



Human Nature

Cat Kane

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Blurb

Left for dead by hunters, werewolf Dominic finds refuge at the isolated home of reclusive demon Gage and his human servant Randall. Healing from the attack, physically and mentally, Dominic has no choice but to rely on his grudging host and his enigmatic assistant.

Hidden away from humans for decades, the last thing Gage wants is a werewolf bringing trouble to his doorstep. Keeping Randall at arm's length is problematic enough, but allowing Dominic to stay seems like the safest option—at least until Gage finds himself drawn to Dominic as much as he is to Randall.

Randall has his own reasons for driving Dominic into Gage's arms. It's only a matter of time until Gage discovers the secrets Randall's been keeping—secrets that will surely destroy their fragile, undefined relationship. Still, the pull of the powerful desire that binds them all leaves him wishing there was a way to keep them both.

But as the outside world encroaches on Gage's sanctuary, all those secrets are about to collide, unleashing a dangerous tide of betrayal, deception and love, and all three men will have to re-evaluate their priorities, their relationships, and who—or *what*—they are.

Chapter One

Beyond the crackling fire, the distant gunshots echoed through the silent evening like an unexpected burst of fireworks on the fifth of July.

Gage cursed silently as he narrowly avoided spilling his cognac, forcing his unsteady fingers into ruthless submission as he tightened his hold on the glass and took a sip.

Perhaps the gunshots startled him, but a moment before they rattled his windows like encroaching thunder, he'd sensed it. That innate disquiet of someone straying onto his land, uninvited.

With several hundred acres of land at his disposal, the issue just didn't come up. Gage couldn't see his neighbors even if there were any close enough to be classed as such, and he could barely sense in which direction the nearest town lay. He'd never seen the need for fences or formal boundaries; no one wandered close enough to pose a threat. He'd made sure of it. There wasn't anything else out here but him.

But this ... this was different.

He could still have ignored it easily enough. He could have remained sequestered in his library with his books and his brandy, losing himself in the flickering shadows of the fire and convince himself he'd made a mistake.

A decorous knock rapped at the library door. Gage closed his eyes, letting the simple presence of the man in the doorway ease the anxiety a fraction. Against the darkness of the hallway and the oak paneled door, he knew Randall was as pale and ethereal as a wraith. "There seems to be a disturbance, sir."

So much for selective hearing. If the shots were close enough for humans to notice, it was even more of a concern. Oh, he wasn't concerned about his staff—they wouldn't be his staff if they weren't capable, and above all, discreet enough not to ask awkward questions.

Randall was a prime example of that, he reminded himself, conveniently skipping over all the other things Randall might be. His assistant still had the dubious honor of being the only one Gage trusted. Also, the one least likely to be missing vital organs or limbs after daring to disturb his peace. Intruders, however, were a different matter.

He swirled the brandy, watching the firelight catch and glint on the dark liquid, reflecting red and gold on the facets of the cut glass tumbler. "Hunters."

"Most likely," Randall agreed. "Would you like me to arrange an interception party?"

"They're not after us." But they were after something. There shouldn't have been anything worth hunting on his land. If anything of the sort had wandered onto his property, he wanted to know about it. "No interception. Just see what they want."

"Of course, sir." With a nod, Randall dissolved back into the darkness of the hallway.

Damn them. Gage glared at his cognac, only the reminder of its price and fine vintage preventing him from throwing the entire glass into the fire. It didn't matter how far he tried to isolate himself from the mundane refuse of humanity, it always followed him. Even here, with alarms on the windows, and the invisible barrier of the land, the mountain ridges and the forest, it seeped in like a sickness.

It had seemed a wise idea, a dozen years ago, to spend some of his shrewdly invested fortune in the ranch. Being half a day from the nearest town worthy of being described as such, he should have been safe enough from the ravages of the outside world. He'd watched that world change beyond all recognition, and he'd always known the day would come when he would be forced to withdraw from it entirely.

He should, he mused, swirling the brandy, have annihilated most of them when he'd had the opportunity. But he'd squandered the chance, and now he had to make the best of a bad situation.

He'd known worse, he supposed, at least in terms of home comforts. He'd known countless years dodging through dark, dusty alleys and streets, stealing meals and lives. But at least he'd been safe then. At least it had been easy. Now, in his sprawling eight-bedroom house, with its gadgets and gizmos and high-tech anti-intruder systems, he was a prisoner hiding in the lush rooms, pretending nothing existed beyond the tree line, and startling every time something disrupted his routine. The dark, warm, oak-paneled library was better than alleyways. The plush wing chair and Persian rugs were an improvement on cold ground, but sometimes he'd trade it all in for a day of back then.

Trade everything except Randall. There were some pleasures he wouldn't deny himself, and his assistant's presence was one of the few.

He read and drank, lulling himself into a haze that grew more content and confident as more time passed and no word came. Granted there were several acres to cover, but surely there'd be more to report by now if there was a problem, and—

"Sir." Randall didn't even bother with the pleasantries of knocking this time. "They're returning shortly. And they've found something they think you should see."

Gage didn't look up. "Kill it."

"Please, sir. You should attend to this matter personally."

He sent Randall a sidelong look. The man had been in his employ for three decades, since he'd been a belligerent little street rat. Good tutors had taken care of the manners, but it was an altogether different quality that allowed for the understanding and tolerance of a master who remained unchanged—in appearance and attitude—during those decades. If Gage had ever trusted a human, it would be this one.

Thoughts of Randall's mortality depressed him. He'd be hard-pressed to find another as loyal, but there was little he could do about it. Once, he'd had friends who could have ensured his assistant's services for an eternity, but he supposed it was a blessing he hadn't heard from said friends in a long time. He shouldn't consider inflicting this life, this existence, on anyone.

"I recall a time when staff never demanded I attend to a matter personally." He smiled wryly, taking his time setting down the book and marking off the page in a tome he knew off by heart.

"I know." Perhaps it was good manners that were responsible for that well-hidden amusement too. "You have told me about that glorious time on several occasions, sir."

Gage stood, stretching slowly like a cat rousing grudgingly from a nap. "It bears repeating."

"I'm sure, sir."

"So what am I—" The loud interruption from the entrance hall answered the question he hadn't even been permitted to finish.

Randall was in charge of all the ranch security. It was easier for Gage to allow him to

deal with the humans, vet them and take the necessary steps to deal with any trouble that inevitably arose. He'd hoped this wouldn't have been one of those times—the men seemed excited by whatever it was they'd found.

He got as far as the door before the scent assaulted him. Randall caught his elbow, and the doorframe kept him from falling. Not the scent of humans. Unfortunately, he was too accustomed to them and their scent. They bothered him little these days.

Blood. A richness and abundance of it, the likes of which he hadn't felt in years. There went the last vestige of hope that this wouldn't be trouble... "You could have warned me." He glared at Randall, shaking off the helping hand, and straightening.

"I didn't know." Randall passed on the glare to the recon team. "I'm sorry, sir, I take full—"

"Never mind. I want it out of here. Now." The men had disappeared into a drawing room closer to the front hall, as though they couldn't take their cargo any farther. He stalked down the hall toward them.

The room fell silent. Randall had trained them well. Even so, Gage was ready to whirl around and snap the neck of whichever one of them still had the nerve to make that wet, wheezing sound. At least until he realized none of them were responsible for the noise.

The first thing that came to him through the disorientating vertigo of the blood-rush, was that someone had seen fit to drop this bloodied carcass on his carpet without thought to stains or putting blankets down first.

Blood. This close, the scent overwhelmed him. It almost seemed to be moving, slippery and gleaming in the light of another blazing fire, black-wet like oil. No. Not moving. The wretched matted creature in front of the fireplace was still alive. The shallow rise and fall of its sides was all that created the illusion of movement. He cast a glance at one of the men, the gesture as clear as if he'd instructed the man to speak.

"It was in the western woods, sir."

"Only this one?"

The man blinked at the unexpected question. "Alive, yes."

"Others?"

"One carcass. But there were tracks, blood. There were several others."

"I see."

"We decided to bring this one to you, because, well..." The man shook his head, waved a vague hand toward the creature. "Who'd believe us? There haven't been wolves around here for years, let alone enough of a population to warrant a hunt."

There hadn't ever been wolves like this one, to Gage's knowledge, but he chose not to share that information. "Did you see anyone else?"

"No, sir. This one was all that was left."

"Very well." He nodded to the men before beckoning Randall over with a look.

"Good work," he said blandly. "You may leave now."

"But sir—"

"Do you honestly believe that thing poses a danger?" He looked back at the crumpled animal shivering on the rug. Each breath seemed like a colossal effort. "It can barely breathe, let alone attack. You may go."

The men looked skeptical, and, Gage noted with more than a little annoyance, looked to Randall for confirmation. "It's fine. We'll see to it that whatever is necessary will be

done.” Randall smiled, the expression reassuring, the pain around the edges barely noticeable. “Thank you for a good job.”

They waited until the men filed out of the room, before Gage glanced at Randall, brow raised. “We’ll do whatever is necessary, will we?”

Randall grimaced. “I’ll leave the animal to you. I’ll take care of them.” One shoulder jerked in the direction of the men’s retreat. “But if I may be so bold, sir, it’s a goddamned shame. They were good men.”

“It can’t be helped. If you want to blame someone, find whoever lured this damn thing here. I give you permission to take any steps you deem appropriate.”

Randall nodded. “You can be sure of it, sir. Will you be all right to deal with this alone?”

“Yes.”

“Right...” Randall checked the clip on his gun, sighing softly as he re-holstered it.

Gage glanced at him, tasting odd and unfamiliar words. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.” Randall smiled wryly. “But I appreciate it in any case, sir. I’ll arrange replacements in the morning.”

“See that you do. I don’t care to be understaffed if this proves not to be an isolated incident.”

“Understood.” Randall nodded again, curtly, backing out of the drawing room and pulling the door shut silently behind him.

Contrary to his assistant’s belief, Gage was sorry. While he’d never grown attached to the fodder that filled out the ranks, Randall saw things differently. Randall saw them as people, as comrades. It was a strange human trait. In the past, Gage had offered to take care of the disposal himself, should any of the staff see or hear more than they ought. Randall had refused, claiming he preferred to deal with it alone, and Gage supposed it was the least he could do, to allow Randall that small indulgence.

He crossed the room, uncapping the top of a crystal decanter on the dark mahogany side table, and taking a sniff. Whiskey. Not his favored taste, but given the circumstances he couldn’t be choosy.

Taking a sip, he watched the creature by the fire. The wolf’s coat looked to be a dirty gray or brown, although it was difficult to tell with all the blood. It was losing its potency as it dried, and Gage frowned; not all this blood belonged to the animal. He could only see two obvious wounds, and they were already beginning to heal to the point where they no longer bled.

“You’re quite welcome to change now, should you see fit,” he said mildly. “You have my assurance it won’t disturb me in the slightest should you do so. I’ve seen worse.”

Even the shivering stopped then. Gage wondered if the creature had breathed its last, until the tiniest increment of movement betrayed the life still left in it.

“Very well.” He shrugged. “I’m sure you’re aware that your pack-mates are dead. My men will be rather curious as to why you survived the ordeal when your pack did not.” Well, they wouldn’t be curious for long. Randall was nothing if not efficient. “I have no interest in you. But I would like you to make yourself at home until you decide to inform me why hunters would be after your kind on my land.”

He set the glass down, walking over to stoke up the fire, keeping it warm and blazing. The wolf didn’t even flinch at his proximity. “I should kill you now.” He held up

the finely tooled and polished titanium poker, turning it over in his grasp. “However, answers are far more valuable to me than your pitiful hide.”

At first, he thought the gleaming amber was the reflection of the fire on wet fur. But the animal’s eyes were cracked open, staring at him, a dull pained gold.

“So you are alive.” Gage replaced the poker in its stand, getting to his feet. “Rest. You may as well. You aren’t going anywhere.” He considered locking the door as he left, but decided against it. Even if he tried, the creature wasn’t going to get very far.

Not until he got the answers he sought.

Chapter Two

Memories were like fragments of a fever dream, irrational, illogical, in garish technicolor that was more illusion than true vision, colors he shouldn't even have been able to name. Blood was bright berry red. Shots were ear shatteringly loud, echoing and reverberating through trees like ping-pong balls.

Chaos, then flames and silence. Voices, but he had no idea what they were saying, couldn't even tell whether they were speaking to him. He hadn't heard humans talking for so long. He could no more decipher their voices than he could use his own.

Blue eyes, lit by flickering flame. Bluer than anything he'd ever seen. Bluer than the sky, than sea, than violets. Cartoonish blue, like the cartoon berry blood.

The silence was a blessed relief, though. The fire and some other underlying scent he couldn't make out nagged at his senses like a low humming, but he could focus on the silence and tune them out.

And with the silence, without distraction, came the pain. Not from the bullets that had torn through fur and flesh as he'd tried to keep his family alive. Those gashes weren't even registering. Not the ripped muscles or the front foreleg that had crumpled unnaturally on that last desperate fling of his body in front of the last bullet.

It hadn't been enough. Nothing he'd done had been enough.

Helpless. Useless.

They should never have been caught in the crossfire.

All his fault.

The heat of the fire cut across the cold rage, a sparked blade against the numb ice, and even through the disorientation he knew he had to get out, had to go and find—

Find what? The remains of his family, and not a trace of the ones that had been responsible for their slaughter?

Get out, get out, get out...

He couldn't be around humans, not at the best of times, and certainly not in this condition. Fighting against the grogginess, he forced himself to focus on the light of the fire, smoldering quietly now. How long had he been here?

Too long.

He was stiff as he stood shakily. He blamed it on the aching and the pain, until the dried blood flaked and tickled his fur, until the movement tore open the half-healed wounds.

Their blood.

The awareness sent him stumbling back to his haunches, shivering and shaking, trying in vain to get rid of it, to close his eyes and pretend it wasn't there. Even if this was all he had left of them.

A few moments passed, but his mind half-blanked them, drip-feeding him splintered images instead. A furious, futile panic. A desperate clawing at these unfamiliar, claustrophobic surroundings that left furniture upturned, and left him feeble and trembling, dizzy at the pain that soaked through his foreleg as surely as if he'd stuck it in the fire.

Broken. The leg, his life, his pack, his family...

When the door swished open, he was too exhausted to try and fight. Running was hopeless, even if he'd been capable of taking a step. If this was the end, so be it. It was preferable to the alternative.

Blue eyes. The man those eyes belonged to was speaking to him again, irked and disinterested, like he was a pet dog. He tried to growl, but could barely summon the breath for it.

Do it. End this.

The man threw something at him, and he couldn't have flinched even if he'd had the strength to do so, even if he didn't feel strangely detached from his body. In the time it took to investigate the projectile, the man left, door clicking shut behind him.

A blanket. Something thick and rich that smelled clean like the forest at dusk. He nudged it warily with his nose, as though it would rear up and bite him. You could never be too careful. He recalled that skunk that had caught him unawares once, when he'd first wandered into their territory. He'd never lived it down, they always laughed when—

The sobbed howl that he couldn't articulate in voice echoed around his head instead. What use was this man, or his blanket, or his fire? It changed nothing.

He wasted the last ounce of strength tearing at the blanket, all teeth and claws and fury. The scraps left scattered across the rug when he was done almost made him cry.

Broken. Everything was broken...

He lay back down in front of the dying fire, letting it chill him until he couldn't feel it anymore.

* * * *

After that incident in the small hours of the morning, the wolf had been silent. Calm or dead, Gage didn't know nor care, as long as it stopped knocking over his furniture. He should have known better than to leave a wild animal in such a room. There were rooms in the cellar far more suitable.

He'd expected to find the blanket in shreds when he walked into the drawing room. Gage sighed, picking up a tattered strip of heavy silken damask. He supposed it was better the creature vented its anger on the blanket than on the rest of the room. Even so, he should have given it something less expensive. He should also, on reflection, have brought a second blanket.

There was neither hide nor hair of the wolf, but he hadn't quite anticipated the sight of what replaced it to be so fascinating.

"At least you might answer me this time, hmm?" He mused, quirking a brow at the decidedly human form, with its naked back toward him, the man still curled in the same position the wolf had favored. It was easier to assess the damage now. What remained of a gunshot wound cut cleanly through the hollow of one shoulder, and a healing tear ran a jagged ugly line across one thigh. The form stayed still and silent. Gage shook his head, moving closer. "Or perhaps not."

Stepping gingerly over the prone body, he studied the awkwardly broken forearm, tucked against the man's chest as though that could protect it. It looked useless, still torn and bloodied, not healing properly in the slightest. A sharp sliver of bone protruded through the mess like a twig.

Wounded, but not dead. Wonderful. He should have put this one out of his misery sooner too. He knelt, reaching out grimly for the limp arm, straightening it out for a better

look.

The sound the man made at the touch as he backed up, snatching back the injured arm, was neither human nor animal, but an unearthly combination of both.

Gage sighed. He forgot sometimes how fragile these wretched things were, with such a low threshold for pain. This one couldn't even find any sort of comfortable position to assume to ease the pain, cradling the arm to his chest again, growling and hissing at the other wounds, and still with the temerity and wherewithal to glare at him with those odd golden eyes.

Gage stood, pacing away a few steps. "If you're coherent enough to sulk, you can start answering my questions."

A low growl was his only answer. He toyed with the possibility that this one had truly gone feral. He'd heard several tales, the occasional rogue were finding it easier to live among their pure blooded brethren, and losing whatever grasp they'd ever had on humanity.

He discarded that idea. The animosity was very human. "Why were you on my property?"

Silence. Gage felt his temper flaring. The wretch wasn't silent out of inability to speak or understand, he was deliberately irritating him, and Gage had little patience for irritation. He strode over to the man, reaching out and grasping a handful of matted hair before the creature could pull away. "Don't test me, boy. Do you understand? If you crave death, I'll give it to you, but I'll still get my answers first." His voice remained soft, dismissive, but the glint in those golden eyes confirmed the creature knew his place.

"Fuck you." Barely a growl, low and hoarse.

Gage let go. "So we've ascertained you can speak. Let's check your comprehension." He spoke slowly and precisely, although he was under no illusion the sarcasm hit its target. "Why were you on my land?"

"I..." It wasn't hesitation this time. The creature was shivering, huddling in on himself. Pain, fever, fear. Gage didn't think it mattered which. "I wasn't..."

"I beg to differ. There's far too much blood and fur on my property that rather refutes your denial."

"It ... it wasn't—" It wasn't much of an answer, half gasped through gritted, chattering teeth, in a purposeful attempt at speaking. "We weren't—"

"You're trying my patience, boy."

"Wasn't on purpose." The words were spat angrily this time, golden eyes blazing. "Got ... chased. Onto your land."

Gage sighed, the sound a little bored. "I see. The others weren't like you, were they?"

A haunted pain that had little to do with physical wounds drifted across those eyes, before they glanced away. "No."

Then it was doubtful it was more than some opportunist hunters after rare game. They weren't aware that this one was different. It made the situation a little less dire.

"They ... they're all..."

It was a question that couldn't be formed, and Gage didn't know for certain which pain prevented it. Randall would have demanded tact from him in such circumstances. Randall was so much better at this sort of thing... "You were the only survivor."

Golden eyes squeezed shut, as the man nodded. It was answer enough.

“You should get cleaned up. My assistant will also see to your injuries before your arm heals that way. Breaking it again to re-set it would be rather inconvenient.”

The man flinched then, the first response to any vague threat he’d made. The eyes were guarded as they looked up at him. “Why?”

“Because you look terrible. Because you’ve made quite enough of a mess of my hospitality already.” The man looked away, catching sight of the torn blanket and the upset furniture, and closed his eyes again. “Randall will see to you.” Gage tossed aside the scrap of fabric. “After that, do what you wish. I would much prefer never to lay eyes on you again, and should hunters return to finish their whitewash of your pack, it would be better for us all if you were long gone.”

A pause, then a shaky nod.

“Good.” Gage turned to leave. “I’m glad we understand each other.”

Chapter Three

He should have run as soon as the man left but the pain was short-circuiting his brain. He was starting to forget more than just his name, his surroundings. He could barely think, barely breathe. The healing was beginning to tighten around the broken arm, flesh knitting and sewing back together, but doing it all wrong.

When the door opened a second time, the man that stood there was a little older, a little blander. Nothing blue about him, he was just shades of gray like the rest of his world. With pale hair and a concerned smile, he held out a fluffy bathrobe like the ones from fancy hotels. “Can you stand?”

He blinked. “I don’t know” was a ridiculous answer to such a question, but it was true. He’d spent so long on four paws, finding his balance on two legs wasn’t easy at the best of times. Trying to brace with his good arm, he stumbled first to his knees, then to his feet, standing there and shivering like a wobbly colt, and just as skittish.

“Okay...” The man—Randall then, he assumed—smiled encouragingly, carefully draping the robe across his shoulders. The soft material brushed against his wounds like sandpaper. “I know, I know...” Randall murmured soothingly. “Try and bear with it for a moment. I’m sorry.”

He gritted his teeth, trying his best to meet the sincerity in the voice with genuine effort.

“There, good.” Randall smiled. “Let’s get you cleaned up, and get something for your pain before you start healing, shall we?”

He nodded, unable to manage anything else.

He was slowly, patiently ushered out of the room into a colder darker hallway, and immediately he whined softly, wishing he could return to the warmth of the fireplace. His chaperone glanced at him, speaking a little too casually and carefully to be anything but an attempt at distracting him from the discomfort. “I’m Randall.”

He couldn’t form the words “I know”, so just nodded a second time.

Randall chuckled. “Ah, Gage warned you in advance I see.”

Gage. The man with the blue eyes.

“Did you have a name?”

The question was asked so tentatively, so politely, it stirred up the surreal urge to laugh out loud. He was hardly a child, even if that man saw fit to call him a boy. “Dominic.” Still, it was strange, lips and mouth forming the syllables of a name he hadn’t used in years. They hadn’t cared about his name. Without it, the pack had known him more than anyone, had made him family.

He stumbled a little as the thought of them danced through his head again, skittering by on soft paws, in a swish of a tail, in the echo of a howl.

“Easy, Dominic.” His name on this stranger’s lips snapped across his consciousness like a lash. Randall paused, allowing him to catch his breath, his balance, his bearings. “Easy...”

“Not...” He sucked in a breath, oxygen clearing the pain for a split second. “Not a pet...”

“No, I daresay you’re not.” Randall smiled slightly. One hand came to rest on the

small of his back, just about the only part of him that didn't hurt, herding him toward a door at the end of the hall.

Every instinct still told him to run, even if he was more likely to plant face-first into the carpet than get very far. He didn't want to be fixed or cleaned up, he wanted to be far away from this house and these people. What happened to him if he ran didn't matter.

"A hot bath is waiting, but I think we should see to that arm first, don't you agree?" Randall pushed open the door, the darkness of the hallway contrasting with the white marble gleam of the room beyond. The bathroom was the size of a meadow, and smelled like one too. Not the artificial chemical smells, but fresh cut flowers and expensive colognes. It didn't cloy at his senses, it teased at them, making his eyes flutter closed.

Randall caught him when he lost his balance. Caught his good arm, which was just as well. "Or perhaps you should sit down somewhere before we do anything more, hmm?"

"Yeah..."

Seeming inordinately pleased at a coherent response, Randall nodded. "Good."

"Somewhere" turned out to be a slatted wooden bench that sat beneath a window wider than he was tall. It wasn't frosted like most bathroom windows tended to be, but crystal clear, threaded through with lead latticework. One glance outside explained why there was no need for privacy—there was nothing out there. Only land and trees and emptiness.

Dominic yearned to be out there too. He might even have whined the need, Randall was smiling strangely at him when he tore his gaze away from the window.

"I'll try to take up as little of your time as possible." Randall held out a glass of water and two nondescript white pills. "Probably best to take these first. They're quite safe for you." A gentle smile met Dominic's doubt. "Don't worry. I confess I've never met one of your kind before, but my master has ensured my preparedness for many eventualities."

The need to leash the pain warred with natural mistrust, but as the only hand that he could move reached out for the proffered medication, Dominic decided his body was making this choice for him.

And maybe no medication worked that fast, not on him, but he felt better the moment he swallowed the white pills and drained the glass. At least now he was doing something about the pain. At least he was doing something, instead of accepting passivity.

Randall took the empty glass from him, setting it down on a marble countertop, before beginning to roll up the sleeves of a crisp shirt that, if it were possible, was whiter than the bathroom. It almost hurt to keep his eyes open.

"I can't promise it won't hurt." Randall sat down next to him on the bench, not even slightly exasperated when Dominic scooted away instinctively. "But I promise I'll be quick."

He held out his hands patiently, an illusion of Dominic's choice, his control. What kind of choice was this? The arm wouldn't heal properly on its own, and these strangers were all he could turn to for help, whether he wanted to accept it or not. It was as inescapable as the bullets. And at least he'd known the hunters' motives.

He held out his arm, hissing a pained gasp even at the tug of gravity on the break. The robe fell off one shoulder to half pool around his hips. As if for the first time, Dominic noticed he was naked. Randall didn't even blink.

My assistant will see to your injuries, that man had said. Was Randall some kind of doctor? It would explain a lot; the unflappable manner, the bland politeness, the dutiful concern. Which begged the question as to why Gage would keep a doctor on the premises way out here? He wasn't sick, he hadn't smelled sick. Odd, but none of his business.

Maybe it was the painkillers, maybe it was just the touch, but Randall's hands were as gentle as his voice. "How on earth did you do this?" Fingertips grazed the skin healing tight and swollen around the bone, healing that tore itself all over again every time Dominic moved his arm, every time he breathed. "Not the gunshots, was it?"

"No." Dominic shook his head. "I ... landed badly." On a rock, he thought, or something else slippery—he didn't want to know with what—that had just slid out from under him with a snap.

There was another snap, as Randall realigned the bone with no preamble, no warning. At least he'd been honest about making it quick. It didn't make it hurt any less. A burning, searing pain ran up his arm, cold and hot all at once, across his shoulders, tensing every bruised muscle as it went, radiating out to every extremity until even his toes hurt. The white bathroom became black and fuzzy around the edges, his vision distorting.

When the roaring in his ears eased, Randall was strapping up the arm in a makeshift splint. Dominic tried to focus on something else, tried to focus, period. There wasn't much distraction in the bland room, or in the neatly pressed man—except the stark black lines of a tattoo peeking out from the rolled up cuffs of white sleeve. It seemed entirely at odds with Randall, but then again, it was another thing that was none of Dominic's business.

Besides, the drugs and the adrenaline drop of relief were kicking in, and he didn't really care much anymore.

"Try to keep it dry for a short while." Randall leaned back, admiring his handiwork. Dominic did too—the pain was admittedly more tolerable now, and he didn't really think it mattered why.

"Thank you."

Randall looked at him, almost surprised. "You're welcome, Dominic. Merely doing my job."

Dominic wondered again about Gage, if this was "merely" Randall's job.

"And if I may be permitted to finish said job, I suggest you take your bath. I also suggest you take your time doing so. There are some salts and oils in the water that should aid your healing."

Taking a breath, Dominic's eyelids fluttered closed at the scent. "Okay..."

"I've also taken the liberty of preparing a spare room. I suggest that after your bath, you—"

"He wants me gone." Dominic shook his head, immediately regretting it when the room spun. He forgot how medication affected him. Randall's voice seemed to fade in and out from far away, as if he were underwater. Lying down and sleeping for a year sounded far too tempting.

Randall waved a hand dismissively. "He also does not need the trouble of picking you out of the front yard either, which is as far as you'll get in your current state. To leave, you'll need to regain your strength."

Dominic paused, running one hand through the luxuriant hot water. "Are you sure

it's okay?"

"Of course." Randall smiled. "Try not to concern yourself. Now take your bath. I'll bring you some clothes shortly."

Gage's clothes? Randall was taller than him, and far broader in the shoulders. Anything of his would make Dominic look like a kid playing dress-up. Besides, he didn't think Randall owned anything that wasn't starched white shirts or pressed black slacks. Even as he thought it, the tattoo drifted back into his mind's eye. The guy couldn't be older than thirty-five, if that, but if Dominic closed his eyes and just listened to Randall speak, he could pretend he was listening to his grandpa.

It was like listening to a bygone age. With both of them, come to think of it, even if he hadn't been paying much attention to anything Gage said.

He sunk into the bath, biting back a sigh of pleasure. It'd been too long without some human comforts, even if he'd never have chosen to get them this way. He felt guilty for even enjoying it.

Try not to concern yourself.

Easier said than done.

Chapter Four

It was much too long to attend to what amounted to a simple wound. Gage made an effort to appear nonchalant when Randall finally found him in his study, perusing books and not watching the minutes tick by on the clock. “Did he leave?”

“Actually, sir, he’s resting in the second guest room.”

Randall spoke so matter-of-factly, Gage had to pause and question whether he’d only imagined those calmly insolent words, or whether he truly had heard them. “Excuse me?”

“If I may, sir—”

“No, you damned well may not! I specifically said I wanted him gone!”

“You also gave me express permission to do as I saw fit to deal with our current situation. And you demanded I refill the unexpected vacancies in our ranks as expediently as possible.”

Gage seethed. How dare Randall use his own words against him this way? How dare he take such a tone, take such liberties? “No.”

“But he would be most suitable, sir. He’s far less fragile than your human staff, and I’m sure once he stops being so wary and reticent—”

“He’s wary and reticent because he’s fully aware that he is the precise reason he’s in this mess! He’s the reason he’s in trouble, he’s responsible for the death of his entire pack—a situation that, I may add, I doubt you want to incite to happen to us—because he knows they were after him.”

“Precisely the reason to keep him here, sir. We can maintain better surveillance, better observation on his movements. And better to have his kind as an ally than an unknown variable.”

“An ally?” Gage scoffed. “Did you take some of those pills yourself, Randall?”

“No, sir. You know such medication doesn’t suit me.” The ghost of a smile touched Randall’s lips. “Indulge me, for a few days at least? If I’m wrong, I’ll willingly fall on my sword over this.”

Gage sighed. He didn’t particularly want Randall developing some guilt over this brat. “You’re quite set on this, aren’t you?” His eyes narrowed into a glare. “The boy interests you far too much for my liking.”

Randall looked away, but not before Gage saw the unspoken retort in his eyes. *What right do you have to dictate who interests me, Gage?* Randall wouldn’t say so, of course, but all it took was a casual glance, there and gone, and Gage’s jaw tensed at the insolent accusation in Randall’s silence. It wasn’t as though Randall knew the first thing about Gage’s desires. Unlike Randall, he was far better at burying those foolish thoughts.

They’d never come to any good. For all he’d lost over the centuries, all he’d been forced to leave behind, Gage knew better than that. He’d sate Randall’s curiosity—and that was all it was—show him physical pleasure the likes of which he’d never known, fuck him till neither of them could stand and Randall was screaming his name, but it ended there.

That was already too much.

“I’ll admit a certain intrigue in him,” Randall said softly. “Purely professional, of course.”

“Of course,” Gage muttered. He watched Randall for a moment, then nodded. “One week. And his mistakes become yours, you are entirely responsible for him, do you understand? Should he prove troublesome, I also expect you to deal with him as you would any other wayward employee.”

“Without question, sir.”

“I certainly hope so, Randall.”

Wisely enough, Randall took his leave at that. Gage sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose absently as though warding off a headache. Perhaps he was. The boy could be nothing else.

He indulged Randall far too much, but he couldn't chastise himself too much for that. He could, however, chastise himself for the flare of annoyance at Randall's interest in the boy. Boy ... they were both no more than boys compared to Gage. Both children. Randall could barely say his own name when he first came into Gage's care, and from the encounters with the wolf, Gage supposed the same could be said for him. Randall had blossomed into a trustworthy ally, who was to say the boy could not do the same?

But thirty years ago, it wasn't just Randall who was no more than a babe in arms. Gage's hope and faith were newborn too. Newborn and utterly foolish. The boy wasn't going to disturb his hard won peace. He'd allow Randall his week of social experimentation, allow him to sate whatever ridiculous curiosity he had in the wretched creature, and then end this debacle once and for all.

The second guest bedroom, Randall had said. Gage decided it wasn't even a conscious decision to stalk his hallways to get there, following the wolf's steps as though he could trace and erase them from his home. He was checking on his guest, that was all. Trying to deduce how immense an error of judgment he'd made this time.

He didn't knock—it was still his house, however much Randall saw fit to decide who could stay in it—just opened the door and strode in.

His entrance was rather wasted on the boy. Despite himself, Gage had to admit he looked more comfortable asleep in a real bed than curled up on the floor in front of the fire. The lines of pain around his closed eyes had eased, and here the light and shadow of the flames didn't dance and play across skin and wounds.

Randall had done a good job in cleaning him up. Gage could hardly even smell the coppery tang of blood anymore.

He walked closer, unconcerned by his open scrutiny of his unwanted guest. Even when the boy—or more accurately, the wolf in him—registered his presence, recognized the threat he posed and struggled against sleep and medication, he didn't back off.

Give me one excuse, boy. Any excuse to put you out of all our miseries this very instant...

Gage prowled over to the window, fussing with the knife-point pleats of the heavy curtains, listening idly to the groggy sounds of the boy fighting to consciousness.

“He said...” When the words became coherent instead of garbled grunts, they were hardly what Gage expected to hear. “He said it was okay...”

“Yes, well, unfortunately for you, it isn't his decision to make.”

Behind him, sheets rustled, the bed frame creaked. Gage raised a brow, glancing over his shoulder at the boy fighting with the bed in an attempt to get out of it. And damned if the brat wasn't wearing his clothes. Randall was going to pay for this.

“Don't worry about it. I'm going...”

“Sit down, you fool,” Gage snapped. “You’re in no fit state. Don’t imagine I care what happens to you, but I don’t particularly wish to explain away a dead werewolf in my home either.” Surprisingly enough, the boy sat. Obedient little pup. Perhaps there was hope for him yet. “Your name.” A demand, not a question.

“Dominic.”

“Sunday’s child, hmm?” Gage turned back to stare out of the window. “Have you decided to be more forthcoming about how you came to be on my property?”

“I told you—”

“What I wanted to hear. You made excuses. Don’t misunderstand me, Dominic.” The name was half spat, half purred. It had been better when the wretch was just that—a thing, a creature. Now that he had a name, now that those wary golden eyes were set in a youthfully handsome face, it did things to Gage’s long-buried instincts. “Quite frankly I couldn’t care less about you, your late pack, your circumstances. But you’ve brought trouble to my doorstep, and if that is likely to repeat itself, I will know about it.”

“It won’t. I promise.”

“Oh, really?” Gage arched a brow. “And you can make such grand gestures, because?”

There was a steel to the boy’s voice that made Gage turn around to look at him. “Because if I ever smell those fuckers who murdered my family anywhere within fifty miles of me ever again, I’ll kill them.”

Brave sentiment. But it solved nothing. “And how do you propose you’ll do that, when they rendered you next to useless this time?”

“It won’t matter.”

“Oh, so you have no value in your own life now, is that it? You go feral for a few weeks and you suddenly define your life’s worth by them? Stupid child.”

He’d seen that pained, haunted look in those golden eyes before. Truthfully, that kind of loyalty would have been admirable if Gage and the life he’d re-created for himself wasn’t suddenly smack in the middle of this boy’s vendetta.

Irritating as it was, he conceded then that Randall was right. The boy would never leave, not completely. If he was released into the wild, he would stay in the vicinity in the hope his hunters would return for him to exact his revenge. And when they did, and when his mangy carcass was too bullet-ridden even for his healing to remedy, they wouldn’t stop there. They would find Gage’s home, infiltrate his peace, the sanctity of his world. The only choice was to keep Dominic here, bide his time with menial tasks until the bloodlust waned, until the haunted pain didn’t cross his eyes every time he thought of his slaughtered pack. It seemed achievable enough.

He let out an exasperated sigh, noticing the boy still wasn’t getting back into bed. “Do you want me to have to inform Randall you’ve wasted his efforts and re-injured yourself?”

Dominic looked at him, then slowly shook his head. Evidently offending Randall’s feelings was more important than paying attention to Gage.

“Then stop hanging out of the side of my bed like a cheap whore. I certainly don’t expect that sort of payment for my hospitality.” Although that would have been far simpler—to have seduced the boy into staying instead. Dominic was attractive enough, and Gage skilled enough—naturally and preternaturally—to make sure he enjoyed it. He gritted his teeth, reminding himself that Randall had that angle quite adequately covered

already.

They'd be quite the striking picture together, his thoughts taunted, calm restraint meeting feral wildness. He'd seen enough of Dominic's skin—or what was visible at the time past the blood and grime—to imagine the lovely contrast between their bodies, Dominic golden and Randall pale. Was that what Randall sought in a mate? This rough-edged, unpredictable creature who seemed as though he'd trample over anything that stood in his way?

The thought of Randall's interest in Dominic leading to that outcome renewed Gage's desire to tear the wolf limb from limb before anyone else could. He'd have laughed at himself if it weren't all so mortifying. He could reclaim Randall's devotion easily, if he knew he wouldn't have to relinquish it sooner or later.

"So what do you want?" Dominic shifted back into bed, tugging up the blanket as if it provided some kind of protection.

"Oh, please..." Gage had to bark a laugh at the over-reaction, before leaning a little closer, turning on a smile that underlined his words. "If I wanted you, boy, I'd have you, whether you liked it or not. Clutching your sheets like a virgin wouldn't help." He pulled back, tone brusque. "As for what I want, your co-operation, voluntary or otherwise, in ensuring no more harm comes to my property and privacy from the attention you and yours have drawn to it."

Dominic wasn't looking at him anymore, and Gage couldn't quite quell the amusement. Still, it was dangerous to think of the boy as anything other than a problem.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"By staying in your kennel like a good puppy."

Dominic growled. Oh, far too entertaining. Worryingly so.

"You know what ... fuck this. I don't see why I have to take this shit. I can just walk out right now." He shoved back the covers again, still, Gage noticed, using his uninjured arm. "I don't need your damn hospitality. I don't need your co-operation. I don't need anything from you. I'm leaving, so you won't have to worry about—"

Gage moved too fast for even a were to catch it until it was too late. One hand pressed roughly against the shoulder that suffered the gunshot, pinning Dominic back against the bed with a sharp exhale of breath. "I'm not a patient man, Dominic. The more you behave like a child, the more you'll be treated like one. Randall seems to think we should keep an eye on you. I disagree, but I do trust his opinion." He leaned closer, his voice soft and quiet, barely above a whisper. "Don't make me lose faith in my most trusted employee, Dominic. I will be most unhappy should that transpire. Do you understand?"

Golden eyes stared up at him, angry and submissive all at once. Gage doubted this one had held a particularly low rank in the pecking order of his pack, but the wolf in him instinctively recognized a superior, even if the man in him fought it vehemently. He may have been an alpha out there, but here he answered to Gage, like everyone else.

The nod was barely perceptible, and Gage didn't underestimate the willpower it had taken to glean such a small response.

"You are welcome to leave," he went on, still speaking softly. "However, if you do, you will be treated as a threat to my security and you will be killed. Should you decide to live in order to plot out your amazingly well thought out vengeance plan, you'd do well to calm down and cooperate. I have no interest in harming you unless it proves necessary."

You'll be treated just like any other staff member."

Dominic glared at him, silent for a long moment. "Staff? How much do I get paid?"

Gage stared, then burst out laughing, levering himself away from Dominic with another knowing shove on the injured shoulder. "You get paid by not being torn limb from limb and annihilated before you even reach the front gate."

"By what?" Dominic looked dubious.

Gage stopped laughing, but still smiled as he strode to the door. "By me."

"What are you?"

He paused at the door, looking back at the undeniably pretty, ruffled, nightmarishly troublesome boy in his bed. "Behave yourself, and you'll never need to find out."

Chapter Five

Randall knew where Gage would go after he took his leave. If he thought it would do any good, he'd have followed and tried to mediate.

He had a feeling Dominic would be fine. He'd already inched his way under Gage's skin enough that his master reacted with more life than Randall had seen in a long time. He couldn't remember the last time Gage had raised his voice at him, the last time he'd been so on edge, the last time he'd been so passionate about anything that the tell-tale blush of heat flushed his cheeks.

Not even with him.

