



PACK DISCIPLINE

THE  
STRENGTH OF  
A GAMMA  
KIM DARE

A Total-E-Bound Publication



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The Strength of a Gamma

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

**Pack Discipline**

# **THE STRENGTH OF A GAMMA**

**Kim Dare**

## *Dedication*

To hidden strengths.

## Chapter One

Steffan tightened his grip around his shaft as his hand moved more and more rapidly beneath the sheets. The back of his fingers rubbed annoyingly against the underside of his blanket with every stroke, but he still couldn't risk throwing the covering back.

The night was warm enough that he'd have welcomed the caress of any breeze that crept into his bedroom through the open window, but the chance of another wolf coming into the room and catching him was far too high.

Squirming on the mattress, Steffan pressed his head back into his pillow as his hips thrust up, pushing his cock into the tight channel between his fingers and palm once more.

Biting his lip to keep back a moan, he rubbed his palm across the tip of his erection, gathering the pre-cum that leaked from the slit and smearing it down the length of his shaft. He closed his eyes for a moment and images immediately flooded into his brain.

A smaller, fairer wolf stared down at him, pleasure filling his eyes as he reached out to him. A moment passed, the picture flickered and changed. The same wolf lay naked, sprawling on a big soft mattress. He smiled and beckoned Steffan closer. Another second brought another scenario. Steffan tilted his head back and looked up at the other wolf as the familiar face loomed over him.

Steffan whimpered then, as if the other man's fingers really were tangling in his hair. A hand failed to hold him still as his head moved against his pillow, but the vision before him still lowered his head until their lips were just a second away from a kiss.

At the last possible moment, Steffan flung open his eyes. Gasping for breath, he pushed the silly little daydreams out of his head as hard as he could, flinging them away from him with all his might.

He stared helplessly up at the beamed ceiling above his bed, but even reality couldn't kill the fantasy completely. It was still there, tempting him with a quicker path towards pleasure.

A slow blink threatened to turn into something longer. Steffan let out a frustrated little groan. He couldn't let that happen.

Friction was all he really needed. Steffan knew that. Part of him even believed it. Enough friction against his shaft and he'd come. It was a simple fact of biology. It still took all his strength of will to pry his eyes open.

Those sorts of daydreams had no place in his head—not even in the middle of the night. It would only make things more painful for him in the long run. It was pointless to torture himself.

Steffan repeated all those facts to himself over and over again as his strokes sped up around his shaft once more. It was far better that he should content himself with his own touch and leave a deeper sort of pleasure to other wolves.

Without any warning, a howl cut through the air, damn near loud enough to shake the dust from the rafters. Steffan held back a low, heartfelt moan. The alphas were obviously having a good time that night. He couldn't bring himself to be surprised. There didn't seem to be many nights when they didn't enjoy themselves loudly enough to wake every wolf in the pack.

Reluctantly removing his grip from his aching shaft, Steffan let his hand drop to rest idly next to him on the mattress. Pushing his other hand into his hair, he counted very slowly inside his head. The only important thing now, was to stay on schedule. By the time he reached five he had to have his mind out of the gutter. By ten it was vital that he'd forced his breathing back in to something like a normal rate.

Fifteen seconds counted out, and Steffan made a conscious effort to try to slow his racing heart. Twenty. Right on cue, his bedroom door creaked open. Soft footsteps padded across the bare floorboards towards him. Steffan drew back the blankets, just far enough to welcome the other wolf into his bed, without letting his friend catch sight of his still flourishing erection.

Francis quickly joined him on the mattress. Steffan lifted one arm and welcomed the smaller wolf to rest at his side. Francis shuddered slightly as he curled up against him.

Carefully tucking a bit of blanket between Francis and his cock so the younger wolf wouldn't notice how hard he was, Steffan encouraged him even closer, trying to make sure he felt as safe and cosseted as possible. His friend quickly took him up on the invitation, hiding his face in Steffan's shoulder as he snuggled up against him.

Francis had plenty of blankets in his own room. Steffan had checked, and added an extra one to the bottom of the other wolf's bed, just in case his smaller frame needed extra insulation and he was too proud to ask. Yet his friend still felt cold on the nights the howl went up from the alphas' room and he came to his friend seeking comfort.

"You know that it was a good kind of howl?" Steffan asked him, as gently as he knew how.

Francis nodded against his shoulder, but the words seemed to do little to reassure him. He huddled against Steffan's side, as if he was afraid the meagre comfort he found in his friend's bed was about to be taken away.

Steffan immediately held him more securely in his embrace, wishing he could spoon behind him properly and wrap the smaller man in another wolf's presence without giving away far too much.

He held back a sigh at his inability to offer his friend that simple reassurance. Francis might be distracted enough that he couldn't read his scent too accurately, but he'd have to notice a hard cock pressing against his arse.

But at least, he hadn't let Francis even further into his fantasies this time, Steffan told himself. That was something to be grateful for. At least, he could hold the slightly younger wolf close and offer him what comfort he was capable of without feeling guilty for using him that way.

Rearranging them slightly in the bed, so they could fit more neatly together, Steffan buried one of his massive hands in Francis' hair, stroking the thick blond strands as gently as he could.

His friend made a contented little noise. Steffan smiled in the shadowy light. "That's right," he whispered. "Good wolf."

Taking one deep breath after another, Steffan let each one out very slowly, trying not to jostle his friend. The smaller wolf made a soft little noise in the back of his throat as he started to drop off, almost like a pup's whimper. He rubbed his cheek against Steffan's shoulder, pressing his naked body firmly against Steffan's side as sleep settled over him.

Closing his eyes, Steffan did his best to remember that he was just a wolf resting with another member of his pack. He was just comforting a friend who was put ill at ease when woken in the middle of the night by a sound that stirred up memories he'd rather forget.

As his friend drifted into a sound asleep, Steffan's own slumber remained far away. He could hardly let himself doze when he was still hard and aching with the frustration of not being able to finish what he'd started.

If Francis woke in the morning and felt Steffan's erection pressing against his skin, he'd no doubt write that off as nothing more than a natural part of waking up. It would hardly be the first time one of them had woken up that way since they'd come of age. But Steffan would cheerfully be damned before he did anything that might make his friend wonder if his hard-on wasn't a reaction to more than the rising of the sun.

No, far better to stay awake than to have Francis wake up in five minutes and find his friend responding to his presence in a way they both knew he shouldn't.

As if reading his mind, Francis stirred.

"Hush," Steffan whispered automatically. "Hush. I've got you. You're safe now. Good wolf."

The softly spoken words seemed to help a little. Within a few moments, Francis had stilled and dropped back into a deeper, more restful sleep. Steffan smiled at the top of the other wolf's head in spite of his frustration.

It was easy to wish for privacy and space when he was on his own. But once Francis was there with him, it always became impossible to remember why he'd ever wanted to be away from his friend's side for a single second.

This was better than his silly fantasies. It wasn't what Steffan had wanted with Francis for as long as he could remember. But it was real, and anything that brought the younger wolf closer to him was something to be cherished.

\* \* \* \*

Steffan stared at the envelope pinned to the kitchen cabinet for several long seconds.

*Only to be used in a real emergency.*

He looked over his shoulder towards the crowd of wolves who'd just arrived on his pack's lands. His attention ran quickly over the visiting alphas before finally settling on the young couple who stood together near the far corner of the room, their hands entwined and her head resting on his shoulder.

Steffan's gaze went hopelessly back to the envelope.

He knew how many weeks worth of work Marsdon and Bennett had put into the talks with the other pack as they negotiated the transfer of the mating pair.

The other pack turning up while neither alpha was there and Steffan was in charge certainly constituted an emergency as far as he was concerned. At the same time, he could remember just how serious Marsdon had been when he said not to contact them unless it was a *real* emergency.

A hand reached past Steffan and yanked the envelope off the cabinet. Steffan turned to Francis as the smaller wolf silently handed him the envelope.

His friend was right. There was no way to avoid it. Their alphas would have to be fetched.

Steffan tore open the envelope as carefully as his overly large fingers would allow. Inside, in Marsdon's scrawling hand, were directions to where they could be found if they were needed.

"I'll fetch them," Steffan said, doing his best to hide his reluctance.

Francis nodded. "I'll come with you."

Steffan looked from his friend to the other wolves in their pack, all of them chatting politely with their visitors. His gaze fell on where Alfred was speaking to the visiting alpha female. Heaven only knew what trouble the other gamma was already trying to stir up.

Francis was right. The sooner the alphas were brought back to deal with it, the better. As he made his excuses to the alphas from the other pack and headed for the door, Steffan couldn't bring himself to tell Francis it would be better if he stayed there and tried to keep Alfred in check.

Francis wanted to go with him, and there was no decision left for Steffan to make.

They were soon in the car, Francis behind the wheel and Steffan reading the directions to him. Wherever their alphas disappeared to when they wished to spend an evening away from the pack, it wasn't in a part of town Steffan was familiar with.

The building they finally stopped alongside was low and dark, all its windows blacked out and barred. A leather clad man stood by the entrance. As they climbed out of the car, the scent of sex and leather seemed to reach out from inside the building and pull them closer.

Steffan frowned and glanced towards his friend. Francis didn't say a word, but he didn't need to. Steffan could practically hear the wheels turning faster and faster inside the other wolf's head.

The man at the door looked them up and down as they approached. Steffan hesitated for just a fraction of a second before forcing himself to keep striding purposefully forward. The human was far smaller than him. He wasn't a threat. There was no need to be wary of him.

Relief still rushed through Steffan's veins as the doorman let them pass without a word.

Inside, the combination of scents was far stronger, they seemed to fill the air until it was impossible to take a single breath without risking making the atmosphere part of his very soul.

Frantically trying to keep his attention on the job at hand, Steffan glanced down at his instructions again. Just as Marsdon's note promised, there was a bar and a man standing behind it.

"The back room," Steffan said, as confidently as he could manage. "The men who've booked it are expecting us."

"Down that corridor, last door on the left," the human said, pointing to a doorway on the other side of the room.

Nodding his thanks to the other man, Steffan strode past an archway that seemed to lead into the main part of the building and straight on towards the other door. Francis didn't stray far from his side. Steffan still kept a careful eye on him. The idea of his friend being alone in a...in whatever this place was, sent a shudder through him.

Reaching the door at the end of the gloomy little corridor, Steffan glanced to Francis for guidance. The smaller wolf shrugged. Lacking any better ideas, Steffan raised a hand and tapped gently at the woodwork.

For several long seconds, nothing happen. Steffan looked to Francis once more, before knocking slightly more loudly.

A few sounds made it through the heavy wooden door then. One of them, Steffan recognised easily. Marsdon's cursing was quite distinctive. He couldn't hear any sound

coming from Bennett, but Steffan doubted the other wolf would be any happier about being interrupted.

The door jerked open a few inches. Marsdon glared through the gap. "What happened?" he demanded, the moment he set eyes on them.

"The pack you've been in talks with—they've brought the mating pair to speak with you."

Marsdon found a few new curses. He looked over his shoulder, no doubt towards Bennett, but the other alpha didn't appear at the door.

"Five minutes," Marsdon snapped, and slammed the door in Steffan's face.

"We should probably go back to the car," Steffan suggested.

Francis nodded as if he agreed, but as they walked towards the exit, his friend's attention wavered from their destination. He turned towards the archway leading through to the main part of the building.

Unwilling to let the other man out of his sight, Steffan was barely a step behind him as Francis stopped in the arch. The younger wolf was small enough for Steffan to easily see over his head and gain just as good a view as his friend.

The room was full of humans.

Francis took another step forward, into the darker, more shadowy space beyond. Steffan helplessly followed him, his eyes darting from one group of men to the next.

Most of them wore strips of leather that did little to conceal how much they were enjoying themselves. All the men in there were turned on, their cocks hard and curving back towards their stomachs. The combined pleasure in their scents made Steffan's head spin as he focused in on certain details.

Some of the strips of leather bound men to various objects.

A huge diagonal cross on the far side of the room housed a young, fair man, each of his limbs tied to one of the four lines of dark, polished wood. His back was to the room. His face couldn't be seen, but his arse was displayed very nicely for any man who wished to glance in his direction.

The skin covering his backside was reddened and sore. As a man to the left of the cross brought some sort of implement down across the bound man's buttocks, it was clear how he'd gained that rosy hue.

The leather snapped as it landed against the young man's skin, making the man, who wielded the whip, smile. Steffan watched them both, completely mesmerised, until a movement in another part of the room caught his attention.

A larger, older human was bound, bent over what looked like some sort of wooden box. One man stood in front of him, lines of bare skin visible beneath his chaps as his cock thrust rapidly into the restrained man's mouth. A third man was positioned behind the guy bent over the box, his cock impaling his arse again and again, as his hips pushed savagely forward with little apparent concern for the man he was mating with.

Steffan looked quickly away from that scene, only for his eyes to be drawn to another, where a seemingly omega human sat at the feet of his mate, his eyes looking worshipfully up at a man who couldn't be anything other than the human equivalent of an alpha. As Steffan watched, the omega lent forward and lapped gently at his lover's stiffening cock, and received a caress from the alpha as a reward.

The wolf's mind spun as he tried to make sense of it all. His cock rose, not caring how illogical it all was. There was a part of him that would have given anything to be the guy hanging from the cross, kneeling at the feet of his lover or... Steffan glanced back to the box for a moment. If there were only one man, or one wolf using him, he'd have happily taken that human's place to. There was only one wolf Steffan had thought about that way for years.

At that moment, a little gasp pulled his attention back to Francis. He was watching it all, just as intently as Steffan. In spite of all the confusion surrounding him, Steffan could make out the scent of the other wolf's arousal. He blinked as he realised he wasn't the only one enjoying the view.

For one brief moment, he tried to picture Francis in leather bonds like the men on the other side of the arch, but his mind rebelled. It was one thing to see humans in those kinds of restraints. But, Francis...

Steffan stared down at the top of his friend's head. No wolf should be treated like that. No wolf should *want* to be treated like that, either. Some of his pleasure, at the multitude of scenes before him, drained away.

That was for humans. It wasn't for wolves.

"Steffan! Francis!"

Steffan looked over his shoulder. Marsdon stood in the middle of the lobby, his expression very serious. Bennett was right next to his mate, but the other alpha didn't say a word as they all walked out to the car. Sitting in the back with Francis while the alphas took the front seats, Steffan studied the other wolves very carefully.

