



Ride the Tiger

A Torquere Press Arcana
by Misa Izanaki

Evan wiped the steam from the mirror and eyed the dark, chin-length hair that fell into his face. The dye was fading again, revealing the streaks of auburn and honey that naturally highlighted his hair. He needed to pick up more dye after work. His boyfriend liked his hair black and without the weird highlights. Tristan always said they made him look cheap and it was easier to dye it than fight over it.

The mirror fogged up again, which was fine. Evan didn't need to see the half-healed bruises that his lover left him the last time they'd argued. It had been what, two nights ago? Tristan had been in a bad mood that day and Evan walked right into it. It wasn't hard. Evan must have said something stupid, or forgot something he shouldn't have. It was his fault because he put up with it; he stayed like a loyal puppy, just waiting for Tristan to kick him again.

Evan pulled a black, long-sleeve shirt over his head and stepped into his jeans. He tugged his sleeves down, hiding Tristan's handy work. It was just easier than trying to explain how things were between them. Despite everything, Evan loved Tristan and did his best to keep his tall, blond lover happy. Well, he tried, but it was rarely good enough.

"I'm lucky to have him." Evan kept telling himself that. He had to; it was the only thing that kept him going sometimes, especially when Tristan was hurting him. Evan sighed and headed out of the bathroom. There was nothing he could do, unless he wanted to be homeless again.

Tristan stood just beyond the bathroom door with his arms crossed over that broad chest of his. "Well, you took long enough."

"S-sorry." Evan dropped his gaze and slinked toward the living room. He needed to go if he didn't want to be late for work. There was someone else sitting on the couch. It was Greg, one of Tristan's friends, if Evan remembered right.

"And where the hell do you think you're going?" Tristan grabbed Evan's arm before he could get too far.

"I'm working tonight." Evan glanced up timidly. Tristan usually ignored him when there was company but tonight was different, and that probably meant bad things for Evan. "Sorry, Tris, I thought I told you."

"Working?" Tristan growled the question. His fingers dug into Evan's bicep, probably leaving more bruises. "You never work on Thursdays."

"Someone called in sick tonight and they needed me to cover for him. I didn't think it would be a problem."

A hard slap caught Evan in the face, knocking him to the floor. He glanced up to see Tristan standing over him like some vengeful angel. Even angry as he was, Tristan was gorgeous.

"If you didn't think it was a problem, you would have asked first." Tristan's voice was calm but there was a cold edge to it that scared Evan, even more than when Tristan yelled at him.

"I thought I told you."

"Sure you did. You don't really have work tonight, do you?"

“I do!” Evan cowered against the back of the couch as Tristan slapped him again. “I never lie to you. You know that.”

“I don’t know.” Tristan kicked Evan in the chest, knocking the breath out of him. “It’s hard to trust you when you’re sneaking out on me. I’ll bet you’re meeting someone, or maybe you’re going to score some extra cash with that tight, little ass of yours.”

“I’m not a whore!” Evan snapped back. He met those angry blue eyes almost defiantly. It was dangerous, but damn it, he was telling the truth and that should count for something.

“Really, so it wasn’t you I found turning tricks in that alley, what, four years ago?”

“I didn’t have a choice, back then.” Evan looked away. “I-I don’t do that anymore.”

“And why is that, brat?” Tristan crouched down and pulled Evan’s head back by his hair.

“Because you saved me.” Evan closed his eyes, the fight draining from him. How could he argue when he owed Tristan so much?

“And I figured you’d be thankful.” Tristan stood back up and leaned against the back of the couch with a sigh. “Pretty stupid, huh?”

“I am thankful.”

“Then why are you sneaking out on me?”

“I’m not!”

Tristan glanced back toward his friend who was watching everything and seemed to be enjoying the show. “What do you think, Greg?”

The silver-haired man glanced down at Evan with an almost predatory grin on his face. “It sounds like he’s up to no good, if you ask me.”

“See, even Greg knows.” Tristan shook his head. “Once a whore, always a whore, I guess.”

“I’ve never cheated on you, Tris, not once.”

“That I know of.” Tristan shrugged. “Who knows what you do when you say you’re at work.”

“Tris...” Damn it! Evan did not want to back down, but what could he do? The longer they fought, the harder it would be to fix things. He knelt there, his fingers clenched in the soft carpeting. Evan hung his head, his dark hair hiding the hurt on his face. “I’m sorry, I--”

“What? Are you going to promise to try harder? What good is that? You always say that, but you never seem to follow through.” Tristan shook his head. “Maybe it’s time I found someone new.”

Evan's eyes widened fearfully and, despite the ache in his chest, he dragged himself closer and nuzzled his lover's calf. "Please, Tris let me make it up to you. I'll do anything you want." He glanced up cautiously at Tristan. "Please don't be angry with me. Don't kick me out."

"You know, I paid that pimp a lot of money for your sorry ass."

"I-I know."

"Then you'd better start appreciating everything I've done for you."

"I do."

"Good, then you're going to be a good pet and do exactly what we say, right?"

Evan blinked as Greg stepped up beside Tristan. He didn't like the way the other man looked at him. It made Evan feel like a mouse cornered by a hungry cat. "We?"

"Greg came over just to play with us... well, with you." Tristan slid his arm around the other man's waist and pulled him closer.

Greg's neatly manicured fingers slid under Evan's chin and tipped his head up. "Mm, I can't wait. You are a cute, little thing."

Evan shook off Greg's touch and edged closer to his lover. He didn't like where this was going at all. Evan still had the scars from the last time Tristan decided to "share" him with one of his friends. "Tristan... please, don't make me do this."

"What's wrong?" Tristan growled, obviously irritated at his reluctance. "You didn't seem to mind so much when you were getting paid for it."

"Tris..."

"Come on, baby, don't be like that." Greg fingered a bit of Evan's hair. "It'll be fun. I hear you're a kinky, little slut."

"He is. He likes it rough. I think he gets off on the pain." Tristan nudged Evan with his foot. "You should see the scars he has."

"I don--" Evan shook his head.

Tristan slapped him again, this time drawing blood. "Are you arguing with me, whore?"

"N-no..."

“Then you better get out of those fucking clothes.” Tristan grabbed the front of Evan’s shirt and hauled him to his feet. “Or I may have to break something.”

Evan took a deep breath. He loved Tristan, really he did, but this was too much and he had a feeling there would be more than bruises on him, if he let Tristan and Greg have their way. He took another breath; his chest hurt but he could ignore it. He had to.

Fueled by a mix of panic and fear, Evan twisted out of Tristan’s grip and bolted for the door. He needed to get out of there and away from Tristan and his leering friend.

Half way to the door, Tristan grabbed a handful of dark hair and yanked Evan backward. The floor hit him hard, knocking the air from his lungs. A hard kick caught Evan in the ribs, sending a jolt of screaming pain through his nerves. Another caught him in the back. Evan covered his head with his arms, trying to avoid the worst of it. Not that it worked, but at least Tristan couldn’t see the tears streaking his face. Crying usually just made things worse.

“Tristan, stop.” Greg must have pulled Tristan off him, since the blows stopped. “He won’t be any fun if you keep on him like that. We want him conscious remember.”

“What do you want to do then?”

“I think we should go out to dinner. A few hours alone, maybe on a nice chilly balcony, should calm your pet down and make him more... cooperative.”

“And what happens if he’s still being a brat?” Tristan growled, kicking Evan again.

“Then we entertain ourselves.” Greg slid his hand down Tristan’s chest and grinned. “I’m sure I can keep you busy.”

Tristan slipped his arm around Greg’s waist and pulled him closer, so they were chest to chest. “I’m sure you can. You were such a fucking animal last time.”

“And a whole lot less drama, right?” Greg nipped at Tristan’s chin. He glanced down and gave Evan a dirty look. “Why don’t you deal with that, then we can go to dinner?”

“Yeah, I know just the place we can go, too.”

Tristan hauled Evan up by the arm and dragged him to the sliding glass door that led out to a small, wrought iron balcony. “This is all your fault, you know. You had to be a little shit.”

“Tris--”

“It’s too late for the sad, puppy eyes, brat. You’re going to stay out there until you’ve learned your lesson.” Tristan shoved Evan onto the balcony and locked the door behind him.

Evan stumbled against the railing, wet metal digging into his hands and bare feet. A cold wind hit him, driving icy droplets of rain through his shirt and chilling Evan to the bone. He turned and pounded on the glass. Tristan didn't even blink. He and Greg just headed out, probably without a second thought.

More rain hit him as he huddled against the door. It was coming down pretty hard and from the sound of the thunder it was going to get worse. Evan shivered. He could feel his toes going numb in the cold. Tristan wouldn't leave him out in the rain all night, would he?

You know he would. Evan raked his fingers through his dripping hair. *He's kicked you out for days at a time...you're the dumb ass who keeps going back to him...* That wasn't true. Tristan loved him, he knew it. At least that's what Evan kept telling himself. It usually made him feel better but not this time.

One thing was certain, though. Evan did not want to spend the night on the balcony. Not that he really had a choice. Tristan's condo was on the third floor and jumping down to the sidewalk below was out of the question.

Maybe climbing down wasn't. There was no fire escape to speak of, but there was a drainage pipe that led from the roof to the street. It didn't look too safe, but it was better than nothing. Evan reached over the railing and shook the long pipe that ran along the wall. It seemed sturdy enough. He just hoped the balcony railing was sturdy, too. Evan climbed over the railing and sat there for a second, weighing his options.

Okay, maybe climbing down the pipe was a bad idea. The drain pipe was smooth and slick from the rain and there was no way for Evan to make it down that pipe that, without breaking his neck, anyway. He sat there, on the wrought iron railing, and tried to figure out a new plan. Okay, if the pipe wouldn't work, then maybe the brackets holding it to the building would. They had to be pretty strong, right?

Evan grabbed one of the brackets and pulled hard. It seemed sturdy enough. He braced his foot against another and scooted off the balcony, hoping for the best. Well, he didn't plunge to his death, which was good. Carefully, Evan found his footing and slowly made his way down.

Most of the brackets were sturdy. Half way down, one of them snapped under Evan's weight and sent him sliding to sidewalk. Evan landed hard, wincing as his ankle twisted with the impact. Wow, that sucked, but it was better than huddling on the balcony, waiting for Tristan to forgive him. Hey, Tristan might even worry about him.

Evan shook that last thought out of his head. Who was he kidding? He wouldn't be in his current situation if Tristan cared, would he? Evan sighed and limped down the street, more depressed than ever.

Evan tried to rub some feeling back into his arms, but it didn't help. The rain had soaked him to the bone and the wind left him half frozen. He'd been wandering around the city for nearly an hour, his ankle throbbing with each step, and looking for somewhere dry and maybe even warm to just sit for a few hours. The only problem was that Evan had nowhere to go.

He shoved his hands in his pockets hoping for a bit of cash. There was a bit of loose change, but not enough to get him anything but a dirty look at any of the local coffee shops. No one wanted a barefoot, homeless boy hanging around. Hell, he couldn't even go to work. There would be too many questions from his boss and his co-workers, if they let him in at all. This was the third night in two weeks that he missed his shift which meant that, on top of everything else, he was out of a job, too. Evan sighed and kept walking. He could deal with that later. The only thing he wanted now was to get off his feet for a bit.

