?"

"Yes, my stupidity has happened," he barked. "The clan's been divided by my poor leadership. The talisman has failed me—or more precisely, *I* have failed it."

"What the devil are you talking about? The clan is growing stronger by the day. Raven awoke in much better spirits and his body looks remarkable. When I left him, he was headed to the spring for a bath, and then Kira was going to cut some of his hair and attempt to even it up."

"Norak is gone and Raven is distraught because of my poor decision. I'll never be able to forgive myself for everything that's happened."

Inuka grabbed his arm. "Where is this coming from? I didn't get much sleep and I'm sure you didn't either, but last night you said—"

"Never mind what I said!" Tarek roared. "It's what I say now that matters. Our clan's been torn asunder and it's my fault. I've failed to carry out my responsibilities. I've let the ancestors down."

"Minu." Inuka studied him fiercely. "The old blowhard was up before everyone this morning. She said something to you, didn't she?"

"It's not Minu's fault. She merely pointed out—"

"Fuck that!" Inuka shook his arm. "Shake off what the old buzzard said and move on! You know better than to take her seriously. "

"This time I fear she's right." Tarek hung his head.

"Get that shit out of your system and pull yourself together. The clan depends on you—needs you. *I need you.*"

Tarek jerked his arm away. "No! Leave me alone! I don't want to be the responsible one anymore. I don't want everyone to need me." He strode off through the grove of trees. He just wanted to escape and be free of the weight he'd carried for so long.

"Oh, no you don't." Inuka jogged after him. "It's not that easy, Tarek. You just don't get to quit."

"Leave me!" he snarled, fighting the tears that threatened. His demeanour wasn't very leader-like, but he couldn't help his feelings. Suddenly everything seemed too overwhelming.

"So this is how you react to crisis? By feeling sorry for yourself?" Inuka called.

He froze then whirled around. "I don't feel sorry for *myself*! I'm sorry I fucked everything up so badly! I made a mistake, Inuka. Can't you get that through your thick skull?"

Inuka poked him in the chest. "Which mistake? Bringing us here or fucking me? Raven blames you for both."

"I can't handle this right now." Tarek looked to the sky and roared. "I don't know what to do or how to please everyone."

With both hands, Inuka grasped his forearms. His face was as red as Tarek had ever seen it and his tone was harsh. "No one expects you to please everyone. But you *do not* get to quit. Pick yourself up, dust off your loincloth and move on. Life goes on, Tarek. Everyone back in that cave is looking to you for proof of that. We're waiting for you to tell us what to do next. Don't let us down now."

"Bastard!" Tarek rumbled.

"You know it!" Inuka growled right back at him, his expression set with determination.

Tarek grabbed him and pressed their lips together. Frustration turned to hunger as Inuka moaned and opened his mouth to Tarek's tongue. His erection sprang to life harder than he ever remembered it being.

Inuka groped at his shoulders and chest then lowered his hands and tugged off Tarek's loincloth. He jerked his own away and pressed their groins together.

Glancing around, Tarek spotted a flat rock formation a few yards beyond the edge of the grove they'd come to. Clasp one hand on Inuka's arse to hold him close, he walked him backwards, kissing and clutching all the way.

When Inuka's back touched the stone, he moaned and nipped at Tarek's tongue. With the firmness only a lover could possess, he cupped Tarek's cock and balls, stroking him until Tarek gritted his teeth with pleasure.

Brushing his thumb over the head of Inuka's rock-hard shaft, Tarek gathered a drop of pre-cum and smoothed it across the head of his own crown. Covering Inuka's hand with his, he forced a thrusting motion to encourage his cock to provide more lubrication.

A sticky ribbon was his reward. Tarek raised one of Inuka's legs and held it up by the knee. Staring into his lover's eyes, the lust he saw there took his breath and made his hand shake as he nudged the head of his cock to the dark, puckered anus. Tarek already knew this man well. The hole ached to be filled as badly as he desired to fill it.

"Yes!" Inuka groaned.

Excitement flowed through Tarek and he forced himself to proceed slowly. Inuka hadn't been stretched properly, but if he could show restraint there'd be no problem. Maintaining eye contact, he pressed his cock forward then eased it back. Several more thrusts and Inuka's outer ring gave way, accepting his cock fully.

He drove deep, pressing them back against the rock.

"That's it," Inuka murmured. "Damn, yeah. Fill me up. *Do it.* I need it, Tarek."

His thrusts increased in speed and passion. Inuka's stream of mutterings caused Tarek's balls to draw up, an intense orgasm threatening. His Dark Warrior had quickly learned how much he loved to hear him talk during sex. Tarek finally broke eye contact so he could press his head into Inuka's shoulder and let the man murmur into his ear.

"Fuck me, Tarek. Damn, I love this. I love *you*."

Looking down, Tarek watched his cock slide in and out of the tight channel. He pressed up on Inuka's raised leg and groaned, release imminent.

"Come on, my love. Give it to me. I crave it," Inuka gasped.

With the lustful words racing around in his mind, Tarek lost the last vestige of control, his climax overtaking him. Shuddering, he fought to remain upright. Glorious sensations washed through his body as he pumped himself into Inuka. When he could move, he pulled back enough to palm the leaking cock stabbing his belly. Stroking up and down firmly, it took just moments for his mate to erupt, spraying them both with streams of warm cum.

Inuka panted, fighting for air.

Tarek lowered the raised leg carefully, reluctantly easing his cock from the clutching hole where he envisioned spending a lifetime. He backed off so Inuka could breathe. "Fuck," he muttered.