The way Marsdon was looking at Bennett was different. He seemed to be watching over his mate, as if he was concerned for him. Maybe he had reason to be. Bennett, for his part, was very quiet, almost withdrawn. Steffan dropped his gaze, wishing that he'd been stronger, that he had been able to deal with the situation without needing to fetch his alphas.

When Steffan finally looked up, he found Francis watching him. The other gamma offered him an encouraging smile. Steffan smiled back, but the expression quickly faded as their car pulled up outside the pack's old farm house.

The vehicles belonging to the visiting pack were nowhere to be seen.

As the alphas climbed out of the battered old 4x4, Steffan spotted a face peeking out from behind the curtains of the main hall. It quickly disappeared. No one came out to greet them.

As Marsdon stormed into the house, Bennett just a pace behind him, Steffan tried with increasingly little success to hold down the growing sense of dread bubbling in the pit of his stomach.

"What happened?" Marsdon demanded as the other members of the pack looked up.

No one said a word, but everyone in the pack already knew the answer. Alfred was looking innocent. The only time he ever looked that way, was when he had something to feel very guilty about.

Marsdon took a deep breath. "Did they say anything before they left?" the alpha asked, with obviously forced calm.

Not a single syllable left any man's mouth.

Marsdon turned to the omega and simply stared at him, knowing he'd be the first to break.

Talbot swallowed. "Their alphas said they'd contact you tomorrow to discuss the arrangement that they'd intended to make."

"Intended?" Marsdon echoed, with a kind of calm he only ever managed when he was royally furious. He took another deep breath. "It's late. It's time you were all in bed."

The whole pack immediately headed towards the stairs.

"We'll deal with you after we've spoken to the Ridgeway alphas," Steffan heard Marsdon snap to Alfred as the other gamma walked past him.

Alfred said nothing, but his steps sped up as he seemed to scurry away from the prospect as fast as his legs would carry him. Steffan joined the end of the line of wolves making their way towards the stairs.

"We'll speak in the morning too," Marsdon said as Steffan reached him.

Steffan nodded, knowing exactly how Alfred felt. Marsdon's voice may have been kinder when he spoke to him than it had been when he addressed the other gamma, but Steffan still had no doubt about just how badly he'd screwed up.

\* \* \* \*

"Steffan!"

Steffan set down the axe he'd been using to chop wood and looked over his shoulder. Marsdon stood in the kitchen doorway looking out over the courtyard. When the alpha beckoned to him, Steffan knew the moment he'd been dreading wouldn't be put off any longer.

He made his way into the house, through the kitchen and the main hall, and into the small room at the back of the house that the alphas used as an office. With every step it was harder not to feel like his neck rather than a log was going to be under the axe any moment.

Bennett was already in the office, sitting behind the desk. Marsdon walked around to sit on the cabinet behind his mate.

"You're aware that we'd planned to make you the beta wolf of the pack for some time now," Bennett began as Steffan lowered himself into the chair opposite the desk.

Unable to bring a single word to his lips, Steffan nodded.

"However," Marsdon took over. "It's recently become clear that the pack would benefit from a new beta being brought in from outside."

"The decision's no reflection on you, or on your actions last night," Bennett added.

Steffan looked from one alpha to the other as relief sung through him. Perhaps there was a way to say that he was glad, that he'd dreaded the day they'd name him as the beta of

the pack. Maybe there was even a way to say it without sounding ungrateful or petulant, but Steffan didn't know what those words were.

"Maybe it would have been better for you to send one of the other wolves to fetch us while you stayed here and tried to limit the damage," Marsdon said with a rueful smile. "But we all know there's only a certain amount you could have done. A beta who's a blood relation to Alfred will never be able to tame him." Truth rang from every word. Whatever anger lingered in Marsdon's words was for Alfred, not him.

"Whatever is best for the pack," Steffan managed to stutter out. It was generally a safe answer. This time, it had the additional benefit of being true.

Bennett smiled at the sincerity that came through in his words. Marsdon nodded his approval too.

Steffan hesitated, knowing this was the perfect chance to find out what he suddenly realised he needed to know, but uncertain how to frame the question.

"Steffan?" Bennett prompted after silence filled the air for several long seconds.

"The new beta – you intend him to be mated to Alfred?" Steffan asked.

"Betas are traditionally very good matches for troublemakers," Marsdon muttered.

"We hope a good match can be made between Gunnar and Alfred," Bennett added, with a slightly reproachful look at his mate.

"Hope?" Steffan jumped on the word. "The final decision's not been made yet?"

"He'll be joining the pack, regardless," Bennett said, not unkindly.

Unease prickled down Steffan's spine. Every instinct he had, screamed at him to stop pushing. It wasn't his place to question his alphas. Still, he forced himself to keep going.

"If he should take an interest in another wolf instead?" he asked.

His alphas exchanged glances.

"I didn't realise you were so eager to find a mate straight away," Marsdon admitted.

"Me?" Steffan blinked. He shook his head very quickly. "No, I didn't mean...I just – if the beta should pick one of the other wolves – Francis or..." he cast about for another name to hide his real question. "...Or Talbot?"

"Gunnar's younger brother, Caden, will be joining the pack with him. From what we've heard, he might prove a nice match for Francis," Bennett offered.

Not about to agree or disagree until he'd met both the wolves in question, Steffan merely nodded his understanding as he rose to his feet. It was possible that a gamma like Caden could prove a suitable match for his friend. Possible, just very, very unlikely.

As they returned to the big hall that occupied most of the ground floor of the house, every wolf's attention shifted towards them.

Steffan pretended not to notice. He walked across to one of the big sofas where Francis sat and took a seat next to him. The smaller wolf caught his eye. Steffan quickly smiled his reassurance.

He kept his attention on Francis when the announcement was made, too. Other wolves asked questions, but Francis just listened, taking it all in without saying a word.

"You're pleased," Francis eventually said, as they all walked outside on their alphas' order. It was an observation, not a question.

"I'm not cut out to be a beta. I made my peace with that a long time ago," Steffan said.

Francis glanced up at him. "You think new wolves joining the pack will be a good thing, then?"

"Yes."

"Because Alfred will –"

"Nothing has been decided there, yet," Steffan cut in.

Francis glanced up at him again, his surprise showing in his eyes.

"Marsdon said that Gunnar could still choose to be mated to a different wolf. He and Bennett wouldn't object," Steffan pointed out, trying with all his might to make that sound like something he'd welcome.

Francis made no comment.

Steffan glanced sideways at his friend before dropping his gaze to study the ground in front of them. The new beta would be a good thing, he reminded himself, very firmly. It was well past time Francis found a good, strong wolf to be his mate.

## Chapter Two

Francis smiled slightly as he saw the cars pull up outside the farm house at almost exactly the same moment as the entire pack walked into the courtyard. Their alphas had obviously timed their announcement very carefully. Alfred wasn't going to have even a single second in which to plot the downfall of the new arrivals.

Marsdon and Bennett immediately strode forward to greet the alphas of the other pack. From his vantage point hanging back with the others, Francis quickly inspected each of the newcomers as they came into view. For what felt like several lifetimes, it was impossible to pick out which of the wolves were the brothers destined to join their pack.

Finally, he saw Marsdon and Bennett lead two wolves towards them.

It wasn't hard to spot which brother was which, then. The larger of the two wolves screamed his status of a beta with every step he took. Tall and broad, compared to almost any wolf except Steffan, he had more swagger to him than any gamma would ever adopt, and more attitude than any competent alpha would even need to display.

While both Marsdon and Bennett walked tall, calmly confident that there was no reason for anyone to challenge their leadership, everything about this new wolf seemed to invite a confrontation, just so Gunnar could have the pleasure of putting an uppity gamma back in his place.

Francis had plenty of time to study him as the other members of his pack formed a line and waited to greet him.

Steffan was one of the first to meet their new beta. Even from a distance, Francis saw the skin on Steffan's hand turn white as the other wolf made some sort of stupid attempt to assert his rank and dominance through a damn handshake.

Francis' opinion of their new beta suddenly dropped not just to the ground, but several yards beneath it, buried beneath layer upon layer of accumulated dirt and debris. The fact the pillock didn't repeat the stupid move with the other wolves in the line only set Francis' hackles up further than ever.

"And this is Francis."

Gunnar barely spared Francis a glance before he silently nodded his greeting and favoured him with the briefest possible handshake. Francis nodded in return, tensing as he realised he'd been firmly filed under the heading 'not a threat' in the new wolf's head.

It was a pity the stupid oaf hadn't been so quick to stick the same label on Steffan. There wasn't a wolf in the pack, except possibly their omega, who'd be less likely to challenge the beta. If he couldn't see that then...

Another hand was suddenly there, being offered for Francis to shake. Pulling himself out of his thoughts, he traced a line from the hand, along an arm, and to a man.

"Caden," the other wolf said.

This was Gunnar's brother? It was hard to picture a wolf more different. Caden was... Francis tried to think of a word other than gorgeous and failed.

"You're very welcome here," Francis said, politely.

Caden nodded his thanks with equal courtesy, but his brilliant blue eyes danced with amusement as he glanced across at his brother, strutting around, making sure everyone knew there was a new beta in town. "He's not quite so bad once he's made his point."

No doubt, Caden was right. A beta had a place in the pack that he had to maintain. Establishing that position probably put a lot of pressure on him and made him look like far more of an idiot than he'd actually turn out to be. However, it didn't excuse the way he had squared up to Steffan.

"Sometimes being a gamma is good," Francis offered.

Caden smiled his complete agreement as he pushed a lock of impossibly golden hair out of his eyes.

"You've met Steffan?" Francis checked as his friend joined them. He looked up at the larger wolf, wondering what he thought of the stunning little beauty who'd just joined their ranks.

Steffan smiled civilly at Caden, but he didn't seem the least affected by his rather blatant charms. His gentle brown eyes didn't linger on the new gamma. "Most of the others are going inside. Have you met Talbot yet?" he said to Caden.

"Your...our omega?" Caden checked. He nodded.

"You should make time to get to know him better," Steffan suggested. "I think you'd get along very well."

"I'd like that."

Francis had always wondered about phrases like, 'his smile lit up his face', but Caden really did appear to shine with a special inner light that made most of the wolves around him look rather bland and ordinary. Francis wasn't sure if speaking to the omega was the single most wonderful thing Caden could imagine doing with the rest of his life, but it was hard to believe such a beautiful smile could be an act.

Still, smile or no smile, within mere moments, Steffan had deposited Caden with a rather wary looking Talbot and, before Francis could even work out what his friend thought of the beta or the beauty, he found himself being gently shepherded towards Gunnar.

The new beta didn't seem particularly impressed with either of them as they reached his side, but he reserved the worse of his glare for Steffan.

"You've met Francis," Steffan reminded him.

Gunnar folded his arms across his chest said nothing.

"I should go and see what work needs to be done." And Steffan walked away without another word.

Francis watched him go, a frown gathering between his brows.

Gunnar squared his stance, stamping his work boots into the ground as he glared after Steffan too. "You're mate's—"

"Steffan's not my mate," Francis cut in, wondering where the hell the beta got that idea from.

Gunnar glowered at him as if he actually doubted he was telling the truth. Then he shrugged the whole matter aside as if he couldn't bring himself to care either way.

Francis cast about for a suitable topic of conversation, sure that the beta would think it an insult if he just stood there and ignored his existence, no matter how much he was inclined to turn his back on him and walk away without another word.

No appropriate subjects came to mind. He glanced across the courtyard again. Steffan was talking to the alphas. Whatever they were talking about, it didn't seem to be going well. The muscles along Steffan's shoulders were all bunched up with tension. As Francis watched, he lifted a hand and pushed it through his hair, disordering the short brown strands the way he only ever did when he was really anxious.

"Tell me about Alfred," the beta suddenly ordered.

Francis looked up at the taller man.

"I heard what happened when the mating pair was brought to visit you. I'm not a fool. I know why I was invited to join your pack."

"Steffan says that nothing's certain there, yet. Marsdon and Bennett want to see how well you suit before any final decisions are made."

Gunnar raised one dark eyebrow at him.

"They were a love match," Francis confessed, with a small smile. "I think they'd like all the wolves in their pack to be the same."

The beta's brows came together. His jaw clenched. All things considered, he looked more than slightly horrified by the idea.

"They're good alphas," Francis snapped.

Gunnar went back to glaring across the courtyard. "I'd never imply otherwise. They're my alphas now too."

Francis pushed down his anger as he forced himself to return to the original question. "Alfred is...inclined to create a lot of trouble where only a little existed before. He pushes at cracks and makes them wider. But..." Francis sighed as he struggled to put his feelings about a wolf he knew so well, into words an outsider might understand. "There's always a crack to start with. It's as if he can't help but pick at existing wounds, no matter how tiny they are. Steffan doesn't think he's a bad wolf—he says Alfred just needs to find peace with his place in the pack. When he does that, he'll settle and become a good wolf."

Gunnar made no comment. Francis looked across the paved area to where the other wolves were still talking.

"Steffan's a good wolf already," he informed Gunnar, as his gaze came to rest on his friend. "You'll like him."

"He's built like a brick wall."

"He's a good wolf—a good gamma," Francis bit out.

"It wasn't an insult."

"You won't find a better gamma than Steffan," Francis added. "Just because he's built to a larger scale, that doesn't mean he should be treated any differently to any other gamma."

Gunnar seemed to turn his complete attention towards him for the first time in the conversation.

"Strangers see his size and they think he must want to be an alpha or a beta, but he doesn't. Anyone who knows him can tell you that. And anyone would see an attempt to put him down as what it was. Challenging him won't make you look like a beta in anyone's eyes, just like a bully."

"I'll remember that."

The way he said it made it sound like more than a polite little throw away phrase. He looked to Steffan, then back to Francis, apparently thinking very deeply about something.

Francis nodded, but a second later, as he ran the conversation over in his head, he became aware that he probably hadn't been as polite to the beta as he should have been. He muttered a few mental curses.

"Caden seems nice," he offered, as enthusiastically as he could manage.

Gunnar didn't smile at the mention of his brother, but a touch of amusement made its way into his dark brown eyes. "He's not as stupid as his looks lead people to think. There's a brain hidden somewhere beneath all that floppy blonde hair."

Francis bit his lip to stop himself from laughing. It wasn't perhaps the kindest description of Caden, but as he watched the other wolf smile up at Steffan on the other side of the courtyard, he couldn't help but think it was a very accurate one. Floppy blond hair, a perfect smile, and an apparent inclination to linger at Steffan's side...

Gunnar was right. There was more to Caden than first met the eye. He was definitely a wolf who warranted careful study. As Francis observed him, the pretty little wolf put his hand on Steffan's arm to stress some point he was making. Very careful study...