Evan ducked down an alley that ran along the side of a strip club. Well, it looked like a strip joint. With the posters of pretty, scantily clad men and a name like "The Body Shop" what else would it be? At least the building blocked the wind and the overhanging balconies that lined the upper floors kept the rain off. It was better than nothing, and hopefully no one would shoo him off, either.

His ankle started to throb again, forcing Evan to sit down and take his weight off it. What the hell was he supposed to do now? He could go and beg Tristan to take him back. Tristan would probably be calmer by the time he got back and would hopefully not beat him too badly. At least he would be warm and dry again. Beating or no, warm and dry was definitely better than squatting in an alley.

Something warm and furry rubbed up against his leg, making Evan jump. He looked down to see a fluffy black and white cat watching him with bright green eyes. It meowed and raised a paw like it was saying hello.

"Where did you come from?" Evan picked up the cat and cradled it in his arms. The cat purred and snuggled against him. "You're too chubby to be a stray."

The back door to the club opened and the cat seemed to perk its ears.

"Damn it, Kiki where are you?"

The cat meowed loudly and wiggled in Evan's arms. Damn, so much for hanging out here. Evan let the cat go and pushed himself to his feet. His ankle ached in protest, but Evan tried to ignore it. It was better to limp off on his own than to be shooed off like a stray.

"Hey..." The figure stepped closer. It was a guy around his age, with horns and what looked like a tail. Body mods, they had to be, and expensive ones by the look of things.

"S-sorry... you don't have to call the cops or anything; I'll be out of here in a bit. I was just resting for a little while."

“It’s okay.” The guy patted Evan on the shoulder and looked at him. There was a mix of curiosity and worry in those violet eyes. “Do you want to come in? It’s warm and dry in the club.”

Evan shook his head. “I don’t have any money.”

“Don’t worry about it. No one’ll mind if you come in and dry off.” The young man blinked at him again and then those eyes went wide. “Evan?”

“How do you know my name?” Evan took a step back. He was ready to bolt if he had to.

“Don’t tell me, you don’t recognize me. It hasn’t been that long has it, little brother?”

“Dante?” Evan took a second, longer look at the man in front of him. It was his brother, his twin. Evan couldn’t believe it. “You’ve changed...”

“Well, it has been a while.” Dante pulled Evan to his feet and tugged him toward the back door of the club. “We got split up, what, ten years ago?”

“That’s not what I meant. You have horns and a tail... and your hair and eyes are different.”

“Aren’t they cool? I know a really good doc. He does normal stuff, too.” Dante grinned, his tail swishing back and forth happily. “I can hook you up if you want.”

“N-no, I’m good thanks.”

“Suit yourself.”

“You look good... as a demon, though.” Evan winced as he put a little too much weight on his injured ankle.

“Thanks, I--” Dante’s face went serious. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. I just tweaked my ankle on the way here.”

“Come on, we’ll go borrow my boss’s office for a little while.”

Dante slipped a slim arm around Evan’s shoulders and helped him inside. It was warm inside the club. Then again, it would have to be considering that most of workers weren’t wearing much. Tristan would have a shit fit if he knew Evan was in a strip club, or had a brother who worked in one.

“Is it okay? I mean your boss isn’t going to be mad, is he?” Evan’s eyes widened as Dante dragged him deeper into the club. An utterly gorgeous man with long, blue-black hair and pointed ears moved on stage as they passed, shedding his clothing to the heady beat of the music

that filled the room. It seemed like the perfect place for his twin. Dante always did have an appreciation of pretty people, even when they were younger.

“Kale won’t mind. He’s a pussycat. Besides I’m the best bartender he has.” Dante pushed Evan into a small, cluttered office and shut the door. “And that comes with certain privileges. Well, it helps that I’m sleeping with him, too.”

“Oh...” Evan sat down on the worn couch in the corner. He was happy to finally get off his feet, but he didn’t want to get his brother in trouble either. “As long as it’s okay.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Dante stood and started rummaging through the office. “Why don’t you get out of those wet clothes and I’ll find you a towel. I know Kale keeps some in here... somewhere.” Dante pulled the bottom drawer of one of the filing cabinets behind the desk and pulled a towel out. “Ah! Here we go.”

“It’s okay. I just need to sit down for a bit.”

“Don’t give me that. You’re freezing.”

“I’m fine.” Evan shook his head and tried not to shiver too much. He knew that tone, though. Dante was not going to leave him alone until he was out of his clothes.

“Evan, this is not time to be shy.” Dante tugged the shirt over Evan’s head. “Once I get you out of those clothes I’ll go find the first aid kit and check your ankle. I’m no doctor, but I’ve patched up more than my share of dancers so--”

He must have noticed the scars. Why else would Dante’s expression change so quickly? There was no hiding the pale, jagged lines that stripped Evan’s chest, arms and back. There were lots of them and they were ugly and Tristan never let him forget it, either.

“How did you get those?” Dante wrapped the towel he found around Evan’s shoulders. “I mean - sorry, I’m staring aren’t I?”

“It’s okay. I had an accident when I was younger... after we were separated. A couple of bullies cornered me in a junkyard and shoved me through the windshield of an old car.” Evan took a deep breath. “I know they look really bad.”

Warm arms wrapped around Evan’s shoulders and pulled him close. Evan leaned into it, resting his head on Dante’s shoulder. Evan had forgotten how good that felt.

“I’m so sorry, little bro. If I had been there...”

“Don’t worry about it.” Evan forced a smile. “I’m all right, for the most part.”

“And what happened tonight?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the bruises for one thing... and the fact that you were barefoot and squatting in the alley behind the club. If I didn’t know better I’d say you were running from something... or someone.”

“It’s not that bad.”

Dante smoothed Evan’s dark hair gently. “Tell me.”

“I had a fight with my boyfriend... and I took off.” Evan glanced away. Dante probably could still tell when he was hiding things, but Evan didn’t want to tell his brother the rest of what happened. The whole thing with Tristan was his own damn fault, but Evan didn’t want to hear that from his twin. They hadn’t seen each other in so long, but Dante’s opinion still mattered to him and it would hurt if Dante thought he was an idiot, too. “It was a dumb move on my part.”

“I don’t know about that.” Dante’s fingers brushed against Evan’s battered cheek. “From the look of those bruises, you’re better off without him.”

“I guess...”

“Come on, Evan, you deserve better than some asshole who hits you.”

“You don’t understand. I owe Tristan a lot.”

“Tristan? Is that the jerk’s name?”

“Dante!” Evan stood, ignoring the throbbing in his ankle. “Look, I don’t want to argue about this.”

“Who’s arguing? I’m just stating fact.” Dante caught Evan as he stumbled forward.

“It’s more complicated than you’re making it out to be.” Evan pulled away and limped toward the door.

“What’s so complicated? He hits you and you don’t deserve that. And unless you’re into that kind of thing, you’re better off without him.”

“I’m not--” Evan shook his head. “Maybe I should go.”

“What? Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.” Evan shrugged. “I’ll figure something out.”

Dante grabbed his wrist and tugged Evan back toward the couch. “Wait, I’ve got a better idea.”

“What’s that?” Evan didn’t really want to go, but he didn’t feel like justifying himself to Dante either.

“Stay here with me. It’s better than being on the street, right?” Dante pulled Evan closer and kissed his forehead. “I’ll even promise not to bring up your boyfriend again.”

“What about your boss? Won’t he mind?”

A tall, growly-looking redhead burst into the office. “Damn it, Dante, you were supposed to relieve Frankie twenty minu-- oh, hey...”

Evan tried to back away but Dante held on to him. He was scared, more so because he thought Dante would be in trouble because of him.

“It’s okay, Evan. That’s just Kale. He growls a lot, but it’s just for show.” Dante glanced up at the tall redhead. “Sorry, Kale, something came up, as you can see.”

“It’s okay.” Kale stepped closer eyeing them both. “Who is he?”

“This is my brother, Evan. He needs a place to stay.” Dante patted Evan on the shoulder. “Evan, that’s Kale, my boss and the love of my life... most of the time.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, you know I love you.” Dante grinned at Kale mischievously.

Evan relaxed a little. Kale wasn’t as scary up close. Besides, if Dante loved him he couldn’t be so bad, could he? “N-nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Kale nodded at Evan then glanced at Dante. “So, I guess this means that you want me to cover for you while you take care of things with your brother.”

“Could you? It’ll be good practice. You haven’t tended bar since you opened this place.”

“Fine. You owe me, boy-o.”

Dante slung his arms around Kale’s neck and nuzzled his cheek. “Don’t worry; I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“I know.” Kale patted Dante on the ass and gave him a gentle shove back toward the couch. “Go, get your brother settled in and I’ll see you later.”

“Thanks, Kale.” Dante waved his lover off and turned his attention back to Evan. “Well, little bro, that settles things. You’re staying with us.”

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely, I wouldn’t have it any other way and I know Kale wouldn’t, either.” Dante helped Evan toward the door. “Come on, I want to show you our place.”

Varian sat on the roof, letting the morning sun warm his tawny, rust-colored fur. He was still getting used to everything, his new job, the new apartment. Varian was a bouncer at a strip club. It wasn’t the most glamorous work, but it came with an apartment above the club and roof access when he wanted a little extra space. How could he say no to that? Or to all the pretty boys who worked in the club, for that matter. The Body Shop had some of the prettiest men he had ever seen. All the dancers, drink boys, even the bartenders were gorgeous and that was a definite perk to his job.

“You know Kale would have a shit fit if he saw you like that.”

Varian stood and stretched, his long, striped tail twitching back and forth. “Come on, Itsuki, don’t you ever run around in fox form?”

“Yeah, but I look like a big dog.” Itsuki’s sable fox ears flicked back. “The boss man doesn’t need Animal Control charging into the club because someone saw a tiger on his roof.”

“Fine.” Varian sighed and willed himself back to his human form. He felt the bones and muscles shift beneath his skin and before too long he stood in his human form. Well, more or less human, Varian kept his tail and the stripes on his back, shoulders and legs. His ears were also more like a tiger’s than a humans, but at least they weren’t furry. Most shifters kept something of their animal side in human form, but it was a little excessive in Varian’s case. Then again, he had spent most of his youth in tiger form. “Better?”

“Much.” Itsuki grinned and tossed Varian his clothes. “Let’s go, Kale wants me to show you around and introduce you to everyone.”

“Sounds good to me.” Varian tugged his jeans up and shrugged on his T-shirt.

They headed to the elevator and took it down to the club. It was still early so the doors weren’t open yet, but there were still people milling around. A pretty young man, one of the dancers by the look of him, sat at the bar chatting with one of the bartenders, who happened to have horns and a tail. It was no small wonder that Varian felt so at home at the club.

“There you are!” The dancer bounded off his stool and hugged Itsuki happily. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Sorry, love.” Itsuki hugged his dancer back. “Kale wanted me to show his new bouncer around today.” He cocked his head towards Varian. “This is Varian, by the way.”