No, that wasn't true. If nothing else, Gage's body was passionate whenever he came to Randall, whenever the demands of their relationship shifted from the even keel of dutiful servitude into ... something else. Randall knew what it was for him, but for Gage...

For Gage it was probably like the cognac he barely drank, and the books he barely read; sex was just something to pass the time, another facet of human needs he deemed he should have.

For Gage it was sex. Emotionless and furtive, as though he was doing something unpalatable, something wrong. Oh, Randall couldn't complain, not really; centuries of experience meant Gage certainly knew what he was doing. Gage knew *exactly* what he was doing, knew exactly what Randall wanted from him, and with every touch, every thrust, every second of spine-melting pleasure that left Randall's body sated and his heart reeling, denied him.

So maybe there had been that flush of passion on Gage's body, but as rarely as he allowed Randall to watch him—and never to savor him—he couldn't remember. He remembered heat, friction, darkness, and wishing he could wrap Gage up in his arms, to tell him everything in his soul.

But Gage didn't want it. Gage wanted a servant, one that barely blipped on the radar unless it was by specific request. Getting Gage's attention to oversee the dinner menu was hard enough; gaining his love, his worship... Randall laughed softly to himself at the futility of that thought.

That would never happen.

With Gage safely ensconced upstairs, Randall slipped out of the house. The cool mountain air brushed through his hair like a gentle lover's touch, and he wondered briefly how much more intensely someone like Dominic might scent the pine-sweet air.

Being human. The bane of his whole damned existence.

Crunching the neatly weeded gravel paths, he made his way to the staff quarters, a single story building almost as large as the house itself tucked away behind a walled garden. Gage's collection of plants from around the world would rival any botanical garden, but Gage just kept them for the hell of it, because he liked the color or the scent. Sometimes Randall suspected they reminded him of a distant time or place, but Gage never spoke of it.

At this time of day the staff quarters were quiet. Never more than a dozen residents at any given time, most of them security, the rest of the staff consisted only of a cook, a

gardener and an odd-jobs man. Unglamorous as their jobs might have been, Randall knew they were the safest of them all. He'd never had to dispose of a cook before, despite Gage's occasional protests and complaints about the food. And if Gage knew the truth, well ... none of them would be safe.

It would be down to him to ensure the new security staff settled. In these times and in this area, it wasn't hard to find staff, especially once they learned how much Gage was willing to pay for a short-term contract. Shorter than most of them would expect.

Randall shook his head, letting himself into the house with the master key, and proceeding to the now-vacant rooms of the departed staff.

It was what Gage expected of him, he reminded himself as he packed up sparse belongings in black garbage bags, haphazardly gathering clothes and books and mementoes of home. In one of the empty rooms he found a small scruffy stuffed bear, a messily scrawled note tied around its paw saying, "Miss you, Daddy."

To do what he did, it was more than his life was worth, and Randall wasn't deluding himself into believing it was worth very much.

He was human, and Gage wasn't. Things Gage never spoke of from a time Randall didn't even remember led him to these orders, and as his loyal servant Randall would only nod and agree. Gage never came here, never saw the leftovers, never felt so torn between love and duty that his head spun with it.

When he'd gathered as many bags as he could manage, and the rooms left as presentable as possible for the newcomers, he carried the detritus out to a nondescript black car parked in a garage behind the building. He tried not to look at the bags lining the back-seat as he started the car, driving away from the house and toward a narrow dirt track that led down to the nearest road.

Gage would expect him to see the disposal through.

I'm sorry...

Or maybe he wasn't. Maybe this was the only way. If the consequences for his actions were all he'd ever get, then it was better than nothing. God knew he'd tried everything else to please Gage, to get his attention.

At a turn-off onto a dirt track, a beat-up old van waited underneath a rusted stop sign. Randall stopped the car, putting on dark glasses before he stepped outside. The door slammed like a gunshot, the vibration of the noise making the stop sign rattle.

"Thanks for coming all this way out." He nodded at the van driver, a man in his forties who might look the part of elk hunter if he only put on an orange vest. A steel-gray moustache sprouted from a weather-beaten face as the man adjusted a worn baseball cap.

"No problem, sir."

"This is all of it, I believe." Randall began pulling the bags from the backseat. "Anything that's missing, just let me know."

"Ah, there weren't much of it anyway," the man said. "Ain't like we travel heavy."

"Quite." Randall watched the man load up the bags into the back of the van, unable to stand still from the urge to get back before Gage decided he'd been gone too long.

"Well, if that's all, sir." The man closed the back of the van, scratching his stubble. "I'll be headin' off."

"Yes." Randall nodded. "Please accept my apologies again for the ... unorthodox termination of those contracts."

“Ah, can’t be helped.” The man shrugged, getting into his van and rolling the window down as he began to drive away in the direction of town. “Just gotta roll with it.”

Randall laughed softly, getting into his car and driving the other way. That was certainly one way of putting it.

He left the window open himself as he drove back up the hillside toward the ranch, letting the chill of the shaded air clear his head. Odd how his conscience played tricks on him even now. His loyalty was to Gage. Gage’s word was everything to him and always would be, even if Gage’s fickle desires changed.

When they changed.

The ranch was still quiet and calm when he returned. It was always a combination of coming home and stepping into a different world. Gage had created a sanctuary here, and it was Randall’s duty to protect it.

He glanced at the forest as he made his way back toward the main house, and a vivid image of Dominic’s injuries crossed his mind. So much blood. He’d never seen an animal so completely smothered in it.

The mountain chill tightened around him a little more. He tore his gaze away from the trees before he began seeing shadows darting in amongst the trunks and branches. No. He was protecting Gage’s security, his peace of mind, more than Gage would ever know.

He let himself into the house, greeted by the familiar scent of roaring fires, and Delia creating some masterpiece in the kitchen. No one around to witness his guilty return. Good.

And perhaps Gage was done with Dominic by now.

Dominic... No protection had been offered there. Randall vowed that no such thing would happen on Gage’s land again, even if he had to walk the perimeter every damned night himself. No one would hurt Dominic like that again. No one would anger Gage like that again.

His interest was purely professional, he’d said, but he doubted either of them believed him. He hadn’t denied the fascination Dominic aroused—even to Gage, when the admission could have cost dearly. But Dominic, with the fiery passion he didn’t try to conceal, with his heart on his sleeve and his every feeling flashing in those unearthly gold eyes, might just be the answer to all of it.

And if he could achieve that before Gage became aware that anything was wrong, then it would all be worth it.

Chapter Six

Despite Dominic's best efforts to fight it, sleep claimed him again, the accelerated healing sapping his energy at an equally accelerated rate. When he had zero energy to begin with, it didn't leave him with much choice.

Sleep brought dreams, blood and fire, paint-bright blue and radiating white. At least the drugs had kept him in such a stupor he couldn't dream, could no more grasp at the fleeting images and sensations than he could have grasped at anything with the broken arm.

He held it up, silhouetted against the twilight-shadowed ceiling, flexing his fingers experimentally. The pain still shot up his shoulder, still made his breath hitch, but the wound itself was healing, and the bone, perfectly realigned, was knitting back together. The pain only flared from his movements that disrupted that process. A few more days and he wouldn't even have the scars as memories. He'd break it over and over to keep that from happening. If he started forgetting...

The night sky outside the window was a deep dark purple fading to lavender between the tree line, the spattering of stars betraying the facts his body already knew—it was a good handful of days from a full moon. It might have made all the difference. He would have been faster, stronger, less pathetic. And he would have healed quicker; the reasons to stay in this place would have been lessened.

He wasn't even sure why he chose to stay. Stay in this damned kennel like the obedient dog that man thought he was. Growling, he kicked off the blankets, still guarding his arm close to his chest as he padded over to the floor-length window. It was a luxurious kennel, no doubt about that, but it was still nothing more than a collar and a leash.

But much as he hated to admit it, they were right. If he left now, if he tried surviving on his own, he'd be a beacon for every predator in this forest and beyond. Even if he had a feeling he was already under the roof of one.

He'd never been great at sniffing out the differences between species. If it looked like a human, Dominic was more inclined to believe it so, and give it a wide berth. Humans were dangerous, unpredictable, they hunted for nothing but sport. But Gage ... Dominic had no idea. A bastard, but that was as far as the deduction went.

He could still smell the man on the sheets, on him, from the clothes, and from that premeditated invasion of his space. He'd spent so long in wolf form, living in sharpened focus black and white, his eyes were having a hard time adjusting to perception in color again. But those bright blue eyes hadn't been an aberrance. He'd never seen anything like that, on humans or otherwise.

He certainly hadn't expected to see them quite that up close and personal, either. He shivered at the thought. Blue eyes, black hair that caught light the way ravens' wings did, reflecting blue and violet as though lit from within, skin that looked fragile as porcelain. He'd never seen anything so simultaneously beautiful and inhumanly remote. That alone should have been firing off alarm bells from the start, if Dominic had been aware enough to take heed of them.

Was staying here any safer than trying to make his way out there? Or was he better

off cultivating his allies here—allies that were undoubtedly powerful? He'd need them if the hunters came back to finish the job.

He'd need them if he ever tracked the fuckers down.

A soft knock on the door across the room made him jump, spinning around from the window, fighting the urge to growl.

"We'll be having dinner shortly." Randall offered him a smile. "I believe you haven't eaten for a while, and it would aid your healing if you ate."

With normal vision, Randall wasn't quite as monochromatic as Dominic first thought. Hair he'd thought was pale gray was actually a light sandy gold, and the equally pale eyes were the color of warm steel. Funny, he looked younger in color, and the tattoo didn't seem quite so out of place. "I'm not hungry."

"Humor me."

"He doesn't—"

Randall sighed. "If you're going to qualify every offer by saying Gage doesn't want you to, I must warn you our discussions will become rather repetitive. He certainly doesn't want you dropping dead from malnourishment, not when there's plenty of food downstairs."

"He eats?"

It was a silly question, but that didn't seem to be the reason Randall took a moment to answer. He seemed instead to be deliberating how much he could say. "Gage ... tries to live as ordinary a life as possible, given the circumstances."

And werewolves gate-crashing his home weren't exactly normal circumstances, Dominic supposed.

"I know he can seem rather abrasive," Randall went on, walking over to the bed, beginning to rearrange the sheets as if by compulsion. Dominic found himself wondering if he made Gage's bed too. "But he's a very private man, and very much a creature of habit." He glanced up, smiled ruefully. "You disrupted his routine, that's all. Give him time."

"Maybe." Dominic paused. "He said I should stay and cooperate."

Randall looked up. "He spoke to you?"

"Yeah. This morning, I guess." Assuming it was still the same day. Dominic couldn't tell for sure, and he could hardly go by the way Randall was dressed since their last meeting, the ubiquitous white shirt and black pants firmly in place. Would Gage expect him to dress that way too, now he was "staff"?

Randall paid rapt attention to tucking down one corner of the bedspread. "I see. And he was, ah..."

Dominic laughed a little. "I'm still breathing. I figured that was extreme restraint and extreme civility on his part."

"Quite. Did he mention I'd suggested to him that you would be safer here?"

"Yeah. Thanks ... I think."

"Well, at least for a few days until you regain your strength, at which point you can consider it again." Randall finished fussing with the sheets, straightening and smiling. "And if you agree to eat, I'm sure you can attain that all the quicker. Besides, I've made your bed, you can't go back now."

Dominic smiled wryly. Couldn't go back now at all. But he'd never bowed down in front of assholes like Gage before, he wasn't about to start now. It pained him to accept

food, to accept that he was being provided for by someone who deemed himself superior, but what choice did he have? He'd call out for pizza if he knew where he was. "Lead the way."

Randall smiled, nodded, holding the door open for him. "After you."

He'd expected some kind of extravagant feast, laid out on a table a mile long, dotted with silver candlesticks, the works. And while the dining room was cavernous, dominated by another grand fireplace, the table itself was a simple four-seated affair made of some dark wood polished to within an inch of its glossy life. And round. So much for avoiding Gage during dinner.

Dinner ... something smelled wonderful, and his stomach voiced its displeasure about not being fed for days. *You were gonna turn this down?* it rumbled at him. *Idiot!*

There was no sign of Gage. Dominic couldn't help imagining they'd have to stand on ceremony and wait for his attendance like royalty before they could take their seats.

"Sit." Randall ushered him toward a chair, dispelling that assumption. He bit back the growl. Everyone in this place seemed intent on telling him what to do, treating him like nothing more than a stray dog. Then again, what was a wolf without a pack but a stray? He'd left so that no one would ever tell him what to do again. He thought he'd found that freedom with the pack.

Gage might have withdrawn to this sanctuary for the same reasons, and Dominic should have felt a kinship at that. All he could summon was mild curiosity. He'd care more about Gage's pseudo-humanity if he saw fit to act like the decent human being he was compelled to live as.

Not that they were, not really. Ever since they'd come to learn that creatures like him—and presumably Gage—existed somewhere other than fairy tales and horror movies, life had become a permanent game of cat and mouse.

He glanced at Randall who was busying himself with the task of straightening the cutlery. So human he might as well have been carrying a banner proclaiming it, and yet dutiful, content if not downright delighted to be serving the supernatural. He wondered how Gage had managed to pull that off.

And exactly what that service entailed, Dominic had no idea. He doubted Randall would argue with any demand Gage made of him. Randall seemed too damn nice for his own good.

Gage sauntered into the dining room in his own sweet time, followed by a nondescript human woman, pushing several covered silver dishes on a fancy trolley. She buzzed anxiously around the table like a neurotic bee, setting out plates and dishes, while Gage dropped lazily into his chair, helping himself to the bottle of red wine and pouring a glass. It took Randall's smile and thank you to make the woman stop fussing.

She seemed nervous, but she didn't smell scared. It took a moment for the penny to drop.

"Is he the only one who knows about you?" he asked, once the woman was safely out of earshot.

Gage stared at him over steepled fingers, while Randall scrutinized the assortment of artistically cut vegetables on one serving plate. The knuckles turning white around the serving spoon in his grasp was the only sign he was paying attention at all. Dominic felt a slight pang of guilt, convinced his inability to keep his mouth shut was going to dole punishment out on Randall instead of him.

“I find the fewer people I have to control, the better.”

“Control? So it’s not just me you want to keep on a leash, huh?”

“I don’t need to leash anyone.”

“Oh, so I’m just special?”

“Well...” Gage smiled idly, inclining his head toward Randall. “At least I tend to know where he’s been. Strange wild dogs do have a habit of being awfully rabid.”

The plate Randall shoved between them was as effective as any barrier. Dominic was reduced to scowling at Gage’s supercilious smile over a plate of greens.

“You should try the asparagus, sir. Delia has quite outdone herself...”

Dominic didn’t know what surprised him most, the flare of defensiveness at “sir”—and damned if he was calling Gage that—or that Gage actually backed down. He could almost see the hackles smoothing.

Gage stabbed a spear delicately with a fork, nibbling at it in a way that drew far too much attention to his mouth. “Hmm, you’re right. Help yourself, Dominic.” He washed the vegetable down with another sip of wine, his tone mild as though this was just a regular dinner. “Keep your strength up.”

Even if Dominic might have argued, his stomach didn’t need telling twice. Whoever Delia was, she knew her way around a kitchen. He loaded his plate, mostly with meats—the asparagus might have been delicious, but one sniff betrayed that they were the modified variety, and Dominic’s palate was distinctly old-fashioned. The meat melted as soon as he bit into it, cooked to within an inch of its life but gloriously untainted by salts or spices or trimmings. It was almost as though it had been cooked to his personal preferences.

He had to look up now and then to check he wasn’t eating with his hands, or worse, just chewing the food off the plate. It had been a while since he’d needed cutlery.

Gage barely picked at his food, or sipped at his wine, and seemed to be looking his way every time Dominic looked at him. “How are your injuries, Dominic?”

It didn’t sound like a trick question, but he already knew that it was dangerous to take anything Gage asked at face value. “Better.”

“Good.” Gage nodded. “You may begin working with Randall in the morning. Light duties, of course, until you are better healed.”

“What kind of duties?”

“Securing the premises, in the main.” Randall was the one to reply. Gage seemed bored with him already. “New people will be coming in the next few days—” there was a brief glance at an impassive Gage, “—so we will have to run background checks on them. Also, while I’ll be involved in their training, you’ll be required to take over my duties around the ranch. Administrative, mostly, ensuring the smooth running of the household.”

“Sounds good.” Sounded boring as hell, and his bluffing fooled no one. Gage sipped his wine. Randall pushed a bit of the wonderful asparagus around his plate. The grandfather clock next to the fireplace ticked. Dominic wished he was anywhere else.

If he’d ever had a family dinner, Dominic decided it would have felt like this. Awkward silences, threaded with an underlying disinterested tension. It almost made him grateful his dad always ate at the bar, or at the diner at the end of the street, and that his mom had a mostly liquid diet sat in front of her stories on the TV.

Was this how Gage and Randall spent every evening of their lives? It made Dominic

yearn to get away, to run, to pretend he was free.

Both gazes snapped to him as he pushed back his chair, a little harder than he'd intended, the legs scraping along the floor. Gage raised a brow. "It's considered good manners to ask if you can be excused from the table, you know. We aren't uncivilized animals here."

Staring at his empty plate in an attempt not to snarl at Gage, Dominic took a breath. "I excuse myself, I don't need anyone's permission."

"Dominic—"

"No, let the boy have his opinion." Gage held up a hand, and Randall dutifully shut up. "Or he'll only believe I'm 'leashing' him again." He watched Dominic for a long moment. "Well, perhaps a little, for your own good as well as ours."

It sounded so right, it should have been reassuring. There was hardly any argument that held up against the logic of it. But it just made his skin crawl, made the walls of his luxurious prison feel as though they were closing in around him, and wouldn't stop until they bound him entirely.

"Thank you for the food." He backed away from the table. "I just want to go and lie down now."

Randall watched him. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, just ... want to be on my own for a while, that's all."

"If you're sure." Randall tried for a smile. "I'll see you bright and early tomorrow."

He managed a nod, even if it felt as though the room would start spinning uncontrollably at the smallest provocation.

He didn't quite make it as far as the room—he refused to think of it as his—before he had to stop and sit out the dizziness and claustrophobia. He barely made it to the lowest steps on the grand sweeping staircase.

Ranch, my ass... He spent a good few moments staring at precisely that, head between his knees, until his breathing evened out, until the world stopped spinning and closing in on him.

By most people's standards, he was lucky. If this had been a human's property, he'd have been shot the first time they saw him change, if he'd even gotten as far as being allowed in the door at all. He certainly wouldn't have been clothed, or fed. Maybe Gage treated him with disdain and disinterest, but Dominic didn't think it was because of what he was—if he followed Randall's theory, Gage was more upset by the upheaval he caused than the fact he was a were.

He was lucky just to be alive. His family hadn't been so fortunate, and he didn't even know why. He didn't know what had gone wrong now, when they'd lived in peace for years. He wasn't going to find answers or the mindless satisfaction of revenge by sitting on his ass in this house, but it was all he'd been reduced to, serving Gage like the puppy he'd been deemed.

The way he saw it, he had two choices: leave or stay. It should have been simple enough, but when leaving was dangerous, and staying felt more perilous still, it wasn't that easy.

He had no reason to trust his host. None. For all he knew, Gage had invited those hunters onto his land. For all he knew, Gage was only letting him stay and heal to give the hunters a better chase next time around.

As if on cue, the moment he skirted close to those thoughts, voices drifted from the

dining room to distract him. “Try not to hold it against him, sir. After all he’s been through—”

“Oh, I don’t hold it against him. I hold it against you. Wasn’t that our arrangement?”

His ears pricked even as his heart plummeted; he’d known Randall’s endorsement would land him in trouble.

“Yes, sir. However, given the circumstances...” There was a silence, then some shuffling, followed by the chink of empty china. He could picture Randall clearing the table, while Gage ignored him. “The boy has lost his family. He’s angry, and in pain—”

He wasn’t given the time to feel the full force of that, his own reaction interrupted as surely as Randall’s words.

“And that excuses him to treat my hospitality with contempt? I didn’t kill them.”

The words were spoken with such casual indifference it was hard to imagine they could be anything but the truth. Gage didn’t strike him as the kind of man who saw the need to deny anything, merely for appearances sake. Hell, doubts aside, he wouldn’t have been surprised if Gage took it upon himself to inform Dominic if he’d been personally responsible.

“I don’t think it matters to him who was to blame,” Randall said. “He wants a target at which to lash out. He wants someone to pay. It’s understandable.”

“It’s irritating, is what it is—bring my wine too, will you, Randall?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dominic backed up against the stairs at that, breath held. But wherever the conversation moved off to, it wasn’t out of the dining room. Relaxing a little, he found he had to listen closer to hear their movements, their words.

“Will there be enough for him to do?”

“Yes,” Randall said wryly. “As if you would ever give me too little to do, sir.”

“Well, can’t have you with too much time on your hands, can I? Or you’ll keep insisting on bringing in injured animals and turning my house into a petting zoo.”

Randall chuckled softly, then was silent for a moment. “I don’t think it’s the injuries we can see that need concern us, sir.”

“No ... I expect you’re right.”

The contemplation in Gage’s voice surprised him more than the capitulation, and despite himself, Dominic found he couldn’t keep from standing, padding silently closer to the ajar door. He wanted to see Gage for himself, wanted to see how the subdued honesty in his tone played out on his face.

If he’d expected anything other than the same bored superiority, he’d have been disappointed. Gage sat by the window in a richly upholstered chair that Dominic hadn’t even noticed, while Randall tended to the fireplace. If either of them sensed his proximity, they didn’t react. Dominic consoled himself with that; he doubted either of them could have kept the knowledge to themselves.

“Are you sure it’ll be all right to leave him in charge of the household duties?”

“Oh, it’ll only be a day or two.” Gage shook his head. The hand not holding the wine glass waved dismissively at Randall’s question. “I promise I won’t kill him while he isn’t under your rapt supervision.”

“I’ll take your word for it, sir.” Kneeling at the hearth, Randall glanced over his shoulder, the firelight turning sandy hair into a burnished gold halo, and catching the profile of a slight smile. “Warm enough?”

Dominic would have wondered about that, whether there was a necessity for all these fireplaces that wasn't only aesthetic, but that smile made his breath catch. That wasn't a dutiful, subordinate smile. It was an indulgent one that matched the look in gray eyes that assured Dominic he could have paraded in there naked doing the cha-cha, and no one would have looked his way. The knowing affection in that one glance made him more aware of his losses than any amount of words. He'd lost that. He'd lost eyes that looked at him that way.

It might have hurt less, had Gage not missed it entirely. Eyes closed, paying that smile no attention, Gage made a non-committal sound in answer.

He had everything Dominic had lost, and he didn't even notice, didn't even care. It was enough to make him howl his outrage and walk away. But he stayed silent, stayed rooted, watching with some kind of inevitable awareness as Randall shifted away from the fireplace to kneel next to Gage's chair instead.

Gage's expression didn't even change when Randall rested his cheek against his master's knee, nuzzling like a prized kitten. If Dominic couldn't hear so well, even from this distance, he could have convinced himself Randall was purring.

Enhanced senses were a blessing and a curse, he decided, listening to the soft rustle of fabric as Randall knelt up, deft fingers making short work of Gage's belt and fly.

How often had they done this? There was an easy, practiced routine to it, and while Gage betrayed no visible reaction, the scent of heat, of arousal and anticipation, was unmistakable. He knew what was coming. They both did. It was only Dominic stunned into a stupor that wasn't entirely unpleasant.

I didn't just think that... But he had, he did, and he could no more stop watching as he could stop breathing. He had no right to be watching them at all. He certainly had no right to feel the stirrings of a reaction of his own. Not here, not now. Not over men he didn't even trust. Not twenty-four hours after his world was ripped out from under him.

He should have been ashamed of himself. They'd be ashamed of him; he'd exacted better behavior than this from his pack, expected behavior more civilized. That he was in a situation so surreal he still didn't quite believe it was happening, really wasn't an excuse.

The awareness hit him like a brick. The closeness he longed for, played out a few feet away, illustrating beautifully in shades of black and gold all the things that had been taken away from him. The emptiness of it made the world around him fall away like a chasm, like a void.

His life was gone. All he'd done was step into Gage and Randall's world, caused friction between them, stirred up trouble.

Just because he'd lost everything didn't mean he had to stay and let the same thing happen to these people.

As silently as he could with every limb wracked by shivers, he turned and headed upstairs.

* * * *

"Randall." Gage hated how breathless those two syllables sounded, how needy. It certainly didn't sound like the warning he intended it to be, and he couldn't blame Randall for paying little heed. He forced himself to unclench his fingers from the armrest, reaching out to wind them in Randall's hair instead—tightening, then pushing away.

“Stop.”

Gray eyes glanced up to meet his gaze, and he could pinpoint the exact moment when Randall realized he was serious. The faintest tug of a frown, a guarded steel hardening the molten liquid in his eyes, blinking once before closing.

There was no teasing, nothing playful in the matter-of-fact way Randall drew back, delicately swiping at his lower lip with the back of his hand. He reached out, presumably to tidy Gage up, and looked utterly perplexed when Gage brushed him off. “Don’t.”

Randall stared at him, then nodded, curt and polite. Getting to his feet, he brushed imaginary dust and creases from the knees of his pants, turning toward the fire, giving Gage the illusion of privacy.

His body seemed to be even more appalled by his decision than Randall, he noted wryly, the fabric of his pants taut against the still demanding arousal as he fastened his pants. But it was neither his body, nor Randall’s decision to make.

Regardless, Gage had no taste for performing in front of an audience. He was relieved the boy had gone, although he admitted puzzlement as to why he fled. He’d felt the boy’s hunger from the hall, and he’d certainly felt as though he was enjoying the show.

Of course, he was under no illusion that Dominic was watching him. He glanced at Randall, fussing with the fireplace again as though nothing out of the ordinary had transpired—and indeed, it hadn’t. He had no idea of the boy’s presence, and Gage was in no mood to inform him. He had a suspicion such a revelation would render Randall rather flustered, and for reasons he chose not to explore, the thought irritated Gage.

“Can I get you anything else, sir?”

“No.” Gage shook his head. “Go to bed, Randall. After all, you do need to be up bright and early in the morning.” Neither of them mentioned the bitter note to Gage’s voice. It wasn’t as though he’d made a great effort to hide it.

The boy should be gone. His very presence upset Gage’s equilibrium, took a wrecking ball to his peace. As events slid out of his control since Dominic’s appearance, he’d begun to feel like an accessory to his own downfall. Watching his most trusted ally starry-eyed over a dangerous mongrel added insult to injury.

It was only the threat of that, of alienating as loyal a subject as Randall that kept him from killing the boy in his sleep. It would have been easy to simply tell Randall that Dominic had just run away. After all, the boy had dug his own grave with that display of claustrophobia. But Randall, despite being nothing more than human, would see through any attempt Gage made at lying.

“Gage...”

He glanced up at Randall, brow arched. “Excuse me? Have you suddenly forgotten your place, Randall?”

“I apologize, sir. I only...” For a moment, something skittered across Randall’s eyes that suggested that indeed he had, as he watched Gage with one of those infuriatingly curious expressions. Then it was gone, replaced by carefully constructed impassivity. “Never mind. If that will be all, I’ll take my leave for the night.”

“That’s fine, Randall.”

Despite the dismissal, it took several minutes for Randall to put word into deed, nodding a curt goodnight at him, before walking out of the room.

Chapter Seven

“And so the boundary runs from the tree line all the way down to the road.”

Randall was speaking, as he had been for most of the morning. True to his word he'd roused Dominic early, and proceeded to give him a tour, first of the labyrinthine house, and then the expansive grounds. Even someone like Dominic couldn't fail to be impressed. Eked out of the very hillside, there was nothing that looked false or out of place except the house itself. There had to be cars here, but none of the tracks or paths crisscrossing the land seemed wide enough to drive.

Dominic should have paid more attention. He had a feeling this could be important later, and he wouldn't have been surprised if a pop quiz on the exact layout of the land was part of the tortures Gage had planned for him. But every now and then he drifted off into movie screen memories of the scene he'd witnessed last night.

When Randall lapsed into silence, regarding him with an amused smile, Dominic roused from his thoughts enough to try and think of something to say. “Where does the road go?” It was a stupid question. They both knew Dominic cared very little about the road, but it proved he was listening. A little, at least.

“North, it runs halfway up the mountain until it turns into a dirt path. South, it heads toward the nearest town.” At the tension that shivered through Dominic, Randall was quick with an easy smile and an amendment. “It's about ten miles away.”

“Gage likes his privacy,” Dominic murmured under his breath. If Randall heard him, he didn't comment. Perhaps there wasn't much to say. “How do you convince people to come all the way out here?”

“Ah, Gage offers a very generous remuneration.” Randall chuckled. “That and the fact we're unlikely to hire anyone for longer than a few months at a time.”

Randall's tone took on a rougher edge at that, but Dominic didn't press. High turnaround made sense, given what passed for Gage's personality and the backwoods location. People would go crazy very quickly trapped in a place like this. He watched Randall, curiously. He seemed remarkably sane, but then he also had different reasons for tolerating Gage. “How long have you been here?”

Stopping at the edge of a rambling wildflower patch that could have been a lawn if there was more landscaping going on, Randall turned, glancing back at him with a smile. “I don't remember anything else. I've been with Gage all my life. Not always here, of course...” His gaze flicked toward the house, visible between the trees and saplings from their position, gray and looming. “But wherever he goes, I go.”

Dominic frowned a little, appalled and empathetic in equal measure. He understood loyalty, just not to a man like Gage. Whatever charms he only saw fit to share with Randall must have been amazing, if they could elicit the kind of adoration Dominic had seen and felt last night. He supposed he needn't worry about ever seeing that side of Gage. The man couldn't stand his presence in the same room.

Randall smiled at him. “He's a good man, you know. He could have left me, he didn't need to take me in, take care of me, raise me. But he did, and asks for very little in return that I don't willingly give in any case.”

Dominic almost growled at the blush creeping warmly across his face. He was well

aware of the things Randall was willing to give. The more time he spent with Randall the harder it was to banish those images.

And Randall, deliberately or otherwise, really wasn't helping. Occasionally during the tour, he'd caught Randall smiling at him in that near-conspiratorial way. Now and then, he'd place a guiding hand on Dominic's arm, or the small of his back. Nothing touches, probably just as naturally considerate as the way Randall had treated his injuries, but coupled with the awareness Dominic couldn't shake, he was reading far too much into it.

He might have entertained the thought of doing so, if that awareness didn't come with the beacon-bright memory of the way Randall had looked at Gage last night. He looked at Dominic with a casual sort of interest, but that reverence in his eyes was Gage's alone.

Dominic accepted the little flare of envy that accompanied that realization. He'd have felt more guilty about it if he believed Gage gave a damn either way.

There was another accidental touch, as Randall's hand splayed against his shoulder to steer him back toward the house. Dominic tried to fight the shiver of reaction at the contact, tried to douse it with the memory of why he was so starved for touch now.

"These were the stables when we first arrived." Randall gestured with his free hand at a long, single story brick building. "Now they're the center of the surveillance and security operation. It seemed a better use of the space," he sent Dominic a sidelong look, "and we attempted keeping horses, but they never settled."

"Yeah..." Dominic met the look with a half smile, glad for any distraction even if that was only venting. "Gage has that effect on animals."

Randall almost managed to stifle the laugh. "They certainly don't seem to take kindly to him at first."

"Probably with good reason."

"Dominic..." Randall sighed, and Dominic knew he'd pushed the joke one line too far. "That Gage has not only allowed you to stay, but has made you as welcome and as much a part of this home as he knows how, speaks volumes. It may not seem to be a great effort to you, but believe me ... he doesn't dislike you."

"Yeah, well. He doesn't seem to be good at showing his brand of liking, does he?"

Randall stiffened. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. Forget it." Cursing his mouth, Dominic strode off in any old direction, following the rutted footpath past the old stables, assuming it would lead back toward the main house. Anything to deter Randall from asking more questions.

He didn't get far. Randall was still talking behind him, but all Dominic could hear was his blood thundering in his head. The forest loomed out before him, dark and endless and gaping. It had been intimidating when he'd been younger, the first time he lost himself among the trees, but a forest had never terrified him the way this one did now. It was freedom then. It was death now.

His breath quickened, coming in short gasps until he was almost dizzy, until the jagged, skeletal trees seemed to spin around him in a disorientating swirl, like a crazed music box dance to the tune of his racing pulse.

And the scent. It had been days, but to his senses it was almost as fresh as it had been that night when it first tainted the musky earth. Every time the wind shifted, it brought with it the smell of blood and metal, dirt and humans.

“Dominic—”

“No!” He’d reeled on Randall the moment the other man’s hand touched his arm, teeth bared in an approximation of a snarl, eyes wild. Randall took a step back, holding up his hands in a placating gesture, as if he was facing a feral animal. He probably was.

“Easy...” Randall murmured. “It’s all right, Dominic. You’re safe.”

But he wasn’t. Not with the trees scrabbling black clawed branches at him, smelling like slaughter and making him sick to his stomach when they wouldn’t stay still. The faster he breathed, the more scent filled his head.

“No!” He wasn’t safe, not here. He turned and ran, anywhere away from the forest’s grabbing talons, running toward the stable buildings so fast he almost skidded into the wall when the footpath wouldn’t keep up with his desperate fleeing.

“Dominic.”

“Leave me alone!” He whirled around. Something in the back of his head felt cornered, even though Randall approached slowly, nothing overtly threatening in his demeanor. None of Dominic’s thoughts were connecting properly, his vision sliding back into monochrome, spattered with reds and blues. “They’re still out there!”

“No, they’re not.”

“He’s told them!” Dominic shook his head, frantic but oddly comforted by the twists the logic took, and the fact he couldn’t hold back the fears even if he wanted to. “He wants them to finish the job, he wants me gone, so just—”

“Dominic.” Randall’s tone was firmer this time. “Stop it. No one’s finishing the job, and Gage certainly wouldn’t have anything to do with the ones who harmed you.”

“But he wants me gone, he—”

“Did. And gone doesn’t mean dead.” Randall’s hands were on his arms, keeping him still, and with the walls of the stable hard against his back, the wolf wanted to fight to get free, and the wounded idiot in him wanted to shriek and squirm and scream till he was hoarse.

He didn’t even realize he was doing just that until Randall’s face was close to his, gunmetal eyes harder than he could remember seeing them. “Dominic, stop! No one’s going to hurt you here, I promise.”

“I saw you!”

Randall froze, hands becoming a little slacker on Dominic’s arms as he spoke slowly. “Saw what?”

“Last night. You and Gage.”

“Last...” Randall blinked, and the edge in his gaze melted back to molten mercury. “Oh. I see.” He chuckled ruefully, shaking his head. “I don’t think you really saw—”

“Yeah, I did. I don’t care what you do, I just ... don’t pretend to be my friend when you’re on his side.”

“I’m not pretending anything. There are no sides, Dominic.” Randall sighed softly. “And if there were, I assure you that Gage and you would be on the same one. To think he would collaborate in some way with humans, bring them onto his land ... forgive me, Dominic, but that’s a very stupid thing to say. He wouldn’t be out here alone if he cared for humans.”

Dominic watched him cautiously, calmer now. “He’s not alone. You’re here.”

Randall laughed humorlessly. “I doubt Gage notices that.”

“But, you...”

“Gage and I,” Randall shook his head, “are old friends. What you saw last night—”

“No. You don’t have to explain. Really. I don’t care what you two do.”

Randall canted his head, watching him. “You don’t?”

“No.” Dominic’s pulse kicked up a notch or two again, his breathing barely back to normal before it sped up again. Randall was close enough that he was starting to spin back into claustrophobia. “What the two of you do is none of my business.”

“It isn’t. It shouldn’t be.”

He smelled so warm, so secure, and Dominic found himself craving to shut his eyes, wrap himself up in it. And this close, it was hard to focus on Randall’s eyes anyway. “It’s not.” He shook his head, words sounding drowsy even to his own ears. “I..”

“Don’t care.”

“No.”

For all the possessiveness with which Randall’s lips brushed against his, Dominic thought his last coherent word might as well have been emphatic assent instead. Not that’d he’d known what he was agreeing to anyway. He wasn’t aware of much past the velvety kiss, Randall’s hands against his shoulders, his own reaching up to clench the front of Randall’s pristine shirt.

He tried speaking when Randall pulled back, as if to assess his reaction, but the only sound Dominic could make was suspiciously close to a whine, and Randall’s response was suspiciously similar to a chuckle. He nuzzled his nose against Dominic’s, and as unintentional as the gentle gesture probably was, the aching familiarity of it wrung a whimper from Dominic’s throat.

Touch. Contact. Someone else, near and warm and real.

His hand snaked up to tangle in Randall’s hair, taking strange delight in leaving the normally perfect exterior mussed and ruffled—mussed and ruffled because of him, not Gage. As long as he didn’t have to see Randall’s eyes, see the emotions that wouldn’t, couldn’t, be there for him, Dominic could take this for what it was.

The wall behind him was less a prison and more a help, as he levered against it, pressing into Randall, making a pleased sound at the way Randall’s arms wound tight around him. Only human, but more immediately, innately aware of what Dominic needed than anyone he’d known in a long time. Those arms were stronger than they looked, but safe and careful, and an image of the stark black lines of the tattoo came unbidden to Dominic’s thoughts.

Where had it come from? Why did someone so unerringly refined and reserved have as dramatic a brand as that? Why was someone so supposedly reserved kissing him as though he was drowning and Dominic was air?

He didn’t know what Randall was getting out of it. From the sweet urgency of his lips, soft nibbles and the uncharacteristic awkwardness of the stroke of his tongue against Dominic’s, he was hardly forcing himself to do this. Gage must have taught him better than this—he didn’t strike Dominic as the type to tolerate anything but perfection in all things, and it made the almost inexperienced touches all the more endearing.

Unless Dominic had gotten it all wrong.

Heat pooled through him like a sunbeam’s encroachment, his body willing to revel in the attention. Dominic arched into Randall, one of Randall’s thighs pressing between his legs. Someone moaned, but Dominic was far too lost in the contact to notice or care which one. His fingers clenched Randall’s shirt, in his hair, head thudding back against

the wall when Randall's lips moved to his throat, murmuring Dominic's name between kisses.

"Please..." Randall rocked against him at Dominic's plea, one hand sliding down over his hip. Something shrieked. Dominic hadn't done this for a while, but he was fairly sure nothing he had was meant to make that sound.

Taking a step back, Randall glanced at him apologetically, fishing a cell phone from his pocket. Dominic caught his breath, running his hands through his hair, feeling the cold of a mountain morning now that Randall's warmth was gone. He looked real now, Dominic noticed. With the starched perfection all creased and ruffled, shirt wrinkled, hair in his eyes, he was almost as breathtaking as he'd been when Dominic saw him on his knees before Gage. Almost.

Randall stole him a furtive glance, stepping even farther away, speaking into the phone. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry. I was showing Dominic the—" Gray eyes squeezed shut, and Dominic wondered wryly if Gage was yelling. Randall certainly looked pained, and he didn't want to think that was because of him. "Yes, we're done. Yes, sir, I'll take care of it immediately. What would you like me to do with—Yes, sir, certainly."

Shutting off the phone, Randall put it back in his pocket, taking a long silent moment to straighten his shirt and brush back his hair with his fingers.

For a moment, Dominic wondered if Randall had forgotten he was there. It was just a kiss. It shouldn't have bothered him that much. But despite everything, all Gage had to do was snap his fingers and Randall went running.

"It appears the schedule was changed without my knowledge, and the new staff is arriving today instead. I have to go back."

Dominic nodded. "Okay."

Randall started walking, and Dominic automatically fell into step with him. "Gage wants to speak with you over lunch. Merely to go over what will be your duties, I assure you he means no antagonism, so try to remain on civil terms."

"Are you gonna be telling him the same thing?"

"I'm asking, not telling, and yes, I likely will. Whether he listens is a different matter." Randall shook his head, sighing when his hair fell in his eyes again, refusing to return to its state before Dominic got his hands on it. "But my time over the next few days will be taken up with other business, and I'll be unavailable to play the peacekeeper. I'd be happier in the knowledge you aren't at each other's throats."