"My thoughts exactly."

He turned his back to the rocks and leaned against them, Inuka at his side. Something caught his attention, and from the corner of his eye he spotted Raven watching them from the safety of the underbrush. The man appeared freshly bathed and was naked, his cock standing firm. He stroked himself and for a moment his eyes met Tarek's.

A thrill tingled down Tarek's spine. The thought of Raven watching them and becoming aroused rather than angry was indeed an indication that life went on. Perhaps Inuka was right. He wondered if his new lover would be open to the possibility of Raven joining their sexual play.

"We should get back." Inuka gazed at him, apparently not seeing Raven who still watched from a distance. "We've got a lot to do before beginning the journey back to the river."

"You're right." Tarek turned to him. "How did I get so lucky as to find you?"

Inuka beamed. "I think *I'm* the lucky one. I love you, Tarek, with all my heart."

"I love you too, Dark Warrior. You know me better than I know myself. You complete me."

"And I always will." He moved closer for a kiss.

"I'm sorry —"

"Shhh." Inuka pressed a finger to Tarek's lips. "We'll speak no more of this. It was pure exhaustion, and time will fix that. For now we take it easy and rest."

"I'm all for that. Let's go." He took Inuka's hand.

"We'll send the cubs back for the roots later."

"Good idea." Tarek led him down the path they'd followed, past the wet spot on the ground where Raven had spent his seed watching. He smiled. He'd definitely need to bring up his idea with Inuka soon.

Chapter Six

Tarek initially thought they'd make the return trip to the river on the following day. He was sure all of them would have made it—except one. Raven proclaimed he was fit. But the stubborn bruin finally confessed the prospect of morphing was more than he cared to think about.

Tarek gave the brute a hug and whispered, "None of us are in what you'd call good shape. We'll wait a few days."

A week later they'd packed up what rations and supplies they'd need and could carry as bears, and while Tarek watched, they changed. The cubs were the quickest, the healthiest, and in a matter of moments were scampering around the great room, tumbling over each other.

Dawn smiled and nodded at the two cubs. She dropped to her knees followed by the others and the chamber soon filled with the groans of first pain and then the sweet pleasure of morphing as the clan took on its animal form. The two elders held back, watching the others before their bodies took on the brief pain of transition. Gunnar waited until Minu groaned. He shuddered and a moment later, his body writhed.

Raven was off to one side and Tarek sensed his feelings of disconnection as if he was of the clan, but not quite.

"Come, Raven, my friend, with Inuka and me." Tarek held up a hand, beckoning to the solitary clansman. "The three of us will see that all the clan members get to the river. We've got to watch for spot fires along the way."

"We haven't seen any for days, but the weather is still dry," Raven said as he joined them. Inuka stood at Tarek's right, Raven on his left. They watched as the small group of bears shuffled towards the doorway.

Inuka gathered up one of the makeshift packs they'd fashioned and strapped it to Kira's back. Raven strapped another onto Minu's, a much smaller, but much more vital package.

She carried the powder. Each of the changelings would carry something. Even the two cubs were pressed into service, and Tarek strapped bundles of roots to them.

"We must also watch for our fallen clansman along the way," Tarek said, trying to keep his voice calm. "He deserves a proper burial."

Raven looked up at him and nodded. "Yes, he does."

He squeezed Raven's shoulder then stepped back. "Everyone ready to go?"

Heads turned towards him and the cubs tumbled to a halt at the mouth of the cave. Each of them nodded.

"You ready, Raven?"

"Of course." The man dropped to his knees. His head lowered, and the change began. His shoulders writhed and the scars on his back seemed to shift as the man's mid-section thickened.

Tarek looked at Inuka and smiled. "Ready, my love?"

"Always." He stepped back, going to all fours, but before he went further, he cupped his hand around Tarek's cock and balls. "Can't wait to get to the river. I want the privacy to hear you yell when you come."

Chuckling, Tarek squirmed as his genitals swelled, his cock rose. "Get moving then. The longer we're here, the longer we both have to wait."

Inuka released him and began his shift. Still Tarek waited. There were two packages left to attach, for his own already dragged at his shoulders. It would make the change more awkward but he'd refused to let anyone else take the extra burden.

It didn't take long for Inuka to complete the morphing, but Raven had trouble. His body was taut, his shoulders and hips writhed in an unnatural display of discomfort. The fur had grown in but not in the patches where scars were forming.

Tarek dropped down beside the partially changed man and ran a hand soothingly over his back. "Easy, my friend, there's no rush. Take a breath and just let it happen. Your body isn't healed yet and that's why the pain is so intense."

Raven turned and looked at him, his eyes filled with appreciation. A tear trickled down his furry cheek as he took a deep breath as he'd been told. A shudder shook him but his

tension seemed to ease somewhat. The change continued at a slower rate but finally he too was ready for his harness and the package he'd carry.

"It'll be easier next time, when you're healed."

Raven nodded his head. *'Thank you.'*

Tarek hurried and hefted his pack then went to Inuka's side. "Hold still, my Dark Warrior." He wound the straps of the last knapsack around his lover's shoulders and chest, securing them. Then he dropped to his own hands and knees.

The amulet slapped against his arm and he wondered again if he was the right clansman for the job. Inuka seemed to think so and now that more than a week had passed since the tragedy, the others did too.