“I’m Aoi.” The dancer flipped a bit of long blue-black hair behind a pointed ear and shook Varian’s hand. “We’ve never had a weretiger in the club before, but I’m sure you’ll fit right in.”

“I already feel at home.” Varian nodded. “At least I don’t have to hide what I am with kitsune and elves around, right?”

“Seriously,” the bartender, added with a grin. “I think I’m the only normal one here.”

“So says the demon boy.”

“My extras are purely cosmetic. I’m all human... unlike the rest of you.”

“This is Dante, by the way,” Itsuki poked the bartender in the shoulder. “He’s our resident troublemaker.”

“At least I didn’t bite the mail man.”

“That only happened once.” Itsuki’s foxy ears flattened against his hair. “These two are off limits by the way. Dante is with Kale.” He wrapped an arm possessively around Aoi’s waist. “And this one’s mine.”

“Yours and Aya’s.” Aoi tapped Itsuki on the nose. He flashed a grin at Varian. “Everyone else is fair game as long as they’re willing, of course. And I’m sure most of the boys will be, considering how handsome you are.”

“Thanks.” Varian wasn’t sure how to take that. It almost sounded like Aoi was flirting with him. Then again, it looked like he was flirting with Dante, too. Maybe he was just friendly. Very friendly.

Aoi petted Itsuki’s ears. “Then again, I have a thing for furry bits.”

Another young man peeked in from the back room. Oh, now he was a pretty, little thing. Whoever he was, he definitely piqued Varian’s interest. Varian always did have a thing for pale, dark-haired boys. Those gorgeous, leaf-green eyes glanced up, meeting Varian’s ice-blue gaze briefly before glancing almost submissively at the floor.

“Um, Dante...”

“Hey, Evan, what’s up?” Dante turned and grinned at the boy.

“Um, do you know where Kale is?” Evan hid that pretty face behind a curtain of hair. “I need to know how he wants his files organized.”

“He had some errands to run. He’ll be back soon though.” Dante grabbed Evan’s hand and tugged him towards the group. “Why don’t you come meet everyone? I promise no one bites... well, except Itsuki.”

“Watch it, you.”

“That’s Itsuki and Aoi. I told you about them earlier.”

“And you shouldn’t believe any of it,” Aoi teased. “Dante has a tendency to exaggerate, especially about us.”

“And that’s Varian. He’s our new bouncer.” Dante pushed Evan forward. “Everybody, this is Evan, my little brother.”

“Little brother?” Itsuki cocked his head to one side, his ears twitching slightly.

“Okay, he’s my twin. But I am older, even if it is only by a half an hour or so.”

“Hi.” Evan waved. Poor thing, he looked nervous. Then again, meeting this lot would be a little overwhelming.

“Nice to meet you, Evan.” Aoi patted the boy on the shoulder then glanced at Dante with a raised eyebrow. “You’ve been holding out on us, Dante.”

“I-it’s not his fault.” Evan said quietly. “We were split up when our parents died and sent to different foster families, what, ten years ago?”

Dante nodded. “That was until he showed up on our doorstep a couple of days ago. He’s staying with me and Kale and helping in the boss man’s office.”

“I just wanted to be useful. Dante and Kale were nice enough to take me in so--” Evan brushed a bit of hair behind his ear.

“He’s better than useful. You can actually see Kale’s desk.”

“That is impressive.” Varian was amazed. He knew from first hand experience what a disaster area Kale’s office was and according to Itsuki, he had seen Kale’s desk on a good day, too.

“It’s not that bad.” Evan shrugged and headed back to Kale’s office. “I need to finish up. It was nice to meet you all.”

Varian watched as Evan scurried off. He couldn’t help it. There was something about the boy that intrigued him. Dante smacked Varian in the head with a bar towel, startling him.

“What?”

“I saw that look.” Dante shook a finger at Varian like he meant business. “You’d better keep those paws away from my brother.”

Varian shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look, Evan's been through a lot and he doesn't need anyone, especially a weretiger hunting him."

"Good luck with that, Dante," Aoi added. "Your little brother is quite the hottie."

"Don't you start!"

"Oh, sounds like Dante wants to keep that pretty twin of his all to himself."

"Aoi!"

Varian had to laugh even with Dante giving him dirty looks. He was an only cub so he could only imagine the protective instincts of a twin or older brother. "There will be no hunting on my part, Dante. I promise."

"Okay." Dante settled down a little. "I'm going to hold you to that."

The last two weeks had been long and busy, but Varian didn't mind too much. He loved his job. There was more to being a bouncer at the Body Shop than just watching the door and throwing unruly people out. Varian had to be a referee, bodyguard, messenger and sometimes host, all rolled into one. He had his hands full even on slow days, but Varian liked being busy, especially if it meant that the club was running smoothly. Of course, it was nice to have a day off, too.

Wednesdays were the official free day at the Body Shop. It was the one day a week that Kale closed the club and gave everyone the day off. Varian planned to finish unpacking his apartment, but that could wait until he had a little roof time. He sprawled on the warm concrete, basking in the early morning sun. At least he was in human form this time. Kale had already warned him about wandering around in tiger form and he didn't want to get yelled at, again.

The door to the roof opened. Varian cracked one eye open to see who was interrupting his quiet time. It was Evan, Dante's pretty twin. That was unexpected. Varian rarely saw the boy unless Dante was around and even then, he usually kept his distance. Varian sighed. Why did he always fall for the shy ones? There was something about Evan that made Varian want to protect the boy. Of course, Evan probably thought Varian wanted to eat him, which didn't help things.

"Oh, sorry." Evan looked a little startled. Varian hoped that he didn't scare the boy. "I didn't know you were up here."

"It's all right. I wouldn't mind a little company." Varian sat up, smoothing the short fur of his tail with his fingers.

“Thanks... I-I didn’t know anyone else came up here.” Evan sat down, that dark, chin-length hair hiding his face, again.

“It’s a good place, if you like the quiet.”

“Yeah, or if you want to hide for a while.”

Varian cocked his head toward the boy with curiosity. “Is that why you’re here?”

“Sort of...” Evan picked at a loose thread in the hem of his shirt. “Dante and Kale were making out in the office and I kind of interrupted them.”

“Oops.”

“I-I didn’t know they were in there. I was just going in to get a bit of work done.” Evan sighed and blew some hair out of his eyes.

“Were they mad?”

“I’m not sure. I ducked out of there pretty quickly. I’ll go apologize later, assuming that they’ll let me back into the office... or the apartment.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. It takes a lot to get under Kale’s skin. He puts up with your brother, right?” Varian reached out to pat Evan on the shoulder only to have the boy shy away from him. Okay, that wasn’t a total surprise. Dante did say that he had been through a lot and Varian could only imagine what that meant.

“I-I guess. I just don’t want to wear out my welcome.” Evan hung his head. There was a mix of worry and fear on the boy’s face. “I’m sure having me around is weird for them.”

The last time Varian had seen a look like that was on a beaten puppy that he worked with when he was at the ASPCA. That definitely explained a few things. “I doubt that. Dante’s pretty damned happy to have you back, and I know Kale appreciates all the work you’re doing in his office. They’re pretty lucky, if you ask me.”

“Why? I’m the one who’d be homeless again, if it wasn’t for them.”

“Evan...”

“It’s true.”

The sky darkened as the clouds rolled in. Rain spattered against the concrete in fat drops. Varian sighed; so much for the sun. It was Seattle, after all. He was lucky enough to have sun for as long as he did.

“Come on.” Varian stood and held his hand out to Evan. “We should go inside before it gets any worse.”

“But...” Evan gave him that beaten puppy look again. He took Varian’s hand at least, which was a start.

“You can come home with me if you don’t want to go back to Kale and Dante’s.” Varian pulled Evan to his feet and grinned. “I don’t bite.”

“Are you sure? I-I don’t want to be a bother.”

It started to rain harder, soaking both Varian and Evan to the skin. Varian opened the heavy steel door that lead back into the building and held it for Evan. The last thing he wanted was for the boy to catch cold. Dante would never let him hear the end of it, if that happened.

“You’re not a bother, Evan.” Varian ducked inside and shook the water from his hair and the fur of his tail. “But your brother will be if I don’t get you out of the rain.”

Evan sat on Varian’s couch and looked around. Most of the tiny living room was taken up by the overstuffed couch Evan was perched on. The rest of the room was pretty bare except for the sofa and the boxes. It looked like Varian was still unpacking. Well, Dante did say he was new.

It was kind of weird sitting on a stranger’s couch in nothing but a thick towel and his boxers. The last time Evan did anything like that, there was no towel and the guy he was with broke two of his ribs instead of paying him. Evan shook that thought away. Varian didn’t seem like the type to lure him somewhere just to hurt him. He wouldn’t be at the club if he was into that sort of thing. According to Dante, Kale made damn sure that he hired good people.

It didn’t really matter, either way. Evan wasn’t going anywhere, even if he wanted to. Varian had taken his clothes and tossed them in the washer/dryer combo in the kitchen before disappearing into the bedroom. Nope, Evan was stuck, at least until his clothes were out of the dryer.

Varian popped out of the bedroom a few minutes later with nothing on but a pair of beach shorts slung low over those lean hips, probably to make room for that long, striped tail of his. Evan couldn’t help but stare. Varian was gorgeous. Something about all those sleek muscles accented by the tiger’s tail and pointed ears made him seem so exotic. Oh, and his stripes didn’t hurt either. Thick, dark lines streaked Varian’s back and shoulders, like an ornate tribal tattoo.

Evan glanced away. He could feel a warm blush creep into his cheeks. Besides being utterly handsome, Varian seemed like a really sweet guy, too. Varian was just the type Evan could fall for, not that the handsome bouncer would ever give him a second look.

“Are you warm enough?” Varian settled on the couch, his tail twitching a little.

“Yeah, thanks.” Evan nodded and tried not to stare.

“Relax, Evan, I’m not going to eat you.” Varian tugged on a bit of his hair teasingly. “Your brother would never forgive me if I did that.”

“Sorry.” Evan was lousy at making small talk, but the silence between them was getting really uncomfortable. He had to think of something to say, even if it was stupid. “Can I ask you something, Varian?”

“Ask away.”

“Why did you become a bouncer?”

“Mainly because Kale asked me to come work for him. He’s very protective of his boys and I liked that. Well, that and the fact that he didn’t mind the tail or the stripes.” Varian raked his fingers through his hair. “That was a big plus.”

“Did it hurt?”

Varian blinked at him. “Did what hurt?”

“Getting your tail and stripes, I mean, they’re body mods, like Dante’s right?”

“Nope, I’m all natural.”

“Oh...”

“I’m a shifter, a weretiger.” Varian smoothed the fur of his tail. “Granted, I have more animal bits in this form than I’m supposed to, but that could be because I didn’t actually change until I was almost twenty.”

“You turn into a tiger?” Evan’s eyes widened.

Varian nodded. “Not as often as I’d like to, but yes. Kale seems to think that there might be problems if people see a tiger lurking around the club.”