The rejection was like a vigorous work-out, straining and aching muscles Dominic hadn't remembered he possessed. But the need to question was drowned out by the promise he'd made himself that he wouldn't get Randall in any more trouble than he already had. He'd meant to answer a grudging affirmation, but the words that escaped were very different. "How long will you be gone?"

"I won't be gone, only that my time and attention will be taken up with the new recruits, and..." Randall glanced at him, words trailing off. Tilting his head slightly, a small smile graced his lips. "Three or four days, not long at all. With luck, it may even be less than that, it depends how well they adapt."

It was ridiculous to become attached to anyone this soon, but something in him yearned for it, yearned for something else to call pack. The distance Randall was putting between them now, literally and figuratively, was making him wonder whether he'd be better off turning and running.

The yawning dark of the forest flashed before his eyes, and he shivered. Like it or not, Randall and Gage were the lesser evils, at least until he regained his courage to venture farther.

Randall stopped in front of him, hands skimming up Dominic's arms. "You think I'm abandoning you, don't you?"

"No," he lied, gaze not quite meeting Randall's. "Just not exactly looking forward to being Gage's replacement lapdog while you're not around, that's all."

"You deem me his lapdog?" Smile quirking wryly, Randall curved a palm against Dominic's cheek, thumb dragging along his lower lip. "I suppose you may have a point."

Despite himself, Dominic's eyelids fluttered half closed at the touch. "Will he know? Can he tell that we—"

Randall's hand slipped away, and his sigh snapped Dominic out of his daze. "No." Randall began walking again, this time not pausing to turn around. Conversation over, even Dominic couldn't miss those cues. "Not if he has no reason to look for such things."

Chapter Eight

“Dominic.”

The situation really required a little bell Gage could ding every time he needed his new servant’s assistance. Or even a collar and bell for said servant. It would have been worth the aggravation just to see the utter fury on the wolf’s face at the mere suggestion.

Barely twenty-four hours into Dominic’s stint as Randall’s replacement, and the boy had already lost his temper half a dozen times. *Only* half a dozen times. Dominic must have been restraining himself.

He gave it ten seconds, and then repeated the call, louder than before. Another ten seconds, and the library door pushed open.

“What?”

Not looking up from his wing chair, Gage idly turned the page of a book he wasn’t reading, taking his time before answering. “The fire needs stoking.”

Silence. Eventually, vaguely irritated that he had to relent in his own game, Gage glanced up, meeting Dominic’s stare. “The fire, Dominic. Sometime before we all freeze to death would be quite acceptable.”

From the looks and the mutterings, it seemed his new employee was quite the sulker. Very different, Gage reflected, than Randall had ever been, even when he was a teenager, even before Gage began appreciating him for more than his unswerving loyalty and efficient management. Randall had never been surly, had never pouted, had never reacted to any demand Gage made of him with anything but unerring polite passivity.

Not so Dominic. If Gage demanded his coffee cup moved closer within reach, Dominic gave him a look that questioned his sanity, shoving the cup across the table with enough venom to make the rich dark liquid slosh over the sides. If he instructed Dominic to adjust the angle of a reading lamp to better assist Gage’s perusal of the newspaper, the wolf damn near growled at him.

Of course he could do them himself, but where was the enjoyment factor in that? Odd, though, that the very things Gage sought to provoke to incite the animosity were becoming rather entertaining in their own quirky way. Odd that Dominic’s anger was as intriguing a reaction as Randall’s calm.

Ridiculous, of course, that he should be comparing the two at all. For one, Randall knew how to tend a fire. Dominic, for all his enthusiasm at hitting the embers with the poker, seemed to create smoke and sparks more than flame.

Setting the book down, Gage resisted the urge to massage the bridge of his nose. The headache had more to do with exerting his influence on the new recruits than Dominic’s ineptitude, but he doubted the wolf would see it that way. For once, he was in no mood to antagonize. “Leave it, Dominic. I’ll take care of it.”

“You asked me, didn’t you?” The gaze tossed over Dominic’s shoulder was as sharp as the tone. “I’ll do it.”

Gage closed his eyes, chuckled softly to himself. “If you’re worried I’ll vent my frustration at your dire lack of talent in the art of fire-stoking on dear Randall, you have my word that it’s the least of my concerns.” The poker clanged against the grate when Dominic apparently dropped it, and Gage’s smile widened.

“I don’t care what you do,” Dominic growled. “But don’t expect me to quit just because it’s what you’d do in my place.”

“Admirable sentiment.”

Dominic didn’t reply, and when even the sound of the poker stabbing at the embers faded away, Gage slitted open his eyes. The efforts at beating the embers into life must have had some surprising success. The first flickers of an orange glow reflected in golden eyes as Dominic stared at the fire, watching it lick the sides of the hearth.

Dominic turned the poker over in his hands. “You’ve really thought of everything, haven’t you?” He tapped the poker against the side of the grate, a lighter sound ringing out than the clanging he might have expected.

“Because I’m wise enough not to keep iron in the house?” Gage shrugged. “That’s rather an elemental thing, isn’t it?” Another mark against Dominic’s recklessness, he thought. When iron was the only thing capable of doing any lasting damage to anything like them, anything *other*, that Dominic wouldn’t have thought to banish it from his household was worrying.

“Still, getting all this stuff can’t be easy.”

“Ah, I have my connections. You have no idea how long I’ve lived with that odd little aversion to iron.” Gage smiled wryly. “And it’s just as well for you that someone is thinking about it. Though one would think the myth about wolves and silver was true, the way you so studiously avoid using my silverware when you eat your meals.”

Dominic growled a little, but didn’t answer.

It was a shame he was so irredeemably annoying. He was quite pretty when he shut up and did as he was told. Actually, Gage would have accepted only the former at this point. Silent and attractive always did hold such an appeal. He watched the fire lighting flecks of red and gold in Dominic’s hair, unruly locks of it obscuring his face. Gage was tempted to insist Dominic got a haircut, if only to temper the urge to run his fingers through it.

“And now you’ve taken care of what I requested,” he murmured, a lazy smile curving his lips at the startled glance Dominic stole at him, realizing Gage was watching. “You’re free to return to whatever important business you were conducting.”

Dominic turned back to the fire, glaring at it rather half-heartedly, as though the flames were responsible for his current predicament. “I wasn’t doing anything. There’s nothing for me to do.”

Gage shrugged. “You’re welcome to anything in the library. And, once we have a restored staff, I see no reason why you can’t shift and run in the forest should the mood take you.”

“I don’t…” Dominic tensed, before shaking himself out of it. “I don’t need to.”

Gage begged to differ. He knew all too well the pains of fighting an unnatural change that became as necessary as breathing, as blinking. Perhaps he didn’t need to indulge it as often as a creature of instinct such as Dominic, but it amounted to the same thing.

But Dominic saw fit to deny that need, and for the time being Gage was content to allow it. He supposed, given the way the wolf clung to his humanity even now, the memories of that place were still too raw to consider returning. He knew that kind of pain too.

Dominic looked up at him, when a rather more acute pain left him hissing at its

effects. Damn the retraining. If there was an easier way to force the new staff to adjust and accept their surroundings, Gage would concede to it happily. The process of influencing them left him in a worse mood than usual, and lately it felt as though it was all he did. Dominic's arrival certainly hadn't helped matters.

He had to smile past the throbbing in his head at the fact Dominic was staring at him as though Gage had shifted there and then, but still refused to even ask what was happening. "Yes, Dominic, I'm fine, thank you so much for your deep concern."

Dominic blushed, scowled and looked away. "Sorry. I didn't think you wanted me asking."

Gage searched for traces of guilt in amidst the awkwardness, and found none. Different to Randall there too it seemed; ever since whatever had transpired between the two yesterday morning, Randall had been vibrating with it. Of course, he was quite aware that Gage would learn of the indiscretion the moment Randall walked in the door, but even so, the guilt felt disproportionate to the offense.

But then, no one but this troublesome boy had ever threatened to usurp Gage in Randall's affections. That Gage chose neither to accept nor truly acknowledge those affections was irrelevant. They were still his, belonged to him as surely as this house, these books, as Randall himself.

He recalled a ragged street urchin in a country where Gage didn't speak their language, and they were wise enough not to question him. He hadn't been so composed back then, and she was easy prey. Barely more than a child, she hadn't feared him for herself, only for the tiny bundle she carried wrapped in a dirty blanket. Small, pale and beautiful but for her circumstances, something would have claimed her life before the boy was old enough to say her name. At least Gage made it quick. He'd intended killing the child, too. It would be as much of a mercy as his mother.

That he'd be in this situation, thirty years later ... perhaps taking the child's life then would have been a mercy for them all.

The thought was dismissed as soon as it arrived. He was selfish enough, glad enough, that Randall was his. If he'd change anything, it would have been that night ten years ago when he first allowed Randall to come to him. Gage chuckled softly to himself. No, perhaps he wouldn't change that, either.

Dominic was staring at him when Gage finally returned his attention to the boy. "Very well, if you claim you have nothing better to do," Gage leaned down to the coffee table, picking up a thickly folded newspaper and tossing it toward Dominic, "you can read that to me."

"I ... read it to you?" Dominic stared at the newspaper as though it would bite him if he got too close.

Gage sighed, debating how to explain it sufficiently without explaining it all, and deciding on vagueness instead. "My new staff, as are all my staff, are human. There are measures necessary to ensure they don't come to notice any of the more unusual aspects of my life or my home. While Randall engages them in training, I can see to those measures without there being too many trivial questions. The effort is quite tiring on occasion."

Dominic stared at him. "You brainwash them."

"In a manner of speaking." Gage leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. "You have some influence over the human psyche too, don't you? We all do, to some extent."

The laugh was harsher than he'd intended, but he supposed it didn't matter. He was speaking to someone who might understand. "That's why they hate us with such venom."

"Maybe..." Dominic was silent for a moment, bar the tentative rustling of the newspaper. "Did you brainwash me?"

Gage laughed, softer than before, allowing the genuine amusement to filter through. "Do you feel brainwashed, Dominic?"

"I..." Another long pause. "No, not really."

"Well then. Believe me, it would have been far simpler to do just that."

"So why didn't you?"

Good question. For all his bluster, the boy was a very astute creature, and Gage decided the question deserved an answer that contained at least a little truth. "Influencing you would have been far too demanding a task when I have the new staff to deal with too. There's also your nature to take into consideration. It's been rather a long time since I had to toy with the mind of a were, and I don't quite trust in my rusty skills when it comes to your kind. It's less bothersome to leave you be."

Neither would he have Randall's support to influence this one, Gage reasoned, and it was always simpler to achieve his ends when the unconscious part of the mind was distracted by the demands of the conscious.

He could hear the wry smile in Dominic's voice. "Wow, thanks."

"Quite welcome. Now, my paper, Dominic?"

He settled more comfortably in his chair as the newspaper rustled again. Then silence. When it dragged on for several moments, he opened his eyes.

Dominic sat glaring at the newspaper in front of him, as if by scowling alone he could burn holes in it. For a second, Gage wondered if some headline or story had caught his attention, caused this consternation, but all he read were foreign papers and business or finance pages, surely Dominic couldn't be this angry at the state of the Far Eastern stock market. He raised a brow. "Is there a problem?"

"I—" Dominic's gaze snapped up to him, burning with more fury than the re-ignited embers in the fireplace, and just as vicious. If Gage was the type, he might have flinched at that look. But the undercurrent of shame that crept like damp through that fire was more intriguing.

"You can't read it, can you?"

"Of course I can!" Dominic growled at him, anger sparking in his eyes, catching the reflection of the flames till the gold fairly glimmered. "I can. It's just ... it's been a while, and..."

Gage couldn't recall the last time he'd been sincerely surprised. Not even when Dominic first arrived. Not like this. "But surely you haven't been wolf for all this time. You must have gone to school before it manifested itself."

Dominic glared intently at the paper, and muttered, "Off and on ... mostly off. When the wolf manifested, if you want to call it something that harmless, I'd get into trouble all the time, and if I wasn't thrown out of school I was staying away to try and keep out of trouble. Then I just left altogether and..."

Gage forced himself to stop staring, looking away with a noncommittal sound. "Well, clearly lack of schooling didn't affect your ability to survive. One doesn't survive as long as you have without some modicum of intelligence."

"That was the wolf, not me."

“You are the wolf, are you not?”

Dominic flinched as if the words were a physical blow. “I tried to be. Look where that got me.”

“And?” Gage arched a brow. “It got you here. It made you survive where your pack did not.” He was relieved Dominic wouldn’t even look at him, it gave him the chance to rein back the flare of power, of instinct, that darkened his eyes and just made his headache worse. “Whine about anything you wish, Dominic, but the moment you begin to denounce what you are, then I don’t care what you or Randall say, it will become rather difficult for me to keep from killing you where you stand.”

Dominic stared at him. “Randall told you not to kill me?”

Gage resisted the urge to sigh. Randall again. Of course, no one had set any rules about what Dominic could, or could not, be told. “Randall told me a lot of things, most of which I tend to ignore.” Getting up from the chair, he strode across the room to a bookcase, casting Dominic a smile. “But as you are his little pet project, and since I do have such a weakness for indulging his little whims, I pretended to listen.” He took his time selecting a book, feeling Dominic’s stare burning into him.

“What the hell does that mean, ‘pet project’?”

“You can’t blame him, really.” Gage shrugged, making a pleased sound at finding the book he was searching for. Pulling it from its place on the shelf, he carried it over to the austere black leather couch on the other side of the coffee table from his far more comfortable chair. “He’s only human, I’m sure he gets rather bored. If he wants to nurse wild creatures back to health and free them after their rehabilitation, well, I’m sure there are worse hobbies he could have.”

“Free them?”

The repetition was rather irritating, but it would be a good habit to cultivate for the purposes Gage had in mind. “Well, as you’ve said, you hardly want to stay here, do you? Now, come here.”

“What for?”

Gage sighed. “So I can bend you over the armrest and have my cruel and unusual way with you.” He held up the book, mildly amused at the wide-eyed flustered look that broke the monotony of suspicious anger on Dominic’s face. “We have time to kill, do we not? And I really can’t abide not having someone to read to me, so we may as well see to it that it’s not a problem.”

Dominic stared at him, blinked, almost smiling. “You’re going to teach me to read.”

“Refresh your skills.” Gage shrugged. “I’m sure you can’t be as hopeless a student as that.” He gestured to the empty space on the couch beside him, and waited patiently while Dominic edged his way closer. It took a while; evidently the threat of being bent over the armrest was even more abhorrent than Gage had intended.

It occurred to him again that seduction would have been far simpler. It would have kept Dominic too busy to be annoying, and it would have made Randall quite aware of his place. Taking Dominic, teaching him skills almost as useful as reading, would have been a much better way of passing the time.

But even when Dominic finally sat down, he kept his distance, and Gage doubted the wolf would have been accommodating to any method to placate him. He set the book down in the space between them, and began to read, pointing to the words as he went, pausing between each sentence for Dominic to repeat the phrase and explain his

understanding of what he'd just read.

Dominic was a good, if grudging student, and Gage wasn't sure which one of them was most surprised by the boy's compliance in the matter. He truly was as abysmal at the task as he claimed, but he picked things up with precise efficiency.

It was the wolf blood, Gage decided. Learning, adapting, surviving. The part of Dominic that still clung to some semblance of humanity was permitted to rear its head now and then, in a show of self-consciousness or impertinence, but for the most part the wolf was willing to learn, to accept the schooling.

Focusing on the task took Gage's mind off his own weariness for a time, but eventually, Dominic's voice, reading the book with jerky hesitancy faded to incoherence, nonsensical sentences full of holes thanks to the beckoning fingers of sleep.

He sat up with a start to see the book closed neatly on the table, and Dominic tending to the fire.

"You looked cold," he said, not turning around as he preempted Gage's question. "And you weren't listening so I figured we were done."

"Reading isn't merely a function you perform for a listener, Dominic. Take the book with you, practice. Quietly."

The fire was roaring again when Dominic half turned, nodding slightly. "Okay, I didn't want to just up and leave with it if you didn't want me taking it out of here."

"That's fine." Gage waved a hand vaguely around the library, gaze still fixed on the fire, hearing the words echoing. *You looked cold*. Yes, quite the quick learner it seemed. "Help yourself to any of the books. I'm sure they'd be grateful for the use."

"Yeah, maybe." Dominic shot him a surprisingly unguarded half-smile as he stood, reaching for the book. He paused as if to determine whether Gage wanted him for anything else, before nodding an unspoken goodnight, and turning for the door. "Once I get past the beginner stage, huh?"

Gage watched the door close, before chuckling softly to himself. "Ah, I'd say you were already intermediate."

Chapter Nine

It was the following evening before Randall could take a break from the training, joining Gage and Dominic for a dinner that had been purposely delayed as late into the evening as Delia would allow.

Randall supposed he should have been grateful.

Gage's morbid fascination with his charade of humanity extended to mealtimes. A family that dined together stayed together, or something just as old-fashioned, just as much a fantasy to Randall as Gage was to other humans. As a child, Randall hadn't noticed that Gage barely ate, or that "family" consisted only of the two of them. Only later, when his perceptions of his master began to shift, did the pointlessness of it all occur to him.

They weren't a family. They were just Gage and Randall, master and servant drifting farther apart the closer they got. What then, Randall wondered, did that make Dominic in their dysfunctional little unit? Where Gage saw little more than a blundering family pet, Randall saw an opportunity for a little peace of mind.

Broaching the subject with Gage wasn't a thought he relished, but that evening Gage made it non-verbally clear that he had no intention of discussing anything. Randall recognized the silence, the way Gage barely acknowledged his presence, as signs Gage wasn't dealing too well with the aftermath of the re-training.

It's your own fault, he wished he had the strength to say. *If you weren't so hell-bent on disposing of everyone around you...*

But that was what Gage did. Randall bore witness to it long enough to realize that however differently Gage treated him, however many liberties Gage allowed him to take, he was still a human. And Gage didn't tolerate humans for long, even humans that loved him.

Dominic, however ... Dominic wasn't human. And in the wolf's belligerent strength, Randall almost saw someone who could stand up to Gage and say, do, all those things Randall wished he'd been able to.

It was good he'd been forced to step away. Spending too long with Dominic was beginning to make Randall half-wish he could keep all that for himself. At least he didn't have to fight for Dominic's attention, didn't have to make bad decisions just to see in Dominic's eyes that he mattered. Dominic couldn't hide his emotions if he tried.

All right, so that kiss might not have been the best decision he'd ever made, but Randall refused to see it as a bad one. Gage didn't want him the way Randall wished he would, and nothing would change that. It was time he gave up.

Gage barely stirred, barely spoke besides greeting Randall good evening, until the dining room doors opened and Dominic walked in.

"Dinner was postponed for Randall's sake, not yours." Gage looked at him, brow arched.

"Yeah well." Dominic took his seat, setting a book on the table next to his plate. "Don't give me things that distract me so much."

"Oh?" Gage chuckled. "I swear. I introduce you to one simple pleasure and you insist on overdoing it. How very young of you."

“Well, then the moral of the story,” Dominic sent him a feral little smile, “is don’t share those simple pleasures if you can’t take someone pushing them to extremes.”

Gage raised his wine glass in a mock toast. “Touché. Duly noted. I’ll refrain from showing you anything useful in future.”

“Thanks. ’Cause I’d hate for it to make me late for dinner again.”

“Are you pushing me, by chance, Dominic?”

“Not at all.” Dominic grinned. “Just making sure I meet your exacting standards.”

“That truly will be the day.” Gage shook his head. “And don’t bring my books to the dinner table again. They aren’t the sort of literature that copes well with having pages stuck together by foreign substances.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you’d know about the sort of literature that does.”

“Ah, there’s a great deal you don’t know about me, Dominic. Most of it would be rather hazardous to your well-being were you to come to know of it.”

Randall watched the exchange, barely able to reconcile the two men at the table with him with the ones he’d left behind just a couple of days ago. He’d expected ... well, he wasn’t sure what he’d expected, but it wasn’t this odd camaraderie, this edgy banter that might have been a joke, and might have been a threat.

But wasn’t this what he wanted? Wasn’t it perfect that Gage and Dominic were getting along, getting closer? Wouldn’t that allow Randall, in time, to step away without revealing too much of the damage done?

He watched the flickering candlelight in lieu of looking at either of his fellow diners, watched the slow trickle of creamy wax down the side of one long, slender pillar candle and wondered why getting what he wanted felt so hollow.

Delia bustled in with dinner, and the three of them remained silent till she bustled back out again.

“So, how are things progressing, Randall?” Gage jabbed delicately at his food, pushing it around on the plate as if it was the most unappetizing thing he’d ever seen.

Randall looked up, staring at Gage. “Well, sir...” His gaze darted to Dominic, but Gage held up a hand.

“Dominic is quite aware of the process involved, Randall, please speak freely around him.”

Despite Randall’s stare, Dominic kept his eyes on the food. When it became clear Dominic wouldn’t acknowledge him, Randall relented, and turned back to Gage. “Things are on schedule, sir. It should be no longer than a day or two.”

“Good.” Gage mused. “Anyone giving you particular trouble?”

“No, sir.” Randall shook his head. “We appear to have gathered a very efficient group this time. I don’t foresee any problems.”

Not until the next time Gage wanted them replaced, anyway. On better days, Randall allowed himself to believe that the fact he hadn’t been replaced spoke of Gage’s true feelings. On worse days, he knew it was just a matter of efficiency—Gage wouldn’t waste his time looking for someone to take his place. Yet.

If he were to be replaced by anyone, Randall was glad it might be Dominic. Maybe in time Dominic would come to see Gage the way he did, would provide whatever Randall couldn’t offer. Still, he wondered where he’d gone wrong when Gage couldn’t even see that Randall would give him everything; his body, his heart, his life.

Gage lapsed into silence again, and something tightened in Randall’s chest that felt a

little like betrayal. “How have you been holding up, sir?” Randall asked softly. “I appreciate the demands this places on you, and I assure you I’m trying to speed the process along as much as possible—”

“I’m fine, Randall.” Gage shrugged. “I’d much prefer the job was done properly, even if it means an extra day of headaches. It’s a small price to pay.”

“But, sir—”

“It’s hardly as if it will result in permanent damage, will it, Randall?” Gage smiled wryly. “And in any case, keeping Dominic in line takes my mind off it.” Gage glanced at him. “Doesn’t it, Dominic?”

If Gage spent dinner acting as if the world didn’t exist, Dominic spent it looking anywhere except in Randall’s direction. It wasn’t dislike or distrust—Randall experienced plenty of that from the staff, past and present, until Gage worked his magic—just unease. His knuckles were white around his silverware, and, besides the ubiquitous meat, he hadn’t touched anything else on his plate.

He should have anticipated how awkward this would be for Dominic. They’d barely seen each other since that morning, let alone spoken, and now Dominic was expected to sit there and act as though nothing had transpired between them.

Dominic was aware of the process, Gage said. But was Gage aware of Randall’s misstep with the man he wanted to take his place? What had Dominic told him in these complicit little moments together?

“I guess,” Dominic muttered. “You haven’t seemed in that much discomfort. Well, you looked in some pain this morning when you tried making me read the finance pages, but other than that...”

“Oh...” Gage pretended to shudder. “Quite. Best forget that incident. I don’t know what currency you deemed my stock was in, but I doubt it’s legal tender anywhere on the planet.”

Randall was watching him intently when Dominic’s gaze strayed over to him. He’d almost forgotten how lovely those golden eyes were, even when they looked at him with a shy guilt. *You have nothing to feel guilty about. If anyone here lays claim to that, it’s me.*

“Gage’s been helping me brush up on my reading,” Dominic explained. “I was never that good at it, and, well ... books aren’t much use to wolves.”

“Ah ... I see.”

“He’s quite the model pupil.” Gage abandoned his food entirely, elbows on the table, chin resting on clasped hands, and smiled mildly. “It was surprising to see there was a decorous side to the savage creature.”

Randall reached for his wine, the murmur almost lost in the act of taking a sip. “I’m sure it was.” He hadn’t intended to sound so sarcastic—so *jealous*—and the awkward silence let him know no one had missed it. He didn’t do jealousy. He’d never felt the need to be envious of anyone, not when he thought he had everything he’d ever want. When he thought Gage could be his.

“Well,” Gage said pleasantly, “you did suggest I try not to kill the boy, didn’t you, Randall? I’d have thought you’d be delighted to see him looking happy and in one piece.”

Randall set down his wine, schooling his voice into careful neutrality. “It does.”

Silence. Randall thought he could even hear the odd little air bubble in his wine breaking the surface. Could hear his heartbeat, too loud, too fast.

“Dominic.” Gage didn’t turn toward Dominic as he spoke; from peripheral vision, Randall could see his master was still watching him intently. “I’d like you to return your book to the library before it gets cleared off the table with the dishes. Choose a new one if you’d like. And then I’d like you to retire for the night.”

“But I’m not—” Dominic began, confusion in the protest.

“Dominic.” Blue eyes flashed a warning this time, matching the sharpness in the tone. “That was not a suggestion. Whatever you may be privy to, there are still matters I must discuss with Randall in private.”

Despite his best intentions, Randall shivered at the implication, the threat in those words. He wasn’t sure whether to hope Dominic assumed Gage meant matters involving the staff, or to wish he knew the truth. His pulse sped with an unexpected jolt, imagining Dominic knew every single way he serviced Gage. Imagining him standing in that doorway, golden eyes wide and wanting while Gage took Randall right there on the dining table.

But if Gage told him, Dominic would believe it *was* just a service—Gage wouldn’t have told Dominic that Randall did everything he did because there was nothing else he *could* do, nothing else he could offer that Gage wouldn’t refuse. Gage didn’t believe that himself.

When it became clear that Gage wasn’t joking, Dominic stood, chair scuffing back along the floor. He reached for the book, but he wasn’t looking at Gage anymore, he was looking at Randall. “Okay…”

Randall bit back on the images dancing through his head, chasing the illogical, ill thought out desire from his eyes. That wasn’t how it was meant to go.

Whatever Dominic saw in his face, there was nothing but puzzlement and a little worry in the wolf’s eyes. Worry. No one worried for him here. The little glimmer of humanity in a decidedly inhuman creature made Randall want to cross the room, wrap his arms around Dominic and tell him there was no need for his anxiety. Dominic had been through plenty—he and Gage had no right adding to it. “Good night, Dominic,” he said gently, mustering a smile. “Sleep well.”

Dominic frowned slightly, as if what Randall suggested was impossible. Maybe it was, for all of them. “Yeah…” Dominic said as he turned to leave. “You too.”

* * * *

Wisely, Dominic chose not to stay and eavesdrop this time. Gage monitored him till his presence faded upstairs. He didn’t want Dominic involved in this.

Randall stood, beginning to clear away the plates. Gage leaned back in his chair, a lazy smile playing on his lips, nonchalantly twirling the wine glass on the table by the fluted stem and watching the blood-red liquid glitter.

“Shall I call for Delia, sir? She can finish the cleaning so that I can return to—”

“That won’t be necessary.”

A plate smacked hard against a silver serving dish. Randall took a breath, and rearranged it again, more carefully. “Very well, but I still should get back to check on them.”

Picking up the wine glass, Gage stood, slinking around the table to stand beside Randall. Taking the plates out of Randall’s hands, noticing the faintest tremble, he set them back down on the table, one hip leaning against the edge as he spoke

conversationally. “You seem remarkably eager to leave my presence, Randall. So unlike you.”

Randall’s gaze remained fixed on the plates, fingers fidgeting as if he wished he could reach for them again. This close, Gage could feel the quickening of his pulse. Want or guilt, though, Gage couldn’t tell. His own pulse raced at the frustration—he was meant to know. He was supposed to be able to read Randall, but these days he was unfathomable to Gage as his library was to Dominic.

“I assure you that’s not the case, sir. I just thought ... that...”

The words faltered as Gage pressed one hand against Randall’s chest, fingers splayed, moving slowly downward. “Hmm?” Gage prompted, fingers curling into Randall’s shirt. “That what?”

“That I should return, and...” Randall’s gaze shifted up from the table to meet Gage’s eyes. “I thought the sooner we get this finished, the sooner it’ll stop causing you discomfort.”

Gage smiled, head tilted. “So considerate. Perhaps there are other things you can do to ease my discomfort, hmm?” He slid his hand higher, palm tracing the familiar planes of muscle and warmth. His fingertips skimmed one nipple, the nub tightening beneath the fabric as Randall shivered.

“Gage, what are you...?”

If Randall wasn’t coherent enough to finish his sentence, Gage wasn’t going to berate him for the slip in manners. He could still do this. Whatever effect Dominic had on Randall, he still reacted to Gage’s touch. *Greedy boy... I taught you better than that.* He’d taught Randall everything, surely it wasn’t too much to ask to expect a decent return on his investment? “Are you refusing me, Randall?” he asked softly, fingers at Randall’s collar, brushing along the starched fabric, stroking the warm skin beneath.

Randall sucked in a breath, a frown creasing his brow. Gage hadn’t deemed the question to be quite that baffling, but precisely that shadowed Randall’s eyes as he searched Gage’s face. Whatever he sought must have eluded him, and the confusion only deepened.

“Of course not, why would you even think something like that?”

Not particularly eager to see that stare any longer—too easy to mistake hurt for guilt in such circumstances—Gage stepped behind Randall, hands reaching around his chest to unbutton his shirt. Lips against the nape of Randall’s neck, he closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. Just Randall, no hint of Dominic, no trace of betrayal. “You didn’t seem very happy at dinner.”

Randall’s hands braced against the table’s edge, head bowed to allow Gage more access. “Didn’t I?”

“No.” Sliding his hands beneath Randall’s open shirt, Gage breathed a pleased sigh at the smooth skin and firm muscle under his touch. Randall was lucky Gage still allowed him to hide his beauty behind bland clothes and unassuming tidiness. A less restrained master would put it on display.

“Then I apologize.”

One hand still flat-palmed against Randall’s chest, Gage nipped the back of his neck sharply, sweeping a lick to soothe, reaching down to work at the belt of Randall’s pants. “I’d have thought you’d be pleased Dominic and I were getting along so splendidly.” Well, perhaps splendid was overstating things, but as close to it as he and Dominic were

ever likely to get. Randall didn't need to know the difference.

Randall almost buckled against the table when Gage slipped his hand into the half-open pants, fingers curling around the feverish flesh of his cock. It wasn't quite as enthusiastic an arousal as the noises promised, but any disappointment faded when Randall arched back, rocking into Gage's own erection.

"I'm..." Randall's fingers tightened slightly on the table as he caught his breath, leaning into Gage's arms, back pressed to his chest, hips rocking forward to follow the lure of Gage's fingers. "I'm glad you are, he's—"

The instinctive need not to hear anything Randall thought about Dominic made Gage tighten his grasp, pleased at both the gasp it elicited, and the way the flesh hardened beneath his touch.

Because of him, or because Randall's mind was elsewhere? He stroked once, a little rougher than he really intended, but Randall didn't seem to mind. Unfortunately, he also seemed intent on talking.

"He's ... he'll be good for you, if he chooses to stay."

Not as good as this. Not as familiar and responsive and so exquisitely beautiful each time he was reduced to a shivering needful creature in Gage's arms. "I doubt that."

Randall shook his head, hips pressing back against Gage again. "If he stays, it would be beneficial to you both. He's not human. He can be with you for quite some time, and—"

The plates rattled hard when Gage spun Randall around, pinning him back against the table. Randall stared at him, gray eyes wide, acting as though he had no comprehension of the reason, as if he had no idea of the implications of his words.

This damned human, polite and loyal, devoted and beautiful, and endlessly dense. At a time like this, thinking such ridiculous things...

For a second, it felt as though he couldn't breathe. Hands fisting in the open shirt, Gage lowered his head, face pressed against the crook of Randall's neck. As if anyone, least of all Dominic, could replace this truly frustrating, infuriating creature he'd possessed, and who'd possessed him, this long. He'd never allow Randall to leave. It was out of the question. The only other explanation for such a suggestion was that Randall wished to leave.

Randall's shirt shushed against skin, muscles moving beneath Gage's touch, as though he was about to raise his arms, enveloping Gage in a hesitant embrace, one that whispered of something more than just taking and claiming. Preempting such a thing, Gage stepped back.

If he never fully allowed himself to know how that embrace felt, if he never tasted something as gently intimate as a kiss, perhaps he could tolerate Randall's desertion whenever it came. Their encounters should never have begun, but at least he could temper them now. Randall had Dominic to keep him entertained. He wouldn't miss this.

"Please ensure someone clears the table before the end of the evening." He hated the tremor in his voice, forcing himself not to turn around as he strode to the door. "You should return to your duties."

"Gage—"

"Goodnight, Randall."

He paused outside the dining room door, just to compose himself. His body still thrummed with the muscle memory of Randall's proximity, heart thundering with the

loss of a very different closeness. Running a hand over his face, through his hair, he let out a breath. Randall would get used to it. And if he didn't, well, perhaps he'd get his desire sooner than he expected.

Only Randall could make him curse his selfishness. Only when he thought of the choices he'd made, foisting this life on him, dragging him into this unnatural situation. Perhaps Randall was right, Dominic would be different. He certainly wouldn't jump through hoops merely because Gage demanded it.

Behind him, there was a muffled crash of china splintering, the chimed tinkling of their fragments scattering and skittering over the table.

Gage closed his eyes briefly, before turning for the stairs.

Randall would get used to it.

Chapter Ten

Banished to his room like a child, Dominic spent the first half hour pacing, walking off the aggression that flared at the command, aggression that threatened to explode at innocent victims like the bed, or the easy chair, or the dresser. Gage wouldn't be pleased to find them in shreds.

But who the hell gave a damn what Gage thought, anyway?

Every time he thought he'd misread his host, he pulled something like that. Just when Dominic thought Gage acknowledged him as a person, as perhaps not an equal but at least someone with their own mind, he was ordered around again like a damn dog.

Falling onto the bed with a growl, he lifted his injured arm, flexing the fingers. Just a small twinge danced through the muscles and bone, and he smiled at the shadowed limb. Almost healed. Another few days and it would function as a paw again, it would take his weight if he ran. And if he could run, then he didn't need to stay.

Believing in either of these men had been a means of survival, irrationality disguised as the need to replace what he'd lost. Nothing more. Perfectly natural in the circumstances. Just as natural as seeking out comfort in Randall, seeking out approval in Gage. He'd been presented with all the things he'd never had, all the things he'd longed for. He'd have worried himself more if he hadn't gone for it.

But it was done. Once he reacquainted himself with the forest, lost that illogical terror of setting foot beneath the canopy of trees, he'd be gone.

He smelled the blood even before the soft knock came at the bedroom door. Bolting to his feet, he bit back the reflexive warning growl as the door inched open.

"Dominic?"

The scent was stronger now, underlined with something else he couldn't define. And for all his convictions, the juxtaposition of seeing Randall at his door and smelling the copper of blood made him light-headed.

"What's wrong?" His gaze traveled to one rolled up sleeve, still mottled with stains that looked black on the white fabric, a humorless parody of the tattoo on pale skin.

"What happened?"

"This?" Randall sounded puzzled as he held up a hand. The moonlight, the only illumination Dominic needed in the room, glanced off the crisp white lines of a bandage wrapped around the palm. "Just a scratch. I cut myself on some broken china while cleaning the dinner table."

Was that all he'd smelled? Dominic didn't notice the inappropriateness of his action until he was already cradling Randall's hand, turning it over in his hand, scrutinizing the injury with senses beyond sight.

"Dominic..." Randall began softly.

"Oh." He let go, stepping back. "Sorry."

"Don't be." Randall shook his head. "Please."

Dominic moved farther into the room as Randall turned to close the door. The other scent came to him then, insidious and intrinsic, hard to distinguish because it was already everywhere. Even so, Gage's scent on Randall made his head spin.

"Why is it so dark in here?"

“Because I don’t need it.” Dominic shrugged.

Randall chuckled softly behind him as he walked over to the night-stand, flicking on a lamp. “Ah, of course...”

“I thought...” He wished he could stop the flow of words, but they were as instinctive as every heightened sense. He couldn’t change his nature even when it was in his best interest to do just that. “I thought he might’ve been angry at you, and...” He waved dismissively at Randall’s hand.

“Gage?” Randall raised a brow. With the added light casting more shadows and definition, he was more ruffled than Dominic would have liked. “Oh, no, Gage didn’t do this. It’s hardly his style. I promise you, I cut my hand on the china, that’s all.”

“But he was angry.”

Randall sighed. “Not angry, exactly, only...” He paused, sitting down on the edge of Dominic’s bed. “The two of you seem to be getting along well.”

Dominic shrugged. “Isn’t that what you wanted? Isn’t that what you asked me to do?”

“I—” Randall stared at him. Dominic was beginning to get uncomfortable under the scrutiny, when Randall laughed a little, the expression creasing away the surprise. “Yes, I suppose I did, didn’t I?”

“Nothing...” Another explanation that strictly speaking he didn’t owe a soul, but it spilled from his lips anyway. “Nothing’s happened, I mean, not like it did with you.”

Randall nodded slightly in acknowledgment, but something about the gesture made Dominic wonder if he believed any of it. He had no reason to, Dominic conceded, any more than he truly believed the spiel about the china. There was too much of Gage’s scent still on Randall’s skin for that, and Dominic preferred to believe it had been a fight. It didn’t smell of sex, it smelled of something far more powerful than that. It smelled of closeness.

“Come here.”

He should have said no, but just the words, just Randall’s hand reaching toward him, and Dominic could only step forward. Randall’s fingers came to rest on his hip, silently encouraging him to sit. The wounded hand slid into his hair. Dominic turned his head, eyes closed, inhaling the scent of blood from Randall’s sleeve, the warmth of his heartbeat.

Randall sucked in a breath when Dominic brushed a kiss to the pulse point of his wrist, tongue darting out as if he could taste the heat. “Dominic...”

“I’m sorry.” Dominic turned his face away, but didn’t pull back. Randall didn’t let him go. “I know there’s Gage and...” He trailed off at the haunted look that crossed Randall’s eyes. The injured hand in his hair tightened as Randall’s lips brushed his jaw.

“No, there isn’t,” Randall said, the murmur hitching with a wistfulness that made Dominic yearn to wrap him up in his arms. Gage was an idiot. If Dominic needed more proof, it was here in his arms, longing for the man who’d done who knew what damage in Dominic’s brief absence. Damage enough that Randall sought him out.

Randall didn’t want him, Dominic knew that. But maybe Randall needed him, just a little, and that might be enough.

Randall’s kiss was as sweet as Dominic remembered it, but laced with a greater desperation, lips nuzzling harder, tongue stroking quicker. Dominic didn’t stifle the moan that rumbled at the back of his throat, instead letting the vibration of it encourage Randall

on.

Contact. Simple contact. He'd missed it more than he knew.

Randall's hands wound into his hair, the edges of the bandage snagging. Dominic didn't care—this was a pain that reminded him he was still alive, called to the wild animal instinct to survive despite it all. He tilted his face up as Randall tightened his grasp, submitting to the kiss.

His pulse hummed in his head, a pleasant static background noise split only by darting licks and low groans, the shuffling of clothes and the creak of the bed. Dominic slid his hands up Randall's chest, clutching at fistfuls of shirt and wishing he'd bothered training himself for partial shifting—it seemed pointless before, but the urge to tear Randall's shirt to confetti had his vision sliding briefly to monochrome.

Fortunately, Randall didn't notice. If he'd worked for Gage this long—a creature Dominic suspected was far more fucked up than a simple wolf—he'd probably seen it all before. But Dominic didn't want him to see it now.

He tugged Randall down on top of him as he leaned back on the bed, reveling in the heat and pressure of another living thing pressed against him.

Randall broke the kiss, hands framing Dominic's face as he gazed down at him. "Dominic..."

Preempting the explanation—*excuse*—he could feel coming, Dominic exchanged one handful of shirt for a handful of Randall's hair, ignoring the quiet protest of his injured arm. "Doesn't matter." He leaned up, nipping sharply at Randall's chin, enjoying this ruffled, disheveled view of such a pristine man. "Whatever it is, doesn't matter."