His musings vanished as the shifting sensation knifed through him. Biting his lip, he kept the groan from escaping. The straps across his back dug into the flesh as his shoulder muscles twisted and grew. He wanted to tear it from him but refrained and simply allowed the sweet torment to engulf him. Moments later he sighed, the change complete.

The others waited, falling in behind him as he took the lead. Tarek tried not to think of the last time he had done so. The two sows and their cubs trailed directly behind him, followed by the elders, Raven and Inuka.

Heading out, he sneezed at the lingering pungent aroma of burnt wood. The forest they travelled through was nothing more than sticks in many places, scorched by the fire. In some spots the main body of the trees were fine and green but the tops poking into the sky were like fingers of a deformed hand. The underbrush was gone for the most part, being the easiest and fastest to go up in flames.

The first corpses they saw were a family of what looked like rabbits although they could have been rats by the size. Burned black, the meat on them was well cooked but smelled rank, left too long in the sun.

The band of bears veered around the bodies, the cubs wide-eyed in their innocent curiosity, the elders turning away, knowing soon enough the body they discovered would belong to a bear.

They stopped for a short rest at midday, and while the others sat or lay on the patch of green grass Tarek had found, the three dominant males circled the area on the lookout for the

remains of their clansman. Raven was the only one who'd actually seen where he'd died, and the other two allowed him to lead the way.

'I know I'm close.' His thoughts rang clear and concise. He was holding his emotions in check as Tarek was and no doubt Inuka.

'I recognise the pile of boulders over there.' Raven headed towards the mound of enormous rocks. The bushes around the pile were leafless, black, the branches twisted into unnatural shapes. Raven seemed to ignore them and made a beeline for a small outcropping of granite off to the right.

'Here, yes, he's here!' His thoughts reached out.

His demeanour was frantic, desperate, and Tarek hurried to catch up with him. The passage of time wouldn't have been kind to the corpse. He didn't want Raven to arrive alone.

The slit in the rocks wasn't big. It barely held the remains. It looked to Tarek as if Norak had tried to morph, perhaps hoping fur would somehow protect his flesh. He'd been unable to complete the transformation. What fur he had was gone, but his limbs were too short to be called human. The flesh was mostly burned away, what remained was blistered and raw, rapidly decaying.

Tarek nudged Raven's neck with his cool nose. *'My brother, don't remember him this way. He wouldn't want that.'*

A deep sob came from Raven, a sound that tore at Tarek's heart. Inuka moved to the other side of the grieving bear and pressed his body the length of him, obviously trying to lend whatever strength he could.

'We'll prepare him for his journey to the afterlife.' Tarek stepped aside and morphed, biting back the yelp of pain as the straps of his package dug into his back. A few moments of torment then sweet bliss flowed through his legs, his arms, his hands and feet. When his jaw moved, he grunted, and then it was done.

Climbing to his feet, he stood panting. Cool air touched his naked flesh and his erection bobbed. He was again reminded of how vulnerable he was in human form. "Inuka, you have the shroud material."

Inuka had also shifted, and when he rose, he took a staggering step forward. By the time he stopped in front of Tarek, he was steady and swiftly pulled the pack from his back.

A rock tumbled from the top of the bluff and Tarek looked up. Two men, large, muscular, beautiful, looked down on them. One was dark-haired, his tall body clothed in rough leather pants and jerkin, the other as blond as he'd ever seen. His hair looked white against the afternoon sun. He too wore rough pants and a jerkin.

Tarek's blood ran cold. Had they seen? What the hell were men doing in the burnt-out woods so close to the clan home?

From above, the man with the long black hair called down. "Is he kin of yours?"

Surprised at the lack of concern the two seemed to have towards both his and Inuka's nakedness and the proximity of Raven, who was still in bear form, Tarek simply looked up at the two men. He guessed them to be in their twenties but they could have been older. The white hair made it difficult to judge.

"Are you all right?" the dark-haired one called.

"Yes, fine," Tarek yelled and turned towards Raven. "Don't shift. They might not have seen us. Might be an idea for you to amble off into that patch of greenery over that way."

Raven got to his feet. With a long, heartbreaking look at the body, he shook himself before heading for the bush.

When Tarek returned his attention upwards, he saw the two strangers coming down towards him.

Inuka whispered, "Are they men, or are they like us? Changelings?"

"We'll soon see. Be ready, my love."

"Always." Inuka stood with his feet apart and his arms loose, ready for whatever was needed. Weaponless, they had only their soft human muscles to defend themselves. That, and Raven.

The strangers scrambled the last few steps then came to a halt ten or fifteen paces from them. Both of them looked to be at least a half head taller than Tarek. The white-haired man wasn't as well muscled, but he looked like he could hold his own in a fight. Neither of them wore shoes.

"Was he family to you?" asked the dark-haired man in a kind voice.

Tarek nodded. "Yes, clan-member and elder."

"I'm sorry. We too lost...people." He shifted uncomfortably and a hand drifted to a pocket in his jerkin. He gave himself a shake then pulled the hand out and let it fall to his side. "I'm Cole and this is Zane."

Tarek began to think they'd be all right, yet he had to be careful. And still neither man said anything about their lack of clothing. His cock stirred. The dark-haired one was very good looking.

Holding his hand towards Inuka, he responded, "This is Inuka. I am Tarek, clan leader and leader of our tribe."

"Tribe leader?" The blond finally said something.

Tarek nodded. "Yes. Do you understand what that means?"

Cole sagged and it seemed he was about to fall. His friend stepped closer and put an arm around him. "Yes, we know what it means. We are of the wolf tribe. We lost our leader to the fire."

