



Duck!

Kim DARE

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A *WICKED* Tale

By Kim Dare

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To everyone who has yet to discover who they really are.

Chapter One

“Duck!”

Instinct took over. Ori Jones dropped to his knees, taking cover behind the waist high partition separating the edge of the dining area from the adjacent corridor. A plate smashed against the wall behind him—just where his head would have been, if his reactions had been slower.

His grip on his tray of dirty plates faltered as he hunched over them in an effort to stay low and out of range. They slid forward. Scrabbling at the china, Ori desperately tried to catch a dozen fragile pieces of crockery.

Two hands were never going to be enough. The dishes escaped him, spilling leftover food and wine onto the floor as they tumbled out of his grasp. Ori made a last ditch attempt to catch a wine glass. Success! His fingers wrapped tight around the delicate stem, as the rest plummeted toward the dark oak floorboards.

As the clatter peaked, then faded away, Ori’s attention flickered from one piece of expensive china to another, from one lead crystal glass to the next. Each item stared back at him, miraculously unscathed.

“What the hell...?” Highly polished black shoes stopped at the edge of the debris.

“I’m sorry, sir. I’ll clean it up immediately.” Ori rushed out, and he quickly began to pick up the mess of scattered utensils and move them out of the other man’s way.

Clearing one side of the hallway first, he made a path through the wreckage for the higher ranking man and politely waited for him to pass.

The shoes didn’t move. Ori sprung back into action, working even more frantically as he realized the shifter had no intention of taking another step until every scrap vanished from his sight.

Keeping his eyes on the floor, Ori didn’t dare waste precious time glancing up at the other man—not when he knew every second that passed probably added another lash to the whipping his clumsiness must have already earned him.

Just a few more steps, and he would have reached the safety of the full height section of wall the other man still stood behind and he would have been out of range—at least until the next time he'd gone back into the dining room to clear another table. It was too late to wish he'd walked quicker now.

The last shard of the plate that had smashed against the wall behind him, placed on the tray next to the surviving dishes, Ori set it to one side of the corridor and knelt behind it, waiting for the other shifter to finally step past him. The shoes remained exactly where they were. Ori risked a glance up about as far as the other man's knees.

A hand appeared alongside the neatly tailored trousers. Ori's eyes went to the tattoo on the inside of the other man's wrist.

Hawk.

Ori knew he still had a lot to learn about the marks that distinguished each species of avian from the others, but the harsh black lines that decorated the other man's skin were impossible to mistake. Ori mentally scrolled through every curse word he knew, then made up a few new ones for good measure.

The stranger's hand stayed exactly where it was until Ori reached up and offered his wrist up in return, stopping just short of shaking the other man's hand while his fingers were still smeared with food cleaned from the floor.

His un-marked wrist only looked more bare when held next to one already signaling the other man's species.

Ori looked up further, to a pair of startling amber eyes.

"There's a reason you're not marked?"

"They're waiting until they're sure what I am, sir," Ori blurted out.

The hawk looked at Ori's wrist again. "The elder's best guess?"

"A rather ugly little duckling, sir."

It was an exact quote. It was also four words longer than his answer needed to be. Such things mattered when speaking to a man whose species endowed him with a rank as high as a hawk's—Ori had learnt that the hard way. He dropped his gaze and waited for the worst.

"Is there a name you're certain of?"

The question was so unexpected, it took Ori a moment to find an answer. "Ori Jones, sir."

"Up on your feet, Ori."

Picking up the tray, Ori rose to his feet without considering anything but the hawk's order.

"Duck!"

Ori dropped heavily to the floor as laughter echoed out of the dining room. His tray spilled out of his hands once more. The plates weren't destined to survive two spectacular demonstrations of his clumsiness in such quick succession. Fragments of shattering chinaware skidded along the floorboards, colliding with the hawk's shoes and Ori's bare skin.

He looked up just in time to see the older man step forward and into view of the crowd of crows who'd been drinking in the dining room for most of the day.

"All of you—over here. Now!"

Ori started collecting up the fragments of smashed crockery, his hands shaking as he imagined the look that would flash in the chef's eyes when he saw the mess he'd made of the nest's fine dining service.

Shadows fell across his skin as the crows crossed the room at the hawk's command.

"Clean that up."

Ori kept his head down, his eyes on his task. "Yes, sir."

"Not you—them."

Ori looked up. "Sir?"

"You heard me. On your feet."

All Ori could do was stare up at him in horror. "I can—"

"You'll do as you're told. Stand up."

Ori's body obeyed the other man, without consulting his brain. Some sort of mental process clicked into operation when he was half way to his feet. "I could—"

The hawk didn't seem impressed. He pointed to an area of clear floor, just outside the fallout from the tray. "Take care that you step over the glass."

Ori gave in. Keeping his gaze lowered, not daring to look toward the crows, he took up position where he'd been commanded.

"You expect us to—" one of the crows began.

"I expect you to do what you're told, too," the older man snapped, as if a crow was no different from a duckling in his eyes.

Ori swallowed rapidly. Perhaps to a man with his rank, the rungs at the bottom end of the social ladder were very close together, but Ori was well aware that the crows all knew the

difference between their station in the nest and his. And he was just as sure that the entire flock would be quick to remind him just how far above him they stood, as soon the hawk stepped out of sight.

The dark haired young men's glares skittered over his skin as they stooped to collect the broken pieces of crockery and pile them onto the tray.

"And the rest," the hawk commanded.

Ori looked up. The last plate the crows had pitched at him hadn't been empty. Food streaked across the wall in a vivid mess of browns and greens.

The hawk caught his eye.

"I'll fetch—" Ori began.

"They can find whatever they need. Just tell them where."

"There's a storeroom behind the kitchens, sir."

A nod from the hawk dismissed one of the crows in that direction.

Ori closed his eyes for a moment. His toes clenched against the floorboards as he fought against a sudden and almost over whelming urge to run. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to race away from the crows or the hawk. The crows were going to give him hell, but the hawk was...

The moment the duckling opened his eyes, his gaze went to the older man. He was far larger than either him or the crows, tall and broad across the shoulders. His well-tailored shirt did nothing to hide the muscles beneath the fabric. The dark material only succeeded in making the other man look more dominant, more aristocratic.

It was only supposed to be a glance, but Ori found himself incapable of looking away. He'd seen another hawk at the nest a few months before, but he had been a much older man whose hair had faded to gray as his back had bent with age.

He'd never seen a hawk like this one. The man was glorious, all strength and certainty.

Ori was still helplessly staring at the larger man when the crows finished their task. The hawk nodded to the tray, finally dismissing him from the corridor. Ori stepped forward, making his way between the crows.

The flock's eyes followed him, sending a shiver racing along his spine. The tiny pair of shorts he'd been provided with when he started serving at the nest had never felt smaller.

He scurried back into the heat and chaos of the kitchens as quickly as possible. A few of the other servants cast glances at him as he strode past them to his station at the farthest end of

the room. Word traveled very quickly through the nest. They would all know what had happened. And no doubt, they knew just as well as he did what would happen next.

Ori took a deep breath as he stared down at the tray full of broken dishes. The crows might not have dared to disobey a hawk, but the hawk would leave at some point, then...

He let the breath out as a sigh. Perhaps if he'd already been a fully fledged shifter, he might have had a chance. As it was, he knew full well that he didn't really exist in the eyes of any of the elders who ran the nest. No one would step in and stop whatever the crows had planned for him.

While his mind rushed in circles, Ori's body automatically resumed the duties that had occupied his time for the last six months. The broken pieces of crockery were soon disposed of, then he was back in his usual place, standing before the huge Belfast sinks and working his way through all the trays of dirty dishes that had been brought back to the kitchens intact.

Each second dragged out until time seemed to stand still around him. His heart raced faster and faster. The duckling's hands shook with nerves, making him clumsier than ever. It was almost a relief then the atmosphere in the kitchen changed and he knew his wait was over.

"Get out."

Still facing the sinks, Ori heard the other servants scurrying out of the room, leaving their duties without a word. Even the chef's domineering presence faded from the kitchens as he temporarily relinquished his domain to the flock of crows. Ori stayed very still, his eyes closed tight, knowing the order didn't apply to him.

Footsteps sounded on the uneven flagstone floor as the flock made its way across the huge kitchen. A rough hand grabbed Ori's arm, spinning him around to face his tormentors. All the crows who'd been in the dining room were there, fanned out around him, blocking any chance of escape.

Ori's stomach clenched, tying itself in knots around his nerves as his hands formed into fists at his sides.

"Did you really think you'd get away with that?" Jermaine, the somewhat unofficial leader of the ragged flock, demanded.

Ori stayed silent.

The back of the crow's hand slammed into his cheek, sending Ori stumbling toward the edge of the counter top. Pain flared through Ori's skin. His head spun with the blow. He fumbled

at the edge of the granite in the vain hope that holding onto it could somehow make the world stop weaving in front of his eyes before the next blow landed.

“I asked you a question,” Jermaine spat out. “Did you really think you’d carry tales back to the hawk and not pay for it?”

“No, sir,” Ori whispered.

Another crow grabbed his arm and spun him around again. Before he could get his balance, the man’s other hand had grabbed his left arm, too. He dragged Ori forward to stand in front of him, his arms wrenched back, leaving him exposed and helpless.

Ori risked another brief glance up from the floor. The crows were all looking around the kitchen. Suddenly it was impossible to see the objects that surrounded him as a simple collection of cooking utensils. It was a room full of sharp blades and scalding liquids.

The duckling’s eyes flickered around the room, to knives and ranges, boiling saucepans and a dozen other things that would hurt like hell when thrown in his direction.

Survival instinct tried to take over. He pulled at the crow’s hold on him. The other man’s grip tightened painfully around his arms. Part of Ori knew he was stronger than the other man, but as the crow’s fingers dug into his skin, another even more powerful instinct took over and Ori felt something inside himself yield to the higher ranking man’s wishes. He fell still within the crow’s grip.

“Apologize,” Jermaine demanded.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

A light came into the crow’s eyes, and some of Ori’s panic eased. He’d become almost used to the flock’s casual sadism over time. Being made to jump through painful hoops for the crows’ amusement wasn’t new. Getting screwed by them wasn’t such an unusual occurrence either. The idea that the situation might be survivable in spite of the crows’ fury began to take hold in the duckling’s mind.

“Again,” Jermaine demanded. “Look me in the eye when you say it,”

Ori lifted his gaze, but the words died on his tongue as he looked past the crows and realized they were no longer alone in the kitchen.

Please, not in front of him.

The words flashed up in the front of Ori’s mind, vivid and desperate. It was a stupid thing to think. Having an audience wasn’t so rare in the nest. He should have been used to it by then. It shouldn’t have made any difference, but it did—with the new hawk standing there, it did.

Then he saw the anger in the older man's eyes.

"Let him go."

All the crows' attention transferred to the hawk.

The hands holding Ori in place snatched themselves away as if the words had turned his skin as hot as any range, as sharp as any knife in the kitchens. The crows fled, colliding with each other in fear as they rushed along the far edges of the kitchen, skirting out of range of the larger shifter.

All Ori could do was remain exactly where he was, staring at the hawk. The older man held his gaze as the crows hurried from the room, and Ori couldn't even bring himself to care that they would no doubt be back at some point in the future.

The hawk was right there, and in some stupid way, that was all that mattered. Ori stared helplessly at the older man as he realized just how much he'd hoped he might catch another glimpse of him.

The hawk stepped forward, closing the gap between them.

Ori watched him approach, not sure what to do—what the other man might want him to do. Reaching out to him, the hawk ran his thumb along Ori's bottom lip.

The duckling's confusion disappeared. Lowering himself quickly to his knees, he reached for the other man's fly. It wasn't until the hawk pushed his hand away, that he saw the blood on the other man's fingertips.

His lip was bleeding. The sharp metallic taste hadn't really registered until then. Snatching a cloth off the counter top to his right, Ori carefully cleaned the hawk's hand.

That task accomplished, he swiped at his own bottom lip, smearing more blood onto the fabric. For a few silent seconds, he stared down at the vivid red smudge.

"Shall I fetch one of the other servants for you, sir?" he asked, trying to hide his disappointment as he realized how stupid it was to hope the other man might want to use his mouth regardless.

"Stand up."

Ori quickly stumbled to his feet.

"How long have you been serving here?"

"A few months, sir," Ori whispered. When he glanced up, the older man was still staring at him, a serious expression lingering in the sharp amber eyes.

The silence went on and on.

“Mr. Hamilton offered me a place here.”

More silence.

“He said it would keep me out of trouble until I can complete a full shift, and everything can be sorted out properly,” Ori added.

“And how old are you now?”

“Twenty, sir. I’ll turn twenty-one in June.” Ori swallowed. He knew the math. Part of him had been counting down the days ever since he’d stumbled upon the nest and found out how things were arranged among the shifters. It would be another six months before he’d reach his maturity and be able to complete a full shift into his avian form, before he had any chance of becoming a true part of the shifter community.

The older man looked him up and down. Without another word, he turned away and walked out of the kitchen. All Ori could do was watch him go.

Except the other man didn’t actually go. He paused in the doorway, looking both ways down the corridor outside the kitchens.

“Everet!”

The hawk remained in the doorway until a younger man, a raven who Ori had spotted in the nest a few times before, joined him. “Watch him.”

The raven looked into the kitchen. His eyes locked on to Ori. He nodded his acceptance of the order. When the hawk strode away, Everet came closer.

For the third time that day, Ori found himself standing in his usual corner of the kitchen, waiting for another man to reach him. He had no idea what was going on any more. Any instinct he might have had for fight or flight was too confused to even suggest a course of action.

“Your lip’s bleeding.”

Ori reached up and touched his mouth.

The raven stood a few feet away from him, watching him, just as the hawk commanded. His curiosity was obvious. “Did Raynard do that?”

Ori blinked. The hawk’s name was Raynard. Eventually, something more than the knowledge of the older man’s surname sank in. The duckling shook his head as he dabbed at his lip with the cloth again. “One of the crows, sir.”

The raven said nothing more, he just looked him over as if wondering why the hell a hawk would take any sort of interest in him.

Ori looked down. He should have already asked himself the same question. Now that the query was in his head, the answer wasn't far behind it. Raynard was a hawk. He was an ugly little duckling. He might not have been raised among shifters, but since he'd found his way into their company, he'd already learnt enough to know that species was rank, and rank really was everything to the avians. The only reason a hawk would ask his name, was so he could suggest his dismissal.

Even knowing his position in the nest was about to be snatched away from him, Ori found himself looking back to the dishes. "Shall I...?"

The raven looked to the sinks and the plates piled high around them. He shrugged, causing highly defined muscles to jostle beneath his t-shirt. "Raynard didn't say you couldn't."

Ori turned silently back to his duties. The work might not have been enthralling, but there was a certain simplicity to it that he'd learned to appreciate. There was something comforting about knowing exactly what was expected of him, exactly where his place in the world was.

The raven leaned back against one of the huge cabinets to Ori's right, arms folded across his chest as he stared vacantly into the middle distance. He was so still, so silent, Ori almost forgot he was there as the minutes ticked by. Picking up a stack of the plates, he turned toward the cabinet and only just stopped short of walking into the larger man.

Everet straightened up and opened the cabinet door for him.

"Thank you, sir."

Not meeting the other man's eyes, Ori turned back to the sinks. Filling them with fresh water, he looked over his shoulder. The other servants had filed back into the kitchen at some point, but they were giving both him and the raven a wide berth. One of them, a rather bedraggled looking pigeon, offered Ori a sympathetic smile as their eyes chanced to meet. Ori managed to return it, but nothing was said. Even the chef was keeping his orders and tantrums more muted than usual.

"Everet."

For a moment, Ori thought it might have been Raynard's voice that had echoed through the kitchens, but it only took him a second to realize it wasn't. The hawk hadn't come back. Ori stayed very still as he waited for the message to be relayed, but whatever it was, it must have been communicated in nothing more than a look.

Everet stepped away from the cabinet. "Follow me."

Turning off the taps and hastily drying his hands, Ori trailed after the raven. The messenger mumbled something to Everet as he reached the kitchen door, too low for Ori to catch. The raven set off again, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to make sure his charge hadn't fallen too far behind.

Past the communal areas of the club, Everet led him up the grand staircase and toward the more exclusive sections of the establishment. It took more courage than Ori had known he possessed to keep walking forward, to keep stepping further and further into increasingly unfamiliar and luxurious territory.

The dining rooms and meeting rooms on the ground floor had taken his breath away when he'd first visited the exclusive old gentleman's club which catered solely to the avian community. He wasn't sure what he'd have made of these corridors then. On each side of him, portraits stared down. Back then, he'd probably have thought they were of wealthy aristocrats, their tamed birds of prey flying in the background.

Now it was obvious that each portrait merely showed two sides of the same man. And there was nothing tame about the birds of prey who filled the topmost levels of the shifter hierarchy. Ori took a deep breath and pushed forward, his bare feet making no sound on the thick carpeting.

Everet reached a mahogany door at the far end of the corridor and knocked on the dark paneling.

"Enter."

Everet pushed the door open and nodded for Ori to step into the room. A moment later, the raven pulled the door closed, sealing the duckling in what looked like some sort of office, if an incredibly expensive one.

Mr. Hamilton sat behind a huge desk on the other side of the room. He glanced across at Ori for a moment, sharp blue eyes flashing over the top of his glasses, before turning his attention back to where Raynard sat on the opposite side of the desk. The hawk didn't even look over his shoulder as Ori entered the room.

Stepping to one side of the door Ori waited, inconspicuous and out of everyone's way, until one of the higher ranking men had some use for him.

"He's obviously not suited to the position as things stand," the hawk bit out, each word clipped and angry.

Ori had never heard anyone speak to Mr. Hamilton that way. The eagle who ran the club was years older than Raynard, his hair already graying around his temples where Raynard's was still deep brown, but their ranks obviously made them equals.

Then the hawk's actual words sunk in to Ori's mind. *Not suited to the position.* The duckling lowered his gaze to the patch of carpet directly in front of his feet. He was right, he was going to be dismissed.

Thoughts tumbled through his head as he tried to work out where he might go. If they paid him off, then he could probably find somewhere, but there was no reason to believe they would. They hadn't paid him until now, when they'd seemed to find his service at least vaguely acceptable.

"Do you really think he'd do better in your house?" Mr. Hamilton asked, each word tinged with a rich Scottish burr.

Ori's gaze snapped up, all his attention focused on the back of Raynard's head.

"Yes." No explanation. No justification. Just the answer. Raynard had made his decision, he obviously didn't expect anyone to argue with him—not even an eagle.

Mr. Hamilton smiled slightly. "Your time away from this nest hasn't changed you in the faintest, has it?"

"Is there any reason why it should have?" Raynard asked.

Mr. Hamilton shook his head at him, but the slight twist of his lips still lingered. It died only when he moved his attention to Ori. "Come here."

Raynard glanced over his shoulder as Ori stepped forward and stopped a pace behind the hawk's chair, and two feet to his right.

"Yes, sir?"

"Mr. Raynard is offering you a position in his house. You'd be his personal servant, answerable to him in all things," the eagle informed him.

"Yes, sir."

"You'd remain under his care until you come back to us to complete your first full shift when you come of age."

"Yes, sir," Ori repeated.

Mr. Hamilton glanced at Raynard before he went on, his accent thickening a little as his tone turned even more serious.

“This isn’t an easy position—you’ll be expected to work just as hard for Mr. Raynard as you do here. And there would be no limits on what Mr. Raynard could expect from you. You’d belong to him, just as you belong to the members of this nest now.”

“Yes, sir,” Ori managed again.

Mr. Hamilton looked him over one more time. “Your answer, then—you accept the position?”

“Yes, sir.” The words were out so quickly, Ori didn’t have time for any second thoughts.

Mr. Hamilton nodded, just once. “The paperwork will be drawn up. There should be some suitable clothes somewhere in the servants’ quarters.”

“Yes, sir.”

The older men turned their attention back to each other, neither bothering to actually dismiss him. Ori backed slowly away, before turning and walking silently from the room.

Everet was still standing outside the door in his seemingly habitual pose, arms crossed, back resting against any convenient surface. He stopped staring into the middle distance when he noticed Ori.

“I’m to go to the servants’ quarters and get dressed, sir.”

The raven nodded and let Ori lead the way into what was obviously less familiar territory for a raven.

With every step Ori took, his heart raced a little faster, until he was sure it would explode from his chest, no doubt making another mess that would need to be cleaned up before his duties were finished for the day.

“Raynard’s taking you with him?” Everet asked as they reached the servant’s quarters.

Ori nodded. “He’s offered me a position in his house, sir.” Opening the door into a store cupboard, he began to look through the clothes, trying to find something that might fit. The clothes were a jumble of bits and pieces that seemed to have been accumulated randomly over the years. There was no order to the way they’d been stored. If the clothes Ori had been wearing when he arrived at the nest had been thrown in there, there was no longer any sign of them.

He felt Everet’s eyes run up and down his back and guessed he should just be grateful that he wasn’t to be led out of the nest just wearing the tiny black shorts.

A pair of dark blue jeans that looked about the right size emerged from the chaos. A green t-shirt was discovered a few minutes later. There was no sign of anything resembling a coat

or underwear. When a battered pair of trainers were unearthed from the very back of the disordered space, his wardrobe seemed to be as complete as it was destined to become.

The shorts were part of the uniform that marked him out as a servant belonging to club. He didn't belong to the club any more. He belonged to Raynard.

Ori took off the shorts. Everet remained in the doorway, but Ori kept his back to him, hoping the other man might not notice that the idea of becoming a personal servant to the hawk was already having an effect on him.

His cock was half hard at the very thought of servicing Raynard the way he had so many of the men in the nest. At the same time, his stomach knotted itself up with nerves. Taking a deep breath, Ori pulled on the jeans.

It had been months since he'd worn anything more than those tiny shorts. His legs felt strange, encased within the crumpled denim tubes. The material in the t-shirt was softer, but he couldn't help but shrug uncomfortably as the fabric settled around him, seeming to cling and suffocate him with every movement.

The trainers were a size too big, Ori wasn't sure if that made them more or less comfortable on feet that had become accustomed to being bare all day. Laces tied, he rose to his full height, such as it was. With the image of the hawk standing in front of him fresh in his mind, he felt far too small to be of any use to anyone.

"Raynard's not a bad guy. Better than most of the birds of prey. Do as he tells you, and you'll be fine," Everet offered.

Ori nodded, wrapping the hope the other man's words gave him around him as best he could. "Thank you, sir."

As he heard the raven step back, he forced himself to turn and walk out of the little storeroom too. Long before he was ready to be, he found himself back in Mr. Hamilton's office, once more standing to one side of the door as he waited for the other men to recognize his presence.

If Mr. Hamilton had seen him return, he made no mention of it. Ori had no idea if Raynard knew he was there either. It wasn't until they shook hands and Raynard turned toward him that Ori got the distinct impression that there was very little that escaped the hawk's attention, even if he didn't choose to turn around to stare at it.

The older man walked out of the room without a word to him, leaving Ori to trail along behind him, scurrying to keep up with the taller man's longer stride as best he could. They were

out of the building and standing in the car park before Ori had quite caught up with events. He hesitated as the chill winter air whipped against his skin.

Closing his eyes, he felt the fresh breeze on his face for the first time in months. When he looked up, the world above him seemed impossibly big, the wide expanse of sky above him both immense and terrifying. He quickly took half a step back toward the safety of the building.

“When was the last time you left the nest?”

Ori turned his eyes toward the hawk. The older man stood next to a sleek black sports car, keys already in his hand. Ori blinked at him, unable to make his mind work quickly.

“A few months, sir.” That was no excuse for keeping the other man waiting. Standing on the threshold to the outside world, he waited to be told if he had displeased the other man so badly he’d been sent back before he had even truly left.

“Come here.”

Ori stepped forward. Eyes lowered, he stood before his new master, waiting for his verdict.

“Get in.”

The hawk nodded to the passenger side door. Ori obeyed the order, fumbling his way into the seat and pulling the door closed after him. The hawk moved around the car and slid behind the wheel, folding his tall frame into the low slung space as if it were the easiest thing in the world.

A moment later, the engine roared into action. Without another glance at his new servant, Raynard drove them both away from the nest.

Chapter Two

Frederick Raynard shifted gears as the car escaped the worse of the traffic in the center of the city and made its way into a quieter, older part of town. The office blocks gradually faded away, giving way to the kind of houses the men who owned most of those office blocks tended to live in.

His newly acquired servant sat silently by his side. Every so often, Raynard felt the other man glance at him, but the duckling didn't go so far as to speak without being spoken to. The hawk wasn't sure if that could be taken as some sort of sign that he had been trained for silent service, or if the poor little sod was just as nervous as hell.

Raynard mentally shook his head at himself. The last thing he needed was an untrained servant on top of everything else, but there was nothing to be done about it now. He was stuck with him for at least the next six months.

Still, the younger man couldn't have been left at the nest—not when he'd have remained a sitting duck to the other men's cruelty. A sitting duck... Raynard held back a sigh as he turned a corner, taking the smaller man a little further away from the nest by the moment.

He had to wonder if Hamilton's control over the other avians was failing. *He's never made any complaints about his treatment here.* Raynard revved the engine a little more forcefully than he intended as the eagle's words replayed themselves inside his head. He probably hadn't complained about the fact he'd not been let out of the nest for so long, either.

"Do you have a family?"

Ori glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, then quickly dropped his gaze. "I had foster families, sir."

Raynard filed the fact away in the back of his mind, in amongst the jumble of business dealings that had recently taken over his world. If nothing else, it explained why the younger man couldn't be certain of the species he'd shift into when he came of age.

"Have you kept contact with them?"

Ori shook his head. "No, sir."

Raynard glanced at the duckling as they stopped at a junction but he made no further comment. There was no point confusing the boy, making him think his master was going to be his new best friend. Within a few more minutes, they pulled into the curved drive in front of Raynard Lodge.

Unfolding himself from the low-slung car, Raynard looked up at the building. The expression on the duckling's face as he did the same made Raynard sure that the boy was already regretting accepting a place in his household—and he hadn't even seen inside the damn thing yet.

Striding up to the front door, Raynard twisted the key in the lock, back and forth until he chanced on the right combination of wrist actions to make the lock cooperate with his inclination to enter what was to be his new home, now that he was required to take his uncle's place in the local avian hierarchy.

Ori hesitated half way over the threshold.

"There may be a servants' entrance somewhere," Raynard informed him. "But from what I've seen of my uncle's organizational skills, it'll take a search team weeks to find the key to it."

The duckling stepped inside, and attempted to close the front door behind him—with very little success. Raynard moved forward. Reaching over the smaller man's shoulder, he pushed high up on the edge of the door, forcing it into its frame.

It slammed with a bang. The duckling jumped, springing away from the door and colliding with his new master.

Raynard quickly steadied him, one hand on the younger man's shoulder, the other reaching around his waist to spread across his stomach and pull him back safely against his body.

There wasn't much of the younger man he hadn't already inspected. The skimpy black shorts hadn't hidden a lot from those he was serving. Still, seeing something, and having it pressed intimately against him were two very different things.

The duckling froze, not even drawing a breath as they stood there in the gloom of the hallway. It had been far too long since Raynard had made time to bring another man close and enjoy what his body could offer.

The younger man wouldn't say no. Raynard harbored no doubts on that score.

He closed his eyes for a moment. Just as Ori wouldn't have said no to the crows in the kitchen or any other man in the nest. Raynard forced himself to step back and put some distance between them before he forgot why he'd brought the boy home with him in the first place.

Turning his back on his new servant, he looked around the hallway. The place didn't need one servant—it needed an army of them, which was rather what he'd had in mind when he went to the nest in the first damn place.

When he looked over his shoulder, the younger man was watching him very carefully, from a position just to the left of the door. He dropped his eyes as Raynard looked toward him. He was hardly what the hawk had intended to bring home with him.

“Do you have any questions?”

Ori swallowed rapidly before he attempted to speak. Even then, his words were softly spoken. “How may I serve you, sir?”

Raynard considered the question carefully. The response had probably been taught to him by rote, but he still had a little of the true submissive in his tone of voice. He wasn't just asking because he'd been taught to—he was asking because he really wanted to know.

The duckling's attention moved to the floor, Raynard's followed it. The tiles had probably been magnificent once upon a time. They might be again, when the dust was cleared away.

“It's late,” Raynard decided. “We'll discuss your duties tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

If the state of the house was anything to go by, it would probably take them an hour and more to find the servants' quarters and discover what sort of state they were in. By that time he was sure they would both be more than ready for their bed—for their *separate* beds, Raynard reminded himself.

“Follow me.” Without looking over his shoulder to see if his order was being obeyed, Raynard set off toward a door he was reasonably sure led below stairs. The sound of his footsteps actually changed as he left the little pathway his previous footfalls had left in the dust.

One trail led to the master bedroom, another to his late uncle's study. The rest of the house hadn't really changed since he arrived a few weeks before.

The little door was tucked away almost out of sight, under the arch of the stairs. Lowering his head to avoid the treads overhead, Raynard pulled it open, and groped around in the darkness for a light switch. A bare bulb flickered to life a third of the way down the stairs. Another guttered and promptly died another third of the way down.

As Raynard made his way into an even darker gloom than existed in the main part of the house, he heard Ori descending a few steps behind him. He could only guess that the younger man was wondering what the hell he'd got himself into.

Reaching the bottom of the flight, Raynard made his way along a dismal flagstone paved corridor. The kitchen, when they emerged into it, was little better. Everything was still draped in dustsheets after the previous servants closed up the house. The curtains were drawn half way across the window. There was barely enough light to see by.

“There should be some sort of butler’s quarters somewhere down here,” Raynard told the boy, nodding to one of the corridors leading off the kitchen.

Ori dutifully approached the first door and tried it. Peeking inside, he closed it before moving on to the next one, then the next one.

Raynard, working his way along the wall to the other side of the kitchen, discovered room after room that would have bustled with a dozen staff when the house was in its heyday and which now lay abandoned. Finally, he heard the younger man call out.

“I think I might have found it, sir.”

Raynard strode back into the kitchen and looked around the room. Ori had found the room, now all he had to do, was track down the damn duckling. He stood silently in the middle of the kitchen, but the other man made no sound.

“Ori?”

“Yes, sir?”

Raynard strode toward the sound of the other man’s voice. Third time lucky, he found an open door that revealed another open door, and finally Ori standing in the middle of yet another shrouded room. One of the dustsheets had been pulled back to reveal the edge of a bed.

“Have to tie a ball of string to you, before I let you out of my sight,” Raynard, muttered, more to himself than his new servant.

Ori blinked at him as their eyes chanced to meet.

“Damn place is a maze,” Raynard bit out. He reached for one of the other dustsheets, but he found Ori there before him. The little fledgling was obviously eager to make a good first impression. Raynard stepped back into the doorway and watched as the younger man carefully removed and folded each huge expanse of fabric.

The room had obviously been furnished with the cast offs from the main part of the house—probably around the time when deep carving and dark wood had just stopped being the latest fashion.

Raynard looked around the room. It would do. A glance toward the duckling saw the younger man looking more than a little skeptical. Raynard pushed that aside. He was only a

fledging after all—it couldn't be easy for him having been raised with no understanding of what kind of man his species would lend him to be.

As he stared at the younger man, he found himself trying to imagine what it had to be like, not knowing who he really was, what his place in the world should be. When the younger man failed to speak of his own volition, Raynard saw little choice but to nudge him on. "Ori?"

"I don't need all this, sir. I could just..." he looked back to the kitchen as if he'd have been content to find some drafty little corner and curl up on the flagstone floor.

Raynard shook his head. There was no such thing as too soon to start showing the boy how things should have been at the nest, how he should have been treated by the higher ranking men there, but at the same time it was hard to think Ori was in any condition to take anything in at that late hour. "We'll discuss the details tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

The younger man looked to his bed. Raynard followed his gaze, then quickly looked away before the sight of it gave him ideas that had no place in his mind. "Get some sleep."

"Yes, sir."

Raynard forced himself to turn away from the pretty little duckling. He was back in the kitchen before he heard the boy speak again.

"You said I could ask you a question, sir?"

Raynard turned back to him and nodded his permission.

"What would you like for breakfast, sir?"

Raynard looked around the kitchen. It would be far easier to summon up a ghost than a meal there. "We'll dig out some coffee in the morning," he promised. Then, they'd go and get some real food. He might not have brought the younger man into the kind of house he'd have liked to be able to provide to anyone he took under his protection, but at least he could see that he was well fed.

As he climbed the last of the stairs to the master bedroom, Raynard pushed his hand through his hair, disordering the brown waves. A suitcase stood open on the ancient chest in the corner of the room. The bed was in the same crumpled mess as he'd left it that morning. But apart from that, it was still very much his uncle's domain.

He'd have to do something about that. Raynard muttered a few well chosen curses under his breath, he'd been saying as much since he stepped into the damn house. Draping his clothes

over the back of the chair by the dressing table as he stripped them off, Raynard strode across to the bed. Collapsing naked against the sheets, he felt his exhaustion in every muscle in his body.

Putting his uncle's financial and business affairs into order wasn't hard physical work, just mentally draining. Inheriting such a mess was an embarrassment in itself. Going from place to place trying to piece together what his cantankerous old relative had been involved with was a special brand of torture, as he found himself having to admit his ignorance of what were now his own business deals over and over again.

And he hadn't had time to shift in what felt like forever. As he closed his eyes, he waited to see the wide, blue expanse of sky materialize in his mind just the way it did every night, reminding him that no shifter could ignore the other side of himself forever.

No blue skies appeared, just a beautiful pair of brown eyes, staring back at him with that perfect look of submission. Ori's mottled hair was still the same disordered mess, as if someone had taken a firm grip on the strands at some point, and they'd never quite settled into place since.

As Raynard's mind's eye drew back, and the hawk's attention trailed down the fledgling's frame, he felt his body start to react to the sight. His hand stopped resting idly against his stomach and trailed down toward his cock.

Flight wasn't the only thing he hadn't had time for. He opened his eyes but the temptation to set that right didn't ease. A glance up at the shadow hanging to the right hand side of the bed, and it doubled twice over.

The bell pull's cables led directly down to the servant's quarters. Ori wasn't stupid. When he heard the bell he'd realize he was being summoned and follow the paths in the dust like a good servant. He'd find his way to his master's room, to his bed.

Raynard closed his eyes. The image of the fledgeling couldn't compare to having the actual man there, but if it was all he could permit himself without turning himself into something as contemptible as the bastards at the nest then...

His fingers stroked slowly up and down his shaft. The touch was barely more than a tease, but the image of Ori as he'd stood in the nest wearing nothing more than that skimpy pair of shorts, still had him quickly hard.

In his private little fantasy, he saw the fledgling hook his thumbs into the waist band and push the shorts slowly down his legs. He glanced up at his master as he stepped out of them, just a little bit shy now he was completely bare before him, hard cock exposed for his master's inspection.

He stepped forward then, coming closer to Raynard, before losing his courage a few feet away from him. An approving nod was all the encouragement he needed to close the gap between them. Ori lowered himself to his knees and glanced up at his master through his lashes.

“How may I serve you, sir?” The words were whispered very softly, full of submission and the simple hope that he’d be allowed to display how much he wanted to please his master.

Raynard gasped as his hand wrapped itself properly around his cock, cocooning the sensitive skin within his palm and fingers. Still keeping his movements slow, he devoted most of his attention to the daydream playing out in his mind.

As Ori stared up at him, waiting patiently for his master’s answer, Raynard watched an image of himself step forward and bury its hand in the submissive’s hair, making the messy strands follow the route his grip created in them. A little gasp escaped from the fledgling as he guided the submissive’s lips to the tip of his cock. The younger man nuzzled gently at his shaft, rubbing his face against his crotch before lapping enthusiastically at the head.

Raynard’s free hand fisted into the bed sheet as the image in his mind tightened its grip on Ori’s hair, tugging him even closer.

More of his shaft slipped into the submissive’s mouth. A pleased little sound surrounded the tip with vibrations, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through him as the younger man lifted his hands to rest on his master’s flanks.

Raynard’s hand tightened around his cock as he imagined Ori sucking greedily around him.

The submissive’s eyes remained closed as he seemed to savor the taste of his master on his tongue. Raynard stared down at him, watching his shaft disappear into the duckling’s mouth, then reappear slicked with the other man’s saliva as Ori pulled back only to quickly dive back down to suck him back into his mouth again.

Raynard’s hand guided the fledgling’s movements, but as Ori blinked his eyes open and looked up at his master, there could be no doubt that his servant was exactly where he wanted to be. The duckling whimpered his own pleasure as Raynard slid further into his mouth. Ori’s grip on the hawk’s sides tightened as if he was fighting against the temptation to reach down and take himself in hand.

Rocking his hips, Raynard pushed his shaft against his palm as pre-cum leaked down his shaft, slicking his strokes. It wasn’t a hot willing mouth, but inside his head, the hawk saw each perfect detail as the younger man held his head still and let his master thrust between the thin pink line of his lips.

Mentally lifting his gaze an inch or two, Raynard let his eyes meet Ori's. The hawk came hard and fast, arching off the bed as his cum spilled against his stomach. His hand worked his shaft more frantically than ever as white-hot pleasure raced through him, coaxing every ounce of bliss out of each moment until he collapsed back against the bed.

His hand was still wrapped around his cock, turning sticky as his semen dried against him, but Raynard's eyes remained closed as he watched the image of Ori pull away from him, a shy little smile on his lips as he remained kneeling before his master, waiting to see if it would please Raynard to give him permission to come, too.

No expectations, no demands, just a simple trust that his master would take care of him and see that the right decisions were made for both of them.

Raynard blinked his eyes open for a moment and stared at the ceiling above him. He didn't look at the empty bed beside him before he let his eyes fall closed and sleep creep into the corners of his mind.

* * * *

Early the next morning, as Raynard stepped through the kitchen doorway, all fantasies were pushed firmly out of his mind. Ori was his servant, nothing more.

He stopped short on the outskirts of the room and checked his wrist watch. It was indeed early in the morning—by his standards at least. Apparently not by the duckling's brand of time keeping. The boy had obviously been up and working for several hours.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee floated across to the hawk, as if it had noticed him in the doorway and couldn't wait to make very good friends with his taste buds. Ori was apparently far less aware of his presence.

He'd found a scrubbing brush somewhere, and he was on his hands and knees making good use of it on the far side of the kitchen.

"Good morning."

Ori spun around to face him and scrambled to his feet. The moment he caught sight of him, heat rushed to his cheeks as if the hawk had walked in on him doing something secret and shameful.

The sight of him blushing prettily for his master, did nothing to help Raynard keep the thoughts that had remained with him through most of the night at bay. He really was a pretty little thing when his submission came to the fore.

Turning his attention pointedly away from the younger man, Raynard looked around the room. It was barely recognizable as the shadowy space they'd walked through the previous night.

"What time did you get up?"

Ori glanced to the wall above the counter top. The clock hanging there proclaimed it to be ten past two. No doubt it had been declaring the same time for weeks.

"I'll see if I can fix it, sir."

Raynard turned his attention back to Ori. "There should be a key somewhere. It probably only needs to be wound."

"Yes, sir," Ori murmured, keeping his gaze down on his freshly scrubbed floor.

The hawk ran his eyes over the younger man's body again. The clothes he'd worn when he left the nest were more than a little worse for wear. "You've been working hard."

Ori glanced up at him, his eyes full of confusion, almost as if he thought he was joking.

It wasn't his fault he'd been thrown in the middle of such a mess. Raynard reached out to ruffle his hand through the other man's untidy head of hair in gentle praise as he made his way past him.

He didn't miss the way Ori tensed, obviously expecting a blow. The heat rushed back to the boy's cheeks, when he realized it was the exact opposite. He soaked up his master's approval the way only a true submissive could.

As Raynard approached the coffee maker, Ori took half a step forward, then hesitated.

"You're allowed to speak."

"I wasn't sure how you take your coffee, sir. I found some sugar, but..."

But any milk left there would have gone bad weeks ago. "Black's fine. No sugar."

Turning away from the machine once he'd reassured himself that it seemed to be in far better order than all his uncle's other possessions and probably wouldn't explode on his submissive any time soon, Raynard made his way to the kitchen table and took a seat.

"Fetch a cup for yourself too, if you want one."

Having an order to follow seemed to help the submissive settle his nerves. His hands were steady as he brought the coffee to the table—just the one cup.

"Thank you." Raynard nodded to a chair opposite him.

Ori slowly lowered himself into the very edge of the seat.

"Tell me what your duties were at the nest."

"To follow whatever orders were issued to me, sir."

Raynard studied the younger man carefully. “Did Hamilton speak to you about what you would and wouldn’t be expected to do?”

Ori shook his head. After a second’s silence he offered, “Mr. Hamilton said permanent arrangements and specific duties would be discussed when I was a fully fledged shifter, sir. Until then...”

Raynard took a sip of his coffee. It was still scalding hot. It burned against his tongue, but he swallowed it down regardless, eager to wash away the bitter taste the elder’s actions left in his mouth.

Hamilton was responsible for what happened to any *shifter* in the nest. He obviously hadn’t stooped to take care of a mere fledgling who didn’t even have a species to call his own. Tempering his anger as best he could, Raynard pushed the matter aside to deal with at a later date as he focused back in on more immediate concerns.

“As you’ve probably noticed—my uncle’s house lay empty for some time before I arrived. It’ll take a great deal of work to set the building in order.”

Ori nodded, very earnestly at the pronouncement. “Yes, sir.”

“You don’t appear to be afraid of hard work.” Raynard let his eyes travel around the kitchen again, allowing the other man to see that he was very pleased with his first impressions of him.