"Dominic—" Randall tried turning away, but Dominic growled and slanted his lips against Randall's again till he felt Randall relaxing against him. Human, he reminded himself. *Fragile*.

He didn't want to hear excuses. He certainly didn't want to hear about Gage. Bad enough knowing that Gage was just rooms away. Hell, Gage might have set it all up; it wasn't as though Dominic understood a damn thing Gage did. But Gage understood nothing if he thought Dominic would turn this down.

He shivered as Randall's hands worked their way under his shirt. Yielding to that urge, Dominic tore Randall's shirt open, lips latching onto the crook of his neck and inhaling a scent almost as reassuring as fur and forest. Maybe Randall he understood.

Parting his legs around Randall's hips, he heard Randall breathe his name, a sound that turned into a low gasp as Dominic arched up against him and rubbed.

"God, Dominic."

Dominic fought Randall's shirt off his shoulders as Randall sat up, bringing Dominic astride his lap and increasing the friction to a point Dominic forgot to breathe. Somewhere in that moment, Randall kissed him again, and tugged Dominic's shirt over his head.

Gage's shirt. Whatever.

That mysterious tattoo wound all the way up Randall's arm, bold lines twisting and crisscrossing in stylized thorns. Like a snake's forked tongue, the pattern split at the shoulder, one branch cutting across to Randall's collarbone, the other disappearing over his shoulder and down his back. Dominic traced his fingertips over the black scars, feeling the smoothness that betrayed their age.

A momentary rebellion against Gage, maybe? Or had Gage demanded it, wanted to

mark this man as indelibly his, adorn his human the way they'd adorn some exotic temple slave? How did it feel to be that possessed?

Randall's hands skimmed down his back, tickled around his waist, grasped his hips as he rocked up against him. Dominic clutched at Randall's arms, leaving marks in between the intricate lines of the tattoo, and just to cement his tenuous, temporary claim he leaned closer, tracing the sweep of one black line across the strong curve of Randall's shoulder.

His head lolled back when Randall ground up against him again, hissing a response at the lick. It wasn't an annoyed sound, Dominic thought. He hadn't overstepped any unwritten bound. Closing his eyes, he felt Randall reach up, fingers brushing from his Adam's apple, down the center of his chest, hooking into the waist of his pants.

"Lovely," Randall said, almost to himself, kissing the hollow of his throat, and Dominic could only smile. It wasn't true, but it was nice to hear it all the same.

He leaned down, kissing Randall softly, taking his time to savor the taste, and content to take his cues from Randall rather than hurry to set the pace himself. He had a feeling he'd have two speeds once he started—breakneck and stop. When Randall's fingers dug into his hip, Dominic rubbed against him, growl turning breathless and intermittent at the shards of pleasure skittering up his spine.

There was want, and then there was *wanting*. The heat of the erection straining the front of Randall's pants, hard and demanding against his own, suggested that while maybe Randall didn't feel the former for him, Dominic certainly inspired the latter.

Or maybe he's thinking about Gage. Dominic shook his head, wishing he could physically shake off the ghost of Gage so easily. The one thinking about Gage right now was *him*. And with a man like Randall lavishing attention on him, the last thing Dominic should have been doing was wondering what Gage might do if he walked in at that moment.

Kill him. Watch. *Join in.*

The last idea made him shiver, grind harder against Randall. Whether it was out of desire, or to stake his own claim, he couldn't tell. Both. Neither. Too needy to care.

Stupid. Gage would probably tell them not to mark the sheets, and walk back out.

He lowered his lips to Randall's shoulder, nipping hard on the pale spaces between the tattoo, watching the skin flush red. Randall murmured his name, unsnapping Dominic's jeans and wriggling the fabric as far down as he could. As his hands slipped down the back of the pants, fingers squeezing and banding across Dominic's ass, he bit at the crook of Dominic's neck. Dominic could feel the smile against his skin, but it tangled with the heart-spinning combination of pleasure and pain, and the *bite*... Surely Randall knew what he was doing, what he was suggesting.

Instinct reared at the back of his mind, wild and snarling, demanding this interloper be shown his place. But the man—the human—wanted something entirely different, wanted to acquiesce to Randall's unconscious show of dominance. Wanted to be owned, claimed, stolen away in something he could wrap around himself like shelter from a storm. It was all he had.

He caught Randall's lips again in a desperate kiss, breaking it almost immediately with a gasp as Randall squeezed his ass again, fingertips dipping between his cheeks, spreading and teasing. His unzipped jeans pulled taut across his arousal, Dominic's cock twitched like a trapped animal, heavy and feverish. With all his awareness focused

between their bodies, it was all he could do to pull away from Randall's maddening hands, intent on driving Randall just as crazy.

It wasn't fair leaving him alone in this. Unruffled, pristine Randall would damn well dirty his hands, as well as Gage's precious sheets before Dominic was through with him.

Randall leaned back on his elbows, watching him with eyes like mercury as Dominic unfastened those tailored pants, pushing them down to Randall's knees. Flushed dark and already glistening with a smudge of pre-come, Randall's cock arched up at him, far less reticent than its owner to demand what it wanted.

Lower lip caught between his teeth, Dominic tilted his head, glancing at Randall before wrapping a hand around that needy cock. Stroking once, root to tip, letting his thumb rub additional friction along the underside, Dominic cupped the head in his palm, smiling at Randall's sharp intake of breath.

Yeah. Not so tidy now. And hell knew, he thought wryly, unable to keep the bitter thought at bay, if Dominic did anything well with the people he cared about, it was mess them up.

When he looked up, Randall was watching him with a guarded wistfulness shadowing the lust in his eyes, and not for the first time Dominic reminded himself that Randall saw someone else entirely. "Close your eyes," he said. *Pretend.*

If he'd been harboring any real hope, the eagerness with which Randall did as he asked might have hurt. As it was, it just confirmed with a hollow certainty that Randall's thoughts were elsewhere. Very much elsewhere—if anything, the hot shaft in his hand hardened further, tension threading through Randall's thighs as Dominic settled between them.

Did Gage do this for him? Dominic couldn't imagine it, couldn't picture Gage on his knees for anyone. He heard a bitten back moan as he lowered his head, nuzzling his lips along the length of Randall's cock.

Randall made a noise deep in the back of his throat, and from peripheral vision Dominic watched his head fall back against the pillows. Stroking both hands along the inside of Randall's thighs, feeling the shudder in the muscle beneath his touch, Dominic took just the head of Randall's arousal between his lips, tongue circling wetly.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd done this with someone who knew what he was, someone who wouldn't care if Dominic savored the moment with every scrap of his enhanced senses. He sucked harder at the tip, one hand cupping Randall's balls, the other twisting around the base of his cock. He could hear every ragged breath, every hint of a moan Randall didn't want him to notice. In the heat beneath his hands and lips he tasted the clean tang of salt and sweat, and smell the oddly right combination of arousal and the starchy, linen soap scent of laundry detergent. The contradictions that were Randall, he decided.

Massaging the flat of his tongue along the ridged underside of Randall's cock, he felt the vibration of a groan rumble its way through Randall's body.

"Dominic..."

Just hearing his name in that breathless, needy tone spurred him on. His name. No one else's. Fingers stroking a figure of eight pattern around Randall's balls, he grazed the barest hint of teeth along Randall's shaft as he drew back, letting just the tip of his tongue rub hard at the V of skin beneath the head, zigzagging up to the slit and pressing down firmly.

“Dominic...” The fingers in his hair flexed, sending a shiver skittering down Dominic’s spine. “Enough...”

Growling softly, Dominic just tightened his lips. Randall’s fingers tangled harder, hips jerking.

“Please...” Even while pleading, Randall managed to sound stubbornly insistent. “At least let me...”

Wondering again whether Gage ever took the time to lavish the attention on Randall’s body that he deserved without expecting anything in return, Dominic shook his head slightly.

Randall just tugged harder at his hair, not enough to hurt but enough to throw Dominic off his rhythm, keeping him from the deep sucking he was aiming for.

“Please...”

That a man as composed and strong as Randall pleaded with him for anything, made Dominic whimper. He defied angels to deny Randall when he asked for something that way. His own cock felt hot and heavy as he shifted his hips, putting himself within reach of Randall’s hands. It dragged against the sheets like electricity, leaving a streak of moisture along the material.

It wasn’t as though he didn’t want Randall’s hands on him. He’d yearned for that ever since the first time they’d kissed. Still, he could barely muffle a growl that hummed around Randall’s cock when Randall reached for him, long cool fingers brushing up his thigh.

He hadn’t exactly thought it out, but as Randall propped himself up on one elbow, Dominic’s breath caught at the intimacy of their position. He could watch Randall’s eyes as they lingered on his body, watch his lips parting on puffs of breath as his hand slid between Dominic’s legs, squeezing and stroking the tightened sac before rubbing just the palm of his hand along the underside of Dominic’s erection.

And Randall could watch him with eyes like a thunderhead as Dominic shuddered, shamelessly thrusting his hips into Randall’s grasp. Randall could watch him, lower lip caught between his teeth like a sympathy pain as Dominic’s mouth tightened around him, cheeks hollowed, suckling harder.

“Dominic,” Randall said, a soft, unconscious mantra, stroking in time with Dominic’s thrusts until he was whining with pleasure. “Dominic...”

He was beautiful, Dominic thought hazily, looking up at Randall from his vantage point. Sweat glimmering on pale skin, the tattoo seemed to move of its own volition with every shallow breath. Hair in his eyes, lips wet and parted, he took Dominic’s breath away.

Gage was an idiot if he didn’t appreciate this. A complete idiot.

But what if it had nothing to do with appreciating? He could understand, trying to cling to what remained of his tenuous control, if the intensity of this didn’t sit well with Gage’s neatly ordered plans.

If Dominic had anything left to lose, maybe he’d be scared to lose himself to this too.

Tightening his lips around the head of Randall’s cock, he wrapped both hands around the shaft, stroking upward with alternate twists. Randall’s touch faltered slightly, rhythm broken and erratic, but Dominic didn’t care—any contact at all was plenty. Seeing Randall come undone was as physical a pleasure as anything else.

Maybe Randall cried out his name, Dominic couldn’t tell anymore. His pulse

thundered in his head at counterpoint with the slick sound of his mouth on Randall, sucking, licking, tasting. He could feel the trembling release of tension through Randall's hips as he came, and Dominic swallowed what he could.

He felt rather than heard the groan that rumbled through Randall's body as Dominic looked up, their eyes locking. Randall's free hand curved against Dominic's cheek, traced the wetness around the seam of Dominic's lips still stretched around him.

Yeah. It'd be much too easy to get swept away by this. Dominic could almost see Gage's point. Almost.

Reluctantly releasing Randall's softening cock, Dominic could only pillow his head against Randall's hip as his own climax tangled at the base of his spine. Thrusting lazily against Randall's stroking, he turned his head as Randall's fingers brushed his cheek again, nuzzling gently at the still neatly-wrapped wound.

Randall sucked in a breath. Dominic looked up at him, holding his gaze as he kissed the edge of the bandage, tongue tracing Randall's palm. "He really didn't do this?"

Randall shook his head. "No."

Dominic nodded, closing his eyes as Randall sat up, pulling him closer into his arms. Moving by touch alone, he wound his arms around Randall's shoulders, pretending he could still trace the lines of the tattoo as he rocked faster against Randall's fingers, any last traces of sense lost to the simple need to seek out his own pleasure.

He came with a barely leashed howl, fingers digging hard into Randall's shoulders as wet heat splashed between their bodies.

The moments after the sensations finally stopped ricocheting through his body were lost in a pleasantly boneless daze. At some point, Randall shifted them so that Dominic curled up at his side. Dominic only noticed when he realized how much easier it was to lean up, brush dazed little kisses to Randall's lips, feel the warm mingling of their breath.

There must have been a hundred things to say—Dominic could think of at least a dozen without even trying—but neither of them spoke. The kisses trailed off to nuzzling, to just the pleasant haze of contact. Randall's fingers combed a lulling pattern through his hair. Dominic felt the tickle of his lashes against Randall's collarbone as he closed his eyes.

Gage would kill him, Dominic thought, snuggling more comfortably into Randall's arms, content for the first time in forever.

But what a way to go.

* * * *

Dominic fell asleep in his arms. For a while, Randall just watched him, following the rhythmic rise and fall of Dominic's chest and the soft exhales of breath against his shoulder. Eventually he accepted that Dominic wasn't going to snap awake at any given moment, act as though Randall was a stranger and tell him to go back to his own bed.

But then, Dominic had never been what Randall expected. Just a few days, but it felt as though Dominic had been a part of their lives for years. That it took a wolf with a greater hold on his humanity than either of them to throw a rope bridge across the chasm between Randall's wants and Gage's needs...

Randall chuckled softly to himself, watching the breath of laughter dislodge a lock of chestnut hair to tickle across Dominic's forehead. Even in sleep, Dominic grumbled, nose twitching at the sensation, and burrowed deeper into Randall's arms.

This, he thought wryly, wasn't going according to plan at all.

While he couldn't control how Gage presented himself, couldn't expect Dominic to see what it had taken him years to realize, he thought at least they were getting closer. And in their admittedly different ways, they were both sensual creatures, both exuding and demanding an allure Randall doubted was even conscious. Not the way humans were aware of their actions. Gage's careless detachment and Dominic's passionate temperament had more to do with what they were than what they actively sought to achieve. It was in their blood. It was something Randall could never offer either of them.

But this ... he should have controlled himself more than this. Perhaps no one in their right mind would turn Dominic down, but he'd already decided Gage needed this more than he did.

And tonight, Gage had turned him away in everything except word. If Randall ever needed reassurance that the right thing to do, that was it. Right didn't mean happy, but his happiness didn't matter in the long run.

Carefully, he extricated himself from Dominic's arms, already longing for the comfort of that undemanding embrace the moment he left it. It would be all right, he thought, if he served Gage out of nothing but duty and obligation. It'd be easy, then, to walk away and convince Dominic to come with him.

Dominic muttered something, rolling over. The pale sheets tangling around his waist just made the golden, dusky planes of skin and muscle beg to be touched. The scars of a few days ago were already healing, turning from vicious red to clean, new pink, and soon not even that would mar the flawlessness.

Beautiful. A perfect match for Gage. Ice and fire. If there was a way to keep this, to have both...

Randall smiled wryly, leaning down to brush a kiss to Dominic's forehead, combing back a lock of chestnut hair. "Goodnight, Dominic."

As decorously dressed as he had the heart to manage, he slipped out of Dominic's room—Gage would be spitting mad if he knew Randall already thought of the guest bedroom as Dominic's room—into the moonlit hallway. Downstairs a clock chimed three in the morning, but as he made his way down the hall, Randall could see a slash of light under Gage's door.

He shoved back the guilt turning the back of his throat to sandpaper; he hadn't done anything wrong, at least not with Dominic. By the time he reached Gage's door, he was nowhere closer to believing that, but schooled it out of his face as he raised a hand to knock.

To do what? To be rebuffed like he was earlier?

Even so, he couldn't just leave it be and walk away. Gage didn't keep odd hours, liking the illusion of a schedule even when he didn't need to live by one. Randall was never quite certain how much rest Gage needed, but from what he remembered of the early days when his master indulged his true nature more, he could go without sleep for days.

Pressing a hand against the door, pretending he could sense the presence of Gage from the room beyond, Randall closed his eyes.

Sometimes he wondered if it was as much his fault that Gage retreated from the world as it was the fault of the world itself. Maybe he should never have become accustomed to those formative years as though they were normal, maybe then the present

wouldn't seem so strange.

Maybe he should have just kept his feelings for Gage to himself. It changed everything. From the first moment he stopped seeing Gage as distant guardian, he'd known he was only hastening his own departure. It amazed him that Gage hadn't thrown him out then and there. He'd crossed a line, and if Gage was fond of anything, it was his boundaries.

Leaning back slightly, he curled his hand into a fist, rapping softly on the heavy oak panels. "Gage?" After a moment of listening to the silence, he turned the handle, pushing the door open quietly.

The fire was dying. Squat golden flames ringed what was left of the coals, and even in sleep Gage frowned his displeasure at the situation. His brows furrowed beneath a fall of black hair, full lower lip suggesting a pout. He looked as young as Randall ever knew him, though that was relative when he doubted even Gage remembered for certain how old he was.

How many times had he been through this? How many people Randall would never know about had been in his position, wishing for the impossible?

He took the book from Gage's lax grasp, glancing curiously at what his master had been reading, smiling wryly to realize it was something that looked like poetry in a language he didn't recognize. Gage wouldn't even make this fumbling, casual snooping easy for him.

After jabbing some life into the fire, ensuring it'd see Gage through the coldest hours of the early morning, he crossed the room to peel back a heavy quilt from Gage's bed. He couldn't help pressing the warm blanket to his face, inhaling the scent of clean linen and Gage. He'd happily wrap them both up in it, curl in front of the fire until the dawn broke, if that's what he thought Gage wanted.

Tucking it carefully around Gage, he took the indulgent opportunity to watch Gage sleep, to notice all the things he couldn't do otherwise without having to explain himself to some barked demand. He curved his fingers against Gage's cheek, feeling the flutter of lashes so thick and dark they looked like smudged shadows against Gage's cheekbones. Gage's lips parted slightly as Randall brushed the pad of his thumb along that tempting lower lip, wishing he had the nerve to taste it, lick it, nip it.

Gage didn't permit kissing. Even when Randall would have traded the most chaste touch of lips for all the other ways Gage claimed his body, Gage never would.

He let his mouth hover just millimeters from Gage's, close enough to feel every breath whispering warmth against his lips. Randall sighed, gently nuzzling his nose against Gage's before pulling back. "Sleep well, Gage."

Chapter Eleven

Randall wasn't at dinner the next night. Dominic wasn't surprised, but that awareness didn't cancel out the thrum of anxiety. Gage regarded him curiously when he questioned as to Randall's whereabouts, rebuffing the concern with a lame excuse about running behind on the training.

It started at dinner.

Gage wasn't even pretending to eat, and it was that Dominic noticed first, not the way his host's shoulders hunched a little more than usual, or the way his hair fell across his eyes because he wouldn't raise his head.

Eventually he had to ask, "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Fine. Eat your dinner."

He loved the way these men told him to do the most ridiculous things, even as they behaved in ways that made the command impossible. Of course he was going to sit and eat his dinner like a good puppy, while Gage had some kind of breakdown across the table.

When he set the silverware down a little too hard on the plate, Gage flinched as if the noise was a punch. "I'm gonna ask again," Dominic said slowly, standing and leaning across the table, pleased that for once he could attempt to loom over Gage. "And you're not gonna lie this time. Are you okay?"

Gage forced a shaky laugh. "Are you giving me orders, boy?"

"Yeah."

"Such horrible manners..." Gage sighed, looking up at him, the reluctance radiating through him with every odd shudder. "It'll pass. If you really want to do something useful, then accompany me to my room and see that the fire's still burning."

"What's wrong? Your powers again?"

Gage nodded. "They take their toll. Everything comes at a price, Dominic. If you take nothing else from your time here, take that."

"As if I need you teaching me that." Dominic didn't bother hiding the growl, and Gage must have been far gone because he didn't even acknowledge it. Levering himself away from the table, he jerked his head in the direction of the door. "Let's go."

If he'd been in a position where anything either of his two housemates did surprised him, Gage following him silently and without argument would have knocked him flat. Still, it wasn't long before Gage reasserted his authority, striding past Dominic along the upstairs hallway when Dominic realized he didn't even know where Gage's room was. He wondered where Randall's room was. Wondered how often Randall had followed Gage into this bedroom.

As he poked and prodded at the fire, relying as usual more on luck than judgment to try and get it going again, Gage slunk into bed. Dominic listened to the rustling of sheets and blankets, trying to distract himself with his surprise at the unostentatious bed—he'd expected some gothic four-poster, all dark wood and heavy curtains. The clean lines of the Scandinavian styled frame and the plain crisp sheets proved yet again that he had no idea what went on in Gage's head.

Hell, it had only been a few days. Why should he? Just because Gage seemed able to

second-guess every move Dominic made...

"That'll do, Dominic." Gage's voice startled him from the thought. It took a moment to figure out Gage meant the fire.

"You really do get cold, don't you?" Dominic canted his head. "I thought all these fireplaces were just for show."

"Yes, well." Gage huddled further under the blankets. "A rather inconvenient side effect of what I am. Much like you and ... puppy breath or some such calamity."

Dominic scowled. "I don't have puppy breath. And anyway," the mutter was quieter, "how the hell would you know?"

The fire was blazing as enthusiastically as it could without posing a hazard to the house, flames crackling and licking, and for the first time Dominic understood the meaning of the term "roaring fire." It was damn well roaring now, a rushing hissing sound like a pounding river. Just standing across the room from it, Dominic felt as though he was melting, his skin prickling with sweat.

Gage still shivered. Gage still looked as though he was going to freeze over any minute.

"Well, can't you just stop whatever it is you're doing that makes you feel that way?"

The quirked brow didn't stay quirked for very long, Gage was shivering too badly for that, but it had the desired effect. "It really isn't that simple, Dominic." The sigh was almost lost in the shudders too. "It's ... a withdrawal effect, if you will. It'll ease, with time."

Dominic frowned. "How much time? 'Cause you really don't look good right now."

"Why thank you, my ego is delighted."

"And I'm still in charge of looking after you, right?"

"I hardly need looking after," Gage protested, and Dominic figured the argument would have held more weight if his teeth hadn't clacked together through most of it.

He'd crossed the room without thinking, or at least, without thinking as a human. The propriety and subtleties of the act were lost in favor of the wolf's survival instinct; if one of your pack was cold, you shared your warmth.

The wolf thought of Gage as pack. Dominic took a moment to test that thought; Gage provided leadership, protection, provision of skill, shelter, sustenance. The wolf trusted his motives, even if Dominic remained in the dark. The wolf *liked* Gage, liked his bluntness and beauty and even the bitter honesty, and Dominic wished he could argue.

You are the wolf, are you not?

It was a little satisfying, though, to see the unnerved shock cross those blue eyes. Gage stared at him for a second, just watching as Dominic yanked back the foot deep pile of blankets, before reacting. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Ah, pretend I'm Randall—" The shock returned with troops and minions at that, and Dominic couldn't stifle the laugh even if he tried, reluctantly amending his words to add, "—and indulge me, okay?"

Gage tried both scooting away from him, and pushing Dominic away, but the heavy cocoon of blankets he'd wrapped himself up in held him trapped and tangled.

"Quit that," Dominic murmured, arms wrapping around Gage and pulling him back against his chest. How Gage could be cold, he had no idea; just a few seconds under the blankets and Dominic could feel sweat prickling his skin.

"Dominic—"

“I was told to look out for you. That’s what I’m doing. Shut up and sleep.”

Gage grumbled something undoubtedly uncomplimentary, but he did stop squirming. Which was just as well, Dominic thought—there was only so much hot body fidgeting in his arms he could take without Gage wanting to kill him.

Randall would do this. Randall would want this, Dominic was sure of it. He’d want Gage cared for to the best of Dominic’s ability, whatever that meant. Gage was everything to Randall, this was the least Dominic could do to make up for coming between them.

Still, as he curled against Gage’s back and closed his eyes, he pretended he could feel Randall’s arms around him, that once again he was falling asleep in an embrace that made him feel like he’d come home.

* * * *

Waking up to another warm body spooned against his back made Gage wonder whether he’d exhausted himself to the point of hallucination. It didn’t happen often enough to be taken as anything other than some horrid misunderstanding on his part.

Randall?

No. As awareness seeped through bleary eyes, Gage focused on the dying embers of the fireplace, and let the earthy heat of Dominic’s presence drive away the hint of a chill.

Letting Randall into his bed was one thing; a mistake no doubt, but one he’d spent years wishing he could avoid. Permitting Dominic the same luxury, leaving the sheets smelling like wild wind and crisp fall leaves, was so far beyond a mistake even Gage couldn’t recall hearing a word that would describe it. And he’d heard several centuries’ worth, in several languages.

Dominic mumbled something, and snuggled closer, breath hot against the nape of Gage’s neck.

What was he thinking? The wolf was Randall’s, they’d made that very clear last night. It didn’t matter that Randall was, to all intents and purposes, Gage’s, or that his assistant had only found solace with Dominic when Gage turned him away.

Reluctant to leave the warm bower of Dominic’s arms, Gage closed his eyes. Such a mess. He’d known trouble would come with allowing a creature like this to infiltrate his peace, but he’d never imagined it might assume this form. If all fates conspired against him, surely Randall would choose this moment to burst through the door.

But nothing stirred in the pre-dawn hour. He could hear the soft crackle of the ashes in the fireplace settling, and the gentle rhythm of the clock. No Randall. No anyone. Just Dominic, warm and infuriatingly reassuring at his back.

“You should go back to sleep.” Dominic’s words were little more than a rumble against his shoulder. Gage hadn’t even noticed the wolf was awake. Careless. “You’re wasting body heat with all that moving around.”

“I wasn’t moving around.” Gage’s protests went unheeded. Dominic just tightened his arms around him. “I was just thinking.”

“Same thing,” Dominic said. “Is this where you tell me to get the fuck out, that I’ve overstepped my bounds or something?”

If not for Dominic, Gage would have had a very unpleasant night, and he certainly wouldn’t have been this coherent in the morning. The last thing he needed was to cause another scene, another drama, and allowing his powers to spiral out of control would be

both. Dominic didn't need to know that. "Why did you assume you could overstep your bounds?" he asked instead.

He felt Dominic shrug. "You were cold, I could help. It's what I'd have done for..." A pause. "What I'd have done out there. You have to watch out for each other, or you weaken the whole pack."

"Oh." That was not disappointment tangling around his spine, pulling it taut and tense in Dominic's arms. No such thing. Let Dominic think he was creating some makeshift pack; it had nothing to do with him.

Dominic pulled away. "Anyway ... I'll get the fire going again and then I'll leave you alone."

Gage almost hissed as the cold insinuated itself in all the places Dominic left. But what could he say? Don't go? Pathetic.

To a relief Gage wouldn't even admit to himself, Dominic didn't go very far, only sitting up to perch on the edge of the bed. When Gage sat up, Dominic was staring at the hands he dangled limply between his knees. "I have though, haven't I?"

"Have what?"

"Overstepped my bounds. With everything."

Gage didn't reply. He couldn't refute or reassure, but neither could he explain to Dominic how loose those boundaries felt now, as fluid as fragments of a dam breaking off and drifting in a current.

No one had ever walked in and rearranged everything as surely as Dominic had, until Gage couldn't tell for certain if the map he'd long held for the world of his well-ordered life made any sense. There was no explaining that.

Feigning boredom, he tugged the sheet higher, trying to cling to the last vestiges of warmth. And if it helped him disguise the way his body reacted to waking up in someone's arms, all the better.

Trying to hide his arousal from a wolf. Gage had done some pointless things in his time, but that came close to the top of the list. Not that Dominic seemed intent on calling him on it. Gage should have been relieved, but instead the snub—even if it was inadvertent—felt petty. "Is this where you make your dramatic exit?" he asked instead. "Spare me, Dominic. No one's holding you here, do whatever you like."

Dominic shot him a glare over one hunched shoulder. "I wasn't asking permission," he spat, more affronted cat than Alpha werewolf.

"So what are you asking, Dominic?"

Dominic looked away again. "You and Randall—"

"No," Gage interrupted. "That is one conversation I will not have with you. Besides, I'm sure Randall would accommodate any questions you have." Dominic growled at that. It was a shame Gage was in no mood to enjoy it.

"Besides, you won't just let me go," Dominic said. "I'd be dead before I reached the highway."

"Don't be stupid."

"What's stupid? You want me gone, and I've done enough damage here already."

"Dominic—"

"I killed my family," Dominic said, tightness running taut through his back as if someone pulled his strings. "And now I'm fucking things up for you—"

"Please." Gage snorted a soft laugh. The sound seemed to surprise Dominic more

than a yell or a strike might. “You don’t get to claim credit for that. I’ll have you know we were managing that perfectly well before you got here.”

Dominic shook his head, and the unspoken understanding in the gesture made Gage want to reach out and throttle him. No one could understand, least of all a stray puppy who’d wandered in a matter of days ago.

“You don’t know anything,” Gage said under his breath. “Nothing at all.”

Dominic growled again as Gage grabbed him by the shoulders, pinning him back against the bed. It was remarkably easy—too easy. Dominic wasn’t close to being strong enough to leave if an under-strength Gage could overpower him this easily.

Unless Dominic didn’t want to fight.

Gage watched him warily, shifting his hands from Dominic’s shoulders to press into the soft, sleep-warm pillow either side of his head. They weren’t even touching, but Dominic’s heat still seeped into Gage like sunlight.

Randall’s wolf, Gage thought again. But Randall wasn’t here. And Dominic wasn’t leaving. It might have been some salve in the knowledge that Dominic was playing him at his own game, but the only thing reflected in those golden eyes was confusion laced with desire.

If he’d been thinking about anything besides the heat, the warmth of Dominic’s closeness, he might have listened to the whispers reminding him what Dominic was. Not just wolf, not just Randall’s, but the single-handed destroyer of everything Gage sought to build. This sanctuary, the distance between himself and Randall, the distance between himself and his own wants—Dominic eroded them all with his careless passion. And, this close, Gage didn’t even care.

Dominic made a soft sound as Gage closed the distance between them, his gaze fixed on Dominic’s eyes until they were too close to keep in focus. Blurry gold fluttered shut as Gage’s lips found Dominic’s, soft and warm and opened on a breath of surprise.

If he knew how sunshine tasted, he’d have compared it to Dominic’s kiss. Warm and gentle and undemanding, it felt as pliable at his senses as Dominic’s mouth was at his lips. It was anything he wanted it to be, as changeable as Dominic’s nature.

He wasn’t particularly surprised to realize he wanted it to be real, wanted it to be as uncomplicated as that. He wasn’t necessarily happy about it, but he wasn’t surprised.

Pretending he wasn’t quite as breathless as he was, Gage drew back, unable to tear his gaze from Dominic’s lips, parted, puffy, glistening from the kiss. “You’re too honest,” he rasped, “too trusting. I could kill you where you lie. That could be all I’m after.”

Dominic stared up at him, lovely and defiant. Parting his legs around Gage’s hips, his calves locking over Gage’s own, he shook his head. “But it’s not, is it?”

Dominic was also too astute for his own good. Gage should have added it to the list of warning signs, the list of reasons Dominic had to go. Should have. Gage didn’t live by “should have.”

The moment he released the hold on Dominic’s arms, they wound around his shoulders. Forearms braced against the pillows, hands raking into Dominic’s hair, Gage thrust against him, swallowing the growl with another deep kiss.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done something so foolish, or the last time it had felt so pleasurable to make a hideous mistake. Randall, he supposed. Every single time he and Randall touched had been a lovely, breathtaking mistake.

How had Randall touched Dominic? Had the fingers clawing at Gage's back done the same to Randall? Had Dominic learned every inch of Randall's body with the same lips that kissed him now? He pretended he could taste Randall on Dominic's lips, feel the ghost traces of Randall's mouth mapping the same soft wetness as he was.

If Randall knew... No. He quashed that thought as soon as it reared its vicious little head. This wasn't about Randall. It would be easier on them all if it was. Everything Dominic had done to his world condensed into that kiss. He was kissing a *werewolf*, for Hell's sakes, like he was falling and Dominic was the only thing to grab onto.

Though to be fair—and that he blamed squarely on Randall's bad influence—Dominic was doing his fair share of holding on. The whimpered intensity in the kiss almost made Gage forget this was the same belligerent wolf who'd barely tolerated a moment in his presence since his arrival.

If Randall knew *that*, where would it leave them? Where would he lay the burden of betrayal? At Dominic's paws or Gage's feet?

Someone growled into the kiss, and Gage couldn't tell if it was Dominic or himself—his frustration or Dominic's guilt. He nipped sharply at Dominic's lower lip, smiling a little at the warning whine as he lapped to soothe.

No guessing. He liked that about Dominic. Liked that, period.

He'd like it a great deal more if there wasn't far too much clothing between himself and the wolf. Considering he was the one who'd supplied Dominic with said clothing, he didn't feel too bad about ripping at the shirt placket till thread tore and buttons pinged.

When Dominic did the same to Gage's shirt, he might have changed his mind if the rending of an expensive garment wasn't followed by the warm, seeking touch of Dominic's hands stroking his chest, tickling down his sides. He could buy another shirt. This ... this wasn't something any fortune could buy.

Dominic clutched at his hair once he'd been divested of the ruined shirt, every touch sending shocks of sensation through Gage's scalp. Still kissing Dominic as though it was an addiction and he'd just taken a gargantuan leap off the wagon, he made short work of Dominic's pants and underwear. If the wolf had any qualms about being naked, he didn't show it. It wouldn't do for a creature that shifted to feel uncomfortable in either skin.

Just another facet of differing opinion; Gage wasn't sure he felt comfortable in either.

He nestled himself between Dominic's thighs, feeling hard heat seeking out the same through the material of his pants. Teasing them both with the friction of sliding fabric, he licked Dominic's throat, humming softly at the racing pulse. "If this isn't what you want, Dominic, I'd make that *very* clear in the next few seconds. Otherwise—"

"I want it." Dominic's words vibrated in his chest as Gage's lips slid lower. "Want all of it..."

"Oh, little wolf, you have no idea what you'd be asking for." He laughed despite himself, despite Dominic's breathlessly affronted growl. Whether the reproach was for the moniker or the condescension, it didn't matter. It was still quite endearing.

Besides, Dominic didn't know what he was asking for. He didn't want all of it. Once he learned what all of it entailed, once he saw Gage's world was gently, serenely shattering at its seams until everything that mattered either slipped away or slipped his mind, he wouldn't stay. Once he knew Randall wouldn't stay, neither would Dominic.

The thought of losing both of them in one fell swoop tightened a clawed fist around

his heart. Dominic made a surprised sound when Gage gathered him into his arms, holding on tightly.

“Gage?”

Afterward. Afterward, when he remembered how to think without setting off broken jagged pieces of his heart to jab and cut at him, he’d deal with it. Find a solution. Something. *Anything.*

Quietenning Dominic with another kiss, he slid a hand between their bodies, finding Dominic’s cock hard and flushed, sliding eagerly into his grasp. Dominic groaned, teeth grazing Gage’s lips, fingers so tight in his hair that it hurt, a good, affirming sort of pain.

Werewolves healed rapidly, he remembered that much, though he’d never met one as intriguing as this before. Still, if he could help it he didn’t want to cause any damage that would require healing. Dominic’s abilities had been stretched enough in that department.

The small bottle of oil in the night-stand drawer felt oddly cold in his heated grasp. The reminder that he’d only ever used this on Randall before made that chill shiver all the way to his heart. He’d never put a collar and chain on Randall. The human was free to do whatever he chose with whomever, and when presented with the opportunity, had done exactly that. No one expected Gage to do any different.

Just the nudge of his hand had Dominic parting his legs wider, hips raised. Gage rewarded him with a kiss to the satin-soft skin on the inside of Dominic’s knee as his oiled fingers slid between Dominic’s cheeks, giving the wolf little time to think or hesitate—thrusting just his index finger inside the tight entrance.

Dominic bucked against him, clenched hands tangling in the sheets.

“All right?” Another kiss, and another finger. The deliriously hot channel tightened around his fingers, sucking them deeper, clinging to his touch.

“Yeah…” Dominic breathed. “Just … keep doing that.”

“Only this?” Gage crooked his fingers inside Dominic’s hole, a flicking come-hither gesture that made Dominic moan. “You don’t want more?”

“Want—” Whatever else Dominic intended to say was lost on a cry when Gage pressed his fingers deeper and crooked them again. “Oh *fuck!*”

Gage withdrew his fingers, focusing on rubbing the oil into the rim of the puckered muscle, his free hand unfastening his own pants. “We must teach you better vocabulary, Dominic.”

“Fuck you,” Dominic said mildly. Whether it was the pleasure or a miraculous personality one-eighty in the tone, Gage didn’t dare guess. But if that’s what Dominic wanted, he was more than happy to oblige. Fisting the remainder of the warmed oil onto his cock, he braced his hands beneath Dominic’s knees, pressed the head of his cock against that ridiculously enticing hole, and pushed.

He had no intention of hurting Dominic, but touched his mind to the wolf’s anyway to distract from any pain. Dominic could call it brainwashing if he chose, but it was for his own benefit. As tight as Dominic’s body clamped around him, Gage couldn’t believe there was no discomfort. *Relax*, he wanted to say. *I’d rather not do this at all than add injury to insult.*

He dragged his lips along Dominic’s jaw, nipping sharply at his earlobe. “Did he do this to you?” Those weren’t the words he planned to say, but it was that thought on his tongue. “Was he deep inside you like this?”

Dominic swallowed, shook his head in a vehement, wordless reply, fingers digging

almost painfully into Gage's shoulders, heels digging into the small of his back.

Gage drew back, withdrawing almost completely before pushing back inside, encountering a little less resistance this time. Dominic cried out under him.

"Did you fuck him?" Licking Dominic's throat, feeling the growl in the convulsions of the Adam's apple under his mouth, Gage bit gently just under Dominic's chin. Somehow, his tone remained conversational and mild. "Did you fuck my Randall, Dominic?"

"No..." The word was just a breath.

Gage stilled, unresponsive long enough that Dominic squirmed beneath him, trying to incite him to move. Gage pulled back slightly, taking the weight on his hands, gazing down at the wolf. He couldn't taste a lie, and in the midst of drowning in that frighteningly open golden gaze, the guilt nagged at him again, niggly as a hangnail.

They'd done *something*, he'd been so sure of it...

"What?" Dominic frowned, catching his expression. A hand slid from Gage's shoulder to brush back a lock of hair, and the tender, unselfconscious concern in the gesture almost undid him.

Even if he'd had the wherewithal to speak, Gage didn't know what to say. Lowering his head, he caught Dominic's lips in a kiss as sweet and gentle as he could manage while wrapped up in hot, vise-like velvet.

Dominic touched his cheek, but didn't ask again. Preempting any change of heart, Gage sat back, hands sliding down Dominic's body to the back of his thighs, pressing them farther back and apart, changing the angle of the thrusts.

Dominic clutched at the sheets, throat bared as he arched back. "Fuck, Gage..."

"That would be the idea, yes." Gage gritted his teeth, forcing his gaze to Dominic's face. If he kept looking at the point where their bodies joined, where his cock pushed slickly into the tight heat of Dominic's ass, he'd come from that alone.

Dominic looked entirely too right, sprawled and wanting in his bed. The only thing that would make it perfect would be Randall's hands on him, those cool reverent touches stroking him while Gage fucked Dominic so hard the bed frame shook.

The thought alone made him harden further inside Dominic, stretching that flexing hole even wider. Dominic moaned softly, half growl and half whimper, his hips rolling. His cock twitched against his stomach, glistening wetness against that sunlight skin, and Gage couldn't help wondering if he was thinking the same thing.

If he'd expected anger or guilt, neither emotion came. There was just a fleeting wistfulness in the thought that Dominic could open him up enough to give Randall what he wanted. That perhaps, as tattered as Gage's boundaries were in the onslaught of Dominic's infuriating honesty, he could admit to himself all that he truly wanted.

"What did you do?" He spoke against Dominic's lips, barely recognizing his own voice. "The two of you ... what did you do?"

"Gage..." Dominic's words were a hot, damp whisper against his mouth. "It doesn't..."

Catching Dominic's lower lip between his teeth, letting go in long, slow, scraped increments, Gage shook his head. The protectiveness wove around Dominic like an aura, and for the first time Gage saw the same passionate loyalty in Dominic as he saw in Randall, and yearned to curl up in its warmth. "It does," he murmured. "Tell me."

Dominic still hesitated. There was no harm in helping him along a little. "You

kissed.” Matching the word to deed, Gage nuzzled Dominic’s mouth again. Something warm fluttered in his chest at the way Dominic’s lips parted immediately for him, no holding back. He lingered in the kiss for a moment, before thrusting hard enough for Dominic to tear his mouth away in a gasp. “Yes?”

“I...” Perhaps it wasn’t fair expecting coherence when Dominic barely looked as though he remembered how to breathe. “Yeah...”

And still information wasn’t forthcoming. If Gage didn’t know better, he’d suspect Dominic liked this little game. “Touched?”