Tarek's eyes widened and went to Inuka, whose expression must have mirrored his own. To lose the tribal leader—the thought sent chills through him. He gripped the amulet around his neck and looked back at the men. "The wolf with the red amulet. We crossed paths. I'm sorry. Has a new leader been chosen?"

Cole cringed. "We're not sure. You hold the talisman of the bear tribe. I see it around your neck."

"Yes."

"It must be a great honour."

Tarek thought of the last few days. "Some would think so. It's not always an easy path."

Cole nodded and pulled away from Zane's hold. "We'll help you prepare your kin for his journey."

Raven chose that moment to saunter from the brush and walk towards them. He stopped only when his body was between Norak's and the two newcomers.

"This would be one of your clan, I assume," offered Zane.

"Yes, this is Raven. Norak was his uncle."

Both Zane and Cole bowed deeply. "Our sympathies," Cole said.

Inuka reached into his pack and offered the package he bore to Tarek. Opening it, Tarek pulled out the length of cloth then dropped it to the ground. "We'll need to lay him out."

Turning to Raven, he said, "Brother, if you'd rather go and tell the others what we've found, we'll shroud him."

Raven nodded. He would bring the others.

Tarek watched the bear shuffle back to where they'd left their small band. He kept his senses open in case Raven needed him.

It took the four of them to free the body and lay it upon the shroud clothes. By the time Raven returned, they had the body covered and ready. Cole and Zane backed away as the clan approached, still in bear form.

Tarek and Inuka removed the packs each bruin still carried. The transformation would have shocked anyone who wasn't a changeling, but the two men simply waited and watched. When the rest of the clan had morphed, the cubs raced up to Tarek and clambered up his body until he cuddled them both. "You're too full of energy." He chuckled and tickled them until they squirmed to get down. Squatting, he said to Lily and Boston, "You've both got to be brave and very quiet now. We have some very serious business to attend to. Do you think you can manage?"

Eyes as big as saucers, both cubs nodded. Hand in hand they returned to the main group and stood quietly.

Rising to his feet, Tarek took a deep breath. This was another part of being the clan leader that he hated. "We have found our clansman. Who will help place him in his tree?"

Raven stepped forward as did the two women and the two elders. Inuka joined the others.

"Good. Raven, would you choose the tree?"

"Yes, thank you, Tarek." The bereaved man shambled towards a patch of barely touched Evergreens. When he'd decided on the right one, he called, "Here. Norak will begin his journey from this one."

Cole and Zane stood respectfully off to the side as the white shrouded body was carried then lifted into the trees. The cubs had moved into the bush and were obeying Tarek's request for silence but couldn't contain the energy that all young things possessed, and

seemed to be playing a stealthy game of catch. When Norak was hefted and secured as high as the clans' people could get him, Tarek gathered them around.

For once Minu was silent and Tarek almost wished she weren't. It would be fitting for her to say her goodbyes with as much grit as she always had. Kira and Dawn retrieved the cubs from their play and they formed a circle around the base of the tree. Gunnar's cheeks were wet with tears as were Raven's.

"We call upon the great spirit to take our clansman into his arms. He was loyal and brave and deserves the very best the next world has to offer. We wish Norak safe journey and much happiness." Tarek heard a sob and knew Raven was saying his own goodbye. "He will be missed."

Tarek left the circle and moved to where Cole and Zane sat with their backs to the rocks. "Thank you for your help. Can we do anything for you or your clan?"

Cole shrugged and said, "I don't think they need anything. They looked all right when we left."

Shocked, Tarek asked, "You haven't been back?"

"Well, yeah," the dark-haired man said uncomfortably. "We came out again to look for our clan leader."

"You said he was killed by the fire."

Cole climbed to his feet and reached down to haul his lover up with him. "We'd better be going now. We have to tell the others."

"Wait a minute. What about the amulet? You said you weren't sure if it had chosen a new holder? You two tried it?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"None, I suppose, it just seems odd you wouldn't know for certain about yourselves."

Again Cole's hand went to the pocket of his jerkin where he clasped something. "Maybe I do know. Maybe I just don't want what it has to offer."

"You?" Tarek muttered, confused. "The talisman chose you?"

Cole pulled his hand from his pocket. In his palm lay the beautifully crafted amulet of the wolf clan, its brilliant red stone cradled in the gold filigree in the shape of a timbre wolf's head.

"It didn't do anything for Zane. It gave me dreams, thoughts, I don't know." He closed his fingers over it and lowered his hand to his side. "I'm not ready for something like this. I—"

"The talisman chooses who it deems is the right one for the task. You are the leader of your tribe."

"I'm no leader. I still have a lot of wild oats to sow. A lot of—"

Tarek growled. He was nearly beside himself with sorrow, and now this pup, like an ingrate child, wanted more time to play. And the amulet had chosen him? "You'll have to lead or your whole tribe will suffer."

"We'll see about that," retorted the young man. He turned and strode away, Zane at his heels.

Tarek watched them go, unable to do anything but gape. He had his own clan and tribe to worry about. Let the wolves sort out their own problem. By the sounds of that young man, they had plenty.

Turning back to his clan, he noted how tired they all looked. He also realised the burial had taken the best part of the day. The sun was low in the sky and they'd be forced to spend the night out. But they would spend it away from this place.

"Let's move on for a while. We'll sleep at the small cave we found on the way in. From there, we'll be able to make it to the river tomorrow."