Ori dipped his head a little, obviously unused to even such mild approval.

“Find a pen and some paper. Start making a list of whatever supplies you’ll need in order to make a start on the tasks that need completing first.”

“Yes, sir.” He sounded confident enough about his ability to do that.

Picking up his coffee, Raynard rose from his chair. Ori stood too.

“When you’re done with the list, come up to the study. It’s just off the hall—follow the trails in the dust and you shouldn’t get too lost.”

“Yes, sir.”

Raynard walked away, back up to his study. The prospect of sorting through yet more of his uncle’s jumble of random pieces of paper was hardly appealing, but he couldn’t help but be aware that it wasn’t just going to the study that made him less than inclined to leave the kitchen. There was something curiously fascinating about the man who occupied the servant’s quarters which made him eager to study him further.

When he heard a soft little knock on his study door an hour or so later, Raynard was more than ready to put his paper work aside and resume his observations of the boy. “Enter.”

He forced himself to keep his attention on the last page of the document he was reading as he heard Ori step into the room and walk across to stand in front of his desk. As he finally looked up, the younger man looked far less happy to see his master than Raynard felt to see him. He allowed no smile to creep onto his own lips.

“Ori?”

The younger man was silent for a second. “I broke one of the other coffee cups, sir.” He rushed the words out so quickly, it took Raynard a moment or two to untangle them and form them into a sentence that made sense.

From the way the duckling’s Adam’s apple bobbed, Ori seemed to think the breakage was some sort of hanging offense. His attention was fixed on the empty coffee cup on the desk as if it might leap up at him and try to take some sort of caffeine fueled vengeance on behalf of its fallen brethren.

Raynard leaned back in his chair and studied the submissive carefully. “I’m assuming it didn’t happen while you were juggling them or throwing them across the room?”

If nothing else the question convinced Ori to lift his gaze and meet his master’s eyes for a moment. “No, sir...?” he hazarded.

“Accidents happen—providing they don’t occur through carelessness, they won’t get you into too much trouble with your master.”

Ori seemed a little doubtful.

“Ducks aren’t generally known for their hand eye coordination,” Raynard pointed out, as patiently as he could manage. “Neither are fledglings for that matter. When you’re fully fledged, you may well find your limbs far easier to control.”

Ori smiled, just a fraction, but Raynard could see the real relief rushing through him. It became pointless to ask if he’d have been punished at the nest. His expression said it all.

“Did you make out the list?”

“Yes, sir.”

Raynard held out his hand for it.

Ori passed it across the desk without a word.

A brief scan down the slightly crumpled piece of paper and Raynard was satisfied that the younger man knew what he was doing. Much to the hawk's relief, he didn't appear to need his every move mapped out for him.

Opening the top drawer of the desk—the only drawer in the entire house that he'd managed to empty of inherited jumble and refill with his own belongings, Raynard took out a credit card and offered it to the fledgling.

“The pin number is four-five-four-three.”

Ori merely stared at it as if he'd never seen a piece of plastic before, or perhaps as if it had never occurred to him that a master would trust a servant with such an item.

“I'm visiting my uncle's lawyers this afternoon. I'll drive you in to town, and you can pick up enough to get started.”

“Yes, sir.”

Raynard waved his dismissal to the younger man. As he turned his attention to the spider's web of jottings that were apparently his uncle's only written record of a business deal that had run into the millions, he nodded slightly to himself.

A servant who was capable of working on the house without constant observation would take one thing off his own list of concerns.

Yes, of course, a sarcastic little voice, piped up in the back of his mind. That was the only thing he was interested in using the boy for. Raynard rubbed at the furrow between his eyebrows. He really would have to find a few hours in which to do more than paperwork...

* * * *

By the time Ori had been under Raynard's protection for a few days, it seemed to the older man that everything had already fallen into a simple but effective routine. It generally centered around making sure he remembered the difference between what he was permitted to do to the image of the younger man while he lay alone in his own bed, and what he wasn't allowed to require of him at any other time.

Still, the hawk was even starting to believe he had quite a good read on his daytime companion. When his fledgling came to stand before his master's desk and looked even more wary than he usually did when arriving there on his own accord, Raynard was immediately sure he knew what brought the ducking there.

“Did you keep the pieces?”

“Sir?”

“From your expression, I’m assuming you don’t think whatever’s been broken will be easy to replace.”

Ori blushed, but he shook his head.

Raynard waited for the real explanation for his presence.

The duckling stared at the desk for a few seconds, his eyes resting blankly on Raynard’s paperwork, apparently not even trying to read it upside down. “You said my duties here would be the same as they were at the nest, sir.”

“Broadly,” Raynard allowed, relaxing back in his chair to study the other man more comfortably.

The boy wore the clothes his new master had bought for him—black trousers and a white shirt. The simplicity suited him well.

“At the nest...” Ori faltered. “I mean, some of the other shifters who visited the nest...some of the...” He took a deep breath. “There are other ways I could be serving you, if you wanted me too, sir.” He risked a brief glance up.

Raynard caught the younger man’s eyes and held them. There could be no doubt what he was suggesting. The only question Raynard had, was if the duckling had picked up on his master’s attraction to him and felt some sort of submissive need to accommodate it, or if he simply assumed that any man who took him into his household would wish to use him as a whore.

“You’re not at the nest now,” Raynard said choosing each word with care. “That sort of service isn’t required here.”

Ori looked down. Heat rushed to his cheeks. “I didn’t mean any disrespect, sir. I just thought...”

Raynard nodded. Ori stopped trying to explain himself. His hands were shoved deep into his pockets, pushing his shoulders up and destroying the line of his trousers, making him look even younger and less sure of himself than ever.

“You’re not in trouble,” Raynard reassured, as gently as he could muster—which wasn’t very right then. “You can go back to your duties now.”

For the first time since he made his offer, the fledgling seemed to breathe. “Yes, sir.”

He walked away from his master’s desk. He had to take one of his hands out of his pockets to open the door. The front of his trousers didn’t quite settle into place the way Raynard expected it to. His hands hadn’t been the only thing altering the line.

Talk about servicing his master hadn't just made the fledgling nervous. It had made him hard.

Suddenly, there was one more possible explanation for the offer in the forefront of Raynard's mind. It was just possible that the offer hadn't been made for his master's benefit. Staring at the door Ori had closed neatly behind him on the way out, Raynard soon found his own fly in much the same tented state.

By the time a few more days had passed quietly between them, Raynard had become used to staring at doors Ori had left through, trying to work out exactly what to think of the boy. He'd also become more than a little accustomed to looking forward to seeing Ori when he arrived home after another day doing increasingly frustrating battle with his uncle's lawyers and business associates.

He never knew exactly what the boy would have achieved while he was gone, and seeing Ori blush when he offered him a few scraps of praise inevitably eased Raynard's mood.

As he walked in that particular day, a little over two weeks after Ori had come to serve him, Raynard heard a noise emanating from the library. The door swung silently open. Ori had obviously been to work on it, eliminating the squeaks and creaks from the hinges.

Raynard paused in the doorway, staring intently at the view across the room. It wasn't quite what he had come to expect from his rather shy little duckling, but he couldn't help but think that it was one hell of a 'welcome home, sir' none the less.

Chapter Three

Ori carefully made his way down the library ladder, balancing the heavy box in one hand as the other hand kept a firm grip on the mahogany rail. The narrow wooden rungs weren't particularly comfortable on his bare soles, but as his feet settled more comfortably onto the wide floor boards that spanned the library, a frown gathered on his forehead. Heaving the box onto the library table, he looked across to the hearth.

The blaze still filled the huge fireplace. It hadn't gone out again. Yet a cold draft still swirled around his ankles. His frown deepened. Raynard would never be able to use the room comfortably while—

"Hello, Ori."

Spinning around, the fledgling came face to face with his master. The hawk stood in the doorway, taking in every detail of the scene before him.

"You're back early!"

It sounded like an accusation, as if Ori didn't think his master had the right to walk into his own house whenever he damn well pleased. He mentally cursed himself for letting the words slip out, but it was too late to drag them back.

Raynard continued to stare across the room at him. At least he looked vaguely amused rather than angry. That was good. His gaze left Ori's face and travelled down. That wasn't good.

There was nothing submissive about the way Raynard lowered his eyes. Ori's brain finally snapped into action. His hands moved in front of him, to cover his crotch as best he could. It didn't feel like enough, especially not when simply being in the same room as his master tended to have a quick and noticeable effect on him.

Even as heat rushed to his cheeks, blood rushed to his cock encouraging him to stiffen for the other man.

When Raynard had finished his leisurely inspection of his submissive's body, he met his eyes once more. Ori looked away, waiting to be dismissed so he could fetch his clothes, but no order came.

Finally the duckling cleared his throat. "With your permission, sir?" he nodded toward the door, incapable of moving his hands to make any other sort of gesture toward his escape route. "I'll fetch my clothes."

Raynard leaned against the doorframe, apparently in no great rush to let his servant leave the room. "And where exactly are your clothes?"

"In the butler's quarters, sir."

"And you're not wearing them, because...?"

Ori swallowed. After the fool he'd made of himself offering his master a kind of service he obviously wasn't interested in receiving from him, he could hardly blame the older man for thinking he'd intended him to walk in on a naked man and somehow change his mind. He shuffled his feet as a fresh wave of humiliation coursed through him.

"Ori?" Raynard prompted.

"The dust, sir. It's easier to..."

"Easier to wash the dust off your body than your clothes?" Raynard finished for him. He took a step forward.

Ori managed a jerky nod in response. The clothes the other man had bought him were all perfect tailoring and expensive material. They had to have cost a small fortune. There was no way he'd have been able to keep them in good condition once he started cleaning in them. His simple solution had seemed so logical until a few seconds ago.

Raynard came closer still. Ori forgot how to breathe. Somehow, he found himself holding the hawk's gaze as the older man closed the gap between them even further. The hawk stopped, barely a foot away.

Ori had to tilt his head back to keep their eyes locked.

Reaching out to him, his master stroked his thumb down his cheek. It came away smudged with dust.

Ori stared down at the digit, completely mesmerized.

"A few days ago, you came to my study."

There could be no doubt which visit he was talking about. "Yes, sir," Ori whispered.

"Because you thought you should, or because that was what you wanted?"

Gaze fixed on the third button of his master's shirt, Ori couldn't make words happen.

Raynard touched his face again. His knuckle slid under Ori's chin and guided him to tilt his head back.

“I guess what they said in the nest was true, sir,” Ori blurted out, as he realized there was no way he’d walk away from the conversation without answering the question. “Head down, arse up is a natural position for a duck.”

His master said nothing, but his touch lingered under Ori’s chin, trapping him there, keeping him exactly where the older man wanted him.

“I’m sorry, sir. I shouldn’t have...I know none of the men in the nest who...I know they didn’t have your rank, sir.”

“You think that’s why I failed to take you up on your offer, because I think you’re beneath me?”

Ori swallowed. It was hard to think of two avian species that could be further apart in the hierarchy. It was equally hard not to picture himself physically pinned beneath the other man’s body as Raynard’s words reached his ears. His cock stiffened further behind his hands, as if desperate to push his fingers out of the way and show off for the older man.

Glancing up at the hawk, Ori tried to be ready to hear the worst. His master still looked vaguely amused. The duckling dropped his gaze again. His attention fell on Raynard’s fly. The material was straining over his erection. Ori’s eyes snapped quickly back up to the other man’s face.

“You were right when you said it had something to do with rank. Hawks are raised to respect their servants—not to take advantage of the men they take under their protection. I don’t order my servants to my bed, Ori.”

“Yes—” Before the honorific could leave his lips, Raynard moved his knuckle to rest against Ori’s mouth. His lips were slightly parted, the knuckle settled between them, not allowing him to open his mouth to speak, not permitting him to bring his lips back together either.

“A submissive, however,” Raynard seemed to muse, more to himself than anyone else. “That would be a very different matter. Do you know the difference between a servant and a submissive, fledgling?”

Ori shook his head, just a fraction. His lips moved around the other man’s knuckle with the gesture.

“A submissive doesn’t simply offer to obey another man’s orders and do his bidding—he belongs to his master, and his master may do anything he wants with him, *anything*.” His knuckle slid a little further into Ori’s mouth. “His master doesn’t just have a right to make use of his submissive’s time and his skills. He owns him. Body. Mind. Soul. Everything”

Ori whimpered at the very idea.

“A servant has rights that a submissive can't lay claim to. A certain degree of freedom. Some level of privacy. The chance to shape his own life and make a great many decisions on his own behalf. Some men find it hard to give up such rights.”

Ori's tongue flickered against the other man's knuckle. It seemed to fill his whole world, just as his master's words filled his head.

Raynard smiled slightly. As Ori looked up and met the older man's eyes, he saw a light shining in them that he'd never seen before. The hawk moved his knuckle slightly, seeming to encourage Ori's attentions to it.

The duckling sucked cautiously against the other man's skin. His eyes dropped closed as the taste of the other man's skin seeped into his mouth.

“There's no shame in being another man's submissive, Ori. But if you're not truly suited to it, if it doesn't call to something inside you, I'd imagine it's little better than torture.”

Another whimper escaped from between Ori's lips as he tried to suck his master's finger deeper into his mouth. Without any warning, the digit was taken away.

Ori's eyes flew open. Raynard was still studying him very carefully. His voice changed slightly, it lost its considering quality and became all brisk and business like. “Make your choice, fledgling. What are you to be—a servant or a submissive?”

Ori could barely breathe, let alone think. He had to swallow rapidly before he could make his throat let words through. “Whatever—” He fell quickly silent when he saw the look in Raynard's eye.

“Whatever your place in my house, if I ask you to make a decision, I expect you to make it.”

Ori took a shaky breath. There was really no decision to be made. There was only one answer he could possibly give. “Submissive, sir.”

Raynard didn't smile, but the light in his eyes grew brighter. In some way that Ori didn't really understand, he sensed that he'd pleased his master. Closing his eyes for a moment, he relished the idea.

“When you've finished your work here, join me in the study.”

“Yes, sir.”

Raynard took a step back from him. Ori didn't move a muscle as he waited for the other man to leave the room, but the hawk merely stood there, less than a yard away from him. He raised an eyebrow as if asking what Ori was waiting for.

The duckling hesitated. "Shall I fetch my clothes, sir?"

"No." It was a simple statement of the way things were going to be. No room for argument existed.

Very slowly, Ori nodded his understanding.

In theory, he knew he hadn't been wearing a great deal when he'd served at the nest. The shorts hadn't hid much. But right then, he'd have given anything to be wearing them again.

Standing before his master, his hands still covering his erection, he found himself frozen in place. He couldn't move.

Raynard didn't stir either.

It was one thing to say he wanted to be the other man's submissive, to say he'd obey any order the hawk issued. It was quite another to do it. And as he stood there, Ori couldn't fail to realize that this was his first test.

A servant would be permitted to fetch his clothes. A submissive was not. He took a deep breath as the differences between the two titles started to make themselves felt inside his head.

Tension poured into Ori's body, until every joint ached and each muscle cramped. If Raynard had told him to get on his knees, it would have been so easy. But the idea of calmly returning to his duties while the other man was clearly able to see how he affected him made the breath catch in Ori's throat and threaten to choke him.

Looking up, Ori met his master's eyes one more time. He held his gaze as he finally managed to drop his hands to his sides.

"Back to your duties," Raynard ordered again.

Ori turned away from his master. Crossing the room on legs that threatened to give way beneath him at any moment, he picked up one of the boxes of books and carted it the rest of the way across the room.

Raynard's eyes tracked his every action, trailing over his bare skin. Ori's hands shook with the effort it took to keep them working rather than covering himself. A few minutes passed before a movement out of the corner of his eye made him look over his shoulder, toward his master.

The older man nodded to him, just once, before he turned and left the room.

Resting his hands on the table in front of him, Ori closed his eyes and tried to make his head stop spinning. Relief at pleasing the other man glowed inside him, but with it came a kind of fear he'd never really felt before, a terror that the other man's approval wouldn't last forever, that it would be all too easily lost and that once that happened, he'd never be able to get it back.

Taking a deep breath, the duckling turned his attention back to his work. He looked slowly around the library as he tried to make his mind focus in on the task at hand. It was a stunning space, or it would be once it was put in order. The books had been pushed haphazardly onto the shelves wherever they would fit—and shoved into gaps where they really didn't fit. Dozens still lingered in boxes, while some of the shelves remained empty.

There would be several weeks' worth of work to be done in there, fitted in around his day-to-day duties, but Ori couldn't help but hope his master might be pleased with the finished result.

He straightened the pile of boxes a little, then he straightened them a fraction more, until they couldn't possibly be any straighter. The simple fact was, the tasks he had assigned himself for that day were now complete.

Eventually, Ori had to turn his attention to the door that led out of the library, that would ultimately take him back to his master. Looking down his body, Ori bit his lip. He was still as hard as ever. He shouldn't really face his master as he was. Not just erect, but covered in dust too.

It wouldn't take him long to rush down to the servants' quarters and jump in the shower. A cold shower would solve all his problems. A hot shower and a hand slicked with shower gel would be an even better solution.

Ori stepped out into the hallway and looked toward the door leading down to his room. His hand tightened into a fist at his side as he fought against the urge to rush across to it. If that's what his master wanted, that's what he'd have ordered him to do. Raynard didn't forget to mention things like that. It didn't matter if he'd lived in the other man's house as a servant or as a submissive. Ori knew his master well enough to know that if he wanted him clean and presentable, he'd have ordered him to be.

His bare feet made no sound on the freshly scrubbed tiles as he walked slowly across to the study door and tapped tentatively on the dark, paneled wood.

“Enter.”

Ori opened the door just wide enough to slip inside the room. His master's attention remained on his paperwork for a few seconds. The novice submissive closed the door behind him and stood to one side of it, waiting for the other man to recognize his presence.

Finally Raynard looked up. His eyes ran over Ori from tip to toe, taking in every detail, dust smears, erection and everything else. It was all Ori could do to keep his hands at his sides.

"Come here."

Ori stepped forward.

Before he could reach the spot where he usually stood, directly in front of his master's desk, the hawk turned his chair and looked to the floor just in front of his feet.

Ori altered his course. The next order was obvious. He dropped to his knees in front of the older man. Raynard made no complaint about that, but when he reached for the dominant's fly, he found his master's hand wrapped tight around his wrist before he even had a chance to unzip him.

He should have waited for permission. All at once, that was clear. Ori mentally cursed himself for letting his stupidity mean the other man's possession of him would now start with a whipping rather than a blowjob.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, fledgling."

Ori kept his gaze on the other man's feet as Raynard released his hold on his wrist. Letting his arm drop to hang idly at his side, he stayed very still as he waited for the next order. He hadn't stumbled across a whip when he'd been cleaning the house, but he had no doubt there would be one somewhere. His time at the nest had taught him that. There was no such thing as a high ranking avian who didn't own a whip—who didn't know how to use one on any lower ranking shifter who was foolish enough to displease him.

"Look up."

It wasn't the command he expected, but Ori still obeyed it. His eyes met Raynard's. For a long time, the hawk held his gaze, and Ori found it impossible to look away.

When Raynard finally turned his attention elsewhere, he reached onto his desk and picked up a long black box. Ori followed his master's movements. It was far too small for a whip. The box snapped open. A black leather collar lay against the crisp white lining.

Ori stopped breathing.

It was a simple item really, no more than an inch wide and decorated with nothing more flamboyant than a simple silver buckle and a circular tag.

It was impossible for him to see the engraving on the tag, but he knew what it would say. He'd seen more than a few collared men come and go through the nest.

One side would declare *Property of Mr. Frederick Raynard*. The other would show his master's rank as a hawk.

"You understand what a collar means between avians?"

Ori parted his lips, but quickly closed them again. He was only just in time to stop himself giving the worse possible answer. A second later, he found the right response. "Yes, sir."

"Tell me your first instinct."

Swallowing down his nerves, Ori forced the words out. "Mr. Hamilton said that collars were only for men who knew who they really were, sir—shifters who knew what sort of avian they would become when they were fully fledged."

"Do you have any doubt you'll become the kind of avian whose species makes him suited to wearing another man's collar?" Raynard asked, seriously.

Ori shook his head.

When he looked up, he saw a tiny smile twisting his master's lips. "Neither do I."

Ori found himself smiling back at the older man, relief rushing through him as Raynard's acceptance of him flew through his veins.

"Nevertheless," the hawk said, his expression once more unreadable. "The collar will be removed when you go in front of the elders to complete your first full shift. You'll be given a free choice over if you wish to retain it after everything is certain."

"I'll want to, sir," Ori blurted out.

"Then," Raynard correct. "Not now. For now, all you need to be sure of is that you wish to wear it until then."

"Yes, sir." No answer had ever been easier to give.

Raynard took the collar from the box. The leather slid through his fingers as if the other man had been handling the material his entire life. A shiver ran through Ori as the collar was wrapped around his neck. His master's knuckles brushed against his skin as he fastened it in place and slipped two fingers inside it to check the fit, just the way Ori had seen humans check the size of a new pup's collar.

A slight color made its way to his cheeks with the comparison. But the knowledge, that he now belonged to the other man in every way there was, went swiftly to his cock.

He'd doubted it was possible for him to get any harder. He'd been wrong. He could barely hold back a whimper as his cock begged for his attention. A few strokes would be all he needed.

Ori quickly swallowed down the desire for his own pleasure. His new collar shifted around his throat, reminding him of the other man's possession. There was only one man whose enjoyment he should be thinking of now.

Lifting his eyes, Ori looked to his master, hoping he might have changed his mind about allowing him to go down on him.

"Go to your quarters. Clean yourself up."

"Yes, sir." Pushing aside his disappointment, the duckling rose very slowly to his feet, hands remaining by his side through sheer force of will as he felt his master's eyes follow him out of the room.

As he closed the heavy wooden door behind him, he let out a breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. His hands immediately went to his cock, covering himself as he stood alone in the hallway. Looking down his body, Ori stared at the back of his dusty hands. Just because his master wasn't there to see him, that didn't mean he could forget how the other man wanted him to behave.

His limbs fought him every inch of the way, but somehow, he managed to bring his hands back to his sides. His cock curved proudly back toward his stomach, begging for his attention, the only part of him not embarrassed by his own enthusiasm.

Ori took a deep breath. If his master didn't want him to cover himself, the best way he could serve the older man was to get used to that fact as quickly as possible. He refused to let his hands creep back to hide his cock.

His fingertips went to his collar instead. It felt good around his neck, a solid reassuring reminder of the other man's ownership of him. Ori smiled slightly to himself as he pushed himself away from the door leading into his master's study.

Down in the servants' quarters, he quickly made his way into the little bathroom off the butler's bedroom and turned on the shower over the tub. Stepping underneath the spray as soon as it reached a comfortable temperature, he tipped his head back, letting the hot water saturate his hair.

It wound in rivulets down his body. A shudder ran through him as the water caressed his aching shaft. Eyes closed, he stood very still. He wasn't going to come just from the feel of the shower. He wasn't.

Ori took a deep, gasping breath, water trickling into his mouth as he fought for control. His fingertips went to his collar again. The leather was wet. His fingers slid over it. Hooking the digits between his neck and the buckle he tugged gently at it. A whimper escaped from the back of his throat as his imagination turned the sensation into something that could only be produced when his master attached a lead to the collar and called him to his heel with it.

Blinking his eyes open, Ori stared down his body. One hand still hooked to his collar, the other went to his cock. There was no thought of hiding it away then.

From the first moment his hand wrapped around his shaft, his hips refused to stay still.

Ori.

A chiding note crept into his master's voice as he said his name. He didn't have Raynard's permission to move that way.

As he closed his eyes once more, a mental picture of the older man standing next to him, staring down at him, filled his mind. His master's hand replaced reality. Ori bit back a moan as he fought for breath under the pounding water.

Stay still, and your master might allow you to come.

Ori had to release his hold on his collar to support himself, one hand against the tiles. His palm slipped against them. He tried to adjust his footing, and almost stumbled. A shiver ran through him, in spite of the heat and steam that swirled around the room.

"That's enough."

For a second, the words seemed no more real than any of the others he had 'heard' his master say since he stepped under the shower. Very slowly reality reasserted itself around him.

Spinning around, Ori came face to face with his master.

Raynard stepped out of the doorway. All Ori could do was stare at the larger man as he stopped at the edge of the bathtub.

"Come here."

Ori's feet took over. He stepped forward, out of range of the shower, out from behind the clear glass partition that separated it from the rest of the room.

Raynard took hold of his wrist. It was only then that Ori realized his hand was still wrapped around his cock. Fresh embarrassment rushed to his cheeks. He tried to snatch his hand away more quickly, but Raynard's grip ensured he moved at exactly the speed his master chose and no faster.

"As of this moment, only one man's hands touch you."

Ori swallowed.

“Answer your master.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You don’t jack off, you don’t touch your cock, you don’t come without my permission—no exceptions.”

Eyes fixed somewhere around the third button of his master’s shirt, Ori nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Raynard’s other hand threaded into Ori’s hair. Strong fingers tugged at the wet strands, pulling his head back. The duckling lifted his gaze. His eyes met his master’s.

The older man had no reason to be pleased with him, but Ori saw no displeasure in the other man’s expression. The light he’d seen in them earlier was still there.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he whispered, fear and uncertainty combining to turn the words throaty and hesitant.

Raynard raised an eyebrow. “For doing something that your master has never forbidden you from doing?”

Ori wasn’t sure what to say. He tried to lower his gaze, but Raynard tucked his knuckles under his chin and made him look up again.

“Now that I *have* forbidden it, I expect you to follow the order.”

“Yes, sir.”

Raynard released his wrist. Ori’s arm dropped to hang idly at his side as his master ran his eyes over his body again.

Behind his nicely tailored trousers, Raynard was just as hard as he was.

“May I serve you, sir?” Ori whispered.

Raynard looked up from his inspection. When Ori would have spoken again, unable to bare the silence that grew between them, his master stopped him short with a shake of the head. “I’m going out.”

Ori looked to the other room and his clothes. “Shall I—?”

“Alone,” Raynard cut in.

The duckling dropped his gaze, and tried not to let the other man sense his disappointment. It was silly to think that the collar would really change anything between them. He might have become a submissive rather than a servant, but he was still a duck rather than a hawk. Raynard was his master. It wasn’t his place to assume an invitation to follow him around

wherever he went. It was stupid to think the collaring could be as important to Raynard as it was to him.

“Shall I lay your clothes out for you, sir?” he offered, as emotionlessly as he could manage.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Yes, sir.” The duckling fumbled around inside his mind for something else he might be able to offer the other man, but found nothing.

Raynard brushed his knuckle against his cheek. When Ori looked up, an amused little smile was twisting the older man’s lips. “There are some places you can’t follow your master just yet, fledgling.” He looked past him to the window. There was no view as such. All that could be seen was a wall and a patch of sky above it.

Sky.

“Oh...”

Raynard chuckled. His hand ruffled Ori’s sodden hair before he stepped back. “Finish up.”

He didn’t retreat from the room. When he’d said that there would be no privacy granted to submissives, Ori hadn’t realized that would mean he’d been provided with an audience at such unexpected moments. He turned his attention back to his shower, but his hands didn’t seem to want to cooperate. The soap, the shampoo, everything jumped out of his hands. It took a life time of scrabbling around in the tub retrieving all the things he’d dropped before the last of the dust that had coated his body was washed away and he could turn off the water.

His towel hung on a hook next to the bath. Ori picked it up and rubbed at his hair, resisting the temptation to hide his still flourishing hard on with it.

Within a few minutes, he was as dry as he was going to get. He glanced across at his master.

“Follow me.”

Ori hesitated next to his clothes as they walked through his bedroom toward the kitchens.

Raynard glanced back to him. “Move a set to the coat closet in the hallway so you can dress before answering the door. You’re expected to appear dressed in front of everyone but your master.”

Ori swallowed. He was going to have a permanent hard on walking around naked in front of the other man whenever they were alone. Taking a deep breath, he mentally corrected himself. He was going to have a permanent hard on *that he had no chance of hiding*. That would be the only real difference. It wasn’t as if he didn’t react to the other man when he was dressed.

A glance at the other man and he realized his master was waiting for a response. "Yes, sir."

Raynard nodded and led the way up the stairs. In the main part of the house, he continued up another set of stairs. Opening an inconspicuous door at the end of a long corridor, he led the way into a part of the house Ori had yet to visit.

It was shrouded in an even thicker blanket of dust than the entire house had been when he first arrived. As he followed his master, Ori automatically added items to his list of jobs that would have to be attended to when his daily duties allowed.

At the top of yet another set of stairs, the narrow little space opened up considerably. A huge dormer window looked out over the garden. Ori stepped toward it. A small balcony had been built on the other side, concealed from the neighboring houses by the steeply pitched roofs on either side of it.

"Open the window."

Ori did as he was told. It was too big to really be called a window. It was more like a door, taller than the duckling and several feet across. As Ori opened it, cool evening air poured into the room, caressing his damp skin.

A rustle of fabric behind him convinced Ori to tear his gaze away from the view and turn around.

Raynard was undoing his shirt. For a second, all Ori could do was gawp. Then his master turned his attention to the far corner of the attic room. Ori followed his gaze. It fell on a rail where several empty coat hangers lingered.

Rushing forward, Ori picked up one. Raynard handed him his shirt. With clumsy movements, his eyes still feasting on the slowly emerging view of his master's body, Ori placed the shirt on the hanger.

As he returned it to the rail and fetched another, Raynard was already kicking off his shoes.

Ori knelt at his feet to take them away. He was still kneeling there when Raynard's hands went to his belt. Ori froze, staring up his master's body, but the hawk's gaze was fixed firmly on the window and the sky beyond it. He obviously had other things on his mind than a blowjob. Ori carried his shoes away and put them underneath the rail. Raynard's socks and underwear were soon folded on top of them, his trousers hanging on the rail.

Taking off his watch, he handed that to Ori too. His attention never once wavered from the sky and while the hawk didn't once look in Ori's direction, the duckling found himself free to run his eyes over his master's body as often as he pleased without any fear of being caught.

Each line of muscle stood out beautifully in the evening half light. Ori watched mesmerized as Raynard stretched, his back arching and his fingers brushing against the sloping ceiling. The tension that was always present in the dominant's movements seemed to fade away. The dwindling sunlight flooded over the older man's skin as he stepped toward the window.

"The window stays open until I return."

"Yes, sir," Ori managed, to rasp out.

Raynard looked over his shoulder to him then. There was a slight smile playing around his lips, as if he was party to some amusing little joke the rest of the world would never understand.

"Shall I wait here for you, sir?" Ori whispered.

Raynard shook his head. "Go back downstairs."

"Yes, sir."

His master stepped through the window onto the balcony. One moment there was a fully grown man standing there looking down into the garden. The next a beautiful Goshawk perched on the balcony rail, feathers shimmering in the light.

Ori's mouth dropped open. In some way he didn't understand, it was as if there had always been both a hawk and a man standing there, but the picture of the man had faded back until the hawk became the only image Ori could see before him.

He stepped forward.

The hawk turned its head toward him. The look in his master's amber eyes still had the power to stop him in his tracks.

Then, without any warning, the hawk was away—swooping down over the garden, wings extended as it re-gained height to soar out over the town. Flinging himself onto the balcony after his master, Ori leaned against the railing, eyes open very wide as he traced the hawk's movements where it climbed over the city and finally disappeared from view.

As Ori finally dropped his gaze, his grip on the balcony turned white knuckled, his stomach turned over. He looked quickly back up to the sky as he stepped away from the edge his master had occupied and moved closer to the safety of the house.

Inside, Ori couldn't help but look to the sky again. His master was out there.

He had his orders, Ori knew that. He was to go back downstairs. His master didn't want him to wait there for his return. Ori's fingers went to his collar. Reluctantly, he turned away from the sky and did as he was told.

Chapter Four

From a hawk's vantage point high in the sky, Raynard Lodge was barely more than a dot, one speck out of thousands that littered a landscape stretching to the edge of the world. While Raynard glided in swooping circles through the evening air, it was impossible for his hawk's eyes not to see everything within his vision as his own personal territory, every man who lived within sight as his own property.

Yet, even with everything in his domain to admire, Raynard soon found his attention drifting back toward his uncle's house. Even in flight, it was all too easy for him to conjure up the image of his new submissive, waiting patiently for his master's return.

A tiny tilt of the wings and he found himself circling back to the house, for all the world like a damn homing pigeon who couldn't fight the instinct to race back to the other man.

The balcony came into view, tucked away between the eaves. After so many weeks in human form, his landing was...embarrassing. His shift completed just a second too soon. His feet, when they materialized, were an inch above the wooden boards.

He landed heavily, only just gaining control of his hands in time to reach out and brace himself against the balcony railing and stop himself tumbling into a messy heap on the rough boards. The world spun as Raynard looked over his shoulder into the gloomy little room behind him. Ori, obedient little duckling that he was, hadn't lingered there to see his master make a fool of himself.

Raynard bowed his head for a few minutes, filling his body with deep lungfuls of air as he fought to push his mind back into an entirely human shape. Hawk or human, he still found his thoughts full of one man.

Stumbling away from the balcony, Raynard went in search of his fledging.

Stairs, and legs that thought they would be better off pulled up tight against his body while his wings took the strain, were a bad combination. It was more luck than judgment that got him to the ground floor in one piece. When he caught sight of light shining under the library

door, Raynard wasn't sorry to avoid the winding little staircase that led the way down to the servants' area.

He pushed open the door, his hands still clumsy and uncoordinated after the shift. The heavy wood slammed back against the bookcase behind it.

Ori spun around to face him. The book he'd been lost in fell from his hands. His eyes opened very wide as he stared across the room at his master.

Raynard stepped forward. Ori remained frozen in place, not even blinking as his master closed the gap between them, each step carefully controlled, carefully human. Stopping barely a foot away from him, Raynard looked down at the book that had been in his fledgling's hand.

"I wasn't reading it, sir," Ori rushed out. Dropping to his knees for a moment, he picked up the fallen volume. Rising, he turned to put it on the shelf. Raynard's reactions, still as fast as a true hawk's, sprung into action.

His fingers wrapped around Ori's wrist before the book could slide into the gap left between its neighboring volumes.

The smaller man hesitated. When Raynard guided his hand away from the shelf, he didn't try to leave the book behind. He turned the cover toward Raynard for his inspection.

I wasn't reading it, sir. As if he'd been caught committing some horrible crime.

"Don't lie to your master."

Ori swallowed. "It won't happen again, sir."

Raynard stared down at him—he was promising to avoid the wrong thing. "When you've completed all your duties, you may have free use of the library—unless you're foolish enough to try to lie to me again."

"Yes, sir." The duckling glanced up at him, apparently pleased with the permission, even if he was also rather confused by it.

With his head still full of flight and the feel of the air rushing beneath his wings, Raynard knew he was in no condition to make sense of the submissive.

Ori looked down. For a moment, it looked like a simple expression of his submission. Then Raynard followed his gaze. His impatience hadn't allowed for clothes. Ori wasn't the only avian naked and incapable of hiding his reactions to the man before him. The fledgling's gaze caressed Raynard's flourishing erection.

When he dragged his attention back to his master's face, the offering was clear in his eyes. His master wanted to come, and he was more than ready to serve him in whatever way Raynard pleased.

There was just a hint of nervousness mixed in with expression. "At the nest they taught me to...I know what I'm doing, sir," he whispered, as if he thought he might have to beg for the privilege.

Raynard hadn't believed there was anything that would make him waver before properly claiming his submissive that night, but the softly spoken words stopped him short.

He could easily imagine the kind of lessons he received at the nest. He was a gentle soul, and he'd probably never received a single gentle touch from any man when he was at the club.

Raynard released his grip on the duckling's arm. Stepping forward he moved his fingers to rest on the fledgling's neck. Tilting the other man's head back, he brushed their lips together—a touch as tender as any hawk could ever bestow on another man.

Ori gasped against his mouth. His lips parted. Raynard ran his tongue against them, tracing a line along the sensitive skin. When he pulled back, Ori's eyes were closed, for all the world as if it was his first kiss.

It couldn't have truly been that, but Raynard still felt the possessive side of his personality bay its pleasure at the idea. Ori blinked his eyes open. For a second, he stared up at his master, all wide eyed and impossibly innocent.

It took every scrap of self control Raynard possessed to take a step away from him, to drag the hawk's instinct's back under his control, to have his inner avian, tethered, hooded, and perched on a mental gauntlet.

Another few steps back and he took a seat in one of the chairs Ori had unearthed from beneath the dust covers.

"Bring the book with you," he bit out.

Ori did as he was told, a slight frown marring his normally smooth brow as Raynard lost all ability to mellow his voice.

There was a cushion on the neighboring chair.

Raynard snatched it up and dropped it on the floor by his feet. "Sit."

Ori lowered himself onto the cushion, crossing his legs beneath him as he looked up at his master.

"Start reading where you left off," Raynard ordered.

“Sir?”

Raynard looked impatiently at the book on the younger man’s lap. Ori followed his gaze. Opening the book, he looked up at Raynard again for the moment, before he cautiously began to follow the order.

The words were tentative, but that didn’t matter. They didn’t really sink into Raynard’s mind anyway. Closing his eyes, the hawk forced himself to concentrate on each meaningless syllable, to corral his human side to the fore as his brain fought to try to understand what was being said to him, to remember that it was important to be able to understand human words and ideas when dealing with a man such as Ori.

He’d been right to stretch his wings before he thought of doing anything else with his new submissive. His mind, when it started to regain its humanity, was clearer than it had been for months. Opening his eyes, he saw his fledgling staring up at him.

The words were still flowing, his eyes dropping down to scan another sentence every few seconds, before quickly returning to rest damn near worshipfully on his master. The syllables faltered as their eyes met. His lips parted, his tongue flicked out to moisten his lips. No further words emerged.

Raynard already knew that his mind was as human as it was going to get that night. There was only so much that words could do to push the hawk’s instincts away, and they did nothing to temper a master’s predilections. He continued to stare down at Ori, unable to hide his fascination with him.

The younger man swallowed. Raynard sensed the nerves building rapidly inside him.

“Scared, fledgling?” he asked.

Ori dropped his eyes to the book. He nodded, just one jerky little movement. “But only because I think you might send me away again before allowing me to serve you, sir,” he whispered after a moment. His teeth nipped at his bottom lip as he seemed to regret his moment of daring.

Reaching out to the younger man, Raynard caught the sensitive bit of skin between his thumb and forefinger and took it out of range of the younger man’s teeth. Ori’s tongue brushed against his fingertip.

Raynard didn’t pull away. Ori’s lips closed cautiously around his finger. A moment passed, neither of them moved. The world hung in the moment, wings spread, riding the air currents.

Ori looked up at him, his eyes full of need—to be accepted, to be owned, to be allowed to serve and please his master. It seemed to come so naturally to him. Raynard supposed that was because it did.

It was as hard to imagine a dominant duckling as it would be to picture a submissive hawk. He smiled slightly at the idea. Ori caught the expression and immediately reflected it back at him, his lips caressing his fingers with the movement.

Raynard took the digit out of his reach and slid his hand into the other man's hair, pulling him forward a little. Ori's eyes sparkled with relief as he leaned in closer to his master, his movements almost taking his head away from Raynard's hand in his enthusiasm.

The hawk tightened his hold on the fledgling's messy mop of hair.

Ori stilled, allowing Raynard to control his movements as he guided him nearer. The duckling parted his lips in expectation. Raynard's eyes feasted on the sight, as the tip of his cock brushed against them.

The glans disappeared into his mouth, Ori's lips quickly creating a firm seal around his shaft. The fledgling's eyes dropped closed as he seemed to savor his first true taste of his master.

Raynard could almost believe he was imprinting on him, that the younger man was creating a mental vision of his master inside his head that went beyond simple thoughts and senses, but cut right down to the very instincts that made the submissive what he was.

He whimpered gently around Raynard's cock.

There was no guile in the younger man. Whatever he might have done or what he may have been taught in the nest, Raynard had no doubt that right then, as he knelt at his master's feet, every reaction Ori offered him was the simple truth. It was what his nature told him to do and there could be no doubt he was exactly where he wanted to be.

The younger man dipped his head, taking more of Raynard's shaft between his lips. Tightening his grip on the submissive's hair, Raynard stilled him.

Ori blinked open his eyes to gaze up at his master.

There was only one man who could ever be in control of whatever happened between them. Ori couldn't be allowed to develop the idea that task fell to the duckling in the relationship. Raynard relaxed his hold on him a little as he guided him closer.

The submissive moved with his hand, gently sucking around his shaft as more of the length slid between his lips. As Raynard led him to pull back, a touch of uncertainty made it into

the younger man's eyes, as if he was afraid his treat was going to be taken away from him altogether.

Raynard said nothing as he tugged him closer again, feeding his cock back into the submissive's mouth. A moan of pure pleasure surrounded his shaft. Ori's hands came to rest on Raynard's sides in an effort to balance himself. They were nothing like the soft hands of the humming birds and finches Raynard had kneeling before him in recent years. They were a working man's hands, a submissive's hands—strong and calloused by enthusiastic service.

Raynard guided Ori away from him again. No fear now, Ori's expression was all eager anticipation at being dragged back toward his master once more. Perfect wet heat surround the hawk's cock with each movement, sending waves of pleasure racing through his veins. Raynard let even more of his shaft slide between the younger man's lips, until the tip touched the back of his throat.

No panic, no hesitation, Ori accepted everything his master was willing to offer him, as if it was a gift he was truly blessed to receive.