“Can I see? You in tiger form, I mean.” As nervous as he was, Evan was curious, too. He’d never met a shifter before.

That got him an odd look from Varian. “Are you sure?”

“I-it’s okay if you don’t want to.”

“I never said that.” Varian stood and turned, dropping his shorts. That gave Evan a good long look at Varian’s broad back. Oh, those stripes went all the way down, from his shoulders to his ankles.

Evan watched in amazement as Varian shifted. Bone and muscle shifted and thick, soft-looking fur sprouted everywhere. It looked painful, but Varian seemed to take it in stride. Then again, he was probably used to the sensation by now.

“Well, what do you think?” Varian sat on his haunches and cocked his big, furry head to one side.

“Wow...” Evan blinked. He’d seen tigers on TV and at the zoo but he’d never been that close, ever. It was pretty amazing. He glanced hopefully at Varian. “Can I pet you? I mean, do you mind?”

“Only if you scratch my ears,” Varian grinned, at least it looked like a grin. It was hard to tell with all those sharp teeth.

“Sure.” Evan stepped closer and stroked Varian’s head and made sure to scratch behind those velvety ears. Varian’s fur was so soft beneath Evan’s fingers. It was amazing to be petting something so magnificent, so fearsome.

“Oh, that’s nice.” Varian’s pale blue eyes closed in a look of utter contentment. “You have good hands.”

“Thanks.” Evan gave those furry ears another scratch. A low, purr rumbled in Varian’s chest. It was kind of funny to hear such a familiar sound from such an exotic animal. He couldn’t help but smile.

Varian lifted that big, furry head and nuzzled Evan’s cheek. “I think that’s the first time I’ve seen you smile.”

“I’m better with animals than I am with people I guess.” Evan cringed. He just hoped Varian wasn’t offended. “S-sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s all right. I know the feeling.” Varian nodded. “It took me a long time to get used to people.”

“Really?”

“Yup, but you get used to them. It’s just something you learn... kind of like walking on two legs.” Varian’s ears flicked back. “I had a hard time with that, too.”

“Are you hungry?” Evan sat back, his stomach grumbling a little. “I can make lunch if you are.”

“Mmm, lunch would be good.” Varian licked his chops. “How about we go out, though?”

“We don’t have to. I’m a pretty good cook. At least, Dante and Kale think so.”

“I don’t doubt your skills, it’s just that...” Varian cocked his head towards the refrigerator. “I just don’t have much in the way of groceries.”

“I’m sure I can manage something.” Evan headed into the kitchen and peeked into the fridge. Wow, Varian wasn’t kidding. There was some very limp celery, a bottle of mustard, half a pack of iffy luncheon meat and two bottles of beer. “Um... how about we grab some lunch and groceries and then I’ll make you dinner?”

“Only if you let me buy lunch.”

“It’s okay, Varian, you don’t have to do that.”

“If you insist on cooking for me, then I’m going to insist on buying you lunch.” Varian patted Evan on the shoulder with a massive paw. “It’s only fair.”

Varian did have a point, and Evan didn’t really want to argue with a tiger. “Okay.”

“Good!” Varian gave him another toothy grin as the dryer buzzed. “Ah, perfect timing. Why don’t you get dressed and we can go.”

“Um, shouldn’t you change, too?”

“Oh, right.” Varian nodded at him before padding down the hall to his bedroom. “I’ll be right back.”

Evan pulled his clothes out of the dryer and tugged them on with a contented sigh. Warm clothes always felt good, especially fresh from the dryer. Varian appeared again, dressed and a lot more human looking. He almost bounced back into the kitchen, his tail swishing behind him. Varian reminded Evan of a kitten. Okay, a really big kitten that could probably break him in half, but a kitten nonetheless. It was kind of funny.

“Okay, let’s--” Varian stopped mid-step and blinked at Evan. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. I-- you remind me of Kiki, that’s all.”

“Dante’s cat?”

Evan nodded nervously. He wasn’t sure how Varian would take being compared to a house cat. Tristan would’ve been pissed. Then again, Tristan was never very partial to cats. “Of course, you’re a lot bigger and not as furry.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No, I like cats, actually.”

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment, then.” Varian gently brushed a bit of hair out of Evan’s eyes and smiled at him. “Shall we go?”

The rain was down to a bare drizzle by the time Evan and Varian left the club. The sky was still overcast but that was hardly surprising.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Um...” Evan thought for a bit. “How about Pike’s Place Market? It’s pretty close and we can get lunch there, too.”

“As long as we can stop and watch the guys who throw fish. I love that, even if it makes me hungry.” Varian held the door open for Evan. “Do you want to walk or drive?”

“I thought we’d walk, but we could drive, too... It’s up to you really.”

“Hmm, considering how the parking at Pike’s gets during this time of day walking might be the better option.” Varian nodded as they stepped on to the sidewalk. “Tigers aren’t terribly fond of traffic.”

After a quick walk and a tasty lunch at one of the cafes, they wandered through the long lines of vendors looking at fresh produce, meats and sweets. Evan picked up some fresh honey from one table and some veggies from another. He had to decide on some sort of protein, too, but Evan figured that he would let Varian pick since it was his dinner.

“Ooh, you have to try one of these.” Varian bounded back with a ball of something covered in chocolate and cocoa in his fingers.

“What is it?” Evan took the tidbit from Varian’s fingers. The flavors of rich, dark chocolate and tart cherry filled his mouth. “Mmm, that is good. I was wondering where you ran off to.”

“I couldn’t help it. There were chocolate-covered cherries at one table and beef jerky next to it, and they were both giving away samples.” Varian grinned and held a plastic bag out to Evan. “I wasn’t sure which you would like better, so I got you a bit of both.”

“Thank you.” Evan took the bag. He wasn’t sure what else to say. No one bought him gifts, at least Tristan never did. “I-- you didn’t have to get me anything.”

“No, but I wanted to.” Varian whapped Evan with his tail. “You’re making me dinner and you won’t even let me buy the groceries. I had to do something.”

“I don’t mind. I like cooking.” Evan popped another chocolate-covered cherry into his mouth. “That reminds me, you have to decide on something meaty for dinner.”

“Are you going to let me buy that at least?”

“No, you got lunch and I’m going to make dinner. That was the deal, remember?”

“Fine, but I’m going to make you dinner later.” Varian took Evan’s bags and followed him towards the fish mongers. “Of course, I might need some pointers if you want it to be edible.”

“You might want to see if you like my cooking first.”

“I’m sure I will.” Varian looked over the display of fresh fish. “Oh, this is going to be harder than I thought.”

After a bit of debate, they settled on a side of wild salmon and headed back to the club. Evan was just thankful that Varian wanted that instead of the shrimp he was considering. Evan didn’t think he would have enough spare cash for that. Hell, he wasn’t even sure they got enough salmon. How much would a weretiger eat anyway?

“Mmm, I can’t wait. That salmon looked really good.” Varian shifted his bags from one hand to the other. Evan offered to carry something but Varian insisted. “Thank you again.”

“For what?”

“For making me dinner. It’s been a long time since I had a home-cooked meal.”

“I just hope you like it.” Evan raked a handful of hair out of his eyes. “Thanks for lunch, by the way.”

“You’re welcome. I just wish you’d have let me buy the stuff for dinner.” Varian stopped as they passed by a Starbucks. “Are you thirsty?”

“A little.”

“Let’s get something then; everything should keep, right?”

“Yeah, I had the fish monger put a bag of ice with the salmon, so we should be okay.”

“Good.” Varian grabbed Evan’s arm with his free hand and tugged him inside. “Come on, my treat.”

“Varian…”

“Nope, I insist and there’s no arguing with a weretiger. We’re very stubborn, you know.”

That settled that. Evan sat down at one of the simple wooden tables near the front window and set their grocery bags on the window ledge while Varian ordered them some drinks. Evan had no idea why Varian was being so sweet to him. They weren’t even dating. It was a little weird but it was nice, too. Maybe Varian just appreciated a home-cooked meal. That had to be it, no one as amazing as Varian would be interested in someone as messed up as Evan was.

“Here ya go.” Varian sat down and set a large purplish drink in front of Evan. “Passion ice tea lemonade, right?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Evan glanced over at the rich looking coffee thing Varian was drinking. “What did you get?”

“A mocha frappuccino.” Varian almost purred in contentment. “It’s very tasty.”

“It looks it. I--”

“Well, well, well.”

That all too familiar voice sent a cold shiver down Evan’s spine. He turned his eyes wide and fearful. “Tristan.”

“It wasn’t very nice of you, running off like that.” Tristan’s voice was calm, but Evan could tell he was pissed. He’d learned really quickly how to read Tristan’s moods, not that it helped. “Greg was very disappointed that you were gone.”

“I’m sure you two managed.”

“Watch it, brat, or there’s going to be hell to pay when we get home.”

“I’m not going.” Evan took a deep breath. Refusing Tristan was a dangerous thing. At least he wouldn’t get beaten too badly with Varian there, or so Evan hoped. He didn’t expect the weretiger to step in, but Tristan rarely hit him in front of strangers.

Long, steely fingers dug into Evan’s arm and dragged him out of his chair. “What?”

“I-I’m not going home with you.” Evan tried to pull away but Tristan was stronger than he was. “I--” A hard slap caught him in the face, knocking him back and sending stars across his vision.

“Oh, is that how it is?” Tristan laughed bitterly. “You’ve been gone for two weeks and suddenly you’re brave enough to say ‘no’ to me?”

“Tristan, please...”

“Too late, brat, you should have just come quietly.”

Evan scrambled back, his hands slipping on the smooth floor. There was no escaping this time, not with Tristan between him and the door. Tristan was going to beat the crap out of him, or worse, and there was nothing he could do. What was worse was that he would have to explain what happened to Dante, too. Maybe it would have been easier if he just went with Tristan and left his twin out of it.

Evan closed his eyes and braced for another blow, but nothing happened. When he opened them again, Varian was standing there like his own feral knight in shining armor. The weretiger looked angry, his hands were clenched tightly and his tail bristled as it twitched back and forth. Tristan was not going to get Evan out of there without a fight.

“Don’t touch him!” A low growl rumbled in Varian’s throat.

“Who the hell are you?”

“A friend of his, not that it’s any of your business.” Varian turned back to Evan. Those muscular arms wrapped protectively around Evan’s shoulders. “Are you okay?”

Evan nodded. He was too stunned to say anything. Varian was angry, there was no doubt in Evan’s mind about it, but the weretiger didn’t scare him like Tristan did. In fact, Varian’s presence just made Evan feel safer.

“A friend?” Tristan chuckled and raked a hand through his hair. “Did he at least wait a few days or did he jump straight from my bed into yours?”

Evan felt Varian tense like he was about to pounce. Oh, crap. He had a feeling if Varian went after Tristan it was not going to be pretty and the last thing he wanted was his new friend in trouble because of him.

Tristan turned and headed out the door like nothing had happened. He glanced back with a smug smile. “One bit of advice, though. Keep an eye on him unless you like sharing that ass with half the city.

“What?”