Gathering up their packs, the clan travelled in human form another few hours to the cave where they'd take shelter for the night. The group was sombre, the journey and burial ceremony weighing heavily on them. Tarek sighed and glanced over his band as they ascended into the cave. A night's rest would do them all wonders. *Or so I hope.*

Inside the small, familiar space, Tarek leaned against the rock wall as the females and cubs prepared some of their supplies for a meal.

Inuka squatted next to him. "This has been a good day. Emotional, but cleansing."

"I agree." Tarek glanced to where Raven stood, talking quietly with Gunnar. The sight of the naked man sent shivers down his spine, and the talisman glowed warmly with each sensation. He turned back to Inuka, his handsome new lover who watched him with kind, adoring eyes. "There's something I need to talk to you about. It's Raven."

"Oh?" Inuka's eyebrows rose. He gazed at the man in question. "I think he's feeling better."

"Yes, I think so too. But that's not what I wanted to say." He hesitated. "You know he comforted me after I lost Skye."

Inuka turned back to him. "I know." His eyes narrowed. "You still have feelings for him."

"I do," Tarek admitted. Before Inuka could interrupt, he continued, "I'd thought my dalliance with him was just that. But recently I've come to see that it was more. Much more."

Frowning, Inuka stared at him. "What are you telling me? After all we've been through, you've no place for me here? You want me to leave?"

"No! Fuck no!" Tarek swore at his inability to get his point across. "That's the last thing I want. I told you I love you, Inuka. Never doubt that."

Confusion crossed his face. "But Raven —"

"Is a good man. A worthy mate. Different from you in every way possible, and I embrace that. I wonder...is it possible...that you could embrace it too?" Tarek held his breath. What he asked was no small thing.

"Really?" Inuka's eyebrows rose again, this time with a note of piqued interest on his face. "I'd never considered anything like that."

Reaching out to touch his hand, Tarek murmured, "I can't be sure, but I think that's where my destiny lies. All I know for sure is I want to try it. *Need to try it*. But I need you to agree." He had no idea what would happen if Inuka said no. He couldn't face that thought. His burning desire for the two men was all he could think about.

"Can I have the night to sleep on it?" Inuka asked.

"Of course." Tarek glanced around the small cave. "Sleep is about all we *can* do tonight."

Inuka squeezed his hand. "We'll have our time. Soon."

Tarek smiled.

* * * *

Everyone awoke with a renewed sense of spirit the following day. As if a great pall had lifted, the mood was lighter, less tense, than Tarek had felt in days. Even Raven managed a smile when little Lily offered him some breakfast.

"The worst is behind us. I feel it." Inuka gazed around the group.

"I believe you're right." Tarek nodded in agreement.

Inuka shook a finger in his face. "If you just remember that, we'll save a lot of time in the future."

Catching the mischievous gleam in his lover's eye, Tarek winked. He didn't mention their discussion of the previous night. There'd be better opportunities to talk later. "Ah, yes. But I love the idea of idling away time with you. Once we get everyone safely back to the river, I intend to take a few days to experience that."

Waggling his eyebrows up and down, Inuka grinned. "*Days*. That sounds blissful, doesn't it?"

"What sounds blissful?" Raven joined them. His injured flesh looked better every day. In a short while the only reminders would be faint scars from the most serious of his burns.

"Going home." Tarek smiled at him, smoothly changing the subject. "We'll arrive later today."

Raven shifted uncomfortably. "The memories there will be strong."

"Savour old recollections as you forge new ones." Tarek touched his arm. "Inuka and I are here for you, every step of the way, my friend."

"I appreciate that." He nodded to each of them gratefully. "I wouldn't want to do this without you."

"You won't have to." Inuka clasped his other arm. "We'll do it together."

The amulet grew warm against Tarek's chest as the three men stood, touching. *This is meant to be.* He felt it in his soul. Now he just had to get Inuka and Raven to see things his way.

They packed their knapsacks and strapped on the skins one last time then morphed into bears. The change went more easily, more pleasurably. An air of excitement buzzed through the clan as they set off for the river.

The devastation of the forest was spotty—some places appeared virtually untouched, while others were burnt to crispy black ash. Their pace naturally picked up as they got closer to the river. Tarek was thrilled to see the other bear clans intact. Some of them had already returned, and some were just making their way back as his was. None had suffered as great a loss as his, thank the gods. They'd all lost possessions but wisely knew things were just that—things. Eventually it could all be replaced.

Seeing the other families buoyed the spirits of his clan members immensely. They approached their old stomping grounds cautiously, hoping for any sliver of good news. The cubs raced ahead as soon as the bank of their stretch of the river was in sight.

'Be careful' Tarek cautioned, but his advice was futile. Boston and Lily knew this territory as well as any of them, maybe better, with the amount of time they spent exploring. The cubs dashed to the river with the anxious adults following.

At the edge of the water, Tarek shifted into his two-legged form and dropped the pack from his back. The others followed and soon they were wading in the shin-deep river where they began pulling out clothes and possessions that had survived the blaze.

"Leaving things here was a good idea." Gunnar dragged some cooking utensils from the water.

"Yes, that was smart of you, Tarek," Dawn agreed, retrieving what she could.

"Inuka thought of it." Tarek tossed clothing onto the shore. "He's a smart man."

"Yes I am." Inuka grinned and nudged him. He added under his breath, "I chose you, didn't I?"

Tarek smiled, thrilled to hear Inuka still intended to be with him. He couldn't allow his playful mate to have the last word. "I believe it was *I* who chose *you*."