A dexterous tongue laved the head as Raynard let the younger man move far enough away from him and fawn over the very tip of his cock for a little while. But he soon tired of the teasing. He pulled Ori lower over his lap once more, quickening his movements, letting the friction of a hot willing mouth caress his cock from tip to base, letting his mind relax as he stopped worrying too much about his fledgling and let his body take its pleasure from him.

"That's right," he whispered.

The simple praise pulled a murmur from the younger man. He dipped his head again, letting Raynard's cock slip into his throat for the first time.

The hawk held him there, allowing no retreat. Ori looked up at him, wide eyed and glorious. There was no way he could breathe with his master's shaft filling his throat, but no panic came into his eyes. He stared up at him, calm and perfect. He didn't pull back until Raynard tugged gently at his hair. For a moment, his cock slipped from between the submissive's lips.

Panic flashed, sudden and frantic in Ori's eyes. He immediately bobbed his head back down toward his erection. A tightened grip on the fair blond strands stopped him short. Raynard let him kiss at the very tip, but allowed him nothing more.

The fledgling's tongue crept out to caress the glans, licking up the pre-cum that leaked onto his lips. When he finally released his grip on the submissive, Ori sucked his way back down his shaft as if he had been born to serve another man that way.

His fingers gripped more tightly at Raynard's sides as he seemed to try to pull his master closer as he took him into his mouth, and back into his throat once more. Raynard tipped his head back as blistering pleasure rushed through him. Left to his own devices now, Ori worked him fast and furious, whimpering his need as he seemed to try to beg the orgasm out of his master.

Raynard's hips bucked. For a moment he slid even further into the duckling's mouth. The other man quickly pulled back, just far enough to catch his master's full taste on his tongue as he came into his mouth.

He swallowed him down, his throat working rapidly as he closed his eyes to savor everything his master could feed him. Pleasure raced through the hawk like the rush of air beneath his wings as he dove through the sky. Every muscle, every fiber in his body gave up all operations but the simple processing of the bliss that flew through his body. He arched against his seat, his fists biting into the arms of the chair.

As Raynard collapsed back against the seat, his mind went blank. Eyes closed, it was easy to believe the entire world had ceased to exist. A gentle suckling sensation around his softening cock tenderly called him back to reality. He opened his eyes.

Ori's eyes were still closed, his lips thinned into a narrow pink line as he continued to caress his master's cock with his tongue. He didn't even open his eyes when Raynard, too sensitive to really appreciate his submissive's continued service, nudged him gently away.

The little fledgling knelt on the cushion at his feet, eyes closed, breathing ragged. One last time, Raynard threaded his fingers into the younger man's hair. He pulled him forward to rest his forehead against his master's leg while he got his breath back. The invitation earned the hawk another pleased little murmur from the other man.

Taking a deep breath, Raynard dropped his head back to rest against the high cushioned support of the chair. All thoughts of remembering to let his hawk side fly more often were superseded with the knowledge that there were even more important needs a man couldn't fail to ignore. A master couldn't ignore his submissive.

As he removed his hand from Ori's hair, the younger man hesitatingly looked up at him. The duckling's own needs were written plain in his expression. Raynard didn't doubt that if he looked further down the younger man's body, he'd see the evidence of the fact. Ori would be just as hard as he had been most of the day, and more desperate to come than ever.

Raynard smiled slightly to himself. Not yet.

Rising from his chair, the hawk stretched up to his full height. His body all sleepy satisfaction, content to rest after being permitted to sate the desires it had for both flight and everything else.

Ori stayed on his knees, staring up at him.

“Stand.”

The duckling obeyed. His movements were more than a little clumsy, which was nothing other than Raynard expected. But there was also a stiffness in the way he rearranged his limbs that betrayed that all wasn't as well in the younger man's world as it was in his masters.

Reaching out, Raynard ran his hands over the duckling's shoulders, his fingers working into the layers of muscle. They were knotted with far more than frustrated desire.

“Sore?” Raynard asked.

Ori swallowed. “It's fine, sir.”

Raynard frowned. Perhaps it was time to think of adding another servant to the household after all. “Your work has been—”

“It's not that, sir!”

Raynard raised an eyebrow at the unexpected interruption.

Ori hesitated, but pushed on. “It just happens sometimes, sir.”

Raynard ran his hands back over the smaller man's shoulders, testing the muscles as they moved beneath his fingers.

He was right about one thing, it wasn't the work that was his problem. He nodded his understanding, hardly heartbroken to be able to keep the younger man to himself a while longer.

Filing a new item onto his mental to do list, he was about to turn away from the other man and make his way to his own bed when he remembered just how inexperienced a submissive his duckling was. Tucking a knuckle under Ori's chin, he made the other man look up. “You remember the orders your master gave you earlier?”

“Yes, sir.” Ori's voice was hoarse, roughened by desire for his own release. A touch of color rose to his cheeks, but there was no lack of understanding in his response.

Raynard nodded, satisfied that in spite of his obvious need, the submissive would follow his command.

“Good boy.” He offered him an approving nod before he left him to switch off the lights, damp down the fires and retire to his own bed below stairs.

* * * *

As the traffic lights switched to red in front of him, Raynard put on the handbrake and glanced to his side. Ori sat next to him, watching the world go by through the passenger side window. If he had any concerns about where his master was taking him, he showed no sign of it. Raynard smiled slightly to himself. If there were other things the submissive might have to work on in the future, giving up control of any and all decisions to his master wasn't one of them.

Ori chose that moment to glance in his direction. He immediately echoed Raynard's smile apparently delighted by the simple fact his master was pleased with the world right then.

As Raynard pulled up outside the leisure center some ten minutes later, Ori glanced at the sign above the door but he made no comment. He got out of the car, when Raynard nodded to him that he should do so, and followed his master into the building without a word. He didn't hesitate, until they were in the changing rooms and Raynard handed him a towel, along with a pair of swimming trunks.

"Sir?"

"You know how to swim?"

His fledgling nodded.

"Get changed."

Ori did as he was told, quickly stripping out of the clothes he'd put on before leaving the house and pulling the tight black trunks on in their place.

Apart from the small amount of skin covered by the trunks, the only other part of Ori that wasn't visible to the world at large was the strip of his neck covered by his collar. Raynard reached out to remove it. The duckling jerked away from him as he realized what he was about to do and an apparently instinctive aversion to the idea got the better of his manners.

His eyes flashed up to his master's. As Raynard held the fledglings gaze, Ori stilled and accepted his decision without a word. Within seconds the buckle was undone and the leather gone. The duckling's neck was only bare for a moment before Raynard had a thick silver chain fastened in its place.

"Chlorine and leather don't mix," he informed the boy. And public displays of the younger man's submission didn't sit well with humans who couldn't be trusted to understand what a collar really meant between avians either.

"Yes, sir." The submissive put his clothes neatly in one of the lockers, along with his towel and, when his master showed no inclination to take it from him, fastened the elastic band holding the key to it around his ankle.

Raynard nodded toward the door leading through to the pool. "Go on."

Ori didn't go so far as to speak, but he did look to his master's clothes in askance.

"Hawks aren't known for their love of water, duckling. I'll be up on the balcony," Raynard told him, only just resisting the temptation to send him on the way with a sharp tap on the arse. It wouldn't do to leave him out there with an erection testing the elastic on his trunks.

As the younger man disappeared from his sight, Raynard made his way out of the changing rooms and up the stairs. The wide gallery ran the whole length of the pool, with tables and chairs set up at frequent intervals for spectators to watch the swimmers below.

There weren't many people venturing into the water at that early hour of day. As Raynard took a seat at the table with the best vantage point, he was just in time to see Ori approach the pool and lay claim to a lane no one else was using.

Settling his toes on the tiled edge, the duckling took a deep breath, gazing down into the deep water before him as if they contained the answer to every question in the universe. Then his attention moved up, Raynard saw his eyes travel along the length of the balcony rail as he looked for his master. When he found him, one nod was all the further encouragement the younger man required. Then there was no need to ask anything else of the sparkling blue depths.

Ori's dive was the most graceful movement Raynard had ever seen the young man make. He cut through the water as if he'd been born there and was merely returning home. Long, powerful strokes took him to the far end of the pool. Disappearing beneath the water, he tucked himself into a tight ball as he spun around and pushed away, gliding for several meters before his head broke the surface and he powered down the length of the pool again.

Raynard relaxed back in his seat as he studied the younger man. There was no sign of the tension that had been building in his muscles now. It wasn't flight, but for an avian who was destined to be as at home on the water as he was in the air, it seemed to be as close an approximation as Raynard hoped it would be.

Another length, then another, the hawk watched his submissive lose himself in the simple pleasure of feeling his body turn weightless in the water.

Staring down at the younger man's lithe, muscular frame cutting through the water, Raynard let his own mind wander back toward his own recent flight, wondering if it felt the same for Ori as it had for him when he'd eventually made it back into the air after so long trapped on the ground.

When the duckling finally stopped at the edge of the pool over an hour had passed. From his vantage point, Raynard could see the submissive pull deep lungfuls of air into his body. He'd pushed himself hard. It took him a few minutes to catch his breath, his head remaining bowed over the edge of the pool.

Suddenly he looked up. A hawk's vision let Raynard see the question in his eyes. Some of the submissive's peace left him as he began to wonder if his master would be angry with him for spending so long there.

Raynard let the younger man see his approval shining down over him. Quick as ever to echo his emotions, the duckling's expression morphed into a stunning smile—more carefree than Raynard had ever seen him.

He gave his submissive another hour to sooth his muscles in the pool before he finally beckoned Ori to drag himself away from the water and join him.

Between leaving his master's sight and appearing through the door onto the balcony, Raynard estimated there was just enough time for Ori to rinse the chlorine off his body, pull his clothes on, and rush up the stairs.

He was slightly out of breath when he arrived at Raynard's side, his hair more than a little damp and his cheeks flushed.

Tapping the leg of the opposite chair with his toe, the hawk pushed it away from the table. Ori took the hint and sat down.

"Feel better?"

"Yes, sir." He looked down for a moment, as if not sure what to make of the question after he'd got his automatic response out, as if he had been so busy enjoying himself he hadn't noticed the pains slip from his joints.

"The aches will start to fade away once you achieve a full shift," Raynard promised.

Ori looked up at him through his lashes.

"You're allowed to speak," the hawk reminded him, when Ori failed to say a single word of his own volition.

"Most of my foster parents said they were just growing pains, sir."

Raynard considered the statement. "Broadly speaking they were right—the avian version. Your body's preparing itself to be able to morph properly."

Ori nodded.

Raynard pushed the tea he'd bought the other man a little closer to the fledgling.

“Thank you, sir.” Ori wrapped his hands around the mug.

“Did any of the families know their foster son is a shifter?”

Ori stared at his tea. “The Greens were the last family I stayed with, sir. They encouraged me to find out one way or another.”

“There were a lot of families?”

Ori nodded, his eyes never leaving his tea. “Seven altogether, sir. I...I wasn’t very good at fitting in.” He blew gently on the surface of the liquid before taking a sip. “I don’t know if it’s because I’m not really...Maybe it was just me...” He forced a smile. “The clumsiness didn’t help...There was always something that would break, then I knew it wouldn’t be long before the social workers would be sent for, to take me back.”

There was a wistful tone in his voice that clawed at something inside Raynard. Ori didn’t say anything else as they finished their drinks. The hawk wasn’t sure what to say either. Finally he stood up and it was impossible to let the silence linger any longer between them. “Come on, fledgling. Time to go home.”

Ori smiled up at him, as if he’d somehow chanced to say the perfect thing. Raynard ruffled his hair as he stepped past him. For the first time, Ori didn’t flinch at all at the sight of a raised hand.

As he made his way out to the car, the hawk found himself feeling rather pleased with himself as well as his submissive.

Chapter Five

Ori took a slow step back, away from the huge window. He knew he'd already lingered in the attic room for far too long as it was. Raynard had given him permission to go down into the main part of the house, and he'd been under the hawk's protection more than long enough to know that permissions and orders were merely the two sides of the same coin.

He should have gone back to the library an hour or more ago, but somehow, he couldn't quite bring himself to leave the shadowy little attic space. His gaze went back to the sky. Every so often, he saw a brown dot that just might have been his master, circling high above the house.

Stretching his wings, the hawk called it. Ori took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. He knew what kind of mood "stretching his wings" put his master in. He'd be inclined to tease when he finally arrived back and sought out his submissive.

When he came storming into the room, Raynard would call him to sit at his feet and read to him. And with every word he said, Ori knew he'd only get more and more nervous, more and more desperate for the other man to want them to do more than merely sit. But his master would still make him wait until he was given permission to come closer, to set the book aside and find a better use for his mouth than reading aloud.

For a moment, Ori turned away from the window, but a second later, he looked helplessly back through it. It had been several lifetimes since his master had decided his fledgling didn't have permission to come via his own hand, and in that moment, Ori felt every second of that time pressing down on him.

Part of him was aware that it had probably been far less than a month since he'd come, but it was impossible for him to be certain.

He wasn't entirely sure what date he'd been brought to his master's house, what date he'd been given his collar, or even what day it was that day. Living with Raynard had a simple rhythm to it. Dates weren't important when everything was able to revolve seamlessly around his master leaving the house and coming home, when everything could be decided by what Raynard was doing and how Ori might best please his master at any given moment.

He smiled joyously into the evening air as his hand crept up to stroke his collar. It was a good way to live a life. Pulling himself away from the window, he finally forced himself to leave the room.

Down in the library, he'd barely picked up a book and lowered himself to his habitual place on the hearth rug when he heard a footfall on the stairs. As usual after his flight, his master hadn't bothered with inconvenient human things like clothes. Raynard strode into the room, as naked as Ori—maybe even more so, since no collar decorated his skin.

The younger man stared across at him, as mesmerized by the older man as ever.

“Good book, fledgling?”

Ori swallowed, but he couldn't even tear his eyes away from his master for long enough to glance at the title.

Raynard's usually immaculate hair was disordered, windblown and wild after his flight. But what caught Ori's attention was the look in his master's eye—something truly feral flashed there in a way it never had before.

Instead of moving to his favorite chair, Raynard flung himself carelessly on one end of the leather sofa set opposite the fire, all long limbs and perfect lines of muscle. “Answer your master's question,” he snapped.

The book...Ori managed to look down at it. “It's one I've read before, sir,” he stuttered out.

Raynard's eyes narrowed, his attention focused in on his submissive in the same way a true bird of prey might stare down at some small, furry animal scurrying around in the undergrowth—or perhaps at some scared little duckling, sitting vulnerable on the edge of the lakeside.

“Come here.”

Ori stood up.

“Leave the book.”

Crouching down, Ori set the volume carefully on the rug before stepping forward.

There was a cushion set on the floor by the side of his master's usual chair. No similar level of comfort existed next to the sofa. Ori lowered himself to the bare floorboards. His knees had barely touched the well-polished wood before Raynard spoke again.

“No, up here.”

Ori looked to his master. The hawk's expression was still unreadable. All Ori could do when his master was like that, was obey and hope his obedience pleased the other man in some small way. He sat on the edge of the sofa, not sure what to do with himself, not sure for what exact purpose the older man had suddenly invited him to share the same piece of furniture.

When Raynard's fingers slid into Ori's hair and pulled him forward, all the submissive's doubts vanished. As the other man guided his head down toward his lap, Ori licked his lips, ready to wrap them around his master's shaft.

The grip Raynard had on his hair wasn't painful, but it was firm. He was going wherever his master took him and suddenly Ori found his face turned toward his master's stomach rather than his cock.

Bent over in an awkward position, Ori hesitated, putting his hands out and trying to steady himself. He tried to look up at his master and gauge what the other man was trying to do with him, but the angle made it impossible to see Raynard's expression.

"Pull your feet up."

Ori clumsily obeyed until he found himself lying on the sofa, his head resting chastely against his master's body. Raynard took his hand out of Ori's hair. When the younger man would have moved, a sharp little tap on his backside stopped him short.

The duckling turned his head just far enough to be able to look up at his master.

Raynard stared back down at him. Lack of permission to move was the same as an order to stay still. Ori froze where he was, until his master looked away, freeing him to drop his gaze.

His mouth was barely an inch away from the older man's abs. He felt sure Raynard had to sense his every breath. As the hawk stroked his hand down Ori's back, he knew his master had to feel the tension in him.

"I asked you about your book."

Ori swallowed. "Yes, sir."

"Tell me about the part you read while your master stretched his wings," he demanded.

Ori closed his eyes. "I..."

Raynard's palm stroked back up his spine. His hand was strong, his touch unyielding. It seemed to creep under Ori's skin and possess parts of him that he'd never even known about until he came under the hawk's protection.

His fingers caressed their way down to Ori's arse again. No tap fell against his skin, but Ori tensed in expectation of one. Desire to feel his master's hand fall on his backside warred with the

need to have the other man pleased with him until he found he had no idea what he really wanted.

“I wasn’t reading, sir. I only stepped into the library a moment before you.” He looked up at the other man then, fearing the worse.

Raynard smiled his approval. “The phrase hawk-eye exists for a reason. Did you really think I wouldn’t spot you?”

Ori scraped up a shallow breath, forcing air into lungs that didn’t seem to remember how to work on their own initiative.

Raynard’s smile didn’t fade as he looked down his submissive’s body again. His hand stroked over the curve of Ori’s backside, back and forth, again and again, making his skin tingle, until he had to fight with himself in an effort not to arch his back and push his arse more firmly into the other man’s hand.

His master’s smile broadened, as if he knew what his teasing was doing to his fledgling, as if he liked knowing just how well he held him in the palm of his hand—not just physically, but mentally as well.

Raynard’s fingers slid between Ori’s thighs as he ran his hand down his leg, then back up to his arse. His fingertips brushed against Ori’s hole, pulling a gasp out of him.

The hawk chuckled, a warm rich sound Ori had hardly ever heard in all the time he’d spent with the other man. Heat rushed to his cheeks.

A moment later, the knuckles of Raynard’s other hand brushed across the heated skin.

“I’m right to call you a fledgling, aren’t I, Ori?”

The younger man dropped his gaze, not sure what would be the right answer. For a horrible moment, he thought his master was going to pull away from him, that he’d regret inviting him so close and send him away, thinking him too foolish and inexperienced to serve him.

Turning his head, Ori pressed a desperate kiss against his master’s skin. Raynard’s hand brushed against his hair in brief praise, before he turned his attention back to the rest of Ori’s body.

Cheeks still warm, Ori helplessly rubbed his face against his master’s skin, wriggling forward slightly as he tried to get even closer to him. As more of his bare skin rubbed against the hawk’s body, he seemed to be surrounded by the other man’s presence. The feel of his flesh, his

scent, everything about him called to Ori, wrapping around him, like a hundred different collars embracing every part of his skin, every part of his being.

And he needed to come so badly...

Ori was sure that shouldn't have been his main concern. Whatever his master desired was far more important than anything he wanted could ever be. He knew that in a way he'd never really understood anything else. He knew it in the same way he'd known he didn't really fit into any of the human families that had fostered him.

He hadn't belonged there—he belonged here, with his master. It was stupid to think about his own petty concerns when he was finally home, safe and under his master's protection. But he needed to come so badly...

A frustrated little whimper escaped from the back of his throat. Ori lifted a palm to cover his mouth, but Raynard's fist wrapped around his wrist before his hand was half way there.

Ori looked up at the older man, his eyes open very wide in sheer disappointment with himself. "I'm sorry, sir. I..."

Raynard replaced his hand back on the sofa, in precisely the same spot as it had rested before. Ori closed his eyes and concentrated on staying still but movements still crept through his control. The hawk's corrections were never anything harsher than simply rearranging him, putting him back where his master wanted him to be, but Ori still felt a shot of pain rush through him each time he needed to be adjusted, knowing he had let the other man down.

Those sounds he was unable to hold back were received rather differently. His master never made a single attempt to discourage them. If anything, he seemed to repeat those actions that caused Ori to moan and whimper all the more often.

The hawk played him like a virtuoso, coaxing out sounds that Ori would have never believed existed inside him. He squirmed under the other man's hands, feeling even more of his master's skin move against his body until he finally felt his cock brush against the hawk's flesh. His eyes snapped open. He looked at his master, and at the position he now lay in.

Without ever intending it, he'd somehow travelled further and further up the sofa with every minute of teasing his master had layered upon his skin. His torso was over his master's lap now, his arse tilted up—offered up to the other man to tease, to spank, to do with as he pleased.

Ori saw the amusement in the older man's eyes, saw the desire in them too, and he had no idea if he should retreat or not. Raynard had corrected any movement that displeased him—that

much he was sure of. Ori relaxed slightly as he realized what that really meant. He *couldn't* be where he was without his master's approval. He was exactly where he should be.

The hawk's hand stroked over his backside again, palming the firm muscle. His touch disappeared for a moment, before falling back against his skin. The spank was light, sending tingles and warmth through his skin rather than pain. Every tendril of heat rushed straight to his cock as Ori helplessly rocked his hips, shamelessly rubbing his erection against his master's leg.

The older man's hand fell again, still light, more of a tease than a real spank. Then again, no harder than before. Slowly, methodically, his hand covered every square inch of Ori's arse, coating the skin in heat and frustration.

Whimpering and squirming, Ori prayed for more. When Raynard's hand lifted from his backside and didn't immediately return, he held his breath waiting for the first real blow.

Raynard hand came down, but it was gentler than ever. His palm rested against his arse, as his fingertips tapped out an unfamiliar rhythm on the full, muscular curve, almost as if he was nothing more to the other man than a convenient place for Raynard to rest his hand while he was deep in thought.

But it didn't matter if that was all the touch represented, Ori whimpered again.

The tapping fingers moved down between his cheeks.

He squirmed and spread his legs in offering. Raynard's fingertips tapped against his hole, making him rock his hips even more frantically. His cock rubbed against his master's leg, sending wave after wave of pleasure crashing through him.

His master's fingers ceased their tapping and slid down further to cup his balls, palming them and pulling them away from his body as he examined them. Ori's grip on the edge of the sofa cushion turned white knuckled as he fought to stay still.

His cock nudged at his master's leg once more. He could feel Raynard's erection rubbing against his stomach as he wriggled across the other man's lap, but there was nothing he could do for his master right then.

Raynard's thumb pressed against his arse, massaging his hole and the sensitive strip of skin leading down toward his sac.

Whimpering again, Ori bit at his bottom lip as he scrabbled for control. It had been so long since he'd been allowed to come, since he'd started spending what felt like every hour of the day hard and aching under his master's gaze.

Doing whatever his master wanted and not coming without permission became impossible. He felt the pressure building inside him, doubling over and over until...

"Come, fledgling."

Ori had done whatever he was told to the very best of his ability, ever since the collar was placed around his neck. He didn't fail Raynard then. His back arched, pushing his arse against his master's hand as he came, cum spilling over the hawk's leg as he bucked across his lap, his grip biting into the edge of the sofa.

Raynard's fingers continued to manipulate his balls and his hole, drawing his orgasm out further and further, until Ori's frozen lungs felt like they would explode, like his heart might burst from the sheer force of pleasure pounding through his veins.

A sound escaped him as he shuddered against the other man's skin, even Ori wasn't sure if it was a cry or a scream, he just knew the room sounded impossibly quiet when the noise faded from the air and he collapsed in a broken heap over his master's lap.

Raynard's hand moved from between his legs and came to rest on his buttocks. He stroked the skin, back and forth, almost tenderly.

Ori fought for breath, control, thoughts, for anything at all. Not knowing what to say, not knowing if he had permission to move or if he was to remain exactly where he was until given leave to do otherwise, he simply lay there feeling more raw, more vulnerable, and more content than he'd ever believed possible.

When his master moved his hand off his arse, Ori tentatively took that as an order to rise. He pulled himself awkwardly away from his master's lap. He'd been turned half upside down for far too long.

The head rush almost toppled him. Unable to raise his eyes and risk meeting his master's gaze, his attention lingered on the other man's lap.

He'd come all over his master. Ori blinked at the evidence decorating the older man's legs. The hawk was still hard. Unsatisfied and cum-splattered, he had to regret ever bringing him to his home, let alone allowing him to wear his collar.

Barely holding back a mew of horror, Ori dipped his head, hoping to make amends in some small way.

Raynard's hand quickly slid into his hair and took a tight grip on the ruffled strands. For a moment, it felt as if his master would drag him away but as Ori's tongue rapidly lapped at the mess he'd made on the hawk's skin the other man's hold in his hair eased.

His master seemed to change his mind. Raynard's touch changed to one of acceptance, he even encouraged him to linger where he was and catch up each and every drop of stickiness with his tongue.

Working his way meticulously over his master's skin, Ori gave his task his full concentration, only glancing up when he'd completed it. A faint smile graced his master's lips, as if the larger man were pleased with him for some reason.

The last smudge neatly licked away, Ori tried to turn his attention toward his master's cock.

Before his lips could touch the other man's shaft, Raynard's attitude changed. His hand dropped down to Ori's collar. He tugged him away.

Ori kept his eyes down as he waited fearfully for the other man's verdict.

"I have other plans for you tonight."

His gaze snapped up to his master's face. Raynard's grip on his collar kept his head tilted partially down. Ori stared up at him through his lashes. The desire hadn't faded from the older man's eyes, if anything it burned brighter than ever.

Ori swallowed. "Yes, sir." The words were barely rasped out.

Raynard let go of his collar. He stood up, stepping past him and toward the door. "Come along, fledgling."

Scrambling off the sofa, Ori followed his master out of the library and up the main staircase. He walked along the same route several times a day. There were still rooms on the upper floor to be cleared of dustsheets and put in order, landings to be cleaned.

His master's bedroom wasn't uncharted territory. The bed needed to be made every morning, the en-suite tended to. Clothes had to be collected, then returned after they had been washed and ironed. He'd visited his master's bedroom almost every day since he'd first been brought into the house. Until that moment, he'd never been in the room at the same time as Raynard.

Ori found himself hesitating on the threshold, one foot still lingering on the hallway carpet.

Raynard glanced over his shoulder. A moment later, he turned to face his submissive, but no command left his lips. Ori had the distinct feeling he could stand waiting there forever, and no order would ever be issued to him.

If he wanted to step forward, he'd have to do it unaided. If he wanted to run away, he'd have to make that decision on his own too. The whole world seemed to hang in the balance, and he didn't even have his own physical need to help him along.

He lifted his eyes and met his master's gaze. If he went to his master's bed, it would be because he wanted to please the other man, not because he wanted, or expected to get any pleasure for himself. In that moment, he knew that the timing of the invitation was no accident, neither was his permission to come in the library.

Something settled inside Ori with the realizations. He stepped into the bedroom and closed the door softly behind him. Turning back to face the other man, he took up the post he'd been taught in the nest, standing neatly to one side of the door, out of the way and ready to obey when called upon.

"Come here."

Ori moved forward bare feet silent against the thick carpet. Raynard stood, perfectly still as he waited for Ori to reach both him and the bed.

Swallowing rapidly, the duckling stopped, less than a foot away from his master.

Raynard reached out to him, sliding his hand into Ori's hair, tilting his head back. The hawk's eyes had travelled over his naked skin hundreds of times before. Ori had never felt as naked as he did right then.

His master took half a step forward, bringing their bodies together. His erection brushed against Ori's skin, pulling a gasp from him. With his head still held tilted back, he found his gaze caught by the taller man's eyes. He couldn't look away.

"Please." The word left Ori's lips without his permission. He wasn't even sure what he was asking the other man for. Anything. Everything.

Raynard's lips covered his.

They'd only shared one kiss before, the brief little touch of lips that the hawk had offered him a life time ago. This was nothing like that chaste little salute.

The hawk took instant possession of Ori's mouth. There was no pretty request for Ori to invite his master in. Raynard's tongue thrust past his lips as if he already had all the permission he needed to do whatever he wanted with his lover, and he was no longer interested in pretending that wasn't the case.

His grip on Ori's hair tightened further, tugging his head back, demanding that he somehow make his body adapt to his masters demands, and adopt the position his lover asked of him.

In that moment, the only thing that was important, the only thing that really existed, was what his master wanted. Ori whimpered into the kiss as he felt the other man's dominance wrap around him more securely than ever.

As Raynard's body moved against his, teasing his senses and overpowering his mind, Ori's cock tried to rise to the occasion. It was too soon. The attempt produced more pain than pleasure, but even that rushed through his blood, feeding deeper instincts than Ori had ever been aware of possessing.

His hands scrabbled at Raynard's skin as he tried to hold onto his master and steady himself as he lost sight of all familiar landmarks. His brain refused to care that the hawk's touch felt different from any other man's. All it wanted to do was follow wherever the dominant led.

As Raynard's hands travelled over Ori's body, rough and demanding, it was impossible for him to fight the confusion that filled his mind. The hawk was all strength and certainty. Ori simply gave himself up to the other man's control and moaned his pleasure into the kiss.

When the hawk's lips left his, Raynard's grip on Ori's hair stayed strong. He pulled him forward, placing Ori's ear just an inch from his lips. "In future, when I return to the window, you'll be there waiting for me. You don't leave that room until I return. No excuses will be tolerated."

"Yes, sir," Ori managed to whisper. His grip on the older man's arms tightening as he tried to balance himself on his tiptoes.

Raynard's hand slid down his back and settled on his arse. The taps he'd laid against Ori's skin had already turned the skin into a mass of sensitized nerve endings. He squirmed against his master's touch, pushing his arse back against the other man's hand.

Raynard chuckled. "Do you like being played with that way, fledgling?"

Ori nodded.

"Speak up properly when your master asks you a question."

Ori glanced up and met the other man's eyes. "I guess the men in the nest were right, sir."

Raynard tensed.

Ori pushed on. "Ducks are pain sluts as well as the regular type of..." He managed a smile, but it quickly faded as Raynard failed to return it.

“You’re not at the nest any more. You belong to me, no one else.” He seemed to dare his submissive to try to disagree with his master on the point.

Ori managed to speak on his second attempt. “Yes, sir.”

Raynard’s fingers hooked into his collar, tugging at the leather as if he thought his lover needed to be reminded of its presence. “Whatever other men think is irrelevant.”

“Yes, sir,” Ori repeated quickly.

Raynard’s hand slid down Ori’s arm. His hand wrapped around his wrist. “Mine.”

The word was little more than a growled whisper. It still sent shockwaves through Ori’s spine, rushing to his cock, which remained rather less than ready to receive all the adrenaline that flooded through him.

Raynard stepped forward. There wasn’t anything Ori could do but retreat out of his way. The back of his knees hit the edge of his master’s bed. At the same moment, his master’s support disappeared. He toppled back onto the neatly made sheets, his hands slipping against them as he tried to steady himself.

The hawk stared down at him.

Ori pulled his feet up onto the bed and pushed himself back a little further onto the mattress, but he made no attempt to entice his master to join him. Any attempt at seduction would have been ludicrous. He belonged to the other man. Raynard either wanted him or he didn’t. All Ori could do was hope.

The older man set his knee on the bed between Ori’s feet. The duckling shuffled his legs further apart for his master.

Raynard leaned forward, his hands found Ori’s wrists and pinned them to the blanket on either side of his head as his body covered the submissive’s smaller frame.

His master’s cock rubbed against Ori’s shaft, teasing him with his lack of ability to respond as the other man’s weight held him down. The fledgling whimpered his pleasure, but as suddenly as he’d pushed him back onto the bed, Raynard pulled away from him.

They remained apart just long enough for his master to roll him over onto his stomach. Then Raynard’s knee pressed against the mattress between Ori’s legs once more. He spread himself as wide as he could as he sensed his master pull briefly away from him again.

When his master’s hands came back to him, his fingers were slicked. They immediately slid against Ori’s hole. For all the strength Ori felt in his master’s fingers, the first contact was almost gentle—a test, to see what his fledgling could take.

Ori pushed back against the digits, consciously relaxing his body so he'd be ready to accept the other man as soon as possible. The hawk seemed to sense his willingness. His fingers soon worked their way inside him, stretching him open, preparing him to take his master.

Fists bunching against the sheet beneath him, Ori did his best to trust the other man's judgment. His master would decide what happened between them, and he'd decide when he was ready. It wasn't Ori's place to scream at him that he'd been ready forever, any more than it would have been his place to complain if the other man wanted to rush him.

Ori's cheek slid against the blankets as he squirmed for his master. A whimper escaped. He closed his eyes and fought for control. Raynard's hands left him.

Opening his eyes, Ori looked over his shoulder, more than ready to apologize, to beg, to do whatever it took to get the other man back. Then Raynard's body moved over his. For just one second, their eyes met. Ori quickly dropped his gaze, suddenly afraid how much his expression might reveal.

The hawk's body slid against his, layer upon layer of muscle pinning him to the bed. The older man's hands caught his wrists once more, holding them down against the sheet too.

Ori murmured his pleasure as he turned his face in to the mattress and tried to silence himself as his forehead rubbed against the bed. His master's cock nudged against his hole and Ori froze in place, held as much by his own instincts as by his master's grip upon his limbs.

The larger man pushed steadily forward, slowly stretching the fledgling open as he slid into him. Ori gasped. His eyes fell closed. He'd taken the other man into his mouth often enough to know how large he was, but he still found himself biting at his bottom lip as the older man stilled inside him, seeming to fill him more completely than any man at the nest ever had.

With glacial speed, the painful stretch morphed into a pleasure-filled ache that only made him desperate to feel the other man move inside him. Still frozen in place, there was nothing he could do.

Raynard made the decision for him. Slowly pulling back, he thrust forward again. Trapped under the stronger man, Ori had no chance of gaining enough purchase on the mattress to move in a way that might compliment his master's rhythm. All he could do was take him.

Robbed of his ability to do anything but accept, every detail of what the other man offered him was magnified a hundred fold. He could feel the pleasure rushing through the hawk's body, sense the barely controlled strength in his every movement.

Adrenaline and endorphins rushed through Ori's veins. His brain scrambled to process everything, to memorize every detail.

Arching his back as much as he could, Ori gave up everything to his master. The hawk's breaths came faster, his heart raced almost as rapidly as Ori's. His shaft seemed to swell larger inside the younger man. Each thrust hit against his prostate, sending shockwaves to his cock and pre-cum leaking steadily onto the sheet below him as he finally started to stiffen.

Another thrust, harder now. His master's grip tightened around Ori's wrists until the duckling was sure there would still be marks left there when he woke the next morning. Raynard's body pressed him more harshly into the mattress.

A yell split the air as his master pounded into Ori with a series of sharp thrusts and spilled inside him. The room fell perfectly still then, perfectly silent—perfectly perfect.

Ori let his eyes drift closed, as he felt his master move away from him, just far enough to collapse back onto the sheet next to him. The whole world seemed to shimmer with a glorious rightness that the submissive had never known existed.

He had to get up soon, and go back down to the servants' quarters, the duckling knew that. But still...Just a few seconds, Ori thought to himself. He'd just rest for a few seconds...

* * * *

Ori blinked his eyes open. Sunlight streamed into the room. For a minute, he didn't fully register what that meant. The warmth from the morning rays caressed his skin as they fell across the bed. Arching his back, he felt the soreness in his muscles, and all his memories of the previous night come rushing back to the forefront of his mind.

His master's hands on his skin, Raynard's body pinning his down against the bed. He squirmed a little against the softness of the sheet as he remembered every single sensation and relished every moment that had locked itself into his memories.

Blinking open his eyes, he looked at his wrist. Just as he expected, there was a faint mark there, where his master had held him. He blinked again as he looked at the sheet his arm rested on. His were blue. This one was white. He opened his eyes wider. Details of the room he lay in flooded his mind. Tension poured into him.

He turned his head. His master lay stretched out on the other side of the bed, his eyes still closed, his face turned away from the sun's invasion of the room. He was glorious, more relaxed than Ori had ever seen him, his hair falling across his temple and his lips slightly parted.

Curse after curse scrolled through Ori's mind. Gritting his teeth, he tried to extract himself as silently as he could from the tangle of sheets. The mattress shifted underneath him. His master's eyes sprang open. No trace of sleepiness lingered in his gaze as he immediately fixed in on Ori.

"I'm sorry, sir."

The hawk raised an eyebrow.

"It won't happen again..." Ori offered.

Raynard frowned, obviously far from impressed.

Ori let out a few more mental curses.

"What are you talking about?"

"I know I shouldn't have fallen asleep here, sir." He wasn't sure if admitting that he was well aware of that fact would make him better or worse in the eyes of the dominant, but he couldn't have lied either way—not to his master.

Raynard's expression remained blank for a moment. Then a slight smile touched his lips before disappearing again. "You were asleep long before me, if I had a problem with you being here, I'd have woken you up and ordered you back to your room."

Ori met his master's eyes.

Even without a smile to soften his expression, the hawk looked more than a little amused now. "As and when I chose to bring you to my bed, you may assume you have permission to stay here until I tell you otherwise."

Ori hesitated for a moment, before shyly smiling his understanding.

Raynard ruffled his fingers through his hair, in that teasing way Ori was quickly falling in love with. "Go on."

"Yes, sir." Ori slipped from the bed and made his way down the stairs, but even as he reached the kitchens, he wasn't quite able to wipe the glowing smile off his face.

As and when...the words swirled around and around inside his head. He was going to be invited back to his master's bed again. Even another broken saucer having to be added to the increasingly long list of casualties to his clumsiness couldn't dent his joy that day or for several days after it.

Chapter Six

Raynard's duckling hadn't found himself a task that required him to lurk in the hallway so he could greet his master the moment he walked through the front door the way he so often had over the previous weeks.

The hawk was reasonably sure that realization in itself shouldn't have been enough to make him smile silently to himself, especially after he'd spent a long day filled with more badly organized paperwork than should ever be allowed to exist in the world. If his uncle hadn't already died a very natural, peaceful death at a ripe old age, his nephew would have been quite inclined to think up some cruel and unusual way to kill off the cantankerous old sod himself—if only because he harbored a vague hope that the murderer didn't usually get left clearing up the victim's bloody paperwork.

Leaving his briefcase and coat in the hallway, he went to investigate what task his fledgling had become so engrossed in, that he'd failed to notice the hours pass.

The library was the obvious place to start. The duckling's pet project, cataloguing all the books in there, seemed to be coming along well. When Raynard silently pushed open the door, he fully expected to see Ori's head buried in some ancient volume he'd unearthed from one of the crammed shelves. The room lay deserted. The fire wasn't even lit.

The study proved to be equally cold and empty.

Raynard stopped in the middle of the hallway, wondering if his next course of action should be to go up the stairs to those rooms that still harbored dustsheets or down to the servants' quarters.

The bell pull called to him. Ori would come quickly to his master's side when summoned. But then he'd miss the startled look and all the blushing that would no doubt ensue when he caught him doing whatever it was that he'd become so distracted by. A door on the other side of the hallway led, if Raynard remembered correctly, to a formal dining room that hadn't yet received the duckling's attention. The door was slightly ajar.

Raynard strode across the hall. The last time he'd set foot in the room it had still been shrouded in dustsheets, but he fully expected to see it transformed by a day's hard work on his submissive's behalf.

The yards of moth-eaten fabric would be gone, the dust cleared away. The furniture would be shining, the scent of furniture polish hanging in the air and Ori would be standing in the middle of it all, dirt clinging to his skin, his body exhausted, but his eyes shining with achievement.

He 'd seen the younger man look that way so many times, only a tiny bit of skin hidden by his collar as he looked toward his master, hoping for his approval.

Raynard pushed the door leading into the dining room. It swung open on beautifully well oiled hinges.

Blood.

The scent of it hit Raynard, even before the scene in front of him registered in his mind. He stopped short, his breath catching in his throat. A mahogany table filled the center of the room. A matching cabinet stood beyond it, set between the windows on the opposite side of the room.

The cabinet doors hung open. The glass in one was cracked, the floor at the cabinet's base was hidden from the hawk's line of sight by the over sized table.

Raynard's hand convulsed around the door handle. He couldn't release it, couldn't take a step forward. His whole body remained locked in place as eons passed and horrors rushed through his imagination. Finally his lungs kicked into action. His hand released the door handle. He stepped forward, around the table.

Shards of glass led his eye to a broken footstool. A chair lay toppled next to it. Then blood. So much blood, pooling on the expensive carpet, so dark it looked almost black. As Raynard stared at it, the blood became his only solid point of reference in the world.

Finally, he managed to step forward again. With glacial speed, that part of the floor still blocked from his view by the table, came into sight. The side of the blood pool was smeared, but there was no broken body laying at the edge of it, still bleeding—or worse, no longer able to bleed.

Ori was gone.

Raynard stepped back toward the door. A drop of blood on the richly patterned carpet caught his eye, leading away from the pool. Raynard spun around. His eyes scanned the carpet.

Another drop of blood. Another. He raced out of the room. A drop of deep red led toward a smudge of blood on the door leading down to the kitchens. Raynard raced down the stairs, almost tripping in the darkness, too frantic to think of the light, until the door at the top of the stairs swung closed behind him.

The bright sunlight flooding into the kitchen dazzled him. He lifted a hand to shield his eyes.

More blood. That was the first thing he saw as he turned toward the kitchen table. More blood.

Raynard focused on pushing the sickening scent out of his head, demanding that his brain work. A bowl of bloodstained water rested on top of the pine boards. Lengths of bandage littered the well scrubbed surface, some stained with red, others still pristine.

A sound on the other side of the room pulled Raynard's attention away from the carnage before him.

Ori stepped into the kitchen, from the corridor leading toward his bedroom. He obviously hadn't heard a manic race down the stairs. He stopped short when he saw Raynard.

"What the hell did you do?"

The fledgling's eyes opened very wide, but Raynard couldn't have kept the words less angry if his life had depended on it.

"I'm sorry, sir," Ori whispered. "I'm on my way to clean it up now."