“It’s okay, Varian. Let him go.” Evan tightened his grip on Varian’s arm.

“But--” Varian sat back down his tail still swishing back and forth angrily.

“If you go after him someone’ll call the cops.” Evan sat himself at Varian’s feet and looked up timidly. “And I don’t want you getting in trouble because of me.”

Varian pulled Evan off the floor and looked him in the eye. The anger in his expression was replaced with worry. “That asshole didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay.” Varian shifted in his chair with a sigh. “So, what was that all about, anyway?”

“Nothing.” Evan stood, hiding a nervous look behind a curtain of hair. “We should be getting back.”

“We will, as soon as you tell me who that was and why he thought that he had the right to hurt you.”

“I-- it’s complicated.”

“Evan...”

“I can’t.” Evan bolted. He needed to get out of there before Varian’s questions go too hard, too prying.

Okay, running away wasn’t the smartest thing to do but Evan couldn’t help it. He didn’t want to explain himself or his past. He also didn’t want Varian to think he was an idiot for putting up with Tristan for so long. Then again, he would have to explain himself eventually. He couldn’t hide from Varian forever, at least not with them living in the same building.

By the time Evan stopped he was standing in front of the club. Well, at least he’d headed there instead of back to Tristan’s. Now, he just had to figure out how to apologize to Varian. Evan slumped against the wall. He didn’t want to go inside yet. He needed to think.

Dante popped his head out of the front door to the club and practically pounced on Evan. “Evan! Where the he--” Dante stopped and touched the darkening bruise on Evan’s cheek. “What happened to your face?”

“I was with Varian an--”

“What did he do to you?” Dante’s tail bristled angrily.

“Nothing.” Evan shook his head. “I-- we went to Pike’s Place and stopped off at a Starbucks, that’s all.”

“Then who hit you?”

“We ran into my ex.”

“Oh.” Dante tugged Evan inside. “I think it’s time that you explained a few things, little bro.”

They took the elevator up, not really talking. It looked like Dante was waiting until they were home before starting the interrogation. Evan took a deep breath. He knew that determined look his brother was wearing. Dante wasn’t going to let Evan slink away without an explanation.

Dante pulled Evan into their apartment and sat him on the couch. “Okay, Evan, spill it. I want to know everything.”

“There’s nothing to tell, not really.”

“Evan, I’m your twin. I can tell when something is bothering you and something’s been eating at you since you got here.” Dante gave Evan’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Tell me, please. I just want to help.”

“I don’t know if you can.”

“We won’t know until we try, right?”

“Okay.”

Evan took a deep breath and started talking. It was easier than he’d thought it would be. The past just poured out of him. Evan told Dante about his foster parents kicking him out when he was fifteen and the few years he spent on the street whoring. He kept his gaze low, somewhere between the couch and the coffee table. Evan couldn’t look at his brother’s face. It would hurt too much if there was rejection there.

“How does your boyfriend enter into all this?”

“H-he bought me. Tristan felt sorry for me and helped me out.”

“And I’ll bet he never let you forget it, either.” Dante snorted, his tail twitching angrily. “He probably treated you like shit and kept telling you that you were lucky to have him.”

“Yeah, I know it was pretty stupid of me.” Evan hung his head, hiding his face with his hair.

“Evan, that’s not what I meant.” Dante pushed his chin up and looked Evan in the eye. It was more of a worried look than an angry one at least. “I think you were desperate and he took advantage of the situation. It’s not your fault.”

“I guess.”

“And what happened today?”

“Me and Varian went shopping and ran into Tristan on the way back.” Evan hung his head again. He felt bad for running out on Varian, especially since the weretiger had protected him from his ex. “Tris tried to drag me home, but Varian stopped him.”

“Then what happened?”

“Varian wanted to know what was up between me and Tris and... I bolted.”

“Why?”

“I panicked. I didn’t know what to tell him.” Evan buried his face in his hands. “I don’t think he would like me very much if he knew about all that... or the scars.”

“Does it matter?”

“It does, to me at least. He’s been a good friend and I don’t want to lose that.”

“Evan, you’ve known him for a day.” Dante slipped an arm around Evan’s shoulder and gave him a gentle squeeze. “There’s got to be more to it than that.”

“I-I know it’s weird. I mean I just met him bu--”

“It’s not that weird. I felt the same way when I first met Kale.” Dante gave Evan a knowing look. “It doesn’t go away, you know.”

“I know. I owe him an explanation, don’t I?” Evan glanced back at his brother worriedly. “I’m just worried about his reaction.”

“You should give him a chance. Varian isn’t your ex, and from what I can tell he’s a nice guy.”

“He seems like one.” Evan leaned against his brother’s shoulder. He was still trying to figure everything out. Talking with Dante was helping a lot, though.

Someone knocked at the door. Dante stood and answered it. Evan thought it might be Kale at first, but why would Kale knock on his own door? No, it had to be someone else.

It was Varian. The weretiger stood in the hallway with the bags of groceries that Evan had left behind. He looked almost sheepish. “Is Evan here?”

“Yeah, he got back a few minutes ago.”

“Good, I’m glad he got back okay.” Varian looked relieved. “Can you tell him something for me?”

“Hold on...” Dante glanced back toward Evan. It was a definite come here look and Evan would never hear the end of it if he ran off now.

Evan stepped up behind his brother. “Hi, Varian.”

“Hi...”

Dante stepped out of the way. “Okay, I’m staying out of this. I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.”

Evan took a deep breath, trying to figure out what to say, how to apologize for running off. He didn’t know where to start.

“You left these.” Varian held the bags out to Evan.

Evan shook his head. “No, those were for you. I--”

“That would be a waste. I can’t cook, remember. You take them.” Varian pushed the groceries into Evan’s hands. “I’m sorry about today.”

“But you didn’t do anything wrong. I-I shouldn’t have run off like that.”

“You were freaked out. It was understandable, considering what happened. I should have stepped in earlier, before that guy hit you.” Varian hung his head unhappily. “I’m a lousy protector, I guess.”

“Varian...”

“You could always make the salmon for Dante and Kale. I’m sure they’d enjoy it.” Varian turned and headed back into the hall. “See you around.”

“Wait!” Evan called after him but Varian was already out of ear shot or at least pretending to be. “Varian!”

Evan didn’t know what else to do. He had screwed things up, big time and he didn’t know how to fix it. Part of him wanted to run after Varian and make him listen but the rest of him was too afraid. The last thing he wanted was to make things worse.

There was one thing he could do, though. Evan headed into the kitchen and set the grocery bags down. He dug through the bags pulling out everything he needed to make dinner. Cooking always helped him think. Besides, taking Varian a plate would be a good way to clear things up between them. Evan never met a man who would say no to dinner.

“I’m going to guess that things didn’t work out with Varian.”

“He ran off before I could tell him anything.” Evan pulled out a cutting board and started paring down the broccoli, onion and red and yellow peppers into neat, uniform pieces.

“And you’re going to make dinner instead of going after him?” Dante rested his chin on Evan’s shoulder. “I don’t get you.”

“I’m going to take Varian some food when I’m done.” Evan stacked the veggies in small piles on his cutting board. “It might make things easier.”

“True. I didn’t think of that.”

“I just hope he likes it.”

Dante slipped his arms around Evan’s slim waist and hugged him. “He’ll love your cooking. Kale and I do.”

“Thanks.” Evan unwrapped the salmon and divided it up. “Can you get me four pieces of parchment paper, big ones?”

“Sure.” Dante smiled as he tore four good size pieces of paper off the roll. “You’ve been watching the Food Network again, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, though.” Evan placed a piece of salmon on the parchment paper and piled some of the veggies on top of it. He added a little salt, pepper to all four pieces and garlic to three of them. Kale wasn’t as keen on garlic as he or his brother was. “I actually remember the recipe for this one.”

“I don’t know. I like your experiments.” Dante leaned against the counter, watching Evan fold the parchment paper around the fish to make four packets. “That blueberry cookie thing was really tasty.”

“It was supposed to be a cake.”

“Really? Well, it was still tasty.”

Evan set the packets on a cookie sheet and slid it into the oven. “Okay, we should have dinner in about half an hour.”

“Cool. Oh, can you make that yellow rice I like?” Dante glanced at Evan, clutching his tail hopefully. “I think I saw some in the pantry.”

“Sure, it’ll be a good addition to dinner.”

Everything for the rice went into a sauce pan and after about twenty minutes everything was done. Kale peeked into the kitchen just as Evan pulled the fish from the oven.

“Oh, it looks like I’m just in time.” Kale scooped Dante up in his arms. “So, have you been helping, love, or just getting in the way?”

Dante whapped Kale with his tail. “I was observing and if you don’t watch it, I’ll make dinner next time.”

“And probably poison us all.” Kale ran his fingers over Dante’s tail. “Eh, love?”

Dante pressed his body closer to Kale’s and nipped at his chin. “Hey, then we can call in sick, right?”

Evan turned back to the stove and kept his eyes firmly on the rice. It was weird to be standing there while Kale and Dante touched and teased each other. They were really sexy together, but Evan couldn’t help feeling like he was in the way. Evan fluffed the saffron rice, determined not to let his brother’s giggles or the low purr of Kale’s voice bother him.

Kale patted Evan on the shoulder, startling him. "If Dante cooks can you keep an eye on him? He's always looking for an excuse to take the night off."

"I do not." Dante snorted.

"Sure, we don't want him setting the kitchen on fire, do we?" Evan nodded in agreement.

"Hey!"

Evan set two plates piled high with fish, veggies and rice on the table. "Dinner's ready when you two are." He pointed to the plate with the slightly larger piece of salmon on it. "That one's yours Kale. No garlic right?"

"Thanks, Evan." Kale sat down and glanced at Evan in curiosity. "Aren't you eating?"

"He's got a date with Varian." Dante sat down and poked at his plate.

"It's not a date." Evan felt a warm blush seep into his cheeks. He busied himself with wrapping the last two plates with aluminum foil and hoped Dante didn't notice. "I promised to make him dinner, that's all."

"Just make sure Varian keeps his paws to himself, okay?"

"I'll be fine." Evan headed toward the door, plates in hand. "I'll see you both later."

"Sure, have fun." Kale waved at Evan. "And thanks for dinner."

"You're welcome."

Dante looked like he wanted to say something else but whatever it was he kept it to himself. It might have had something to do with that evil glare Kale gave him. Evan just hoped his brother wasn't in too much trouble.

Evan took the elevator down to Varian's place and balanced one of the plates on his arm so he could knock on the door. Varian looked surprised to see him.

"Have you eaten yet?"

Varian shrugged. "I was just heading out to get something, why?"

"I-I cooked that salmon we bought today and thought you might want some." Evan glanced up hopefully. "And I was hoping we could talk, too."

"Sure." Varian took both plates and gestured with his tail for Evan to come in.

"I'm sorry I ran out on you like that." Evan peeled the foil off the food while Varian fished a couple of forks out of a drawer. "I freaked a little, I guess."

"It's all right." Varian inhaled, taking in the scents wafting from his plate. "Oh, that smells awesome."