"You're a good team, all right?" Kira smiled at them both as she passed by.

"I'd agree with that. You're two fine men." Raven paused next to them. "I'll never forgive myself for the way I acted. I could have harmed one of you —"

"That's all behind us." Tarek pressed a finger to Raven's mouth. "We don't need to speak of it again."

Raven's lips pursed against the finger, his eyes locked on Tarek's.

Tarek traced the outline of his mouth gently then cupped Raven's cheek. "We have many other things we'll need to talk about, but now's not the time."

Raven's eyes closed. "This might be more difficult than I imagined. Being this close to you is torturous, Tarek."

"It doesn't have to be." Tarek took a step towards him. "I have plans for us, my love, if you'll only be open to the possibilities. We want you to join us."

Raven's eyes sprang open. "*My love?* Seriously?"

Inuka moved in so his body touched each of the others. "Very seriously, my handsome one. You'll need some time to get used to the idea. The more I've thought about it, the harder my shaft becomes."

Raven shuddered. His thick cock, which had risen to partial erection, stood even higher now. "I don't need time. See what the thought does to me?"

Leering at the luscious staff, Tarek turned to Inuka and they smiled. "The future promises to be exciting, my loves. We must all be open to new adventures."

"I sure as Hades am!" Inuka's cock rose as he looked back and forth from Tarek to Raven.

"I am too! Thank you." Raven looked at the men.

Tarek pulled his gaze away from the two cocks reluctantly. He wished for nightfall, but knew they had work to do before then. "We'll discuss this later."

Inuka pulled away, muttering, "We'll do more than talk, I promise you that."

Chuckling, Tarek trudged through the river once more, searching for things they'd deposited there. Confident they'd retrieved all they could, he gathered an armload and instructed the others to do the same. There'd be several trips to the river and back to get everything, but he knew no one minded. Going to the water's edge was a routine part of

their day during normal times. They were all ready for things to return to normal. Gazing at Raven's naked arse, which bobbed ahead of him, Tarek smiled. It promised to be a new type of normal, but that sounded good to him too.

* * * *

What remained of their campsite was charred and dusty, but to Tarek's amazement a grassy field nearby had been left almost intact. They were able to retrieve most of the tent poles, which would save them much time in their rebuilding efforts. New skins would take time to cure but they'd been able to carry some from the winter cave.

"These are fine!" Gunnar gathered the poles he'd salvaged in the patch of green, unburnt grass. "We'll have make-shift shelters by tonight, and by tomorrow night our tents will be as good as new."

"Can we help?" Boston jumped up and down, Lily at his side.

"Definitely. Ask your mother for the strips of leather we'll need to bind the tents. Inuka, Raven, could you haul the skins to this spot?"

"You got it." Inuka grabbed one armload and Raven picked up another.

Tarek watched them talking amiably as they worked. He wondered briefly at his plan for their future, but deep inside he knew it was the right decision. He and Inuka were already soul mates. They had the same needs and urges. They felt the same things. It almost seemed their hearts beat as one. Inuka seemed ready to welcome Raven into their bed with the same growing enthusiasm he felt.

Glancing down, he noticed his cock stir. *Growing, indeed.* He needed to hurry. The faster the work was done, the sooner *relaxing* time would commence.

With help from all the clan, Gunnar fashioned three new tipis by nightfall.

"These are good." Tarek checked his handiwork.

"There were only enough poles for three. Tomorrow we can work on getting more, and put the finishing touches on these. But I think they'll do enough for tonight."

"Three tents are just fine." Tarek nodded to the elder. "We have no problem sharing."

"I thought you might not." Gunnar smiled at him and returned to tying knots.

Tarek strolled through the camp and nodded approvingly. Kira and Dawn had gotten the cooking area put together. They were without tables and had two chairs between the lot of them, but that was minor. In coming days the men could fashion new furniture. The loss of possessions seemed small compared to their greater loss. *Things* could be replaced. Each of them seemed to appreciate what they had left and appeared glad to be home.

Even Minu had few complaints as they ate and rested, day waning into night. Her silence couldn't last and Tarek smiled when he heard her whining before the moon could rise high in the sky. "I don't have enough furs to sleep on. The ground is harder for old bones like mine."

"We have to share the furs, Minu," Kira responded patiently. "Eventually we'll get more. For now we only have so many."

"I won't sleep a wink." The old sow paced around the entrance to her new quarters.

Tarek stepped forward to face her. "If you'd like to take the furs set aside for the cubs, go ahead."

"Really?" Her wizened face lit up.

The others watched him with surprise. Tarek smiled. "Absolutely. Boston and Lily don't take up much room. You can put one on your right side and the other on your left. Of course they tend to squirm and kick when they sleep so you might have to—"

"Blast you!" Minu turned and stomped into her tent.

Everyone laughed and Gunnar shook his head, following her. "I'll share my furs with you, old woman. We'll cushion our weary bones together."

"Come on, you two." Dawn huddled the cubs into their tipi. "I don't think anyone will have trouble sleeping tonight."

"That's for sure. Good night." Tarek called after them.

Kira stepped up to Raven. "Good night. Sleep well." She placed a light kiss on his cheek. Turning to Tarek, she clasped his hand. "Thank you, Tarek. It's been a long journey but we've made it and we're home again, thanks to you. We all appreciate you so much."

He squeezed her hand and leaned in to kiss her temple.

Kira cupped his face for a moment then pulled back, smiling. "You've done well, leader. The ancestors are proud of you."