The younger man was deathly pale as he hurried forward. When he reached out to pick up the bowl of blood stained water, his hands were shaking.

Raynard caught Ori's shoulder and pushed him roughly toward one of the kitchen chairs before he collapsed all over his nicely mopped floor. One of the submissive's arms was heavily bandaged. Raynard couldn't take his eyes off the lengths of white material binding the limb, couldn't force the image of glass cutting into the duckling's skin out of his head.

He could have been killed.

For a long time, silence reigned over the room. Finally Raynard dragged his gaze to the younger man's face.

"What happened?" Even to his own ears, he sounded completely calm—in the way a man only could manage if he'd gone straight through panic and emerged through the other side.

"I was cleaning the cabinet in the dining room. I slipped and..."

Raynard's mind flashed back to the view in the upstairs room. He'd been standing on top of the stool, which had been balanced on top of the chair, and he probably still hadn't been tall enough to reach the top of the ancient monstrosity easily. He'd have had to have gone up on his toes, leaning and stretching to reach the corners of the cabinet.

"What possessed you to be so...?" Raynard shook his head as he spun away from the younger man and paced toward the other side of the room.

He could have been killed.

As he reached the wall, the hawk swung back around to face the submissive. The bandage on his arm extended all the way down to his wrist. How close had the shards of glass come to his veins? How close had he come to bleeding out before he'd managed to stem the flow? Questions ricocheted around Raynard's head. For the first time he could remember, true terror swirled inside him at what could have happened, at the scene he could have walked in on when he came home.

His gaze snapped up. He met Ori's eyes.

He could have lost him. Raynard had never known fear like it.

"I..." The younger man's words faded away. He dropped his gaze. "I'll clean up the mess, sir."

"And you think that will fix everything?" Raynard demanded, striving to keep the volume down, but unable to make the words gentle.

Ori stared mutely at the table.

"Your behavior today has been entirely unacceptable," the hawk threw at the younger man. "Clearing away the evidence will change nothing."

Ori's gaze seemed to drop even lower, until it was impossible to tell if the younger man's eyes were open or closed.

The hawk parted his lips to make his views on the risks the submissive had taken completely clear. The harsh clang of a bell rang through the air.

Ori's attention immediately went to the line of bells displayed next to the door leading back up to the main house. Raynard followed his gaze to the label indicating that particular summons came from the front door.

The fledgling rose unsteadily to his feet and stepped forward.

"Stay where you are." The words cracked like a whip, echoing off every hard surface in the kitchen.

The submissive fell still.

Raynard looked to the bandaged arm, trying to push his anger aside to deal with the most pressing matters first. "The bleeding has stopped?"

"Yes, sir."

"Completely?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir."

The hawk nodded as he tried to force his mind back into some sort of working order. The doorbell rang again. He saw his submissive tense as he barely resisted the urge to fulfill his duties.

"Go to your room."

For the first time Raynard could remember, the younger man hesitated to follow his master's command. The moment was brief, but after so much instant obedience, it was a vivid and unmistakable deviation from normality. Another moment passed, when Ori did nothing but stare at the floor in front of his master's feet.

"Yes, sir." He turned away and retraced the steps into his bedroom, his bare feet moving rapidly across the tiles as he scurried for cover.

Raynard stood in the kitchen for several long seconds, until the doorbell rang out for a third time and snapped him out of his thoughts. Making his way upstairs, he answered the door and signed for the parcel the post man was still stubbornly trying to deliver to him.

Back in his office, Raynard tossed the package onto his desk, and sank down into his chair. Resting his elbows on the table, he let his head fall forward into his hands as he took a deep breath and let it out very slowly.

What had happened that day, couldn't be changed. But it was never going to happen again. He could see to that. Raynard straightened his back. Several more deep breaths and some semblance of thought indicated the best way for him to ensure that.

The idea of going down to the kitchens and seeing the younger man's blood turned his stomach. Far better to call his fledgling to his master's side and deal with the situation with what calm he'd been able to muster in those few quiet moments, than to go through the kitchen and feel the anger pour back into his veins, hot and more uncontrollable than he'd ever believed possible.

He tugged the bell pull hanging down the wall behind his desk, knowing the sound would echo through to the butler's room. It didn't take the submissive long to respond to the new summons. A gentle tap fell on the study door.

“Enter.”

Ori pushed open the door, and slipped through the gap he'd created. Raynard directed him to stand before the desk with a glance.

He hadn't thought it possible for Ori to become any paler than he had been downstairs. The younger man looked terrified. Raynard couldn't bring himself to believe that was entirely inappropriate.

The scene he'd arrived home to was never going to be repeated. He wanted that knowledge to have an important place inside the submissive's mind. If he ever thought of doing something so reckless again, he wanted him to remember how he felt standing in front of his master that day, and he wanted him to think better of it.

For the first time in what felt like years, the submissive wasn't even vaguely hard in his presence. Pushing aside his desire to run his hands all over the submissive's body and ensure that he was truly fine, Raynard forced himself to remain in his seat and be content with merely scanning his eyes over the younger man's body in as thorough a visual inspection as possible.

“Do you have any questions?” he bit out, making no attempt to gentle his voice.

Ori's Adam's apple bobbed as he seemed to struggle to get his words past his emotions.

Raynard waited.

“May I know if I'm permitted to return to the nest, sir?”

For a moment, Raynard thought he'd misheard the whispered words—or maybe he simply *wanted* to believe that he'd misheard them. Finally he had to admit, to himself at least, the syllables were what they were.

He was probably still in shock. It was silly to think that he'd stand firm in the face of his master's anger after everything his mind had gone through that day. Raynard still couldn't help but be just a little disappointed with the realization his fledgling would turn tail and walk away from his master so easily.

“Is there an explanation to go with that request?” he asked, his voice still somehow remaining level.

Ori swallowed again. His hands clenched into fists at his sides. The bandage shifted around his left arm with the motion, but no red seeped through. He hadn't opened the wound with his fidgeting.

“I...” Ori closed his eyes briefly, before trying again. “I only overheard part of your conversation with Mr. Hamilton, sir. I’m not sure if being found unacceptable to serve you, means that I might still be considered an acceptable servant at the nest.”

He thought he was being dismissed.

As Raynard stared across the desk at him, there wasn’t room for another thought inside his head. Ori thought he was being dismissed.

He wasn’t running away, he was...Raynard’s eyes narrowed as he studied the younger man’s expression more carefully. He was...holding himself together by the skin of his teeth, fighting against his instincts and somehow forcing himself to accept his master’s desertion of him.

“Upon what grounds do you think you’re being dismissed?” The words were even harsher than all those that had gone before.

Ori frowned slightly. His whole body trembled as he took a shaky breath. “The cabinet, sir. I know it’s not the...I...”

Raynard stared, speechless, at the younger man. It obviously didn’t occur to him that he could be worried about the damage to something far more important to him than any bit of furniture.

Some of the hawk’s anger slowly drained away—or at least found a new direction. If that’s what the fledgling believed, it was because that’s what he’d been taught to believe. Ori couldn’t be blamed for that.

Raynard turned his chair to the side. “Come here.”

From the look on Ori’s face, anyone would have thought he’d asked his submissive to crawl over broken glass to reach him. Yet he still obeyed the command. He walked very slowly around to stand before his master.

At any other time, Raynard had no doubt that the younger man would have immediately dropped to his knees, the way he always did when his master called him to that side of the desk. Right then, he didn’t. Raynard had to look pointedly at the floor by his feet before the submissive finally lowered himself.

The moment his knees hit the floor, Ori’s hand went to his collar. He turned it around so the buckle faced Raynard as if the final service he could offer his master would be to help the hawk take back the mark he’d given him.

Raynard reached out and tucked his knuckle under the younger man's chin as he realized exactly why his submissive had struggled to circle the desk. "Is that really what you've been taught to expect from me?"

Ori frowned as if he didn't understand the question. "I know you've been very tolerant of my clumsiness, sir. I can't blame you for finally losing patience and—"

Raynard covered the younger man's lips with his palm. "That's enough." He caught hold of the tag on Ori's collar. "When I gave you this what did I tell you it meant?" He took away his hand so the submissive could answer.

"That I belonged to you, sir."

"You're still wearing it. Correct your tenses," Raynard snapped.

The collar moved around the submissive's throat as Ori swallowed. "That I *belong* to you, sir."

"And do you think a good master would disown a man on a whim?"

Ori shook his head.

"Do you really think I'd disown you over an accident?"

"You said..." Ori frowned and looked away from him as if the memory of the words was too painful for him to echo.

"That your behavior today was unacceptable," Raynard finished for him, refusing to flinch away from the statement. "It was. That doesn't mean you'll be disowned—it means the behavior will be corrected."

Ori looked up at him then. Raynard watched as the younger man's expression turned from uncertainty, to hope, to relief. He nodded, a jerky little motion that promised acceptance of anything and everything that might entail.

"What do you think that means?" Raynard checked, not about to take anything for granted between them, right then.

"A punishment, sir."

Raynard leaned back in his chair, taking his touch away from the submissive for a little while. Ori didn't falter without his master's hand under his chin to steady him. The strength seemed to have poured back into him with the simple knowledge that his collar wasn't under threat.

"You've been punished before?"

Ori nodded again, a far more certain gesture now.

“At the nest?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How?”

Ori looked down for a moment, then back up to him. “The whip, sir.”

“Anything else?”

“Sometimes they spoke about extra duties as a punishment, sir.”

“You disagreed?”

“I was there to work, sir,” Ori said, an uncertain frown lurking around his eyes.

And they both knew he wasn’t afraid of hard work. “Anything else,” Raynard prompted.

Ori seemed to think carefully about the subject. “It wasn’t always a whip, sir. Sometimes a crop or a paddle.”

“But always a physical punishment?” Raynard pushed.

Ori nodded. “Yes, sir.” As if he had no idea there could be any other sort.

Raynard knew then what had to happen next. It was time his submissive learned exactly how different a punishment could be when delivered by an avian who truly understood what dominance and submission meant.

Taking a thick pad of lined paper out of his desk draw, he set it on the desk top. Pen in hand, he stared at the blank page for a moment.

He could feel Ori’s eyes on him, feel the confusion pouring off him as he tried to work out what was going on. The fledgling still had so much to learn about the difference between serving at the nest and serving one man—between being a servant and a submissive.

Raynard tapped the end of his pen against the desk. No doubt his master had a lot to learn, too—about how to keep a submissive whom he had no intention of ever releasing from his protection—a man he cared about as well as one he owned.

It only took him a few seconds to scrawl the words across the top of the page once he’d decided what they were to be. Turning in his seat, he handed the paper to the submissive.

“One thousand.”

Ori took the pad from him. His right hand appeared uninjured by his fall. Raynard offered him the pen. He took that as well.

“Lines...?”

Raynard didn’t bother to agree with a statement of the obvious. Ori looked from the paper to him and back again.

“I..”

Their eyes met. Raynard raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, sir.” Ori just sounded more confused than ever. He was silent for a few seconds.

“You may use that table.” Raynard pointed to the other side of the study.

“Yes, sir.” Ori continued to kneel there, staring at the papers in his hand.

“Start now.”

“Yes, sir.” He still didn’t move. A full minute passed before he rose to his feet. He took a few steps away before turning back to his master. “Just this, sir?”

“Just that,” Raynard agreed, somehow still managing to sound damn near calm.

“Yes, sir.”

Ori walked across and sat down at the table on the other side of the room. Raynard looked back to his own desk. There seemed very little for him to do but get on with some of his own work, there was certainly enough of it crammed into his briefcase. He automatically reached for it.

The briefcase wasn’t placed neatly at the side of his desk. For a few seconds, Raynard stared at the empty patch of floor, with just as much confusion as Ori had stared at his stack of lined paper.

Of course, his briefcase would be where he left it in the hallway. Shaking his head at himself, Raynard went to fetch it.

Ori looked up as he walked past, but he didn’t speak. When he saw Raynard carry the briefcase back into the room, he bowed his head guiltily over his work, as if there had been some time between his master coming in and that moment when he should have found time to retrieve it in for him.

Settling himself at his desk, Raynard calmly worked his way through the first file—mostly. There were just a couple of occasions when he found his attention wandering across to the big mahogany table on the other side of the room.

If Ori found his presence as distracting as he found the fledgling’s, Raynard never caught him at it. Whenever his gaze strayed toward the younger man, the duckling’s head was bowed industriously over his work, his hand making steady progress across, and gradually down, the page.

The submissive’s injured arm was absentmindedly cradled to his chest as he wrote. He was still pale, his skin barely distinguishable from the bandage, but Raynard doubted he’d remain

that way for long. After the tumble he'd taken, he'd probably be black, blue, and lots of other interesting colors by the next morning.

He could have been killed.

Raynard swallowed down the bitter taste the thought left in the back of his throat.

He could have been killed.

The hawk mentally rolled his eyes at himself. The younger man was right there and he was fine. He'd been kept right there making a start on his punishment, when it would have been far more logical for him to finish clearing up after the accident, principally because it allowed Raynard to keep him safe and within sight while he gave his own panic time to fade a little.

Ori was fine.

Except, he could have been killed.

Pushing his first file into one of the trays on his desk, Raynard reached for his mobile phone. The younger man had obviously had a very eventful day. There were certain routine duties that hadn't been performed as a result. It was lucky then, that his master still remembered all the take away numbers that had been his very good friends before the duckling joined him.

Order placed, Raynard looked across the room. Ori's head was still bowed over the papers, but his hand wasn't making any further progress. The hawk watched him for a few moments, but he remained frozen in place.

"Do you have something to say, Ori?"

The younger man licked his lips before he attempted to speak. "Shall I get dressed so I'll be ready to answer the door, sir?"

"No." The idea of the younger man's body being covered up, of him not being able to see with his own eyes that there weren't any truly serious injuries on the fledgling, sent a chill down Raynard's spine and lent a snap to the word.

Ori made no comment as he resumed his lines.

The door bell rang some twenty minutes later. Raynard left the room. When he came back, take away bag in hand, Ori glanced up at him.

"Shall I fetch...?" Ori trailed off. His eyes dropped closed as if he couldn't force himself to go on.

Stopping next to the table, Raynard held his hand out.

Ori looked down at the lines he'd already written out. The first page was full, as was a second. A third page had just been started. "I haven't finished the thousand, sir."

“Hardly surprising in this length of time.” Raynard continued to hold out his hand.

Ori eventually surrendered the lines to him.

“Fetch a tray from the kitchen.”

Relief poured off the duckling. He scurried from the room as if afraid his master might change his mind. Raynard set the bag down on the coffee table and took a seat on the little sofa that occupied one corner of the room. He’d barely had time to set the take away cartons on the table before Ori was back.

Either his arm wasn’t hurting him, or he was used to working through pain. Whichever it was, being allowed to provide his master with some kind of service, seemed to have settled his nerves a bit.

The tray he delivered was set for one. Raynard watched Ori lay everything neatly on the coffee table before him, curious to see what the younger man might do next. The last item set in place, Ori rose to his feet. He looked to the table where he’d been writing out his lines.

Raynard dropped a cushion where the duckling had knelt on the bare floor a moment before. Ori hesitated, but lowered himself without actually needing a verbal command.

Even then, he honestly didn’t think he was going to be fed. Raynard could see it in his eyes.

Opening one of the boxes, Raynard fed himself a forkful of food. Ori made no comment. The fork dove into the box again. Raynard held it just in front of Ori’s lips.

The younger man looked back to the table he’d worked at. “I haven’t finished, sir.”

“The lines will keep you busy for several days. I don’t intend you to starve in the mean time.” He nudged the fork against Ori’s lips.

The submissive took the food from his master’s fork. A blush rose to his cheeks as he stared at the things he’d brought up from the kitchens and seemed to realize he’d miscalculated.

“Shall I—?”

“Stay where you are.”

Raynard offered him another forkful. There was something curiously pleasing about watching the submissive practically eat out of his hand. The next mouthful of food was picked up with his bare fingers. That made an even more pleasing picture, and Ori blushing over it was hardly going to put him off—especially when it suited the younger man so well.

The color didn’t fade from his cheeks as the meal continued. Not when Raynard held his glass up to his lips for him to share his drink, or when he offered him his desert, every mouthful

of it lapped from his master's hand. It made him look wonderfully healthy and alive. And how much of the younger man's embarrassment was down to the fact his master was feeding him by hand, and how much was due to the fact he was getting turned on by his master feeding him that way, was debatable anyway. As naked as he was, there was little Ori could do to hide his reactions as his cock hardened and rose for his master.

Raynard had always had a vague awareness that Ori would probably like being fussed over a little, it had never occurred to him that he'd like it in that way too. He hadn't realized that he'd find it so pleasant a way to pass the time either.

As the food disappeared from the coffee table, Raynard felt himself relax. Ori was fine. If he was in danger of anything at all, it was spontaneous submissive combustion due to his master's teasing.

Reaching out to him, for once with no food on his fingertips, Raynard stroked his thumb across the heated cheek. Ori's eyes dropped closed as he seemed to glory in his master's brief caress.

It was late. His submissive was in no condition to be taken to his master's bed. Still, when Raynard rose to his feet he couldn't bring himself to send the other man back to the servants' quarters.

He wasn't a servant, he was a submissive, and a submissive slept wherever the hell his master wanted him to. He had every right to take the boy up to his room.

"Follow your master."

Ori, hands already extended toward the empty take away cartons, stopped what he was doing and rose to his feet. He followed Raynard out of the study and up the stairs without a word. Within a minute, they both stood in his room.

Tentative pleasure shone in the younger man's eyes, screaming his relief at his master wanting him there. Raynard looked across the room. As much as part of him would have loved to push Ori down on the bed and bury himself inside the younger man's body, to prove to the whole world beyond any doubt that his fledgling was fine, to feel the life pounding through the duckling as his master's larger frame covered his, he held back.

Ori's rib cage rose and fell as he took a deep breath. He could easily have cracked a few of those bones as he fell.

Ducks were said to be hardy creatures, but the hawk didn't have enough experience with them to know if the marks would show quickly on his skin if damage did indeed lie beneath it.

Raynard stepped forward. Ori smiled cautiously up at him. The hawk reached out to his cheek first, just as he had in the study. The same delight at his master's touch spread across his face.

Keeping his contact careful, Raynard began to explore the rest of his lover's body, looking for hidden wounds as he gloried in the health and vitality that pulsed through the smaller man's veins.

The submissive stood very still, a touch of confusion creeping into his eyes as he registered that he wasn't getting the kind of caress he expected from his master when invited to his bedroom.

Raynard ignored that. The inspection was too important. Gradually, his hands mapped out every inch of the other man. No complaint was made, but Raynard had a good enough read on his submissive to notice the tension that crept into Ori's muscles as his master's hands passed across his body.

There were more than a few shallow scratches that had already stopped bleeding. By the end of the examination, Raynard also had a good idea where the bruises would be by morning.

The only place he hadn't examined was the forearm beneath the bandage. No blood seeped through the crisp white fabric. Raynard was loath to unwind the material for no reason. He ran his fingers lightly over it. "Painful?" he asked.

Ori shook his head.

"The truth," Raynard demanded.

"At first, sir. It's not so bad now."

Raynard continued to glare at the binding. "If the pain gets worse, you're to tell your master immediately—the same if it starts bleeding again."

"Yes, sir."

The hawk tucked his knuckles under the younger man's chin and made him meet his master's eyes for several long seconds so he could see how important the matter was to him. "I'm serious, Ori."

The fledgling's jaw shifted under Raynard's touch as he swallowed. "Yes, sir."

Raynard made him hold his eyes for a few seconds longer, before he was finally satisfied with what the younger man understood.

"Into bed."

Ori turned away from him. He didn't seem to know quite what to do with himself. By the time Raynard had tossed aside his clothes and was ready to slide between the sheets next to him, Ori was still sitting on top of the blankets, apparently waiting for further instruction.

Raynard tugged back the covers as far as they could go while Ori sat there. The duckling shuffled around until they were freed from beneath him. Raynard tossed the blanket back over him.

Ori frowned slightly as he stared across at his master. There was little point in Raynard pretending that all he wanted to do was sleep. If there had been fewer injuries hidden just beneath the submissive's skin, there would be no question of what they would do next, he couldn't be the only man in the room who knew that.

As things stood, the hawk merely lay under the blankets on the other side of the bed and tried to push his pillow into some position that might allow him to sleep. Switching off the light, he stared up into the darkness.

For a long time the room was silent enough that Raynard was almost willing to swear he could hear the wheels turning around in the smaller man's head.

"Speak," he ordered, when the tension in the room built up to a level he wasn't willing to tolerate.

"If you've changed your mind, sir..." Ori whispered.

"You sleep where your master wants you to sleep," Raynard said leaving no room for argument in his tone.

Silence seeped back into the room. Then, finally—"Yes, sir." He sounded thoroughly obedient, but as Raynard lay listening to the younger man's breathing, it was obvious the boy wasn't making the least attempt to sleep.

Reaching across the bed, Raynard caught the younger man around the waist and pulled him along the sheet until he was curled in front of him, while his master spooned behind him.

Every muscle in the fledgling's body tensed, yet it only took him a second to shift his posture, to move his body and offer it up for his master to take whatever he wanted from him.

"Sleep," Raynard reminded—himself just as much as Ori.

"I..." Ori hesitated. "Yes, sir."

Knowing he was curled up safe in his master's arms seemed to reassure the younger man that he truly was welcome in his bed that night. If the knowledge didn't sink into his mind, it at

least registered with his body. Within a few minutes, the heat from his master's larger frame wrapped around his seemed to have soothed the younger man into a deep, contented slumber.

Moving carefully, so as not to wake Ori, Raynard rested his temple on the back of the younger man's head. That was right. Their positions were solely for the fledgling's benefit, so Ori would be able to sleep knowing he was safe.

Ori was safe. Raynard repeated that fact just one more time inside his head, and it was impossible to believe that anything was entirely for the submissive's benefit right then. He'd just take one night to reassure himself his lover was fine, and that would be the end of it, Raynard told himself firmly. Tomorrow everything would be back to normal, and Ori would mean no more to him than any of the other avians who'd submitted to him in the past.

Raynard almost believed everything he told himself too. Almost.

Chapter Seven

“Busy day?”

Ori spun around to face Raynard. The hawk was home early. All his plans for everything being perfect and ready for him were ruined, but he still couldn't help but be pleased to see his master. The house was different when he was home. The world a very different—a much better—place.

Raynard walked slowly across the kitchen toward him. “Don't you have anything to say?”

“Hello, sir,” Ori offered.

“I asked if you've had a busy day,” the older man reminded him as he moved past and around him.

“I couldn't find the lines, sir,” Ori blurted out. And he'd wanted so badly to have them finished for the other man when he came home.

“I locked them in my desk drawer.”

Not sure what to say, Ori studied the kitchen floor just in front of his feet.

“Punishments are always supervised—you don't work on them unless I'm here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Raynard was standing right behind him by that point. His hand settled on Ori's waist, his thumb stroking back and forth over his skin. Ori closed his eyes.

His master had already thoroughly inspected all the bruises that had blossomed over night. It had been a tortuously teasing process that had left Ori with an erection that had lingered long after his master had left the house that morning.

“Were you good while I was gone?”

Ori nodded. Raynard leaned forward and pressed his body against Ori's back. He couldn't repress a whimper as the other man moved against him.

His master had provided him with a long and detailed description of what being good entailed on that particular day. It principally involved not clambering about on unsteady bits of furniture, and resting if his injuries made his chores too painful to complete.

“Yes, sir.” He’d been good.

“Did you rest?”

“I...I didn’t need to, sir.” His voice faltered as his master’s hand wrapped around his cock. It was, much to Ori’s relief, one of those rare parts of his body that didn’t bear any marks from his fall. There was no need for his master to let his fingers play there unless it was for the pure joy of seeing his submissive squirm while he teased.

“You’ve been cooking.”

“Yes, sir,” Ori barely managed a whisper.

“What?”

“Sir?”

“What have you been cooking?” Raynard clarified, more than a little amusement creeping into his voice as he rubbed his thumb back and forth over the tip of Ori’s cock, smearing the precum that leaked from the slit all over the head.

“I...” He couldn’t make his mind work. Food. He’d been making something. He knew that. After failing to prepare anything the previous day and his master having to order take away when he might not have wanted to, he’d been determined not to fail at the same task twice in a row. There was food on the stove. He just couldn’t remember what the hell it was.

Raynard chuckled as he turned Ori around. His lips brushed against Ori’s very gently, just as much a tease as his fingers were against his skin.

The fledgling’s eyes dropped closed as he savored his master’s acceptance until Raynard finally stepped away from him, leaving his submissive standing alone by the kitchen table, not entirely steady on his feet.

The hawk turned and made his way out of the room. At the door leading back up to the main part of the house, he looked over his shoulder. “Ori?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Spaghetti.”

Ori blinked at him.

“Dinner tonight—it’s spaghetti.” He tilted his head toward the pans on the stove. Ori followed his gaze. The scent of the sauce made its way back into his senses. Spaghetti. That was right. He heard Raynard chuckle as he made his way out of the kitchens.

Ori remembered how to breathe. Shaking his head at himself, he turned his attention back to his duties, but his mind didn’t seem to be willing to come back under his control.

His master had been angry with him. He remembered the feeling well. Raynard had been furious with him. And he'd also fussed over him, and let him sleep upstairs in his bed for no reason at all and...Ori shook his head again. Replaying it all over and over inside his mind wasn't making his head work, it was just starving his brain of blood supply as it all rushed to his cock, instead.

His master was pleased with him now. He even seemed to have gone out of his way to tell him so. Lifting his hand to his collar, Ori just reminded himself, one more time, of the things that were really important. He belonged to his master, and Raynard wasn't going to send him away. Everything else could be worried about later—or maybe never at all.

He didn't let any doubts creep back into his head until the last of the dinner things were put neatly away, the kitchen cleaned and he was free to go in search of his master once more.

Slipping into the library, he found Raynard already there, sitting in his usual chair by the fireside. Ori was half way across the room, heading for the cushion by his master's feet when the hawk looked up at him.

Raynard directed his gaze to the table on the other side of the room. The pad of paper Ori had started to write his lines upon, rested on the polished mahogany surface, next to a pen.

The duckling looked back to his master. Their dinner had passed very nicely, almost companionably, while Raynard patiently tried to explain to him exactly why it was so important to keep proper business records and just how much of a fool his uncle had been.

There was no hint of the man who'd sat opposite him at the kitchen table now. It was as if the simple act of taking the pen and paper from his desk draw had reminded him just how angry he had every right to be with his submissive.

Not knowing what else to do, Ori retreated to the table and sat on the chair where the paper had been laid out for him.

The lines weren't a problem, they weren't even a real punishment. There was no harm they could do him, except give him a slightly sore wrist. Part of him understood that.

Being banished from his master's side, that was a different matter. Ori hadn't really realized how much he loved that quiet part of the evening when he was allowed to simply sit with his master and feel the other man's presence and approval wrap around him after a hard day's work.

He stared down at the lined paper for several long seconds before he could bring himself to pick up the pen. Raynard had said it would take him days to finish the lines. If the only time

he'd be permitted to work on them was during that part of the evening, he was right. Ori could easily believe it would be weeks before he was allowed to crawl back to his master, before he could even know if he would truly be welcomed back there at the end of it all.

Finally, he set the pen to the paper and set about copying the same words out again and again. The ink slowly filled the page. Forming each letter as neatly as he was able, Ori concentrated all his energy on completing the task to the best of his ability in spite of the way his hand wanted to shake and tremble.

His other arm burned beneath its bandage. Scrapes and bruises that hadn't bothered him through the day started to complain loudly. It was as if his master's disapproval made them worse than they could ever be while the other man was pleased with him. With every moment that passed, more and more pain rushed into him until he was lightheaded with it.

"That's enough."

Ori jumped as his master's words cut through the silence of the room. He had no idea how long he'd worked away at the lines. A few of the blank pages were now full, but he wasn't anywhere near the total that had been prescribed.

He stared across at his master as Raynard rose from his chair. Taking the pen and the paper from Ori, he walked across to his desk and locked them away once more.

Ori stayed in his seat by the table, waiting for an order, for some indication of what might happen next. Turning the key in the lock on the desk drawer seemed to change his master's mood.

When he looked back at Ori, a slight smile graced his lips. Wary of returning it, just in case he was somehow misinterpreting the situation, Ori stayed serious. His master crossed the room to him. He slid his fingers through Ori's hair, his tight grip on the strands guiding him to tilt his head back and look up at the taller man properly.

"Tired, fledgling?" Raynard asked.

Ori quickly shook his head, tugging roughly at his own hair in the process.

Raynard raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Not too tired to..." Ori blushed. A day hadn't passed since his master first allowed him to go down on him when they hadn't had sex, when he hadn't either tasted his master on his tongue or felt the other man thrust deep inside him as he came.

He might not have been allowed to find his own pleasure every day, but he'd always served and serviced his master. Except for yesterday. Ori's hand clenched into a fist at his side. He

wasn't at all inclined to lose that time with his master as well as their chaste little moments in front of the fire.

Raynard's fingertips traced down Ori's cheek, but he shook his head. "No."

Ori looked up at him, just in time to see the older man's eyes wander across his battered skin.

Heat really raced to his cheeks then. He couldn't blame his master for thinking he looked like hell. He was right.

Rising to his feet, Ori's only thought was to retreat to the servants' quarters as quickly as possible and leave his master in peace while he tried to find some way of getting over his embarrassment before he had to face the older man again in the morning.

The hawk caught hold of his good arm when he would have stepped past him and hurried from his sight.

"Do you really think I could be put off so easily?" Raynard asked, pulling Ori back so he was held firmly against the larger man's body.

The hawk's erection pressed against him through Raynard's trousers. Ori hesitated. He tried to look over his shoulder at the other man but his master's grip on him didn't ease.

"I told you before that you're not a servant in some stupid club any more, Ori. You belong to me. I'm your master. I'm responsible for you. Do you understand that?" Each word was bit out, impatience making them harsh.

Ori would have nodded, but his master's hand moved underneath his chin. Raynard held his head back so it rested against his master's shoulder, preventing the gesture.

"Yes, sir," he managed to whisper.

"And that means you'll be taught to behave in the way I expect. It means you'll be punished when you make mistakes. And it means I'll think with my brain and not my cock when I decide what should happen between us. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't expect me to fawn over you while you're receiving a punishment. And don't expect me to cling to any anger I may feel when the lines are locked away either."

Ori closed his eyes as relief rushed through him. "I understand, sir."

"Good. So you can stop thinking you can screw your way back into my good graces while you're still paying your penance for your mistakes, too."

Ori swallowed, his throat working rapidly under his master's hand. "Yes, sir."

“Bed, now.” Raynard sent him on his way out of the room with a sharp tap on his backside, catching him neatly between the bruises from the fall.

In the hallway, Ori hesitated. “Upstairs until you’re told otherwise,” Raynard shouted after him.

He was still under penance, there was no way in hell his master was going to do anything more than tease him until he’d finished every last line, he wouldn’t even get a healthy dose of second hand pleasure when he was allowed to go down on the other man. The duckling knew all that.

He still couldn’t help but be glad his master had decided he’d be allowed to sleep next to him regardless.

* * * *

“Ori?”

An uncomfortable feeling rushed down the duckling’s spine as he met his master’s eyes across the room. He’d never thought he could hate anything about the other man, but he loathed knowing his master was displeased with him far more than he’d ever detested even the worse punishment the men in the nest had been able to come up with.

A whipping would have been so much kinder than this. The flesh on his back was far less important to him than his master’s good opinion of him. He understood that now.

“There’s a reason why you’ve stopped?” Raynard asked. Even his tone of voice was different when the lines were on the table.

Ori swallowed down his nerves. “One thousand, sir.”

He’d neatly numbered every line, all the way down the side of each page. After checking them twice, he no longer harbored any doubts. He had written out exactly one thousand lines, and he’d never been more petrified in his life.

“Come here.”

Lines in hand, Ori rose from the table and made his way across to his master. When he reached the other man, he wasn’t sure if he was permitted to kneel for him or not. He stood before the fire, shuffling his feet against the hearth rug.

Raynard held out a hand. Ori offered up the lines. The hawk looked through each page, seeming to read each often repeated word one at a time.

Without any way to release his nerves, all Ori could do was get more and more anxious. He folded his arms across his chest, cradling the sore wrist against his body. The bandage around

his other arm had been dispensed with a day or two before. The dining room was cleaned and polished to within an inch of its life.

The only evidence of his mistakes lingered in his master's hand.

When he looked back to the hawk, Raynard's eyes had risen from the paper. He was staring straight at Ori. The hawk stood up. Ori remained frozen in place in front of him, unable to even step back and get out of the larger man's way.

Raynard handed the lines back to him. "Burn them."

"Sir?"

The hawk looked toward the fireplace. Ori followed his gaze. He stared into the flames for a long time. The order was very simple. There was no excuse for failing to obey it instantly, but his hand didn't want to cooperate. The lines were supposed to fix something.

In some way that he hadn't quite been sure of, that idea had been keeping him going through the evenings while he'd been banished to the other side of the room in disgrace. When he finished the lines, everything would be okay.

The most valuable possession my master owns is his submissive. I will take great care that no harm comes to my master's submissive whenever he is not there to watch over me himself.

Ori closed his eyes for a moment, before finally reaching out and sacrificing the papers to the flames. The dry sheets caught quickly. In what felt like seconds, the last of the charred remains had been consumed and his hopes of them healing the rift between him and his master along with them.

The most valuable possession my master owns is his submissive. I will take great care that no harm comes to my master's submissive whenever he is not there to watch over me himself.

Raynard's hand came to rest on Ori's shoulder as he moved to stand directly behind him. With the fire in front of him, and the warmth of his master's body against his back, it would have been so easy to fall into the trap of believing that the comfort that surrounded him made everything okay, but nothing was okay. As he stared into the fire, Ori was overwhelmed by the sudden and inescapable feeling that nothing would ever be okay again.

The most valuable possession my master owns is his submissive. I will take great care that no harm comes to my master's submissive whenever he is not there to watch over me himself.

"You took your punishment well."

Ori swallowed his emotions down as he closed his eyes.

"Speak up, fledgling."

“I hated it, sir.” There was no excuse for the words, and no way he could keep them back, either. If it had fixed something, it might have been worth it, but as things still stood between them...

The most valuable possession my master owns is his submissive. I will take great care that no harm comes to my master's submissive whenever he is not there to watch over me himself.

Raynard's fingers stroked through his hair tugging him back slightly to lean into the larger man's body. “It wouldn't be a very effective punishment if you didn't, would it?”

The hawk stepped away from him. Ori looked around, just in time to see his master retake his seat. A glance at the cushion on the floor by his feet had Ori rushing to kneel there, hope hastening back as quickly as it had deserted him.

Raynard smiled down at him. He stroked his knuckle down his cheek. “You're expected to learn from your mistakes, not to dwell on them after they've been dealt with. Understand?”

Ori nodded, very quickly, turning his head into his master's touch. Raynard chuckled at him as he leaned so far he almost lost his balance. The sound was rich and perfect. Even as Ori ducked his head in embarrassment, he found himself smiling cautiously back up at the older man.

He was back with the version of his master that existed when there was no penance in force, and with the lines consigned to the flames there was no way they could sneak back out of the desk draw and ruin things between them again.

The most valuable possession my master owns is his submissive. I will take great care that no harm comes to my master's submissive whenever he is not there to watch over me himself.

Gathering up his courage, he placed his hand on the inside of his master's knee. Raynard considered the suggestion very carefully before he shook his head. Ori snatched his hand back, not sure how he could have misread the situation so appallingly. Raynard's fingers wrapped around his wrist before he had a chance to retreat too far.

“I think we can do better than that can't we, fledgling.”

“Sir?”

Raynard brushed the thumb of his other hand across Ori's lips before rising to his feet, pulling Ori up alongside him. “Let's see if we can find a better way to celebrate you being properly back in your master's good graces, shall we?”

Ori nodded rapidly, making the other man chuckle again.

The hawk glanced back to the fire. “Put everything in order before you join your master upstairs.”

“Yes, sir.”

There wasn't much to do except damp down the fire and switch out the lights. Ori quickly ran through his evening chores, eager to go to his master as quickly as possible. All trace of the aches and pains that had filled his body while he was being punished were a distant memory then.

The most valuable possession my master owns is his submissive. I will take great care that no harm comes to my master's submissive whenever he is not there to watch over me himself.

When he reached the bedroom door, he found it closed. Not sure what to do, he stared at the woodwork for a few seconds before knocking politely against one of the panels, unable to raise the daring to push it open without an invitation.

“Enter.”

Nudging the door ajar, Ori slipped inside. His master stood on the far side of the room by the big oak chest. Reaching into it, Raynard pulled out a set of leather cuffs and placed them on the top of the chest of drawers to his right.

Teeth nipping at his bottom lip, Ori waited for an order just inside the door. His eyes feasted on more and more leather as it was brought out of the chest and scattered on top of the dresser.

He'd seen some of the toys that the higher ranking shifters liked to play with while he was serving at the nest. Some of the middle ranks had even brought him into their experiments with them. He swallowed rapidly as the memory of the leather moving around his limbs rushed back and entwined itself with the knowledge he already had of his master.

Ori didn't need any further reasons to be hard. His master's words had seen to that before he even reached the room, but the idea of Raynard and the leather together raced to his shaft, stiffening him further, until he could almost believe he'd come right there, while everything he longed for was still on the other side of the room.

Raynard finally glanced over his shoulder. Setting down a blindfold next to the cuffs, he beckoned him across the room.

Ori moved to the hawk's side, but the older man shook his head when he would have lowered himself to his knees. Stepping around him, Raynard ran his hands down Ori's arms, moving his hands behind him.

He guided Ori to wrap his right hand around his left wrist. His foot tapped against the inside of his ankles, guiding him to spread his legs a little further apart. Moving to stand in front

of him once more, Raynard tapped the back of his fingers under Ori's chin. "In the future, whenever you're waiting for an order, you're to stand exactly like this."

"Yes, sir."

"There's no reason to keep your eyes on the floor unless you think there's something there you might trip over."

Ori was about to say the wrong thing. He changed the answer to—"Yes, sir," just in time.

Somehow Raynard still seemed to realize that it hadn't been his first, instinctive response. From the look in his eyes, Ori knew the hawk would continue staring at him for as long as it took, until he got the answer he wanted.

"In the nest, they said that the lower orders shouldn't look their betters in the eye," Ori whispered. He'd never been very good at following that order when he was with his master, standing there and admitting he'd known the rules but hadn't obeyed them was just about the hardest thing he'd ever done.

"They were wrong."

"Yes, sir."

"It's not about that." The words were slow, as if his master was thinking about the matter carefully, choosing his words very deliberately.

Ori glanced up at him through his lashes.

Raynard's knuckles fell away from Ori's chin, and stroked down the center of his chest in an idle caress.

"It's about each man finding a place in the world that suits his nature. Do you think you'd enjoy being in charge of a gentleman's club like the nest, giving out orders and taking responsibility for all the men under your control every time they visited the building?"

Ori shook his head.

"Do you think you'd like to be responsible for putting a deceased relative's estate in order, for taking over all his business interests and managing all those things a man needs to control when he takes up the reins of one of the leading avian families in the city?"

Ori shook his head even more forcefully.

Raynard smiled, as his fingers continued to stroke over his skin, almost absentmindedly, the way a man might stroke a favored pet that he liked to fuss over, but that was still a pet for all that. "That's not because you're not good enough to do it, it's because it's not in your nature to

want those things. There's nothing wrong with men who prefer to follow rather than lead. They have their strengths, too."

Their eyes met, Ori couldn't look away. He'd never seen his master more serious, not even during his punishment. The whole concept was important to him. Ori nodded his understanding, even if he wasn't really sure he did comprehend everything the other man was trying to explain to him.

His master's expression gradually changed as he seemed to set that aside to be revisited at a later date. "There's nothing wrong with a man who prefers to be bound rather than to bind other people, either," Raynard whispered in his ear, his tone quickly turning teasing.

Ori took a deep breath, as his master's attention shifted toward the cuffs on the dresser. Raynard reached back and picked them up. Holding the restraints between them, he ran his fingers over the leather.

"Have you ever been bound, Ori?"

He nodded. "At the nest, sir. Some of the other shifters liked to practice on me."

"Did you like it?"

"I'll like it when you do it, sir," Ori promised.

Raynard raised an eyebrow. "Answer the original question properly, fledgling."

"Sometimes, sir."

"But not at other times?"

"I don't think I was supposed to enjoy it those times, sir," Ori observed, trying to let the words sound as neutral as possible.

Raynard nodded. He seemed to be aware of everything Ori *didn't* say as well as what he did.

"When you're with your master, you're always supposed to enjoy your leather."

Ori nodded.

"Over time, you'll learn that these cuffs will always keep you just where your master wants you, they mean you belong to me, and that'll always be a good thing, won't it?"

Ori nodded again. "Yes, sir."

Dipping his head, the taller man brushed their lips together. Ori tried to open his mouth in invitation, but his master had no need of one. He kissed him like he owned him, as if he wanted to remind him that he knew he owned him, and that would never change.

A moan escaped from the back of Ori's throat. His right hand tightened around his opposite wrist behind his back, as he leaned into the kiss. His master pulled him closer, so their bodies pressed tight against each other.

Ori rose up on his toes as he tried to bring them nearer still. Raynard smiled into the kiss as he kept them both balanced when the duckling would have toppled them.

As Raynard finally pulled back, Ori leaned up and tried to bring their mouths back together, desperate to cling to the moment forever. Raynard wouldn't permit it, not even when Ori let out a pathetic little whimper. The cuffs were still in his master's hand, but he dropped them on the dresser, and he reached for the blindfold instead.