A few seconds later, Francis met Gunnar's eyes as he turned his attention back to the beta. "I'm sure you'll both be very happy with us," he muttered, quickly leaving Gunnar behind as he crossed the courtyard.

When he was just a few yards from Steffan's side, the pretty new gamma walked away to speak to someone else. For some reason, Francis found himself quite pleased at the idea of not having to make small talk with him.

Steffan turned towards him, as if he sensed his approach. "How's Gunnar?"

Francis shrugged, only managing to resist the temptation to say he was a complete arsehole because he wasn't inclined to hear his kind-hearted friend stand up for the man.

"He looks like he'll be a good beta – strong, confident."

Francis shrugged again. "Caden seems nice too," he forced out.

Steffan made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat.

"You don't like him?" Francis realised, more than a little bit fascinated with the idea. He'd never known his friend *not* to like another wolf. Hell, he even managed to think kindly of Alfred!

"I'm sure he's a fine wolf," Steffan conceded. "He and Talbot could do very well together."

Francis tilted his head to one side. It was hard to imagine Talbot with *anyone*. The arrival of the new wolves seemed to have thrown him back into the persistent state of panic he'd resided in for those first few weeks when the pack was first formed. Perhaps, when he got used to them, it would be different. Right then, Francis was pretty sure their omega would hyperventilate if anyone mentioned the possibility to him.

"And Gunnar and Alfred?" Francis prompted.

"No."

Francis glanced up at his friend. He sounded more certain than he had ever heard him. "You don't think they'd suit?"

"I think it would be very wrong of us to assume that Gunnar will choose Alfred as his mate," Steffan replied.

Francis nodded as he looked from one of the wolves in the courtyard to another. If nothing else, the brothers' arrival was certainly going to make things interesting.

\* \* \* \*

"This is Alfred's responsibility."

Francis put down the box he'd been filling and mentally counted to ten, then to twenty. It did him little good. By the time he'd forced himself to turn around and face the beta, he was no calmer than he'd been as he first heard the other man's voice.

Gunnar's head and shoulders were already visible through the trap door leading down into the room below the attic. He looked thoroughly pissed off with the world. Francis couldn't bring himself to be particularly surprised. That seemed to be pretty much par for the course.

"One of the other wolves asked him to go into town with him to pick up some supplies," Francis said, careful to keep his tone of voice polite.

"You mean *Steffan* took him into town with him," Gunnar growled as he climbed the last few steps up the ladder and joined Francis in the attic. He was taller than Francis. He had to stoop considerably until he reached the high point under the roof's ridge, and even then he wasn't able to stand at his full height.

Francis met the other wolf's eyes as Gunnar stopped directly in front of him. "Yes." There didn't seem to be any reason to apologise for the fact.

Gunnar glowered at the attic's beams as if their existence personally offended him.

It was amazing just how much room the man managed to take up. He wasn't half so broad across the shoulders, nor as tall as Steffan, but he still managed to expand to fill all available space, as if he thought the world was his personal entitlement and everyone else should be happy that he let them reside there at all, let alone exist in comfort.

The cottage wasn't large, and its attic was perfectly in proportion. There wasn't a lot Francis could do to sort out the mess of clutter that had been left behind by the previous occupants of the cottage while a hulking great beta loomed in the middle of the space. Taking a seat on one of the boxes he'd already filled, he waited as patiently as he could for the lecture to commence.

Gunnar might not have proved to be much of a talker during the weeks since he'd joined the pack, but he did like to bloody well babble on once he got going.

"While Alfred is doing God knows what with Steffan, and you're doing Alfred's duties, whose doing your work?" the beta demanded, as he turned back to him.

"Bennett says that we should all be able to take care of each other's duties, just in case," Francis observed, with only slightly strained calm. "It's always useful to—"

"Answer the question," Gunnar cut in.

"I've already finished my duties," Francis said, his civil tone of voice already slipping. The words came out clipped, frigid and unlikely to appease the other man's bad mood in the slightest.

Gunnar turned around as if he wanted to try and pace. Quickly discovering there wasn't room, he spun back to frown at Francis.

The gamma tried not to be disappointed that the larger wolf hadn't tried to stomp about the same way he did in the rest of the house. Steffan might not seem to be bothered by the way the beta constantly sniped at him, but Francis would have dearly loved to see the other wolf slam his head into one of the beams and drop through the laths that bridged the gaps between the joists beneath them. Perhaps falling through the floor into the room below would knock some better manners into him.

"What's Steffan's interest in Alfred?" Gunnar suddenly growled, jolting Francis out of his thoughts.

Francis frowned. "Why would you think—?"

"It would be far easier for me to take care of *my* duties if every time I sought out Alfred, I didn't find you in his place."

Francis tilted his head to one side and studied the other wolf for a few moments. He tried to picture a world in which Gunnar's accusations could be well founded. It wasn't possible. Just picturing Steffan and Alfred together sent an uncomfortable feeling down his spine, making him squirm in his seat. It couldn't be true.

"Steffan is the only wolf who has ever been kind to Alfred," Francis said, carefully, feeling his way forward into a new idea. Yes, that made far more sense. He wasn't fussing over Alfred because he had any interest in making the other man his mate. He was doing it because he'd always been soft-hearted that way.

"And that's what they're doing now, is it—sneaking off to be *kind* to each other?"

Pure fury shot through Francis, hot and burning, unlike any anger he'd ever felt before. "Perhaps he's just trying to make sure Alfred's in favour of the match before he ends up mated to you whether he likes it or not!"

"The alphas will make their decision. We'll respect it," Gunnar bit out.

"Yes, they will," Francis spat at him, knowing there was no way in hell either Marsdon or Bennett would ever force a wolf into a match he found truly distasteful. Gunnar would find that out soon enough. The alphas might be inclined to let him settle in and find his feet for a little longer, but they wouldn't let him be a pillock forever.

"Tell your friend that whatever they decide, it'll happen regardless of his opinion," Gunnar snapped.

Francis suddenly found himself on his feet, standing right in front of the larger wolf, glaring up at him without any attempt at due respect for the beta's place in the pack or for anything else. "Steffan would never challenge his alphas!"

"That's not what I heard."

Francis lifted his chin, not about to let the beta use all their stupidity as a weapon against one wolf—and especially not against Steffan. "He didn't make the challenge—we all did. He's no more to blame for it than anyone else."

Gunnar merely grunted as he turned away, dismissing the truth, dismissing Steffan, as if he was nothing.

Francis grabbed his arm. "Steffan is the last wolf in the pack who'd want to challenge anyone."

"He was still the first to step into the challenge ring," Gunnar glared down at Francis' hand on his arm as if he expected to be able to put him in his place with nothing more than a look.

Well, sod that. He was a beta not an alpha, and as far as Francis could see, he was a pathetic excuse for second in command for them, too. "We all stood on the other side of the ring. We were all at fault."

Gunner just continued to glower at his hand on his arm. Francis let him stare. Right then he didn't give a damn what the other wolf thought of him. If he became the target for the beta's temper, at least it would give Steffan a break from the other man's sniping.

"*You* challenged Bennett?" the other wolf sneered.

Francis raised his gaze and met the older wolf's eyes. "Yes."

"Any fool can see that there was only one wolf in this pack who'd ever have a chance against Bennett. It wasn't you."

Francis shook his head. That wasn't fair. Francis could guess how heartbroken Steffan would be by the other wolf's accusations. The worst thing of all was that his friend might actually believe there was some sort of truth in them.

Steffan hadn't been the same wolf since the two brothers joined them, and suddenly Francis was sure he knew why. "You said that to him!"

Gunnar turned away, dismissing him as if he was nothing more than a little pup yapping around his heels. Francis lost his grip on the other man's arm, but he lunged forward and caught hold of him again.

If Gunnar had put some stupid notions into his friend's head, he had to know what they were so he could replace them. The thought of Steffan suffering in some idiotic silence because the beta had shot his mouth off, over things he could never understand, sent fresh anger streaming through his blood.

Gunnar growled at him, pushing him out of his way as he moved towards the step ladder. Francis fell back against the boxes. Pain shot through his shoulder as he collided heavily with the corner of one of them. Without thinking, he launched himself at the larger wolf. His hand wrapped around thin air as the beta moved away from him. Another step forward along the narrow beam and he snatched at Gunnar's shoulder again.

"Francis?" Steffan's voice floated up through the trap door.

Francis looked to the ladder, then back to Gunnar. The expression in the beta's eyes told him everything he needed to know about what was going to happen next. He lunged forward, determined to stop his friend becoming the victim of another one of the beta's temper tantrums.

His foot landed awkwardly on the edge of the beam.

He looked down just in time to see his ankle twist out from under him. His other foot came down heavily on the laths between the beams. Gunnar turned back to him. The beta's eyes opened very wide beneath those heavy eyebrows. He reached out to catch him, but he wasn't quick enough. Francis felt the insubstantial laths give way beneath him.

Twisting frantically, he tried to catch hold of the thick oak beam as his side slammed into it. His hands scrabbled at the roughly hewn hulks of wood as his feet kicked out against nothingness. Air rushed around him. Dust and plasterwork filled the air. Then, there was just pain...

\* \* \* \*

Francis tried to blink open his eyes.

Darkness continued to surround him. He wasn't sure if that was because his eyes were still closed in spite of his best efforts or if the world really was that black. His whole body throbbed with a kind of pain he'd only known once before.

He tried to lift his head, but nothing would move. There was no way he'd be able to undo his seat belt. Even his lips didn't want to obey his brain's commands. Francis forced his mouth open and tried to summon up the energy to howl. Fire shot through his ribs as he attempted to drag the necessary breath into his body. The sound that emerged from between his lips was pathetic, barely more than a whimper.

No one would ever hear that. No one would ever find the car and come to help them if he couldn't do better than that. Another tiny little whimper escaped from the back of his throat.

"Francis?" The word seemed to come from a long way away. A hand touched his cheek—a very big, very gentle hand.

Steffan was there. Francis tried to blink his eyes open again, but the darkness remained. He had no way of telling how badly the larger wolf was hurt.

"You're going to be fine."

Francis tried to nod, to reassure his friend that he was already fine, but no part of his body wanted to cooperate with his plan.

"What did you say?"

Francis couldn't even manage to frown as the beta's voice pushed its way into his consciousness. He tried to raise a hand and reach out to Steffan, to protect him from the other man's angry words, but it felt like someone had drilled a metal spike through his wrist while he'd been...sleeping?

He didn't remember going to sleep. He just remembered being angry with Gunnar. The beta had said something about Steffan. Francis tried to pull his thoughts together. His mind didn't seem to work properly.

"I said everything's going to be fine," Steffan repeated.

He sounded very sure—or perhaps as if he wanted to be very sure. Either way, Francis didn't doubt he was right. Steffan was there and everything would be fine.

"No," Gunnar snapped. "Before that you said 'the wolf you're going to be mated to'."

Silence fell over the world. As another wave of pain rolled through Francis, it was easy to believe that he was once more trapped in the back of a car, that his parents were in the front seats but that they weren't answering his pleas because they were no longer able to speak, because they'd never be able to say another word.

Not again. Francis pursed his lips. He managed a howl. But it was still too weak. He was too weak. No one would ever hear such a feeble little sound. No one would come to help. If he'd howled louder last time then maybe other wolves would have come in time to save his alphas and...

No. That wasn't going to happen again. He was bigger now, stronger. He could howl louder. Help would come. Steffan would be fine.

"Hush. Hush. It's okay. Good wolf. I've got you safe. It's okay..."

Steffan...Francis let out the breath he'd been trying to form into a howl. A mewling little sound escaped with it.

"You said, 'the wolf you're to be mated to'," Gunnar repeated from somewhere close by. "You called Francis the wolf I'm going to be mated to."

"You're a good match for him," Steffan whispered as Francis felt his friend slip something soft beneath his head.

"You're trying to set me up with Francis?" The beta sounded angry now, but Francis still couldn't make sense of the words.

"He deserves a good, strong mate," Steffan informed him. "To be mated to a beta."

There were several seconds of silence. Even angry voices were better than that. Francis tried to make his throat work.

"Bloody hell! You really are in love with him, aren't you?" That was Gunnar again. Even he was better than silence, better than being trapped out in the middle of nowhere with no way to raise a large enough howl to summon help. But he was no replacement for Steffan.

Francis wanted Steffan. He wanted his best friend. He tried to raise his head.

"That's not important," the other gamma whispered.

Francis felt Steffan's hand begin to move over his body, as if checking for injuries. His touch was as gentle as it always was, but everywhere he examined still hurt.

"What the hell's going on?"

Bennett. A very angry Bennett, Francis realised. That was good too. The alphas were here. They could take care of everything now, they could take care of Gunnar and leave him and Steffan to rest.

"He fell," Gunnar said.

Yes, Francis thought. He fell. The attic. The world swirling around him. The floor. He'd fallen. He was in the old cottage near the main farm house. The whole pack was close by. There was no need to howl, no need to call for help.

There were no more silences after that. Words swirled around him. Orders and responses. Questions and answers. More wolves came. Others hands roved over his body, checking him for injuries.

"...carry him through into the main house..."

"...sofa in the main hall..."

"...going to hurt..."

A hand stroked his cheek.

Steffan. Francis would know the other wolf's touch anywhere. He managed to turn his face slightly into the other man's palm. A moment later, he felt strong arms lift him from the floor. Pure agony cascaded through him. In the blackness behind his lids, a deeper darkness seemed to encroach further into his mind.

"I think he passed out..."

The words pricked at the edges of Francis consciousness as the deeper darkness closed in even further.

"...probably for the best..."

\* \* \* \*

Francis tried to blink open his eyes. Somehow, he expected them to stay closed regardless of his wishes, some scared little part of him assumed he'd remain surrounded by nothing but blackness forever. But his eyes opened. The light blinded him. He tried to lift a hand to shield his eyes. Fire shot through his wrist.

He winced as he peered at the bandage cocooning the joint.

"Everything would probably hurt a lot less if you stopped wriggling about so damn much."

Francis managed to turn his head to one side. The blinding light slowly became more bearable. The blurry shape on the other side of the room morphed into Gunnar.

"Where's Steffan?" Francis rasped. His throat felt like someone had poured sawdust down it while he slept. "What happened?"

"You fell through the attic floor. The whole ceiling will probably need to be replastered now."

Francis tried to nod as memories slowly came back. "You were shooting your mouth off about Steffan, again." Swallowing several times did little to make his throat work.

"I was right."