Sitting back, drawing his knees under Dominic’s thighs, he kept the wolf pinned back against the bed with one gentle press of a hand. Fingertips tracing the hollow of Dominic’s throat, Gage raked his fingernails down the wolf’s chest, feeling Dominic arch into the faint stings like static. Scraping his thumbnail against Dominic’s nipple earned him a near howl, and he filed it away for future reference.

Future? With a wolf? Shaking off the unbidden thought, he met Dominic’s gaze, watching the gold flare dawn-bright as he tightened the other hand, fingertips a harder pressure against the underside of Dominic’s cock. “Yes?”

Dominic swallowed hard enough that Gage could feel it in the hand against the wolf’s chest, and nodded. “Yeah.”

From that first night, he’d known Dominic was lovely. Loud, ornery, insolent, but lovely. But lying beneath him, morning light sparkling in the sweat on golden skin, pleasure making his eyes unfocused, he was on a par with the most beautiful thing Gage had ever seen.

Game over...

Dominic cried out as Gage withdrew, flipping him over and positioning him on his knees before sliding back inside. Back arched toward him like the wanton, wild animal he was, Dominic clutched at the sheets, chestnut hair falling forward and obscuring his face.

“Gage, just...” Dominic shook his head, wisps of hair sticking to the nape of his neck. “*Please.*”

Stroking one hand up Dominic’s spine, Gage wound a hand into that messy hair, tugging Dominic back up against him. Thrusts pounding deeper, tight rippling heat making sparks dance behind his eyes, he latched lips and teeth onto the juncture of Dominic’s shoulder.

“Don’t beg,” he whispered hoarsely, raining kisses against Dominic’s shoulder blade, his neck. “*Never beg.*”

“Gage...”

He sought out Dominic’s cock again, stroking harder and slicker, letting Dominic’s own pre-come increase the friction. Whining softly, Dominic leaned his head against Gage’s shoulder, reaching back for him with one hand while the other lowered to his cock, their fingers intertwining, controlling and encouraging the strokes.

Still trying to be Alpha, little wolf? He wouldn’t expect any different. He doubted it would be such a rush if Dominic’s aggression didn’t infuse every touch, every thrust, every growl. Possessing a wild creature completely might be impossible by its very nature, but to challenge it, watch its reactions, was as heady a temptation as anything else.

A creature he couldn’t possess, and a human he couldn’t release.

All he’d wanted was peace; when had it all gone so wrong? *This* had gone wrong

from the second he allowed Dominic into his bed. Perhaps Gage valued restraint, but even he had his limits, and Dominic had been testing them since he arrived.

Even now, everything Dominic's body did tested every ounce of willpower Gage had. Every time he thrust deep, Dominic clamped down around him, making him fight the pleasure spiking through his body in ragged shocks. And every time he paused, losing rhythm preferable to losing control, he heard a soft chuffed laugh that betrayed the fact Dominic knew precisely what he was doing.

It wasn't sex. It was a duel. What was the prize? The upper hand in this, or something more than that?

As much in misdirected punishment as offering pleasure, he spread his knees a little wider, changing the angle of the thrusts, stroking Dominic faster and harder before the wolf had the chance to change his own strategy. *I don't lose, little wolf. Not to anyone.*

Licking at the tense muscles of Dominic's back, the shudders reverberating up Dominic's spine vibrated beneath his lips. Gage closed his eyes, losing himself in the rippling of heat around his cock, the sounds Dominic made, the scent and heat of the blood rushing beneath his golden skin.

Still stroking Dominic, Gage wrapped the other arm around his chest, reveling in the rapid thunder of the wolf's heartbeat. Dominic made an odd little sound as Gage held him tighter, wishing he could leech the warmth into himself. Then Dominic's hand slid along his arm, leaving goosebumps in its wake as he anchored himself tightly in Gage's arms, and he almost forgot to breathe.

Too much.

Dominic growled as Gage disentangled himself, shoving the wolf back down, chest first against the bed. Dominic moved under him, tightening and rubbing in all the right places, and he managed one thrust, two, before the orgasm ripped through him. Shoulders straining, sensation radiating from his cock through the small of his back and up his spine, it was all he could do to loosen his grip on Dominic's hips so he wouldn't leave marks.

And damned if Dominic didn't almost howl his pleasure, though the sound was muffled by the pillows and Gage couldn't quite tell. It didn't matter. The hot, sticky liquid trickling over his fingers told him enough.

As soon as he could move without seeing stars, he withdrew from Dominic, missing the contact as soon as he did. Dominic muttered something that didn't sound very happy, but didn't lift his head. He cursed the concern that had him brushing a gentle touch along Dominic's back, and snatched his hand back as soon as the possibility of "concern" hit him.

His world falling apart concerned him, not Dominic. Not anyone.

He needed distance. A place where Dominic's scent and heat didn't wind around every thought he had, as though they had rights to be there. Rights to him. Standing from the bed, he fastened his pants as he strode toward the door. "Feel free to clean yourself up." He gestured vaguely to the closed bathroom door. He didn't want Dominic prowling the halls like that; he could use Gage's bathroom before he let Dominic run into Randall looking well and truly fucked.

Perhaps they could compare notes on Gage's epic mistakes.

He could feel a headache stirring, the chill of the late morning chafing his bones. He needed a drink. And a time machine. Pity, he used to know creatures who could do that

sort of thing, once upon a time.

“Gage—”

“Come downstairs when you’re done.” He made the mistake of glancing back at Dominic. As he stepped into the hallway and closed the door, he could still see that lovely body sprawled against his sheets. Too tempting. Never wise to look back at temptation. “We’ll discuss it then.”

Chapter Twelve

When Dominic was done gathering body and mind into something resembling normal, he found Gage downstairs, nursing a glass of something strong enough Dominic could smell it way across the room, and frowning out of the window.

Gage turned to look at him, and instinct had him standing his ground, not averting his gaze.

“Will you tell Randall?”

The odd hint of vulnerability of the question didn't match the look on Gage's face. Admittedly, if he didn't know firsthand, Dominic might have believed Gage had that superior, haughty expression pasted to his face permanently.

Remembering the way Gage's eyes looked when he was lost in pleasure, haunted and open all at once, made him shiver. There were too many sides to this man, and there was no way any single person could hope to understand. He sat on the armrest of a no doubt stupidly expensive chair, ignoring Gage's look of consternation. “Do you want me to? 'Cause it kind of sounds like you do.”

“Dominic—”

“You don't understand. Yeah, you said that before.” Canting his head, he studied Gage. “But you know, I think it's the two of you who don't understand. And if you're making me some kinda chew toy between the two of you, then—”

“Believe me, Dominic, you're many things but a chew toy isn't one of them.”

Even the usual almost-venom wasn't there in the humor. Dominic frowned, dropping his gaze to his hands, watching them resting limply between his knees. “But you love him, don't you? Why are you both screwing around with me when you already have that?”

He'd half expected some flustered, spluttering defense, Gage questioning his parentage while reminding him someone as lowly as a mere wolf couldn't begin to figure out how his head worked. Maybe it would have been easier that way, gentler on Dominic's conscience to delude himself that Gage and Randall's relationship didn't run deeper than anything he'd ever seen before.

He remembered that night in front of the fireplace, the adoration in Randall's eyes. It wasn't quite that emotion melting the hard edges of Gage's eyes to a liquid, seashell blue, but it was close.

The light bulb that went off in Dominic's head was about the same shade of laser sapphire, bright and screaming as the flashing lights on a cop car. He stood without noticing it, closing the distance between himself and Gage because he couldn't help it, needed to be closer.

“You don't want to love him, do you?” There was a rigid set to Gage's jaw that should have warned him he was getting very close to the line, but Dominic pressed on anyway. “Why not? I mean, if you can't see the way he looks at you, the way he talks to you, if you think he doesn't worship the ground you mope on...”

Gage arched a brow. “I'm sure you've noticed he does the same to you.”

“Is this where you tell me ‘it doesn't mean anything’?”

“No.” Gage shook his head. “This is where I tell you something you should have

learned a long time ago, little wolf. We're not like him. It's foolish to develop attachments to such ... transient creatures."

"Transient creatures?" Dominic barked a laugh, feeling himself showing teeth. "Is that how you see him, just as a 'transient creature', just as some other human? Gage, he adores you, he'd move the fucking earth for you if you asked. If that's what you call transient..."

"Don't think one fuck permits you to take that tone with me, Dominic."

"I'll take whatever damn tone I like. You're not my Alpha and Randall's not just your damn 'human.' The sooner you pull your head outta your ass and notice that the better."

He was pushing, and he knew it. But Gage still wouldn't meet his expectations. Instead of another supercilious comment, or a physical blow Dominic almost expected, Gage just took a slow sip of his brandy. Behind him, a breeze blew a scattering of leaves across the windowpane, and something just as wild stirred in Dominic's blood.

"Don't you think it'd be easier if I'd never noticed any of that?"

"No, not really. If you're in a position where you can turn down what he offers, then great for you. But don't ask me to understand when your excuse is 'transient creatures.' Shit, if that's what you want, I could change him for you and—"

"No!" Gage snarled, a low, discordant ring to his voice that didn't even sound like him. Certainly didn't sound human, and not for the first time Dominic wondered what the hell he was really dealing with. "You will not do that, under any circumstances, do you understand me?"

"What if he wants it?"

"He'd want it for the wrong reasons."

"So, your abilities stretch to being a psychic too, huh?"

"I'm getting tired of your tone, little wolf."

"Then say something intelligent."

"What would you have me say?" Gage growled, his fingers around the glass turning white, knuckles tight against skin. But the wolf in Dominic could tell the bluster from the real aggression; there was no real threat here, at least nothing physical. "That I'm foolish enough to believe in a pathetic little world where everything works out in the end? Come back to me with that request when you've lived a quarter of the time I have, Dominic. Come back when you've seen a fraction of the things I've seen."

"Then you should know the difference between the past and what's right in front of you." Dominic gentled his tone, but didn't back away. "You should recognize truth when it's biting your ass. You think just 'cause everything's been shitty before that you have the right to throw away something so precious as that? I've lost *everything*. *Twice*. And if I rolled over and as good as died, what fucking difference would that make now?"

The silence following his words tugged at his senses, urging them to amp up and see if there was something they'd missed. He could smell the brandy, the lingering traces of sweat and arousal. Gage flickered into sharp monochrome for a moment, every nuance of the rise and fall of his chest, the slow blink of his eyes, the loosening in the tension of his fingers looking like time lapse photography.

Leaves scuffed the window again. He could hear the soft inhale and exhale of Gage's breathing, and the shuffle of fabric as Gage moved a little from the window sounded like a marching band. Reining his senses back in, he watched as Gage drained the glass.

“You speak as if I planned any of this. He was my ward, he was a human I couldn’t bring myself to kill, nothing more.”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“No.”

“Gage—”

“For a long time, he was barely on my mind. I thought it was only right to ensure the creature I’d rescued was given the very best opportunity. I could provide that at least. He’d never have been in that position if I’d left him where he was, and it was my responsibility to see to it. He received the best tutors, the best education...” Gage shrugged. “By the time he was ... I don’t know, eighteen or nineteen, he was coming back and forth, I was trying to find a place—this place—where we could find a little peace, where I didn’t have to keep looking over my shoulder.”

Dominic looked away. He could understand that, if nothing else. Maybe Gage’s rationale made about as much sense to him as the library had a short while ago, but he knew that desire for safety, for sanctuary, a place to belong with someone who understood and accepted you anyway.

He’d spent a long time looking over his own shoulder, head down, tail between his legs, wishing for a place to call his own. And he’d had it, for a while, just like Gage. Maybe he understood how it felt to lose it too.

“One day,” a faraway look crossed those laser blue eyes as Gage continued speaking, “it was as though someone flipped a switch. It was as though I had a stranger in my home, but one that knew me, better than I knew myself sometimes. He was no longer a creature I’d rescued, he was no longer anything I recognized. Anything I could control.”

“So you pushed him away.”

Gage faced the window, nodded. “Repeatedly.” He turned to Dominic, smiled wryly. “But you well know how stubborn he is. He wouldn’t give up, and I...”

“Went into denial about it all.”

“There’s denial and acceptance that things won’t be as you wish them to be, Dominic. They aren’t the same thing. Sometimes you have to let things go.”

“And sometimes you have to fight for them.”

“Yes, well.” Gage sent him a pointed glare. “You’re doing such a good job of that yourself, aren’t you?”

With a low growl, Dominic shouldered past Gage to stand at the window himself. Clouds the color of old over-washed linen scudded across the huge sky above the treetops, promising not a storm but at least a damp afternoon. He could barely remember the feel of rain against his fur; all he could remember now was the feel of sticky, cloying blood.

Arguing with Gage was pointless. If he refused to see, there was nothing Dominic could say. Gage had a damned answer for everything. “I’m going out,” he announced. When Gage just murmured some noncommittal response, he added, “to shift.”

Gage looked up. “Are you ready for that?”

Ignoring the reflexive bristling—Gage had a point, after all—he turned back to stare at the tree line, watching the breeze ruffle the pointed caps of the pines. “Yeah.”

Gage nodded. “Then try not to draw any attention to yourself. Otherwise, do as you please.” A glimmer of the familiar devil glinted in his eyes as he set his empty glass down on the coffee table, and turned for the door. “I suppose I ought to get myself

cleaned up after you made such a mess of me.”

If he wasn't out of credits with the Don't-Get-Yourself-Killed Fairy, he might have asked Gage what kind of mess he meant. As if anything he said got under Gage's skin. As though Gage would still think about this conversation once he was out of the door.

Instead, he took himself out of the door.

A fine drizzle prickled at his skin when he left the manicured grounds proper, only one destination in mind. The smell of rain and ozone and rich, dark vegetation lured him like a beckoning lover, one he was even less capable of refusing than Gage or Randall.

Gage *and* Randall.

The canopy of trees were as effective as an umbrella, just the occasional fat drop of rain gathered on the leaves dripping onto his hair, into the neck of his shirt, working its way down his back. As he undressed, heartbeat accelerating with every piece of clothing he took off, he ran that over in his head again. Gage and Randall. Randall and Gage.

Maybe it was the wolf in him, the pack animal so used to sharing affection, but even the man had no problem admitting he was drawn to both of them. And, well ... he couldn't kill the little flare of pleasure that skittered through him, warming him even in the cool forest; they were drawn to him, too.

They just weren't happy about it. But then they weren't too happy about loving each other, either. *Stubborn dumbasses...* Maybe all they needed was someone to bring them together.

He knelt in the damp earth, running the rotting leaves, broken twigs and small stones through his fingers like sand, inhaling the musky scent. He didn't know how far he was from the place in the woods he'd been attacked, but he couldn't smell blood here. Couldn't smell strangers. Just earth and rain and the lingering scent of Gage's touch. It wasn't anything a human could still pick up, but it was a guilty pleasure, wearing the scent of a lover for hours, days, after their last contact.

Smiling to himself, Dominic closed his eyes, letting the adrenaline of anticipation flood his senses. Later. Right now, everything else could wait.

He'd gone longer without releasing the wolf before, but never after living in that form for so long. He still forgot, sometimes, that he had two feet and not four paws, and that eating dinner without silverware was just asking for one of Gage's pointed stares.

He'd always thought shifting was a little like being drunk. A giddy, out-of-control sensation that, if you were coherent enough to actually think about it, would probably be a lot worse than it was. But watching from a distance, he could almost believe it all happened to someone else. They weren't his bones realigning, it wasn't his skin pulling and tightening and finally blooming with a ticklish brush of dark chestnut fur.

If it hurt, he wanted it too much to notice anymore. *It's worth it. It's worth every second.*

He wasted a few indulgent moments stretching himself out, grooming a few unkempt tufts of fur, testing his paws on the springy earth. The breeze blew, ruffled his coat, sent a couple of still-dry leaves skittering.

And Dominic ran.

He didn't know how long he raced through the forest, dodging trees and bushes, or how far. The wolf was just happy to be racing with the wind, tail swishing, paws skipping over the earth.

It only occurred to him where he was when something primal and ancient in his head

that neither man nor wolf could control made him skid to a halt, tail and ears flattened. He couldn't put one paw in front of the other; it was as though someone suddenly dropped a glass barrier between him and the scene in front of him.

It'd been darker then. He hadn't really taken it in. And even though he couldn't see it now, the cloying, coppery smell of blood clung to the back of his throat.

Whining quietly, he stepped back, shaking his head to try and rid himself of that smell. He trod on a twig, snapping it. The sound echoed through the trees like a gunshot, and he shied away so hard he side-swiped a rough tree trunk, the bark grazing painfully through his fur.

He could smell human. Here, in the place his pack had died, where he'd been left for dead, where Gage's people found him, he could still smell human.

And not long-faded human. They'd been back. Recently.

He couldn't pinpoint it to a specific moment, or a specific face. He barely remembered faces at all, just shadows and scent. It was a human from that night. That was all he knew. A human from that night who'd come back.

His tail was tucked so low between his legs he almost tripped on it in his haste as he turned to run. *They've come back.* The thought ran over in his head as he raced back the way he came, ignoring the branches whipping at him, ignoring the slips and stumbles over slick ground. *They've come back.*

Looking for me.

Chapter Thirteen

Just a routine check on the staff drew Randall out into the grounds. Funny that he'd found so many things that required his immediate attention in the days after he'd slept with Dominic.

Oh, he wasn't avoiding Dominic, unless you counted the desire to put as much space between himself and a temptation that rocked his senses, but he supposed the wolf might see it that way.

And he was only avoiding Gage until he was confident he could face his master without the transgression blaring bright in his eyes.

No. Standing in the drizzle on the front lawn, staring at the warm comfort of the house as though he was a lamb gamboling like an idiot toward the slaughterhouse, he convinced himself he wasn't avoiding anyone. He *liked* standing out in the rain. It was good for the soul.

Well ... he couldn't help but think it was better for his health than dealing with either man inside that house. He needed to get the plan back on track. Dominic was meant for Gage, not for him. Just because he'd made a mistake once didn't mean he had to perpetuate it.

With nowhere else left to explore that didn't involve going inside for at least a coat, he found himself at the edge of the trees where Dominic had reacted so badly.

Where we first kissed. Shaking his head to clear that thought, he followed the barely-there path deeper into the trees.

Evidence of the attack still scarred the tangled bushes and lichen-covered trees. A branch broken here, a patch of undergrowth flattened there. Rainy days and dewy mornings had cleaned the blood off the leaves, but the earth still bore darkened patches, a rusty brown staining the mud.

It still rested uneasy that someone had found their way onto the land. Even if they were only chasing Dominic, who would imagine it was a good idea to hunt any kind of wolf around here? Even Randall and Gage hadn't been aware of a pack so close.

But someone had. Someone who'd taken great pains to learn about the terrain, to arm themselves for a serious hunt. Someone who'd known the quickest way to get onto, and off, the property. He *really* didn't like where that train of thought inevitably led.

Backing up from the deeper part of the forest as if the old "out of sight, out of mind" could make him feel better, he skirted the edge of the trees, circling back toward the house. Going inside wasn't any more appealing than earlier, so he continued onward, following the tree line toward the north of the property where it led to nowhere but the rear of the land and the forest and hillside beyond.

He understood Gage's desire for this solitude, he really did. But sometimes he couldn't help feeling it would be a lot easier to protect the things he cared about in a place where the environment itself wasn't working against them.

Anything could be out there. Anyone. Maybe Gage could tell what lurked or didn't in the trees, but Randall's inability to—his damn *humanity*—left him feeling like the last man in the room to get the joke.

Something moved deeper in the trees, and Randall *really* didn't feel like laughing.

He didn't know what he'd expected. Hunters, guns, an ambush. Certainly not the large chestnut wolf that sprang from behind the thicket in a glorious leap, seeming to hover in midair for a gravity-defying moment before landing on the damp ground with near-silent paws.

Dominic.

Weaving between the trees as though they weren't there, he could almost believe Dominic hadn't even sensed him. Almost. He knew otherworldly creatures well enough to know that, if nothing else, they *always* sensed you, whether you wanted them to or not.

He followed in the direction the wolf ran, quickening his pace but still nowhere near catching up. It was enough just to keep Dominic in his sights.

Last time he saw Dominic like this, he'd been bloodied and broken, more dead than alive. To see him now, vibrant and so full of life as he raced through the forest, everything else slipped Randall's mind. It was worth it at any price. Even in the gloomy light, Dominic's coat rippled with sheen and shadow, his tail streaming out behind him. Up ahead, he cut in front of Randall, slowing as he moved to the edge of the trees.

Randall found himself breathing hard in sympathy, as though he'd been the one running full pelt. He thought Dominic might have stopped to wait for him, but as Randall approached, it became clear Dominic had other things on his mind.

While he knew both Gage and Dominic had forms other than human, and had now been privileged to see both, he'd never given much thought to the moments in between. He knew, logically, that Dominic didn't just change from man to wolf in a puff of smoke like some magic act, but the process was something he'd been oblivious about.

He had a nagging feeling he shouldn't be watching now, that this was something too intimate, too private. Dominic could have chased him off if he chose, but that still didn't make him feel less of a voyeur.

As he watched, the wolf's frame stiffened, four paws braced rigidly against the earth, tail tucked low. Teeth bared in a grimace, Dominic growled a low, angry sound as his spine arched and elongated. Randall gritted his teeth, torn between keeping his distance and reaching out to offer what comfort he could.

Maybe Dominic could glean some strength from the fact he was there, that with every sound Dominic made, it broke Randall's heart, just a little.

Something he didn't even want to identify made a cracking sound, and with a yowl, Dominic's hind legs snapped forward, joints reversing. The front legs followed suit, and while Randall watched, fascinated and anxious, as Dominic's snout shortened and flattened, the long brushy tail did the same. The growls turned to more human grunts and gasps as the fur rippled, then disappeared into the familiar golden skin.

As Dominic, human now and hunched over, caught his breath, Randall's gaze landed on the pile of messily folded clothes he hadn't noticed tucked on a dry, low branch of a nearby tree. If he couldn't help lessen the pain, then at least he could slip back into his role of servitude. He took down the clothes, shook them out, and draped them over his arm as he waited for Dominic to acknowledge him.

Eventually unfurling, stretching as he stood, Dominic looked at him, and smiled shyly. "Hey..."

"I'm sorry." Randall held out Dominic's clothes, deciding to forgo any explanation and cut straight to the apology. "I shouldn't have just watched, but you were so beautiful."

“It’s fine.” Dominic chuckled, busying himself with his clothes. “I just ... don’t really think of myself that way. I’m just me, y’know?”

“That’s what I said.” Randall smiled a little. “And your change, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything that...”

“Gross?” Dominic grinned wryly.

“Amazing,” Randall corrected. “The strength it must take to go through that every time...”

“Ah, it doesn’t take much.” Dominic shrugged. “I’m kinda a passenger. I’m not putting a whole lot of effort in, believe me.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” The smile crinkled the edges of Dominic’s eyes. “But like I said, I’m just a passenger. I can’t control it either way.”

“Does it hurt?”

An odd look crossed Dominic’s eyes, and for a moment Randall worried that he’d taken offence at the question. But the expression was more a mild curiosity, the way Randall supposed *he* should have looked.

“Yeah,” Dominic said after a moment. “But you don’t mind.”

He should have averted his gaze while Dominic dressed, but as unselfconscious as the man in front of him was, Randall’s attention refused to leave him alone. The way his shoulders moved, bone and muscle supple beneath the skin, reminded him too much of the way the wolf leapt and pounced, lithe body rippling, absorbing the shock of impact as it landed.

The sheen of rain on that skin just reminded him how it tasted, how it felt. He’d never noticed before how much of the wolf was inherent in Dominic’s behavior, as though the line that separated man and wolf was dotted and flexible. Nothing like Gage. Gage was wrapped in lines, each one of them reinforced a dozen times over.

There was a fading graze on Dominic’s side, too new to be one of his original injuries, but already healing. It didn’t seem to bother Dominic as he shrugged into his shirt, leaving it unbuttoned, so Randall didn’t ask. “How did it feel?” he said instead.

Dominic looked up at him before frowning slightly and gazing off into the trees again. “It was fine.” Randall waited. Eventually, Dominic shrugged, smiling slightly. “It felt good to be *that* me again. Really. It’ll take time, I know that. And I know it’s gonna be hard forgetting what happened, but...”

Unable to help himself, Randall tugged Dominic into his arms, cheek against warm chestnut hair. “No one expects you to forget, Dominic. Just that maybe with time, it’ll cause you less pain.”

In his arms, Dominic fit as though it had always been this way. As though it had only ever been the three of them in this place, and the rest of the world had ceased to exist somewhere along the way.

“I know.” Fists curling into the back of his shirt, Dominic smiled wryly against his chest. “Are you gonna be the same as Gage and tell me my whole ‘vengeance’ kick is a waste of time?”

“Is that what it is? Vengeance?”

Dominic shook his head. “It’s my duty. They were mine to protect and I...”

“Then no, I don’t think it’s a waste of time. I think it’s dangerous, and purely from a selfish standpoint I’d prefer you didn’t.” He smiled softly when Dominic leaned back,

looking up at him. “But duty is never a waste.” Not even when it was duty to a man who had no idea how deep it ran. Not even when it hurt, when it went against everything Randall thought he knew about himself, about Gage.

“I thought...” Frown lines creased between Dominic’s brows. “I thought I could still scent them out there. Like they’d come back.”

Randall froze. He cursed his humanity again when Dominic tensed in his arms, though anyone would have felt his reaction.

“What?” Dominic pulled back slightly. “You think it’s crazy, don’t you, that I’m just traumatized or some shit and—”

“No.” He shook his head, hands resting on Dominic’s shoulders, half holding on and half keeping him at a distance. “I don’t think you’re crazy. Just ... tell me what you sensed.”

He listened while Dominic told him about running in the forest, about unconsciously picking up a trail and following it, about the growing fear as he began to realize where he’d smelled the trail before.

“The hunters?”

“Yeah, I guess ... maybe.” Dominic shook his head. “Or just something—*someone*—from that night. It couldn’t be anyone else. Who else was around that night? Just you and Gage and your staff, right? But I’d have picked up on them around the house or the grounds.”

As the dread coiled around his spine, Randall wished he could tell Dominic that he knew all about growing fear. Instead, he just pulled Dominic closer again so those wolf eyes couldn’t see his face.

“Maybe I did imagine it,” Dominic said against his shoulder. “But it felt so *real*.”

Holding on tighter, he kissed Dominic’s hair, schooling his voice to stay even. “If you sensed it,” he said carefully, “then there was something that caused it.” *Yes*, a vicious little voice in the back of his mind said, *you caused it*

But how could he have known? When he’d left Gage the night Dominic arrived, his gun loaded, and then proceeded to let the ex-staff know their services would no longer be required, how could he have predicted it would come to this?

He thought letting them walk away would be easier on his conscience. He remembered the confusion among the men when he’d made his announcement, citing unforeseen issues and blaming Gage’s displeasure with their failure to secure the property.

“Your boss is screwed up,” one of the men said, looking none too happy to be thrown out of such a well paying job. Randall supposed he wouldn’t be either, given the circumstances. “Somethin’ not right with him.”

“He’s difficult, I grant you that,” Randall said. “Of course, a final payment will be made to make up for this sudden decision. You won’t be out of pocket.”

The men grumbled, but eventually agreed to leave immediately. Randall promised he’d arrange the return of their belongings as soon as possible.

He’d fired off his gun at the dirt before heading back toward the house, counting each pull of the trigger against the number of men. Otherwise Gage would know no shots had been fired, and it mattered so much that Gage believed his orders had been carried out to the nth detail.

It mattered so much that Gage thought Randall did as he was told. How else would

not doing as he was told have any effect whatsoever?

He couldn't kill; he'd known that from the moment Gage began making the tacit order. He'd longed to believe Gage didn't really want him to either, didn't want him to become something he wasn't. But Gage didn't want him as he was. Gage didn't want a human.

Gage refused to need him for anything else. It was all he'd known to do. When Gage put him in charge of re-training the staff, when Gage kept him around because of the skills and services he could offer, it was better than nothing. Eventually Gage would tire of that too, but for now ... for now it had been enough.

Yes, like an attention-seeking child, breaking toys to get noticed when loving him didn't get you anywhere.

But now Dominic was affected. His hopeless reasons faded in the face of the shiver that ran through Dominic's body as he burrowed into Randall's arms.

"It'll be all right," he promised, feeling the conviction as a soul-deep searing. The how of carrying out that vow wasn't clear yet, but damn it, he'd do it. Dominic's safety mattered too much. "We're safe here, you know that. No one will harm you."

He'd keep the new staff on alert for any intruders. Pace the whole perimeter himself if he had to, until he either confirmed or reassured himself that the old staff had decided their payoff wasn't enough, that the "somethin' not right" with Gage deserved closer inspection and they were back to chase wolves on Gage's property.

If that was true, he wouldn't have to worry about what Gage thought. Gage would surely kill him before even voicing an opinion. And what more did he deserve? It had been a stupid, stupid risk.

"Yeah," Dominic said. "I know."

"I'll speak to Gage," he lied. "Next time he's out here himself, he might be able to pick up the same trail."

"He can do that?"

"He can do a lot of things..." Randall felt his smile tug a little bitterly. "But you should ask him that."

Dominic stepped back, golden eyes almost amber in the gloom of the weather. He reached for Randall's hand, fingers tracing the newly replaced bandage. "I'm probably just freaking over nothing, you know. It's no big deal."

"It's a big deal to you. And keeping the two of you safe is my job."

"You don't owe me anything, Randall." Dominic shook his head, smiling softly as he brushed his lips against Randall's palm. "I don't pay you enough. Or, you know, at all."

"All the more reason." Sensation tingled up his arm from Dominic's kiss. Curving his fingers against Dominic's cheek, he leaned closer, kissing lips that tasted of rain and the breeze through the pines.

He'd never thought there'd come a point where walking away from Dominic might be just as bad as walking away from Gage. One he'd known his whole life, one he'd known for just days, but he'd already begun thinking of them as one entity, compartmentalizing them both in the same place in his heart. Neither of them would forgive him if Dominic was hurt, or someone he should have dealt with infiltrated Gage's sanctuary.

He'd never forgive himself. He could only mitigate the damage before any of that

happened. “You should get inside.” He reluctantly drew back from the kiss, lips clinging to Dominic’s, feeling the contrast of warm skin and cool rain. Beginning to button Dominic’s shirt, just for an excuse to feel the heat of his skin, he added helpfully, “It’s raining.”

Dominic chuckled. “Yeah, I noticed. It’s raining on you too, you know.”

You have no idea... “I have some work to do,” he said, smoothing Dominic’s shirt against his chest. “I won’t be long.” He let go and walked away before the urge to follow Dominic to the door like some over-zealous chaperone got the better of him.

“Randall?”

“Hmm?”

“Be careful, yeah?”

He nodded, fists and throat clenching at the concern in Dominic’s eyes. “Yes,” he managed before he turned away. “I will.”

Chapter Fourteen

For the first time in living memory—his own or anyone else’s—Gage almost wished he had somewhere else to go. Somewhere he could lose himself in the crowd. The cool, quiet halls of his home closed in on him as he prowled the corridors, aware with every breath of Randall and Dominic’s presence, but doing all he could to avoid them. The familiar sanctuary he’d created for himself now kept everything he wished he could forget far too close.

They still met for meals, but two nights running—twice since he’d dropped his casual little bombshell—Dominic left him and Randall to their own devices immediately afterward. If Dominic had been hoping to instigate something, he’d be sadly disappointed to know that Randall just fussed with plates Delia would only re-stack as soon as his back was turned, and Gage lingered on expensive red wine he barely tasted.

Tired of being left alone with Randall late into the evening when his resistance and willpower were fading, and the desire to confront Randall with Dominic’s words rose temptingly close to the surface, Gage demanded dinner early. He didn’t even care if Randall and Dominic showed up. The masquerade act of it all was beginning to seem ridiculous. He could see every wire, every faded seam, and all the smoke and mirrors in the world wouldn’t fix it. Still, he couldn’t help but be relieved that they did turn up.

Dominic spent most of the meal giving pointed looks. Gage kept ignoring him, and Randall for his part kept silent, as though everything was fine.

“I’ll leave you to it.” The same familiar line came as soon as Dominic was done wolfing down his meal. “I wanna check out some stuff in the library.”

“What’s the rush?” Gage asked mildly, sipping wine that could be lighter fluid for all the attention he paid.

“Ah, no time like the present, right?” Dominic looked at him and grinned. “Seize the moment and all that stuff.”

Gage rolled his eyes. “How admirable.”

“I think so.” Dominic stood, but not before giving him another look that suggested if he could reach to kick Gage under the table, he would have.

Throughout it all, Randall kept rearranging his leftovers on his plate like an embarrassed teenager trying his best to ignore the thinly veiled conversation the adults were having.

Gage gritted his teeth; no doubt Dominic would claim the upper hand there, claim that he was more adult than either of his tablemates. Surely he thought Gage’s behavior was immature. Besides ... mere words wouldn’t fix this. *You don’t want to love him, do you?* No, he didn’t, but the past few years had taught him that it mattered little what he wanted, his heart stubbornly refused to allow him to let it go.

Delia stuck her head around the door as Dominic left. “A-are you done, sir?”

Well and truly. “Yes.” He threw his napkin onto his plate as he stood, rattling the silverware against the china. He felt the spike of Delia’s nervousness clear across the room.

“Was everything all right, sir?”

“Yes, fine.”

“I’m sorry if the meal was a disappointment,” she went on in that irritatingly oblivious way humans did when they couldn’t accept the answer they were given. “There wasn’t much time to prepare with the change of plans... Oh, not that I minded, of course!”

Gage dismissed the babbling with a wave of the hand, tuning her out as he picked up his glass and walked over to the window. Gazing outside always made him feel a fraction less claustrophobic. Behind him, he heard the chink of plates, and Randall’s helpful, reassuring murmurs. Always reassuring everyone else.

China and glass crashed like melodic thunder.

“Oh! Oh no, I’m so sorry, sir!”

When he turned, Delia was fussing with a napkin trying to wipe the spill of wine that bled across the tablecloth. A crystal wineglass lay on its side, the rim cracked and broken against the edge of a serving dish.

“It’s all right,” Randall said soothingly. Placing a hand over hers, he gently steered her away from the spill and the jagged edges of broken glass. “Careful.”

“But...”

“It was just a glass, no harm done.” Randall smiled, still gentle and calm in the face of the housekeeper’s escalating nerves. Delia’s fearful gaze darted to Gage, and Randall’s hand just tightened over hers. “No one’s angry.” Randall looked at him pointedly. “Accidents happen, we’re only human.”

Only human. Only not.

Watching Randall with Delia, he was reminded again of Randall’s humanity. The empathy for Delia’s upset was a palpable thing, there in Randall’s smile, in the softness in his eyes, in the careful way he kept her from trying to pick fragments of crystal from the tablecloth.

Randall cared about these creatures. He was one of these creatures, no matter how Dominic chose to perceive it. Randall wasn’t like them. He could never know how it felt to watch the ones you cared about grow old and die, watch the attachments formed fade away to nothing for no reason but a difference in species.

If he admitted his love for Randall, admitted to them all how deeply that attachment ran, where did that leave him? Losing friends and acquaintances over the centuries who weren’t half as special as Randall had almost killed him, sent him seeking this seclusion. If he let himself love Randall, let himself fall that deeply, it terrified him that he’d rather die with Randall than try and exist in a world without him.

He’d thought so often on Dominic’s suggestion over the past two days that he’d worn it thin and faded. But it was impossible. To change Randall would be to deny him this warm mantle of human feeling and empathy that permeated the room. It would mean turning Randall into something he didn’t want to be, and Hell knew Gage demanded enough of him already to blur those edges, demanded too much that eked away at Randall’s humanity.

He wouldn’t even offer. It would kill him a thousand times over if Randall, given the choice, chose his humanity over forever with Gage.

“Leave us,” he said, startling both the humans at the table. Delia dropped a fork she’d just picked up, and it skittered across the hardwood floor. Gage thought wryly that Randall’s humanity was the only reason his staff stayed at all. It certainly wasn’t his warm and effervescent charm. “It’s fine, Delia, don’t worry yourself. You’re dismissed

for the evening. I have things to discuss with Randall in private, and we aren't to be disturbed."

Delia glanced nervously between them, but nodded. Gage could feel her relief radiating like a beacon. "Yes, sir. Thank you."

Randall watched him as Delia left. Perhaps he was waiting for an explanation, but Gage didn't have one. Weary of being lost in his own head, he crossed over to the chair by the unlit fire, sat down and closed his eyes.

"Come here." It was Randall's choice, Gage told himself, to stay or go. He hadn't made a demand, he'd made a request.

His senses tracked Randall as, after a moment's hesitation, he approached, slow and suspicious. "Should I light the fire, sir?"

His frustration was keeping him warm enough. That and the closeness of Randall, grudging as it may be. "No."

I want you.

Randall didn't ask, and Gage mercifully avoided embarrassing himself with such a remark. Dominic would, a little voice murmured in his head. Dominic would have no compunction telling either of them what he wanted and how he wanted it. The wolf's utter unselfconsciousness was like the first sip of water after a drought. If only he could take on Dominic's resolve the way he could leech the wolf's heat, they might stand a chance.

"Gage..." Randall's voice was muffled as he knelt, head bowed. "There's something I need—"

"No." Gage shook his head, eyes slitting open. "I didn't send her away so we could talk, Randall." Randall's head snapped up, and any lingering doubt about his compliance dissolved in the melting mercury in his eyes, the flush staining his cheeks. "If this is about Dominic," Gage began, enjoying the way Randall's eyes widened in surprise. "I know. I don't mind." He chuckled softly, a little at Randall's reaction and a little at his own. "He is an infuriatingly tempting boy..."

Randall dropped his gaze again. "So you and he are—" A pause, and Gage wondered what words Randall was scraping around for. "—getting along?"

"You could say that." Gage tilted his head, before moving forward off the chair abruptly, tumbling Randall back onto the rug in front of the dormant fire. The one in his soul was raging. "You're not still trying to arrange a replacement, are you, Randall?" Randall stared up at him, as Gage lowered his head, nuzzling the side of Randall's neck. "You'd give up so easily on something you want?" he asked again when Randall's only answer was to clutch his shoulders, one hand sliding up reverently to the nape of Gage's neck, sending a shiver of pleasure sliding down his spine.

"Gage..."

Something else tickled at the back of his mind, something—*someone*—moving about in the hallway, and Gage smiled against the crook of Randall's shoulder. "You never thought perhaps we could have him, Randall? Both of us?"

Randall moved beneath him, knees bending as his legs parted, letting Gage nestle closer without a breath of hesitation. "But he..."

Nipping along Randall's jaw, tasting and licking, Gage bit down hard enough on his earlobe to make Randall jump, body arching under him.

The movement Gage sensed in the hall was that close to fleeing. If he didn't act now,

the opportunity to turn the tables on the damned wolf would be gone. “Oh, I don’t think he’d be too adverse to the idea, would you, Dominic?”

Randall froze beneath him. The movement out in the hall froze too, but a moment later the door creaked open, and Gage supposed that answered the question. So did the look on Dominic’s face as he stood in the doorway, a book limp in his grasp, eyes dark at the scene in front of him. His tongue darted out to lick unconsciously at parted lips. No, Dominic couldn’t hide his emotions if he tried.

Randall’s reaction to Dominic’s presence—Dominic’s heat—hardened further against Gage’s groin, but to take offense would be rather hypocritical. He rocked his hips against Randall’s parted thighs, proving to both of them that even if everything else was taking the scenic route to hell in a hand basket, this was fine. More than fine.

“What...” Dominic swallowed, tried again. “What are you...”

“Hmm.” Gage rolled his hips against Randall, feeling the heat of Randall’s cock against his own through the annoying barrier of cloth. “You seemed to recognize it the other day. If you’ve forgotten already, then...”

Randall clutched at his shirtsleeves, head falling back with a gasp as Gage switched direction, hips shifting from side to side, keeping a constant pressure and friction between their bodies. Dominic licked his lips again, and Gage found himself mimicking the action, remembering how those lips tasted.