"I hope you like it." Evan picked at his own plate. He was too nervous to eat.

Varian scooped a forkful of salmon into his mouth and almost purred in contentment. "That's really good."

"Really?" Evan relaxed a little and nibbled on a bit of broccoli. That was one worry out of the way. Maybe the food would distract Varian from everything else.

"Yeah, and I'm a picky eater, too." Varian took another bite before fixing his gaze on Evan. "So, are you going to tell me what happened today? Who was that guy who grabbed you?"

"He's my boyfriend... well, my ex-boyfriend."

"He was an ass and you deserve better."

"I guess." Evan didn't know what else to say. He still felt like an idiot for staying with Tristan for so long, for loving him so much.

"Boyfriend or not, he had no right to treat you like that." Varian stood, his tail twitching like an angry cat's. "You should have let me at him."

"Varian..."

"I know, I know. You didn't want me to get in trouble."

"Exactly. I'm not worth getting in trouble over." Evan glanced down, studying his food.

Varian pushed Evan's chin up gently, forcing him to look into those warm, blue eyes. "Why would you say that?"

"I-I have a lot of baggage, more than most people want to deal with, I guess."

"I'm sure if Dante can deal with your 'baggage' I can, too."

"Dante's my brother. He doesn't really have a choice in the matter." Evan chewed on his bottom lip nervously. He wanted to believe that Varian's opinion wouldn't change because of his past, but Evan also knew better than to get his hopes up. "Y-you don't have to be my friend if you don't want to."

“I’ll still be your friend, Evan. A little dirty laundry in your past isn’t going to change that.”
Varian settled in his chair again. “But it’s up to you if you want to share or not.”

“I don’t even know where to start.”

Varian just patted him on the shoulder. “Try the beginning and go from there.”

“Okay.” Evan took a deep breath and hoped he wasn’t screwing everything up.

Varian stretched and leaned against the bar. It was a pretty good night. The club was busy but not rowdy and Varian was off work in twenty minutes. Now, if he could just talk Evan into going out for a bite. That would really make his night. True to his word nothing changed between him and Evan, even after the boy told him everything. If anything, Evan’s past just made Varian want to protect him even more.

The music died down as two of the dancers switched off. That’s when he heard Dante yelling at someone.

“Damn it, Evan!”

Oh, that’s who Dante was yelling at. What the hell? Yelling at Evan was like kicking a kitten and that was something that just didn’t happen while Varian was around. Evan had been through enough without his brother yelling at him about something. Varian glanced around making sure Itsuki and Snapper had the club covered before heading to the back of the club to see what was going on.

Before Varian could get too far, Dante stormed into the main part of the club and made a beeline to him. “You need to talk to him.”

“Talk to who?” Varian knew who, but he didn’t want Dante to think he was listening in or anything.

“Evan, that’s who! You need to talk some sense into my little brother before he drives me crazy.” Dante folded his arms over his chest, his tail swishing back and forth.

“I’m sure the yelling didn’t help.”

Dante’s shoulders sagged a little. “Oh, you heard that…”

“Bits and pieces, mostly.” Varian pulled Dante back toward the hall leading to Kale’s office. No reason to let the whole club hear them. “So, what happened?”

“Look, I know he’s had a shitty life and that I shouldn’t be yelling at him but he’s so damned stubborn sometimes.” Dante threw his arms up in obvious frustration. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“Okay, I’ll go talk to him but I need to know what I’m talking to him about.” Varian leaned against the wall of the narrow hallway, watching Dante intently.

“He’s letting that damned ex-boyfriend of his walk all over him, again.”

“What happened?” Varian tensed, his tail lashing back and forth angrily. He promised Evan that he wouldn’t go after the guy, but all bets were off if he ever showed up at the club. “Did that asshole show up here? If he hurt Evan, I--”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” Dante ran his hand through his hair with an unhappy sigh. “Evan left everything behind when he ran. He didn’t really have a choice, considering how he got out of that apartment and all.”

“And you think he should go back and get his clothes and whatever else that he left behind.”

“Well, that asshole sure as hell isn’t going to bring any of that here.”

“True, but you can’t really force Evan to go, either.” Varian shrugged. “I think he’s been through enough trauma without that.”

“I know.” Dante paced back and forth. Damn, that boy was a bundle of nervous energy. “But it’s not fair! Evan deserves better than that. He deserves more out of that shitty relationship than some bruises and the clothes on his back.”

“Fair or not, Evan’s scared and, frankly, I don’t blame him.” Varian grabbed Dante by the shoulders to try and keep the boy in one spot for a second. “That ex of his is a nasty piece of work.”

“That’s why I told him to take you, or one of the other bouncers with him, but Evan didn’t even want to do that. It’s like he doesn’t think he’s worth the effort.” Dante slumped against the wall. He looked more frustrated and worried than angry. “And it kills me that he thinks so little of himself.”

“And that’s why you want me to talk to him, right?”

“Evan might listen to you. He likes you a lot.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

Dante shrugged. “I just want him to be happy. Besides, if anything happens between you two, I’m supposed to stay out of it -- boss’s orders.”

“Oh.”

“Kale thinks you’re good for him and I do, too.”

“No promises, but I’ll see what I can do.” Varian patted Dante on the shoulder.

Evan sat on the roof with his arms wrapped around his knees. It was cold and damp, but he was too depressed to care. He didn’t know what to do. Evan didn’t want to fight with Dante but he didn’t want to go back to Tristan’s place, either. It wasn’t that Evan didn’t want his stuff back; he just didn’t think he could face Tristan again, at least without someone getting hurt. He just wished that Dante understood that.

Something furry nudged Evan in the back. It had to be Varian in tiger form, unless Dante’s cat got huge all of a sudden. Evan wiped his face and forced a smile. He didn’t want Varian to see him crying, especially over something as stupid as an argument. “H-hi, Varian. What are you doing up here?”

“Looking for you.”

“Oh... Did Dante send you up here?”

“Yeah, he was worried.”

“He thinks I’m being stubborn and stupid.” Evan hung his head.

Varian rubbed his furry head against Evan’s shoulder. “Stubborn maybe, but not stupid.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” Evan turned so he could scratch Varian’s ears. “Hey, should you be in tiger form? I mean, didn’t Kale tell you not to shift where people can see you?”

“He did, but I wanted to find you and scenting is easier like this.” Varian pushed his furry head into Evan’s arms. “I won’t tell him if you won’t.”

“You should probably go before someone sees you.”

“Come with me?”

“Okay.” Evan wasn’t ready to face Dante quite yet and spending time with Varian in either form always made him feel better.

Evan stood and followed his friend into the elevator. Neither of them was very good at making small talk so they rode the elevator and walked down the hall to Varian’s apartment in relative silence. The only sound between them was the low rumble purr from Varian’s chest as Evan

stroked his fur. The weretiger really liked to be petted and Evan was more than happy to accommodate him.

Evan settled himself on Varian's couch. He scooted up against one arm to give Varian more room if he needed it. "So, why did Dante send you after me?"

"He wanted me to convince you to go and get your stuff from your ex." Varian hopped on the couch and sprawled beside Evan. "He seems to think that you'll listen to me."

"Figures that he would send you." Evan hung his head unhappily. "He just doesn't get it."

"Get what?"

"That it's just some clothes, an old laptop and a box of books, and that's not worth dragging someone with me and getting into it with Tristan."

"In the end it is your choice if you want to go or not. I'm not going to force you into anything." Varian shrugged which was an odd gesture, at least on a tiger. "But, if you change your mind, I'm more than willing to go with you."

"Why?"

"Because I want to help and you deserve to get your things back."

"Thanks. It won't be easy, you know. Tristan still thinks I owe him a-and he's not going to let me just grab my stuff and leave without a fight." Evan clenched his hand to keep it from shaking. Facing Tristan again was a scary thought, but what bothered Evan more was the thought of anyone, even Tristan, getting hurt because of him.

"That's why I would go with you." Varian patted Evan's leg with his paw. "I'll have him for lunch."

"Varian!"

"What? He deserves it."

"Maybe he does, but part of me doesn't want to see him hurt, either." Evan pulled his knees against his chest and sighed unhappily. Varian probably thought he was mental for still caring, but he couldn't help it. "He got me off the streets. He saved me."

"That doesn't give him the right to treat you like shit." Varian just looked at him, those amazing eyes full of concern and something else Evan couldn't place. "He doesn't own you."

"I know, but that doesn't mean I want to see him hurt, either."

"Why do you still care after all he's put you through?"

“I know, it’s stupid, but I was lucky he found me.”

“He was the lucky one.” Varian nudged Evan’s chin up with his nose and snuggled closer. Evan leaned against that furry head. He couldn’t help it. Varian’s fur was so warm and soft. The weretiger started to purr loudly.

“I don’t know about that.”

“It’s true. I would count myself very lucky to have a sweet and beautiful boy like you.” Varian pushed a little harder against Evan’s chest.

Of course, that was six hundred pounds of tiger head-butting him and that was more than enough knock him over. Evan toppled off the couch and landed flat on his back.

“Oww.” Evan cringed and rubbed his head.

“Damn, I’m sorry Evan.” Varian shifted back into his more human form and crouched over him. He touched Evan’s cheek worriedly. “I forget how big I am sometimes.”

“I-It’s okay.” Evan blushed and tried not to stare too long at the gorgeous body over him. They were so close, Evan half expected Varian to kiss him. That was until he noticed the cautious, worried look in Varian’s eyes. “I’m tougher than I look.”

Varian smiled at him. “I can tell. You’re pretty sexy, too.”

“If you say so.”

“It’s true.”

Evan wiggled out of his shirt to show Varian the scars that criss-crossed his body and prove his point. “Look at these. I’m too fucked up to be pretty or sexy.”

“You are not fucked up.” Varian ran a finger over a pale, jagged line that crossed Evan’s shoulder. “These are kind of like my stripes, just white instead of black.”

“Your stripes are beautiful.” Evan held his arm up and pointed to a particularly nasty scar on his bicep. “These are ugly and no one wants an ugly boy.”

“That’s your ex talking and you know it.” Varian pushed Evan’s chin up. “You need to stop thinking like that and start listening to the people who love you, like your brother... and me.”

“You?” Evan blinked at Varian. Sure they were friends but he didn’t just hear what he thought he did, did he? “Varian...”

“I meant it, Evan. I like having you as a friend, but I would be even happier having you as my mate.” Varian leaned closer and kissed him. Varian’s lips barely brushed Evan’s but it was more than enough to leave Evan breathless. “Of course, that’s if you want me.”

Evan brushed his fingers over Varian’s cheek. “I-I do. I want you more than anything.”

“Even if I go all furry sometimes?”

“Furry or not, you’re gorgeous... and brave.” Evan cupped Varian’s face in his hands and pulled him closer. “You’re my knight in shining armor.”

“Mmm, I like the sound of that.” Varian nipped at Evan’s fingers teasingly. “Of course, I’m having some very unchivalrous thoughts about you.”

“Oh, like what?” Evan stroked Varian’s striped shoulder. He just hoped that Varian liked to be petted in both his forms.