Francis ignored him. His frown deepened as other memories hovered around the edges of his mind and tried to draw attention to themselves, only to refuse to form into anything recognisable when he tried to make sense of them. "Where's Steffan?" he asked again.

"The alphas ordered him to get some sleep."

Francis looked around the main hall, at the bright sunlight streaming in through the windows.

"He sat with you all last night," Gunnar informed him.

"Oh..." Francis glanced at his bandaged wrist, wondering if that was Steffan's handiwork. "He...you said...after I fell..." he remembered. More details came back to him, and he quickly cut off the direct route his brain seemed to have to his tongue.

"You weren't completely dead to the world then?"

"I was...it's all a bit hazy..." Francis hedged.

"Steffan's in love with you."

Francis tried to take a deep breath. His ribs wouldn't let him.

Gunnar had accused Steffan of being in love with him. He remembered that now. Gunnar had said it, and Steffan...Steffan hadn't said he was wrong.

Francis rubbed at his temple, but that just made both his head and his wrist hurt all the more. And Steffan wasn't there. That was more wrong than anything else. Steffan should be there. Steffan was always there.

He looked across to Gunner.

The beta raised one dark eyebrow at him.

Pushing himself into a sitting position took every scrap of energy Francis possessed. A cold sweat broke out across his skin with the effort.

"Bennett says you'll be fine, but it'll take you another few days to heal—and your ankle will probably take an extra week or two."

Francis swung his feet over the side of the sofa. His ankle ached like hell, and he hadn't even tried to put any weight on it.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Francis' head spun. "Steffan—"

"—has been ordered to sleep," Gunner cut in. "And you've been ordered to rest, there."

Already exhausted, Francis slumped back against the sofa cushions. "When you see Steffan, will you tell him I'd like to speak to him, please?" he asked, as politely as he could manage.

Gunner grunted. Francis had little choice but to hope that meant yes, but by the time he was finally helped up to his bed that night, he still hadn't set eyes on his friend.

He was more than ready to believe the beta hadn't passed on his message. But, he wasn't sure why none of the other wolves in the pack would have refused to let Steffan know he wanted to see him. He couldn't understand why the other gamma wouldn't have sought him out without any prompting, either.

With his mind full of Steffan, and with his friend suddenly invading parts of his head where he'd never ventured before, Francis was sure he wouldn't be able to sleep a wink. There were too many memories that needed to be re-examined with a different perspective, too many things that suddenly made him wonder about facts he'd never thought to question before.

Steffan was his friend—his best friend. He was the one wolf Francis knew would always be there, who would always be at his side. Steffan was the one man he needed to be close to whenever a howl in the night reminded him how painful it was to lose someone he loved...

\* \* \* \*

Francis jerked awake. He tried to sit up in his bed, but pain quickly pushed him back against the mattress. His eyes darted desperately around the room. No one was there. He pushed his uninjured hand through his hair. A sheen of sweat clung to his skin. His breaths came in pants, much to the horror of his bruised ribs. When Francis pushed at the blankets that pooled over his lap, his hand came away sticky with cum.

Letting out as deep a breath as his lungs would allow, he looked around the shadows of the room, again. There was still no one there, but the dream had been so real.

Steffan had been right there in his bed and...

Francis closed his eyes and images came rushing back.

Steffan had been there, lying on the mattress, staring up at him as Francis straddled the large wolf's body and held him in place. He'd seen the desire as well as the love in the older man's eyes.

Francis' palms itched as he watched the version of himself, that had come to life within his dream, reach out and run his hands over his lover's body. It was just like watching the men in that club where they'd found Marsdon and Bennett.

Steffan gasped and arched into his touch as enthusiastically as any human ever could. He made no move to take over, to tell Francis what to do. That was the thing he remembered, almost more than anything else.

Steffan had lain there and let Francis do as he pleased with him, until Francis had felt his friend's pleasure rush through his body and saw Steffan throw his head back and howl his ecstasy loud enough for the whole world to hear.

It had all been so simple, so perfect. Steffan had been his to do whatever he wanted with and —

Francis turned to face the door as it creaked open. "Who's there?"

"It's only me." Steffan stepped quietly into the room, closing the door behind him.

"Steffan?"

"I heard the alphas. I thought you might..."

So the howl hadn't been entirely in his imagination then. Francis had just been wrong about the source of it. It hadn't been *Steffan's* pleasure he'd heard splitting the air. He still didn't know how Steffan would sound when he screamed his release into the night.

Francis swallowed. Suddenly not knowing something so important felt incredibly wrong. "I..."

Steffan stepped closer to the bed. He frowned as he studied him in the moonlight pouring in through the open window. His hand went to Francis forehead to check his temperature.

"It just startled me," Francis whispered. "I wasn't expecting..."

He hadn't expected Steffan to sneak into his dream that way. He hadn't expected a man he knew better than any other wolf in the world, a wolf he'd been raised beside ever since his parents' death, to suddenly turn into someone he didn't know how to talk to.

Steffan nodded. "Maybe you should speak to Gunnar about it."

"What?" Francis snapped.

"Tell him about how the howls startle you," Steffan said gently. "He might be able to help."

"I spoke to Gunnar earlier," Francis blurted out.

Steffan half smiled, even while his eyes continued to look sad. "I should fetch him for you..."

Francis shook his head. "You help," he rushed out. When he heard a howl, Steffan was the only wolf who helped.

The older man began to pull away from him regardless. "Gunnar could —"

"Stay with me?"

Steffan hesitated. "I just came in to check you were okay. I really shouldn't be..." He looked to the door as if planning his escape.

"Please?" Francis asked, feeling as lost and as alone as he ever had when he went to the other man's bed.

"Are your wounds bothering you?"

Francis shook his head. No matter how much he wanted him there, lying and making Steffan worry would still be inexcusable.

Steffan rocked on his heels as he seemed to consider his decision for a long time. "I'll sit with you until you fall asleep," he finally offered.

"Until morning?" Francis asked.

"You'll rest better on your own," Steffan protested.

That was nothing more than a pure lie. Francis just wasn't sure if Steffan knew it or if he'd really convinced himself it was the case. "Stay?" he asked again.

Steffan took a step closer.

"Do I spoil your rest when I come to your room?" Francis asked, as Steffan reluctantly settled himself on the bed next to him.

"It's hardly the same thing," Steffan said, spreading one of the spare blankets from the bottom of the bed over his body, keeping Francis' blanket firmly between them.

Francis supposed he should be glad for the barrier, should be glad that Steffan would never guess how much he'd been enjoying the dream the alphas jolted him from. But he still wanted, needed, to feel the other wolf's skin next to his. As Steffan turned on his side and spooned behind him the way he so often had in the past, Francis pushed the blanket between them down to his waist, so he could feel his friend's bare chest against his back.

Steffan made an attempt to straighten the blanket. Francis pretended not to notice. Eventually, his friend gave up and accepted things the way Francis wanted them. He followed meekly along when Francis tugged at his wrist and pulled him close to press against his back too.

The larger wolf's presence immediately surrounded him. As easily as that, Francis felt some of his worries ease. Steffan remained tense for a little while longer, but he gradually relaxed, as well.

Everything always felt right with the world when Francis was wrapped up in Steffan. It wasn't possible to believe that everything couldn't be sorted out when he was held in the larger man's embrace. Just like it wasn't possible to imagine sharing his bed with any other wolf—or to imagine any wolf but him being permitted into Steffan's bed, either. Francis felt a growl building in the back of his throat at the very thought.

## Chapter Three

When Steffan heard another man step into the kitchen, he didn't need to look over his shoulder in order to know who it was. Even if he hadn't heard the tap of a walking stick against the tiles, he'd still have recognised Francis' presence in the room.

No matter how much he wanted to turn and check that his friend was okay, Steffan remained facing the sink and kept his attention on his work. It wasn't his place to fuss over the other wolf. Far better that he leave Gunnar to do that, once and for all.

"You're in love with me."

For several seconds, Steffan clung to the belief that he'd somehow misheard the other wolf's words, that his fear of discovery had turned the syllables that had left his friend's mouth into something different as they passed through his ears.

"I know you heard me, Steffan." The other wolf took a few more shuffling steps forward, still aided by the stick Marsdon had made for him to use until his ankle healed.

Very slowly, Steffan turned to face the smaller man. Their gazes met. There was no doubting the look in his friend's eyes.

"Of course I do," Steffan managed to say, his voice almost calm. "I...I care for all the wolves in the pack."

Francis didn't even blink. "I heard what you and Gunnar said to each other after I fell."

"You'd hit your head really hard," Steffan reminded him, trying not to sound as if he was frantically trying to dig himself out of a very deep hole, but not sure he succeeded.

"Did Gunnar hit his head as well?"

"What?"

"Gunnar remembers things the same way I do," Francis informed him, still perfectly composed.

"You must have misunderstood," Steffan started to babble. "He must have meant he'd realised how much I cared about you when he saw how afraid I was that you were badly hurt. Members of the same pack—"

"He wasn't talking about that kind of love," Francis cut in. "And I understood exactly what he meant."

Turning his back on him, Steffan returned his attention to the plates he'd washed and was now drying. It wasn't easy to hide how badly his hands shook as the layers of chinaware rattled against each other when he tried to pick them up.

Gunnar couldn't have told him. The beta couldn't have been that cruel...

"He was talking about the sort of love a wolf has for his mate," Francis said, softly.

"Then he was mistaken." The words sounded wrong, even to Steffan's own ears. They sounded like a lie. Steffan cleared his throat and tried again. "He's new to the pack. He doesn't understand us yet."

"Or maybe he sees things more clearly because he's looking at them with fresh eyes," Francis suggested, the sound of his voice warning Steffan he was moving closer with every word.

"If you didn't know they were brothers, it would be easy to see Gunnar and Caden together and think that they were more than friends." It was a good comparison, Steffan decided. He and Francis were like brothers. Yes, that was right.

"But we're not brothers," Francis said, from right behind him.

"We might as well be," Steffan rushed out. "We were practically raised in the same pack."

"But we still grew up knowing that there was no blood shared between us, that there was no reason why we couldn't be —"

Steffan couldn't listen to another word, not and stay sane at the same time. Abandoning his duties half completed, he twisted away from his friend and rushed out of the kitchen without a word.

He'd paid attention when the alphas were giving Francis his orders that morning. His injured ankle meant he'd remain confined to the house for several more days. Francis was effectively trapped.

All the way across the courtyard, Steffan felt the other wolf's eyes on his back. He turned the corner and kept going, not heading anywhere except away from the wolf he'd been in love with for longer than he could remember. Crossing one of the fields, he strode into the orchard towards the south side of their lands.

"Where are you going?"

Twisting around, his gaze darting between the trees to every side of him, Steffan finally spotted Gunnar. The very sight of the beta made him freeze.

"Are you going to answer me?" the other wolf demanded.

Steffan swallowed. "You told him I was in love with him."

"Yes." And he said it so calmly, as if he had the right. As if his sudden appearance in the middle of the pack gave him the privilege of breaking all the bonds that existed before his arrival – bonds that it had taken an entire lifetime to form.

"You'd no right to –"

"It's the truth," the beta cut in, dismissing everything he had to say in just a few snapped words.

"No, it's –"

"Any wolf in the pack could see the same if they just looked at the two of you together," Gunnar threw at him as he closed the gap between them, ducking under low hanging branches along the way.

The other wolves in the pack weren't the point. "*He* didn't need to know," Steffan yelled, unable to keep his anger in check as he felt his friendship with Francis slip through his fingers and found himself unable to save even the tiniest scrap of it.

"Yes, he did."

"Because you say so?"

"Yes." Gunnar moved forward. He pushed his shoulder against Steffan as he stepped past him, as if he sensed a challenge in the offing and was determined to slap it down before it could take hold.

"I've no interest in being a beta," Steffan snapped. As if he could care about that while his bond with the most important wolf in his life was crumbling before his eyes.

Gunnar growled. Catching hold of Steffan's arm, the beta spun him around and made him face him. And Gunnar was right there, in Steffan's space. And he was pushing, pushing all the time. And he'd told Francis.

Steffan flung the other wolf away from him. Just for a fraction of a second, he forgot to be careful with wolves who were weaker than him. He forgot everything that had been drummed into him about playing carefully with others since he was a pup.

Gunnar stumbled backward. His footing failed him. He tumbled into the dirt beneath one of the apple trees. The beta immediately launched himself up, anger flooding his eyes and a snarl building in his throat.

Steffan knew what he should do then. He should lower his eyes, offer his apologies and make it clear that he wasn't trying to challenge the other wolf for his place in the pack.

But as he glared at the beta, Steffan found himself completely incapable of doing the right thing. For the first time in his life, Steffan wanted another wolf to push him, to confront him, to try to fight him. He wanted an excuse to lash out in return.

Meeting Gunnar's eyes, he unflinchingly held his gaze as the beta started to circle him.

"I've the right to do as I see fit," the other wolf informed him. "To tell the gammas in this pack whatever I please."

Steffan made no comment as he turned to keep the beta in his field of vision. He wasn't even sure he could force any words out past the ball of pain and anger lodged in his throat.

"Acknowledge!" Gunnar demanded.

Steffan stayed silent. His hand clenched into a fist at his side.

Gunnar stepped forward, but the gamma was incapable of backing down right then. The other wolf growled and pushed his shoulder against Steffan again before starting to circle him once more.

Steffan merely stayed exactly where he was. He was bigger and stronger than the other wolf—if Gunnar wanted to move him he'd have to do a hell of a lot better than that.

As eyes met once more, Steffan saw the moment when the beta lost his temper. Gunnar flung himself forward, kicking the gamma's legs from beneath him. Steffan stumbled but kept his footing. He snapped at the other wolf as he helplessly began circling the beta in return.

The first real blow sent him staggering backward, colliding heavily with one of the tree trunks. Branches shook overhead. Loose leaves rained down around him.

Gunnar hung back a few paces, as if waiting to see what he'd do next. While every instinct Steffan had screamed at him that this was his chance to make it clear he didn't really want to challenge the beta, anger still roared and crashed inside him, drowning out all sense and reason.

Launching himself at Gunnar, Steffan toppled them both onto the increasingly muddy ground beneath the trees. They rolled and scuffled, scrabbling at each other, morphing half way into their lupine forms as they each sought to pin down the other man and failed.

A knee landed hard in Steffan's stomach, knocking the breath out of him. He shoved his elbow into the other man's neck as he tried to push him away. Gunnar growled and choked, but he rallied quickly.

Clothes ripped and were tossed aside as wolven forms found their legs and tails tangled in trousers far more suited to a human body. Mud coated their skins and their pelts in equal measure.