He smiled as he placed it over Ori's eyes, not a half smile or a little twist of the lips, a real, full smile. It was a rare sight, and the last thing the submissive saw as the world went black and the room disappeared from around him. He could still feel the larger man's presence standing in front of him, but that was suddenly the only thing he could be sure of.

"I'm going to tie you up now."

Ori gasped as the words caressed his ear. His master's hands were strong as they settled against his arms. Guiding Ori's hands around in front of his body, he led him blindly forward.

The duckling had walked across the bedroom a hundred times and more, in the half light of dawn and in the real darkness of night too. He'd have thought he could stride across there with his eyes closed, but stepping forward wearing the blindfold was harder than he'd ever imagined it could be.

He knew full well how easily things had appeared to trip him up whenever the shifters at the nest had covered his eyes. Objects that hadn't existed the last time he'd been permitted to see had a way of materializing in front of him for the amusement of the crows.

Sliding his toes along the carpet, he desperately tried not to make a fool of himself in front of his master and ruin everything between them with his clumsiness.

Raynard's hands remained wrapped around his wrists as he slowly led him forward. Ori could feel the cuffs hanging from the older man's fingers, swinging gently with each movement.

"Trust your master, fledgling."

The most valuable possession my master owns is his submissive. I will take great care that no harm comes to my master's submissive whenever he is not there to watch over me himself.

Except his master was there. He didn't need to look after himself when Raynard was there to do that on his own behalf. Ori swallowed. He took another step forward lifting his foot from the floor, moving more quickly, feigning a confidence he really didn't feel.

"Better," his master praised.

Ori smiled slightly as he took another step forward. Nothing jumped in front of his feet as his master continued to guide him forward. It wasn't easy to trust when other men's laughter at his blind clumsiness rushed back into his mind as his nerves increased, but he called up every scrap of strength he possessed and gave everything he had to the endeavor. When his master turned him around and nudged him backward with a push against his shoulder. Ori let himself fall as if he had no doubt the bed would be there to catch him.

He bounced slightly as he hit the mattress.

He sighed his relief as he slid his hands out across the sheet to steady himself. His master's shoe nudged against his feet as Ori lowered them to the carpet by the side of the bed. The duckling obediently spread his legs further apart as he sensed Raynard move closer and stand between his thighs.

Tilting his body forward, Ori found his master. His forehead moved against the older man's shirt as he leaned into him, rubbing his face against Raynard's torso.

The hawk's hand came to rest on the back of his head, encouraging him to believe he was welcome there, until his master eventually nudged him away.

Ori toppled backwards, not even managing to reach out and brace his fall. Before he had time to right himself, one of the cuffs was wrapped around his left wrist. He had a fair idea of how it would look against his skin, but he had no idea if his master would be pleased with the sight or not.

"Sir?" He bit his tongue, but it was too late. The plea for reassurance had already escaped. His master tugged his wrist up toward the headboard. As Ori blindly scrambled to please him, the mattress shifted and he knew the larger man had joined him on the bed. His clothes brushed against Ori's bare skin as Raynard leaned over him to cuff his right hand in place alongside the left. Ori wriggled beneath him, blindly glorying in a world that was suddenly full of wonderful sensations.

Then, his master disappeared.

Ori strained his hearing, trying to get some sense of where his master was. His own heart raced faster, filling his psyche, making it even harder to distinguish any clue as to where the other man might be.

A hand wrapped around his erection, catching him by surprise. Ori thrust up into the welcome touch. His master chuckled, but it was nothing like the laughter he'd heard so often at the nest. There was a warmth to it, as if his master was pleased with him as well as amused by his enthusiasm.

Ori bit at his bottom lip as the older hand stroked his cock, every move strong and confident. Not having been able to touch his own shaft for what felt like a lifetime, his master's fingers set off wave after wave of pure pleasure cascading through his veins. He tried to still himself, but it was impossible. He thrust into each stroke until his master's hand moved away from his shaft, to rest over his hip bone. The hawk's other hand settled over his other hip, they pressed him down against the mattress, forcing him to still himself when he continued to try push his cock desperately against the empty air.

Ori scrambled for control, panted for breath, but his body was no longer his to command. The cuffs kept his hands in place more securely than he would ever be able to by himself. The hands on his hips were stronger than his own willpower. Raynard owned every scrap of him

He was his master's submissive, and there was only one man making any decisions.

Hot wetness closed over the tip of his cock. Ori let out a cry as his hips redoubled their efforts to thrust forward. For a moment, he slid even deeper into his master's mouth.

The air rushed out of the room. The vacuum pulled each molecule of oxygen from his lungs. His head spun as every drop of blood in his body rushed to his cock, leaving nothing for the rest of him. Raynard pulled back. His tongue swirled around the very tip of Ori's cock, teasing his foreskin, making him squirm.

The hawk tightened his grip on his sides further as he began to dip his head again. Ori opened his eyes behind his blindfold and tried to stare down his body at the other man. The darkness remained. His imagination took over.

A mental image of his master's head bobbing over his cock flooded through his mind, his shaft disappearing between the older man's lips as he sucked around him and dragged him closer and closer to the edge by the moment.

He wasn't allowed to come without permission. From those times when he had gone down on other men, he was reasonably sure he shouldn't want to come without permission—not after just a few seconds. But he did. He wanted to come, he *needed* to come so badly.

“Sir, please...”

The hawk murmured around his shaft, as if he loved listening to him beg—maybe even as if he intended to draw out the blowjob even longer simply because he wanted to keep hearing him begging for his release. Vibrations shot through Ori's body, making him arch up. His hands pulled at the cuffs. His feet kicked against the bed sheet. The older man's fingers bit into his sides as he held him still, forcing him down against the mattress as he toyed with him in his mouth.

The marks from his tumble had faded away. There would be new ones there the following morning. His master's finger prints, etched into his skin where he'd held him so tight, would linger long after Raynard's hands left him.

Suddenly one of his master's hands disappeared. When it came back, his fingers slid between the duckling's thighs, slick with lube. Ori instinctively spread his legs wide apart on the mattress.

The older man's fingers slid into him. Within moments, they were thrusting deep inside his hole, rubbing against his prostate with every stroke. Raynard's head dipped lower over Ori's shaft again, his mouth working around his cock in time with his fingers until the pleasure was so intense it became pain.

“Please...” Ori bit down on his bottom lip, hard enough to draw blood, but there was no way he could keep the stream of breathless begging back.

His head thrashed against the pillow, his hands clenched and unclenched into fists above his head as he strove for control and failed. Just when he thought there was nothing he could do, that he'd come with or without permission, his master's mouth left him. The dominant's fingers vanished from his world.

Ori parted his lips to resume begging but no words left him. Raynard's body covered his, his mouth came down over Ori's lips, stealing the words from him. The hawk's slicked erection nudged against Ori's hole as Raynard's tongue stroked across the cut on his lip.

The dominant sucked against the broken bit of skin, just as he'd suckled around his cock. Ori whimpered into the kiss as his master's cock pressed against his hole again, teasing him, then denying him until, with one deep thrust, the other man was sheathed inside him to the hilt.

The kiss broke as Ori tossed his head back. He was so close. “Please...”

“Come.”

He did as his master commanded. The permission left the older man’s lips and rushed straight to his cock without bothering to check in with Ori’s brain en route. He came, clawing at his cuffs as crescendos of pure bliss rushed through him, and his cum spilled between them, landing on his stomach to be smeared against their bodies every time his master pushed forward.

Raynard thrust into him again and again, drawing Ori’s pleasure out until it was impossible for the duckling to remember a time when he hadn’t been in the grip of a kind of ecstasy he’d never guessed at the existence of before that night.

As he slumped back on the bed, too exhausted to move, his master pushed into him, one last time. Raynard yelled out as he came, pounding into him harder than ever as he lost himself in his own pleasure.

Ori blinked in the darkness behind the blindfold, wishing he could see the look on his master’s face. When the older man pulled away from him and rolled onto the mattress beside him, the cuffs were the only thing that kept him from trying to follow his master across the bed.

He wasn’t far away. Ori could feel his presence right there. But there was no such thing as being close enough to his master right then. He wanted to feel his master’s cock buried inside him forever, anything else was a paltry second best.

The hawk didn’t leave him bound, trapped on the other side of the bed, for too long. The cuffs and the blindfold were soon tossed aside.

His master stroked Ori’s cheek as he turned his submissive to face him. Ori slowly lifted his gaze and met the other man’s eyes. Success shone in Raynard’s expression and Ori knew his master had realized that he was the first man who’d ever actually gone down on him, the first dominant who’d ever thought he was worth granting that sort of pleasure to.

Raynard’s lips curled into a satisfied little smile. Ori echoed the gesture as his master’s satisfaction with the discovery seeped into his mind. He turned his head and kissed his master’s fingers in a way he would never dared to have done with any other man, in the tentative hope his master would understand what he was trying to tell him.

The older man chuckled at his silliness, but it was a gentle sound, as if he really did understand, and didn’t mind that he didn’t know a better way to show it.

He ruffled Ori’s hair before he took his hand away. “Good boy.”

Ori felt the blush race to his cheeks.

“Put these away before you settle,” his master said, handing the cuffs to him, and the blindfold.

Ori carried them over to the oak chest, his knees still not quite steady under him. He put those items his master had tossed on top of the dresser away as well. They were all simple bindings, but he couldn't help but catch sight of some of the toys still left in there, before he closed the lid and carefully locked it. Carrying the key back to the bed, he offered it to his master.

Raynard studied him carefully as he took the key. Ori couldn't bring himself to meet the other man's eye. He'd seen the whip in there, and he knew that his master would realize that the moment their gazes met.

“You said you've been whipped before?”

That he'd realized it even *before* their gazes met...

Ori nodded. The older man patted the bed next to him, guiding his submissive to lay down on his stomach alongside him. His palm stroked up and down Ori's back. There weren't any marks there right then, but there had often been, during the time he'd spent at the nest.

“Always a punishment?” Raynard asked.

Ori was about to give an automatic answer, when he stopped himself short. “Sometimes, I think they made up an excuse, just because they wanted to whip me, sir,” he admitted.

“And did those whippings feel different?” Raynard asked.

Ori thought about it for a little while, as he savored the feel of his master's palm sliding over his skin. He nodded, his cheek rubbing against the sheet beneath his head.

“Did you like it?”

The duckling bit his lip as he realized the truth, as he let the truth come to the front of his mind and really make itself known for the first time. He nodded again. “I never liked knowing I deserved to be punished, sir,” he added, a few seconds later, unable to stand the idea of the other man thinking he didn't care whether or not he pleased those he served.

The hawk's hand continued to stroke his back, along the lines where the lash had landed so many times. The memory of the whip tingled along his skin. His imagination rushed forward, wondering what it would have felt like if his master had been the one holding the whip, and if he'd known the other man was only whipping him because he wanted to.

If he hadn't already been so completely filled with satisfaction, Ori knew he'd have stiffened against the sheet.

“Shall I fetch the whip for you, sir?” he asked.

Raynard shook his head. "Sleep now. You're going to need your energy. Tomorrow, I'll be starting your formal training."

Ori nodded. He didn't really understand what that might mean, but his master sounded pleased with the prospect. Right then, that was enough to please Ori too.

As he closed his eyes, the same words that had gradually been seeping into his mind every time he wrote them down, replayed themselves once more inside his head.

The most valuable possession my master owns is his submissive. I will take great care that no harm comes to my master's submissive whenever he is not there to watch over me himself.

Chapter Eight

Raynard ran a critical eye over the dining table one more time. It was set to perfection. If Ori hadn't actually got out a ruler and measured all the arrangements, no one would ever have guessed it. Every piece of silverware shone, every glass sparkled.

If his first forays into it were anything to go by, the more formal rituals of submission and high service were going to suit the submissive very well. More than a few times over the last few days, Raynard had caught sight of a quietly satisfied smile on the duckling's face. After all the grunt work he'd put in making the house fit for habitation, finally getting to play with a bit of sparkle was obviously doing him a world of good.

A smile crept to Raynard's lips too. The simple fact that Ori had managed to do it all without adding to the list of things he'd broken since he came to serve in his master's house, seemed to have done a great deal for his confidence, too.

Raynard looked over his shoulder. Ori stood by the door, his hands folded neatly behind his back, his stance now as perfect as everything else he'd laid out for his master's inspection in the dining room.

The table was set for two, just as the hawk had ordered.

Raynard nodded to the younger man, signaling that he was ready for the food to be served.

The submissive reappeared a minute or two later, ornate silver tray in hand. He'd followed his master's orders when he'd been preparing the food as well, and hadn't panicked himself into trying to produce something that truly fitted the elaborate trimming that graced the table.

The scent of the meal called to Raynard. Not quite as much as the sight of the naked submissive carrying it, but still, it promised him a plate piled high with the kind of simple food he'd discovered the younger man had quite a knack for.

As Raynard took his seat, Ori served the meal to his master, just as the hawk had taught him over the previous few weeks, when the kitchen table had found itself set more and more elaborately every day.

He served the empty chair next to Raynard in much the same way before stepping back to receive his master's criticisms.

Raynard didn't have any to give.

"Leave the tray by the door, and take your seat," Raynard ordered, as they reached the end of the section of the evening's proceedings he'd instructed the submissive in so far.

"Sir?"

Raynard raised an eyebrow at him. "Did you think I'd be eating alone?"

Ori hesitated for another second, before stepping forward and slipping into the seat to Raynard's right. Just because his master had been content to eat with him in the kitchen until that evening, it obviously hadn't occurred to the duckling that they would *both* migrate to the formal dining room now it was fit for purpose.

"There will be times when the table will be full of guests," Raynard told him. "The Raynards have been a leading family in the area for generations. We'll be expected to entertain."

"Yes, sir."

"In which case, you'll be required to dress for dinner," Raynard added, a little rush of jealousy rushing through him at the very idea of anyone else seeing the younger man wearing nothing but his collar.

Ori glanced up at him. He smiled, slightly hesitantly, as if not sure his master really meant him to take a seat at the table when there were others there.

"Different occasions require different forms of protocol," Raynard expanded, as the dinner progressed. "If the meeting is specifically for hawks, only hawks will attend."

"Yes, sir."

"And there will be other times when a greater variety of avian species are present, and you'll be expected to take your place at your master's side and eat the same meal you serve to our guests."

"Yes, sir."

Raynard studied him out of the corner of his eye, wondering just how much complex thought went on in the younger man's head while such simple answers left his mouth. The more time he spent with him, the more he thought he was bound to find out eventually.

It didn't seem possible he wouldn't have time to learn everything there was to know about the boy, especially when he had no intention of allowing him to wander away from his master's protection at any point in the future.

The hawk might have been aware that he had to wait until Ori was a fully fledged shifter before he could make his intentions toward the younger man a matter of record, but he saw no reason why that should dictate when he made his actual decisions.

The dominant glanced across at the duckling once more. For once, he didn't find him sneaking a return peek at his master.

Ori's attention was all on the cabinet at the other end of the table. The glass had been replaced just the previous day, the rest of the monstrous piece of furniture cleaned via a sturdy step ladder, and earlier that day Ori had carefully re-filled it with all the delicate antique porcelain that had, luckily enough, been removed before his tumble.

The cabinet looked as good as it ever had. But there was still a frown on the submissive's brow as he stared at it.

Raynard reached out and picked up his wine glass. It was filled with water that evening. When he placed it back on the table, Ori glanced at it. Picking up the water jug, he refilled his glass.

"Thank you."

Ori smiled at him, almost absentmindedly, before turning his gaze back to the cabinet.

Raynard felt his hackles rise. "Ori?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Who do you believe is the master in this relationship?"

Suddenly, he had his duckling's full attention.

"You, sir," Ori said, very seriously.

"And, that being the case, who do you believe should be the judge of what standard of behavior you should attain?"

"You, sir," Ori repeated.

Raynard could practically feel the younger man's pulse race faster and faster as he tried to work out where the conversation was heading and what the hell he'd done wrong.

"When I punish you for a failure, that's the end of the matter. Acting as if you believe otherwise could easily be interpreted as an insult."

Ori held his gaze, apparently still none the wiser.

"You took your punishment," Raynard told him. "You were forgiven. Unless you have some reason to believe the cabinet is about to launch itself across the room at us, stop staring at it."

The duckling looked down for a second, then back up, careful not even glancing toward the cabinet in the process.

Raynard reached out to him, and tucked a knuckle under his chin, encouraging him to tip it back a little and not look quite so heartbroken over the rather gentle criticism.

“Do you have any reason to cling to your guilt?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

Raynard smiled his approval. As the meal progressed, for the first time since that disastrous day some six weeks earlier, he felt the younger man slowly start to relax while in the dining room. By the end of the meal, he almost seemed to have reached a point where the cabinet was just another piece of furniture. Almost.

Finally, the companionable dinner had to come to an end. The younger man had just brought the tray across to the table to clear it, when he hesitated. “Shall I light the fire in the library first, sir?”

Raynard shook his head. “Not tonight.”

Ori didn't question his decision, he simply went back to clearing the table.

Raynard stood up. “When you've finished here, come up to the bedroom.”

“Yes, sir.”

The simple enthusiasm in the younger man's voice at the idea they might be going to bed early had Raynard smiling to himself as he left the room. The marks he'd left on Ori's skin might have faded, but the impression he'd left on his mind when he'd brought out the cuffs obviously hadn't. If he was unable to face the china cabinet without feeling guilty, he was equally unable to face the toy chest without blushing.

Raynard made his way up the stairs and into their bedroom. As he automatically set about the tasks he needed to accomplish, Raynard turned that thought over and over inside his head. Their bedroom.

He supposed it was, in a way. Technically, Ori might have still had his own room down in the servants' quarters, but it had been some time since his master had wanted the submissive to sleep anywhere but at his side. It was hard to believe that would change as time passed. The hawk shook his head at himself, wondering how the hell a submissive ever managed to get so far into his affections in such a short time.

A click from the door caught Raynard's attention just in time to see Ori's expression drop as he realized his master was getting dressed ready to go out.

The protocols Raynard had already taught him, came to the younger man's rescue. He settled into his at rest position, hands folded behind his back.

"Come here."

He stepped forward to stand just to Raynard's left, waiting for another order. Raynard nudged him in the direction of the shower with a tap on the backside.

"Clothes on when you're done," he ordered

When he came back into the bedroom a few minutes later, he'd already dried himself. His hair stuck up at all different angles after he'd toweled it off.

Raynard ruffled his hair further as Ori walked past him, making the younger man smile. There was no hint of the flinch he'd seen in him the first few times he'd raised his hand to do that.

There weren't many choices for the younger man to make as he stood in front of the wardrobe Raynard had set aside for his use. The clothing his master bought for him was very simple. Black trousers. White shirts. Black boots and belt. He was ready in minutes.

Raynard watched as the fledgling turned to the mirror over the dresser. He combed his fingers through his hair a few times, but it made very little difference. He caught his master's eyes in the glass then, and looked down, a slight blush rising to his cheeks at being caught trying to style himself up.

Moving to stand behind him, Raynard stared over the duckling's shoulder and met his eyes in the reflection. He slipped his fingers into the smaller man's hair, pulling his head back to rest against his shoulder for a few moments.

"It's always kind of done whatever it wants, sir," Ori admitted.

"That will probably change after you've completed your first full shift."

Confusion flickered through Ori's expression as Raynard ran his fingers through the duckling's hair again. He made no attempt to lift his head from his master's shoulder.

"Your adult plumage should be easier to manage, a little less like a fluffy little fledgling's. The color can change like that too." He snapped his fingers with the word, keeping his tone light, he couldn't help but wish he could keep his submissive exactly as he was then, forever.

"It won't turn green will it, sir." Ori's eyes opened wide in horror. It didn't seem to be so much vanity as a lack of inclination to draw attention to himself in that manner.

Raynard managed to keep a straight face for a little while, as he pretended to consider the matter very carefully. He gave in then and chuckled. “Unlikely. Most ducks keep a brown plumage in their human form.”

Ori laughed a little at his teasing as he shook his head at his own gullibility. As they moved away from the mirror, Raynard adjusted the younger man’s shirt slightly, to make sure the leather collar was clearly visible in a way Ori was rarely encouraged to display it when going out into the wider world.

Turning away from him, Raynard picked up a leather jacket from the bed and held it out behind the submissive. Ori’s coordination deserted him, it took him a few seconds to work out how to get his arms into the sleeves in such a way as his master could settle it neatly around his shoulders.

It was a perfect finish to the outfit.

“You’ve already bought me...” *A coat.* Raynard put his finger over Ori’s lips before he could finish the sentence.

He did have a very nice coat, a winter one.

“Spring’s on its way,” Raynard said. And promptly felt a fool for feeling as if he had to make excuses for the purchase. Ori was his submissive, he was free to dress him any way he chose, and he was perfectly free to fuss over him a little if he wanted to.

“Thank you, sir.”

Raynard stepped back and picked up his own jacket, not sure he wanted to meet the other man’s eyes right then. Leading the way quickly down the stairs, they were soon in his car and retracing the route they’d taken when he’d first driven the other man away from the nest.

The atmosphere in the car slowly changed. The submissive grew more and more tense as he seemed to sense where they were going. The easiness that had existed between them in their bedroom was a distant memory by the time they pulled up outside the nest.

Ori quickly got out of the car. Raynard glared after him until he realized that he wasn’t rushing away, just around to open his master’s door for him. He opened the main door into the nest for him too.

The hawk stepped inside, his eyes scanning over the men in the large entry hall. On the far side of the room, he saw another collared submissive opening a door for his master. Raynard relaxed a little as he realized where Ori had acquired the idea, and knew it wasn’t from another dominant.

The duckling looked up at him as he stepped through one of the doors, obviously hopeful that his service was pleasing his master in some way. In one of the large communal rooms on the main floor, Raynard dropped a cushion onto the floor at his side as he sat down. He nodded his approval to the younger man, but Ori didn't immediately accept his invitation to kneel there.

"A drink, sir?" he asked, softly.

Raynard nodded.

The younger man knew him well enough to know what to fetch without it being spelled out to him. "For us both," he mentioned, just in case the submissive didn't know that, too.

Ori made his way to the bar on the far side of the room. Raynard was willing to bet every penny he had that no one but the duckling's master would have been able to guess just how nervous he was at being back there. The submissive didn't seem to relax at all until he was kneeling at his master's feet, sipping at his lemonade.

Raynard reached out and stroked his fingers through the younger man's hair, certain that he had made the right decision in bringing him back there before he found himself standing before the elders for his first shifting ceremony. That would be a stressful enough occasion for the younger man, without anything else being added to the mixture.

Ori leaned into his touch, resting his head on his master's knee, just the way he did in the library at home. It was almost possible to believe that they were alone back in the ramshackle old house until a shadow fell over the submissive.

Raynard lifted his attention to the men who'd paused by the little group of chairs they occupied.

Two peregrine falcons stood before him, waiting to be recognized. Harry and...Harry's brother, whose blasted name Raynard never could remember. He only had vague memories of them from before he'd moved away from the area, they didn't appear to have changed much, even if their fledgling jeans had been exchanged for overly fashionable suits.

"We wished to pay our respects—we were both very sorry to hear about your uncle's passing," Harry said somberly.

Raynard nodded his acceptance and indicated to the seats opposite him.

As the younger men sat down, Raynard sensed Ori looking up at him, a question in his eyes. Raynard nodded for him to ask it.

"May I serve you a drink, sirs?"

"Two beers." Harry didn't even look at him as he said it.

Ori was back with their drinks before all the bland pleasantries the situation demanded had been finished.

Neither falcon said anything as the duckling set the drinks before them, but Charles, as Raynard had discovered the younger brother was called, glanced at Ori as he knelt back at Raynard's feet. "Didn't he used to serve here?"

"He did," Raynard said.

"Not a bad fuck, if he's the one I'm thinking of."

Raynard felt himself tense at the statement. Ori didn't look up. He remained staring at his master's knee, his expression unreadable. Raynard stroked his fingers from where they rested in Ori's hair, down to his lover's collar, subtly reminding the submissive of the leather's presence around his throat.

"He's belonged to me for several months. He's no longer available to serve the members of the club."

The peregrine seemed to sense something in his tone of voice. He quickly dropped the subject. Raynard wasn't overly surprised when they made their excuses and retreated before too many more minutes had passed.

Tugging gently at the messy strands of hair, Raynard pulled his submissive's attention up to his master's face.

"You don't belong to the nest anymore, fledgling. You belong to me. No one lays a hand on you without my permission, and no one has my permission, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Raynard held his gaze, wanting to make sure the knowledge really had settled properly into the duckling's psyche. He was strong enough to defend himself, the dominant had no doubt of that. The mental ability to do so, though, that was rather more open to debate.

Finally, he let the younger man look away, but he couldn't turn his mind away from the matter entirely. Understanding the way things were now, wasn't the same as being able to forget a time when that wasn't the case.

Raynard took a deep breath as he pushed down his anger. The way the fools used him had been a distasteful enough thought when the duckling was a stranger to him. Now that he knew the younger man, knew that there was no way anyone with his instinct for submission could have fought back against the demands they made on him, it was even harder to keep his temper from boiling over.

“Do you remember Charles?” he asked, as calmly as he could.

Ori shook his head, a touch of uncertainty rushing to his eyes with the confession. Raynard guessed there would be more than a few men there that night who he wouldn't remember half so well as they remembered him. It was hard to remember the faces of men who didn't think a submissive was good enough to look them in the eye.

“He always was a forgettable little sod,” Raynard observed.

Ori smiled slightly, as if it really was that easy for his master to make all right with his world.

A few minutes later, Raynard glanced in the general direction of the kitchens, guessing there would be a few of the servants his submissive would appreciate a couple of minutes to catch up with. When he saw Hamilton making his way across the room, he decided there could be far worse times to have him out of ear shot.

“See if there's anything you can do to help your former colleagues for a few minutes,” he said, with a nod to the kitchens.

“Yes, sir.”

Hamilton arrived just as Ori rose to leave. The younger man hesitated, until he saw a drink already in the eagle's hand. By the time Hamilton had taken his seat, Ori was already on his way down the corridor to the kitchens, a little more confidence in his tread now than when he'd walked to the bar.

“The collar looks good on him,” Hamilton said.

Raynard nodded his agreement.

“A little premature though, wouldn't you say?”

“I thought you were a better judge of men than that,” Raynard said, taking a sip of his drink.

Hamilton looked his query at him as he leaned comfortably back in his chair.

“Do you really have any doubt that submission is in his nature?” Raynard asked.

Hamilton shrugged. “I've no idea what he is. He's not even a true shifter until—”

“Bollocks.”

The older man's lips twitched. His accent deepened as his amusement seeped through. “Succinct and to the point as always—just like your uncle. The boy's really got under your skin, hasn't he?”

Raynard studied his drink for a second. “He's a good submissive.”

“And is that all it is?” Hamilton asked.

Raynard raised an eyebrow at his uncle’s old friend.

“You wouldn’t be the first man of rank to go giddy over a young man who is, as you’ve already said, so naturally inclined to want to please his betters.”

Raynard had his mouth open ready to answer, when a crash from the general direction of the kitchens caught his attention. His submissive had all the natural inclination to service that every duck seemed to possess. He had all the coordination of a true duckling as well.

A face appeared around the corner. It wasn’t Ori, but the man still looked straight toward Raynard and caught his eye.

Rising from his chair, the hawk quickly strode across the room, only half aware of Hamilton trailing curiously after him. His heart rate doubled as the image of the dining room sprung back into his mind.

Swearing reached his ears as he turned the corner. Ori stood to one side of the narrow hallway, half way between the kitchens and the dining room. Raynard ran his eyes over the younger man. Several empty pots and pans littered the floor around his feet of him and those of one of the nest’s servants, but they both appeared to be entirely unharmed.

The same couldn’t be said for the crow crumpled on the floor a few yards away from him, hands clamped down over his crotch, which a knee had obviously made recent acquaintance with. More swearing emanated from the huddled man.

One of the other crows from the flock that seemed to spend most of their time drinking and causing trouble at the nest approached Ori, his trainers squeaking against the tiled floor, the edge of his jeans fraying behind them. The duckling held his ground, tilting his chin back and looking the crow straight in the eye.

“And what do you think your master will say when we tell him—”

“His master will say he’s obeyed his orders very well,” Raynard cut in.

Ori’s attention snapped toward him.

“He doesn’t have permission to allow any other man to lay a hand on him,” Raynard added, never once breaking eye contact with the younger man. “I assume you mentioned that fact to them?”

“Yes, sir.”

Raynard nodded his approval. “Good boy.”

And he met the gaze of every other man lurking in the narrow corridor. He had a feeling that any man in the nest who was tempted to try to treat him as public property, would soon take note. Word like that flew around the nest quickly. *Raynard's sub can defend himself—and his master likes that fact.*

He took a pace back. Ori stepped over the still prone crow and took his place at his master's side as Raynard made his way out of the corridor, stopping only to mention to one of the other birds of prey that an eye should be kept on the servant who'd been at Ori's side in case the crows should take exception to him. Finding their seats once more, Raynard settled himself in his chair.

"You did well," he told him, not caring that Hamilton had joined them once more.

"You ordered him to strike out at a higher ranking avian?" The eagle asked.

"I ordered him to defend himself if he needed to," Raynard corrected. He barely managed to stop himself pointing out that it was the same order Hamilton should have given him when he first came to the nest.

Ori's head moved to lean against his master's knee as he instinctively sought for reassurance. A shudder ran through him. Raynard settled his hand in his hair, encouraging him to stay there and rest until he got himself back together.

Hamilton seemed to linger with them for a long time, purely to be annoying. Raynard gave the older man half his attention as he petted his submissive. The duckling really had come a long way since he was last at the nest. The nest's servant would never have had the strength or the confidence to floor the crow. His submissive was a different matter. Raynard smiled to himself with the knowledge as pride at the younger man's achievements rushed through him.

Finally, Hamilton got bored and moved away to speak to someone else.

"Where did all that courage come from?" Raynard teased.

Ori looked up at him through his lashes as he lifted his hand to his collar. It didn't seem to be so much an answer as an instinctive gesture, it was still remarkably eloquent for all that.

When Raynard rose to his feet, Ori once more fell into step beside him as if it was the most natural thing in the world. If he was anxious about remaining in the nest, he showed no sign of it.

By the time they made their way into the maze of play rooms that existed on one of the upper floors of the club, there could be no doubt in the mind of anyone who saw them, exactly who Ori belonged to. Every man in the place had to have seen them together. Every shifter who

had met Raynard's eye had lowered his gaze before the hawk. Raynard was gradually starting to feel a little bit better about the world.

The main exhibition station in the center of the leather clad area of the club was set up for a whipping. The hawk heard Ori's steps falter as he saw the arched wooden frame. Raynard glanced toward his submissive. Tension ran through every bit of the younger man's body, half fear and half something far more interesting.

Raynard walked up to the whipping post. Ori didn't hang back. He stayed at his master's side. Reaching up, the dominant carefully examined the cuffs that hung down from the top of the arch. They would do nicely.

"Take off your coat and your shirt."

He looked over his shoulder. Their eyes met. Ori obeyed the order without ever looking away from him. Folding the leather, then the crisp white fabric in turn, he placed both garments neatly on the floor just outside the whipping area and settled himself into his rest position there, waiting for his master to call him forward.

The hawk didn't make him wait too long. He soon had the cuffs wrapped around Ori's wrists, his hands secured high above his head, stretching out his body toward the top of the arch, creating a perfect canvas for his master to decorate in any way he chose.

He'd healed well after his fall, only a slight scar still lingering down his left arm. Raynard ran his knuckle down along it. Ori swallowed rapidly as his eyes dropped closed.

He'd expected to be whipped as a punishment for that tumble. He'd have taken whatever Raynard had given him and thanked him for beating him senseless over an accident. The hawk remembered the look in the younger man's eyes so well, the pure desperation.

Time for his next lesson in the difference between belonging to a club full of fools and one good master...

"Just because I want to," he whispered into the duckling's ear. "Because you belong to me and tonight you've earned the right to have a few extra marks to show it."

As easily as the words left his lips, he felt any lingering hint of fear leave the younger man's body. He hadn't been lying when he told his master that was the only thing he hated about being whipped. The only thing displayed in Ori's body language right then was eager expectation.

His eyes blinked open as he looked up at his master. The same desperation to please was still there, but it was tempered now, with the knowledge that his master was already pleased

with him, with the realization that from that moment on a whipping was a sign of that and nothing else.

Satisfied they understood each other, Raynard turned away. He picked up one of the whips off the table where a selection had been laid out for the use of any avian with a high enough rank to claim one as his toy for the night. He didn't look around the room, but he knew full well that there were already a dozen and more men watching them, waiting to see exactly what the new hawk intended to do with his submissive.

Raynard ran the leather through his fingers as he turned his complete attention to the fledgling's back. His shoulders were a little broader than they'd been when he'd first met him, the product of all the work he had done setting the house in order, combined with those frequent visits to the swimming pool. His collar was a stark black line around his neck, screaming Raynard's possession of him to anyone who was interested.

The hawk ran the whip over the younger man's skin as he stepped closer. A shiver raced through Ori. As Raynard stood next to the smaller man and looked down his body, the effect the prospect of a whipping was having on him was obvious. His trousers were tenting in front of him.

Far more used to seeing his lover undressed than covered, Raynard's hands itched to reach for the younger man's belt, to peel the fabric away and leave Ori standing naked at the whipping station. He stepped away from him before he gave in to temptation and forgot all about the other men in the room.

They might have seen the duckling naked before, but that had been before Raynard owned him. It wouldn't happen again without a bloody good reason.

The hawk lifted his arm. The first lash landed across Ori's back. The submissive man gasped as the leather flicked against him. Raynard stepped forward then, and ran his hand across the mark it had left in its wake. The whip had added little heat to him. A pale red line appeared on his skin as blood rushed to the site, to transport the pleasure around his body as quickly as it could.

The duckling said nothing as Raynard stepped back, raised his hand and let the whip fall against him once more. No inspection followed. Another flick of his wrist and the whip caressed the younger man's skin again.

The whip he'd chosen was far from the harshest implement that had rested on the table, and Raynard knew how to make it dance against the other man's back in just the way he wanted. Each lash landed perfectly, decorating the submissive's skin to his exact wishes.

The rest of the club ceased to exist. Other men might have flooded into the space to observe, but they were irrelevant. Ori's ragged breaths filled Raynard's world. He watched, enchanted, as Ori's head dropped back a little on each stroke, as if he had to struggle to keep his reactions in check.

Each touch of leather, each touch from his master, appeared to push more and more pleasure into him until the younger man didn't seem to know how to contain it. His hands clenched into fists above his head. One hand scabbled at the opposite wrist.

Raynard let the whip drop to his side as he saw the fingers of Ori's right hand wrapped around his left wrist. It was as close to his rest position as his bondage would allow. He was doing exactly what he was supposed to do when he didn't know what to do with himself, even then his master's words were in his head, guiding everything he did.

Raynard moved closer to him. His hand came to rest on the younger man's back.

"Look at your master."

Ori blinked open his eyes as he turned his head, his expression unfocused, clouded with pleasure.

Raynard held his gaze as he stroked his fingers tenderly across the whip marks. They were still light, even after the repeated contacts of the leather. Ori arched into his touch as far as he could. His eyes fell helplessly closed as more and more ecstasy seemed to rush into his body with each mark Raynard's fingers passed over.

"Ten more. Count them out for your master."

He waited at Ori's side until the other man found his voice.

"Yes, sir."

The words were barely whispered, but the only person who needed to be able to hear them was easily close enough to catch each syllable.

Raynard stepped back. The whip cracked more loudly against the fledgling's skin as he let loose a little more of his strength against his back.

"One, sir."

A darker red line flourished over the lighter ones.

He brought the lash down again.

"Two, sir."

He only gave him just enough time to make his responses before he brought the whip down on him again and again. Each time Ori counted it out for him. Three...four...five...six...

“Seven, sir.”

Another kiss of the leather. A little cry as the whip cracked against Ori’s skin, harder than before.

“Eight, sir.”

Every line of muscle in the submissive’s body was taught and perfect. His head was tipped back toward the ceiling, but his voice was strong. He was breathless with pleasure, not pain.

Raynard snapped the leather again.

A whimper escaped from the younger man as his head dropped forward. “Nine, sir.”

If he’d been a step further away, Raynard wouldn’t have been able to make out the words.

One more. Raynard raised his arm higher, the whip cracked against Ori’s back, crossing several of the other dark lines he’d already painted against his skin.

A scream filled the air as Ori’s body jerked. He seemed to rise into the air, hanging from the cuffs for a moment. Then the world appeared to snap back into focus around him. The scream faded away. Ori collapsed, limp within his bonds.

Tossing the whip aside, Raynard stepped forward. Ori managed to drag his head up to look at him, even while he wasn’t quite capable of supporting himself on his own feet. He licked his lips and swallowed rapidly as he tried to find his words. “Ten, sir.”

The hawk slid his hand into the younger man’s hair as he tugged him forward, just far enough to lean his head on his master’s shoulder. “Good boy.”

Ori dragged a satisfied breath into his body as he heard the whispered praise.

He trembled slightly as Raynard slid another hand around his waist and encouraged him to rest more of his weight against his master’s body. He stayed stiff for several long seconds, holding himself slightly away from his lover, in a way he hadn’t since he’d first come to his master’s bed.

“Hush,” Raynard whispered to him. He pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “I’ve got you.” Even if they did have an audience...

Another second of hesitation and Ori relaxed against him, he rubbed his head tenderly against his master’s shoulder, nuzzling against him in an effort to get even closer than was physically possible.

“That’s right,” Raynard whispered to him.

He stroked his fingers through his hair. Part of Raynard wanted to look up, to meet the eyes of the men around them and stare them down, to mark his territory and scream his ownership of the man in his arms.

He resisted the urge. They could be dealt with at any time. The hawk kept his attention firmly on the duckling. Some things were too important to be put off until a later date. Ori needed his master right then, and he was no more able to deny his submissive whatever he needed, than Ori was capable of disobeying his master.

Raynard smiled softly against the top of the duckling's head. "Good boy."

Chapter Nine

Ori arched lazily against the slightly lumpy mattress. Eyes closed, and his mind lost in memories, he could almost swear he felt the whip marks covering his back rubbing against the soft cotton sheet beneath him.

Of course, the marks were already long gone. They'd faded slowly, but they hadn't been able to last forever, either. Ori sighed sleepily to himself as he turned onto his side. The breeze from the open window caressed his bare skin as his hand snuck up his neck and traced the line of a mark he knew would always be there.

It was getting darker. His master would be back soon. Ori stretched out a few of his aching muscles, before snuggling back down against the little cocoon his blankets had formed around him. His eyes dropped closed, only to snap open when he heard a fluttering of wings on the balcony. By the time he focused, his master was striding through the big open windows.

Ori tried to scramble off the mattress and onto his feet. He didn't even have time to sit up before Raynard was there, his lips on Ori's mouth, his body covering his smaller frame as his master pushed him back down.

Hands wrapped tight around his wrists, Raynard pinned the duckling's arms down on either side of his head.

Ori managed a brief "I..." before the words were swallowed up by the kiss. The submissive smiled against the hawk's mouth. Words were wasted when Raynard had only just finished stretching his wings anyway, far better to simply part his lips and offer himself freely to his master.

The older man was already hard. His erection slid against Ori's skin as he pressed him down against the sheet. Ori squirmed underneath him, trying to pull his legs back. It wasn't easy when the older man didn't even seem capable of understanding what he was trying to do right then.

For the first time, Raynard didn't seem to be holding anything back. There was no attempt to gentle his hold on him, no checking to see if he was able to keep up with his master's demands.

His teeth nipped, harsh and demanding, at Ori's lips, pulling a whimper from him as he finally managed to draw his knees back. The hawk's shaft nudged against his already slicked hole. Raynard immediately pushed into him. No hesitation, no question of his absolute right to thrust his cock deep inside him whenever he wanted to.

The lube Ori had applied while his master was out stretching his wings only eased the older man's way so much. Ori arched against the sheet, his hands clenching into fists above his master's grip on him, even as he tilted his hips back and tried to spread himself even wider, offer himself to the other man even more readily.

Raynard barely stilled inside him before he pulled away, and thrust back into his hole again. Ori's prostate sung out as Raynard pounded into him again and again. The sudden stretch started to ease, and soon there was nothing to take away from the pleasure his master pushed into him with every movement.

Hard ever since the hawk took flight, Ori desperately tried to hold back. In the half light, he saw his master staring down at him, naked possession flashing in his gaze.

He did his best to rock back in time with his master's movements, to clench around him, to do anything he could to make it perfect for the other man. And even then, part of him knew that wasn't really required right then. All he had to do was be there, waiting and willing, when his master came back. All he had to do in order for his master to be pleased with him was to be the kind of avian who loved it when his master let the hawk side of him loose and forgot his human manners.

All he had to do was love being owned, and marked and possessed by his master. Nothing the dominant could ask of him would have ever been easier.

Pure bliss shone in his master's gaze as he stared down at him. And that was the moment when the ducking realized that his master truly felt as free to be who he was with Ori, as Ori was with him.

Raynard thrust into him again, rough and seemingly determined to claim a bit of his lover's soul with every movement.

Ori gasped. He pulled at his master's hold on him, just for the joy of feeling the other man's grip tighten around his skin. Somehow he knew Raynard would understand, that he

wouldn't think he truly wanted to get away from his master. He was safe with the knowledge that Raynard would never actually release him, no matter how hard he struggled. There was no room for begging when his master was in this mood. No room for disobedience either.