“Carrying you off to my bed and getting you naked, for one thing.” Varian purred contentedly as Evan’s hands caressed his back. Oh, he must like that. Varian leaned in, nuzzling Evan’s cheek. “If you’re up to it.”

That was definitely different. Tristan had never given him a choice about anything, least of all sex. Evan just hoped that Varian wouldn’t be disappointed. “I can be, for you.”

“Are you -- mmph!”

Evan kissed Varian before he could finish, flicking his tongue teasingly against those sharp, white teeth. It was easier than trying to tell Varian how he felt and why he wanted this. Luckily, Varian got the hint. Those big warm hands slid around Evan’s waist and lifted him up.

It amazed Evan that someone as big as Varian could be so gentle. The weretiger carried him down the hall and settled him on the bed. Hot, nibbling kisses trailed down Evan’s neck and chest. Evan gasped as Varian flicked that rough, wet tongue against his nipple.

“Hrr, you smell good.” Varian nuzzled lower, rubbing his face against the flat plain of Evan’s belly. He slid his hands down and tugged at Evan’s jeans. “And I bet you taste even better.”

“W-what?” Evan lifted his hips as Varian pulled his jeans and underwear down. He felt those sweet lips slide lower and graze the base of his cock. “Varian, wait, you don’t have to--”

Varian flicked his tongue against the tip of Evan’s already hard cock. “But I want to, love. I want to taste you as well as touch you.”

“Bu-- oh!” Evan gasped and arched off the bed. Warm, wet heat surrounded his cock as Varian sucked on him. It was a new sensation for Evan and it felt amazing.

“Oh, you are tasty.” Varian nuzzled Evan’s balls and licked his straining length from base to crown.

“V-varian stop please. If you keep doing that I’m going to come.” Evan tugged pleadingly on Varian’s hair.

“That’s the plan.” Varian swallowed Evan again, this time moving his head slowly and stroking Evan’s cock with his lips and tongue.

That last sensation pushed Evan over the edge. He bucked against Varian’s mouth, filling it with sticky warmth. Once his brain started to work again, Evan glanced up at Varian nervously. “I-I’m sorry, I--”

“You have nothing to be sorry about, love.” Varian licked his lips and grinned. “You’re delicious.”

“Can I see what you taste like?” Evan pushed himself up on his elbows and gave Varian an eager look. “Supposedly, I give pretty good blow jobs.”

“Maybe later, right now I’m going to work on making you come again.” Varian dropped a kiss on Evan’s hip. “Now, roll over for me.”

Evan moved fluidly, sprawling on his hands and knees. He glanced over his shoulder hopefully. “Like this?”

“Perfect.” Varian ran his hands over Evan’s back and the soft skin of his cheeks. “Mmm, you make me hungry, love.”

“Wha-- oh!” That was all Evan could manage. It was hard to think straight with Varian’s rough, wet tongue circling the tight pucker between his butt cheeks. Oh, that was new, too. Then again, Tristan had never really been big on foreplay.

Varian lapped harder, stabbing at Evan’s hole with the tip of his tongue. Evan closed his eyes and pushed back against Varian’s face. It was a shameless move, but Evan couldn’t help it. Varian made him feel so good that he wanted more.

“Did you like that?” Varian knelt and licked his way up Evan’s scared back.

Evan nodded, hiding a dark blush behind his hair. “Yeah, I-I like the way your tongue feels.”

“That’s only the beginning, love.” Two of Varian’s fingers rubbed against Evan’s ass, moving in small teasing circles. “Can you hand me that bottle next to the bed?”

“This one?” Evan held up a small plastic bottle that smelled like strawberries.

“That’s it.” Varian took the bottle and dripped some of the liquid on to his fingers. “Thanks.”

“What’s tha-- Aah!” Evan yelped as Varian squirted more of whatever that was between his cheeks.

“To slick you up, so I don’t hurt you.”

“Oh... it smells good.”

“It’s edible, too.” Varian added with a wink. “Of course, it isn’t as tasty as you are.”

Evan had a response to that, really he did, but that slick finger pushing into him was oh, so distracting. A second digit joined the first, stretching him a little more. Varian moved his fingers, fucking Evan with them slowly.

“Good?”

“Mmmn...”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Those agile fingers curled inside him and rubbed against something amazing. Whatever Varian did sent a jolt of intense pleasure straight to Evan’s brain. Damn, that felt good. Evan pushed his ass back, hoping that Varian would do it again. Oh, it was his lucky day. Varian pushed against that sweet spot again, making Evan moan and tighten around those thick fingers.

“Are you ready for more, love?” Varian leaned against Evan’s back and nipped at his shoulder.

Evan nodded and glanced nervously at Varian’s long thick cock. That was going to hurt, no matter what they did. He took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Varian wasn’t Tristan. Varian had never hurt him and never forced him to do anything he didn’t want to.

Varian rubbed Evan’s back with his free hand. “Relax, love. I don’t want to hurt you...” The fingers still buried in Evan’s ass wiggled a little. “But you’re so tight.”

Oh, those fingers did wonders for Evan’s nerves. How could he not relax with Varian’s fingers moving in and out of him? “I-It’s okay... I want to feel you.”

“You mean this?” Varian shifted onto his knees and rubbed his cock against Evan’s ass.

“Please...”

Varian nodded and dripped some of the lube onto his cock. Evan watched eagerly as Varian slicked up that gorgeous prick of his. He was rock hard and the tip was already dripping with pre-come. Evan didn’t want to make Varian wait any longer. The weretiger had been beyond patient with him.

Evan gasped as the flared head of Varian's cock pushed into him. It didn't hurt. It just felt like he was being stretched and filled. Varian pushed deeper, inching his way into Evan's tight body.

Warm, slick hands wrapped around Evan's narrow waist as Varian started to move. Evan moaned and clenched his hands in the sheets puddled around him. He rocked his hips back, meeting each of Varian's thrusts.

Then the whole room shifted. Evan found himself on his back with Varian between his legs and that thick cock pushing back into him. Varian's hands ghosted over Evan's chest stopping only to tweak his nipples and fondle his cock.

"No fair, I want to touch you, too." Evan held his arms out. He wanted to do more than just fuck. He wanted to feel those hard muscles and that warm, velvety skin.

"Whatever you want, love." Varian sat back and pulled Evan into his lap.

The change in positions sent Varian's prick sliding right over Evan's sweet spot and sent sparks across his vision. Oh, that was good. Evan wrapped his arms around Varian's neck, bracing himself as he rode the hard length inside him.

There were so many sensations: Varian's hands rubbing his back and squeezing his ass, the soft brush of fur as Varian's tail curled around Evan's thigh, and the dual friction of Varian's cock thrusting in and out of his ass while Evan's own slid against Varian's warm belly. It was too much. Evan tensed and tossed his head back as he came. He leaned against Varian's broad, striped shoulder trying to catch his breath.

"Oh, you came hard." Varian purred and nuzzled Evan's cheek. "I felt it."

"Couldn't help it, you feel so good." Evan fingered one of the dark stripes streaking Varian's cheek. "What about you?"

"I came right after you did." Varian grinned and nipped at Evan's finger. "It was hard not to, with you squeezing me like that."

"Oh..." Evan blushed and looked away.

"You are amazing, by the way."

"So were you... I mean, I didn't know sex could be like that."

"All it takes is patience and a little skill, that's all." Varian gave Evan a mischievous wink. "Come on, I want to get cleaned up before you fall asleep on me."

"I'm not sleepy." Evan stifled a yawn. "Okay, maybe a little."

“Well, we could play in the shower, too, if you’re up to it.” Varian stood, still holding Evan against him.

Evan nibbled on Varian’s ear and whispered into it. “I will be if you give me a few minutes.”

Varian meant to get out of bed sooner, really he did. It was hard, though, with such a lovely boy sleeping next to him. Evan shifted, snuggling against Varian’s chest. He smoothed Evan’s dark, sleep-rumpled hair and sighed. “You’re not making this any easier, you know.”

It wasn’t that Varian minded spending the morning in bed and watching his new lover sleep, but he wanted to surprise the boy with breakfast, too. Evan, his lover, his mate, Varian did like the sound of that. He was also pretty sure Evan would be hungry when he woke up. With that in mind, Varian slipped carefully out of bed and headed into the kitchen.

First things first, Varian grabbed the apron hanging from the pantry door and slipped it on. As sexy as it sounded, cooking in the nude didn’t seem like a good idea, especially if there was hot oil involved. He opened the fridge and pulled out a carton of eggs and a pack of bacon. Varian was pretty sure he could manage that. Evan did like bacon, Varian knew that much. He just hoped the boy liked eggs, too.

The bacon was easy at least. It went into the frying pan until it was crispy but not too burned. Once the bacon was done it went on to a paper towel lined plate to drain. Varian turned his attention to the eggs. Those he was still leery of. Evan had never showed him how to make eggs, so Varian was on his own.

Varian cracked a few eggs into a bowl and fished out a few stray bits of shell. Okay, maybe he should have woken Evan up. The last thing Varian wanted was to poison his new lover with his cooking.

“Morning...” Evan peeked into the kitchen with a sleepy yawn. He was wearing an oversized shirt, probably one of Varian’s. It had to be, considering how big it was on him. Damn, he was cute like that.

“Good morning, love.” Varian smiled at him. Part of him was curious to see if Evan was wearing anything under that shirt of his, but Varian pushed that thought aside. He wanted Evan happy and well fed before they had sex again. “Um, how do you like your eggs?”

“Scrambled is fine. I’m not picky.”

“Okay... wait, how do I do that?”

“Grab a spatula and I’ll show you.” Evan took a fork and stirred the eggs for a bit. He added a little salt and pepper and dumped the whole mess into the frying pan. “You should have woken me up if you wanted breakfast.”

“I was trying to surprise you.” Varian shrugged and held up his spatula. “What do I do with this?”

Evan lay his hand over Varian’s and guided him through the motions. “Just push the cooked stuff toward the center and let the raw move around the pan.”

“Like that?” Varian shook the pan a little.

“Perfect.” Evan slipped his arms around Varian’s waist and snuggled against his back. “Thank you.”

“You might want to taste it before you thank me.”

“Not just for breakfast, but for last night, too.”

Varian turned to kiss Evan on the forehead. He would have hugged the boy but he didn’t want to touch Evan with his egg hands. “No need to thank me, Evan. I love you, remember.”

“I know. It’s all a little new to me, I guess.” Evan cupped Varian’s face in his hands and smiled brightly at him. “Love you.”

“You don’t know how happy I am to hear that.” Varian leaned into Evan’s touch, purring contentedly.

“Varian, the eggs.”

Luckily, Varian was quick and pulled the pan before the eggs burned. He turned off the stove and grinned at Evan. “Let’s eat.”

Evan divided the eggs and bacon between two plates while Varian washed his hands and toasted a couple slices of bread. He had almost forgotten that. With toast and butter in hand, Varian sat down beside his pretty lover. He was eager to see if his cooking was any good.

“Well, how is it?”

“It’s good,” Evan said around a mouthful of eggs. “Thank you, again.”