Gunnar pounced.

As Steffan deflected the blow, he deftly rolled the other man onto his back, both his body and his mind operating more like a wolf's than a man's.

Nipping at the hand the beta thrust into his face as he tried to shove him away, Steffan forced the higher ranking wolf to the ground and loomed over him, demanding Gunnar tilt his head back and show his submission.

Out of nowhere, a hand caught hold of the back of Steffan's neck and pulled him away from the prone wolf. Spinning frantically around, he instinctively tried to shake the hand away. It did him no good. The grip on his scruff held firm.

Twisting like a pup in the hold of a fully grown wolf, he looked over his shoulder, trying to see who had hold of him.

Marsdon stood tall behind them, towering over them both. His other hand gripped the hair on the back of Gunnar's head where the beta had morphed half way back to a human and lost the scruff of his lupine form.

Steffan froze. Dropping his gaze, he automatically shifted completely back into his human skin.

Gunnar seemed to recognise who was holding him a moment later. Within seconds, they were both entirely human, Marsdon flung them apart, sending them sprawling towards the bases of different trees, their tattered clothing flailing around them as they fell.

"What the hell's going on?"

Steffan stared at the muddy ground to one side of his alpha's feet, panting for breath, trying to pick up a few of his scattered human thoughts.

"I asked you a question!"

And a question from an alpha had to be answered. "It was nothing," Steffan muttered.

"You broke rank for nothing?" Marsdon demanded. He turned to Gunnar. "And what do you have to say for yourself?"

Gunnar swiped a thumb across his bloodied bottom lip. "Rank wasn't broken."

Oh, yes. Because rank was the only thing that mattered—as if there weren't more precious things that could be broken, things that couldn't be fixed as easily as a wolf could lower his eyes. It was all Steffan could do to hold back his howl of mingling pain and frustration.

"I expect far better from both of you. Squabbling like petty little children! You're both far too old to play rough—it's small wonder one of you didn't get killed!" Marsdon turned to Gunnar in particular. "If you didn't know better than to start a fight with a gamma before you joined our pack, then you'd best start learning quickly."

"He started it," Gunnar muttered.

Steffan didn't bother to object—it was pretty much true.

"Well, I'm finishing it," Marsdon snapped. "Gunnar—inside. Get cleaned up."

Steffan remained where he was, his hands fisting in the grass under the tree as the beta stormed off.

"What happened?" Marsdon demanded again, as they were left alone in the orchard.

Steffan stared at the mud for a long time, not knowing what to say.

"We're staying here until you answer me."

"It's his fault," Steffan blurted out. "He put lies into Francis' head, he told him I'm in lov—" Steffan met his alphas eyes as he cut himself off. He saw the start of some sort of understanding in them and looked quickly away.

Marsdon walked across to a large tree stump at the edge of the orchard and sat down.

"Come here."

There wasn't room on the stump for two. Steffan collapsed onto on the grass at his feet.

"Are you sure they were lies?"

Steffan closed his eyes. "I stepped aside," he whispered. "I told him that I knew he was a better match to Francis than I'll ever be. I showed him every due respect to a beta. He didn't need to..."

"He didn't need to what?" Marsdon asked.

"He didn't need to push us apart! I was walking away."

Marsdon reached out and stroked his fingers through Steffan's hair.

"He was always comfortable with me. Even when he was a little pup, Francis was the one wolf who was never worried that I'd get clumsy and hurt him."

Marsdon stroked his hair again, just the way he'd comfort a pup. Steffan rested his head on rough wood next to his alpha's leg.

"And now he doesn't know quite what to do with you, and you don't know what to say to him. Everything has changed," Marsdon said.

Steffan nodded.

"If he was mated to Gunnar, everything would change then, too."

"I know." Steffan closed his eyes. He'd known that. He'd known he'd have lost the nightly visits to his room when the howl went up. He'd resigned himself to the fact that he wouldn't be able to spend all his time with his friend, and that he'd have to stop looking after him as best he could, because Francis would have someone who could look after him properly.

But he hadn't realised how much it would hurt. He hadn't truly understood that looking into his friend's eyes and seeing something other than gentle companionship in his gaze would make him feel as if his heart was being ripped out through his chest.

"What did he say?"

Steffan frowned. "He told Francis I was in love with him." He'd already told his alpha that.

"What did Francis say?" Marsdon rephrased.

Steffan shrugged.

"I saw you storming away from the house. Did you give him a chance to say anything before you left?"

Steffan shrugged.

"Don't you think you should talk to him?"

Steffan shook his head. For a little while, Marsdon let him sit there at his feet while he petted his hair, offering him the reassurance of an alpha's care and a pack's presence when he felt so alone.

"You'll have to face him sooner or later," Marsdon finally told him.

Steffan nodded his agreement. He didn't mind acknowledging it was the case, as long as it never had to actually happen.

"But first, you need to clean yourself up. Come on. Gunnar should be finished by now. Inside. In the shower. Let's see what needs to be patched up."

A few minutes later, Steffan was standing under the hot steam. Marsdon was waiting for him in his room when he came out. A few cuts and scrapes decorated his skin, a few bruises were starting to show through, but Marsdon was soon ready to pronounce him not too much the worse for his foolishness.

"This is what's going to happen now," the alpha informed him "We'll go down stairs. You'll sit at the kitchen table and eat your food with everyone else. Every bit of it'll taste like ash, but you'll eat it anyway. Bennett and I will decide what's to happen about your scuffle with Gunnar and an announcement will be made after the meal. After that, you and Francis are going to be left alone to talk."

Steffan parted his lips as if to answer back. Then he met Marsdon's eyes. There wasn't anything he could say to his alpha. The decision had been made. If Marsdon thought it was best for the pack that they talk, they would talk, whether he liked it or not.

\* \* \* \*

Francis studied his friend very carefully as the older man pushed his food around his plate. Steffan hadn't even looked in his direction since he came in. If Marsdon hadn't ordered his friend down to the other end of the table, Francis might have been able to whisper to him as they ate, but there were several wolves sitting between them now. All Francis could do was stare.

Steffan lifted his gaze and looked to Marsdon again. Something passed between his friend and the alpha. Steffan put another forkful of food in his mouth. He didn't appear to be enjoying it.

Francis bit his lip. The bruise on his friend's temple was still deepening, turning an increasingly vivid purple as he watched. It had to hurt like hell.

Gunnar had his fair share of bruises too, but they weren't important. Steffan was hurt, and he shouldn't be. Francis pushed away his plate, his own food barely touched.

He caught Bennett's eye as the alpha set his own empty plate to one side and cleared his throat, pulling the attention of every wolf in the pack towards him.

"It's about time someone started work putting the cottage back in order. Steffan, you're going to be responsible for that. You can work on it after you finish your other regular duties."

Francis turned his attention back to Steffan. It would take a lot of work to put the cottage in order, especially if one wolf was working there alone. There could be no doubt it was a punishment duty.

The other gamma's expression didn't waver, but Francis frowned. Whatever happened between him and Gunnar, he was very sure it wasn't Steffan's fault. He shouldn't be the one being punished for it.

"Gunnar," Bennett went on. "The old shearing hut on the other side of the wood needs attention too. You can add that to your other duties."

A glance at Gunnar showed that he wasn't at all pleased with the announcement, but he nodded his understanding and didn't try to wheedle his way out of it.

Francis' felt his hackles go down as he realised the alphas weren't singling Steffan out.

"Steffan, Francis, you're both on clean up duty in here," Marsdon ordered, as he stood up. The other wolves filed out of the room, leaving them alone at the long table in the kitchen.

Francis watched his friend move his uneaten food around his plate a little more. Without even acknowledging there was another wolf present, Steffan stood and started to clear the bowls of leftovers from the middle of the table.

Pulling himself to his feet, Francis started to collect some of the empty plates.

Steffan quickly appeared at his side and took the dishes out of his hands before Francis could even attempt to hobble across to the sink with them.

"I can do that," Francis said.

"You're hurt." His friend still didn't look him in the eye.

"So are you," Francis reminded him. "And I've had more time to heal." He stood next to the table, his hands empty and every bit of him desperate to reach out to the other wolf. But he didn't know how. His hands stayed at his sides

"It's nothing," Steffan muttered, as he took the dishes to the sink.

"You were fighting with Gunnar."

Steffan turned on the tap, filling the basin with hot water. Francis frowned at his friend's back. For the first time in his life, he didn't really know what to say to him. Picking up the salt and pepper he limped towards the pantry to put them away, playing for time while he tried to bully his mind into working properly.

"Don't."

Francis stopped half way across the room. "I—"

"I know I've got no right to tell you what to do," Steffan interrupted. "But just...don't. You're going to make your ankle worse if you keep trying to walk on it before it's healed properly."

"Sit at the table with me, then?" Francis asked.

Steffan closed his eyes for so long, Francis began to think he'd never open them again. When he finally looked up, the other wolf seemed to have resigned himself to the conversation. Steffan lowered himself into the seat at the furthest corner of the table.

Shuffling across the room with the aid of his stick, Francis sat in the first seat along the adjacent edge. "What I remember, what Gunner said—it's true."

He didn't bother to make it a question. Steffan didn't provide an answer, either.

"For how long?" Francis asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

Steffan shrugged. "I didn't wake up one day and decide to fall in love with you. It just happened." He picked up one of the forks still on the table and fidgeted with it as he spoke. "I don't remember *not* being in love with you, anymore."

The pain in the words was impossible to bear. Francis reached out and touched his cheek. Their eyes met. Francis saw the agony in his expression, he saw the confusion and the shame there too, and his heart broke a little for his friend. "Did it ever occur to you that I might feel the same way?"

"No."

Francis took a deep breath.

"Don't," Steffan whispered.

Francis hesitated. "Don't?"

"Don't tell me you feel the same way about me. We both know it'll be a lie."

"I don't really know how I feel about you," Francis admitted. His heart racing as he realised how true that was.

"Then I'll tell you," Steffan said, slowly. "You feel just as you always have. I'm your friend, nothing more, nothing less."

"No, you're wrong." He was more than that. Francis didn't know much, but he knew Steffan was far more than a mere friend to him. He'd been more than that for years. It had just never occurred to Francis to try to work out exactly what he'd become as their friendship had deepened past simple companionship.

Steffan set down the fork and put his hand on the table to lever himself out of the chair. Francis quickly put his palm over his fingers. It took amazingly little strength to keep the strongest wolf he had ever met sitting where he wanted him.

Francis stood up. Before Steffan could protest, he put his hand on his friend's cheek, once more. He'd felt his friend's skin against his palm hundreds of times. This time, it felt different.

"Francis..." Steffan began.

Leaning down, Francis brushed his mouth very gently against Steffan's open lips. The older wolf gasped. Air rushed against Francis' mouth. Holding his friend in place with the fingertips on his cheek, he brought their lips together again. Steffan didn't pull away, he didn't do anything.

Another gentle kiss, and Francis' tongue snuck out to tease Steffan's lips, before Francis leant back just a fraction of an inch. Steffan's eyes remained closed, but as the smaller wolf watched, his friend's tongue crept out to taste the kiss, too.

Francis' palm slid from Steffan's cheek, back towards his nape. His fingers buried themselves in the larger wolf's short brown hair stopping any possibility of a retreat. Francis dipped his head, again.

Steffan parted his lips in cautious welcome, and Francis lapped his way into his mouth to taste him properly for the first time. And it felt...right. So right.

A surprised little murmur escaped from Steffan. Francis stepped forward, nudging the other man's knees apart so he could step between his legs and press his body against the larger, stronger wolf's frame. Steffan didn't try to hold him close in return. He seemed completely frozen in place, but he was no less perfect for that.

Francis let the kiss trail on into another, then another, until it was hard to remember a time when he hadn't been kissing his friend, until it was impossible that a time had ever existed when it hadn't occurred to him to think of Steffan as far more than a friend.

Steffan whimpered as Francis pulled back a fraction and rested their foreheads together. So this was what it felt like when everything in the world clicked into place, and the missing piece of the puzzle was discovered.

Steffan still didn't move. One of his hands remained on the table. The other arm hung idle at his side. It was as if he thought moving might break some sort of spell, or, knowing his friend, as if he just wasn't sure where to put his hands.

Francis smiled. They would have to sort that out. He couldn't have a mate who was afraid to touch him. Francis ran his hand from the back of Steffan's head down his neck and across his shoulder. A mate...Yes...

Steffan swallowed as if he'd heard what his friend was thinking and was quietly terrified by it.

They both took a deep breath at the same moment, as if one brain was telling both their bodies what to do, as if they'd only ever needed one mind to make both of them safe and happy for the rest of their lives.

"Francis..." Steffan finally said.

"Hush." Francis kissed him again, a sweet little touch of lips to silence the other wolf. When he leant back, he put his fingers to Steffan's lips in place of another kiss and smiled at his friend. "Don't say anything."

Steffan nodded his willingness to obey the order.

Francis brushed his fingers across Steffan's lips again, marvelling that he could have missed something so blatantly, bloody obvious for so long. "Can you finish the dishes on your own?" he asked.

"Your ankle," Steffan was immediately on his feet, guiding him to sit in the chair he'd occupied.

"It's fine. Just a little sore."

The reassurance failed to ease Steffan's frown. Francis caught hold of his friend's wrist.

"Really, I wouldn't lie to you, Steffan," he said seriously. "I'm fine."

The larger wolf reluctantly nodded his acceptance of the fact.

Francis kept hold of his wrist. Steffan stayed there as if he was as trapped by Francis' grip on him as Francis would be if their positions were reversed and it was the stronger wolf who held him in his grasp.

Francis smiled up at him. "It was worth standing up for."

Steffan blushed. He dropped his gaze then, and wouldn't look back at him. Finally, Francis let go of him. While his friend finished the dishes, Francis turned his attention to another matter—one that it was undoubtedly *his* duty to attend to.

As soon as the last plate was set back in the cupboard, Francis hobbled out of the kitchen and straight to the door leading into the alphas' office. Marsdon sat behind the desk.

Francis cleared his throat.

The alpha looked up.

"May I speak to you and Bennett later?" Francis asked, every word as polite as he could make it.

Marsdon glanced at the papers spread across his desk before closing the folder in front of him and pushing it aside. "You can speak to me now."

"I'd like to speak to both of you at the same time," Francis said, making sure to keep his tone of voice perfectly respectful. "In private, if possible."

"This evening, after dinner then?" the other wolf suggested.

Francis nodded in return. "Thank you."