Another hard thrust. Raynard's hand dropped Ori's wrist to dive between them. He jacked Ori's cock hard, fast and unrelenting, eyes daring him to come without permission. Ori bit down on his bottom lip as he scrambled for control, his free hand clawing at his master's shoulder.

"Come."

The submissive tossed his head back, his nails biting into his master's skin as he came, spilling between them. Gasping for breath, Ori struggled to keep his eyes open, not wanting to miss the sight of his master coming just a moment after him.

Raynard jerked before throwing his head back, each muscle freezing in place as he lost himself in the pleasure racing through his veins. The whole world seemed to stop as Ori's master came, as if the sight of him distracted the whole universe and it all had to pause to admire the sheer perfection of him.

As the last of the older man's ecstasy drained from his expression, Raynard's strength seemed to leave him for a moment. More of his weight came to rest on Ori, pinning him to the blanket from tip to toe as the larger man collapsed over him.

No pretence, no politeness. He was his master's to do with what he wished, and if the older man wanted to sleep like that all night, Ori knew he'd have loved every minute he spent trapped underneath him, barely even able to draw breath as his muscles cramped and his joints turned numb.

All too soon, Raynard came back to his usual self enough to roll away and lie next to him. It wasn't a large mattress. A double would never have made it up the stairs into the little attic room.

On the tiny single, they had no choice but to snuggle as they rested. As much as Ori wanted to lie still and not disturb the dominant, he couldn't help but try to rearrange himself a little more comfortably as the minutes passed.

"Still sore, fledgling?" Raynard stroked his hands down Ori's arm as he guided him closer.

He helplessly leaned into the other man's touch, letting it soothe the muscles it passed over. "It's fine, sir."

The hawk gathered him close, cradling him against the heat from his body. “You’ll feel better once you complete your full shift.”

Ori burrowed a little closer into the other man’s embrace.

“Nervous?”

Ori shrugged.

“You’ll be fine,” Raynard promised.

“Yes, sir.”

It would be fine. Ori knew that. He rubbed his cheek against his master’s chest, taking strength from his strength.

A sneaky little voice in the back of his mind reminded him that he’d thought it would be fine last time too. But then, everyone’s attitude to him had changed when he’d completed his half shift and...Ori held back a sigh.

Everything would be fine. Raynard’s hand rested idly on his chest, just next to Ori’s head. Reaching out, the duckling stroked his fingers over the tattoo on the inside of the other man’s wrist.

Raynard lifted his head to see what he was doing. Ori was about to pull his hand back and apologize for over stepping some sort of invisible line, but the hawk merely bent his hand back, offering the mark to be inspected more easily.

Ori cautiously ran his fingers over the mark, tracing the jagged lines of it with his fingertip.

“What does it feel like, sir, shifting I mean?” he asked.

Raynard seemed to think about it for a long time. “As if a part of you that can’t flourish when you’re in a human form is being freed,” he offered eventually. “The first few times can be difficult. It can be painful until you get used to it. But it’s worth it. So very worth it...”

Ori smiled as he stared up at the expression of pure peace on his lover’s face. Then his smile faltered. “Do you wish...?” His courage dissipated him, the rest of the question died, unspoken.

“Ori?” his master prompted.

Ori frowned across at the window. “Do you wish I was a hawk instead, sir?”

The older man chuckled. “Two hawks seldom lie comfortably together—especially not two male hawks.”

Ori glanced up at him.

“I’m very happy with the man I have. Don’t start letting all that nonsense a few fools spout about your supposed *betters* turn you into as much an idiot as them. All species have their strengths and weaknesses, the things they are known for.”

“What are ducks known for, sir?” Ori whispered, his fingers still tracing the other man’s tattoo.

“Most find their way into the service of others for good reason. They’re hard workers. Strong. Resilient. They enjoy pleasing other people. They’re loyal, dedicated and affectionate. Ducks have always made fantastic submissives,” Raynard recounted, almost matter of factly.

Ori dipped his head as a pleased little blush came to his cheeks.

“And there are a couple of lesser known traits,” Raynard went on, his tone of voice changing slightly. “Some of them seem to have a way of sneaking under a dominant’s skin so that, when he least expects it, he finds himself with a servant who becomes a submissive, with a submissive who somehow becomes much more to him, than even that.”

Ori couldn’t even bring himself to raise his gaze and see what might be in his master’s eyes. The hawk didn’t try to make him look up either. Head resting on his master’s chest, Ori listened to his heart continue to beat out a slow, steady rhythm, while his own pulse raced faster and faster.

Raynard took hold of his hand then, and held it up so his wrist was clearly visible to them both. As Ori watched, he painted a symbol on the skin with his fingertip, mapping out just where the mark stating his species would rest, just over the vein.

“A copy of it will need to be added here too,” Raynard said, transferring his attention to the tag hanging from Ori’s collar.

“I’d like that, sir,” he whispered.

Raynard pressed a kiss to the top of his head as he relaxed back against the mattress.

As the room turned cooler and the breeze continued to swirl through the open window, Ori curled closer still to his master’s strength.

I love you too, sir.

He couldn’t make himself say the words right then, any more than his master seemed inclined to say them out loud before he had who he was properly marked on his wrist.

Ori smiled slightly as he started to doze. Maybe completing his first full shift was something to look forward to after all...

* * * * *

“Sir?” Ori looked up at his master, as the older man reached for the buckle on his collar.

“The tradition of each avian appearing bare before the leaders the first time they complete a full shift exists for a reason,” Raynard informed him, in the same serious tone that seemed to have lurked in his voice all day.

Ori swallowed. The rest of his clothes lay on a chair to his right. It was easy not to care about them, but his collar...

The leather moved around his throat as his master hooked his fingers through it. “As much as I’d like to leave it on, it’s best that you don’t accidentally throttle yourself the first time you shift.”

It was a risk Ori would far rather have taken than feel his collar being removed, but he forced himself to accept his master’s decision and stood still and silent as his neck was bared and, for the first time in so many months, left bare, without even a silver chain to take its place.

Reaching up, Ori ran his hand over his neck. His eyes met Raynard’s. He moved both his hands behind his back and took up his usual waiting position.

Raynard brushed their lips together. Ori’s grip tightened around his opposite wrist as he cherished the brief moment of reassurance. Everything would be fine. His master had told him that several times, and he believed his master.

“Go on, fledgling,” the older man ordered, nodding toward the curtains lining one wall of the shadowy little space.

Nudging the curtains apart, Ori slipped reluctantly through the gap and onto the stage. A dozen of the elders sat on a semi circle of chairs arranged before him, every one of them fully clad in a perfectly tailored suit. Between them, they represented all the leading avian species.

Taking a deep breath, Ori moved forward, to the middle of the stage and settled himself in his familiar rest position to wait for an order. He felt the gazes of all twelve men running over his naked body, assessing him, some of them with more appreciation than others.

More than a few of them were familiar, in that he suspected they were men who had issued orders to him before he moved under his master’s protection. They hadn’t all been pleasant orders to follow. They weren’t all pleasant men.

He closed his eyes for a moment as more and more tension rushed into his body. As he looked up again, a movement at the back of the room caught his attention. Raynard stepped through the door in the far corner and found a vantage point along the back wall. Ori’s nerves

settled a little as he saw him. When he noticed a flash of silver in his master's hand, he recognized the tag on his collar.

His master was waiting for him. All he had to do was get this over with and he could go back to his master, and his collar, and everything really would be fine. He looked to the highest backed chair in the middle of the semi circle, to the leader of the nest.

Mr. Hamilton nodded for him to begin.

Ori took another deep breath. Releasing his hands from behind his back, he let them hang idly at his sides, just as his master had told him he should. Closing his eyes, he searched for that place in his mind where he'd come so close to finding another side of himself once before.

A frown crept to his brow as he pushed his way into unexplored areas of his psyche. As he delved deeper, it became far easier not to care about the men watching him, about the nest, about almost anything.

Some part of him was vaguely aware of his physical body lowering itself so he was crouching on the stage, his hands reaching forward to steady himself on the floor boards. As his head started to spin, he lowered himself further, onto his knees.

His mind raced faster, suddenly spiraling uncontrollably along paths he hadn't even guessed existed a few minutes earlier.

The partial shift had been all about scrabbling for something out of his reach. It was nothing like this. He gasped. A small cry escaped him as he felt his body being pulled in a million different directions all at once. His mind rebelled against the idea, panicking and trying to pull away.

Like gravity and destiny rolled into one, something relentlessly dragged him forward, down into a place he didn't understand, that he didn't even know if he wanted to understand.

The stage boards seemed to bow and sway under him, threatening to toss him down into the assembled audience at any moment. Ori shook his head. Pain flashed through his whole body. And, all at once, it wasn't his body. He had no control, no say over what happened to it.

For the first time in so many months fear rushed in to the space left behind after his control was ripped from him. It wasn't his master assuming power. It was something both inside him and that wasn't him at all. Ori tried to rise to his feet. Tried to reach out to the world around him, scrabbling for something, anything, to hold on to as terror raced through his veins faster than he could chase it away.

He dragged his eyes open and looked to the back of the room. He couldn't see into the shadows, couldn't focus. The elders were close enough to the circle of light directed toward the stage for him to make them out, but they swirled and distorted before him, their faces blurring and melting until they were barely recognizable.

Ori's limbs wouldn't work. He tried to rise to his feet. Something moved, but all he saw was a flash of white to his side. Pain shot through him again, bright and vivid, worse than any whipping could ever be. He collapsed forward again.

His body met the boards with a thump. He tried to open his eyes. For a second everything returned to its usual focus. Then, very quietly, it all faded to black.

* * * *

A hand caressed Ori's cheek. He immediately leaned into its touch, relishing his master's reassurance. But the hand was wrong. It was softer, plumper than his master's hand should have been. Ori pulled away from it as he fought to open his eyes.

Men crowded around him, enclosing him on all sides, looming over him. Ori looked past them and between them, seeking any sign of his master.

Raynard wasn't there. Ori tried to sit up.

A hand came to rest on his shoulder, nudging him back against something soft and yielding. "You should rest a little longer, sire."

Ori looked over his shoulder. Someone had placed a huge velvet cushion behind his back. He looked around him again. There were blankets and cushions everywhere, half covering his naked body.

Swallowing rapidly as he tried to make his throat work, Ori tried to sit up again, as he automatically pulled the blankets more securely over his lap. His other hand went to his head, it ached in a way he hadn't even known was possible.

His hand dropped to his neck then, seeking out the reassurance of his collar. It wasn't there. Even as panic spiked inside him, a few memories started to present themselves front and center in his mind.

His master taking the collar back so he couldn't accidentally strangle himself with it. Stepping onto the stage. The swirling thoughts. The pain.

"My master," he managed to whisper.

The men looming above him exchanged glances as if they had no idea who he was talking about.

“Mr. Raynard,” Ori managed to croak out. He focused in on Mr. Hamilton. He knew who Raynard was. “Where’s my master, sir?”

The older man stared down at him for several long seconds. “You should rest, sire.”

Ori frowned. *Sire...*

His brain wouldn’t work. “I need to see my master,” he repeated. Raynard would make everything fine.

The eagle turned and spoke to someone over his shoulder. When he looked back to him, a slightly strained expression lingered around his eyes. “One of the servants has been sent to find him, sire.”

Another man crouched down at Ori’s side. “A drink, sire.”

Ori frowned. He didn’t know what was going on. There were only three things in the world he was sure of—he was scared and confused, and he wanted his master. He tried to rise again. When another stranger put his hand on his shoulder to push him back down, Ori pulled away from him.

No one was supposed to lay hand on him but his master. As his mind spun, that was one of the few facts that couldn’t be denied. He shrugged off the other man’s touch, losing all ability to be polite and subtle as he did so. The man didn’t try to reach out to him again as Ori pulled himself to his feet.

“Your clothes, sire?”

Ori hesitated. He looked down at his naked body. He was supposed to wear clothes when other people were around. He remembered that too. His master’s rules arranged themselves neatly in his head, building a frame work for him in a suddenly uncertain world.

He nodded. He wanted his clothes. Raynard wouldn’t like him wandering around the nest naked, not now that the shifting ceremony was complete. He’d made it very clear that that was a specific exception to the rule. The exception was over.

Pushing his way through the curtain at the back of the stage, Ori scrambled into the clothes his master had bought him, his hands clumsier than ever. Some of the elders followed him into the cramped little space. Some hopeful part of Ori had thought that his master might be back there waiting for him, but there was no sign of him.

Casting a wary look toward the other men, Ori pushed open a door and stumbled out into the hallway. His master wasn’t there either, but lots of other men were. A few familiar faces peeked out from the crowd, servants he’d worked alongside, men who’d used and abused him

over the months he'd lived there. But not Raynard. Turning in every direction, Ori tried to work out which way to go, but there was no path through the other men.

He lifted his hand to touch his collar the way he had so often over the months. His fingers brushed against bare skin.

A movement caught his attention. Everet, the raven who'd followed his master's orders that first time he saw him in the nest, met his gaze before quickly looking away.

Ori dropped his own gaze as he hurried past the other men who lined the corridors. They stepped back to let him through, making a path just wide enough for him.

"In the old library."

The words were just on the edge of Ori's hearing, and they reached him as he walked past the raven. It was impossible to be sure that they came from Everet, but something of the kindness in the words reminded him so much of that day when the raven had watched over him at his master's command, he couldn't ignore the possibility they were honest. He rushed in the direction of the old library.

Throwing open the door, he staggered to a stop several yards inside the room. On the far side of the high, book lined space, his master stood by the window, looking out over the gardens. He didn't turn around to see who had entered the room. Closing the heavy paneled wood behind him, Ori took a deep breath.

Hands neatly folded behind his back, he retreated to stand next to the door. His master continued to stare out of the window. The hawk's face only visible to his submissive in profile, but it was enough for Ori to learn all he needed to know. The older man's shoulders were knotted with tension, his eyes very serious. Not one muscle moved as Ori watched him across the room.

Ori's relief at finding his master drained away. Something was wrong. While he'd been completing his shift, something else had obviously happened in his master's world, something far more important than any ceremony could ever be, something bad.

"May I serve you, sir?" he whispered, unable to simply stand there and watch the other man in pain.

Raynard closed his eyes. Without any thought of protocol or rules, Ori stepped forward. He broke from his rest position and crossed the room to stand at his master's side. Reaching out to him, he laid his hand on the older man's arm, desperate to offer him some sort of comfort.

"Sir?"

The hawk spun away from him. He strode several paces toward the center of the room before he turned to look Ori in the eye for the first time. His eyes ran over Ori's body then, from the top of his head, all the way down to his booted feet and back up again.

"Sir—?" Ori began again.

Raynard cut him off, raising his hand for his silence.

Ori swallowed down his plea for reassurance.

For what felt like days, Raynard didn't say anything, he just stared at him as if he was some ghostly vision the hawk was unable to comprehend. Finally he spoke. "What did the elders tell you?"

Ori shook his head. "Nothing, sir. I..." He took refuge in his rest position as he realized that running away from them might not have been the best way to please his master. "I'm sorry, sir. I might have left before the ceremony was properly completed."

Raynard closed his eyes again, just for a second, as if that was the only way he could keep control of his own emotions. Turning away from Ori as he opened his eyes, the hawk led the way across to a little seating area nestled among the towering bookshelves. As the older man lowered himself into an armchair, Ori moved instinctively to his master's feet.

The dominant stopped him short. "Sit there." He pointed to the chair opposite him.

Frowning, not sure now just how angry Raynard was with him, Ori sat on the edge of the seat his master had indicated and stared across the dark bare floor boards at his master.

"The ceremony didn't go as expected," the hawk said slowly.

"Have I done something wrong, sir?"

Raynard shook his head. "No, fled—" He stopped abruptly and took another deep breath. He straightened in his chair then, tilting his chin back and squaring his shoulders. "The partial shift you performed before the elders when you first came to the nest wasn't conclusive. Sometimes the elders' best guess isn't accurate."

Ori tentatively tried to feel his way forward in the conversation. "I'm not a duckling, sir?"

"No," Raynard said. "You're not."

Species scrolled through Ori's mind. Whatever he was, it didn't seem to be anything that pleased his master. He still couldn't think quite clearly, couldn't remember what species were below even a duck. He wasn't even sure if there was such a thing as a lower rung in the hierarchy.

"You're a swan—that's what the elders saw."

Ori nodded his understanding, waiting to be told what his master thought of that development and what he should think of it too. But no further information seemed to be forthcoming.

“You...don’t like swans, sir?” he hazarded.

Raynard stared across at him for a moment. “There’s no need for a swan to use an honorific when he’s speaking to a hawk...sire.”

Ori felt the air rush from his lungs. He tightened his grip on the edge of the seat. He shook his head, as much at the way his master spoke to him then, as at the actual words he chose to use.

Raynard glanced down for a moment, not in submission, but as if he couldn’t even bear to look at him right then. His master’s attention fell on the collar still in his hand. The moment Ori followed his gaze saw it, he couldn’t look away.

He swallowed rapidly as Raynard seemed to sense what he was looking at. The hawk pushed the collar into his pocket, the tag catching the light before it quickly disappeared from sight.

For a second, where the older man ordered him to sit stopped mattering. Ori sprung forward and lowered himself to his knees at his master’s feet. He put his hand on the other man’s leg, only just stopping himself short of actually reaching for his pocket. “Sir?”

“I neither like nor dislike swans,” Raynard said, his voice stiff and formal. “I’ve no reason to, sire—”

Ori touched his fingers very gently against his master’s lips. “Please don’t call me that, sir.”

Raynard took hold of his wrist and moved Ori’s hand away from his mouth. The younger man couldn’t bring himself to struggle against his master’s hold on him. It felt too good to have the hawk’s hand wrapped around his skin. There was a familiarity in it that promised everything would be okay.

For a few seconds then, the hawk’s anger seemed to leave him, there was nothing in Raynard’s eyes but sadness. He settled his other hand in Ori’s hair and guided him forward to rest his head against his master’s chest. “Everything’s fine,” Raynard told him. “There’s nothing for you to be upset about.”

Ori nodded. His cheek rubbed against his master’s shirt with the movement. It didn’t feel like the truth. It didn’t feel as if Raynard really believed it was the truth either.

“Tell me about swans, sir?”

Raynard's body moved under his head as he took a deep breath. "Swans are...the purest species of avian that exists. They are good, and noble, and beautiful. They have the most exquisite spirits, the finest temperaments."

Ori frowned slightly as he waited for the rest. Raynard said nothing.

"For service, sir?" Ori hinted eventually.

"Swans don't serve," Raynard whispered, each word raw as if pushed through a throat that didn't want to let them pass.

Ori pulled away, just far enough to look up at his master.

Raynard's fingers stroked through his hair again. He cleared his throat. "Swans don't serve other avians, fledgling." His lips twisted into a mockery of an encouraging smile. "By the end of the day, you're going to have a great many servants of your own."

Ori shook his head. His hand tightened on Raynard's shirt, bunching the fabric within his grip.

The older man took hold of his wrist, but Ori couldn't make his fingers unfurl and release him.

"You will," Raynard repeated. "A lot of things are going to change for you, now."

Another shake of the head.

"A swan's life has its course plotted out for it from—"

"Maybe they were wrong," Ori rushed out. "Maybe I'm not a swan at all—"

"Ori..."

"Maybe I'm really a duck," he pushed on, fueled by a sudden and overwhelming desperation for that to be the case. "A very big, white duck. They might have mistaken that for a swan. Or a goose—they look even more like swans. Would a goose be allowed to—?"

"Enough!"

Ori fell silent as the word snapped through the room. Standing up, Raynard dragged Ori to his feet, too. An ornate mirror filled a gap between two towering book cases. Raynard held him facing it.

His master glared out of the reflection at him, his expression so very serious. Ori barely recognized the other man standing with him.

The fluffy, mottled hair was gone. Sleek, white strands had taken their place, each one laying neatly against his scalp in a way his fledgling colors never had.

“I was there,” Raynard bit out. “You’re a swan. It’s not an opinion. It’s not a mistake. It’s a statement of fact.” The words were calmer, but it was a kind of forced calm that was barely able to contain the anger that still boiled in his master beneath it.

The hawk sat back down with a sigh, his hand running through his own hair, disordering the dark brown waves.

Ori swallowed as he lowered himself once more to kneel at his master’s feet. While uncertainty surrounded him, he latched on to what he could depend on when all else failed. “You said you’d put the collar back on, sir.”

Raynard didn’t answer immediately. “If the ceremony had gone as we expected, I would have,” he said, almost emotionlessly.

“But not on a swan...” Ori whispered, as much to himself as the other man.

“A hawk can’t own a swan, Ori. It would never be permitted, and even if it was, it wouldn’t be right. That’s not what—I’m not what you need now.”

Ori’s eyes dropped closed. He couldn’t think. Couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. He blinked his eyes open as he felt Raynard lean forward in his seat. He stood up. Ori stayed on his knees, hands slipping down his master’s body until it rested on his master’s trouser leg just above his shoe.

Raynard stepped forward, fabric slipping out of Ori’s hold on him as he went. “Let your true nature take over and you’ll be fine,” Raynard said as he crossed the library. “The elders will take good care of you now. They’ll make sure you’ll have everything you want.”

He closed the door behind him as he left the room.

Ori’s eyes fell shut. There was only one thing he wanted, and he doubted any of the elders could provide him with it.

He wanted his master.

Chapter Ten

“Sire?”

Ori looked up.

Mr. Hamilton stood next to him. The eagle’s eyes moved from him to the empty chair he still knelt in front of and back again.

“Would you like to see your rooms, sire?”

“Rooms?” Ori repeated blankly.

“A suit of rooms on the upper floor has been set aside for your use, sire,” Mr. Hamilton informed him.

Ori just stared at him. He already had a room—the butler’s old bedroom at his master’s house. “Mr. Raynard...?”

“Has already left the nest,” Mr. Hamilton finished for him.

Ori closed his eyes. When he finally found the strength to open them again, the empty chair before him filled both his field of vision and his world. He ran his hands over the cushioned seat as if that might somehow summon up his master, like a genie from a lamp.

“Did he leave any orders for me, sir?” he asked, not able to make the words anything more than a whisper.

“Sire?”

“Mr. Raynard—before he left, did he leave any orders for me, sir?” Ori repeated, with all the strength he could muster. His hand tightened into a fist against the cushion top.

“You’re no longer under any obligation to obey Raynard’s orders.”

Ori looked up at the older man.

“You have every avian’s sincere apology for being forced to serve a lower ranking species of...”

Ori shook his head, unwilling to hear anyone speak of his time with his master that way. Mr. Hamilton trailed off. For a long time, they both remained in frozen silence.

Finally, Ori found words. “What do you think my master would be pleased with me for doing now, sir?”

“I... think he'd wish you to see your rooms, sire.” Uncertainty made the Scottish accent more pronounced, softening the words a little.

Ori dropped his gaze. Part of him was aware that he couldn't remain kneeling before an empty chair forever—no matter how much he might wish he could. He slowly dragged himself to his feet.

His knees weren't steady, they only trembled more violently as he was forced to make his way through the crowds of men that lurked outside the door. Dozens of pairs of eyes raked over every inch of his body. The fact that he wore more than he had while he served at the nest did nothing to reassure him. His neck was bare. The collar gone. Mere clothes couldn't help him forget that.

A lifetime passed before the crowd thinned out, and Hamilton finally stopped next to a high set of double doors. The older man opened one of them, and stepped back to allow Ori through first, for all the world as if he were the servant.

“Anything that you dislike will be changed as soon as possible.”

Ori looked at him, then at the space around him. As the eagle led him through one opulent room after another, Ori couldn't think of a single word to say. It was all rich furnishing and marble, all gilt and shiny surfaces. Habit made Ori look for dust and work to do. There was none.

Eventually, there was nothing else for the eagle to show him.

“If there's anything you wish for, you need only mention it to one of the servants, sire.” He indicated one of the elaborate bell pulls and, with that parting shot, the eagle was gone.

Ori gazed helplessly around the marble coated lobby that linked all the other rooms in the suite. When he lifted a hand to his neck, his fingers were shaking. He covered his mouth with his opposite palm, not sure if he was fighting back a scream or sickness. Very slowly, he lowered himself to the floor.

He had no idea how long he sat there, the cold from the marble tiles seeping into both his bones and his soul. Eons seemed to pass before he could pull himself back to his feet and stumble toward the door.

Ori pushed open the painted woodwork, just enough to peek out into the hallway of the main nest.

A servant immediately rushed forward to open it further. Ori stood on the threshold, not sure what to say to the other man.

“Is there something you wish for, sire?” the pigeon finally hinted. “Or someone you wish for?”

Ori blinked at him.

“Any avian would consider it a privilege to—”

“No!” The word shot out of Ori’s mouth, as he realized what the other man was actually offering him.

The servant’s eyes opened very wide, he flinched as if he thought he was about to be struck. Ori recalled doing the same thing himself, so many times. But he never remembered anyone reacting to him that way.

Ori shook his head, retreating from the servant, back into the safety of his suite. At the last moment, a whispered little memory tugged at the edge of his consciousness.

“Everet!”

The servant continued to stare at him, blatant fear in his eyes.

“There’s a raven called Everet,” Ori managed to say, a little more calmly. “I…ask him if he’ll speak to me, please?”

“Immediately, sire.” The servant offered him a bow, before taking off down the hallway as fast as his legs would carry him, his bare feet silent on the thick carpet.

Tugging the door closed behind him, Ori sealed himself in his rooms, away from the craziness that seemed to reign outside.

He was still pacing the hallway when a tap sounded on the huge door. He rushed across to open in.

Everet stood outside. One of the rooms Mr. Hamilton had displayed to him was a lounge. Not sure what else to do with him, Ori led the raven in there and directed him to one of the seats by the fireplace.

Far too much nervous energy raced through him for him to think about sitting down, he fidgeted in the center of the room, all the things he’d planned to say to Everet deserting him.

“You wished to speak to me, sire?”

Ori swallowed. “You know my master, sir,” he blurted out.

“I’m acquainted with Mr. Raynard, sire,” the raven rephrased carefully, watching his host the way Ori thought other men might watch an unexploded bomb.

“You know where he lives?”

Everet nodded. “Yes, sire.”

“Will you take him a message? I...”

Everet hesitated.

“Please, I...” Ori had no idea what to say.

Another moment of silence passed before Everet nodded his willingness. “If that’s what you wish me to do, sire.”

The suite was well stocked with everything anyone could want. It didn’t take Ori long to track down a pen and some paper. Working out what to write was far more difficult.

He stared at the paper for a long time, while Everet sat patiently on the other side of the room.

Half an hour had passed before Ori was able to carry the sealed envelope across to the raven.

“Thank you, sir.”

The other shifter said nothing as he reached out and took the message from him. On the inside of Everet’s wrist was the neatly tattooed raven’s mark.

Ori looked quickly away from it, but even after the other man had left the suite, the image of the identifier was still fresh in his mind.

Looking down at his own wrist, he re-traced the line of the duck’s mark that his master had painted on him once before. He had no idea what a swan’s identifier looked like. He had no interest in finding out.

Covering his right wrist with his opposite hand he fought down the wave of panic that the idea brought with it. He was never going to have that kind of mark on his skin.

He was going to be marked as a duck. That’s what his master wanted, that’s what he was. Out of the corner of his eye, Ori caught sight of his reflection in the mirror in the lobby, and looked quickly away from it. He was going to be a big white duck. And he knew exactly how a duck lived while he was in the nest. He’d simply go back to that life until his master was willing to come back and fetch him.

Simply having a plan caused some of his panic to fade away, replaced by a pathetic excuse for the safety he felt when he was with his master.

Pushing open the door once more, he didn’t give the servant lurking in the hallway time to hold it for him or offer him any other kind of service. He strode past him, only vaguely aware

of the other avian trailing after him as he rushed down one set of stairs, then another, heading straight toward the kitchens.

Heads turned to watch him go, but men also stepped back to clear his way. A flock of crows making their way into the dining room scattered at the very sight of him hurling himself down the corridor. Ori paid them no attention. Striding into the kitchen, he caught sight of the chef on the other side of the room. A moment later he was at the older man's side.

The gull turned toward him. He was about to speak when he stopped himself short. He offered Ori a deep bow. "Sire—"

"Do you have any work for me, sir?" Ori cut in.

Part of him knew that interrupting the notoriously bad tempered gull was risking a whipping. There was a section of him that would have welcomed the punishment as a familiar landmark in a world that had tilted on its axis, tipping everything that was important off its surface. Maybe there was even a piece of him that would have welcomed the chance that enough external pain might have taken his mind off that which already flared deep inside him.

The gull looked past him to the servants that surrounded them. The kitchen was eerily silent, everyone was staring at them, waiting for the chef's reaction.

Ori swallowed down the instinct to beg, even though he knew he'd give in to it eventually, if that was what it took.

The chef looked down. "May I offer my humble apologies for the way you were treated before your true nature was revealed, sire."

Ori shook his head. "You...I..." He looked across the room, to the sinks he'd worked at for so many weeks. Another servant stood in his place, wearing the same scant uniform. There was no room for Ori there anymore. The duckling...the swan took a step back.

The servant from outside his door stood close behind him, he didn't retreat in time to avoid the collision.

Spinning around, stumbling away from him too, Ori fled from the kitchens. The flock of crows were lurking around the entry to the dining area now. The two falcons who'd stopped to speak to Raynard were walking out of one of the meeting rooms further down the corridor. They all turned to gaze at Ori.

Looking from one group of men to the other, Ori tried to think, tried to make his mind function so he could work out what his master would want him to do now.

He knew what kind of service both the crows and the falcons would want from him, that it might be the only kind of service a swan was thought capable of. He closed his eyes for a moment, as the idea of servicing any man but his master cut deep inside him, threatening to tear something out of his very soul.

“Sire?”

Hamilton. Ori felt the eagle approach and step to his side.

“You’re tired after the ceremony. You should rest now.”

The way he said it almost made Ori think it was what his master would want him to do too. Part of what he had written on his note to Raynard came back to the center of his mind. He might not have his master close at hand, but he had his orders. He could still follow them to the best of his ability. Ori nodded his assent.

“Yes, sir.” He should rest now. That was what his master would want him to do. Turning away from both the falcons and the crows, he let Hamilton guide him back to the suite of rooms.

As he found himself alone in the bedroom, Ori lay down on the overly soft mattress and covered his eyes with his hand. His head still ached. His whole body was a mass of pain, and the worst of it all radiated out from inside his mind.

* * * *

Raynard took no notice of the doorbell. It wasn’t going to be Ori, and he had little interest in seeing anyone else.

It rang again, then again, and again.

Standing by the little bar set in the corner of the library, Raynard stared down at the decanters. The amber liquid called to him through the lead crystal. One of the three was ever so slightly different to the others—a replacement tracked down by his submissive after the duckling’s lack of co-ordination laid waste to its predecessor.

Raynard ran his fingers over the faceted glass. It sparkled, just like everything else Ori had turned his attention to while he was under his care...

His care...the hawk shook his head. The younger man would have been far better off without that kind of *care*. He closed his eyes.

The doorbell rang again. In another version of the world, Ori would have answered it for him. Memories flooded back of the last time he’d been unable to do so. Pushing himself away from the bar, Raynard strode through the hallway and wrenched open the front door, if only to make the blasted ringing stop.

Everet stood on the door step. He silently offered him an envelope.

Raynard stared at the rich cream paper. The coat of arms belonging to the nest was embossed on the flap.

Of course, the elders weren't going to be pleased with what had passed between a hawk and their new swan, either. He took the envelope and nodded his dismissal to the younger man, unable to raise the inclination to speak.

He was about to slam the door when the raven stopped him short.

"Would you like me to wait for a response, sir?"

Holding back a sigh, Raynard left the door open as he turned away from the younger man and tore open the letter.

The moment he saw the handwriting, he knew it was no summons from the elders. He'd seen pages and pages filled with those same neat letters, line after line of the same words repeated over and again.

Ori.

For a full minute, that was all that really sunk in. It was from Ori. Raynard reached out to steady himself against the banister. Slowly lowering himself to sit on the third stair, he forced his mind to take in the words before him.

Sir,

I don't know what the elders saw during the ceremony. I don't know what you saw either. None of it matters to me. I didn't grow up among my own species. I have no idea what I should be like—you can make me into whatever you want me to be.

I'll never shift from my human form. You can place whatever mark you'd approve of inside my wrist. I can be whatever it is you need me to be—whatever is best able to serve my master and make him happy.

I might never have given you reason to believe me, sir, but if you are willing to give me just one more chance, I'll show you that I can be the kind of submissive you want to own. I'll do anything. I'll accept whatever punishment you see fit, and I'll take any place in your life you are willing to grant me.

I am your submissive, your servant, your—whatever you want me to be.

If you send for me, I'll come to you, sir.

Please...

Yours, Ori.

Then, a little way further down the page, in a slightly less steady hand.

The most valuable possession my master owns is his submissive. I will take great care that no harm comes to my master's submissive whenever he is not there to watch over me himself.

Raynard closed his eyes, his head still bowed over the paper.

If there was one fact that couldn't be denied, it was that Ori truly hadn't been raised among shifters. He had no idea what any of it meant—what it really meant for a man to force another avian to live outside his true place in the world.

Well, there was no doubt he'd learn quickly, now. The paper crumpled within the hawk's grip. He'd learn his true place in the world, then he'd understand how much he should hate his former master, what sort of cruelty the man he seemed to think so much of was capable of.

Raynard forced his eyes back open as he felt the other man's affection for him slip away as if it had never existed. Ori couldn't be blamed for that. He really was the one innocent victim in the middle of it all, poor little sod.

Standing up, Raynard strode across to the door.

Everet still waited on the step.

Raynard stared blankly at him until the younger man finally cleared his throat. "The return message, sir."

"You may tell the swan that there's no return message and that I've no intention of visiting the nest in the foreseeable future." He closed the door before the raven had a chance to reply.

Leaning against the woodwork, it was all too easy to remember the way the fledgling had jumped when the door had thudded into its frame on the first night he brought him to the house.

Turning away, Raynard looked for some place of solace away from his memories. Wandering through the house only took him on a tour through different days they had shared there. Each room bore the duckling's...the swan's touch. The library. The study. The attic room.

Raynard paced through each of them in turn, pouring out a whole glass full of whiskey as he moved through the library, before his wandering finally took him down the stairs to the servant's quarters.

The kitchen was as immaculate as ever. The floor leading to the butler's quarters as well scrubbed as all the others in the house. The little bedroom seemed to bear less evidence of the supposed submissive than any other room.

It had an unlived in feel, much like the entire house had before Ori arrived. The submissive hadn't spent a great deal of time there for what felt like a lifetime. Every night had been spent in his master's bed for months.

He should never have been working below stairs in the first place. Raynard turned away from the sight of the neatly made bed.

In spite of everything, part of him wanted nothing more than to race back to the nest, to take the newly fledged avian in his arms and tell him everything was fine. Except that wouldn't make anything fine. It would just make everything worse for his lover, confuse him even further. He needed certainty now—from men who could teach him about what he really was.

There was nothing his master could do for him now but stay as far away from him as possible. If he couldn't remain away from the nest until his return would be painless for himself, then he could at least stay away until his return wouldn't cause any further pain to the swan.

Turning his back on the kitchens, Raynard tossed back the last of the whiskey in the bottom of his glass and went in search of the rest of the decanter.

Chapter Eleven

Frederick Raynard hadn't been brought up to believe that hawks were inclined toward masochism, the way some of the other avian species were, but he couldn't think of any other reason why he'd drag himself all the way across town to visit the nest that night either. It wasn't as if he hadn't known it would feel like his soul was being torn apart.

Staring across the nest's grand hall, he ran his eyes slowly over the raised platform occupying the opposite end of the towering space. The chairs lined up on the stage were all empty, but Raynard was acutely aware they wouldn't remain that way for long. The hawk's hand clenched into a tight fist as he tried to keep his impatience at bay. In just a few minutes, the elders would file in, and they wouldn't be alone.

Another shifter stepped in front of Raynard then, blocking his view for several seconds before he continued on his way.

The whole space was full of men, a palpable air of expectation buzzing through the crowd. Raynard felt many of the pairs of eyes that should have been staring toward the stage, turn their attention toward him as they passed by.

Whispers swirled around the room. *Tried to master the swan... Calculated insult... Worse kind of cruelty... Servant... Shouldn't be allowed... Something should be done...* The hawk ignored them all.

Folding his arms across his chest, Raynard tried to be patient. All he needed was a glimpse of his fledgling... He held back a sigh. No, not his fledgling. The boy was a fully fledged member of shifter society now. It was no longer any more appropriate to call him that, than it was to refer to Ori as his submissive.

He wasn't a fledgling, and he wasn't Raynard's *anything*, no matter what the crumpled note in the inside pocket of the hawk's jacket might suggest.

The dominant took a deep breath. All he needed was a glimpse of the swan, just so he could know that the younger man was okay, that Ori was safe and well and thriving in his new

life—in the life he should have been living ever since he'd found his way to the community of shifters.

A commotion at the other end of the room sent waves of chattering through the gathered men. Silence descended in its wake. For several consecutive lifetimes, Raynard couldn't catch a single glimpse of those who entered the hall.

Heart racing faster and faster, the hawk kept his gaze fixed on the steps leading up onto the raised seating area as prayers rushed through his head.

Hamilton stepped up first. Another elder followed him, then another. Then...

Ori.

Raynard's breath caught in his throat. He'd forced himself to accept the fact that the man he saw wouldn't match his memories of his lover. Of course, he'd have changed. His attitude, his mannerisms, everything would have altered as he found out who he was. Raynard had prepared himself to see a swan.

It was the image of the younger man growing stronger and happier as he settled into his new position in the nest that had kept him going all the way through the longest month of his life, as he forced himself to stay on the other side of town. But the mental picture he'd pushed to the front of his mind every time he felt the younger man's absence couldn't have been further from the truth.

The figure that dragged himself onto the stage was no vision of health and happiness. His skin was pale, and it was nothing to do with his adult plumage coming through. Dark shadows circled his eyes. He'd lost weight. His body was all tension, all nerves, every movement tinged with something close to panic. All the opulent clothing in the world couldn't hide the way he felt.

The boy didn't want to be up there on the stage in front of all those people, and it didn't take a man as familiar with his moods as his former master was, to see that he was barely hanging on to his composure.

Hamilton whispered something to him. Ori glanced at the high backed chair set in the center of the row of seats—the one that looked far more like a throne than anything else. He sat down upon the very edge of it.

The other elders took their positions, sitting and standing around him. His backside had barely hit the velvet cushion before the first shifter approached the little set of steps leading directly toward Ori.

The man dropped to one knee before the swan's chair. Ori's eyes opened very wide as he stared down at him, as if the man might reach out and bite him at any moment. Hamilton whispered into Ori's ear once more.

The swan extended a hand toward the other man. A kiss was placed on the back of his knuckles. It was nothing more than one avian paying due homage to the arrival of a shifter bearing a truly exalted rank. Raynard still felt his throat turn dry as jealousy rushed through him at another man laying hand on his lover. It took every ounce of control he could scrape together to stay where he was.

If it was possible, Ori grew even paler.

Another man knelt before the swan a few seconds later. The process was repeated. Then again, and again. Any hopes Raynard might have had that the younger man would settle into his chair and find some sense of ease, faded.

The swan remained perched uncomfortably on the edge of his seat, his anxiety becoming more and more apparent with every second that passed.

Raynard's control failed him. He stepped forward. A long line of men waited to greet the swan, but those few who outranked Raynard had already knelt for Ori and moved away. The hawk strode past those of a lesser rank without a thought. Mutters and whispers rattled along the queue, but no one tried to stop him.

There was a man at Ori's feet when Raynard reached the front of the line. Ori looked up. Their eyes met over the other shifter's head. Raynard knew that expression. He'd seen it in the younger man's eyes before. He'd been about to bolt, but he froze as he saw his former master standing before him.

The man between them moved away murmuring his subservience to the swan as he went. Raynard stepped forward. He took hold of swan's hand as he lowered himself to one knee on the top step in due homage.

The younger man parted his lips.

"Stay exactly where you are, Ori." Raynard kept his head bowed over his hand as he said it, but he glanced up and met his eyes through his lashes. "It's your duty to complete the tradition. You'll fulfill your duty." He left no room for argument in the statement.

"Yes, sir." The words were whispered back so softly, Raynard, as close as he was to the other man, could barely make them out. No one else could have overheard them. Raynard let the honorific pass between without comment or correction, just that once.

He nodded his approval, just slightly before brushing his lips quickly across the back of the younger man's hand and rising to his feet.

Ori moved as if he intended to follow him.

Please.

When Raynard looked over his shoulder and their gazes locked he heard the word so loudly inside his head, Ori might as well have screamed it.

He pinned the younger man to the seat with nothing more than a look, almost daring the former submissive to disobey his order. Ori subsided back against the rich velvet. Raynard had to force himself to walk away then, each step harder to take than the last, until he was finally able to take up a post in a part of the room where the swan would be able to see him if he was inclined to look in that direction.

If seeing him there gave the swan some sort of courage, it was the least Raynard owed him, after the several kinds of hell a man of his nature must have gone through trying to mold himself into someone suitable for service.

Hamilton stepped forward and whispered something to Ori. For the first time, the smaller man whispered back. More softly spoken words passed between Hamilton and another shifter standing just off the stage.

Raynard lost track of the relay of messages, until someone stepped up beside him.

"Mr. Jones invites you to stay behind after the ceremony to speak with him in private, sir."

Raynard glanced at the servant, as he eventually connected the swan and the surname together. "You may give Mr. Jones my apologies. I'll be leaving the moment the welcoming ceremony ends."