“Gage, don’t...” Randall shook his head. “Please...”

“You don’t want Dominic to see you like this?” He lapped at Randall’s bared throat, willing Randall to face him. “Not even when this is when you’re most beautiful?”

Randall shook his head again, but his fingers clenched tighter on Gage’s shirt, body rising under him to meet Gage’s movements with erratic little thrusts of his own.

Despite his hesitation, Dominic edged closer. The wanting to wasn’t the issue. Gage could smell that, see it in the dilation of Dominic’s pupils, hear it in the uneven breathing. No, it was whether Dominic would.

Whether Randall let them. But Randall was his. Randall would never refuse him.

“Is it okay?” Dominic asked softly, speaking to neither of them and both of them at once.

“Is it?” Gage slid a hand into Randall’s hair, forcing him to look into his eyes seeing as Randall had no intention of doing it without encouragement. “Do you want this too, Randall? Or is your body—” he thrust hard into the cradle of Randall’s thighs again, “—lying to me?”

“No...” Randall gasped. “Not lying.”

Gage smiled. “Good.” Randall gasped again when Gage made short work of his shirt buttons, pushing the sides of the garment aside, fingers raking down Randall’s chest and leaving faint white lines in their wake that faded to a blushed pink. “Dominic tells me,” he said, touch smoothing up Randall’s chest, pinching one nipple, lowering his head to lap away any pain, “that you didn’t fuck him.” Randall made a strangled noise under him, cock throbbing, hands tight in Gage’s hair. “Is that true?” The lapping turned to a nip sharp enough to make Randall hiss. “Didn’t you even want to, Randall?”

“Gage—”

“Should I tell you how it feels?”

As soon as Dominic was within reach, moving as though he was being reeled in by an invisible line, Gage sat up and reached for him. Already a little unsteady, Dominic

dropped to his knees, hands braced on his shoulder. Gage slanted Randall a glance before drawing Dominic into a quick, hungry kiss.

Dominic was still whining quietly when Gage let him go. Randall, head back, hair haloing in pale strands against the rich darkness of the rug, stared at them with mercury eyes. “Yes,” he said, a husky edge to his voice that made Gage’s cock arch against its confines. “Tell me.” Reaching a hand out to touch Dominic’s thigh, Randall’s gaze darted between them before locking onto Gage’s eyes, his voice murmuring two syllables that almost made Gage come without either of them touching him. “Show me...”

Gage chuckled. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

Dominic made a helpless little sound. “But you’re not...”

Randall propped himself up on one elbow, the hand on Dominic’s thigh reaching up to curve around the back of his neck, tugging him down into a kiss.

Did Randall taste him on Dominic’s lips, the way Gage always imagined he could in reverse?

The intimacy of the kiss, the way Dominic’s brow furrowed with the intensity of the touch, the movement of Randall’s throat, his jaw, reminded Gage why he’d chosen not to partake of it before. Why he *longed* to now, with a ferocity that made it hard to breathe.

But he could still wait, content enough to vicariously feel every brush of lips and tongue by the way Randall’s body twitched under him, by the way Dominic’s fist clenched and kneaded at his shoulder.

If someone else had dared kiss his Randall, Gage could have spent many a happy hour dreaming up a myriad of ways to rip their skin from their bones and castrate them with it. But this wasn’t someone. This was *Dominic*, and Gage couldn’t tell which one of them he longed to switch places with the most in that moment.

Dominic groaned against Randall’s mouth as Gage insinuated a hand between his legs, rubbing the hardness pushing into the front of Dominic’s jeans, heat radiating along Gage’s palm.

“Stop...” Dominic pulled away from them both so fast Randall nearly lost his balance, the twist of his body almost pushing Gage off.

“Dominic—”

“No...” Dominic shook his head, eyes narrowing as he stood. “I’m not gonna be a fricking bone for you two to fight over.”

Gage felt the urge to sigh, arousal ebbing but not quite dissipating. “Is that what you think you are?”

“Wanna know what I think?” Dominic ran his fingers through his hair, backing up, knocking into one of the dining room chairs. “I think you’re both idiots. I think neither of you see what’s in front of your damn faces.”

Randall stiffened under Gage at that accusation, refusing to look at either him or Dominic, even when Gage backed off, getting to his feet.

“So you’ll walk away from something you want?” Gage raised his chin, glaring at Dominic, daring him to change his mind.

“Why the hell not?” Dominic snorted a laugh. The book he’d brought in lay forgotten on the floor by the door, and even Gage didn’t care. Dominic turned for the door, taking, Gage noticed, about three tries to remember how it worked. Even as the door slammed behind him, its echo reverberating through Gage’s skull, Dominic’s last words lingered on. “You two do it all the damn time.”

Chapter Fifteen

Damn them. Damn both of them.

Taking out his anger on his clothes, Dominic left them in a haphazard trail at the edge of the forest. A leading path for his Hansel and Gretel back at the ranch? Not likely. And right now, he doubted Gage or Randall gave a shit if some kindly psychotic old witch made wolf kibble out of him.

Of all the mistakes he'd ever made, believing he—or anyone—could knock any sense into those two had to rank in the top five. The other four spots contained variations on why the hell he'd come here in the first place and why the hell he'd stayed.

Even when he shifted, they were on his mind. Past the rushing of the change and the heady scents and distracting sounds of the forest, they still nagged at him. Why couldn't they *see*? He lunged at an innocent weed, tearing its garish pink flower to shreds with his teeth, petals streaming like confetti. He could see it, and he'd only been here for days. They'd been together years and they still deluded themselves. *Stupid!*

Something small and brown rustled in the undergrowth, a mouse or a shrew. It shrieked as one large chestnut paw landed on it, batting it like a golf ball along the forest floor. No, he was the stupid one. To think he could just show up and fix it all, bridge a chasm he knew nothing about...

The mouse squealed again, scrabbling at the base of a tree. He pounced, both front paws crushing the small form. Silence. It wasn't much of a meal but at least it was one he caught for himself. It wasn't one handed to him on a silver platter by a grudging host.

Licking his muzzle clean, he padded farther into the shade of the trees.

No ... "grudging" wasn't fair. There had been nothing grudging in the way Gage kissed him, in the hands that stroked him, mapping out the faded scars on his body with feather-like touches. Pausing, he shook out his coat, trying to shake off the sensory memories that didn't quite belong to this body.

What would Gage's hands feel like buried in his fur? How would Randall's skin taste if he licked at that tattoo like this? The wolf's form wouldn't allow him to feel those thoughts the way he wanted to. Shifting to his human form, he leaned against a nearby tree trunk, its bark rough against his bare skin. His head fell back, legs parting.

He recalled that perfect, mind-numbing second when both of them touched him. Gage's fingers, Randall's lips, with Dominic's body like some sort of living conduit between them. He could almost feel the electricity crackling. Almost believe it would work. The warm, wet velvet of Randall's kisses, the cool, soft whisper of Gage's touch.

Oh God, why did they *stop*?

It wasn't even warm enough to break a sweat—he had a feeling it never got that warm up here—but the heat crept through his skin anyway. Closing his eyes, he tried to focus on those memories. On how it might've felt if they'd carried on.

Eyes still closed, he slid a hand down his chest, not even caring whose touch he pretended it was as long as it wasn't his own. The rough bark behind him scratched his shoulders like a lover's nails as he arched against the tree, cool displaced air whispering across his skin tightening his nipples.

Whining softly, he flicked a thumb against the pebbling nub of a nipple, sucking in a

breath as the sensation arced across his chest. His body thrummed with it, a yearning that made each breath shudder.

Raising one hand to his lips, licking and suckling at his fingers, he lowered the other to his lap, wrapping a hand around his cock. His moans vibrated against his fingers, tongue sweeping wetly over them, and he stroked himself once before stilling, until just the crown remained within his curled grasp, his hips trembling with the effort of restraint.

Because they'd tease, the bastards.

Biting down on his fingers so hard he could taste blood, he rewarded himself with another torturously slow stroke. He tried to make it different from the way he usually touched himself—because they wouldn't know that, not yet—hips rocking as he thrust against his hand, trying to seek the friction and pressure he craved.

Keeping his grasp frustratingly loose, he curved his palm against the tip, sliding lower as the tension shivered through his thighs. Randall might feel sorry for him, he thought, tightening his grasp, squeezing the head of his cock, a sweep of his thumb spreading the moisture that beaded at the slit. Gage wouldn't—Gage didn't have the capacity for sympathy—and Dominic forced himself to withdraw his hand completely, just running his knuckles against the sensitive underside of his shaft.

Oh, fuck, he wished it was them doing this...

He wouldn't even kid himself he had the sort of willpower Gage had. Gage had enough willpower for a small European country. Toes curling into the lush, damp earth beneath him, he wrapped his fingers around his shaft again, ass lifting a little off the ground with every jerk of his hips.

Drawing one knee up to his chest, he slipped the slick fingers between his legs, grazing over the tight, heavy sac, then sliding farther. A low bitten-back growl rumbled in his throat as he brushed a single fingertip against his hole, just teasing at the resistance. He stroked himself harder again, lower lip caught between sharp teeth, knees spreading wider as he tried to decide whose touch he wanted it to be. A second finger joined the first, and he rubbed in alternate directions.

He wanted it to be both of them. Maybe it was the only way they could coexist.

A gasp escaped despite his best efforts as he pressed his fingertips inside, only to the first knuckle. It was enough. Free hand moving slickly with sweat and pre-come, he tightened his fingers, chasing the climax that clawed at the base of his spine.

Eyes squeezing shut, knees drawing together, he came with sparks of light and color going off behind his eyelids. Black and white, blue and silver.

Damn both of them. All of them.

Leaning back against the tree trunk, he gazed up vacantly through the crisscross of branches, just trying to catch his breath. A soft breeze cooled him off, drawing his attention to the splashes of moisture on his skin and reminding him he could've had this with Gage and Randall rather than his own hand. He should have been wrapped in their arms rather than scraped up by a tree trunk and stuck to leaves and twigs.

He snorted a laugh. At least the tree was less abrasive. He'd get further trying to talk sense into it than he would Gage and Randall. Surely he'd given them enough time, now. He should just go back, make them see, explain it so—

A branch snapped.

Ears straining so hard his head hurt with the effort, Dominic sat up, hands digging into the soft ground at his sides. They hadn't followed him, he'd have *known*. The heat of

wondering if they'd been watching, doused immediately with the awareness that the noise came from the opposite direction to the house. Whoever was out in the forest, they hadn't come from the ranch.

Not Gage. Not Randall.

The wind shifted, bringing the scent to him. *No...* Visions of that night flicked through his head in painted splashes.

Blood. Mud and paws and running.

Pain.

Howls, and then nothing but silence. Laser blue and dancing fire.

He forced himself through the shift so desperately it left him breathless and shivering. Keeping low to the ground so as not to draw any attention to himself, his ears pressed so flat against his skull that even with his senses it was a wonder he could hear anything.

In the distance, voices spoke in hushed tones. Fabric rustled and leaves crunched. The forest suddenly smelt of cigarette smoke and oil, cloying human stench that caught in the back of his throat.

The voices stopped.

Dominic turned and ran. The forest floor was just a blur of motion under his paws, nothing but the sound of wind rushing in his ears and his pulse crashing around in his head. If anyone chased him, he wasn't slowing down to check. He should have shifted back, but he didn't feel safe enough to do so until he was closer to the forest's edge where the trees were thinner and he knew the ranch was within reach.

He stopped long enough to pick up his jeans, almost tripping onto his face in his haste to put them on, ignoring the way the fabric clung damply to his thighs. The sharp jabs of the stones digging into his feet didn't even register, he ran as easily as he would if he still had paws.

There was just getting away.

Same scent. Same man, he was sure of that now. They'd come back for him. They'd come back to finish the job, and instead of standing and fighting, Dominic was racing back to the safe bower of the ranch, to the backing of Gage and Randall. Back to his pack.

He didn't even care what state he'd find them in, as long as they were safe. Gage must have sensed his flight, because the front door opened just as Dominic reached the path toward the porch. He all but shoved Gage back inside the hall as he slowed.

"Dominic, what's—"

"Hunters," he managed on a fast rasped breath that turned two syllables into one.

Gage's eyes narrowed. "Impossible. I'd know."

"Same ones..." One hand on Gage's chest just for something to lean on, Dominic tried catching his breath. He looked up at Randall. "I told you, same one..."

Randall stared at him, wide-eyed, and Dominic knew in that single gaze that he'd made a mistake. Another one. Several in the same day, had to be a record even for him.

"Dominic—"

Before Randall could finish either the explanation or the admonishment, Gage stepped between them, as effective as any barrier. "It seems," Gage began, on a slow, deliberate exhale, "there are things the two of you have neglected to tell me. Again."

* * * *

For a long time after Dominic left, Gage just stared at the dining room door as though it wasn't entirely fathomable that someone could walk away. But Dominic wasn't just someone, not anymore.

Randall wouldn't even look at him, hands braced behind him on the edge of the table, gaze fixed on the fireplace. Gage wished he'd at least button his shirt; the distracting temptation was something he could do without.

"*You're both idiots,*" he heard Dominic repeat in his head. "*Neither of you can see what's in front of your damn faces.*" He could see perfectly well, thank you. He could see a stubborn human and a wolf who didn't know his place. Blind, reckless loyalty and loud, careless contrariness. How Dominic thought it was possible to build anything from those foundations, Gage couldn't understand.

Closing his eyes, he tightened his grasp on the back of a dining chair till he heard the wood creak. He didn't understand anything anymore. He needed some time, some peace, needed to get away from both of them. Dominic had the right idea there, even if he was badly mistaken in other areas.

Striding to the door, his attention was so focused on the simple act of placing one foot in front of the other, he barely heard Randall move.

"He's right, you know," Randall said softly. Gage heard the shush of fabric, and had to close his eyes and swallow at the thought of that open shirt grazing Randall's chest. "What am I saying, of course you know. You've always known."

"I'm not discussing this, Randall." Shoving the door open, Gage marched out into the hall, cursing under his breath as Randall followed. He *wasn't* discussing this. He didn't even want to think about it. If he didn't let Randall speak, if he didn't say the words Gage wanted to hear with a desperation that took his breath away, he could pretend none of it ever happened. "You and Dominic can do as you please," he went on, "but don't bring me into it."

Randall shook his head. "You already are. You're the reason for it all, Gage, can't you even see that?"

"Oh please, I'll accept that ridiculous rambling from the wolf, but from you?"

"No..." Randall barked a harsh laugh, a bitter sound Gage would never have imagined coming from him. "You never accept anything from me, do you?"

"Randall—"

It was just as well the wolf chose that moment to barrel back into the house as though the devil himself was on his tail. The devil surely wasn't—he had far better things to do than chase wolves—but from the panic in Dominic's eyes, the shivered agitation in every movement, he might as well have been.

If Dominic wasn't quite so terrified, Gage might have felt the petty need to call him on the fact he was storming back into the house seeped in the musk of arousal. It was hard enough to concentrate on the words when he could still feel it winding around them like mist. At least until Dominic and Randall contrived to turn the pleasant haze of simple lust into all-consuming irritation.

This. This was why Dominic was wrong. There was nothing to come in between, not when Gage didn't even recognize the men standing in front of him. "Well?" He resisted the urge to massage his temples. There was a headache of mythic proportions brewing, and it had very little to do with expending too much power. Though perhaps he'd willingly accept the headache in return for expending that power on kicking Dominic and

Randall to kingdom come.

How had he ever entertained the fantasy that, just maybe...

“Gage, I didn’t think—”

“Forgive me for not finding your opinion reliable at the moment, Randall,” Gage snapped. “This was your responsibility. If Dominic’s right, then I want to know why.” Randall looked away as though the words had been a physical blow. His hair, still mussed from earlier, obscured his eyes, but Gage knew what he’d see in them.

“I don’t know, sir.”

Even Gage’s breathing, slow, measured, but a little more forceful than was necessary, betrayed his disbelief. So many things he’d controlled perfectly till now. So many ways Dominic’s presence was unraveling everything he’d meticulously arranged.

But it wasn’t Dominic’s fault, not this time. Gage couldn’t speak for the first time, but he knew Dominic hadn’t led anyone onto his land this time. The wolf’s fear, a cold swampy thing like breathing in ice, convinced him of that. It made his blood sing, but for all the wrong reasons. Since when had someone’s fear been something he sought to soothe? Everything Gage was, relied on stoking it.

Unraveling...

“We’ll discuss it later.”

“Gage—”

“Later, Randall. We have more pressing concerns. There’s vermin on my property that needs to be disposed of.” Randall hesitated for a moment, and Gage wondered if he’d speak—tell the damned truth—if Gage allowed him enough silence. Maybe he just didn’t want to know. “Send the men to the east woods,” he went on when Randall stayed silent, rolling up his shirtsleeves. “And get some guns from the weapons’ room. Dominic will stay here and we’ll—”

“Like fuck Dominic is staying here!” Self-same Dominic snapped, glaring fire at him. “They killed my fucking family! If you think I’m letting you ‘dispose’ of them, then—”

“And clearly they’re after you. If you want to hand yourself over to them with a rhinestone collar around your neck, be my guest. However, while you *are* my guest, you’ll do as you’re told.”

“The hell I will!” Dominic blocked his path to the door. “That’s the exact damn reason I’m going with you!”

“The exact reason you ran back here, tail between your legs?” Gage arched a brow. Something flickered in the fire of Dominic’s eyes, something bitter and vulnerable, and for a fleeting second Gage wished he could take that back, however much he believed it. “You’re safer here.” And it mattered that Dominic was safe. More than he’d care to admit.

“It concerns him, Gage,” Randall said softly. “It’s his revenge to take.”

“Not on my land, it isn’t.” Gage shook his head. “And while we’re standing here arguing like fishwives, whoever dared infiltrate my property is merrily leaving. Go, Randall. Now.”

Randall spared him a glance, a guarded, somber look that told Gage he really didn’t want to have that conversation that would be necessary after all this. Then he turned and left without a word.

“If anyone approaches the house, then the—”

“Don’t fuck with me.” Dominic growled. “I’m going, whether you want me to or not. I’m not your dog.”

No, he certainly wasn’t. Gage ran a frustrated hand through his hair. Nothing made much sense anymore, and he’d never felt so much like he was floundering in waters so foreign he could barely see from one second to the next. “Then why didn’t you take them on yourself, hmm? If you’re so hell-bent on your vengeance, why did you run back here to us?”

He barely caught the significance of his question until Dominic’s eyes widened, surprise banking the flames. Perhaps they were all floundering, really. It wasn’t much of a comfort.

“I’m going.” Dominic didn’t answer the question. Turning for the door, he unfastened his jeans, letting them drop to the floor. Despite the situation, a part of Gage had to stand back and appreciate the view. “If you want to stop me, then you can dispose of me too.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?”

By the time he reached the porch, the dark chestnut wolf was shaking itself out at the bottom of the steps. It looked up at him with those same, stubborn golden eyes. Still, it was easier to allow that concern to surface when Dominic couldn’t verbally question him about it. “You’ll get yourself killed.”

Dominic watched him for a second, ears perked, head canted. Then with the drop of a shoulder he was gone, racing across the path and toward the forest in a blur of paws.

“It’s not our place to stop him.” Randall appeared by his side, handing Gage a handgun. Gage checked its contents before clipping it shut. “Gage, I should have told you—”

“Not now.”

“I didn’t think it warranted concern. I thought...” Randall shook his head. “I thought Dominic must’ve been imagining it. I didn’t think it was real, I never thought—”

“No. You didn’t.” Gage glanced back as he followed Dominic. “So by humoring him, you’ve put us all at risk. Nice work, Randall. Excellent. Expect a pay rise.”

“Gage—”

He hadn’t realized Randall was following so closely until he almost crashed into him when Gage turned. Lips pressed into a taut line, Randall stared at him with an expression on his face Gage had never seen aimed at him.

The first time Randall saw his true form, saw him hunt, Gage expected fear, expected revulsion. None came. Randall took it all in his stride, dealt with it with quiet efficiency, the way it had always been. Until now. Until those rain-cloud eyes looked at him as though he was anticipating pain.

“I’m sorry,” Randall said, and whatever else Gage doubted, he didn’t doubt that. “I never wanted this to happen...”

Stepping back, Gage ran a hand over his face, through his hair. It didn’t help. The world still felt inside out and upside down. Randall was still staring at him as though he was looking at a stranger, and Gage still wanted nothing more than to pull him into his arms and lie that everything was all right. “I know. We’ll ... deal with it all later, Randall. For now, I want those damned humans off my land.” He turned, following Dominic’s path again, following by sense as much as sight. “And keep that damned wolf

from digging his own grave.”

There was no sign of Dominic by the time they entered the deeper part of the forest, but Gage could feel him scuttling around through the bushes, hear the crackle of branches under his paws. He couldn't hear anything else. Couldn't sense anyone else.

Impossible.

He stopped when the makeshift path led to a dead end, a tangle of bushes and vines high as his waist. The ranch and the land around it weren't visible from here, and above, the trees formed their patchwork canopy, letting only a latticework of milky sunlight through.

“Gage...”

He held up a hand to silence Randall's whisper. Above them, a bird chirped. Somewhere in the forest, Dominic stilled. And there it was. The sensation of intrusion. Of blood.

Without realizing, he'd clenched his fist into the front of Randall's shirt, hard enough to feel the fabric begin to rend under his nails. Randall grunted softly as the action tugged his collar tight, one hand wrapping around Gage's wrist, a gentle touch that snapped him out of the trance.

“Go,” Gage said, letting go and stepping back. “Dominic's south of us. Follow him, and make sure he isn't getting himself killed.”

“But what about—”

Gage handed Randall his own gun, butt first. “Take it.” *Keep yourself safe.*

Randall's gaze searched his, and whatever he found must have satisfied him. He took the gun, tucking it into the back of his waistband. “Are you strong enough to shift?”

“Probably not.” Gage shrugged. “If it's necessary, I'm sure I'll manage.” He wasn't sure of that, not with the recent re-training still fresh in his mind and its repercussions still rattling round his powers.

But Randall didn't ask again, just nodded. “Be careful, Gage.”

Gage watched him disappear through the trees, a monochrome shadow as well-trained as Gage had been able to achieve. Reliable. So why was there a cold dread coiling his spine like a venomous snake ready to strike when he finally understood what left him so uneasy?

If he could shift, he could scale the trees, balance in the branches and watch for movement. But if he was happy to revel in his true form when humans were present, then he wouldn't need to be out here, a mile from the middle of nowhere. Bad enough he had to do it to hunt, to feed. And until he knew what he was dealing with, he couldn't afford to hunt. It was one thing disposing of transient staff that no one missed; killing unknown variables was another thing entirely.

For no reason whatsoever, he suddenly tried to picture Randall carrying out that unsavory aspect of his job. Sometimes, he wondered if there was anything he could demand of Randall that he wouldn't get. Whether Randall even had limits when it came to him.

Dangerous. For all of them.

Shaking off the thought, he set off at a ninety degree angle from the direction he'd sent Randall. For all his training and stealth, Randall was still human, would still draw more unconscious attention to himself than Dominic or Gage would in the same circumstances.

Randall wasn't bait, exactly, but Gage banked on whoever was out there following him, and in turn leading themselves straight to either himself or Dominic. He didn't know which one of them would be most lenient.

Ahead of him, he felt Dominic's presence doing precisely what he hoped—circling back in a wide arc toward the edge of the forest, heading off anyone who dared go in that direction. The thought of anyone infiltrating his land was bad enough. The idea of humans in his home, rifling through his things, marring and tainting everything he'd chosen and cherished, made Gage's stomach turn.

Once, when he'd kept a home in what was now the Middle East, they'd burned it to the ground when they learned what he was. Fortunate for him, he supposed grimly, that they believed he was in the building at the time. Days later, picking through the remains of the whimsical trinkets and junk with which he'd surrounded himself, he'd wondered briefly who really was the demon, them or him.

He was monster by blood. They were monsters by choice.

If they destroyed this, the home he'd shared with Randall, the place he'd truly believed might be his sanctuary for a very long time, he'd never forgive any of them. And if they harmed his human or his wolf, he'd ensure humanity paid the price for it. If they burned him at the stake extracting justice for harming what was his, then so be it. It had been a long time coming. The vermin owed him.

The land around him still thrummed with the recent disruption, like the healing of flesh after a wound, but Gage couldn't feel any tangible presence of humans besides Randall. He pictured the layout of the land in his mind, suspecting the hunters had backed up onto the track winding down the hillside toward the nearest road. Once the three of them regrouped, he'd tell Randall to send someone down there to see if there was any sign of a vehicle, or any sign of recent activity.

But in the meantime, there was nothing. No alien sounds, no unexpected presence, no real basis for the continued unease. Nothing.

Undoubtedly the stench of human—of intruder—still lingered, but whoever had left it behind was gone. Nothing else in the forest stirred his hunger, nothing else called to his blood with the promise of power.

Damn it. Damn it all...

Randall and Dominic were already at the forest's edge when Gage reached them, and for a moment everything else slipped his mind.

Pale sunshine made Randall's skin even paler, bringing out that infernal tattoo in sharp relief. It draped over his back like a lover's embrace, and Gage couldn't help following its swirls with his eyes, across the curves of strong shoulders, down the elegant sweep of Randall's back to where the second gun still remained tucked in the back of his pants.

His shirt hung on Dominic, and the wolf huddled into it like it was a favorite bathrobe. The crisp white of the fabric just made that golden skin glimmer like it had been dusted with a sheen of heat—the color humans tried to achieve with their exotic vacations, but never came close to the real thing. The tails of Randall's shirt skimmed the top of his thighs, the unbuttoned front showing nothing but a glimpse of shadow.

Dominic looked up at him first, making Randall turn, and the surge of possessiveness that coursed through him almost made Gage stumble. *Mine*. His responsibility. His to keep safe. Both of them.

“Anything?” Randall asked.

Gage shook his head, taking a moment to compose himself before answering. “No. But they were here. It wasn’t anyone’s imagination.”

Randall looked away. “I’m sorry. I ... didn’t want to think it was possible.”

Gage didn’t particularly want to think at all. The results of that effort wouldn’t be anything he wanted to know.

“Do you think they’ll be back?” Dominic frowned at somewhere in the distance. His fingers clenched tighter on Randall’s shirt.

“Probably,” Gage said, deciding that couching the issue wouldn’t help anyone, least of all Dominic. “No hunter worth his salt would walk away without a prey as valuable as you. But this time we’ll be prepared for it.”

“Gage...”

He didn’t want to see the look in Dominic’s eyes. He didn’t want to watch the rise and fall of Randall’s chest, or know that Randall still refused to look him in the eye.

“Enough,” he said. “We’re going home.”

Chapter Sixteen

Home.

Following a silent Gage and a brooding Dominic back toward the ranch, Randall tried to envision a way the place could ever be a home again.

Dominic could have been hurt. It was sheer blind luck and the wolf's natural instinct to gather strength in numbers. If Dominic had seen red and gone after them himself... It had to stop. There had to be something he could do to mitigate the damage already done.

Perhaps Dominic really had scented the hunters from that night, but Randall still couldn't shake the way he'd phrased it the first time. *I felt someone from that night.* He couldn't take any chances. Dominic felt a lot of people that night, and some of them weren't quite as dead and gone as Gage thought.

"I'm going to shower," Dominic mumbled as they let themselves into the house. Randall watched Gage close his eyes briefly, no doubt checking that the security of the house itself hadn't been breached when they all ran out earlier. Careless. They were all getting too careless.

"Make it quick," Gage said. "I still want to know what the hell is going on." His gaze snapped to Randall. "See to the staff. And I suggest both of you spend the time getting your stories straight."

Randall managed a wry smile at the tactic. Separate the prey, don't give them a chance to pool their resources. If Gage was anything, he was an efficient tactician when it came to getting what he wanted.

"I'll take as long as I want." Dominic's glare was weak. He glanced at Randall. "I'll leave your shirt outside."

Randall shook his head. "It's fine." He watched Dominic disappear up the stairs, and Gage stride off toward his library. No doubt the brandy decanter was in for some punishment, even if it would only be a panacea. It wasn't as though Gage had the option of getting blind stinking drunk and forgetting his troubles. Troubles Randall brought to his doorstep. Literally.

He fetched a replacement shirt before heading out to talk to the returning staff gathered on the driveway.

No one saw anything. Randall hadn't expected otherwise—when two preternatural creatures hadn't sensed a soul on the property, he hadn't believed a group of humans, however highly skilled, could do much better.

"I want someone watching the perimeter tonight," he said. "Take it in shifts, but someone always watches the entry and exit points. Someone watches the road too. No one's walked here, they must have had transport close by."

"Yes, sir."

"And..." He paused, glancing back at the house. There was a muted light on in Gage's library, firelight and a lamp. He couldn't see the bathroom window, but imagined it glaring bright through the latticework on the glass. "Be on your guard. It's very likely the intruders know the layout of the property just as well as you do. Don't count on the chance you have that advantage."

The men regarded him curiously, but just murmured their agreements.

Just as well. Randall could hardly tell them they were likely hunting their predecessors.

As he entered the house, Gage was waiting in the hall. Levering himself away from his position, leaning against the staircase post, Gage didn't speak, just nodded briefly and turned for the stairs.

Randall followed the unspoken command, watching the rhythm of Gage's stride as he prowled up the stairs and toward his room.

He knew what might follow wouldn't be pleasant, but his body still responded with the ingrained memory of following Gage up the stairs to his room. The arousal crackled with new memories of earlier that day, of Dominic and Gage's hands on him.

Gage left the door open as he walked into the bedroom, and Randall's oddly pleasurable discomfort compounded when he realized Dominic was already waiting for them. He turned to close the door behind him out of habit—*drafts, Randall. Drafts*—but the image of Dominic, hair dark and damp, body swallowed by a large white bathrobe, tickled a caress against his senses.

"Well?" Gage leaned against the dresser, arms folded across his chest. From Randall's vantage point, Gage reflected in the floor length mirror by the closet, and in the smaller tri-fold mirror on the dresser. It was like being trapped in a dizzying kaleidoscope. Nowhere to hide. Caught between Gage's dark monochrome and Dominic's gold light.

Dominic looked back and forth between them, brow furrowed. An unruly lock of chestnut hair had dried messily across his forehead and he swept it out of his eyes with an impatient hand.

"Dominic told me he thought a scent in the forest reminded him of that night," Randall began, watching Dominic for verification and choosing his words carefully.

"I wasn't sure." Dominic nodded, looking at Randall even as he was speaking to Gage. Randall tried not to let his gaze wander to the widening V at the front of Dominic's robe. "Not till today. So, you know ... there was no point kicking up a fuss over nothing."

"That's irrelevant." Gage didn't shift his accusatory gaze from Randall. "Even the suspicion of someone still infiltrating my land, I want to know about it. And you're well aware of that."

Letting out a frustrated little growl, Dominic sat on the edge of the bed with an ease that made Randall falter. Not that Dominic was so much at home here, but that Gage allowed it. Either he was comfortable around Dominic or angry enough to ignore it.

"Look, I get that you're pissed, but if I honestly thought someone was out there I'd have come to tell you myself," Dominic said. "It was more my place to do it. Randall has enough to do without—"

"No." Guiltily relieved at the opportunity not to have to answer Gage, Randall stepped toward Dominic, kneeling at his side. "There's nothing more important than your security. Both of you." He glanced back at Gage. "I made a mistake. A bad mistake, and you have no idea how sorry I am for it. Believe me that I'd do anything in my power to keep the two of you safe." There was honesty in that, at least. Even Gage couldn't refute that.

"You have the men on this?" Gage asked.

"Yes." He nodded. "They're watching every possible means of entry, there's no one

coming onto the land without their knowledge.”

“But they can’t be everywhere, can they?” Dominic wrapped his arms around his waist, hands tucked into the sleeves of the bathrobe. “You have a shitload of land to secure around here. I mean, we got onto your property without anyone batting an eye.”

Gage shrugged. “Only because no one was expecting you. This is different.”

“And I’ve authorized the men take any means necessary to secure the perimeter,” Randall said, partly to reassure Dominic, partly to convince Gage. And maybe to ease himself. “No one’s going to hurt you, Dominic, I swear that. If it’s the last thing I do, then—”

“Don’t say that.” Dominic shook his head. “Please... I’ve had too many people do last things.”

“I’m sorry...” Without thinking, he reached out, one hand brushing the inside of Dominic’s knee. Golden eyes widened at the touch, but a little sliver of tension loosened from Dominic’s body.

“I’ll check the grounds myself in the morning,” Gage said, and Randall wondered if Dominic picked up on the menace in his tone, or knew the implications of Gage’s “checking.” Hunting. Nothing would get past him. And if Randall’s suspicions were right, if Gage recognized any of the men as staff he believed were dead...

“Randall.”

The two clipped syllables lashed across his senses like a whip-crack. One hand still on Dominic’s knee, he turned to Gage. “Sir?”

“Enough...” Gage ran both hands through his hair, leaving furrows in ruffled black silk. “No ‘sir.’ Not now. But tell me one thing, Randall. Tell me you weren’t keeping that information from me for some reason, because if you were—”

“No.” He shook his head. “I just... I thought I could deal with it myself.” Gage watched him. Unable to take the scrutiny, Randall turned his attention back to Dominic. “And I swear, I would never knowingly put you in danger. Never. Either of you, you both mean too much to me.” Brushing a kiss to Dominic’s knee, he closed his eyes, cheek resting against warm, golden skin, content to stay in this supplication all night if that’s what Dominic thought he deserved.

“Randall...” Dominic’s fingers brushed through his hair, softer and kinder than anything Randall deserved. With a gentle tightening, Dominic urged him to lift his head, and even though he knew Gage watched their every move, there was nothing he could do but comply. “I know you wouldn’t.” Dominic’s eyes held his, serious and laser-sharp, as though the gaze could cut through every lie, everything he kept from them. “Whatever’s going on, I know that.”

“Dominic...” The heat in Dominic’s eyes reminded Randall—reminded his body—of earlier in the dining room, but a new tenderness suffused the want now. He couldn’t tell if he leaned up, or if Dominic leaned down, just that they met somewhere in the middle, and that Dominic’s lips were soft and yearning against his own.

Dominic tasted of sweet mint and warmth, and Randall’s eyelids fluttered closed as Dominic cupped his face, each fingertip grazing like a gentle brand. He slid his hands up Dominic’s thighs, skin warm under the edges of the soft robe.

Gage was watching him kiss and touch Dominic. Just the fantasy of it was enough to spark pinpricks of lightning through Randall’s blood. The reality of it stroked down his spine, heat and pleasure sparking straight to his arousal.

He thought he heard Gage's breathing sharpen as Dominic parted his legs, shifting closer to the edge of the bed. Dominic's body was hot against his, arousal peeking through the open folds of the robe. When the tip grazed Randall's shirt, he felt Dominic's thighs tense under his hands and he curved his fingers into the taut warm skin of Dominic's ass in response.

Dominic moaned against his lips, the hunger sliding through Randall's body, making him shiver. Arms winding around Randall's shoulders, Dominic arched against him, deepening the kiss, tongue tangling with his, lips nuzzling.

Gage wasn't even touching either of them, but Randall could still feel him in every breath, every movement, could imagine that blue gaze watching them. Did Gage like what he saw? Randall longed for one of those mirrors now, longed to see Gage's face.

Dominic broke the kiss with soft little nibbles at the corner of his mouth, each dab of his tongue sending shocks of pleasure surging through his body. He gazed up at lust-dark gold eyes, reaching up a hand to brush back a damp ribbon of hair from Dominic's face.

Beautiful. Open. Honest.

Was it possible to love someone in this sudden a rush, and still love someone with the long aching yearning he felt for Gage? Dominic kissed him softly again, and Randall thought maybe it was.

He was still kneading Dominic's ass gently when Dominic raised his head, the same sweet gaze fixed on something beyond Randall. And there was no flare of envy, no anger that someone else drew Dominic's attention. The desire smothering the room in a warm haze was a thing divided equally. Randall couldn't begin to discern between them, they'd become a whole, a package, one not existing properly without the other.

Dominic canted his head, smiling, gaze sliding back to his. He didn't protest as Dominic disentangled himself from Randall's arms, knowing precisely why Dominic was doing it. A shuffle of movement sounded behind him. Close. Very close, and Randall closed his eyes, senses absorbing as much as he could of Gage's scent, the sound of his breathing.

"Come here."

That command from Gage's lips was something he could never disobey. Dominic's fingers still lingered as Randall stood, gaze lowered slightly as he faced his master.

"Promise me, Randall..." Gage approached in the slow, measured steps of the predator he was. "Promise me you aren't lying to me."

It was a promise he couldn't make, and he suspected Gage knew it too. "If I've hurt you," he said instead, "then I'll pay the price for it."

There was none of the usual brusqueness in Gage's hands as he undid Randall's shirt, lingering over the task and tugging him incrementally closer with each one. Randall couldn't stop staring at the elegant fine-boned hands, frustratingly close to touching him, as they slowly pushed a pearly button through a stiff buttonhole, parting a little more of Randall's shirt before carrying on.

Every time he thought Gage would touch him, his skin feeling like it was all pulling taut toward its master's fingers, Gage would manage to touch no more than fabric, and the smallest shift of fabric against his chest made Randall bite back a cry.

His arousal felt hard and heavy between his thighs, and he was more aware of it than he could ever remember. Or maybe just more *aware*. He thought he could even feel the movement of air from thick black lashes every time Gage blinked, that he could feel

every pore, every hair standing on end, sweat prickling his skin.

Gage pushed the shirt from his shoulders when he was done, hands skimming down Randall's arms. A sound he didn't even recognize as his own voice whispered from his lips, Gage's touch feeling as though it could reach beneath the skin and tease every nerve along the way.

He wanted to plead, to beg, but he couldn't even articulate the thoughts in his head. The only sound he could make was the gasp of pleasure as Gage lowered his head, lips against his shoulder.

Behind him, fabric rustled again, dropping in a muted, muffled hush. Even though he could have guessed it was Dominic divesting himself of the robe, the shock of a warm chest against his back and Dominic's arms wrapping around his chest made him glad they were holding him up; his own body certainly wasn't up to the task.

As Gage kissed his way to the base of his throat, up along the side of his neck, Dominic's lips grazed the other shoulder, warm sure hands sliding up his chest, capturing his nipples in the webbed valley between thumb and forefinger.

Somewhere beyond the kisses, the touches, Randall's body felt liquefied, flowing between two points of pleasure and unable to tell one source of sensation from the next. Eyes closing, trying to temper the intensity, he let his head fall back, let himself go boneless, secure in the knowledge that they'd keep him safe.

"Randall." Even the way Gage said his name sounded different now. Exotic. Erotic. As if he was hearing it for the very first time. *This is who you are, and these are the men to whom you belong.*

Dominic pressed his cheek against Randall's shoulder blade as Gage cradled his face between cool palms, gaze boring into his and burning everything away like a blue-hot flame.

Then, as slow and blurry as watching a time-lapse photo, Gage leaned closer, lips touching Randall's in the gentlest, most tentative touch he'd ever known.

"Gage—"

"Ssh." The sibilant whisper felt like a desert wind against his mouth, hot and devastating.

He gripped the front of Gage's shirt, half-terrified and half-delirious as Gage touched his lips again, breathing soft open-mouthed kisses to his lower lip, upper lip, the tip of his tongue sweeping in an electric charge against Randall's as he gasped Gage's name again. The heat raced through him, the sharp clean taste, the spice of brandy, as Gage's mouth closed over his. "But you never..." he managed to say.

"I was a fool," Gage said, tongue nudging between Randall's parted lips, sliding slow and warm along his own.

Dominic's arms tightened around him, butterfly kisses following the path of the tattoo's curve. The scarred skin felt hyper sensitive, as though it could feel every ridge and groove of Dominic's lips.

He barely even realized Dominic's hands moved, tickling along his stomach, reaching for the fly of his pants. Randall cried out into Gage's kiss—*Gage's kiss!*—as Dominic's hips rocked forward, the hardness rubbing against Randall's clothed ass. He tried to press back, tried to clench around Dominic to keep him from moving. Dominic growled against the nape of his neck, and Gage murmured something against his lips, and Randall swore he could see stars.