"Thank you." His heart swelled. Her words meant more than she could know.

Kira moved on and touched Inuka's shoulder as she passed him by. "Good night, everyone." She slipped into her tent.

"Good night, Kira," Tarek called after her and glanced at the two men who were looking at him.

"Looks like it's just the three of us," Inuka said and suddenly appeared nervous.

"If you two have changed your minds..." Raven's eyes widened, uncertainty crossing his face.

Tarek smiled, hoping to reassure him. "I thought a long bath sounded good before turning in. Will you both join me?"

Raven nodded, his mouth opening slightly with amazement.

Inuka grinned. "Hot damn! Let's go."

* * * *

The deepest section of the river appeared nearly untouched by the fire. The banks were charred but otherwise looked eerily the same as when he and Inuka had frolicked there—*when was that?* A mere week ago? *A lifetime ago.*

It felt like forever since they'd been home and really able to relax. Tarek dipped his foot in the cool water and sighed.

"This place looks pretty good." Inuka charged past him and jumped in, feet first, with a large splash.

"It sure does." Tarek watched his mate bob in the water, a big grin covering his face.

Pulling his long hair back and to the side, Inuka did a summersault, his browned arse cheeks flashing quickly before disappearing again.

"Just like a big kid." Tarek smiled at Raven.

"A very big kid." Raven watched Inuka hungrily, his eyes teeming with lust.

"You ready to join him?" Tarek held out his hand.

Hesitantly Raven accepted. His eyes widened when Tarek, grinning, pulled them both into the water. They submerged and came up breathing heavily in the river that barely reached their waists.

"I'm going to have to get you for that." Raven shook his head then dragged his hair from his face.

"Not if I get you first." Tarek reached for him, amused to see Raven hadn't moved away. *He definitely wants to be caught.* "Come here, you." Tarek cupped his chin. "I've wanted to do this all day." He pressed his mouth against Raven's, his heart thumping wildly when lips parted to accept his tongue.

He thrust it deep, tasting the musky flavour of Raven, so different from his precious new mate. He already knew they would complement each other nicely. Running his hands over the masculine shoulders, Tarek's excitement grew.

"Is your skin sore?" Inuka appeared beside them, lightly touching Raven's back.

"No." Raven's voice was breathy. "It feels fine. It craves your touch."

Stepping behind him, Inuka pulled back Raven's hair and planted a kiss at the nape of his neck. "All of your cravings will be fulfilled tonight, handsome brute." He reached around and tweaked Raven's flat nipples.

"Ah, damn." Raven closed his eyes and pressed back against Inuka.

"You're so gorgeous." Tarek moved forward, thrusting his aching erection towards Raven's.

Grinning, Tarek knew the pleasure of being sandwiched between two strong men must be intense. Hopefully he'd experience it for himself soon. For now they needed to get out of the water and get down to business. "As nice as this is, let's move to the shore. I have plans for both of you and I'm ready to get started."

"Fuck, yes." Raven eyed the riverbank anxiously as if they couldn't get there soon enough.

"Come on, studs." Inuka pushed them both towards the shore. "I've got a few plans of my own."

They scrambled to the water's edge and crawled onto a patch of half-burnt grass. "Not the softest," Tarek mused.

"Who cares?" Inuka knelt over him, stroking his erect shaft tauntingly.

"As much as I'd enjoy that, I think we should pleasure Raven first. Do you agree?" He waggled his eyebrows.

"Most definitely. Lie down here." Inuka patted the grass.

"I won't argue." Raven rolled to the indicated spot.

Tarek ran his hands over Raven's taut thighs and settled between them, blowing warm air over the stiff erection jutting towards him. "This is nice. *Very* nice." He cradled the heavy ball sac and licked the plum coloured cock head gently.

"More! Please..." Raven thrust his hips up.

Chuckling, Tarek kissed the crown. "Greedy boy. You'll get more. You'll get all you can handle."

Raven looked at Inuka's pulsing cock. "I could handle some of that right now. Feed it to me."

Inuka grinned. "My kind of guy!" He bent over Raven's head and thrust his cock forward into the waiting mouth. "Fuck, yeah."

Tarek watched them as he sucked Raven's shaft deep. Pre-cum already oozed from the slit. His lover wouldn't last long with this treatment. His head bobbing up and down, Tarek imagined the many variations the three men could accomplish. He knew exactly what he wanted to try next. His own cock throbbed at the mere thought.

"Yeah, take it." Inuka fucked the prone man's mouth. "So good."

Raven grunted an unintelligible agreement around the cock.

Tarek stole a breath and spoke quickly. "Let's hear it, Dark Warrior. Let us know how much you like it."

"Oh, yeah." Inuka grunted as he thrust. "That's it, take all I've got. I'm going to empty into you soon. Then I'll watch as our sexy Tarek fucks you in the tight, hot ass, just the way I like it. He's got the thickest cock. I don't have to tell you how good it feels." With a low growl, Inuka's body shuddered its release.

Watching was intense and highly arousing. Tarek almost forgot the task at hand but was quickly reminded by a thrust against his mouth. Redoubling his efforts, he was rewarded by a spurt of warm cum down his throat. Groaning with pleasure, he sucked harder and swallowed all that was offered.

When he drew back, he spotted Inuka squatting on his haunches, a satisfied gleam in his eye.

"Feel good, Dark Warrior?"

"Extremely good. You should have told me he has such a talented mouth."

Raven gazed at Inuka lustily. "It's easy when you've got such a good man to work with."