“I’m just glad it came out all right.” Varian nibbled on a piece of bacon cautiously. He had faith in the eggs since Evan had helped with those. The bacon on the other hand was a little darker than it was supposed to be, but it tasted okay.

“Hey, Varian...”

“Hmm?”

“I was thinking about it.” Evan pushed his eggs around his plate nervously. “Would you still be willing to go with me to get my things from Tristan’s place?”

“Of course I would.” Varian reached out and gave Evan’s hand a squeeze. “And I’ll be on my best behavior, too.”

“Thanks.”

“But, if he lays a hand on you, all bets are off.” That came off a little angrier than Varian wanted, but he couldn’t help it. “No one’s going to bully you while I’m around.”

“Varian...”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Evan scooted closer and kissed him on the cheek. “My big, growly man.”

“That’s me.” Varian nuzzled Evan’s neck. “What changed your mind?”

“I don’t know. I’m tired of running away from things, I guess.” Evan shrugged. “I need to settle things with Tristan. If I don’t, I’ll be looking over my shoulder every time I leave the club.”

“All right, love, as long as you’re sure.”

“I am, but the sooner we go the better. I might lose my nerve, otherwise.”

“We can go after breakfast, if you want.” Varian’s tail brushed against Evan’s bare thigh. “Well, we might want to get dressed first.”

“Yeah, which means I have to run back to Dante and Kale’s for some clo-- oh crap!” Evan looked like he was about to have a panic attack.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Varian rubbed his lover’s shoulder, trying to calm him down.

“What am I going to tell Dante?” Evan looked up at Varian, worry written all over that sweet face of his. “H-he didn’t seem to keen on you... us... you know.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much.” Varian nuzzled Evan’s forehead. “Dante did send me to talk to you last night.”

“True...”

“Of course, I was supposed to keep my paws to myself.”

“Varian! I-- tell Dante it was my fault. I-I don’t want you to be in trouble because of me.”

Varian grinned and ruffled Evan's hair. "I'm kidding, Evan. I talked to Dante before I came to find you. He's fine with all this as long as you're happy."

Evan whapped Varian on the shoulder. "Don't scare me like that."

"Sorry." Varian tugged Evan to his feet. "Come on, let's get you dressed and get your things back."

Getting dressed was the easy part. Varian was in a playful mood which kept Evan's mind off Tristan, at least until they were ready to go. They got into Varian's truck and drove the three blocks to Tristan's condo.

"Thanks for driving me." Evan could help but be scared. He clenched his hands in his lap to keep them from shaking. Varian would be there with him and that helped a lot, but he could still feel the nervous butterflies beating themselves against the walls of his stomach. "And for lending me the duffle bag, too."

"You're welcome." Varian reached over and gave Evan's hand a gentle squeeze. "I figured that you would need something to put your stuff in."

"Yeah, I doubt Tristan would lend me anything." Evan gave Varian a nervous little smile. "Hey, if we're lucky though, he won't even be home."

Tristan's car was in its usual spot when Evan and Varian pulled up. Damn, so much for getting in and out quietly. Evan took a deep breath as they got out of Varian's truck and headed to the elevator. Maybe they should forget the whole thing and go home.

"It's alright, Evan. I'm here." Varian wrapped his arms around Evan's shoulders and gave him a gentle squeeze. "I'll protect you."

Evan tapped the button for the third floor. "I-I know."

They stepped off the elevator and down the hall. Evan fished out his keys once they got to Tristan's door. His hands were shaking so badly that he dropped them twice before he finally got the door open.

Tristan was lounging in the living room, watching TV. He didn't look happy to see Evan at all and down right pissed to see Varian. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I came to get my stuff." Evan's voice trembled a little, but he stood his ground. Varian gave his hand an encouraging squeeze. That helped. It was a whole lot easier to face Tristan with Varian there with him.

“I don’t think so.” Tristan’s stood with arms crossed over his chest. “You gave it all up when you ran out on me.”

“It’s still my stuff, Tristan.”

“And you belong to me, remember? Don’t forget who saved your sorry, little ass from living on the streets.”

“Be nice or I’ll have you for lunch.” Varian narrowed his eyes and gave Tristan a toothy snarl. Evan felt his lover’s body tense beside him.

“So protective,” Tristan said with a chuckle. “You must’ve gotten a taste of that sweet ass of his. I hope you used protection considering how many other people have fucked him. Who knows what he has.”

“Shut up!” Varian growled his hands clenching angrily at his sides.

“Tell him, Evan, tell your protector here about where I found you.” Tristan gave Evan a long hard look. “And about the pimp I paid because I felt sorry for you.”

Evan took a deep breath. It didn’t matter what Tristan said, not anymore. Varian knew everything and the weretiger loved him anyway. “I already told him.” Evan stepped up and for the first time looked his ex-lover in the eye. “I know you saved me and I’m thankful, but you don’t own me and I won’t be your whipping boy anymore.”

“What?”

Evan stumbled back as Tristan lunged at him. He brought his hands up to protect his face from Tristan’s blows but nothing happened. Evan peeked around his hands to see Varian standing between him and Tristan.

Varian growled low in his throat, his clawed hands tearing into the fabric of Tristan’s shirt. It was probably taking all of Varian’s control to stay human or at least human as he was. Even then, Varian was looking a lot more feral than usual and his teeth a whole lot sharper. He slammed Tristan against the wall. “I warned you.”

“What do you care anyway?” Tristan grunted as Varian slammed him into the wall again. “He’s just a worthless litt--”

“Don’t you dare call him that!” Varian pulled a clenched fist back and punched Tristan square in the jaw. “Evan’s not worthless and he’s not a whore.” Varian pulled back to hit Tristan again. “The only mistake he ever made was trying to love an asshole like you.”

“Varian stop it, please.” Evan grabbed onto Varian’s arm. He wasn’t sure what the weretiger’s reaction would be, but he couldn’t take anymore.

“Why?” Varian glanced back at him with a snarl. “I’m sure he’s done worse to you.”

“But you’re not like him.” Evan felt the tears trail down his cheeks. He didn’t know what else to say. There were too many emotions twisting together and tightening in his chest. Part of Evan felt that Tristan deserved it, but there was also the fear that Varian would turn that anger on him. Evan didn’t want to think that but he couldn’t help it. “And I don’t want you to be.”

Varian dropped Tristan and glanced at Evan. The anger in his features was replaced with worry and something else Evan couldn’t place. “Why don’t you go get your stuff?”

“Are you sure? I--”

“I’ll behave myself, I promise.” Varian nodded and gave Evan a gentle push.

Evan nodded and ducked into the spare room. He grabbed his clothes and laptop and stuffed them into his duffle bag along with a few of his favorite books. There wasn’t much, but it would have been easier if his hands would stop shaking. It was more from amazement than fear, though. Evan never thought anyone would care enough to protect him like that. Either way it was a lot to take in.

Varian didn’t say a word when Evan stepped back into the living room. The weretiger just took the duffle bag from Evan and slung it over his shoulder. He gave Tristan one last glare as Evan set his key to the condo on the table near the door.

They walked to Varian’s truck in silence. Evan wasn’t sure what to make of it. Was Varian mad at him? Was it because he didn’t want his ex hurt?

“Varian, I--”

Before Evan could say another word, Varian turned and hugged him tightly. “I’m so sorry, love.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“For making a mess of things. I know you didn’t want anyone to get hurt and that I scared you.” Varian gave him a worried look. “I was just so angry, I-- you know I’d never hurt you, right?”

“I know. You were just protecting me.” Evan kissed his lover on the forehead. “That’s different than Tristan knocking me around because he’s pissed off.”

“I’d like to think so.”

“Besides, you could have hurt him a lot worse and you didn’t, and you stayed in human form, too.”

“I tried, at least.”

“I know. Thank you.” Evan kissed Varian on the nose and settled back in his seat. “We should get going. I’m sure Tristan is calling the cops as we speak.”

“True, though, I don’t know if they’d believe him.”

Evan and Varian had been on the roof for almost an hour and were finally starting to relax. They had both been exhausted and in dire need of some quiet time when they got home. Evan leaned against a furry, striped shoulder. Varian had shifted forms as soon as they were alone and currently lay dozing beside him. It was easier for him to relax in tiger form, or so Evan guessed.

“Poor thing.” Evan scratched Varian’s furry ears. “Who knew being scary took so much energy?”

“It was more the staying bipedal than the being scary, love.” Varian rolled on to his back, baring the snowy fur of his chest and stomach. That’s right, he liked having his belly scratched, too. “It would have been a lot easier if I could have gone like this.”

“Yeah, if we wanted you to be shot or carted off to the zoo, or worse.” Evan ran his fingers through soft, white fur. “I don’t know what I’d do if that happened.”

“I thought I’d find you two up here.”

Evan looked up and waved. “Hi, Dante.”

“So, how did it go today?” Dante sat himself down next to Evan.

“Not too bad. It helped having my big, furry protector here.”

Varian sat up with a big toothy grin on his face. “His ex isn’t so tough when he has to deal with someone bigger than him.”

Dante rubbed his temples. “Please tell me you didn’t go like that.”

“I was dressed and bipedal, thank you very much.” Varian snorted and hit Dante with his tail.

Evan nodded in agreement. “He was on his best behavior. Well, he didn’t maul anyone, at least.”

“I’m not going to ask. So, what happened last night? You weren’t home when I left this morning.”

“I-I stayed at his place.” Evan hid a blush behind his hair.

“I had a feeling that’s what happened.”

“Well, we were talking for a while and one thing led to another a--”

“It’s okay, Evan.” Dante patted Evan on the shoulder. “I can’t tell you who you can and can’t spend the night with.”

“I still want you to be okay with it, you’re my brother an--”

“Are you happy?”

Evan’s glanced fondly at his lover. “I am. Varian makes sure of that.”

“Then you won’t get any complaints from me.” Dante turned and gave Varian a stern look. “You take care of him or so help me, I’ll make a rug out of you.”

“Dante!”

“Don’t’ worry. Your brother is in good hands... or should I say paws?”

“Good.” Dante stood and stretched, his tail twitching a little. “So, do you two want to grab dinner with me and Kale? Kale’s treat, of course.”

“Sure.” Evan was hungry and he was pretty sure that Varian was, too, since they did skip lunch. “We need to stop by his apartment first, though.”

Varian nodded. “Yeah, I need to grab some clothes. Unless, you want to take a tiger to dinner.”

“Um, no.” Dante headed to the door. “We’ll meet you two downstairs in a few.”

“Okay, see you in a bit.” Evan waved his brother off.

Varian touched Evan’s hand with his paw. “I meant it you know.”

“What?”

“That I’d take care of you.” Varian purred and nuzzled Evan’s shoulder. “You mean everything to me.”

“We’ll take care of each other.” Evan knelt up and kissed Varian’s furry forehead. “And no one’s going to turn you into a rug, at least not while I’m around.”

Ride the Tiger

Copyright © 2009 by Misa Izanaki

All rights reserved. No part of this eBook may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-60370-674-2, 1-60370-674-7

Torquere Press, Inc.: Single Shot electronic edition / April 2009

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680