He wound a hand into Gage's hair, luxuriating in the feel of the black silk through his fingers. The grasp tightened involuntarily when Dominic undid his pants, letting them fall to pool at his feet, but Gage didn't seem too upset by it. Not if the way he deepened the kiss was any indication.

Randall could barely keep up, but that was all right—he didn't want to. This was Gage's kiss, literally, figuratively and everything in between.

He cried out when Dominic's hands slid beneath the waist of his underwear, hot fingers finding even hotter flesh, squeezing and stroking, Dominic's cock rubbing his ass in rhythmic sympathy.

Gage growled softly, biting down on his lower lip. If he was supposed to divide his attention, Randall figured he'd failed before he'd even begun—he could barely tell where any of them ended or began. He knew that Gage's skin was cool, Dominic's warm, and that between them he felt like he was melting.

Gage broke the kiss despite Randall's inarticulate please and tugs on his hair to keep him from pulling away and kneeling. If he'd known what Gage had in mind instead, maybe he wouldn't have argued the point so vehemently.

Opening his eyes felt like moving boulders, but Randall managed it in time to look down and meet Gage's gaze, blue and vivid. When Gage hooked his fingers in Randall's underwear, tugging the fabric down to reveal Dominic's hands around Randall's cock, the pleasure of it rippled through his spine.

Dominic laughed against his shoulder, kissed him, fingers squeezing tighter around the base of his cock. "Not yet."

"Listen to him, Randall," Gage said with a voice like smoke, before proceeding to lick at the point where Dominic's fingers met Randall's shaft, and making that order impossible to obey. Gage just chuckled, did it again, and Dominic's fingers moved slickly along the skin Gage licked.

"Please..."

"Your impatience flatters us," Gage murmured, hands on Randall's hips, stilling his movements. "But I taught you better manners than that."

Dominic's erection traced slick patterns on Randall's ass, the blunt, heated tip nudging the crease of his buttocks before moving away, and Randall tried to flex his back to lure it back, trap that friction. He needed the intensity of the feeling. The light teasing touches would drive him insane—if he wasn't there already.

One hand still tight around the base of his cock, Dominic kept the other one moving as Gage's mouth closed around the head, sucking hard. Too many sensations collided together. Wet and hot, tight and slick, Gage's tongue flicking against the slit at the tip of his cock, Dominic's fingers rubbing along the underside.

Taking pity on his whimpers, Dominic shifted his hips, cock sliding snugly into the sensitive crease of his ass. He drew back slightly, before sliding hard against the skin again. The sweet friction of the hot, wet head ghosting across his hole had him crying out so loudly his throat felt like sandpaper, and white lights flickered in his vision.

"No, please...I can't..." He had no idea what he wanted, beyond release, relief from this tormenting build-up of sensation. Gage drew away, and Dominic's hips moved back out of reach. Randall whimpered, not even caring anymore how much of a needy fool it made him seem. He did need this, more than he needed to care what happened afterward. And he was a fool, that was moot. It seemed pointless to keep forcing the issue.

Still keeping one hand on his cock, Dominic turned him around, kindly ignoring the way Randall almost tripped on the tangle of clothes around his ankles, and kissed him softly. “Want you...”

“Dominic...”

His clothes and shoes came off somewhere on the short path to the bed. It felt like crossing oceans. Dominic tugged him down on top of him, legs parting around Randall’s hips, arching up eagerly for him.

Dominic couldn’t deliberately tease if he tried, but the honesty of his need and hunger was so much more seductive. Dominic wanted him—wanted *them*—and wasn’t afraid of it. And enveloped in that, neither was Randall.

Dominic kissed him again, slow and yearning, suckling on Randall’s tongue until they could hardly breathe. And then there was that mischievous glint in Dominic’s eyes again, watching something over Randall’s shoulder, and—

“Oh, God...”

Gage’s hand, cooler than usual and slick with lube, reached between his legs, knuckles kneading Randall’s balls, and his fingers—judging from the low throaty growl and the slack look of pleasure on Dominic’s face—getting Dominic’s body ready for him.

Gage, preparing Dominic for him.

Randall’s mind raced in circles, synapses continuously failing to make the right connections. When Gage’s other hand slid between his buttocks, long cool fingers rubbing soothing circles around his hole, Randall didn’t even know what he was holding onto anymore, let alone how he was managing it.

Dominic’s growls grew more demanding, his body squirming against Gage’s hand. All Randall knew was the slick heat welcoming the head of his cock when Dominic arched his hips, one hand tight on Randall’s shoulder, the other guiding him inside.

“Randall, please...”

Even if Randall had words to answer, they’d have scattered the moment Dominic flexed around him, drawing just the tip of his cock past the tight muscle, and Gage’s fingers plunged into him, deep and fast and hard.

Randall’s hips snapped of their own accord, driving him to the hilt inside Dominic’s body. He couldn’t even cry out; he wouldn’t know which one of them to call *for*.

Dominic tightened his legs around Randall’s waist, and somewhere he found enough wherewithal and comprehension to slide a hand under Dominic’s thigh, spreading him wider apart. The other hand sought out Dominic’s arousal, taut and tense and already leaving wet streaks across Dominic’s stomach.

“Oh, fuck yeah...” Dominic clung to him, fingers raking through Randall’s hair as though he was tangling his fingers in a pelt of fur.

“I always knew you’d make a beautiful picture.” Gage’s voice was a husky murmur against the back of Randall’s neck, all lips and teeth and possessiveness as his fingers slipped deeper, tips grazing a place inside Randall that turned his bones to ash. “But never this beautiful.”

Gage kissed his way down Randall’s spine, withdrawing his fingers. Randall braced himself in Dominic’s arms as Gage positioned the thick head of his cock against his entrance, pushing slowly inside, the angle knowing and sure.

“Beautiful,” Gage said again, one hand on Randall’s shoulder, anchoring him, the other overlapping Randall’s around Dominic’s cock. It wasn’t even the physical pleasure

that tipped him over the edge, but the sensation of a circuit completing with that gesture.

Behind him he heard Gage grunt as Randall clamped down tightly around him, body frozen in sensation, cock pulsing deep inside Dominic. The intensity of the climax ripped a near scream from his already tinder-dry throat.

Dominic rocked under him, hips circling, milking the pleasure and dragging it out in aftershocks almost as paralyzing as the first.

He was boneless when Gage's arm wrapped around him, pulling him tighter against his chest, cock driving deeper and harder. One hand still stroking Dominic—though admittedly Gage was guiding him now—Randall leaned back into Gage's embrace. With heavy-lidded eyes he watched Dominic beneath them, his hands fisting in the sheets, golden eyes just dark, luminous slits.

"Mine," Dominic growled at both of them, sounding even more sure and possessive than Gage ever could.

Alpha, something in the back of Randall's pleasure-drunk mind supplied. *This was Alpha.*

Still buried inside Dominic, feeling his lover moving restlessly beneath him to attain his own release, Randall barely caught his breath before Gage turned his head to face him, kissing him again.

Gage's kiss, Dominic's body. Eternally caught between the two, and Randall couldn't think of anything he wanted more.

He could feel the tremors shuddering through Dominic as he watched them kiss, heard the soft whining noise of pleasure he made, and Randall tried again to grasp onto something that made sense of this. Why it felt so right. *You love them*, his mind said helpfully again, *how else would it feel?*

The change in angle sent the electricity of friction zinging through him again when Dominic sat up, hands on Randall's chest, trapping his arousal between their bodies. Then it was Dominic kissing him, and Gage's lips were at his throat, his ear, and Randall's senses ran haywire.

At some point he lost track of whose lips were kissing him, whose hands were in his hair, whose were tugging his nipples and scratching down his chest. Just that it was both of them. One living, breathing entity.

Dominic's orgasm splashed between them, hot sticky ribbons that clung to their skin, and he knew it was Dominic's kiss when he felt the vibration of a deep rumbling growl. Randall held on tightly, blindly, dimly aware of Gage's hands shifting to grip his hips hard, the pace and fervor of his thrusts picking up.

He couldn't count the number of times he'd felt that, but he'd never felt it like it was tonight. Never with the same exquisite desperation to Gage's movements, the want that burned in his touch.

"Wait..." Gage slowed, and Randall turned as much as he could, needing to see Gage's face, his eyes. Needing to see if he looked as different as it felt. "Randall." Gage touched his cheek, his kiss-bruised lips, brushed a tangle of sweat-damp hair from his face. "Randall..."

He couldn't speak, not even to say "I love you." Instead, he kissed Gage again, hoping he knew anyway, memorizing every nuance of heat and texture, his heart soaring at the answering need on Gage's tongue. He thought he felt Dominic grin against his collarbone, and supposed he had a right to throw an 'I told you so' at them both. Dominic

had known all along.

He sought out Dominic's hand, fingers entwining, surrendering to the bed-shaking, heart-shattering speed and force of Gage's thrusts. He was aware of every ridge, every vein as Gage's cock slid in and out, in and out, faster even than Randall's racing pulse.

Gage held him crushingly tight as he came, arms around Randall's chest, face buried between his shoulder blades, and if Randall dared wish for anything more, he'd have liked to see Gage's eyes in that moment.

He didn't realize he'd closed his own till he felt Dominic's soft kisses against his eyelids, felt himself being urged down to the bed. Gage still locked inside him, slick friction making Randall's body react all over again, he let them guide him.

He could breathe. He just about knew his name. After all they'd done to him, broken him apart and put him back together again, Randall thought that was good going.

He didn't even remember speaking—or what he said—just that Gage nuzzled the nape of his neck, pressing him closer into Dominic's arms. "Sleep," Gage said, and Randall found himself grateful for the order. Thinking for himself felt beyond him.

There were still things he needed to say, to explain. There were still things that, beyond the warm, drowsy bower of Gage and Dominic's arms, threatened all three of them, and he needed to tell them what they might be facing.

Maybe the restlessness edged into his body, tensing and fidgeting. Gage nipped the back of his neck. "Tomorrow, Randall. Whatever it is, we'll deal with it tomorrow."

Randall sighed, arms winding around Dominic's waist. Dominic made a pleased sound, head tucking under Randall's chin. Tomorrow, he agreed silently, his body letting him know in no uncertain terms that it wasn't going anywhere until then at the earliest.

Everything would be okay tomorrow.

Chapter Seventeen

Dominic awoke to a shaft of gray daylight slanting in through the window. No one had closed the drapes. Careless, if they weren't in a place where no one could peek in.

For a moment, he basked in the limbo of that in-between moment, not quite asleep, not quite awake enough to think. To remember why he should. Besides, he could hardly get up or move around without disrupting his bed-mates.

The wolf was well used to waking up in a warm tangle of limbs and snuggled bodies, but he doubted Randall or Gage were quite as accustomed. Well, he knew Randall wasn't, and Gage... Dominic couldn't picture it, couldn't imagine a time when that icy facade had cracked so drastically before.

In sleep, Randall's arms had slipped to his waist, face pillowed against Dominic's chest, and like noticing a paper-cut made it hurt, noticing the way Randall's breath puffed warm little gusts across his nipples made Dominic acutely aware of it. Made his body aware, awake, and happy to go. He tried scooting back slightly, but Randall just murmured something and followed him.

Dominic smiled, fingers lacing in Randall's hair. It wasn't as though he wanted to be anywhere else. As if he'd forever been attuned to Randall's every move, every sound—and he had, Dominic was certain—Gage turned a bleary-eyed look at him, one that had the nerve to suggest drowsily that it was all Dominic's fault he'd woken up.

Dominic grinned back. He hadn't missed the way Gage's lips had been pressed against the back of Randall's shoulder, or the proprietary, possessive arm he'd wrapped around Randall's chest.

At Dominic's smile, Gage's lips quirked at the corners. The other hand slipped from Randall's hip to skim a gentle, familiar touch along Dominic's arm. "Good morning."

"Yeah." Dominic laughed. "It is."

Randall murmured something again, snuggling closer, evidently happy to pretend he was dozing on, even when Dominic could feel the slow, rhythmic tickle of lashes sweeping his skin.

"What was that?" Gage asked, hand stroking up Randall's chest. "You aren't fooling anyone, Randall. You're not *that* good an actor."

"Hmm." Randall stretched, managing to rub against Dominic and Gage at once. "I was just agreeing with you." Hips arching back, one leg stretching to tangle with one of Dominic's, he turned his head, nuzzling Dominic's collarbone under the pretense of a yawn. "A *very* good morning."

"Could be better, though..." Dominic smiled lazily. "Just someone over there wants to ruin it by talking."

"Ah, yes, he does that a lot." Randall nodded, the action grazing his lips across Dominic's skin. "Bad habit."

"Mmm..." Dominic agreed, shifting slightly in Randall's arms, one thigh rubbing between his lover's. "See what he's missing out on?"

"You're like teenagers," Gage said, managing to make a dour mutter sound amused anyway.

"Hey, I'm the closest one here to being a teenager," Dominic said. "Are you telling

me you can't keep up with me?"

"With age comes the ability to take your time and savor things, Dominic." Gage sat up, stretched. Getting up off the bed, he sauntered over to the dresser—deliberately putting that damn sway in his hips, Dominic thought, watching the play of sinew and muscle under porcelain-perfect skin. Picking up a black silk robe, Gage put it on, not bothering to belt it. "Perhaps one day we'll teach your uncouth self those manners."

Randall leaned back on his elbows, watching the exchange with a smile. "This is never going to stop, is it?" He tilted his head in Gage's direction, then in Dominic's. "Even after sex, you're bickering. No wonder I couldn't tell what was going on between you."

Dominic laughed, curling back at Randall's side, head against his chest. "Ah, it's not my fault if this old guy doesn't have the stamina."

Gage snorted. "Please. This 'old guy' could outlast both of you. But for now," he crossed the room, the black silk of his robe rustling, and opened the French windows to the small ornamental balcony, "said 'old guy' needs to replenish the energy his willful young lovers have sapped."

"Ha!" Dominic muffled his laugh against Randall's skin, the shaking of Randall's body under his betraying the fact he wasn't the only one laughing. "You *so* can't cope!"

"He has a point, sir," Randall said mildly, a brand new edge to "sir" that made Dominic shiver for all sorts of other reasons.

"Oh, be quiet, Randall." Gage waved an imperious hand at them. "I haven't hunted in weeks. Between the retraining and," he shot Dominic a look, "puppy training, I need to feed."

That one word changed the atmosphere as surely as if one of the gray storm clouds outside had drifted into the room. "Feed?"

"As you have to," Gage said. "And why I chose a property where the wildlife is abundant."

Dominic frowned. He hadn't seen an abundance of anything since he'd been here. Maybe any other animals sensed him, felt him prowling the forest and kept their distance. Still...

"You're welcome to join me." Gage shrugged, the faintest tremor to the action and his voice. If thinking of "Gage" and "vulnerability" in the same sentence wasn't such an anathema, Dominic might have found himself unsettled by it. It must have been something else; a chill from the morning breeze, or an edge of Gage's hunger making itself known. Gage certainly wouldn't be nervous—almost shy—about inviting Dominic to hunt. "I leave it up to you." In a flare of monochrome motion, robe and drapes fluttering in a gentle squall of wind, Gage disappeared over the edge of the balcony.

"Gage!" Instinct propelled Dominic from the bed, from Randall's arms, so sure he'd see Gage in a heap below the window when he stuck his own head over the balcony, staring down into the garden below.

Nothing.

Randall laughed a little. "I'd have thought you'd know by now he's not quite that fragile."

Folding his arms over his chest, fighting the urge to huff, Dominic frowned at him. "He's a goddamn show-off."

"That he is." Randall smiled, arms looping around Dominic's waist, the warmth of

his naked body countered by the fresh mountain air coming in through the open window. Dominic could smell the pines and wildflowers, and the scent of his lovers, and even the wolf was content to believe everything was okay with the world.

“He doesn’t really want me tagging along, does he?”

Randall lapsed into silence for a moment. Dominic watched him curiously as Randall’s gaze turned to face the open window. “He’d never admit he’d like you to know, to *accept*, both his forms,” Randall said. “But...”

“Don’t try to convince me Gage hates what he is,” Dominic began. “‘Cause he doesn’t.”

“It’s not that.” Randall shook his head. “But he’s spent a long time trying to find somewhere he can be both without fear of reprisal, against himself or the people around him. As much as you mean to him—” At Dominic’s start, Randall chuckled. “I’m sure he’d like you to see it eventually. He’d like you to see him.”

Dominic followed Randall’s gaze out of the window. He remembered Gage’s promise—his threat—last night. He didn’t need to ask, they knew where they’d find their lover.

Randall watched him as he dressed—or tugged on his jeans and found his shoes, that was about as dressed as Dominic could stand when his skin still tingled with their touch. As fascinated as he was by Gage’s shifting, he was just as eager to get back here, back in bed, back wrapped up in his lovers’ bodies.

“He doesn’t expect you to do this so soon, you know.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged, waiting for Randall to decide whether his wrinkled shirt was still wearable, finally deciding it was after a couple of shakes and a lot of smoothing. “But since he met me when I was the wolf, it seems kinda weird to get hung up about it.”

Randall sent him a smile. “And you’re curious.”

“As hell,” he agreed. “Whatever he is, I’ve never felt it before.”

Following him out of the bedroom, Randall laughed softly. “No, but then you could apply that to many, many things about Gage.”

The house was cool and silent as they walked through the halls, making their way outside. Dominic wondered if Gage had given everyone else the day off. He couldn’t even smell the temptations of dinner preparation emanating from the kitchen. He might never have really seen the place bustling with people, but the lack of it was odd.

His hand found Randall’s as they walked, the wolf reveling in the comfort of touch, the man just content to assuage some of that desire to shove Randall against the nearest tree and tear off the clothes his lover had so carefully put on. *Later, maybe.*

They followed the familiar path into the forest, but long before Randall squeezed his hand, pace slowing, Dominic felt the oppressiveness in the air, felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, ears twitching.

He’d never truly felt the presence of another predator before. Not one that could snap him in half before he had the chance to lunge or bite. The humans had frightened him, but only because he’d had half a mind on protecting his pack, and they’d had the advantage of surprise.

This ... this felt like walking willingly into the lair of something that was at the top of every food chain known to mankind, wolfkind and everything in between.

“Dominic...” Randall’s voice wasn’t warning, just caution, but Dominic couldn’t take much reassurance from that. Just because whatever the hell it was hadn’t eaten

Randall for breakfast yet, didn't mean it would have the same grace when it came to him.

"What is he?"

"He's Gage." Randall's chuckle was wry, faintly bitter at the edges.

"I meant—"

"I know what you meant. He's Gage. He's the most controlled creature I've ever known. He won't harm you."

"He wants to." Dominic shivered. "I can feel it."

"Wants and will are two different things."

Dominic bit back the argument. He still didn't quite believe it, but reasoned that the wolf would never harm those it knew as pack, whatever form they took.

The creature crouched at the base of the tree was nothing like Dominic had ever seen. The leathery skin stretched taut over pronounced bones had a tinge of reflective, iridescent blue in the black, like ravens' wings. Like Gage's hair. The same skin pulled almost transparently thin over long bony wings that didn't look as though they could lift a sheet of paper let alone the body they were attached to. Long, deadly talons curled around the tree trunk, as eyes like polished jet glared at him, imperious even now.

And in that look he understood what Randall had been trying to tell him.

This creature was Gage, just as the wolf was Dominic and Randall was human. They were still the men who'd wrapped him in heat and pleasure last night, still the same men who'd spoken his name like it was some exotic incantation, who'd touched him as though he was something precious.

He didn't care what they were; they were his.

The creature that was Gage tilted its head as Dominic stepped forward slowly, as if he was approaching a skittish pup. He wanted Gage to see he wasn't afraid. He wanted Gage to see he didn't care what he was. He wanted—

The gunshot crashed through the trees, echoing from all directions.

Gage turned and snarled at the unseen assailant, as Dominic fell to his knees, hands clamped over his ears. *No...* He whimpered and flinched at the hands that clasped his shoulders, growling and flailing at them till he realized it was Randall.

"Stay down," Randall whispered harshly at Dominic's struggles, though even through his own panic Dominic could see he'd turned an ashy shade of white.

Gage's talons had gouged parallel white lines in the tree bark. Sinew moved under that odd skin as he stood, wings jabbing out behind him like barbs. Dominic couldn't notice much else; every time he moved his head, a dizzying starburst of color danced before his eyes, his breath coming too fast for his body to keep up.

They're after me, he wanted to say if he had the oxygen for words. *It's my fault, I brought them here.*

And he should have been the one to deal with it, but he was curled up in terror instead, barely able to keep the tightness from his chest, skin tingling with fear. Maybe Randall's hands were shaking just as badly as they held him, but when just blinking felt as though it wracked his body with shudders, Dominic couldn't be sure.

Gage made an inhuman sound, a low, discordant screech like an incensed bird of prey. Dominic caught the whoosh of air, the sudden rush of deeper scent as those wings flapped.

"Gage, no!" Randall's plea was met with another snarl, and a vicious flash of bared white fangs, and even Dominic couldn't misinterpret that look. *Why are you stopping*

me?

Randall's hands trembled harder.

Another shot echoed, much closer than before. They were just sitting ducks here. He couldn't just wait, couldn't just let them find him, tear him apart like they had his pack. They were after him. If he could just run, distract them, take them far, far away from here, from Gage and Randall...

Gage snarled at Randall again.

"They know," Randall said, words coming as if the air was being wrenched from his chest. "They know the land, and they might know what you are."

Gage froze. Past the racing heartbeat that shook him with every pulse, Dominic tried to make sense of the words. He felt a rush of displaced air as Gage shifted back, though still nearly flying as he barreled into Randall, pushing him away from Dominic and pinning him against a tree, forearm against Randall's throat.

"What did you say?" Gage growled, voice so low it was a vibration. "And think carefully, Randall. I'd hate to misunderstand you."

Dominic raised himself to a crouch as he watched them, feeling the urge to shift singing through his blood. Even if it meant drawing more attention to himself, it'd make him faster, stronger...

Randall closed his eyes, swallowing hard enough that Dominic swore Gage's arm moved a little. "They're our old staff."

Fingers digging so hard into the earth that dirt jabbed beneath his fingernails, Dominic tried to assimilate those words.

"The old staff are dead," Gage said. "Aren't they?" Randall said nothing, just turned his head. "Answer me!"

"No," Randall said, and for a moment Dominic thought it was another refusal. "No, they're not..."

His head tried to compute it. He'd begun the day believing everything was well in his world, that just maybe the two men he'd come to love might be able to get past their stupid issues and forge a life together. He stared at Gage and Randall, still so lost in their private war that they barely noticed him, and didn't think he even knew them at all. Maybe he'd been a fool for imagining it was possible in the first place.

It didn't matter. The humans wanted him dead, and all Dominic could think was to put as much distance between himself and Gage and Randall. The man might not know them, but the wolf would lie down to protect them anyway.

At least it tried. The man couldn't even breathe evenly enough to allow the change, couldn't relax, couldn't focus. They'd die, like his pack, and once again Dominic wouldn't be able to stop it.

Useless. What use was the wolf if the man was too helpless to let it fight? When the man just wanted to run? Just wanted away.

He dug his fingers into the ground again, a very human howl tearing from his lips. The earth piled up under his feet as he pushed against it for speed, lifting from the crouch like a sprinter off the blocks, not even caring where the finish line was.

As long as it was somewhere safe. Somewhere Randall and Gage wouldn't be caught in the crossfire.

He heard Gage yell his name as he fled, but nothing would make him stop or slow down. He might as well be dead, but he didn't have to take someone else with him.

Not again.

Chapter Eighteen

No more shots rang out as Dominic ran. Gage had to believe the wolf's innate sense would lead him safely back to the house, and that Dominic's terror would keep him from doing something stupid. Besides, Randall had that covered.

"You told me," he began, noting with some satisfaction that Randall flinched at every word, "you'd dealt with them."

"I couldn't, Gage, I—"

"You lied to me!" He pulled his arm away, but only so that he could yank Randall closer by the shirtfront. And it quelled the urge to have just kept pressing. "I put my trust in you! I believed you when you said you were keeping us safe!"

"They're people!" Randall cried. "I can't just murder people every time they see something around here that they shouldn't!"

"So humans you don't know mean more to you than us?" Gage growled, shoving Randall hard to the ground. "Their lives matter more than our safety?"

"Of course not! Gage, damn it, everything I do is for you, and you never even stop living in the past long enough to notice!"

"Everything?" Gage spat. "What exactly have you done for me, Randall? What exactly have you done for reasons that aren't your own?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Randall slowly got to his feet, not sounding very sorry at all. "I'm just a *human*, I forgot my place."

Just as well that Gage didn't put all his power into the punch. As it was, it sent Randall crashing back to the ground, leaving his clothes mud-stained, and leaving grooves and gouges in the lush earth.

They were doing a bang-up job of attracting the attention of every hunter within fifty miles, but Gage couldn't stop himself. The rage blinded him to anything but Randall, this lover-turned-stranger that was the reason for everything.

Randall. All this was down to Randall. Gage's brain couldn't even wrap itself around the possibility, let alone the truth. "You led them here! You led them straight to Dominic's pack. You're the reason he's lost everything he had in the world." The words kept coming, even though a part of Gage's heart that was frightened senseless by the implications of this told him to stop. "You might as well have slaughtered them yourself!"

"I didn't know, I—"

"Do you think that excuse will be enough for him? 'Oh, I'm sorry for murdering your family, I didn't think my betraying my master would be that big a deal.'"

"Stop it!" Randall slammed a fist into the earth. "I never betrayed you! I couldn't kill for you, but that doesn't mean I ever betrayed you. Gage, I love you, I—"

Gage snarled. "Do you think that matters now?"

Randall looked up at him, and for a moment the anguish sparkling bright in gray eyes tore at Gage's heart more surely than any bullet. "I thought I was doing the right thing," Randall said, voice hoarse and trembling. He turned away, swiping the back of his hand across his eyes. "I'm sorry I'm human, Gage. You have no goddamned idea how sorry, how much I wish I wasn't for you. But I am. If you want to call that a betrayal,

then so be it.”

The sense of his world unraveling came to him again, only this time it felt like someone had just torn a loose thread and the whole thing disintegrated into dust. There’d be nothing left if he couldn’t fight this. No Randall, no Dominic, no sanctuary.

No point.

But he couldn’t do anything while Randall kept looking at him with wounded, heartbroken eyes as though Gage was the one who’d betrayed everything he believed in. “Go. Get out of my sight.”

“Gage—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Randall. I don’t want to deal with you. I have to repair the damage you’ve done. Go after Dominic, and make sure he’s safe if you want to do something at all useful. Try to keep them from finishing the job.”

Randall dragged himself to his feet. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” Gage didn’t look back. “You’re not.”

Before Randall could argue, Gage shifted again, using his talons to cling to the soft wood of the tree trunk as he launched himself up.

I’m sorry I’m human.

No. All this wasn’t because he misunderstood Randall so badly. He’d loved the man, for Hell’s sakes ... how could he have missed this?

His wings caught on low, torn branches as he rose higher into the trees, seeking out a decent vantage point where he could watch the forest for any sign of movement.

Of course Randall would never have chosen to do this had he known it would lead to Dominic’s tragedy. Randall did what he did to avoid bloodshed. That was just how a human would think.

Gage didn’t have the luxury. Randall’s actions backed him into a corner; if these were the old staff, men well aware of the quirks and oddness around the estate and even more aware of the layout, the roads, the escape routes, then he didn’t have the option of leaving them alive. If they knew, or even suspected that their old employer or the wolf their predecessors hunted weren’t normal, he had no choice.

It wasn’t even a matter of his own safety anymore. He peered through the mesh of branches, the blanket of leaves, and snarled low. It was Dominic’s safety, the safety of others like them.

A handful of twigs snapped and sheared in his grip as he vented his anger on the branches that served as a platform. Beneath his feet, the narrow point of the tree top creaked and swayed as he dug his toes into the wood for balance, wings folded tight against his back. Ahead of him his forest and the hillside sprawled like a quilt.

If humans knew, it wouldn’t be long before nowhere was safe.

He recalled a house on fire, humans he’d cared about dead at the hands of humans that feared him. Maybe they were right to. It was a small price to pay.

Not so much as a leaf rustled out of the ordinary in the forest. The wind carried the scent of pines and tree sap and rain, but not human. No other animal, either, and Gage tried to remember the last time he’d noticed the presence of deer or elk. Too long. Before Dominic arrived. The wild creatures had been warning him of an alien presence on this land, and he’d chosen not to notice.

Because of Randall. Because Randall was supposed to have dealt with it.

With a screech, he launched himself out of the tree, feeling the whip and scratch of

branches as he streaked his wings out behind him, diving deeper below the canopy.

The world rushed by in a flicker of images, movement and stillness. His every sense trained on watching for the smallest hint of something moving in the trees, gaze sharp on anything that didn't belong. Snarling his fury, he flapped his wings once, rising above the trees.

There was little point hiding now. No one who saw him would live to tell about it.

Another gunshot echoed in the distance, the sound a cold, discordant scratch against his hearing, and sounding much too far away. Much too close to the house. The house where he'd just sent Randall and Dominic.

They know the land, Randall had said. Knew the land, and knew their procedures. Knew how to silence the current staff, knew they'd separate and circle back toward the house.

No... The mistake—elementary, stupid!—drew a harsh sibilant scream from deep in his chest, the noise ripping through the trees.

Decades of rage fuelled every flap of his wings. Of all the things humans had taken from him, of all the fear and loss, they'd crossed a line. If they harmed Randall or Dominic, Gage would never rest until he'd annihilated every last living one of them.

Rising above the trees till he could see the sharp relief of the ranch's roof, he swooped toward it with a screech, blood and hunger running through his head.

They could do what they wanted to him. They could torch his property, chase him out of every home he'd ever known waving their burning torches and their superstitions, but they would not take the men he loved.

It ended now.

Chapter Nineteen

Randall heard Gage's cries as he stumbled back toward the edge of the forest.

His ears still heard the sound, the branches still clawed at his sleeves, and he still stumbled on the loose, damp earth beneath his feet, but none of it registered. It might as well have been the disjointed sensation of a nightmare.

"Do you think that matters now?"

He tripped over a root, landing hard on one knee, body still aching from Gage's attention. Maybe he could even pretend the tightness in his throat and the burning in his eyes was all Gage's fault too.

Randall got to his feet, bracing one scraped palm against the rough tree bark to keep his balance until the world stopped spinning. He had to find Dominic. That was all he had left to do.

"You might as well have slaughtered them yourself."

No... He swiped at the tears stinging his eyes again with his shirtsleeve, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other.

Dominic. Keeping Dominic safe until Gage could deal with this. If he started thinking of anything deeper than that, he doubted he'd care about breathing let alone anything else. Selfish.

"What exactly have you done for reasons that aren't your own?"

He'd made his choice, and he'd been wrong. It seemed greedy to hope that somehow the damage could be reversed, but that was all he had.

He kept running, a numbness that began in his heart muting the aches in body and soul.

Dominic was heading back to the house of his own accord. Randall grasped onto that scant hope with both hands. If Dominic wasn't running from himself or Gage, just from the hunters—from the fear—maybe there was a way to salvage it.

If he could just keep Dominic safe at the house, ride out the worst of the wolf's urge to go and avenge his pack—an urge that would arise, sooner rather than later when the panic faded—maybe it would give Gage time to...

To kill the men Randall should have.

Another branch scratched at him, scraping a shallow cut along his cheek, and Randall lashed out at it in return, yelling and kicking his anger.

Maybe now, maybe for this, Randall could have carried out Gage's unstated orders. The same terrified fury that had him lashing out at every tangled vine or misplaced rock that stood in his way would have flung him across that unwritten line.

Was this what Gage and Dominic understood? This fierce, single-minded need to protect what was theirs? The need that rang in his ears, stung his eyes, filled his head with stupidly irrelevant thoughts, like he couldn't remember the last time he'd heard Gage laugh—*really* laugh—or that he didn't know Dominic's favorite color yet. They couldn't take that from him. Not just because he'd been a fool.

A shape slowed ahead of him, pausing to lean against a tree, catching his breath.

"Dominic."

Dominic started, looking back at him with wide, glassy eyes, and Randall didn't

think Gage had to worry about Dominic doing something reckless like going after the hunters himself. Dominic hardly looked as though he recognized the word Randall spoke as his own name.

Did I do that? Did I put humans that turned on us before him?

Dominic turned and ran again, speed and agility belying none of the exhaustion Randall saw in his face.

“Dominic, wait...”

Being this close, the hopeless desperation to do the one last thing Gage had entrusted to him, energized every step. He’d almost caught up with Dominic as they reached the front lawn. Dominic stumbled on the porch steps. Randall reached for him, knocking them both off balance.

“No!” Dominic squirmed beneath him, flailing kicks connecting with parts of Randall already bruised. None as bruised as his heart when he was faced with the terror gleaming fever-bright in Dominic’s eyes. “Let me go!”

“Okay, it’s okay...” Releasing Dominic, Randall pulled back. Dominic scooted back until he was leaning against the front door, knees drawn up to his chest, watching him with pained eyes. “It’s okay.”

Dominic shook his head, fingers scrabbling at the decking in fast scratching strokes as though he could dig his way through it. “No ... they’re here for me.” Dominic blinked, a fragment of lucidity clearing his gaze. “Was it really your old staff, all this time?”

Randall ran a hand through his hair, closing his eyes. Swallowing made the bruises Gage left across his windpipe ache, but breathing hurt just as much. It felt like each lung weighed a ton.

“I couldn’t kill anyone. I ... I never thought they’d come back. I didn’t know they’d find you, Dominic, if you don’t believe anything else—and I wouldn’t blame you for not—then please, *please* believe that causing you pain was never what I wanted. Ever.”

He’d hoped, selfishly, for reassurance, but Dominic just asked, “Why didn’t you tell Gage?”

“He wishes I wasn’t human.” Randall leaned his head back against the edge of the porch rail. “Why remind him of that weakness?”

“Do you?”

“Wish I wasn’t human?” He opened his eyes at the unexpected question. Hell, the unexpected conversation. If he were Dominic, he’d have been tearing strips out of the man who led to his family’s death by now. “All the time. Maybe then I could be what Gage wants. Maybe then there’d be a chance for me to stay here with you both.”

Dominic said nothing. Randall supposed he’d relinquished the right to expect comfort when he’d chosen to lie.

“And when I told you...”

“I thought I could fix the damage before it got this bad. It was my mistake, my responsibility. Expecting you or Gage to fight—”

“But we can, we—”

“I know. Don’t keep reminding me that *you* can. I know you can.” He hadn’t meant to snap so venomously, hadn’t meant the years of futile anger to come out now. It wasn’t Dominic’s fault. Or Gage’s, really. Just the bad luck of a draw Randall hadn’t even known he was in until it was too late. He ran a hand over his face, wishing he could wipe the bitterness away that easily. “I’m sorry.”

Dominic shrugged a little, still watching him warily. "I just meant that it's my responsibility," Dominic said quietly. "Maybe you didn't have a reason to kill them then, but I do now. They took everything from me, and I'm sitting here shitting myself instead of going after them. Do you think I feel big right now? You think being anything more than human means a shit now?"

"No one can help the fear."

"Maybe."

Slowly, feeling every single scrape and knock, he stood. At least Dominic didn't flinch or run. It was a start. "Come on, let's get inside."

Dominic got to his feet, but didn't seem eager to agree. Arms folded across his chest, chin raised, he frowned. "And leave Gage to it himself? No way, if you even think—"

"I promised him I'd keep you safe."

"Yeah?" Dominic stared at him, nostrils flaring. "And who's gonna keep him safe if we don't?"

The words hit like a sucker punch.

Gage never asked for that, never asked for Randall's protection. All he'd expected was trust, loyalty. There was no easy way to scrape that back, but maybe there was a place to start. Maybe, for once, Randall could repay all the ways Gage had kept him safe. "You and Gage have your own weapons," he said eventually. "I don't. At least let's get properly armed before we go back."

Dominic watched him for a moment, then nodded purposefully, turning for the door. "Okay."

There was an odd peace in the decision, in choosing a path of action. It didn't matter what came of it, the calm came in choosing at all. He watched Dominic open the front door, smiling a little to himself. He wouldn't have reached this place without Dominic, without that black and white, stupid simple view of the world.

As Dominic stepped into the hallway, a shadow barreled into his side, shoving him from Randall's line of sight.

"Dominic!" Not even pausing to consider who might be waiting for them, Randall shoved at the heavy closing door, feeling it meet something soft and mobile on the other side that grunted as it was hit.

The only thing that crossed his mind as he was shoved from behind, meeting the floor with a bone-bruising thud, was that Gage made a mistake sending him alone to look after Dominic. Even against other humans, Randall was useless, barehanded and blind-sided by their weapons and their numbers.

"Where is he?" One of the men holding him down asked. "Where's your boss?"

"I don't—" A kick to the gut whooshed the rest of the answer from his lungs. The gloom of the hallway darkened further, speckled with dots of light flickering across his vision.

"No!" Somewhere to his right he heard Dominic yell as he scuffled with his captor. "Leave him alone, you fucking assholes!"

"Shut the fuck up."

As Randall raised his head, he saw the men holding Dominic hauling him to his feet. One of them yanked his head back by the hair, the other pressed the barrel of a gun under Dominic's chin.

"You think we haven't been watching you too, doggie?"

Dominic growled, and a cold nausea roiled through Randall's stomach, doubling him over as surely as another kick. *What have I done?*

"Get up." Something hard and cold jabbed him between the shoulder blades. Randall tried to half-turn, until the gun was shoved harder, but he saw enough to recognize the men as one of the last batch of staff, one they'd let go last summer.

Men he'd tried to keep safe.

Idiot!

"Why couldn't you just leave us alone?" he asked through gritted teeth, hating how gullible and small his words sounded. "You got to walk away, why didn't you just stay away?"

"Why?" One of the men holding Dominic—another of the group they'd dismissed before Dominic arrived—laughed. "'Cause this guy here's gonna be worth more than your boss could pay us in ten fucking lifetimes. Besides..." He grinned. "We've done our homework."

He drew the gun away from Dominic's chin, but before Randall could even think about launching some death-wish ambush, the other man pressed a hunting knife in its place. The other man unclipped the bullets from the gun, holding them out to Dominic. Randall watched Dominic's eyes widen, then close in resignation.

The man chuckled again, reloading the gun. Dominic opened his eyes, the gold flaring intensely, and for the first time today, Randall noticed that familiar predatory gleam. "Silver," Dominic said, sounding weary.

They'd done their homework, all right. They'd just chosen the wrong myth.

Randall tried not to visibly relax. It was a small nod in their favor if the bullets were silver and not iron. They might not do as much damage to Gage or Dominic, but they'd still make a mess of him.

Just human.

And as close as the gun was to Dominic's jugular, Randall didn't know if he could heal that sort of injury in time.

"I'm gonna ask you again," the man behind him said. "Where's your boss. And don't even bother saying you don't know. You damn freaks know everything."

Randall paused. He'd never expected to be classed with Gage and Dominic. He couldn't tell if that would be another mark in their favor or not. They'd realize their mistake soon enough if they pulled the trigger.

Gage ... I'm sorry this was the best I could do. "Then I'm sorry to disappoint you," he said. "He's not here." He hadn't expected the belligerence to be met with anything other than anger, but the wind was still knocked out of him as he was shoved back to the floor.

"Don't fuck around with us!"

He gambled on the hope that this early in the game, they were more value alive than dead. A shortcut to Gage.

He couldn't tell for sure, they weren't letting him move enough, but he thought there were five or six men. Each one was someone he recognized. It didn't take much to summon the anger as he kicked out at the men holding him down, struggling as wildly as any trapped animal.

Dominic knew what he was trying to do. Dominic watched him intently, and Randall could see the wheels turning behind that narrow, glittering gaze.

He'd seen the process in reverse. Dominic needed time to shift, and Randall had to make sure he got it.

"Goddamn it!" One of the men yelled, and Randall buckled under the force of a rifle butt being slammed against his back. Pain zinged to every nerve, but he fought the blackness clouding the edges of his vision. He had to make sure Dominic was all right.