The alpha looked curious, but he didn't ask any questions of him right then. When Bennett returned from his trip into town, he soon began to look at Francis with the same curious expression. As soon as the evening meal was finished, both alphas headed to their office.

Francis waited a few minutes, until Steffan was busy and had his back to him, before he limped after them. He tapped his knuckles against their door.

"Come in."

Francis shuffled into the room.

Marsdon immediately directed him to the chair. Bennett already sat behind the desk, Marsdon perched on the cabinet behind it.

"How's your ankle?" Marsdon asked.

"Healing, thank you."

"You wanted to speak to us?" Bennett prompted as silence attempted to fill the room.

Francis nodded. He'd rehearsed the words very carefully. There'd barely been a moment since he'd kissed Steffan that they hadn't been going around and around in his mind. It was still far harder to say them than he thought it would be.

If he got them wrong, too much was at stake.

"Francis?" Bennett nudged.

"May I have permission to court Steffan?" Francis rushed out.

Marsdon's lips twitched as if he was holding back a grin. He didn't look at all as surprised as Francis assumed he'd be. "You've reached an understanding with each other?" he asked, quite calmly.

Francis hesitated. "No," he acknowledged. "But I'd like to. I'd like permission to court him formally."

"And Steffan's view on this?" Bennett asked, looking at the space next to him as if wondering why the other wolf wasn't standing in that spot beside him.

"He's not asking for permission," Francis said. "I am."

His alphas exchanged glances.

Francis held his breath.

"Is there anything else you want to tell us before we make our decision?"

"I kissed him," Francis blurted out, suddenly realising he couldn't bear to start his life with his friend with a lie.

Bennett nodded, encouraging him to go on as if he didn't realise that was the extent of the confession. Finally he seemed to guess there was nothing more for him to admit to. "You

know that you don't need our permission to kiss Steffan — as long as you have *his* permission, that's generally considered enough."

"I should have waited until I had your permission to court him," Francis said firmly. "I want everything done right for him."

Marsdon nodded his approval. "You can go. We'll discuss your request and let you know our decision."

Francis nodded. "Thank you." He pulled himself to his feet and reached for his stick.

"Do you need help?"

Francis shook his head. He doubted he'd need to get far past the doorway on his own anyway. Someone would be there to help him soon enough.

## Chapter Four

There he was! Steffan quickly strode across the hall and slid his arm around his friend's waist, supporting his smaller frame and taking most of Francis' weight off his injured ankle before the other wolf could lie and try to tell him he was okay.

The other wolf slid his arm around him in return, somehow managing to fit against him perfectly regardless of their difference in heights. Steffan did his best to ignore their closeness, even as all his senses sang out their pleasure at having the man he loved pressed so tightly against him.

They were both fully dressed. Skin was barely brushing against skin. But with the memory of the kiss still lingering on his lips, Steffan found it almost impossible to remember that. There was an intimacy in their touch that was new. Steffan had never felt closer to his friend.

As he led the younger wolf to one of the sofas, questions streamed through his mind. What had Francis spoken to the alphas about? What was going on? Did he regret the kiss? Was he angry with him? Steffan looked at the other wolves who were already starting to gather in the hall and the queries died before they ever reached his lips.

"You're okay?" he settled for.

Francis nodded. "Of course."

Steffan echoed the gesture. Of course he was okay. Francis had merely spoken to their alphas about something. There was no need to worry. Steffan lowered himself onto the sofa next to Francis and a whole new set of questions flooded his brain. Was he sitting too close to the other wolf? Too far away? He'd always been wary of taking up too much room, but suddenly things that he'd never have thought to question before were important.

Part of him knew the best thing to do was simply pretend nothing had altered between them. Except another side of him was screaming that everything had changed. Steffan folded his arms across his chest in an effort not to reach up and touch his lips.

Gunnar strode into the living room and threw himself onto the sofa opposite them without a word. He'd obviously been for a run. His hair was still damp from the shower. A moment later, Caden joined them, too.

The beta had sprawled out, long limbs claiming the entire sofa. There wasn't much room for the smaller wolf, but as Steffan watched, Caden nudged his brother, gently but persistently, until there was a perfect Caden-sized space on the sofa for him to make himself comfortable.

When he met Steffan's eyes, Caden smiled. "When are you two going to start your new projects?"

Steffan politely waited for the beta to give his answer first.

"Tomorrow," Gunnar said, his tone clipped. Apparently, Caden either didn't notice his brother's annoyance with the question, or he didn't care.

Steffan nodded his agreement. "I'll start tomorrow, too."

Other wolves began to gather around the fireside with them as they finished their various duties. Steffan noticed Talbot as the omega quietly settled himself on the floor close to the hearth. He was soon staring across at Caden in blatant adoration.

Steffan smiled slightly to himself. They would make a very pretty pairing. Caden might not have his brother's status as a beta, but he had a quiet confidence. He was the only wolf bar the alphas who could stand up to his brother and —

"Francis. Steffan."

Steffan looked up as his thoughts scattered. Marsdon stood in the doorway leading through to the alphas' office, beckoning them both. Steffan quickly helped Francis to his feet, and guided him across the room.

For all he was trying to hide it, his friend was obviously nervous as hell. His grip on Steffan's arm risked cutting off the blood supply. By the time Steffan had helped his friend into the office, his own anxiety was skyrocketing as he frantically tried to work out what the hell was going on, what Francis could possibly have to fear from the alphas.

Marsdon and Bennett were on the other side of the desk as they entered the office, Bennett leaning against a cabinet behind the desk and Marsdon in the chair. Guiding Francis to the only other seat in the room, Steffan stood beside him.

"We've discussed your request, at length," Marsdon announced.

Steffan looked from Francis to the alphas, wondering if he was supposed to know what they were talking about. He turned his attention back to Francis just in time to see his friend nod. At least one of them was following the conversation.

"Permission is granted," Bennett said with a smile.

Every ounce of the tension that had filled the smaller gamma drained out of him. Francis nodded again, smiling across at his alphas as if they'd given him the whole world on a plate, then offered him the rest of the universe for dessert, just for good measure.

If it made Francis that happy, it was obviously a good thing. Steffan would still have felt far more comfortable if he had some clue to what the hell was going on.

Bennett caught his eye and seemed to sense his confusion. "Francis didn't tell you he'd approached us?"

Steffan didn't need to say a word, the alpha seemed to guess the answer before he even finished asking the question.

"Francis has asked us for permission to court you, in the hope of you becoming permanent mates."

"No!" Steffan couldn't have kept the word back if his life had depended on it. Maybe not even if Francis' life had depended on it...

His alphas stared across the desk at him as if he'd lost his mind. Gammas didn't say no to alphas. It simply didn't happen. Steffan looked quickly from one of his leaders to the other and back again. They didn't look angry exactly, just shocked.

"I—" Steffan hesitated. "I'm sorry. I spoke without due thought or respect. It won't happen again."

Bennett quickly nodded his acceptance of the apology and brushed the entire matter aside. "You're not in favour of the match?"

Steffan swallowed. Part of him wanted to just go with it. Part of him didn't care that it would be wrong and selfish to accept what his friend seemed to be willing to do in order to make him happy. That part of him was apparently a complete bastard.

But even while the selfish side of him howled, another part of Steffan pushed its way to the fore, and that side of him really didn't care what he wanted for himself. When there was any doubt at all, he should do what was best for Francis. He'd been living by that code for so long, it was practically *first* nature, now.

"I don't think we'd suit well as mates," he said, quietly.

Marsdon turned his attention to Francis. "Do you have anything to say?"

"My request still stands," Francis said, perfectly calmly. "If I still have your permission?"

Marsdon and Bennett exchanged a slow, speaking look before they each nodded. "Our decision stands."

When Steffan would have protested again, Marsdon held up his hand.

"Francis has the permission he asked for—to court you and try to obtain your consent to a formal mating ceremony. That doesn't mean anything will happen between you—formally or informally, unless you both agree to it."

Steffan somehow managed to nod.

"We're not saying you're mated," Bennett added, seriously. "The permission is for a courtship. Nothing's final."

While Steffan's mind reeled, his body twitched the appropriate nerve endings required for another nod.

"You can both go now," Marsdon finally allowed.

Steffan automatically helped Francis up from his chair and out of the office, but the smaller wolf shook his head when Steffan would have led him back to the fireside.

"I'd like to go up to my room, now," Francis whispered, with a speaking glance towards the stairs.

Steffan guided his friend to his bedroom without a word. While his mind swirled in all different directions, his body took over. Turning down Francis' bed for him, he arranged the pillows as he knew his friend liked them and unfolded one of the spare blankets onto the bottom of the bed just in case it would be needed.

Francis sat in a chair in the corner of his room and watched it all in silence. Finally, there were no details left for Steffan to fuss over.

"Do you want to...?" he nodded towards the bathroom.

The other gamma shook his head and pulled himself to his feet before Steffan could rush to help him. Some of the soreness seemed to have returned to the smaller wolf's body. His ankle in particular appeared to be causing him a lot of pain.

Steffan carefully helped him out of his clothes. Settling Francis on the edge of the bed, he quickly turned away from all the bare skin he'd have loved to stare at for a lifetime. Folding each garment, he put them neatly on the chair, giving the simple task his entire concentration.

When he turned back to his friend, expecting to see him tucked up chastely under his blankets, Francis still sat on the edge of the bed as naked and as stunning as ever.

"Can I get you anything?" Steffan hazarded.

Francis extended one arm towards him.

Steffan automatically took Francis' hand in his, supporting it carefully so he could study his wrist, checking for any sign of swelling or deformity in the joint. It had been badly bruised in the fall, but Steffan had thought it had healed well and had stopped troubling his friend.

Fingers closed tight around his palm. Steffan looked up and met his friend's eyes. There was no trace of pain in his expression.

"You're tired. You should rest," Steffan said.

"I'm not tired. I just wanted you on your own. This seemed like the best place."

As easily as that, the room morphed from a simple space for sleeping, into very dangerous territory for Steffan. He shook his head and tried to take his hand back, but Francis stubbornly refused to ease his grip on him.

He could have pulled his hand away, Steffan knew that, but as he met Francis' gaze, he also had no doubt his friend would have fallen off the edge of the bed before he let go.

"You shouldn't have asked the alphas for that," Steffan whispered, suddenly unable to keep the words back.

"For permission to court you?" Francis specified.

"I know what you think you overheard, what Gunnar told you was said," Steffan said. "But you don't need to do this."

"This has nothing to do with Gunnar."

Steffan knew damn well it had everything to do with the thoughts Gunnar had put into his friend's head, but that wasn't the point. "You need to tell the alphas that you've changed your mind," he decided, with what he felt was truly admirable calm. "Tell them you don't want any of this."

"I haven't changed my mind. I do want this," Francis corrected.

"You and Gunnar –"

"I wish him every happiness with Alfred," Francis cut in sharply. "Maybe one day he'll be a good beta wolf and a useful member of the pack – maybe. But I've never had any interest in being mated to Gunnar. There's only one wolf that I have any interest in making my mate."

Steffan closed his eyes, as if that would somehow help, just like a silly little pup hiding his head under the blankets. When he opened his eyes, Francis was still there, still sitting naked on the bed, and he was still staring at him with that unfamiliar expression in his eyes too.

"This is just because Gunner told you...told you..."

"The truth?" Francis asked. He smiled slightly as if amused by something.

"You never had any interest in being mated to me before," Steffan reminded him. "Doesn't that tell you that this is a mistake, that you're just confused and –?"

Francis tugged on his hand until Steffan got the idea and knelt between the smaller wolf's legs so his friend wouldn't have to tilt his head back and get a crick in his neck to look at him. As soon as he was on his knees, the smaller wolf put his hand on his shoulder as if he meant to keep him there forever. Steffan barely held back a whimper at the thought.

"We aren't pups anymore," Francis told him. As he spoke, the fingers resting on Steffan's shoulder started to move, tracing the line of his collarbone through his t-shirt. "When a grown wolf climbs into another wolf's bed, it means something."

Steffan turned his face away. "That's why you're doing this because you think I expect –"

Francis silenced him with three fingertips pressed against his lips. The fingers on his other hand stroked the lines of muscle running from his shoulder up to his neck. It made it so damn difficult to think.

"I'm doing this because I realised that your bed's the only one I want to be in."

"That's just because you're used to me," Steffan said, scrambling for words as his brain threatened to explode with the sheer possibility of all his fantasies coming true. "You like to sleep next to a wolf that's bigger than you and –"

"Gunnar's bigger than me. I have no interest in sharing his bed." His words were slightly distracted, as if Francis was just going through the motions of the conversation and all his attention was actually on the patterns he was tracing on Steffan's skin as he started to explore his body.

"That's just because you don't know him that well yet," Steffan said as he dropped his gaze. "Once you spend more time with him —"

Steffan quickly looked elsewhere as he realised that he wasn't the only one responding to his friend's interest in his body. Francis was hardening before his eyes, his shaft stiffening and beginning to curve back towards his stomach, seeming to offer itself up to Steffan's lips to be tasted in the process.

"I might have been oblivious for a long time, but I do have a mind of my own, sweetheart."

Steffan didn't doubt that. Francis was the smartest wolf he'd ever known. But he was also well aware that his friend's mind had a tendency to get fixated on one thing and not be able to move on from it until he had thoroughly explored every facet of it.

"You're not going to let this idea go, are you?"

"No," Francis agreed softly. "I'm not."

Steffan nodded his understanding. "If we were to..." he caught hold of Francis' fingers and held them carefully within his hand, needing to think clearly for a few moments. Francis seemed to understand. He let Steffan think without distraction as the seconds silently passed.

"If we use the alphas' permission to investigate whether or not we'd suit as mates," Steffan said slowly. "If we did that, and it turned out that we're not as good a match as you think we'll be, then you'll let the idea that we should ever be mates go?"

"We'll suit —"

"But if we don't," Steffan pushed. "If we don't match well, or if one of us should take an interest in someone else, there'd be nothing stopping either of us deciding he wasn't in favour of the match after all, would there?"

Francis studied the question very carefully. "That makes sense."

Relief flooded through Steffan, until Francis cupped his cheek in his palm, and pleasure at his love's touch pushed everything else aside.

"You're willing to try?" the smaller wolf asked very gently, as if he thought Steffan might spook and run.

Steffan nodded again.

The smile Francis offered him made agreeing to anything worthwhile. Steffan automatically smiled back. Francis stroked his cheek with his fingertips as he guided him to lean towards him.

The first touch of lips was just as delicate as the kiss in the kitchen. It was sweet, and it was perfect, and it was Francis. His friend lapped at his lips asking for admittance, and Steffan never had been able to say no to his friend.