"You've got that right." Tarek stroked his cock. A ribbon of pre-cum dangled from the tip.

"Two good men." Raven eyed Tarek's erection. "I have a thought as to where you can stick that monster, if you need suggestions."

"I believe we're thinking along the same lines." Tarek cupped Raven's balls and lifted them to look underneath.

"Won't have to worry about lubrication." Inuka moved beside him and swirled the cream around Tarek's cock head. He took the same finger and found Raven's arsehole, circling the edge gently.

"Mind if I move your legs up so we can see what we're doing?" Tarek asked.

"Good idea." Raven bent his knees, raising them towards his chest.

Tarek pushed them the rest of the way. "Ah, there it is. Lovely, perfect little rosebud. Reminds me of you, Inuka."

"Then I am quite delightful indeed." Inuka worked his finger in and out of the hole. "Because this channel is hot and tight. I think it will be very satisfying, my love."

"Damn, that's good," Raven said.

"Watching you pump that finger in and out is about enough to make me burst. Stretch him for me so I can get started." Tarek rubbed his cock against Inuka's thigh. He observed Inuka adding a second finger then a third, tugging at the hole carefully.

"I'm ready," Raven declared.

Inuka removed his hand and moved back.

"Don't go too far." Tarek smiled at his mate. "I want you near me. Need to feel your skin next to mine."

"I'm right here, handsome." Inuka caressed his arse as Tarek nudged his cock into Raven's hole. "This is so fucking hot, it's amazing."

"Damn right!" Raven gasped.

"I agree too." Tarek pushed past the sphincter and the rest of his shaft sank in easily. After pulling back slowly, he pressed forward again, revelling in the tight channel and the sensation of Inuka licking his flesh.

"Fuck." Tarek froze, balls already churning. "This feels too good to be over yet."

"If it lasted forever, it wouldn't be too long," Raven managed.

"Let me play." Inuka knelt behind him and spread his arse cheeks. His tongue dipped into Tarek's anus and circled the warm skin.

"Ah, this is about the best set-up I could imagine." Tarek sighed, his cock fully submerged in one man while a tongue reamed his arse.

"Me too," Inuka agreed, then went back to licking and sucking with vigour.

"All right, you two." Raven wiggled his legs. "I need more action. I know, call me greedy, but you've awakened me to these sensory delights. I'm not sure I can get enough."

"Tell us," Tarek commanded. "Tell us how it feels. What you want to do next. Explain it all to us."

"Feels fucking fantastic!" Raven exclaimed. "Fuck me like you mean it. I need it, to feel alive again. I don't care what we do next. As long as it involves the two of you, I'll be happy."

Inuka pulled back and gave Tarek room to resume his thrusting. Kneading the flesh of Tarek's arse, he said, "Your cock's getting hard again, Raven. Would you like to fuck me? What do you say, Tarek? Would you like to see me on my hands and knees while he thrusts into my arse? Of course, you'd have to stand in front so I'd have something to lick and suck."

Grasping the knees of the man he towered over, Tarek gritted his teeth and came, shooting streams of cum into Raven's hole. He thrust until he could barely move then eased out. Dropping to the ground next to Raven, he grinned and watched the man he'd just fucked stroking his own erection. "Looks like you're ready to put Inuka's plan into action."

"I've never been so ready." Raven gazed at him with adoration. "Thank you, Tarek. You and Inuka have truly shown me life does indeed go on. And sometimes takes the most amazing turns."

"This *is* amazing," Tarek agreed. "The possibilities are mind-boggling. I'm aroused again just thinking about them." The amulet around his neck glowed with a pleasant heat. Tarek knew he'd made the right choice. Raven was stoic and serious while Inuka was playful and fun. They balanced each other, and the three bruins would make an incredible team.

Inuka stood with his hands on his hips, his thick cock swaying. "Why just think, big guy? So much to do, nothing but time to do it all."

"You go ahead." Tarek grinned then sighed. "I'll lie here and catch my breath. Besides, what could be better than watching a gorgeous cock disappear into an equally gorgeous arse? I couldn't be happier."

"Oh, I think you could." Inuka extended a hand, attempting to pull Tarek to his feet. "No one gets to sit out a round. This is too much fun. I'm hard again trying to decide what to do next...and the time after that."

Tarek tugged back and dragged a willing Inuka onto his lap. "The three of us have a lifetime to explore each other, Dark Warrior. I didn't mean we had to try everything tonight."

Inuka blinked innocently. "Why not?"

Tarek laughed and cupped a hand around Raven's neck, drawing him closer to them.

"I'm game." Raven caught his eye. "Whatever you two want sounds good to me."

They shared a smile before converging on their playful mate. Amidst whoops and hollers, they clung to each other and held tight.

About the Authors

Jamie Hill was born and raised in the Midwest, where she continues to live with her husband and two sons. She juggles her spare time to include writing every day, freelance editing, reading as she finds time, tinkering on the computer, listening to country music, as many naps as possible, and watching movies (especially scary movies) with her family.

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Jude's imagination frequently leads her astray and she eagerly follows while trying to keep out of trouble, or at least, not get caught. For those of you who know her, you'll know that's not always easy. A picture, a smell, an unexpected glimpse of flesh, or a load of soil in the back of a pick-up, are all fodder for her writing. Her male characters run the gamut from the dominant male ruling his women with an iron fist, to a simpering purple-clad boy-toy whose only desire is to please. As diverse and as richly depicted, her women find themselves in a myriad of exotic and erotic situations.

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