The servant shuffled his feet. Raynard almost thought the little finch would take to his heels and flee. "Mr. Hamilton reminds you that Mr. Jones' rank enables him to order the attendance of any avian at any time."

The poor little bugger obviously thought he was going to get a back hander for being the unfortunate last link in the chain of whispers. Raynard forced himself to offer the servant a brisk nod and keep any of the words he might be inclined to let fly safely tucked away inside his head for those who really deserved to feel their sting.

The finch scurried away. Raynard turned his attention back to the stage. The line was growing shorter now. Those below a certain rank would have to wait for another time and

another ceremony to pay their respects. They hadn't even been allowed into the hall on this occasion.

Before the last man approached Ori, Raynard felt someone take up a position directly to his left. He looked over his shoulder. A huge albatross stared down at him.

"Mr. Hamilton asked me to show you to the swan's drawing room, sir."

Raynard bit back a curse, even as he nodded his acceptance.

Ori had barely left the room, looking over his shoulder with every step, when Raynard found himself being led unceremoniously out of the hall, up the stairs and to a massively oversized set of double doors.

The huge painted panels swung open to reveal a lobby leading to an opulent suite of rooms. Every surface visible through the various doorways glistened and gleamed.

Ori must have worked his fingers to the bone putting it in that condition.

Raynard hesitated just inside the door, mentally cursing himself for a fool. Of course, Ori wouldn't have lifted a finger. He had an army of servants now, ready to cater to his every whim, as well as keep any room he wanted to use, immaculate.

A matching set of doors on the other side of the room swung open. Ori walked in, flanked by several bustling servants. His steps rushed more quickly across the marble floor as he caught sight of Raynard.

The younger man stumbled to a halt barely a step away from Raynard, his face still pale. His hands clenched tightly at his side.

"You came back, sir..." he whispered.

Out of the corner of his eye, Raynard saw yet another servant carry in a tea tray and take it into one of the rooms to his right. Turning away from the swan, the hawk made his way into the drawing room and to the little group of seats where the servant set down the tray.

Ori followed hot on Raynard's heels. When the hawk indicated a chair, the swan sat in it. His new found maturity hadn't yet transformed itself into grace. His movements were jerkier than they had ever been when he was in service.

The swan's servant reached for the tea pot.

Ori sprang forward onto the edge of his seat and snatched the handle away from the other man. Tea splashed from the spout over the edge of the tray and onto the table. "I'll do it!"

"Sire, that's really not—" the pigeon began.

"I know how Mr. Raynard likes his tea," Ori said, his grip on the pot tightening.

For a few seconds it looked as if there would actually be a scrum over the pot. Then the servant dropped his gaze. “Just as you wish, sire.”

“Can...can you make them leave, sir?” Ori whispered, not once glancing up from the pot. “Ori?”

The younger man’s eyes fell closed. “Order them to leave, sir. Please?”

Raynard looked up. Five different servants lurked around the edge of the room, none of them with any clear purpose. “Leave.”

Only one hesitated to obey his commands—the same pigeon who had tried to do battle for the tea pot. “Mr. Hamilton said—”

“And I’m telling you that your master wishes our meeting to be conducted in private. What an eagle wants shouldn’t be your concern while you’re fortunate enough to be in the service of a swan.”

The pigeon dropped his gaze, backed out of the room, and no doubt rushed away to carry tales to Hamilton.

Finally alone with the swan, Raynard turned his attention back to Ori.

“Thank you, sir.”

Raynard studied him very carefully. “You’re allowed to give your own orders to the men who serve you,” he pointed out, as gently as he could. “You don’t need anyone else to do that for you.”

Ori gave the tea things his complete attention for a little while. A little of the hot liquid spilt onto the tray as he poured it, but when he handed it to Raynard, the hawk had to admit Ori had been right—he knew exactly how he liked his tea. Just as he had learned exactly how his master liked everything else while he had been under his care.

“Everyone here is treating you kindly?” he asked.

Ori had wrapped his arms around his waist, as if his grip on his body was the only thing holding him together. He nodded, but he didn’t raise his eyes.

“Look at me.”

Ori slowly did as he was told.

“The whole truth.”

The younger man swallowed. “Everyone’s been very kind, sir.”

“The *whole* truth,” Raynard repeated.

“They won’t let me do anything, sir,” Ori whispered, pain creeping into his expression with the admission.

“What do you mean?”

“They won’t let me work, sir.”

A bitter taste rose to the back of Raynard’s mouth. “It’ll take time for you to get used to your new life.”

Ori shook his head.

“But you will get used to it,” Raynard pushed on. “You’ll see how suited you are to it over time.” Then the swan would realize just how wrong his former master had been about anything and everything he’d offered him while he was under his protection.

Ori obviously wasn’t ready to see that just yet. Raynard found himself scrambling for anything he could say that might make it easier for him. “There are some things you like about your new life, aren’t there?” He wasn’t sure who he wanted to believe that more.

The younger man stubbornly shook his head.

“You have free run of the libraries here, don’t you?” Raynard said, grasping at straws. He knew how much his fledgling had loved the library in his house, and that had been miniscule compared to all those at the nest. “Isn’t that something you like?”

Ori frowned, never lifting his gaze above the top button on Raynard’s shirt.

“And there are plenty of people to look after you, to make sure you’re taken good care of.”

“You could punish me, sir.”

Raynard stared across at the other man as every thought in his head scattered in a different direction.

Ori’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed rapidly. “If you punished me for lying to you about what species I am and—”

“Ori—”

“And, for all the things I did wrong that you didn’t punish me for at the time because you thought it would be cruel to expect more from a duck—you could punish me for them too.” He lifted his gaze to meet Raynard’s eyes for a moment. “You could expect more from me now, you wouldn’t have to put up with my stupidity or my clumsiness. I’ll—”

“You will stay at the nest and get used to your new place in the world,” Raynard cut in, as instinct took over. It sounded far too much like an order, as if he still believed he had the right to order the younger man about.

Raynard closed his eyes for a moment, while Ori sat opposite him looking so scared and lost, it was almost impossible to believe he wasn't actually that ugly little duckling the elders had thought they'd seen in him the first time he'd tried to shift his form in front of them.

"You can do anything you want," Raynard told him. "There's not a single man in this nest who can disobey you. Anything you want, your slightest whim, it will all be catered to. Don't you see you have everything now?"

"Back in the attic, you said that I was suited to service, sir, and—"

"And I was wrong," Raynard snapped. "I told you about what role *ducks* enjoy. You're a swan! The elders must have spoken to you about what that means. Can't you see that changes everything?"

"I know it changes the way you feel about me, sir," Ori whispered.

The other half of the sentence might have remained inside the other man's head, but it still reached Raynard loud and clear—the discovery hadn't changed the way his submissive felt about him in the least. He had to look away then, scared himself of what the younger man might see in his former master's eyes if he held his gaze for too long.

"I wouldn't expect you to continue to be so kind to me, sir."

Helpless in the face of the other man's pain, Raynard looked back to him.

"I could move back to the servants' quarters. I wouldn't bother you or take up any of your time. I'd stay out of your way and..."

"Ori," Raynard began.

"I could take care of my upstairs duties when you were out. You wouldn't even have to set eyes on me and—" Each word was more desperate than the last.

"That's not what—"

"And what you said about having more servants, you could do that, sir. You could have someone else who would be what I was to you. I wouldn't fuss about that. I could serve you both, if that was what you wanted, and—"

"Enough!" Raynard snapped.

Ori fell silent, his eyes closed very tight, his teeth cutting into his bottom lip as he bit down harshly upon the sensitive skin.

His former master's presence wasn't helping him. Raynard saw that, then. He'd hurt the younger man so badly by taking him under his care, and teaching him how to be someone he was never intended to become. And now every extra second he spent with him, was only going to

make everything worse for the younger man, make it harder for him to fight his way out of all the training Raynard had pushed on him and emerge into the man he was truly destined to be.

It was far too soon. He should never have come to the nest.

Raynard stood up.

Ori opened his eyes. He made to rise to his feet too, but Raynard put his hand on his shoulder to keep him where he was.

“Sir?” the younger man asked again.

“I’m sorry,” Raynard whispered. It didn’t fix anything, there weren’t any words that could, but he said it anyway. And he turned, and walked away from the younger man before his will to do so gave out and he became a bigger bastard than ever.

He didn’t look over his shoulder once as he strode from the room. His pace only got quicker as he walked down the corridor.

He wasn’t running away. In his own mind, he was very clear about that fact. He wasn’t running away, he was simply putting himself as far away as he could from the younger man, before he ended up doing even more damage to the fragile swan’s soul than he already had.

* * * *

Ori stared down at the tea tray for a long time, not really seeing it, but unable to look away either.

He was vaguely aware of a door opening and closing behind him, of someone walking across the room toward him, but it wasn’t his master. He knew Raynard’s footsteps, he knew the way the atmosphere in a room changed when the hawk entered it.

It wasn’t Raynard, and right then, Ori couldn’t bring himself to believe that anyone else mattered.

Mr. Hamilton sat down opposite him, in the chair his master had so recently vacated. “The meeting went well, sire?”

Ori shook his head as he dragged his gaze from the pot. “He hates me...”

Mr. Hamilton’s expression was as hard to read as always. He seemed to study Ori for a long time. “What did you hope would be the outcome?”

Ori stared down at his master’s cup of tea once more. He’d barely taken a sip of it.

What had he hoped for...? That the other man might somehow agree to take him back. That all of this was some horrible mistake and he might wake up from the nightmare of the last month to find everything had gone back to being as it used to be between them.

“Sire?” The hawk prompted.

“I thought I might be able to convince him to change his mind, sir,” he confessed.

“About what?”

Ori closed his eyes. “Before he found out what I really am, Mr. Raynard said that...”

The older man just waited there while Ori fought against his own mind, for words that might make some sort of sense of everything.

“He said that after the ceremony, he’d give me a permanent collar—I’d have a permanent place in his house.”

“As his servant?” Hamilton prompted.

“As his submissive, sir,” Ori whispered. “He...we...”

“You’re in love with him,” Mr. Hamilton finished for him.

Ori didn’t deny it, the strength to try and lie about it wasn’t in him anymore.

The silence stretched out. The tea grew cold on the tray between them and neither of them said a word

“Perhaps Raynard merely needs to be reminded how good a submissive you were, sire,” Mr. Hamilton said eventually, the words sounding loud and harsh after the extended hush.

Ori couldn’t meet the eagle’s eyes. Maybe that wasn’t the problem, maybe Raynard had simply had time to remember that he wasn’t a very good submissive. “I made lots of mistakes, sir.”

“If Raynard wasn’t satisfied with your progress, he would never have spoken to you about a permanent collar,” the eagle said.

Silence reigned once more. As much as Ori wanted to believe it, there had been a finality in his master’s leaving that was impossible to wipe from his mind.

“Tell me about the time you spent with him, sire.”

Ori hesitated. “I don’t know what you want me to say, sir.”

“There’s no wrong answer,” Mr. Hamilton said, with the kind of patience that seemed to come so easily to him, now that he wasn’t speaking to an ugly little duckling. “Just tell me how things were between you and Raynard.”

Part of Ori wasn’t sure if he should be talking about his master with a man he still found hard to trust, even if they had spent a great deal of time in each others’ company since that disastrous shifting ceremony.

A much larger part of him, the section of his mind that had been replaying all the time he'd spent with his master over and over inside his brain, couldn't resist the invitation to get some of those memories out of his head and into the real world.

They were real memories, not the idle fantasies of a submissive. Things had been that way between him and his master—not just for an hour or two, but for months. It was the truth, and he couldn't lose his faith in that as well as everything else.

"He was a fantastic master, sir."

Hamilton nodded to him to continue.

Still not quite sure what to say, Ori simply let the first words that came into his head pass his lips without trying to edit them en route.

"He was so kind to me, sir. Patient, and strong and he taught me about..." He closed his eyes then.

"Go on," Hamilton pushed.

"He taught me that who I was, wasn't anything to be ashamed of. Submission is something a man can take pride in—it takes strength to commit to following another man that way. Loyalty is as important as leadership and..." Ori sighed. "That was before, sir...when he thought I was a duckling."

He forced himself to lift his gaze and look across at the other man, trying to get some sense of what the eagle might think of him and his rambling recollections.

"Did he ever punish you, sire?" The question was asked very carefully.

Ori answered it honestly. He recounted the story of the china cabinet, and a dozen other memories of occasions large and small. The leader of the nest didn't seem to be bored by them. He listened vigilantly to every word, as if it were the most important conversation he had ever had with another man.

Finally, he seemed to run out of questions.

With his head swirling with all the memories the eagle had dredged up, Ori took a deep breath and tried to find the kind of mental balance his master had inspired in him so easily.

Then Hamilton found another question for him. "You're aware that your new station in the nest means that you can summon any member of the avian community to attend you, in any way, at any time, and for any reason?"

Ori nodded. The facts of the matter had been explained to him several times, even if he still couldn't bring himself to like any of them.

“That means you could summon Raynard here, if you were inclined to remind him just how well you suited each other.”

Ori frowned across the table at him, trying to see where the joke was leading.

“Do you think that’s something you’d like to do, sire?” Mr. Hamilton pushed, not sounding the least bit like he was heading for a punch line.

“I don’t think Mr. Raynard would be pleased with me if I did that, sir.”

“Perhaps not,” Mr. Hamilton allowed. “But perhaps it would be worth him being displeased with you for a little while, if it meant you’d be able to see more of him in the future? Maybe even come to some sort of arrangement with him...”

Ori hesitated as he reached out to straighten the items on the tray. The aches in his joints made the movement painful, but that wasn’t important right then. “I could make things the way they used to be, sir? I could serve him?”

Hamilton nodded. “No one can deny you anything, sire. If a swan truly wants to serve, no one has any right to try to stop him.”

Ori nodded, very slowly as the idea started to take shape inside his head.

Mr. Hamilton smiled. It wasn’t the same as having his master smile at him, but it gave Ori just a little confidence in the possibility that he was about to make the right decision.

Chapter Twelve

Ori's hands were shaking.

The swan stared at where his fingers were wrapped around the edges of the heavy silver tray, but he couldn't quite steady them, no matter how hard he tried.

Tearing his gaze away from them, he nodded to the servant standing by the door leading into the dining room. Stepping inside, he walked across to the table, never once looking in Raynard's direction. Setting the tray down, he served the food, settling the plate carefully between the cutlery and glassware he'd carefully arranged there earlier that day.

Raynard really had answered his... Hamilton had referred to it as a summons, Ori thought of it more as a plea to be allowed to see his master. Either way, the hawk was there. Ori felt the older man's gaze travel over him as the hawk observed him from the other side of the room.

It was his favorite meal. It was cooked perfectly. After yet another long day battling to set his uncle's maze of business affairs in order—work that Ori was well aware his master had hated even more with every month that had passed, he had to be hungry, but he made no move to approach the table.

"May I take your coat, sir?" Ori whispered, his voice raw with nerves he wasn't capable of hiding.

Raynard slipped his jacket off his shoulders, but he laid it over the back of the chair closest to him rather than let a swan take it from him.

Ori dropped his empty hand back to his side. The movement sent pain flaring along his shoulders.

"What do you mean all this to prove?" Raynard asked eventually.

"I'm still capable of serving you, sir."

Raynard shook his head. He was just about to turn on his heel and walk out of the room, when desperation gave Ori the courage to speak up again.

"Mr. Hamilton said that I'm allowed to insist that you give me a chance, sir."

Raynard turned back to him.

Ori quickly looked down. "Just a chance, sir?" There was no word for it but begging, duck or swan, he knew he wasn't too proud to beg if that's what it took.

The hawk's hand clenched into a fist at his side, but he said nothing.

"Have you eaten, sir?" Ori tried, he didn't look like he had eaten in days. The older man had lost weight. He didn't look like he'd slept in days, either.

Raynard took a step toward the table and toward his former submissive at the same time. "Have you?"

"Sir?"

"Eaten," Raynard translated, waving a hand toward the table he'd set for one.

Ori shook his head. He wouldn't have kept it down if he tried.

Very slowly, Raynard took his seat. Relief rushed through Ori's veins, almost making him light headed with the simple pleasure of his master being close and once more feeling all was right with his world. His hand was still shaking as he poured the water into his master's glass. It was far more luck than judgment that none spilled across the carefully ironed cloth.

He stepped back then, folding his hands behind him to wait for another order.

The rest position, the clothes his master had given him, the very sight of his master combined with the smell of the food, all combined to bring the memories of the meals they'd shared together rushing through Ori's mind. That formal meal in the dining room before they'd visited the club. The first meal they'd shared in the kitchen, before he'd had any idea that his master might one day consider him to be anything other than a simple servant. The takeaway they'd shared after his fall from grace...

"Come here."

Ori stepped forward. Raynard only had to glance at the floor at his side to have Ori kneeling there. Taking a fork full of food from the plate, Raynard offered it to Ori's lips, just as he had the last time the submissive thought his master was too angry with him to share a meal with him.

The swan parted his lips, and let the hawk feed him, quick to relish every hint of dominance his former master was willing to offer him, every bit of submission he was allowed to display for him. For just a little while, it felt as if nothing had changed.

When the last of the food disappeared from the plate. Neither of them moved. The room itself seemed to hold its breath.

"One night."

Ori blinked up at the hawk as he tried to follow his meaning and failed.

“One night together, to give us some sort of...closure on what happened between us before we knew your true nature.”

One night...

It hadn't been what Ori had hoped for, but he still wasn't too proud to take whatever he could get from his master and cherish every second of it. If one night was all the older man wanted to give him... The younger man closed his eyes for a moment, pushing away all thought of the days that would come after that night, of the times when his master wouldn't be there.

Ori nodded his acceptance of any tiny concession the hawk was willing to make.

Raynard stroked his fingers through his new head of white hair as he made Ori look up and hold his master's eye.

“You understand that this is about finding a way to move on? It's not about going back.”

Ori nodded again, if only because he knew that was the only way to get that one night.

“And after tonight, you'll stop fighting who you really are. You'll stop refusing to be properly marked as a swan. You'll stop refusing to stretch your wings.”

Ori stared up at him, wondering if he had stopped to speak to Mr. Hamilton on his way up to his suite.

Raynard made a rough, displeased noise in the back of his throat. “Do you really think I wouldn't notice your wrist is still bare—or how much pain you're in?”

Ori closed his eyes, and nodded his acceptance of those conditions too.

Standing up, Raynard stepped away from the dining table. Ori stayed on his knees, his hands still behind his back, waiting hopefully for an order—any order.

“On your feet.”

Ori rose. He stepped closer to his master. His hands stayed behind his back. Raynard stroked his knuckles down his cheek, then his throat.

No collar blocked the caress. Ori pushed the fact away as Raynard's hand slid behind his neck and pulled him forward. Ori's lips parted under the kiss, the moment their mouths met.

For just a fraction of a second, Raynard seemed to hesitate, to hold back. The world balanced on a knife edge, and Ori had no idea which way it would fall.

Without any warning, the hawk's grip on him tightened, he dragged him closer, almost pulling him off his feet. The older man took complete possession of Ori's mouth. Holding Ori tight against his larger body, the dominant thrust his tongue past his lips and devoured him.

A mewling whimper escaped from Ori as he leaned into the kiss and tried to lift himself onto his toes to bring their bodies in line. Raynard's other hand roved over his body, seeming to want to touch every inch of him, to own every bit of him, duck, swan or anything else.

Ori's hands stayed behind his back, even as his feet left the floor as Raynard lifted him into his arms.

"Bedroom," Raynard demanded.

Ori looked over his shoulder, toward the door. Raynard didn't put him down. Pushing the door open, he carried him through the lobby and into the opulent bedroom at the end of his suite.

Kicking the door shut behind him, Raynard strode quickly across to the bed and tossed him down. Ori sprawled on the mattress, his hands springing from behind his back to try and brace himself on the satiny blankets.

He was only alone on the bed for a second, then his master was with him, above him, covering Ori's body with his own.

"Naked."

He didn't pull away and give Ori room to follow the order. Ori had to scramble around beneath Raynard, trying to wriggle out of the clothes in the tiny space he was granted.

His movements only grew more clumsy as Raynard began to run his hands over every new inch of exposed skin. But all that really registered in Ori's mind was that his master wanted to touch him—he really wanted him. He wasn't humoring a swan because of some mistaken idea of rank.

Raynard wanted his submissive.

A frustrated whimper escaped from the swan as he struggled to obey the hawk's order. The moment he managed to kick away the last of his clothes, he reached for his master. And in that moment, that's what Raynard was—his master. They both knew it. Even if they could only give in to it for one more night, it was the purest form of truth Ori had ever known.

Raynard was his master, and Ori belonged to him as thoroughly as any man ever could.

His preparations had been optimistic. Lube had been placed in pride of place on the bed side cabinet.

The hawk snatched up the tube and smeared his fingers. Ori pulled his knees toward his chest in offering. Gasping his pleasure, he pushed back against Raynard's fingers from the first,

encouraging him to thrust them more deeply, more roughly inside him as his master started to prepare him.

The hawk's fingers worked quickly. As he took away his hand and smeared more lube onto his shaft, there was no time to be wasted. That knowledge was right in the front of Ori's mind, and he could see it in Raynard's too. If one night was all they could have, there wasn't a moment to squander.

Ori gasped as his master thrust into him, hard and determined. All he could see in Raynard's eyes, as the hawk stared down at him, was dominance and possession. He gazed back at him in return, completely mesmerized.

He'd never thought he'd see the other man look at him that way again, and all he could do then was glory in it, burn it into his memory so he'd never forget how it felt. Several lifetimes seemed to pass before the other man began to pull away from him. Ori reached up to him, clinging to his shoulders through the older man's shirt, desperate not to have him slip through his fingers again.

Nothing he did could stop the other man's retreat. Then, just as true panic started to swirl inside him, Raynard pounded back into him. The older man moaned his pleasure as Ori clenched tightly around him.

Raynard didn't even try to shake Ori's grip on him away. He let him cling, and without the other man's disapproval to motivate him, Ori didn't have enough strength to ease his grip on his own. His fingers bit into his master's muscles as harshly as Raynard had ever held him.

Being in the same room with his master after so long had been more than enough to have him hard ever since the hawk had arrived in the suite. By the second thrust Ori was already desperate.

Raynard plunged into him again. The soft mattress cushioned the other man's movements. Ori squirmed against the suffocating comfort that crept around him as he slid against the expensive silks.

He closed his eyes, imaging they were back in the cold little attic room. A hard mattress. Serviceable sheets. The chill breeze sneaking in through the open window. He gasped as Raynard's grip on him tightened.

The hawk's mouth covered his. When Ori failed to instantly part his lips, the dominant nipped at them. His tongue thrust into Ori's mouth and laid its claim to him.

Mewing, scrabbling to control his own body, even as he helplessly rocked beneath the other man, trying to compliment the rough rhythm his master set, Ori tipped his head back and let the other man take whatever he wanted from him and suddenly it didn't matter where they were.

Permission. When every other thought in Ori's head disintegrated, that one remained. He needed permission to come. In the weeks since his master had left him at the nest, he'd obeyed every rule within his grasp to the letter. His hand hadn't strayed to his own cock once.

He wasn't going to come without permission now.

Raynard's hold on him changed. He pulled back, breaking the kiss as his grip on Ori's body tightened.

"Come!"

More a demand than permission, it raced straight to Ori's cock. He didn't know if the older man knew he was on the edge, he wasn't even sure the dominant cared. He belonged to his master, and he'd come when he was told to.

At his master's command, Ori's orgasm tore through him, seeming to rip apart his mind as more pleasure than any one man could contain exploded inside him. Raynard thrust into him again, as Ori's cum spilled against his stomach.

Every inch of his skin sung out with an overload of sensations. As his master's shaft pushed into him once more, the dominant's clothes rasped against his body, a pure point of reality mixed in with all the cloying softness the elders had tried to wrap him in.

His master hadn't come.

Even as his own ecstasy rushed through him, the thought jumped up and down inside him mind, screaming for Ori's attention.

Raynard almost always gave him permission to come, just as he was going to climax himself. Ori's eyes blinked opened as he looked up at the older man.

He hadn't come.

Raynard pulled away from Ori, very slowly. Ori's hands tightened their grip on his master's shoulders, as he tried to make sense of what was happening and failed. Fear flashed through him. His master really had meant it when he said he had no interest in a swan and...

Raynard said nothing as he turned Ori onto his side and moved to spoon behind him. His slicked shaft kissed against his hole again and Ori's fretting subsided. Steadying his submissive with a hand on Ori's hip, Raynard pushed into him again.

The younger man murmured his pleasure into the pillow as Raynard rocked his way back into him. He knew his master's body well after all the months he'd spent with him. He had so much control, the older man would be able to keep up the slow steady thrusts all night if he wanted to. Maybe he could even keep them up forever.

Ori's hand gripped the sheet in front of him. Forever. At one time he'd really believed that might happen, and he let himself lose himself in the way that had felt.

Raynard's hand reached over him and moved against his skin. It caressed and teased again and again, as if the older man had missed being able to touch him whenever he wanted to, almost as much as Ori had missed the other man doing it.

The swan whimpered softly against the pillow, turning his face into it, so his master wouldn't hear his weakness. Everything was going to be perfect for them. If all his master could grant him was one more night together then, he couldn't ruin it.

"Hush."

Raynard's fingers brushed against his cheek, guiding him to turn his head and look over his shoulder. Their lips met. The kiss was softer now, gentler, his master's mouth reassuring as it caressed.

Ori cautiously parted his lips and let his own tongue creep out to join in. Not to lead, his master would never let him do that, but he let him play a little as he followed behind his master.

One slow, heartfelt thrust after another, Raynard brought their bodies together again and again. He was getting closer to coming. Ori could feel the change in his manner as he tensed. Raynard held back, controlling himself until the last second. A final, deep thrust and his hand returned to Ori's hip, holding him still as he spilled inside him, marking him out as his submissive in the most basic way any man could.

Ori collapsed, exhausted onto the sheet, as he felt the other man pull away. He couldn't even bring himself to reach out and try to stop him anymore. It was over. He knew it then, in a way he'd never really let himself believe before.

Closure apparently felt like someone was driving a stake into his chest and twisting it around, not really killing him, just making Ori wish he would.

Raynard's hand on his shoulder made Ori open his eyes. The hawk guided him to turn around and rest his head against the larger man's chest.

"Just for a little while," Raynard whispered, not quite looking him in the eye.

Ori nodded as he snuggled closer in to the other man's body. He'd slept like that so many times, lulled into slumber by the beat of the other man's heart. Raynard pulled him closer still, as if he couldn't bear the idea of him being torn away from him any more than Ori could.

He closed his eyes as his master slid his fingers through his hair, but he quickly opened them again.

They only had a little while. He wasn't going to waste it sleeping.

"Sleep."

Ori lifted his head, just enough to glance at his master.

"I'll still be here when you wake up," his master promised.

Ori couldn't do anything more than stare up at him. His master had given him an order. He expected him to obey it. They both knew that. Ori reluctantly lowered his gaze and rested his head on his master's chest again as the older man switched off the light.

It was wrong to lie to his master, but he did his best to let his breaths fall into a slow sleeping rhythm while he remained as wide awake as ever.

A few minutes passed and Raynard's body shifted slightly underneath him as his master sighed softly into the darkness.

"Good boy."

The words were barely a whisper. Ori wasn't even sure he'd have heard them if they hadn't vibrated through the other man's chest directly into his ear. He closed his eyes a little tighter. His master was pleased with him.

Curling himself closer against Raynard's body, Ori nuzzled gently against his skin.

"Hush, I've got you," Raynard whispered.

His master still thought he was asleep. It was wrong to take advantage of that, but Ori couldn't help but let out a little whimper, maybe as if he was having a less than pleasant dream, or as if his aching joints were even more painful than they really were.

"Hush," his master whispered to him again, as he gathered him safer against his body. "You're fine. Everything's going to be just fine." He pressed a kiss to Ori's temple.

The submissive sighed slightly as he settled back again, not brave enough to keep up the pretence, no matter how much he wanted his master to continue whispering to him that way.

As much as he wanted to fight sleep when it danced around the edges of his mind, Ori couldn't hold it at bay forever, it wrapped around him, blending with Raynard's hold on him,

lulling him into a deeper slumber than he'd ever been able to manage when he was away from his master's side.

* * * *

Raynard looked up as Ori jerked awake and let out a startled little whimper.

His fledgling reached out, his palm sliding across the sheet where Raynard had slept through the night. The younger man dropped his head back onto the mattress. His whole body shook slightly as his hand fisted around the thick satiny sheet.

"I told you I'd still be here when you woke up." *And masters always keep their promises.* Raynard had never known it could be so hard to keep such silly, sentimental words back.

Masters kept their promises, they looked after the men they took under their protection. Masters...

Except he wasn't Ori's master any more, and he never should have been in the first place.

Ori spun around, tangling himself in the sheets as he turned to face him. Lifting a hand the younger man pushed it through his hair, brushing it back off his face. "Sir..."

"I've already told you that there's no need for you to call me that...sire."

Ori dropped his gaze. Raynard turned his attention back to tying his shoelaces. He'd said he'd still be there, that didn't mean he couldn't be dressed and ready to leave.

"Do you remember your promise?" he asked, doing his best to keep all trace of emotion out of his voice.

Ori was still staring at the bed they'd shared when Raynard looked across to him.

"Ori?" he prompted.

"Yes, sir."

Raynard let the silence stretch out between them.

Ori closed his eyes. "I'm to get the identifier and stretch my wings properly, sir," he recited.

Raynard sat there for several minutes, staring down at his shoe laces as if they contained all the answers in the universe. "It's for the best. You'll see that over time." He couldn't bring himself to add the honorific, couldn't bear to see Ori flinch again, as he did every time he tried to call his former submissive by his new title.

The swan said nothing, quite possibly because there was nothing left for either of them to say. Raynard rose from his seat. His hand clenched into a fist at his side as he forced himself not to

walk across the room toward his lover. He headed for the door instead. His fingers were already on the handle, when the other man finally spoke up.

“If you ever change your mind, sir—I’ll still be here. I’ll still...”

Raynard closed his eyes for a moment, but he didn’t look over his shoulder. Stepping out of the room, he closed the door carefully behind him, resisting the temptation to vent his frustration on the wood work.

One of the servants was clearing away the things from the dining room. He looked up when he heard Raynard walk through the lobby. Raynard couldn’t bring himself to acknowledge the other man’s existence as he strode past him, as fast as he could without breaking into an actual run.

Out of the swan’s quarters, he kept going, suddenly desperate to be out of the building. He had no idea where he’d go, all he knew was the longer he stayed in there, the harder it would be to resist the need to rush back, to snatch Ori out of his bed and take him with him.

“Raynard?”

At the end of the corridor leading to the outside world, Raynard turned and looked over his shoulder. Hamilton stood in the doorway leading into his office. Raynard paused.

Ori wasn’t the only man he had to answer to regarding his earlier behavior. All the avians were accountable to the elders. There was no way he could leave, at any pace, and have them all think he was running away from that fact.

Raynard walked slowly back down the corridor, his pace calm and measured, every trace of emotion wiped from his face. In the other man’s study, he closed the door behind him and stepped up to his desk, no trace of hesitation or reluctance allowed to creep into his body language.

“You wished to speak with me?”

Hamilton picked up a tumbler of scotch and handed it to him. Raynard stared down into the amber liquid for several seconds before tossing it back in one go.

It was a bad idea to start drinking at breakfast time, especially when he was going home to a house that currently contained a very large selection of fine spirits and no fledgling submissive.

Raynard set the glass back on the desk very carefully. His hand didn’t shake. When he lifted his gaze to look at the older man across the desk, his eyes didn’t waver.

Hamilton stared back at him, his fingers steepled together as he rested his elbows on the well cushioned arms of his chair.

“Our swan is...well?” the eagle asked.

Raynard was tempted to pick up the glass and pitch it at the other man. Ori wasn't *ours*, he was Raynard's—his and no one else's.

“Ori will be fine,” he snapped. He would be fine, he reminded himself—providing his former master stayed the hell away from him.

Hamilton made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat.

Raynard sat down opposite him, barely resisting the temptation to tell the other man to get whatever the hell it was he wanted to say over with.

“Ori mentioned that you told him about the role ducks tend to flock towards.”

Raynard shrugged. Picking up the empty glass, he turned it around and around between his fingers. The light caught against the crystal, sparkling and shining as if all was right with the world.

“What would you have told him if you knew he was a swan?”

“Obviously, I wouldn't have wasted my time telling him about ducks,” Raynard bit out.

“You'd have told him about swans instead,” Hamilton said.

“Of course.” Raynard's jaw ached as he ground his teeth together.

“And what would you have said?” Hamilton asked again.

The hawk pushed himself up out of chair. If the elders wanted him raked over the coals for the way he had treated a swan, he'd take it, but not this, not the other man pulling his time with the younger man apart, piece by piece.

“Raynard?”

He shook his head as he reached the window and looked down into the courtyard below.

“Maybe you'd have said that swans are the gentlest souls of all the avian species,” Hamilton suggested. “That they have to be protected and cosseted from the outside world—that they aren't suited to being thrown into society and left to fend for themselves.”

Raynard swallowed down the bitter taste in the back of his mouth, wondering if there was any more scotch where that last double had come from.

“Perhaps you'd have told him that swans are too easily taken advantage of, too easily used and abused by those who don't understand their true worth. They need the constant support and guidance of those who have their best interests at heart if they are to flourish.”

All Raynard could do was close his eyes, as his hand clenched tightly around the glass still in his hand.

“Or maybe you’d have mentioned to him that’s why they are generally appointed some sort of guardian—a man who is often taken from one of the highest ranking local families and—”

Raynard spun around to stare at the other man. “You can’t mean to—”

Hamilton merely gazed back at him over his steepled fingers.

Raynard strode back across the room. His hands slammed down on the other man’s desk. “Don’t you think I’ve already hurt him enough?”

“You consider him damaged, then?”

Raynard took a deep breath. He looked down at the table. The glass had smashed beneath his hand as he’d slammed into the desk. His palm was bleeding where it continued to crush the shards against the mahogany. “He’s strong,” he said, the words barely more than a whispered hope. “He’ll heal.”

“I’ve seen him show strength,” Hamilton agreed.

Raynard took his hand away from the broken glass. Peering into the wounds, he absentmindedly checked them for splinters before wrapping his handkerchief around the broken skin.

“Once,” the eagle added.

Raynard knotted the cotton in place. Red immediately seeped through. Once wasn’t much, but it was something—it was a start that could be built upon.

“That day you brought him back here wearing your collar—he was strong then, strong enough to floor a bullying crow, to take a whipping from his master and enjoy every lash, strong enough to serve you in whatever way you saw fit.”

“And that’s what you want for him now—for a man who was never cut out for service to spend his whole life waiting on a man of lower rank and—”

“It makes him happy.”

Raynard just stared down at him, his hand clenching around the handkerchief until pain shot through him. “It’s not the way things are meant to be.”

“It could certainly be considered an...unconventional arrangement,” Hamilton said.

“Uncon—!”

“Someone who will protect him, lead him, take care of him. Someone who will stand between him and the rest of the world and look after him. Some could say that’s the very definition of a good avian master.”

Raynard glared down at the other man, completely speechless.

“A man who loves without boundaries, an avian whose soul is so pure he wishes to give everything he is and everything he has to one person. A true submissive by any other name...” Hamilton went on.

Raynard shook his head.

“While he was under your care—”

“Swans are not suited to submission!” Raynard was sure of it. It was damn near the only thing he felt sure of right then.

Hamilton seemed to think about that for a moment. “While he was under your care, did you give any thought to what he needed, what he might want from his master?”

“I thought he was a duck,” Raynard yelled as guilt flashed through him. “So did you!”

Hamilton rose to his feet on the other side of the desk, his hands pressing against the old polished wood opposite Raynard’s. “Answer the question!”

“Yes!” Raynard spat out. “Are you satisfied now? Yes, I thought about what my submissive would want. I thought about what he’d need in order to be happy under my protection. I was wrong.”

“You’re sure about that, are you?”

“What?”

“Are you sure you were wrong?” Hamilton shouted.

Raynard simply stared at the other man as if he’d lost his mind.

“The elders have come to the conclusion that your initial instincts toward Ori may have been far closer to the correct method for dealing with him than we originally suspected.”

Hamilton sat back down, as he lowered his voice. “It’s possible that, as a swan, he feels the need to please everyone. Having a master, one person to devote himself to, might be what he needs. Lord knows we’ve tried everything else since we found out what he really was...”

Raynard lowered himself to his seat.

“Do you really think this sort of arrangement was our first choice?” Hamilton asked, annoyance seeping into each word. “Everything we offer him only makes him withdraw further into himself. The only time I’ve seen a hint of life in his eyes is when he speaks about the time he spent serving you.”

“So you try something else,” Raynard demanded. “You don’t give up on a man like Ori just because—”

“You’re in love with him.”

For a moment the hawk could only stare at the elder in slack jawed silence. “Irrelevant,” Raynard finally said, dismissing the fact with a shake of his head as he pulled himself together.

“Hawks have always had a tendency to mate for life.”

“Equally irr—”

“So have swans.”

Raynard stopped short, meeting the other man’s eyes across the table.

“Last night, while he was with you, he was happy?” Hamilton asked.

The whole evening played through Raynard’s mind. The younger man had been so relieved, so grateful for his master’s attention, so desperate, so exhausted. But yes, he’d been happy too, so happy to be back under his master’s care, if only for a little while.

“He’s a swan,” Raynard whispered, just in case the whole world had suddenly forgotten that fact.

Hamilton steepled his fingers once more. “The elders can’t actually force you to take him on, any more than they could force a swan to accept such an arrangement. However, they wished me to make it clear to you before you left, that we would, let us say, look very favorably upon any such understanding...”

Raynard rose to his feet, turned his back on the eagle and all his stupid ideas, and strode across to the door.

Swan. Submissive. Swan. Submissive.

The two words warred against each other inside his head with every step he took, refusing to resolve themselves into one character, one man, one future.

When the door to Hamilton’s office swung closed behind him, Raynard looked both ways down the corridor, toward the exit, toward the swan’s quarters, then back to the exit again.

The decision was his and, submissive or not, in that moment, Ori was dependent upon him making the right choice for them both. It was all very well for the eagle to say his instincts were right.

If only the two sets of instincts warring inside him would agree with each other, then it would be so very simple.

Chapter Thirteen

“Whenever you’re ready, sire.”

Ori closed his eyes. He’d promised. When he forced his eyes opened a few moments later, his gaze went straight to his bare wrist. He’d promised his master that he wouldn’t put off getting the swan’s mark any longer.

He ran his fingertip over the skin just over his vein, tracing out the mark his master had painted on him once before. That combination of lines would have marked him out as a duck. And every time he’d reached out to shake another avians hand, they would have realized what he was, and they’d have looked at him differently. Then the orders would have started to flow and...

Ori took a deep breath and forced himself to picture another kind of pattern in its place. The second he did, it was impossible for him not to imagine the kind of life that would come with it. Whenever he shook hands with people and they saw the swan’s mark branded beneath his skin, that would cause them to treat him differently too.

No orders. There would never be any orders then, nor any work, and never any chance of being taken back under his master’s ownership either.

Ori looked up.

The peacock had already been waiting very patiently for permission to practice his art for over an hour. Ori nipped at his bottom lip. The poor man would have probably had more luck if he’d simply ordered him to stop making a fuss and bloody well do as he was told.

Bowing his head slightly, Ori called his master’s order to the front of his mind and nodded to the other avian.

A deeply upholstered chair was set in the middle of the room, the tattoo artist’s stool was placed next to it, a tray with all his equipment laid out just to its right.

Ori lowered himself into the chair and placed his elbow on the little support built in to the arm rest. It held his wrist out toward the other man like some bizarre sort of sacrificial offering.

“It shouldn’t hurt too much,” the peacock promised, as he settled himself on the stool.

Ori didn't bother to try and explain that his hesitation had nothing to do with that kind of fear. He doubted he'd have been able to explain the real truth of the matter anyway.

If it had been another man offering him a different sort of pain, he knew he'd have welcomed it. He pressed his back against the softly cushioned chair, but no hint of discomfort flared from the lines that had been painted on his back a lifetime before. The marks his master had left on him were just a distant memory.

Ori closed his eyes as the tattooist's needle touched his skin for the first time, not wanting to see the swan's lines grow. The machine whirred away, the only sound in the otherwise silent space, until a sudden click on the other side of the room made him jerk his eyes open. The door swung open. His master strode into the room.

Snatching his hand away from the needle, Ori launched himself to his feet. "Sir!"

He covered his wrist with his opposite hand, not sure exactly what kind of mark had already been placed, if it was the start of something that could be converted into a sign that would please his master, or if he had managed to ruin everything at the very last moment.

"Out."

Rank ceased to matter right then. The artist didn't look to Ori for confirmation. The elaborately dressed young man quickly scurried away, closing the door behind him.

Ori stared wordlessly across the room at his master.

Raynard took a step forward, then another. Moving around Ori, he made himself comfortable in the chair the submissive had just vacated. Never breaking eye contact with the older man, Ori turned to face him, lowering himself to his knees at his feet as his master sat down.

The hawk held out his hand. Ori remained frozen, the beginnings of a tattoo still hidden beneath his palm.

"Show me."

Ori reluctantly offered the limb for his master's inspection. The grip his master took on him was strong as he stared down at the curved line that had already been painted under his skin.

"Can it be fixed, sir?" Ori whispered, very softly.

"Fixed?"

"Turned into the kind of mark you'd like," Ori translated.