Steffan shuffled closer, so Francis wouldn't have to bend his neck at an uncomfortable angle. One of Francis' hands threaded into his hair and took a tight grip on the strands, tilting Steffan's head to one side and holding him still to be kissed.

By the time they pulled away from each other, both panting for breath, Steffan's mind was already swirling with joy. He lowered his gaze. His eyes fell on Francis' erection once more. This time, he didn't rush to look away.

"You really want this?" he whispered.

"Yes." The younger man sounded so determined, Steffan saw little choice but to let the idea run its course in his head.

He wasn't taking advantage, he told himself, not if he just did whatever Francis needed them to do in order to face the fact that *one* of them being in love with the other wasn't enough to make them a mated pair.

"Steffan?" Francis asked. He coaxed him to lift his head and look him in the eye. He kissed him again, soft and sweet, as if all he'd ever want to do from that moment on, was spend his entire life kissing him.

Steffan gave in and gradually allowed himself to return the other man's kiss. Francis' hands slid down his back, pulling him closer, exploring his body through his t-shirt, setting fireworks off inside him with every touch.

"Steffan, you know that I've...that there have been other wolves..." For once, Francis didn't seem to be able to find the right words.

Steffan nodded. He'd known. Every single time Francis had so much as smiled at another wolf, he had known. He'd tried not to care, tried not to let anyone see how much it had bothered him, but he had always known.

"So you don't have to be so careful with me," Francis hinted.

Steffan just blinked at his friend.

"You have, haven't you?" Francis asked, delicately. "With other wolves?"

Steffan nodded. With other wolves – with wolves who might not have been his equal in size and strength, but who were far closer to his build than his friend would ever be. And even with them, he had been careful, cautious, in case he should hurt them by accident.

Francis kissed him again, as if he saw his unease and knew that a brief touch of lips would soothe him.

"Tell me what you want us to do?" Steffan finally asked.

"Everything," Francis said, stroking Steffan's hair back from his face.

"More specifically?" Steffan hinted. He'd be damned if he was going to guess. If Francis wanted this, he had to say it. It was the only chance Steffan had of getting through his friend's experiment without thinking himself a complete bastard. It all had to be about Francis. It had to be.

His friend brushed his fingertips across Steffan's lips. It was close enough to a request.

Steffan nodded. "Yes."

Sitting back on his heels he immediately lowered his lips to caress the tip of his friend's cock, unable to resist the temptation for another second. Francis gasped. Steffan glanced up at him from beneath his lashes. He appeared so awestruck, so beautiful, as if it truly was the first time a lover had touched him that way.

Steffan instinctively reached out to the other man, but at the last second, he stopped himself short. For what felt like a lifetime, his hands hovered in the air, but he finally brought them to rest on the bed, one either side of his friend's body, neither of them even touching him.

His fists clenched tightly around the edge of the mattress. The blanket bunched in his grip. And that was why his hands were better off on the bed. Too strong. Too rough. And he wanted Francis too much. After so many years of fantasies, he didn't have the control he'd need to corral his strength and trust himself.

Keeping every action as gentle as he knew how, Steffan kissed the top of his friend's shaft again, taking the head into his mouth and sealing his lips tightly around it. Francis murmured his approval as he moved both his own hands to rest on the back of Steffan's head.

His fingers soon tangled snugly in Steffan's hair, guiding him to take his lover's shaft deeper into his mouth. Steffan complied, reassured by the strength he felt in Francis' hold on him. The younger man knew what he wanted, he was telling him what he wanted. Everything would be fine.

Steffan ran his tongue along the vein on the underside of the other wolf's cock as he bobbed his head. Pre-cum leaked onto his tongue and he moaned his pleasure as he gained his first real taste of his friend.

Francis' hips rocked forward as the vibrations surrounded him. His grip tightened in Steffan's hair as he pushed his cock deeper past his lips. His eyes dropped closed as he relished the sensation.

Steffan let another pleased little whimper escape from his lips and glanced up to see his lover's response. Francis blinked his eyes open and held his gaze.

"That's right," the smaller wolf whispered. "Just like that."

Heat crept into Steffan's cheeks as he gave his friend what he wanted, and let him hear every scrap of his enjoyment. He let Francis feel every vibration as he let his lover know just how much he relished being allowed to take him in his mouth that way.

Francis' eyes shone with pleasure, too. His lips remained slightly parted as Steffan bobbed his head more quickly over his friend's lap. Taking him deeper into his mouth, he increased his attention to the tip of the other wolf's cock every time he pulled back. Sensing him getting close, Steffan became even more frantic to feel his lover spill into his mouth.

"Steffan!" Francis' hips bucked. His hands fisted firmly in Steffan's hair as he came.

Swallowing quickly around him, Steffan coaxed every possible drop of semen from his friend, until the smaller wolf was completely spent. The whole room fell still, then. They remained exactly where they were as the moments slowly ticked past.

Francis had turned completely soft within his mouth before Steffan finally convinced himself to pull away and let him slip delicately from between his lips. His friend was already sleepy as Steffan guided the sated wolf to lie back on the bed and rest his head on the pillow.

"I knew this was a good idea," Francis whispered to him.

Steffan couldn't help himself. He leant forward and pressed a kiss to the younger man's forehead. Francis frowned and slid his hand behind Steffan's neck, trying to guide him down for a real kiss.

Steffan hesitated. "You should rest," he whispered. "You're still healing."

"We're not finished." His gaze dropped to rest pointedly to where Steffan's erection tented his jeans.

Steffan shook his head. "Just... rest." Enjoying pleasing Francis during their little experiment was one thing, but he knew in that moment that anything more than that would be going too far.

Before his friend could say another word, Steffan made a rapid retreat into the ensuite.

He wasn't hiding like a pup. In his own mind, he was very clear on that fact. He was merely leaving the room to take care of his frustrations in private. It was different.

Closing the door behind him, he leant back against it and took a deep breath. Steffan's eyes dropped closed. The memory of Francis looking down at him was all he needed to ensure he wouldn't keep his friend waiting too long.

Scrabbling frantically at his fly, he dragged down the zipper and pushed the layers of fabric aside. His fingers wrapped around his shaft. A few strokes would probably be all it took while he had that image of his friend in his mind.

So beautiful, so perfect, and right there with him. His hands had been buried in his hair, pulling him closer, keeping him exactly where he wanted him.

Steffan's hand sped up. His grip tightened around his cock as he smeared the pre-cum leaking from the tip down the length of his shaft with each stroke. No need to be careful with himself. He could take rougher handling, enjoy a touch so harsh it was almost painful.

He'd been exactly where Francis wanted him...Francis wanted him...

A final stroke and Steffan came into his own hand, clumsily catching most of his cum in his palm in the process.

The gamma kept his eyes closed as he fell still. His breaths came in pants. His vision blurred. And all he could do then was wait for the guilt to sweep every ounce of his pleasure away, as it inevitably did whenever he gave into the temptation to use his friend that way.

It didn't happen. The pleasure stayed. In a stupid way, maybe he had permission now. While Francis conducted his experiment, perhaps he was allowed to take his own milder form of pleasure from it.

Maybe he was even allowed to pretend his friend really loved him in return, just for a little while.

Francis stared hard at the en suite door as if it might feel guilty and open itself for him. It already felt like someone had set his ankle on fire. Walking across the room would have been agony. But it was the little click he'd heard a moment after Steffan closed the bathroom door that kept him where he was.

The door was locked. There was no point in walking across the room if Steffan wouldn't let him in when he got there.

Francis strained to hear for any hint of sound from the bathroom, but nothing made it through the door. His patience was rapidly fraying by the time Steffan finally stepped back into the bedroom.

The older man didn't meet his eyes or offer any explanation. He didn't need to. He'd been desperate to come when he walked in there. He wasn't any more. Francis didn't need his friend to draw him a picture—he'd have much preferred to watch the real thing.

Steffan looked to the door leading into the hallway.

"If you go back to your room, I'll follow you," Francis said. To his surprise, his voice sounded perfectly level and unemotional.

The other gamma hesitated. "You'll rest more comfortably—" He didn't even bother to finish the sentence once he met Francis' eyes. He came across to the bed and reached for one of the spare blankets without even taking off his shoes.

"Skin," Francis demanded.

"I don't think—"

"That's right, don't think—there's no need to," Francis offered. "Just take your clothes off, lie next to me and rest until morning. Everything will be fine. I promise."

Steffan seemed more resigned to where he was going to sleep than enthusiastic about the prospect, but Francis pushed that aside. As soon his friend lay down, he quickly snuggled up against the larger wolf, and made them both comfortable.

Steffan remained on edge for several long minutes, the way he so often did when Francis joined him in his bed. Steffan just took time to get used to it. That's what Francis had always thought, at least...

With hindsight, it seemed more important, like something he should have noticed right from the start. Turning his head, Francis placed a kiss on Steffan's skin. That just made him tense even more.

Finding a way to make Steffan relax when they were together moved to the top of Francis' list of priorities. If Steffan was going to be his mate, it was going to be his responsibility to look after his lover. As duties went, he was sure it was one he was going to enjoy immensely. He smiled at the prospect as sleep started to claim him.

\* \* \* \*

When Steffan joined him at breakfast the following morning, Francis leaned calmly across the table and pressed a kiss to his cheek. He was pretty sure his future mate couldn't have looked more shocked if he'd taken a swing at him.

Francis grinned. "Because I can."

Steffan frowned. His fingers twitched on the tabletop, as if he wanted to reach up and touch his cheek, but was fighting against the temptation as hard as he possibly could.

"You wanted to know why I did that," Francis explained. "I did it because I can. I never realised I even wanted to until a few days ago, but now I really like knowing I can kiss you whenever I want."

Steffan shook his head and stared at his plate.

"There are lots of other things I'd like to do with you," Francis added.

Steffan made no response.

"I'd like to see if I could make you howl as loud as our alphas do." As loud as he'd thought he had in that dream...

Steffan's head jerked up. He met their gaze. "They're alphas," he muttered. "It's different for them."

"Maybe," Francis allowed. "But how it is for a gamma, felt pretty fantastic to me, last night. I could have made it good for you too, if you hadn't walked out on me."

"You don't need to do that," Steffan whispered, looking around the room as if quietly petrified that someone would guess what they were talking about.

"I'm pretty sure I *do* need to do that," Francis disagreed, very politely.

Steffan shook his head again, apparently not so much at anything specific as at the world in general.

Francis reached out and stroked his cheek.

"You can do this," Steffan said softly, almost sadly. "You can have your experiment. But don't ask me to use you that way."

"And you think that's what I'm doing?" Francis asked. "Using you?"

Steffan shook his head, his cheek rubbing against Francis' hand with the motion. "You think this is going to work, that we're going to fall in love and be mated to one another. You think we're going to live happily ever after together. You can't think like that and use someone at the same time."

"But you don't believe that's possible?"

"Even if it was, I wouldn't want it to happen," Steffan whispered, each word raw with emotion. "It's not for the best in the long run."

"Because you think Gunnar's best for me," Francis observed.

"He's the beta."

"And who's best for you?" Francis asked, a shot of jealousy ricocheting through him at the very thought of anyone else touching his friend.

"I haven't even decided if I want to have a mate at all," Steffan said.

"You want to be alone."

"In the middle of a pack?" Steffan asked, managing a chuckle at an idea Francis was sure didn't seem the least bit funny to anyone present.

"It's easy to feel alone, even then," Francis said. Unless he'd snuck into Steffan's bed in the middle of the night, of course. He'd never felt alone then.

The older wolf took a deep breath, as if he wanted to deny it but didn't want to lie.

"It feels good to have another wolf sleeping in your bed next to you, doesn't it?" Francis pushed.

Steffan shrugged. "Perhaps someday the alphas will decide they wish me to be mated to another wolf. I'll respect their wishes."

"As long as they don't say you should be mated to me?" Francis asked.

Steffan pulled away from his hand and stood up, his breakfast barely touched. "I should get to work."

Francis rose and was immediately reminded why he shouldn't put his full weight on his ankle. He bit back a yelp, not wanting his friend to hear his pain. Scrubbing every trace of it from his voice, he called out to his friend. "Steffan?"

The larger wolf stopped in the doorway. "Yes?"

"You can't work forever. Sooner or later, you'll have to come home. I'll still be here when you do."

Steffan turned away and left without another word.

Francis lowered himself slowly back to his seat. As his breakfast cooled in front of him, just as untouched as Steffan's, he turned the problem over and over in his mind.

He'd told his future mate everything would be okay. He'd be damned before he let it be a lie.

## Chapter Five

Carefully, keeping most of his weight off his injured ankle and on his walking stick, Francis hobbled into the main hall.

"Anyone know where Marsdon is?"

A couple of the other gammas shrugged their ignorance. Talbot looked up from his usual place by the fireside. "He might be in the barn."

Francis nodded and stroked his fingers through the omega's hair on his way past. Talbot offered him a shy smile in return as he went back to shelling peas into a small bowl next to him on the rug.

Limping his way outside, Francis crossed the courtyard towards the big barn door. If he turned the problem over in his head one more time, he was going to go crazy. Hopefully a wolf who'd already found his mate would have some sound advice for him.

Peeking past the half open door, Francis was about to call out a greeting when he stopped himself short. Talbot had been right. Marsdon was in the barn. So was Bennett.

Marsdon had the other alpha pressed against the barn wall, his hands wrapped securely around his wrists. For a second, Francis just stood there, frozen in place, assuming he'd walked in on some sort of challenge.

Then other details made themselves known to him.

While Bennett's hands were held still, his hips weren't. The alpha was thrusting forward, rubbing himself against Marsdon as his mate pinned him in place.

As Francis watched, Bennett leaned up, trying to coax a kiss from the other wolf.

Marsdon pulled back, just out of his reach. "Are you going to be good for your master, pup?"

Bennett nodded.

From his place on the other side of the doorway, Francis saw every detail, from the way Bennett's Adam's apple bobbed as he fought for control, to the pleasure in his eyes as he looked up at his lover.

"Tonight, when they're all asleep, do you want to know what I'm going to do with you, pup?"

Bennett shook his head. Unless Francis was very much mistaken, that was only because he wanted to hear his mate tell him every detail he had planned for him out loud. No man in his right mind could doubt what Marsdon wanted to do with him!

"First, I'm going to make you wait," Marsdon teased.

Bennett groaned, pushing his crotch more firmly against the other alpha's body.