Distantly, as though through muddy water, he heard the man aiming the gun at Dominic yowl, a terrified, pained sound. Randall raised his head as best he could.

The creature whose teeth were still clamped around the man's forearm was neither man nor wolf, but some nightmarishly dangerous thing in between. The other man drew his knife again, but without even releasing his prey, Dominic half-turned, lashing out with wicked looking claws. The knife, shreds of the man's sleeve, and splashes of blood dropped to the floor.

"Shit!" The man with the knife dropped to his knees, holding his arm, while his comrade whimpered, trying in vain to extricate himself from Dominic's grasp without putting any more limbs or extremities within Dominic's reach.

Dominic bit down harder. Randall closed his eyes as the man shrieked. He didn't need to see it. Bad enough he could feel no remorse for the humans he'd sacrificed everything to save. They'd never wanted his help. They'd wanted to use him, destroy Dominic's family and Gage's peace. Randall focused on that galling thought instead of the man's cries.

His own captors must have been as transfixed as he was. At least, no one had hit him since Dominic's half-shift. It was one thing, he supposed, to hunt. Another thing entirely to come face-to-face with a prey you'd underestimated.

When one of his captors screamed, even Dominic in his animalistic state paused, distracted.

Randall turned his head in time to see one of his assailants crashing into the grandfather clock by the dining room door. The case shattered in splinters of wood and glass, and as the man slumped to the floor, he could make out five deep, ragged puncture wounds in his chest.

Gage.

The dark haze distorted the edge of his vision again, and Randall couldn't do a thing to fight the slow slide into darkness.

Chapter Twenty

Even through the fear, the taste of blood and the pain of the erratic change, Dominic sensed Gage's arrival. The chill of it permeated the room, enough that he swore he could see his breath misting in the air.

He licked his muzzle, tasting the bitter coppery tang. The man he'd bit couldn't be allowed to live. There was no way Dominic would be responsible for accidentally changing someone who'd tried to kill him, and not one but two of his families. But while the man drooped against the bottom of the stairs, clinging his arm and turning a sickly white, the other man scrabbled for his knife again.

Dominic howled, dodging back, but not moving quickly enough to avoid the sharp slice of the blade cutting his arm. Neither silver nor iron, just the clean stinging kiss of steel. He snarled, hearing Gage screech almost in reply, and allowed the shift to take him completely. What he lost in brute force, he gained in agility, darting out of the way of another slash of the blade. The hunter whirled on him, unsteady, and Dominic gathered his haunches beneath him, leaping with a howl that hurt his own ears.

He could hear his pack, their howls and yips rang out in his head too as he went for the hunter's throat, feeling flesh and bone rend between his jaws. Limp as a ragdoll, he shook his head once, hard, making sure the death was as quick as he could make it. They wouldn't want him to stoop that low. They wouldn't want him to become what he hated, not even for their memory.

Dropping the still hunter to the ground, one paw swiping the knife away into the gloom of the hallway's shadows, he turned to the man on the stairs. He didn't think the man could even see him. Shock setting in, the hunter shivered, eyes glassy and unfocused.

Did you stop to think how much pain they felt? he wanted to ask. Did you even care?

Did it wound something buried deep inside, the way it did to him as he growled, lunging at the man's jugular? He was the freak, the monster, but it was the human he bit that could so easily, so guiltlessly take the life of those around him without blinking. They hadn't lost a second's sleep over it, it had broadcast loud and clear in their greedy gazes, in the very fact they'd come back for more.

For him.

He let the body go, slinking back, tail between his legs, ears flat. There was no relief in the aftermath, no pleasure, no peace. Just a hollowness that made him want to cry. Just as well he couldn't in this form.

"Dominic!"

He turned at Randall's yell, his world slipping into slow-motion monochrome. One hunter remained. He could see the wide white of the man's eyes as he raised his gun in a violently shaking hand, veering back and forth between them.

He must have thought Dominic was the greatest threat, and that whatever dollar signs flashing behind his eyes faded in the face of getting out of here alive. The man turned the gun toward him, aimed at his head. Silver, iron, it didn't matter. Dominic could never heal that. He couldn't move. It would have taken an earthquake to shift his feet.

When the man toppled sideways, the gun going off with a muffled crack, Dominic didn't understand why. Even when the scent of blood spiked again, it took a moment to realize why that particular scent made his hackles rise, teeth bared.

He only saw Randall's crumpled form when Gage ripped the final hunter away from him.

No...

The shot—the one meant for Dominic—left its mark in a ragged wound on the side of Randall's abdomen.

No!

He didn't hear the man's yell, even if he made a single sound as Gage screeched, talons digging deep as he snapped the hunter's neck. Forcing himself through the change so fast he felt the half-healed wounds re-opening, Dominic dropped to his knees at Randall's side, hands fumbling, helpless and uncertain, before pressing hopelessly against the wound. "Randall!"

Gage shifted back, but as horrified and twisted as his expression was, Dominic could barely tell the difference. "No..." Gage said, voice low and inhuman, barely audible. "No."

"Fuck sakes, help me! Do something!" Wiping tears from his face, feeling the stickiness of Randall's blood mixing with the saline, Dominic reached for Randall's face, slapping him, shaking him, lost in the irrational panic. There had to be something he could do. Something.

Change him, the wolf growled, still prowling close to the surface. *Change him. Save him.*

"Gage..." he whined despairingly, hands over the wound again, wishing to all the gods he knew that Gage would make this choice for him, give him permission. "Gage, we have to do something now." The blood kept spreading along the wooden floor, running faster than Dominic's hands could press. "Gage!"

No answer. He couldn't even tell for sure that Gage heard him.

He didn't have time to wait.

It wasn't how he wanted to do it. If it happened, he'd wanted it to be in the comfortable, loving environment of their bed, bodies locked together like they'd been last night, warm and safe like they'd been that morning. He'd wanted it to be a slow, savoring process.

He'd wanted Randall's permission, Gage's approval. He wouldn't get either.

Teeth bared, he forced himself back into the half-shift, holding back ruthlessly from answering the lure to just shift and run. With hands more claws than fingers, he tilted Randall's head, trying to swallow past the cold fear at how slackly it lolled against his hands.

He looked up at Gage one last time, wishing desperately for something, anything.

Gage was just a black and white and laser blue statue, still staring at Randall as if he could fix him through gaze alone. They'd need more than that, otherwise Randall was beyond fixing. The blood smeared Dominic's knees, hot and sticky and cloying.

"I'm not losing you," he growled, voice rough past his sharp teeth. "Either of you. Not now."

Randall's body jerked as Dominic sank his teeth into the skin and muscle at the juncture of neck and shoulder, biting down hard and deep. The taste of blood made a

mess of his senses, the wolf joyous and hungry at the prospect of a new mate, of new pack, the human hopelessly aware that this was Randall's blood, and too much of it was spilling across the hallway floor as it was.

When he was sure the wounds were deep enough, he bit into his own lip, letting the blood well before pressing his lips to Randall's shoulder again.

There was no Werewolf Manual, no nifty little handbook they gave him when he came into his powers. Countless times Dominic wished there was, but here and now, feeling Randall's pulse pick up against his lips, feeling the cool, wild shiver like a fresh, forest breeze through his mind, he understood why he never needed one.

The wolf knew what it was doing. It kept him licking at Randall's shoulder until he felt the tingle of the skin knitting itself back together.

It wasn't as though he'd done this before, but he breathed a little easier to see the accelerated rate of the healing, faster even than anything Dominic's own body would manage. The power of the newly-changed, he supposed. As it adjusted to the new power rushing through its veins, Randall's body healed and altered at the same time.

Gage watched them in stony silence. Even rage would be better than the emptiness in those electric blue eyes. But then what did he expect? He'd done the very thing Gage warned him not to, thrown whatever precarious balance Gage had worked out in his head into turmoil.

Still, as he watched the steady rise and fall of Randall's chest, the conversation they'd had out on the porch came back to him. "*Wish I wasn't human? All the time.*"

Randall had given his permission, had done all but write them a memo demanding this. He wanted to be with them, he wanted to knock away that last barrier between himself and Gage, and Dominic refused to believe that it wouldn't be for the better this way. One way or the other.

Wiping the drying tears with a grimy forearm, he tried gently shaking Randall awake again. He thought he heard a soft intake of breath behind him when Randall finally opened his eyes, the gray dull and bleary, but responsive. "Hey..." He touched Randall's cheek, fresh tears welling. "Don't try to talk. You're gonna be okay, I swear."

"I..." Randall swallowed, the effort of a smile seeming to exhaust him. "You're okay."

"Yeah." Dominic nodded. "We're all okay."

"Gage?" Randall's gaze scanned the room wildly, as though he was trying to take it all in at once and failing miserably.

"Do as Dominic says, Randall," Gage said, voice cold and clipped. "Conserve your energy."

"But, I..." Randall tried to sit up, wincing. Dominic helped him to his feet, shoulder under Randall's arm. It was like carrying a dead weight.

But not dead. Thank fuck, not dead... Everything else could be fixed, in time.

"I'm sorry, Gage..." Randall began. "I never wanted... I'm sorry."

If Randall hoped for a reply, he'd be waiting in vain. Dominic could see it in the stubborn set of Gage's jaw, the way he wouldn't even look at them except in fleeting glances, as though seeing the expression in Randall's eyes would cause them both pain.

"I'm going to get him cleaned up, see how he's healing," Dominic said, trying to distract Randall from Gage's rejection. "Are you gonna be okay on your own for a while?"

Gage glared at him, but the viciousness in his eyes was laced with a hurt that Dominic could almost taste.

“I’ve been ‘okay’ on my own for lifetimes, little wolf. You’d do well to remember that.”

Randall slumped a little against him as Dominic turned for the stairs, studiously avoiding looking at the bodies in their path. “Is this what you call ‘okay’, Gage?” he asked, not looking back. “Because if it is, you really need someone to redefine it for you.”

“Like you?” Gage barked, trying to sound angry but only sounding sad.

“Yeah,” Dominic said, carrying on up the stairs. “Maybe like me.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Water. Rain? No. Too warm.

Like struggling to wake up on a ridiculously early morning, Randall fought the haziness that smothered him. The water shushed around him a sibilant rush, and Randall tried to open his eyes.

Shower. He was in the shower. All right, that was a start.

Something was propping him up. The shower tiles gleamed far too brightly, as though someone was aiming a megawatt lamp directly at them. He squeezed his eyes shut again, willing the throbbing in his head to stop.

Gradually, other aches and pains reminded him of their presence: a dull ache in his side, as if he'd been badly winded; moving his shoulder hurt a little; a stiffness in his back, and in one knee.

He struggled for lucidity again.

"Hey..." Dominic's voice sounded far away, soft and shaky. "How are you feeling?"

"I..." Somehow, he didn't think he should feel as okay as he did. Sore, tired, but ... breathing, functioning. Alive.

Trying to piece together the day's events was a little like trying to remember what you did on a drunken night out. He could see fragments, but couldn't recall how they fit together, or even in what order they occurred.

"It's okay..." Dominic kissed his shoulder. "Don't try too hard, it'll be okay."

"No, it's..." Randall shook his head, awareness just out of reach like the ephemeral memories of a dream. Hunters. Blood. Dominic and Gage fighting. He remembered losing a few moments to unconsciousness, and waking to watch a hunter aiming a gun at a large chestnut wolf. He heard an echo of himself yelling at Dominic, willing him out of the way of a gunshot.

Heard the shot ring out. Felt it tear through skin, flesh, felt cold darkness sucking him under—"No!"

"Shh..." Dominic said, a commanding edge to his voice that Randall couldn't help but obey. "It's okay. You're okay. Gage is fine, I'm fine. It's over."

Listening with one ear, Randall braced a hand on the cool, tiled wall for balance and looked down at himself. Where he was so certain the hunter's bullet had torn through his flesh was just a closing wound, still tender and sore, but healing.

In an hour, if that.

"What happened to me?"

"I..." Dominic's hard swallow felt like a rattle of drums against Randall's spine. The embrace tightened, but Randall felt the way Dominic's hands shook. "I changed you."

"Changed me," he repeated stupidly before stars swirled in his vision, blood rushed in his head, and the world went dark.

The next time he could see without feeling as if he wanted to throw up, Dominic was holding on to him, body warm and wet under the shower spray.

"I'm sorry..." Dominic shook his head, wet hair sticking to Randall's chest, his breath coming in erratic gasps. "I'm sorry. But you were going to die, and I couldn't lose you, I couldn't lose someone else, I..."

“Dominic.” Fighting the wave of dizziness that moving caused, Randall held Dominic closer, one hand stroking the wet satin of his hair. “You saved my life.” The enormity of it prickled through his soul, his heart, in little spiky daggers of heat like the hot water pummeling his skin from the shower.

He saved my life.

Dominic made a soft sound when Randall’s arms tightened, hanging on desperately. The tears were lost in the hot rain of the shower, but the sobs wracked his body regardless, reminding him of every pain, every bruise that should have been there but wasn’t.

He shouldn’t have been here.

“Can’t...” Dominic kissed his way to Randall’s lips in nuzzles and nudges of cheek, nose, mouth. “Can’t lose you.”

“You won’t.” His words dissolved on Dominic’s lips, lost in the sound of the water and their breathing. He tasted the fear on Dominic’s tongue, felt the desperation and the relief in the way Dominic’s hands roamed his body, as though checking he was still there, still in one piece.

After a moment—not enough, his body groused, over-riding any conscious decision Randall wanted to make—Dominic stepped back. The space between them in the shower cooled, but still sparked with the memory of sensation. He could almost feel the way the water trickled across Dominic’s skin, the way it ran in a rivulet over his hipbone.

“Come on...” Dominic held out a hand to him. “You need to rest first.”

Aside from the rapidly fading aches and pains, Randall certainly didn’t feel tired. Adrenaline, or just what he was now, he couldn’t tell.

Wolf. Was that the restless thing circling every thought, reminding him of pine trees and warm fur, warm and longing for contact, for touch?

Even the soft scrape of the bath towel on sensitized skin felt strangely comforting as Dominic dried him off. If he’d been thinking clearly, Randall might have felt a little embarrassed at the careful attention, but his entire capacity for thought was taken up with not falling over, and not arching into the rhythmic petting strokes of the towel.

Dominic tugged on his jeans over still-wet skin, leaving them half-buttoned, and Randall fought the desire to drop to his knees and lap at the stray droplets of water clinging to Dominic’s stomach.

“Damn...” Dominic’s laugh was tired, but sincere. “Even getting attacked doesn’t stop the two of you staring at me like you wanna eat me.”

“Ah... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Dominic took his hand, kissed him, lips lingering. “But I won’t let you push yourself right now to do anything. Not even fuck me till I can’t stand straight.”

Randall growled, only noticing what he’d done when Dominic’s eyes widened, flaring bright gold.

“Don’t do that.” Dominic’s voice was thicker than it had been as he let go of Randall’s hand, backing out of the bathroom. “If you do that again, I’m not ... just don’t. My willpower sucks as it is.”

Dominic would only brush off another apology, so Randall just lowered his head slightly and nodded, following him through the doorway into the bedroom. It took a while to realize everything was in black and white. The panic tightened his throat, made him grip the door frame as though the hurricane of it would blow him away. “Dominic?”

“It’s okay,” Dominic said again in that soothing mantra. “I know everything’s gonna be different for you for a while. I’m here. Whatever you need from me, I’m here.”

Randall closed his eyes till the room stopped swaying, and nodded. When he looked again, the room was still black and white, but he began to notice how many little details he could see so sharply now. Each knife-pleat of the curtain was like the edge of a chasm, every facet of glass in the lamp glittered like its own constellation. “Is this how it is for you all the time?”

“Not all the time. When you get tense, or stressed...” Dominic smiled a little, touched his hand, herding him toward the bed. “Survival mechanism, y’know?”

Survival. It was hardly something he’d needed to think about before. He supposed he better start. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he turned down the sheets, getting into bed. He didn’t look different. He just looked alive, despite the extent of all the pink, healing flesh along his side. It might not even scar. It was ... too much.

Dominic switched off all the lights bar a lamp on the dresser, and Randall closed his eyes, grateful for the soothing dark.

Where was Gage now? Imagining the way he’d looked the last time Randall saw him, disappointed and betrayed, had a chill tightening his chest. He wasn’t so foolish as to regret the gift Dominic gave him, but there seemed to be less of a reason for it if Gage still despised him. “Is he angry?”

“Gage?” Dominic paused, and Randall noticed with a start that he could taste, smell Dominic’s reaction. He’d know if Dominic was lying, or hesitating, or couching the truth, picking up on cues that the human would never have thought to look for. “I don’t know. Not at *you*. At me, maybe, or at himself...”

“It’s not his fault. Or yours. I was the one who—”

Dominic cut him off with a kiss, leaning over him, hands on the sheet either side of Randall’s hips, pinning him down. “No. No more blame. I’ve had enough of the fucking *blame*.” Dominic drew away, perching on the edge of the mattress, running his hands through his hair.

Randall rested a hand against the small of his back, offering the comfort of touch that he’d have liked himself now. “Are you really okay?”

Dominic turned muted gold eyes on him, and in the dim light Randall could see the redness and shadows under his eyes. Still, Dominic tried gamely for a smile. “Yeah. I mean...”

He didn’t seem okay to any of Randall’s new, tentative senses. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Dominic lowered his head, body curling in on itself. Unable to help himself, and ignoring any twinge that told him not to move, Randall reached for him, wrapping Dominic up in his arms.

“No,” Dominic said softly. “I don’t think I am. But I will be, and it *is* over.”

“Dominic—”

“I thought,” Dominic began, snuggling into Randall’s arms, breath warm and shaky against his cheek, “that if I killed them, it’d stop hurting.”

“Oh, love...”

“And it won’t, I know that. But maybe ... I don’t know. They won’t hurt anyone else. They couldn’t hurt you or Gage, they couldn’t take you two from me.”

“Nothing ever will.” Holding on tight, Randall spoke against Dominic’s hair. “Ever. I swear to you.” And he’d keep that promise. The wild, restless thing making itself at

home in between his senses sent a contented rumble through his chest at the vow. He didn't even care that it might take forever to get Gage to forgive him, that there was a chance things would never be right between them again. He had to try. And he'd made enough mistakes to know that trying wasn't one of them.

"Rest," Dominic said, kissing him again, reluctance on his tongue as he drew away and stood. "I'm not kidding about that part. You're gonna be feeling all this tomorrow."

"I'm feeling it now." Randall did as he was told, body reacting to Dominic's words as though they were suggestion made flesh. He wasn't tired, but a bone-deep weariness settled over him as surely as the cotton sheet. "Dominic?"

"Hmm?"

"Tell Gage that I..." Even through an intermediary, the words wouldn't come. I'm sorry, I love you ... nothing seemed to make up for what he'd done.

But Dominic smiled back at him, nodded. "Yeah, that's exactly what I'm gonna do."

Chapter Twenty-Two

While Dominic attended to Randall, Gage attended to the messy detritus of the fight.

He tried his best, as he clutched the limp bodies in his talons, wings heaving with the effort as he dragged them as far into the forest as he could, to think of them as humans. Tried to see them they way Randall had when he'd let them go.

No doubt Randall would be angry at what they'd done. Even with a bullet hole wider than Gage's palm cutting clean through his stomach, Randall would still defend the humans.

"They're people," Gage imagined he could hear Randall say as he dragged the last carcass out of the house, "they have lives, families of their own."

But they'd made their choice. Gage hadn't sought them out, they'd come into his world. They'd destroyed everything Dominic had found in his world, and hadn't paused to care before coming after them again. Humans had the planet to choose from. They didn't have to come into his tiny corner of it, but if they did, Gage would defend that which he loved with every last breath.

And wasn't that so very human of him, when it all came down?

He found clean clothes when he returned to the house, sick enough at the reminders of the day that still stained the hallway, still stained his senses.

His library was as warm and dark as it always was. Gage lit a fire, listening for any indication of movement from upstairs.

They couldn't stay here anymore. His hands were shaking as he poured himself a glass of brandy, not even bothering to replace the stopper on the decanter when it became painfully obvious his fingers weren't steady enough. Not drinking, he stared around the library as if he was looking at a stranger's house. All these things, all the trinkets with which he'd surrounded himself. He'd have to leave them behind again.

Why couldn't you just let us be? Does our existence have less value than yours? Is my love for what's mine less than yours?

He was still staring into the same glass when Dominic came downstairs an indeterminate age later. Gage didn't look up. Eventually coming to the conclusion he wouldn't instigate conversation, Dominic dropped onto the leather couch with a whump, voice muffled as he ran his hands over his face.

"He's asleep. It looks like everything's healing, but..." Running his hands angrily through his hair, Dominic shook his head. "I don't know enough. I've never done this before, I told him I'm here for him, but I have no fucking idea how to help him, really, and—"

"Don't waste too much effort," Gage said. "I'd hate for you to exhaust yourself just so I can kill him with my own hands."

"Gage—"

He stood, started pacing, watching the firelight flicker in the cut crystal of the glass. It didn't distract him, just irritated him more. Even inanimate objects couldn't do the right thing anymore. It was all he could do not to hurl the damn thing at the fire. "After everything he's done, you can sit there and protect him?"

Dominic watched him, eyes as clear and amber as the liquid sloshing angrily in

Gage's glass. "It's what you do for pack. It's what you do when you love someone."

Neither the words nor Dominic's upfront honesty were much of a surprise, but the depth with which they hurt made him stop pacing. Without his footsteps on the hardwood floor, the room sounded too quiet, even the fire subdued and crackled softly. "What does love have to do with any of it?"

"Everything." Dominic shrugged. "Doesn't it? You forgive someone you love, even when they fuck up this badly, when you know they were only trying to do what they thought was right. It's not like he woke up one day and thought 'oh hey, I'll set the wheels in motion to kill the pack of a werewolf I haven't even met yet!', did he?"

"Dominic, will you stop..." He trailed off, not even sure what he wanted Dominic to stop. Stop defending Randall, stop making it all seem so simple. Stop saying the words Gage himself should be saying.

"Okay, fine, even if you take loving him out of the equation, he's pack now. If you try to hurt him, then you'll have to go through me." There wasn't much venom in Dominic's threat. "Please don't do that ... I wanted to bring you two together, not come between you."

Gage snorted, watching the fire's slow progress devouring the thick log of firewood. "So he's yours now, is he?"

"Ours." Dominic shook his head. Gage could feel the sidelong glance on him, feel the heat that crackled against his skin warmer and more demanding than the fire. "And don't act like you're not my pack, just because I haven't bitten you."

There was such a basic indignation to the tone—as if he'd committed some terrible impolite slur against wolfkind in general—Gage couldn't quite stifle the smile. "Oh, you have, just not *that* way."

"There you go, then."

Dominic remained silent for a long moment, long enough for Gage to decide to put another piece of firewood on the flames, long enough for him to wonder if being this close to the heat would eventually evaporate the cognac into a mist of expensive alcoholic air.

Gage didn't turn, even when he felt Dominic's eyes on him again, even when he fought the urge to shiver under the attention when Dominic spoke quietly. "He saved my life."

"If it wasn't for him, your life would never have been in danger! None of our lives would have..."

"For fuck's sake, Gage ... he was doing what any right-minded human—any right-minded anything—would! Did you want to turn him into a killer?"

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Doesn't it? Gage, he was doing what his conscience let him live with." Dominic leaned back on the couch, gaze focused on the ceiling as if he could watch Randall through the layer of wood and plaster. "Isn't that all any of us can do?"

Gage couldn't remember the last time he'd cared about his conscience. He listened in silence to the new log popping and sparking, to the chime of the hallway clock declaring it to be a lot earlier than Gage would give credit for.

Just twenty-four hours ago, he'd been wrapped up in Randall and Dominic's bodies, lost in guiltless pleasure for the first time in centuries. It felt like the day had lasted lifetimes.

The thought of Randall's kiss had him touching his lips, fingers moving of their own volition. He could still remember that first taste and the way Randall all but melted in his arms, surrendering so completely to the kiss. He'd never felt so wanted, so cherished.

So loved.

"Besides," Dominic said, "isn't this what you wanted?"

Gage set the glass down on the coffee table before his clenching fist shattered it. Even by his standards, he'd seen enough blood today. A shudder coiled through his stomach as he pictured Randall's blood spilling out across the hallway floor, running in rivulets through the grain of the hardwood. He could still smell it, if he focused, even with his abilities so exhausted. Just the thought that someone—himself or Dominic, because who else was there?—would have to clean it up made him nauseous. He never wanted to see that again. "Not like this."

"He's alive. He's safe. He fucked up, I'm really not denying that, but..." Dominic managed to stand and cross the room before Gage even noticed. Too tired to care about his lapse, he let Dominic wind his arms around his waist, face pressed against his shoulder. "He was trying to do the right thing, Gage. That's all."

"As simple as that, hmm?" He couldn't even summon the wry amusement the sentiment deserved, he thought in an oddly detached way. "But all this time... I don't even know who he is."

Dominic chuckled tiredly, breath warm against Gage's neck. "He's Randall. He's always gonna be Randall, human or not. All I did was change his body, the rest of him isn't anyone else's to change."

He turned in Dominic's arms, pretending that not fighting the comfort wasn't the same as seeking it out. Dominic just held on, fingers combing through his hair, silent and undemanding while Gage tried to pull himself together.

Centuries of life, and nothing—*nobody*—burrowed as deeply into his soul as a wolf who wore his heart on his sleeve, and a human who wore his stubbornness like a shield. Even if he knew how to stop it, how to undo it, he knew he never would.

When he was confident he wouldn't make a fool of himself, he pulled back. Dominic kissed him softly before letting him go, the firelight reflecting in his eyes.

"Go see him."

Gage shook his head. "I'm going to bed. I suggest you do the same. You need rest as much as he does."

"In a while, maybe." Dominic shrugged. "Too damn wired to sleep. I thought I'd start on the clean-up..."

Pausing at the door, Gage grimaced. The hallway was dark enough, but he could still smell the blood. Too much of it was Randall's. "Leave it. We'll decide what to do tomorrow."

Or the next day, or the day after that. Whenever any of them felt capable of making more decisions. Faced with the choice of whether to sleep on his left or right side, Gage didn't think he could summon the will to decide.

Too many decisions.

And they'd never end, he knew that now. Turning for the stairs, he took each step slowly, barely enough energy in his body to push him to the landing. There'd never be a place they'd be safe forever, there'd never be an end to the hard decisions about trusting humans, about trying to coexist.

His head directed him to the warm, dark safety of his own room, but neither body nor soul wanted to follow. His heart wanted to be with Randall.

Dominic had left just a table lamp on in Randall's room. Just as well; Gage didn't particularly want to see the extent of Randall's injuries, or see quite how deathly pale his skin was, even compared to normal. He could still see the blood running along the grooves of the hallway floor. He could still hear the choking sounds of Randall still trying to apologize through the blood and the pain.

Stubborn, stubborn man...

Randall stirred slightly in his sleep just at Gage's presence, a frown creasing his brow, the sheet tangling around him as he moved. Would this be the way of things now? Couldn't he as much as walk into a room without Randall reacting as though someone was attempting to murder him in his sleep?

"Shhh..." he whispered automatically as he sat on the edge of the bed. "Hush, love." Randall made a soft noise, but quieted. He didn't look any different, and the closer Gage looked, he couldn't even pick out the injuries he knew should be there. The bruises were already turning an ugly yellow, already healing.

He's Randall.

"What did you do?" He turned away from Randall, looking across the room. "Always so damned stubborn, always making your own decisions without thinking how it affects other people. Never thinking how losing you would affect us..."

Randall said nothing, even if Gage's words had woken him. Gage didn't know what he'd want to hear anyway. An apology seemed childish to expect—he wouldn't want Randall to apologize for being what he was.

No, *who* he was.

"You were right, you know." Gage spoke to his hands in lieu of admitting Randall might be listening quietly. "I wouldn't have wanted to turn you into a killer. It's not who you are."

"But you trusted me, and I lied to you." As soft as Randall spoke, it shouldn't have startled him. "I wouldn't blame you, you know, if you decided you never could again."

"Don't be ridiculous." The words left his lips before his mind had a chance to process them. On reflection, it would have still agreed with his heart. "You should never have been put in such a position."

The bed shifted under their weight as Randall sat up. "Did you mean it when you said it didn't matter that I love you?"

Gage closed his eyes. Not even the neatly ordered detail of Randall's room could distract him from the sharp jab of pain at that reminder.

"Because I do, you know." Randall's arms slipped around his chest, and Gage bit his lip to keep from making a sound suspiciously like a plea at the warmth that pressed against his back. "I always have. You and Dominic are my world. If anything happened to you because of me..."

"Hush..." Hands overlapping Randall's, fingers entwining, Gage shook his head. "What's done is done."

"So now what?" a voice asked from the doorway. Dominic lingered there, almost as though despite everything, he didn't want to intrude.

Gage looked up, felt Randall's arms tighten. Reaching out a hand to Dominic, he shrugged. "We do what we've always done, and what we'll always have to. Move on."

Find somewhere else.”

Dominic came to him, took his hand, and knelt at his side. “All three of us?”

The past hung heavy in the air on the edge of that question, and Gage wondered briefly if that was where he’d always gone wrong. He could choose now. Choose to let things continue to fester, or choose to wipe away the blood, the hurt, the deception. Start over in the truest sense. Not just a new place to live, but a new way of life.

“Yes,” he said. “All three of us. If either of you think I’m letting you go now, you’re badly mistaken. Besides...” One hand squeezed Randall’s, the other combed through Dominic’s hair. “I’d never move into a new home without my two new guard dogs, would I?”

Such an odd sensation, the stereo vibrations of the same growl, one at his nape, the other at his knee.

“Guard dogs?” Dominic looked up at him, a wild gleam in gold eyes. “Is that what you think you’re getting?”

“Isn’t it?” Gage smiled, slow and dangerous. *Come on, little wolf, challenge me. Break me apart and put me together better than before.* “Perhaps you need to show me where I’m going wrong.”

Dominic’s gaze flicked to Randall, concern slitting through the teasing, but whatever he saw there seemed to reassure him.

“Don’t fret so much, little wolf.” Gage smiled, showing teeth. “Our Randall isn’t as delicate as that.” He turned, sitting sideways on to Randall, one knee bent up on the bed. “Are you?” Randall’s eyes gleamed silver. Gold and silver, Gage mused, the ice and fire of his lovers reflected in the very colors their nature chose for them.

“No.” Randall shook his head, gaze defiant even as his hands quivered as they cupped Gage’s face, leaning in to kiss him.

The combination of wolf—wild and warm and restless—and the steady, familiar taste of Randall’s mouth stole the breath from Gage’s lungs. It was a missing piece finally slotting into place, something he’d waited for, yearned for, that he never realized was lost till it returned.

“Perfect...” he murmured against the kiss, rewarded by another slow sweep of Randall’s tongue along the parted seam of his lips, not quite daring to slip inside, content to tease and worship.

The sheet had all but tangled its way off the bed. It clung to Randall’s thigh, but did nothing to hide anything else. Forehead pressed against Randall’s, Gage allowed himself to look, to scan that lovely, sculptured body for telltale signs of how close he’d come to losing this.

Randall and Dominic watched as he brushed a hand, featherlight, across the healing skin of the bullet wound.

“Gage...” Randall sucked in a breath, and for a moment Gage was terrified he’d caused pain. But it was an odd sort of pain, judging by the way Randall’s cock hardened against his thigh.

“Hmm.” Gage brushed a kiss to Randall’s mouth, stroking that tender skin carefully again. “If this is what it does to you, we’ll have to shoot you more often.”

Dominic slapped his leg. “Not funny.”

It wasn’t, but Randall didn’t seem to mind. One hand curving around the back of Gage’s head, he deepened the kiss, lips and teeth demanding with a sweet aggression

Gage had never noticed before.

Wolf, or just the hunger? Did it matter? Not when each stroke of Randall's tongue sent shudders skipping to Gage's brain, dragged teasing licks of friction down his spine like the raking of claws. Something coiled tight deep inside—fear, relief, desire, all winding together, creating something new, something bigger than each one of them. It wasn't even love. It felt even deeper than that.

Now. He wanted them now.

Randall gasped into his mouth as Gage reached for his cock, feeling the flesh harden and flush warm against his palm. Gage nipped at his lower lip, and to his delight, Randall nipped back, sweet playful little grazes of teeth and tongue.

As mesmerized as he was by the kiss, he left himself wide open for Dominic to gain the upper hand. He thought he heard the tickling whisper of a pleased chuckle as warm hands made short work of his pants, only tugging them as far as his thighs.

Dominic had more important things in mind.

Warm breath touched the already feverish head of his cock, surprising him how helplessly ready he was for their touch. Pre-come already moistened the way for Dominic's mouth as it nuzzled along his length, kissing and suckling but never hard enough.

Who was he trying to fool? He'd never get enough of either of them.

Randall's eyes were dark and dilated as Gage gently nudged him back, trying to be as careful as he could when all he wanted to do was grab Dominic by his damned infuriatingly teasing head and bury himself hilt deep in that mischievous, smart mouth.

"Lie down, love." Gage licked at Randall's lower lip, puffy from their kisses. "I don't want to hurt you."

Randall shook his head. "Then don't *stop*. Please, Gage..."

Dominic murmured something around Gage's cock, the humming vibration of it switching off all coherent thought.

Insolent brats. They'd be the end of him, one way or the other. Taking a steadying breath—just as Dominic grinned, taking him deeper still—Gage tried to focus on the only thing he had a hope in hell of controlling.

Dominic followed as if reading his mind when Gage scooted a little higher on the bed, giving him access to Randall without asking him to move.

They still had to be somewhat careful, after all. At least for tonight. After that, all bets were off. He'd spent too long wanting Randall this way to get his fill in a week, a month, a year.

And Dominic ... well, the little wolf still had a lot to learn.

"Up." He tangled a hand in Dominic's hair, just to get his attention. Gold eyes looked up at him, and for a moment Gage was lost in just watching the way Dominic's cheeks hollowed, lips wet and tight as they slid up and down his erection.

All right, maybe there wasn't *that much* to teach him.

Still, the suggestion made light spark in Dominic's eyes, and without ever quite letting go, he climbed up onto the bed, head pillowed against Gage's thigh, body stretched out alongside Randall.

Occasionally, some alien sensation of humility crept against Gage's soul, making him amazed that two such beautiful, selfless creatures were his. That they were part of his life at all. That they knew what he was, what he was capable of, and *stayed*.

Randall didn't need a hint at all. Even as his legs parted for Gage's touch, he reached for Dominic, fumbling with the half-fastened jeans. Watching the slide of rough denim down Dominic's thighs, the gorgeous golden cock rising from the thatch of chestnut curls, Gage decided he was over-dressed.

Bad manners, when Dominic had forsaken underwear and Randall had helpfully forgotten about clothes altogether. Next place they lived, he decided, would be warm enough to encourage that sort of behavior on a regular basis.

The play of color and hue fascinated him again, watching the long pale bands of Randall's fingers circling the dark flushed skin of Dominic's cock. He knew both were satin soft, warm and wanting, and couldn't resist leaning over, tongue dragging between Randall's fingers, tasting both of them at once.

Dominic's mouth pulled away from Gage's arousal with a gasp, and he allowed himself a moment's satisfaction. It only spurred Dominic on. One hand reached past the tangle of Gage's unfastened pants, inquisitive fingers tickling the inside of his thighs before a single fingertip ran the length of the crease of his ass. Gage bucked, and Dominic's laugh just rippled through his body again.

"I believe," Gage managed, breathless and not caring, "that Dominic needs reminding of his place, Randall."

Randall smiled, a breathtakingly lovely expression, and tugged Dominic's jeans to his knees, where he half-twisted them, trapping Dominic in position.

Another vibration shocked like lightning along Gage's cock. "I think you need to know how he likes that, Randall," Gage said. "It's only fair, after all."

"Hmm..." Randall tilted his head, stroking Dominic slowly. With just the head of Dominic's cock against his palm, Randall twisted his grasp back and forth, thumb tracing the ridge of the crown.

Dominic made an inarticulate whimpered noise, and Gage in turn lowered his head, kissing the inside of Randall's knee, kisses slowly edging higher. "I'd say he was rather pleased."

Randall laughed hoarsely. "It certainly feels that way."

Nudging closer to the juncture of Randall's thighs, Gage licked the tender skin that followed the line of muscle from Randall's balls all the way to the sharp jut of hip bone. He blew a breath along the wet trail, making Randall jump. "Does it, now?"

"Gage!" Randall arched against him, fingers tight around Dominic, but stilling.

"Who said you could stop, hmm?" Gage turned his head, repeating the action on the other thigh, well aware of how close he came to the healing wound. "Do you want him to stop, Dominic?"

Another whimper tightened around Gage's cock. Gage gritted his teeth, the head of his cock vibrating against the back of Dominic's throat. Damned wolf, he'd wanted to last longer than this, wanted to drag out their pleasure. "I believe that's a no, Randall..."

Before Randall could reply, Gage brushed a kiss to the point where scarred, healing skin met unmarred flesh.

"Oh, God... *Gage...*"

He felt the ragged shudder of Randall's breath quickening as Gage kissed the scar again, fingers closing around his lover's cock, stroking once, twice. Randall thrashed and fidgeted beneath him, his free hand twining in Gage's hair. Wet heat bloomed against Gage's hand, trickling through his fingers, and what he lost in friction he gained in speed,

stroking Randall until he rode out every last jerk of his hips.

The way he tensed under Gage's touch, there was no way Randall didn't feel any pain from his injuries, healing or not. But neither of them stopped, Gage willing to acquiesce to whatever Randall wanted from him.

"Then don't stop."

Never. Whatever either one wanted from him, Gage wouldn't stop until he made them happy.

Dominic rocked into Randall's fist, crying out as Randall twisted his wrist again, and each of Dominic's thrusts rubbed the sensitive underside of the head against the heel of Randall's palm. Gage felt the moment Dominic's climax crashed into him, felt the change to the rhythm of Dominic's mouth, lips slackening, that deviously intent suckling losing out to whatever little licks and kisses Dominic could manage.

It was plenty. Content his lovers had reached their own pleasure, Gage surrendered to his own, the barest touch of Dominic's lips enough to push him over the edge. He didn't know if he cried out their names, didn't know much besides the molten pleasure searing through his veins, that coiled tension shattering in shudders that made it hard to breathe. He felt broken in a million fragments, each one glittering gold and silver, sweeping around him like beautiful dust.

His. He'd live for them, die for them, everything in between.

For a long moment—years, Gage would have happily believed it—none of them moved. Gage watched the rise and fall of Randall's chest, felt Dominic's slowing breath still whispering against his thigh.

This was home. Where they were was inconsequential. They'd find another house, find another desolate expanse of land. He'd never find this again.

Eventually his body reminded him of the exertions he'd forced it through in the course of the last twenty-four hours. Muscles aching, he turned on his side, stretching out. Randall curled into his arms, asleep before Gage could even tug him close. Dominic slid up behind him, a warm and secure presence at his back.

He watched Randall sleep in his arms, and brushed back a lock of pale hair. He'd come so close to throwing it all away. Too close. He turned his head to find Dominic watching him, the sentiment reflected in his eyes, although no doubt in less conciliatory terms. Gage smiled, pressing a kiss to Randall's forehead. It would never happen again. He didn't need to be told twice that wherever he made his home, it was these men who made his life.

He didn't remember falling asleep, but when he opened his eyes next, he was half slumped against Randall's pillow, and Dominic was dragging a quilt over him.

When Dominic had the temerity to grin crookedly, as if he'd been predicting this capitulation all along, Gage growled half-heartedly. "Stop looking after me. It's done."

Dominic chuckled, the sound weaving around Gage's senses as sleep dragged him back under.

"Are you kidding me? It's only just started."

The End

About the Author:

Cat Kane is a BA honors graduate in Creative Writing, currently pursuing her Masters in the same field, and has been writing for as long as she can remember. Cat hails from Wales, the land of song, saints and sheep. She adores felines of all varieties, peanut butter cups and cookie dough ice-cream, bleeds espresso coffee, thinks several Gods got together to send her the best friend anyone could hope for, and would marry her computer if it was legal. Actually even if it *wasn't* legal. Visit Cat at <http://www.morethanfiction.com>

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