Raynard looked back to Ori's wrist. "What convinced you to come here and get this mark today?"

Ori dropped his gaze to his wrist too.

“The truth,” the older man pushed.

“You told me to, sir.”

“Hamilton told you to weeks ago—so did the rest of the elders.”

“They aren’t my master, sir.” Ori closed his eyes as he said it, knowing he didn’t have the right to call him that anymore.

Raynard’s other hand stroked through the Ori’s hair, tugging his head back and tilting his face up to look at his master.

“Tell me what you want—not what you think you should want, not what I’ve told you that you should want, or what rights the elders have told you your station grants you. Tell me what you want.”

Ori swallowed rapidly. “For everything to be the way it was before. For you to be pleased with me. To be your...to be whatever I can be to you now, sir.”

Raynard stared down at him, very seriously. His chest rose and fell as he took a deep breath. “You know that a swan has every right to request anything. Any man in the nest would be expected to do as he wanted—even if he asked for something other than what swans traditionally desire.” The hawk’s hand tightened in Ori’s hair. “If you really wish to belong to me, you can have what you want.”

The submissive dipped his head, suddenly desperate to escape his master’s hold on him.

Raynard’s grip merely tightened around the silky white strands. Ori pulled away, as sharply as his could, tearing his wrist out of the other man’s hand at the same time. He fell backward, sprawling on the tiled floor before scrambling away from his master until his back hit the wall next to the door.

On the edge of his chair, Raynard froze, staring down at him, anger and confusion warring in his eyes.

“No.” It was the first time Ori could ever remember saying the word to his master. He’d had no idea he could ever sound so certain about a word, so determined.

“Ori?”

“No,” he repeated.

“No?”

Looking up, Ori stared horrified into the other man’s eyes. “You really think I’d do that to you, sir?”

Raynard glared back at him, his expression unreadable.

“I don’t want you to keep me because you *have* to, sir,” Ori whispered. “I’d never ask you to do that and...and I won’t let you do that either!” The words flowed out, and there was nothing he could do to stop them, even as panic flared inside him, a true terror that he wouldn’t actually prove strong enough to stop the other man making that kind of sacrifice for him.

“Since when do you ‘let’ your master do anything?” Raynard asked.

There was a teasing note in his voice, but there was an undercurrent to it. Ori immediately dropped his gaze, knowing he was pushing the other man past what he’d tolerate from a submissive. “We both know you don’t need my permission to do whatever you want with me, sir.”

Raynard said nothing.

Ori stared at the floor a few inches in front of his master’s feet as he frantically tried to make his mind work, to do what was right for his master rather than himself. “You said I could ask you for something, sir,” he remembered.

“It’s a swan’s right to—”

Ori shook his head. “No, sir. I mean months ago, when we first...you said I could ask you for something.”

Raynard nodded his acceptance of the fact.

“I’m not asking as a swan, sir. I’m asking as a submissive.” His master had to understand that. Not knowing what else to do, Ori glanced up and let the other man see the desperation in his eyes.

Raynard nodded permission for him to go on.

“Please, don’t...” Ori dragged a shuddering breath into his lungs. “Please don’t take me back with you if you know there’s never any chance you’ll want me there—if you know that I’ll never be able to please you then...”

When the hawk remained silent, Ori found he had to go on, had to find words to fill the silence. Picking at the seam on his trouser leg, he pushed each syllable out through a throat that didn’t want to work.

“If there’s any way I can belong to you and please you, I’ll do it, sir. I’ll serve you and anyone else, in whatever way I can. I’ll do whatever you want, and I’ll get down on my knees and thank you for it every second of the day, but I can’t be... Please, don’t take me back if you don’t

want me. I'd rather be miserable here on my own, than make you unhappy thinking you have to own a man you hate."

Raynard sat back in his chair, his anger and his confusion suddenly fading away as if neither had ever existed. "Hamilton was right."

Ori swallowed, waiting to see what that verdict meant for him.

"You're stronger with your submission than you'd be without it."

Ori stared past the hawk, at the bare white wall behind him. It sounded like a joke, but he couldn't see any reason for laughter.

The hawk nodded to himself as if everything was suddenly settling into place inside his mind.

The swan watched the other man's chest rise and fall as he took a slow, deep breath.

"Come here."

Unable to trust his knees to support him if he tried to rise, equally unable to disobey his master's summons, Ori crawled across to the base of the hawk's chair.

Raynard tucked a knuckle under his chin, holding him still to be studied. "I never thought I'd fall in love with a swan." The words were slow, musing, as if he was talking as much to himself as anyone else.

Ori's eyes opened very wide as he stared up at the older man.

Raynard smiled slightly. "Are you really that shocked, fledgling?"

He nodded, making his master chuckle a little. Ori automatically smiled in response, as the rich, comforting sound wrapped around him, as his master's hand slid through his hair and pulled him closer.

"It's not so unknown for a master to fall in love with his submissive."

Ori buried his face in his master's shirt, helpless to resist the temptation to nuzzle in against him, even as his brain desperately scrambled to work out what the hell was going on now. "You said..."

Raynard stroked his fingers through his hair again, welcoming him against his body and not even chiding him for wriggling the way he sometimes had when he'd shared his bed every night.

"You said I wasn't your submissive anymore, sir," Ori whispered against the cotton.

"Apparently, even masters are wrong on occasions—not often," he stressed. "But just on a few, very rare occasions."

Ori glanced up at the hawk.

“Perhaps I don’t know as much about what a swan’s nature makes him suited to as I thought,” Raynard whispered then, a slight frown appearing to dance around his eyes.

“I meant what I said, sir,” Ori offered quickly. “If I don’t shift—”

Raynard’s hand covered his mouth. “You will shift as and when you’re told to, and there will be no arguing with your master when he gives you that command.”

There was no room for negotiation when Raynard took on that tone of voice. Pleasure rushed through Ori, just as it had every time his master had offered him that kind of certainty over the months they had known each other.

“I wouldn’t let you be ashamed of your species when you were thought to be an ugly little duckling. Do you really think I’ll let you hate yourself for being a swan now?” Raynard demanded, his voice gaining more confidence with each word, until they began to sound harsh.

Ori’s fingers stroked the edge of one of the buttons on his master’s shirt, around and around, again and again.

“I fell in love with a swan. That means no one, not even my submissive, is going to insult the species in front of me.”

Ori blushed slightly as the words seeped into his mind, reassuring some instinctive part of him that didn’t care about anything but his master’s good opinion of him. Something inside him sang out with joy and refused to care if anything made sense or not.

Raynard reached into his pocket and took out a familiar length of leather. “The back of the tag will need to be marked with both our symbols.”

Ori simply stared, mesmerized by collar.

“Is that what you want, fledgling?”

Ori nodded very quickly.

Raynard had the collar around his neck in seconds. For the first time since it had been taken away, Ori felt his soul settle into some semblance of peace. His heart raced, but for the first time in so long, it was with pleasure, not panic. He looked up at his master, wanting nothing more than to make everything exactly as it was before.

“Take me home, sir?” he whispered, no longer caring if it sounded like he was begging.

The older man smiled slightly, but he also shook his head. “Soon, but you have some unfinished business to attend to first.” He looked to the door the tattoo artist had disappeared through.

Ori's opposite hand quickly covered his wrist again.

"No arguing," Raynard ordered, before Ori even had time to say a word. "Let him in, then come back to your master."

Reluctantly rising to his feet, Ori did as he was told. When he hurried back to kneel at the hawk's feet, the older man shook his head again. He held out a hand to Ori and guided him to sit on his master's lap, so he could once more offer his wrist to the tattooist. The peacock made his way cautiously back to his stool next to them.

If he thought the seating arrangement a strange one, he seemed to take one look at Raynard's expression and decide he had no wish comment on it. By the time he had straightened out the contents of his tray, Raynard had arranged Ori comfortably on his lap.

He let him curl into his master's body and rest his head on his shoulder, too. Ori watched, rather fascinated as his master's hand wrapped around his forearm, holding his wrist steady for the artist's needle.

"Do you know why avians started wearing these marks on their wrists?" Raynard asked him softly, as the tattooist bowed his head over his work.

"So everyone would know what everyone else was, even in their human form, sir," Ori whispered back.

"That's right."

"So they'd know where they stood in the hierarchy," Ori added.

"No," Raynard said, in the slow tone of voice that meant he was thinking about what he said very carefully. "Not at first. Years ago, it was a simple statement of pride—this is who I am, this is what I stand for. There was no such thing as a mark a man should be ashamed of. That was never what these markings were about."

Ori nuzzled closer into his master's shoulder, knowing what the older man was trying to tell him, even if he wasn't sure he was ready to hear it.

"You're a good man, Ori—and you're a good submissive, too. In time, your master will see to it you become a good swan, as well. And no one will be prouder of you than your master when that happens."

Ori closed his eyes as his master tightened his embrace around him a little and the tattooist's needled buzzed on.

* * * *

Everyone was staring at him. Ori tried to push the sensation aside, but the spread of whispers through the crowds of men was impossible to ignore. Everyone was staring at him and talking about him and—

“Keep up, fledgling.”

Ori scurried forward a few steps, to walk more closely to his master's side.

Raynard didn't even glance toward him. It was as if he knew exactly where he'd be, as if he trusted him to be where he was told, where he belonged, and saw no need to check up on him once a clear order had been issued.

Ori's steps faltered for a moment, when he caught sight of Mr. Hamilton standing at the other end of the hallway. He looked toward them as they approached. Ori felt the eagle's attention settle on his collar. Fear rushed through him at the idea he might somehow be able to take it away, but he kept pace with his master regardless.

The leader of the nest shook hands with the hawk. Then he turned to Ori and held his hand out to him. Ori automatically looked to Raynard. He nodded his permission.

Ori reached out and shook hands with Mr. Hamilton. The older man turned his hand on the side as their palms met, turning the tattoo up to be viewed. The skin was still red around the edges of the swirling black mark, but the design was clear and vivid against his pale skin.

“It looks good, sire.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Mr. Hamilton turned his attention back to Raynard as he let go of Ori's hand. Not having any order to occupy himself with, Ori stepped back out of everyone's way and settled himself into his rest position until such time as his master had another order for him. The movements felt so natural, for a few seconds, it was possible to believe that it had all just been some horrible nightmare and nothing had changed at all over the last weeks.

“We can expect you both to be at the feast this weekend?” Hamilton asked. The question seemed to be directed entirely toward his master, but Ori felt himself fall under the scope of the inquiry in a way he never had when he was believed to be a duckling.

“We'll be there,” Raynard said.

The rest of the conversation didn't seem to need any sort of contribution from Ori. Mr. Hamilton nodded to him as he walked away, but the swan barely had time to notice the little half bow before his master was striding off again.

As they stepped out into the car park, Ori hurried forward and opened his master's car door for him, before running around to the other side and taking his place in the passenger seat.

The drive was completed in what might have felt like an easy, companionable silence, if Ori's nerves had been stronger. As it was, he was only grateful he hadn't actually hyperventilated by the time his master's car pulled up outside the house.

Getting out of the car, he scurried around to open the other man's door for him again. Ori stopped short. Raynard was already out of the vehicle. Eager to find some other way to serve the older man, he turned toward the front door of the house and rushed to open that for him instead.

His hand was already on the handle, when he realized it was still locked and his master was the only one with a key.

Raynard stepped up behind him. Ori tried to move back out of his way, but he found his escape route blocked by a solid wall of hawk. Swallowing down his nerves as best he could, he stood very still as the heat from his master's body started to soak through his clothes.

Raynard pushed the door open. It had taken Ori a day's work on the hinges to make the door slide smoothly and silently that way.

It was silly to be pleased that some little part of the service he'd provided for his master still lingered on in Raynard's home while he'd been gone, but Ori concentrated his whole mind on those hinges—it was his only chance of ignoring the other thing he'd realized as their bodies pressed against each other.

His master was hard.

The moment the door was open, Ori stumbled forward, heading straight for the servants' quarters.

Raynard's hand wrapped around his arm, stopping him in his tracks. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I should start catching up on the duties I—"

"And do you think that's the best way you could serve your master right now?" He stepped closer, until his cock pressed intimately against Ori's backside once more.

His master had no doubt had plenty of erections before Ori came under his protection. He didn't need that from him, and Ori knew he'd already given up his right to offer himself to the other man that way.

"I promised," Ori whispered. "I promised that I wouldn't expect things to be the same way between us they were before, sir. I meant it."

“You think I’ve lost interest in you?” The hawk’s hand slid along the edge of Ori’s collar. The younger man’s eyes fell closed as he leaned into his touch. “I…”

“Or do you think a hawk’s not good enough for you, now that you outrank me?”

Ori spun around, wide eyed with horror at the idea. “I wouldn’t…!”

A smile played around Raynard’s lips. “If nothing has changed for you, why assume it’s changed for me?”

“Because you said everything had changed!” It sounded like an accusation. Ori wished he could take it back the moment it left his lips, but by then it was too late. The words were there, hanging in the air between them.

Raynard let go of his arm and walked away from him, over to the other side of the room. He leaned against the sideboard, his arms folded across his chest.

Ori’s feet stuck to the tiles, he was helpless to step forward and bridge the gap between them, even when every inch of space threatened to kill something inside him.

“I think your species changes what you’re suited to,” Raynard announced, no trace of emotion in his voice. “And, yes—that it means you’ll prove to be matched to a somewhat different form of submission than the one I had planned for you before the shifting ceremony.”

Ori shook his head.

“The matter isn’t open for debate.”

Ori met his master’s gaze across the room.

“You offered me your submission. It’s your master’s right to ensure you practice a form of submission that brings out the best of your nature.”

No matter how much Ori wanted to look away, he found it impossible.

“The way you’ll serve me changed the moment you completed the shifting ceremony. I won’t lie to you and say otherwise,” Raynard went on. “But I never once told you that the way I feel about you has changed, have I, fledgling?”

Ori finally managed to drop his gaze. The words his master had said to him in the tattoo studio still echoed around and around inside his head, too fantastical to be believed.

Submissives could easily fall in love with their masters, especially when their masters were as perfect as Raynard—Ori had known that for months. But the idea that the reverse could also happen, that his master could care for him as much as Ori cared for the dominant, was…

He looked up at Raynard.

“Come here.”

Ori stepped forward.

When he was a foot away from the other man, Raynard hooked his fingers through Ori's collar and tugged him the rest of the way, so he collided heavily with his master's chest. Holding him there with the circle of leather, Raynard dipped his head to whisper in his ear.

"You're mine, fledgling. You belong to me—body and soul. I own you. Never doubt that."

"Yes, sir."

"And you're going to do as you're told and let your master take care of you properly, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir." It was barely a whisper.

"And now, you're going to run up those stairs and strip yourself down before climbing into your master's bed, aren't you?"

Ori parted his lips, but only an enthusiastic whimper emerged.

"Fledgling..."

"Yes, sir," he rasped.

Raynard let go of Ori's collar. A sharp tap on his backside sent him on his way up the stairs.

His master had said run, Ori didn't walk. He threw himself up the stairs and into the other man's bedroom. His clothes seemed to fight against his need to follow the older man's order. He scabbled at the seemingly endless yards of fabric as he threw them aside.

The bed hadn't been made. Ori climbed on top of the rumpled sheets, just in time. Panting for breath, he turned toward the bedroom door as it swung open.

Raynard stepped into the room, slamming the door behind him. His eyes seemed to take in every detail as he stalked toward the bed.

He stopped at the edge of the mattress and stared down at the submissive. Ori had seen the same look in the hawk's eyes when he came in from stretching his wings. There was something wild about him, as if he could control the whole world—every bit of it, bar himself, as if there was something in him that was too strong for anyone to master, even the dominant himself.

"Never doubt this is exactly where you belong."

"Yes, sir. I mean...No, sir...I mean—"

Whatever he might have been destined to mean, was swallowed by the kiss as his master's lips covered his and took complete possession of him.

Ori tipped his head back, his hands going to his master's shoulders to steady himself as Raynard pulled him into the kiss.

The hawk's tongue thrust past his lips, sparring against Ori's tongue until he couldn't keep up. He moaned into the larger man's mouth when Raynard nipped at his bottom lip. His fingers clawed for a purchase on the other man's arms when the dominant suddenly pushed him away.

The hawk man loomed over Ori as he toppled backwards. Raynard's eyes were serious and wild in equal measure as he joined him on the bed. His clothes were still between them. The hawk didn't seem to care about that as he caught the lube from the bedside cabinet and smeared it over his fingers.

No teasing, no time wasted, the digits thrust into Ori, not so much encouraging him to relax and accept his master, as demanding that he do so.

Arching on the bed, Ori pushed back against the other man's fingers, trying to squirm his way further on to them. He met his master's eyes as the other man's touch left him.

Raynard's hand went to his fly. In moments, the material was pushed out of the way. A nudge to Ori's side prompted him to roll over and lift himself onto his hands and knees.

The dominant's hands push his knees further apart. A moment later, his palms were on Ori's sides. A slicked cock pressed against his hole. One motion had the hawk buried inside him to the hilt. The younger man cried out as pure pleasure rushed through him.

Raynard stilled. Ori scrambled desperately at the sheet as he tried to do the same and failed. One of the hawk's hands moved forward, to push down between Ori's shoulder blades.

The swan's arms gave way, his body tipped forward. His cheek came to rest on the blanket as his back arched, and he offered himself up to the other man more thoroughly than ever.

Raynard grunted his approval as he pulled back to deliver a slow, deep thrust.

Ori gasped as his body took over, and his mind shut down. All that existed then was Ori and his master, his master's cock buried inside his arse, the other man's hands holding him as tight as they could as he rammed into him again.

It was impossible to think it was about anything other than dominance and ownership then. He wasn't a swan, he was a submissive, he was his master's fledgling. He was simply a man who loved his master.

Permission to come not granted, Ori clung to his control as best he could, but as his body rushed to the edge of pleasure, he found himself stopped short. His mind could think what it

liked, but Ori knew in that moment, his body wasn't going to allow him to come until Raynard gave the word.

His master owned him down to the core. Such decisions were no longer his to make.

The hawk pushed into him again and again, holding him on an edge he wasn't allowed to fall over. Ori rocked against the mattress with each deep thrust. His hands clenched into the sheet as a mewling little whimper escaped him.

His cheek rubbed against the bedspread as he forced another breath of air into his lungs. His master's scent clung to the sheets, seeming to envelop him in the other man's presence.

Suddenly, Raynard yelled his pleasure up to the ceiling, the whole bed shaking as he delivered a final series of rapid thrusts. Ori closed his eyes and simply relished the other man's satisfaction as the dominant came inside him.

He remained frozen in place even after his master pulled away. Head down, arse up. They'd said that was a natural position for a duck. Apparently, it was a natural position for a swan, too. Ori stayed that way for a long time, panting for breath, not sure if he could move without coming.

Fabric rustled behind Ori as his master dispensed with his clothes. A hand caressed his buttocks, teasing the sensitive skin and making him whimper, until a tap prompted him to try to move. Kneeling up on the bed, he turned toward his master.

The older man pushed the last of his clothes off the bed and collapsed back against the mattress. Ori nibbled at his bottom lip as he watched the dominant settle and rest. There was a sensitive spot on his lip, where his master's teeth had caught him hard enough to draw blood. He ran his tongue over it, relishing the sensations it sent spiraling through him.

"Come here."

The first word almost had him spilling onto the sheet. Somehow, Ori managed to shuffle forward without tripping over his orgasm en route. His master's hand wrapped around his cock as he reached his side, his grip tight and perfect.

Ori met Raynard's eyes. There was a touch of amusement mixed in with the sleepiness and the afterglow, but all the anger and confusion was gone, at least for a little while. Moving his own hands behind his back, Ori knelt next to his master and arranged himself as close as he could to his rest position, his knees spread wide apart and his head bowed to watch his master's hand toy with him.

Raynard had always liked to hold him like that, to cradle him in the palm of his hand and know that he had complete control over his lover. He was treating him in exactly the same way he had when he was a duck. Ori had never been more grateful to feel so painfully frustrated in his life.

“Come.”

The word was said at his master’s discretion, and according to his own timetable. Ori knew that. He also knew he’d never been more thankful to hear it spoken.

He came. Lights flashing, head spinning and his master’s hand never even slowing its movements. The older man’s palm kept pumping around his shaft long after he had stilled.

Ori whimpered, too sensitive to truly enjoy his master’s touch right then, too lost in his submission to even consider protesting. Gradually his master’s hand slowed of its own accord until it finally left him completely.

The submissive managed to blink open his eyes. His come decorated his master’s stomach in long creamy ropes. Ori’s eyes opened even wider then. Raynard chuckled as he scooped up some of the cum and proffered it up to his lover’s lips.

Ori automatically opened his mouth to receive it, and the next fingers full too, cherishing the intimacy of the offering.

When Raynard’s cleaned fingers slid into Ori’s hair and guided his head down, he lapped the trails directly off the other man’s skin, gaining a little taste of his master at the same time. Murmuring his approval, he pressed lick after lick, kiss after kiss, against the hawk’s body. He let his face rub against the other man’s skin too, nuzzling him, trying to soak up his master’s presence through every pore until he finally fell still, exhausted, his head resting against the other man’s chest.

“I love you too, sir. So much.”

For a full minute, Ori’s head moved against his master’s chest, in time with the larger man’s breathing as Raynard stayed silent. Ori was just about to apologize, sure he had said the wrong thing, when his master finally spoke.

“I know you do, fledgling.”

Ori glanced up at his master.

The dominant’s smile was gentle as he looked down on him. One last ruffle of his hair, and the submissive soon found himself snuggled contentedly against his master’s side under the blankets.

For just a little while before he fell asleep, it was easy to pretend he was still an ugly little duckling, nothing at all had changed, and everything really was that perfect.

Chapter Fourteen

Ori tensed as he realized he was no longer alone. Someone else was there, watching him. A glance over his shoulder found his master standing in the kitchen doorway.

Turning toward him, Ori pushed his hair off his face with the back of his wrist. Raynard's eyes trailed over his body very slowly. Ori dropped his gaze and followed the other man's example. Naked, but for his collar, the only thing that hid any part of his skin was a good layer of dust.

There were thicker smudges here and there, where he'd managed to make himself increasingly dirty as he threw himself into his neglected duties.

When he looked up and met his master's eyes, Raynard was smiling, but there was something else in his expression as well, something Ori couldn't decipher.

"You may be the only avian I've ever met who can look happier like this than you ever did while surrounded by luxury."

Ori bit at his bottom lip as he set his cloth on the kitchen table, still not entirely sure if his master was pleased with him for being that way, or if the hawk quietly hated him for it.

As he waited for an order, he arranged himself neatly into his rest position. Raynard walked across the room toward him, then behind him, out of his field of vision.

"How much pain are you in?"

Ori would have tried to turn and face the other man if he'd thought he might be able to get away with it. But he also knew he'd have been ordered to turn around if the hawk wanted him to be able to see his master when he gave his answer.

"The work's not too hard for me, sir," he rushed out.

"I know. The pain comes from staying in one form for too long."

Tension flooded back into Ori's body, making his joints ache more than ever.

"Shower off. It's time you stretched your wings properly."

"Sir, I..."

Raynard's hands settled on his shoulders as he turned him to face his master.

Ori looked up at him, trying to find the right words, but the look in his master's eyes quickly informed him that there were no such words. There was nothing he could say. The decision had already been made.

"Yes, sir."

When Ori came out of the shower a few minutes later, his master had already left the kitchen. Making his way up the stairs into the main part of the house, he forced himself to keep going, past the study and the library where he and his master had spent so many wonderful hours and up the main stairs towards those that would eventually lead him to the attic.

They'd spent more than a few happy hours there, too, when his master had come back from his flights, but that had been before.

A noise behind him stopped Ori short. "Where do you think you're going?"

"You said..." Ori frowned, looking from where his master stood in the library doorway, up to the attic room and back again.

"Not from there."

Ori silently made his way back down the stairs.

His master studied him in silence. "I can see the question in your eyes, fledgling—spit it out."

"Because I'm a submissive, or because I'm a swan, sir?"

"Because the chances of you landing successfully on a small balcony on your first attempt are very slim," Raynard said, ruffling his hair and pushing him toward the front door. "Get dressed."

Opening the little coat closet in the hallway, Ori quickly scrambled into his clothes.

Raynard had a bag with him. He carried it out to the car himself and set it in the back seat before Ori could even open the door for him. Sitting uncomfortably on the passenger side, Ori glanced across at his master again and again as the older man drove, but he still couldn't read anything in his master's expression.

"Are we going to the pool, sir?" he finally blurted out, unable to bear the silence a moment longer.

"No."

Ori fidgeted with the seam on his trouser leg.

No further information was offered, until they pulled up at a big set of iron gates in a part of the city Ori wasn't familiar with.

Raynard took a key out of his trouser pocket and passed it to him. There was a padlock on the gates. The swan eventually made his brain add one and one together. Hurrying out of the car, he unlocked the heavy metal chain from the fancy ironwork. By the time he turned back to his master, Raynard was out of the parked car, his bag in his hand once more.

His master strode through the gates ahead of him, and nodded for him to re-lock them behind them both. Trapped in the park with the older man, Ori scurried to keep up with him as he walked swiftly down one of the paths that wound away between the trees.

Far too busy wondering what the hell was going on to take too much notice of the trees and bushes that filled the grounds, Ori came to an abrupt halt as they emerged from the foliage. A wooden bench was set in a clearing, looking out over a large lake.

Ori stared at it as if he'd never seen such a body of water before.

"Keep up, fledgling."

His master put the bag on the bench and sat next to it, looking out over the water. Ori stepped closer, until he was standing directly before his master.

"Strip."

"Sir?"

Raynard looked up at him, as if he couldn't see what the problem was. Ori wasn't sure he knew what the trouble was, either. He seemed to have spent most of his life naked in front of his master. No one else was there. It wasn't even as if anyone else was likely to wander through the locked gates after them.

But, for the first time in so long, he found himself clinging to the protection his clothes offered him. His master couldn't order him to shift while he was still dressed. If he hadn't been willing to let him shift in a collar, there was no way he could command him to change forms in a tangle of trousers, shirt and boots.

The hawk leaned back in his seat.

Ori shuffled his boots against the leaf litter. Not one word, no recriminations, no condemnation. Raynard didn't need to say anything. Ori knew when he was failing to obey his master. He knew when he was being a bad submissive.

He held out all of three minutes before he started to remove his clothes. Folding them neatly, he set them on the seat next to his master, until he stood naked bar his collar.

Raynard reached out to relieve him of that too.

Ori wrapped his hand around his master's wrist, as if some stupid little part of him thought he could actually stop the attempt. "Please, sir..."

Raynard took no notice. In a second, the collar was gone. Raynard took Ori by the hand then, and led him into the center of the clearing facing the lake.

"Your collar will still be here when you get back."

Ori blinked up at him.

"So will your master."

Swallowing down all his protests, Ori dropped his gaze to the ground between them.

Raynard tucked his knuckles under Ori's chin and tilted his head back, demanding Ori look him in the eye. "Sometimes belonging to another man means accepting that there are times when he knows what is best for you—that he's doing what's best for you, even if it doesn't feel like it."

"Yes, sir."

"You're going to stretch your wings."

Ori nodded, looking to the side so his master wouldn't see his reluctance.

Raynard tapped him on the cheek with the tip of his finger. He was smiling when Ori looked back to him. "I don't expect you to like it, or even pretend to like it. But, swan or not, I do expect any man who offers me his submission to do as he's told."

Ori managed another nod.

Raynard walked away from him then, back to the bench. Standing alone near the water, Ori looked over his shoulder to the other man.

"Try to land somewhere near the edge of the lake when you come back."

Ori looked to the water.

His master didn't want a swan, and now he was going to watch his submissive morph into one before his eyes. Folding his arms across his chest, Ori instinctively reached for the comfort of his collar.

It wasn't there.

The sooner he got this whole stupid thing over with, the sooner he'd know if it really would be waiting for him when he got back.

He glanced at his master one more time. Nothing to hide behind, nothing to disguise what he was...

Ori looked down at his wrist, before quickly closing his eyes.

The mental door that he'd opened inside himself when he was on the stage before the elders was still there. It had been trying to push itself open more and more insistently over the last weeks, as pressure built up on the other side of it, leaking out as an ache that seeped into every muscle and joint the longer he tried to deny its existence.

Even as he mentally glanced in its direction, the door inside him seemed to explode open. Sensations rushed into his body, faster than he could process them, pain and pleasure mixed together so thoroughly it was impossible to tell where one began and the other ended.

For one glorious moment, it felt like everything he was and everything he could be existed in the same universe. Almost too soon, he felt the side of himself he was most familiar with fade away. Reaching out he tried to grasp at it with the farthest edges of his mind, but it raced away from him until it was hard to see it over the mental horizon, hard to remember there was even anything that had gone.

Ori lifted his arms, but his shoulders didn't move the way he expected them too. He tipped his head back, stretching out an unexpectedly long neck as he looked up toward the sky.

He took a step forward. His legs weren't the same as he remembered them. Everything was different, the world had changed.

The breeze blew against him, seeming to call to him. He stepped forward again, a little closer to the lake. Instinct took over. Arms stretched out as if they were wings, he ran forward. The edge of the water was right in front of him, then the air suddenly caught against his arms and the ground was falling away beneath his soles and he was climbing higher and higher into the atmosphere.

Even as his mind looked in wonder at the world below him, it shrank a little more. The sky was wide above him, pulling him up with each movement of his arms. A flicker of his fingertips was all it took to turn in large lazy circles high above the lake and the bench at the edge of it.

* * * *

Leaning back against the rough wooden seat, Raynard craned his neck and stared up into the sky. Ori was little more than a white dot as he reached the far end of his circular path, but he never once moved out of sight of his master.

Smiling up at the spectacle, even as he felt something inside himself crack and break at the sight, Raynard tracked his lover's progress, around and around as Ori started to experiment with his new found freedom, dipping and swirling in the atmosphere above the park.

It was impossible to tell from the way he flew what kind of man he'd be when he came back to the ground. If there was no trace of submission in him when he landed then...

Raynard took a deep breath. If that was the case, then it wasn't the swan who needed to change. If Ori needed him, and couldn't have a master then, somehow, Raynard knew he'd have to learn how to be something other than a master to him. He'd have to find some form of submission inside himself, some way he could serve the needs of the swan.

The chances of a hawk doing it and keeping his own sanity intact were slim at best, Raynard knew that too. But if there was no other way then...

Another deep breath failed to bring Raynard any comfort as the swan continued to circle above him.

If nothing else, he'd been right to think Ori was strong. He stayed in the air a lot longer than most men could ever hope to manage on their first attempt. Over an hour had passed before he started to descend back toward the lake.

The hawk watched, his heart racing faster and faster as he realized the younger man was coming back to him, that it was now mere moments before everything would be settled once and for all.

The swan glided down perfectly, all grace and fluid movements. He was barely a foot above the surface of the water when tension flooded back into his body. After that, the landing was...interesting.

A flurry of wings and webbed feet splashed and crashed into the edge of the lake. One moment there was a blur of feathers, the next, a beautiful, naked, submissive appeared in the shallow water closest to the bench.

Raynard perched on the edge of the seat, studying, watching, waiting for some sign. Shaking the water out of his hair, the swan immediately looked toward his lover. Their eyes met. Raynard's hand tightened around the younger man's collar, his breath caught in his throat, prayers rushed through his head, and all he could do was hope against hope.

Ori stumbled up onto his feet under his master's watchful gaze, arms and legs all going in different directions as he tried to control a body that wasn't entirely sure what shape it was.

He splashed his way to the edge of the lake. Again and again he stumbled, but he kept pulling himself upright and pushing forward, making his way determinedly back to Raynard's side.

The edge of the lake was muddy. By the time Ori emerged from the water's edge, he was smeared with dirt. Earth and leaf litter clung to the mud as he scrambled up the bank.

He tumbled to his knees at his master's feet, reaching out to him. Seemingly unable to scrape up human words, Ori whimpered his pleasure, rubbing his face against Raynard's body in a way that seemed to promise the hawk that everything really would be fine.

Wet, muddy and affectionate in equal measure, he snuggled against his master.

The wildness that was so familiar to Raynard from his own returns to the human form, was conspicuous in its absence. Ori was all...

Raynard closed his eyes for a moment. There was only one word that fitted and he was almost too afraid to use it.

Ori was all submission.

As Raynard encouraged him even closer, the swan's lips moved to his master's fly, kissing and licking him through the fabric, desperate little noises escaping from the back of his throat as he pawed his master and clung to whatever material he could wrap his fingers around.

Every movement cautious and measured, Raynard slipped his hands between them, nudging Ori away slightly so he could undo his fly and free himself.

Ori didn't appear able to comprehend what he was trying to do. He turned his attention enthusiastically toward Raynard's hands, licking and sucking at his fingertips, slowing him down with every nuzzle and kiss.

Raynard smiled at his antics, relief racing through him, turning him as silly and lightheaded as his submissive seemed to be. As he finally managed to pull his fly down, Ori dived on him. His hands fluttered over his cock as he sucked around the tip of his shaft.

The stream of whimpers and mewling moans turned into a flood. Raynard stared down at his lover as his cock slid deeper into the younger man's mouth. No technique, no control, Ori was running entirely on adrenaline and instinct, and he was stunning.

A true submissive. It didn't matter what it said on his fledgling's wrist. No avian could hide who he really was when his species was so close to the front of his mind. Swan or not, Ori was all submission.

The younger man dipped his head again, begging Raynard with his lips and tongue to come into his mouth. Holding back, Raynard made his submissive work for that pleasure. The submissive's eyes were closed. He seemed content to stay there all evening. He knew his master so well, and his memories still seemed to be there. He still knew what would please his

dominant, what would push him to the edge, and he didn't hesitate to display that knowledge to his master.

Not even a hawk could hold back forever. Ori moaned his pleasure as Raynard gave in and gave him what he wanted. As he spilled into the other man's mouth, his hand tangling itself in the submissive's hair as he held him close to receive everything his master could give him.

Ori bucked as he tasted his master fill his mouth and Raynard had no doubt that his submissive had found his own pleasure in servicing his master. Even when they both fell still, Ori didn't pull away. He stayed exactly where he was, suckling gently around his shaft.

The collar was still in Raynard's hand. He fixed it carefully around his submissive's neck. Ori murmured his pleasure as he finally let his master's cock slip from between his lips.

Reaching into the bag next to him on the bench, Raynard pulled out a huge towel and wrapped it around the younger man's damp body. Sleepy and sated from his climax, Ori snuggled against him as the hawk rubbed the towel against the submissive's skin.

A few minutes passed before Ori blinked open his eyes. He frowned at Raynard's clothes. "You're all muddy, sir..."

"Hush," Raynard chided, encouraging him to snuggle against him however much he wanted regardless of all the wet and dirt he brought with him.

Ori didn't need much convincing. He was all trust in his master right then. Raynard smiled down at him as a full breath finally made it into his lungs. All submission, all what he'd thought he was from the very first moment he came into his master's service.

Very slowly, the guilt for everything he'd thought he put a man not suited to submission through began to fade. There was no cruelty in teaching a submissive about submission.

"Good boy."

Ori blinked up at him, a tiny touch of confusion making it back into his eyes.

"You have no idea how glorious you looked up there, do you?"

His submissive smiled at him, even more beautiful there than he had been up in the sky.

Raynard pushed his fingers through the other man's damp white hair, studying him intently.

"You have no idea how much your master loves you either, do you?"

"Even though I'm a swan, sir?" Ori whispered, fear creeping back into his eyes.

"You're you, and you're mine. Nothing else matters." For the first time, there was no doubt in Raynard's mind as he said it.

Ori seemed to sense that. All his fears seemed to fade away as easily as his master stroked his hair. "Yes, sir."

Raynard smiled down at his submissive. "Ready to go home, fledgling?"

The swan nodded as he smiled up at his master in return, as content in his submission as any ugly little duckling could ever have been.

About the Author

26 years old, from Wales, UK, Kim writes about kink, love and happy endings. If a story doesn't have those three things, it's not going to be written—at least not by this writer!

Apart from that, Kim likes to write a little bit of everything. So far that list includes Male/Male, Male/Female, a few different varieties of ménage, shifters, vampires, fairytales, time-travel and ghosts. It's anyone's guess what will come next...

A firm believer that there is no "One True Way" for people to kink, Kim likes to let the characters in each book pick their own ways to dominate and submit to each other. As long as they stay safe, sane and consensual—Kim's happy to let them live their lifestyle 24/7, or just open the toy box on weekends—whatever's right for them.

Published since 2008, Kim also writes BDSM erotic romances for Total-e-bound. Kim loves to talk to her readers and can be found at www.kimdare.com.

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***Ryland's Sacrifice* by Kim Dare**

Principles don't pay tuition fees. When Ryland's math scholarship disappears overnight, he has two choices. He can borrow money from fellow student Jason Burrows, who has very interesting ways of collecting debts. Or, he can volunteer to be thrown to the werelions.

One night spent playing the part of a willing human sacrifice will give him enough money to finish his PhD. It seems like a good deal-right up until the moment he finds himself naked, blindfolded, bound and surrounded by lions.

***Marrick's Promise* by Kim Dare**

Marrick thinks that being thrown to the lions will be the ultimate adrenaline rush, and he's not disappointed. But his plan is to try everything life has to offer once. He has no intention of visiting the lions again.

Blaine and Luther don't expect to give any of the human sacrifices they share another thought once they leave the den. This man's different. They have no intention of letting this one go. The only question is, while they are willing to share Marrick with each other, are they willing to share each other with a human who could become as important to each of them as they are to each other?

***Extinction* by Carol Lynne**

Professor of Environmental Science/Wildlife studies at UNLV, Jack McBain has spent his adult life trying to track a legend overheard during his youth. Born and raised in the Canadian Province of Newfoundland, Jack remembers his grandparents telling stories of a race of people eradicated by European settlers in 1829. According to the legend, the Beothuk people didn't die out as first thought, but were transformed into wolf shifters.

When Newfoundland wolves began to appear in great numbers, the European settlers began killing them under the guise of population control. In 1910, the last of the Newfoundland wolves was shot, making them one of the few extinct species of wolves in the world.

Following spotty leads, Jack begins to track what he believes are Beothuk/Newfoundland shifter wolves. His search leads him to the Lake Mead National Recreational Area outside of Las Vegas. There, on Spirit Mountain, he finally comes face to face with not only the shifter he's been looking for, but the man of his dreams he didn't know he needed.

***Tropical Hedonism* by Dakota Rebel**

After a boating accident, Sean Harris wakes up staring into the eyes of a handsome doctor. Even when he discovers that he is on an island within the Bermuda Triangle, and there is no way for him to get back to his old life, he can't be too disappointed if it means being stuck with the doctor.

Dr. Wesley Carpenter cannot believe that the younger Sean Harris would want anything to do with him. After half-heartedly turning down the advances of his patient, he realizes that resistance is futile.

The men find themselves falling for each other quickly, but ghosts from their pasts and outside influences try to get in the way of their happiness. Sean and Wesley may be on the island forever, but neither is sure if that guarantees they'll be able to continue their *Tropical Hedonism*.

***Mind F*cked* by Mia Watts**

Sage has the ability to read minds, but only in high passion moments when thoughts transmit at a higher frequency. But the gift is double-edged. Sage is inordinately handsome. Some might even say he's a walking orgasm. So what's a half-breed to do when every person he meets seems intent on seducing him, and how will he know if the man he chooses will love him for more than his looks?

Joe has never been the object of anyone's lust before. Now Sage, the hottest guy he's ever laid eyes on, has Joe starring in his sexual fantasies. It would be perfect if only Sage could shut up for one minute, and quit talking about his own hotness—or about how he can read minds.

Meanwhile, Joe and Sage must secure the last three Zodiac Stones and prevent their theft while they wait for exhibition. Can they put their sexual tension aside long enough to stop a clever thief? And even if they do, will Joe's heart be a casualty of their inevitable fling, or could Sage really be looking for more than a one-night stand?

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Little Red Riding Hood has nothing on Rhys. On his way to his grandmother's house, Rhys' car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately for him, there is a big, bad rescuer watching and waiting to sweep him off his feet.

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When Department of Natural Resources officer, Gwendolyn Locke, hits a black bear on the way home from work one night, her entire view of reality changes. She discovers that shape-shifters exist, and she's just become Goldilocks to three gorgeous, very aroused men who also happen to be werebears. Being snowbound has never been so hot.

***Open Sesame* by Mia Watts**

Alister Baban overheard a business discussion that netted him and his Uncle Cassimer a lot of money. When the Simsim Group stock crashes and declares bankruptcy within weeks, the owners immediately suspect the Babans of playing dirty.

Oz Adamo, one of four brothers who owned Simsim Group, agrees to abduct Alister to obtain information and win back the lost pensions of former employees.

Tied to a bed and lusting after his captor, Alister fights the sexual attraction he has for Oz. They want information and he isn't about to give it. But Oz loves a good challenge, and shrewd, serious, sexy Alister is naked and his—at least for now.

***Heart of Ice* by Brynn Paulin**

Kai is perfectly unhappy with his life. Cast into a role as shop boy and forced into marriage to save his family, he sees nothing good in his future. In fact, his betrothed, Gerda, seems to hate everything he enjoys. Especially winter and his attraction to dominating his partners. His prospects look grim...until the Snow Queen arrives.

Wyn has spent her life alone, living vicariously through those who love winter. When she learns of Kai's predicament, she knows she must save him. If only she could save herself. She craves his dominance, but there's one tiny thing standing in their way. No human can touch her without experiencing chilly agony. And that might bring any relationship to an icy death.

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