"We're going to sit in front of the fire for a long time this evening," Marsdon told him. "You're going to lay close and rest with me, because you're going to need your rest. I might not let you get a lot of sleep tonight."

"Room," Bennett whispered.

"Yes, I'll take you up to our room eventually. And I'll strip you down and bind you to the bed exactly the way you love.

Bennett's eyes dropped closed as if he was imagining every second of it. His teeth bit into his bottom lip as he whimpered.

"It's been too long since you felt the leather against your skin, hasn't it?"

Bennett half nodded, then he hesitated. He blinked his eyes open and looked up at his mate as if he was worried Marsdon would be angry with the criticism.

Marsdon let go of one of his wrists and stroked his hand into Bennett's hair, sliding his fingers through the long dark strands until they rested on the back of his lover's neck. "I need it too," he whispered. He brushed their lips together, more tenderly than Francis could have ever believed possible.

Bennett's free hand came to rest on his mate's forearm, just over the scar there. They leant their foreheads together for several long seconds before Bennett began to lower himself out of Marsdon's grip, to kneel at his mate's feet.

The sound of Marsdon's zipper being drawn down, snapped Francis out of his daze. He took a step back, then another. Dragging his gaze away from the alphas, he turned back to his house. Gunnar was leaving the building just as Francis approached it.

"You're not supposed to be outside."

"Bennett said I'm allowed as far as the courtyard if I promise to stop if it hurts."

Gunnar didn't look impressed. "Where's Bennett?"

"He's in the barn, but—"

The beta moved to step past. Francis couldn't let it happen.

He caught hold of Gunnar's arm. He couldn't actually stop him, Francis knew that. If the larger man wanted to keep going, he could easily drag him hopping along. But, for once the beta showed sense.

He stopped and looked down at Francis' hand.

"He's with Marsdon—they're...busy," Francis said, not slackening his grip on the beta's arm in the slightest.

A second passed. He saw realisation dawn in Gunnar's eyes. "You're still holding on to my arm."

Francis let go. "Very busy," he added, just in case his meaning hadn't been clear enough the first time.

With a longsuffering sigh, Gunnar turned them both back to the house.

Francis took a step forward and immediately stumbled as his stick caught in a gap between two of the cobblestones.

Gunnar growled, low and frustrated in the back of his throat, but he didn't say anything as he turned back to face Francis. The beta simply picked him up with one arm behind his knees and another around his back.

Every muscle in Francis' body tensed as he felt the ground disappear from beneath his feet. Gunnar was strong. It was unlikely the beta would drop him—if only because he'd be bound to get in trouble with the alphas if he did. But there was still no safety to be found in his embrace.

A glance at the other wolf's profile and Francis knew there was no way in hell Gunnar would put him down just because he demanded it. All he could do was yearn for the beta to walk faster so he could lower him back onto solid ground as soon as possible.

Kicking back the kitchen door, Gunnar strode inside with him. Steffan was sitting at the table, speaking to a few of the other gammas. He stood up as soon as he saw them and rushed across.

"He's fine," the beta growled. "He's an idiot, but he's fine." Rather than put him on his feet, Gunnar dropped him straight into Steffan's arms like a neat little package.

His message couldn't have been clearer. *I have no interest in him. You deal with him.*

Still no closer to the floor than he'd been in Gunnar's arms, Francis immediately felt the difference in the holds the two men were capable of having on him.

He was safe with Steffan. His friend would put him down if he asked him to. He'd carry him wherever he asked to go, as well. Cradled close against Steffan's body, Francis could feel the other wolf's heartbeat, sense each breath he took.

He didn't just know he was safe, he knew Steffan was fine too. That was just as...No, that was even *more* important.

Steffan just stood there with him in his arms for several seconds before he seemed to snap back into reality. "What happened?"

"My ankle gave way a bit."

Steffan carried him through to the living room without the slightest strain and set him gently on the sofa. Talbot looked up from his task as they came in, his eyes full of worry.

"Stay there, I'll get the ice," Steffan ordered, already on his way out of the room.

Francis looked back to the omega. "I'm fine. I just twisted it a bit."

"Did you find Marsdon? Was he in the barn?" Talbot asked softly.

Francis smiled slightly to himself.

"You spoke to Marsdon?" Steffan asked, warily, as he returned with the ice and placed the compress carefully on his ankle.

Francis shook his head. "It wasn't important, and he was busy."

Steffan and Talbot both seemed to notice something slightly strange about the way he said it.

"Busy with Bennett," Francis expanded.

Steffan nodded and turned his attention back to his ankle. Talbot blushed.

Francis stared down at his friend's lowered eyes, wondering if Steffan would have blushed too, if he'd seen how things really were between the alphas.

Marsdon and Bennett were always...affectionate seemed the wrong word. They were always conscious of each other, always aware of where the other man was and how they were. No one could ever see them together and not realise they were mates.

Humans in some strange club were one thing, but Francis had never seen his alphas look at each other like that. He'd never seen Bennett's eyes shine with that sort of pleasure. It

had never occurred to him that an alpha would let anyone, even his mate, hold him against the wall that way either.

Bennett was big and strong and it was impossible to imagine that—

“Francis?”

Blinking, as he slowly focusing back in on reality, Francis looked at his friend.

“Are you okay?” Steffan asked.

Francis nodded, as he stared fixedly at the other gamma. He was big and strong and...and it was so easy to imagine that sort of pleasure in his eyes.

“You zoned out,” Steffan informed him. Leaning closer, he put both his big hands into Francis’ hair, as if feeling for bumps. “Did you hit your head when your ankle gave way?”

Francis shook his head. Steffan’s fingers were all spread out, his hands almost encompassing his whole skull as they supported his head, but it was still easy to move within his grip. The strength was controlled. It wasn’t like when Marsdon held Bennett against the wall.

Staring back at his friend, it was impossible to imagine Steffan in Marsdon’s place. Holding someone that tight, denying another wolf any movement he wanted. Taking control. Giving the orders. That wasn’t Steffan.

Francis blinked once more. It was so much easier to picture his friend leaning back against the wall while someone else held him there, so much more natural to imagine the bliss in his friend’s eyes when Francis envisioned Steffan giving up control, and giving up the need he always seemed to feel to control himself too.

It was easy to visualise Steffan’s eyes filled with bliss if someone could do that for him—if his future mate could do that for him. Francis smiled slightly as he let Steffan fuss over him a little.

Taking control. Giving orders. He could do that.

\* \* \* \*

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Steffan asked, as they stepped into Francis’ bedroom that night.

Francis nodded, but he still didn't say a word. Whatever tumble he'd taken seemed to have knocked all the speech out of him.

Just a few seconds later, Steffan had to bite his tongue to stop himself asking his friend exactly the same question, again. As the younger wolf took his turn in the bathroom and walked across to his bed without a single word, all Steffan's intentions of making sure they slept in separate rooms fell by the wayside.

He could barely convince himself to let Francis out of his sight for long enough to take his own turn in the en suite. When he hurried back into the bedroom a few minutes later, Francis still sat on the edge of the bed, completely lost in his thoughts.

Steffan hesitated, not sure if he should try to snap him out of it or if the younger man just needed to be left in peace to work out whatever was troubling him, without any distractions. Before he could decide on any sort of course of action, Francis seemed to realise he was being watched.

He gazed at Steffan for a few long seconds, his expression more serious than Steffan had ever known it.

"Come to bed."

It sounded more like an order than an invitation.

Steffan obediently walked around to the other side of the bed and lay down, expecting Francis to curl up against him and quickly drop off to sleep the way he so often had in the past, but the smaller wolf remained sitting. Pulling his feet up onto the mattress in front of him, Francis turned to face Steffan, that same intently studious expression still on his face.

Every movement slow and measured, the younger wolf reached out and wrapped his hand around one of Steffan's wrists. His hands were a lot smaller than Steffan's. His fingers couldn't even form a complete circle around the joint as they lifted his hand from the bed.

Francis studied the grip he'd taken on him for a long time, until Steffan couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"Fran?"

The smaller wolf lifted his gaze and looked him in the eye, as if waiting for the rest of the sentence. When Steffan failed to think of anything else to say, his friend simply turned his attention back to his wrist. He tightened his grip on it, turning his hand this way and that, studying it from every angle.

Steffan cooperated, not sure exactly what his friend was trying to do, but never wanting him to have to struggle to make it happen. "If you'll tell me what you want?" Steffan suggested after a little while.

"I'm just thinking," Francis said.

Francis always thought. He seemed to spend all his time watching the world around him and thinking about all sorts of different things. He didn't usually need to hold onto Steffan's wrist and stare at it while he did that.

Eventually Francis' attention seemed to broaden slightly. He picked up Steffan's other wrist for an equally thorough examination. With both his hands wrapped tight around Steffan's skin, Francis seemed to lose himself in his thoughts, again.

The older man found himself assessing his friend with just as much devotion as Francis studied at him. At any other time, he'd have loved to have the opportunity to gaze at the other wolf, but all the attention he was suddenly receiving was starting to get to him in ways he was sure it shouldn't. With Francis holding his wrists, there was nothing he could do to hide his rapidly stiffening shaft.

Against all logic, that knowledge just made his cock stiffen even more quickly. By the time Francis was ready to notice anything but his wrists, Steffan was already hard, his erection curving back towards his stomach.

Very calmly, almost as if he was occupying a slightly different version of reality to the rest of the world, Francis carefully placed Steffan's hands to rest on his stomach. The larger wolf immediately reached for the blankets. But Francis quickly put his palms over Steffan hands, holding them where they were.

"Don't move." Francis looked up at him for a moment, but he didn't wait for him to voice any sort of agreement.

In that moment, it didn't seem possible that he could disagree, Francis seemed to sense that too. He took his hands away from Steffan's wrists without another word and slowly began to explore Steffan's naked body.

Steffan tensed, but he stayed still. It seemed unthinkable to do anything else.

Francis ran his hands over every line of muscle Steffan possessed, seemingly fascinated by them. For a few short moments, the larger man felt at ease with his size and massive bulk in a way he never really had before. Francis appeared to be pleased with the

way he was built, and that was everything. But such moments couldn't last forever. Soon Steffan needed all his self control in order to rule those muscles.

There was no way the smaller wolf could keep him still with those tiny hands. Steffan had to do that himself. Control was important. He'd been brought up with that word.

Control.

Careful—that was another word he remembered hearing over and over again as he grew so much larger than his litter mates.

His hands tightened into fists on his stomach. Smaller wolves would get hurt if he forgot to be controlled and careful. Steffan closed his eyes and fought to stay still when all he wanted was to reach out and explore his lover's body in return.

Francis' hand slid between Steffan's legs, where they rested neatly together on the mattress in a vain effort to take up as little space as possible and make sure his friend had enough room to rest comfortably in his own bed.

The younger wolf tapped at the inside of his thigh, encouraging him to spread his legs for him. The instinct to obey and please his friend hit head-long into the need to make himself smaller and stay still. Steffan couldn't do both. He couldn't do anything.

Francis transferred his hand to Steffan's cheek, coaxing him to turn his face towards him. Without any warning, he leant down and brushed their mouths together. Steffan cautiously allowed his lips to part. Such a tiny movement might be safe to risk. Francis immediately took him up on the invitation and deepened the kiss.

Steffan closed his eyes. The hand on his cheek disappeared, as Francis seemed to realise that he didn't need to hold him in place, that Steffan would always have enough control to do that all by himself.

Francis' hand wrapped around his cock and every muscle in Steffan's body tensed as he fought against the instinct to move, to push himself against his friend's palm, to reach down and cover Francis' smaller hand with his own and demand he tighten his hold.

For impossibly long seconds, the younger man's fingers stayed perfectly still against his erection while Francis concentrated on exploring his mouth. The shallow thrust of Francis' tongue as it teased his lips tempted him to rock his hips, but he remained motionless and helpless.

Finally, the fingers moved against his cock. Francis' grip tightened and began to stoke him, slow easy hand movements that covered his shaft from root to tip again and again. His palm closed over the head and rubbed back and forth over the glans, making him whimper against his lover's lips.

"Do you like that, darling?" Francis asked softly, breaking the kiss to whisper the words into his ear.

Steffan swallowed.

"Answer me," Francis pushed, his fingers working around his erection, tightening and relaxing the grip each digit had on him one by one as he massaged the hard shaft against his palm.

"Yes." Steffan barely managed to force the whisper past his lips.

"That's good," Francis said, his voice so strong compared to the pathetic little rasp Steffan could manage right then.

"Do you want to come for me?"

Steffan whimpered. He closed his eyes and bit his lip. That sort of restraint wasn't in him. He couldn't let go and forget to look after his friend. He couldn't hold back and come at the same time either.

"Can't," he whispered.

"That's fine."

As Steffan forced open his eyes, he saw the smaller wolf nod, seemingly to himself, as if everything was panning out just as he expected. Leaning back in, he offered Steffan another brief kiss before he took his hand away from his shaft, leaving nothing more than the empty air to caress his cock

Steffan hesitated, knowing that Francis couldn't possibly understand why they had to stop – not really.

"We'll try again tomorrow."

Steffan gave a tiny nod of his head, as if that made sense too, as if he was actually agreeing to that.

Francis pressed a kiss to his forehead and rearranged them comfortably on the bed so he could curl up against his side. He was just as hard as Steffan. Pre-cum smeared onto the larger wolf's skin as the younger man's shaft pressed against him.

"Fran," Steffan whispered.

"Yes?"

"You can still..."

Francis shook his head. With a contented, sleepy little sigh, he snuggled in closer to Steffan's side. "Tomorrow's fine."

Steffan didn't know how to argue with that. It felt like the decision had already been made, and he didn't have any say in it. Francis' knee brushed against Steffan's cock as he hooked one leg over his, but that didn't seem to bother his friend any more than the way his own erection pressed against Steffan's hip.

The younger man seemed perfectly at ease with the world, as if he had it all worked out and wouldn't change a damn thing about it. His contentment couldn't help but soothe Steffan. With his friend pressed up against him, all warm and sleepy, there didn't seem to be anything else to do, anything else he could *want* to do but follow his lead and close his eyes.

Against all his expectations, he fell asleep quickly, but he couldn't bring himself to be surprised when he was soon awoken again by the sound of a pleasure filled howl emanating from the alphas' bedroom. He immediately wrapped his arms more tightly around his lover.

For a few seconds, Francis pressed himself against the safety of a larger wolf's body, the same way he always did. Then he reached out and fumbled against Steffan's skin until he found his arm. Tracing the path down towards his hand, he took Steffan's wrist in the same grip that had fascinated him so much earlier that night.

For some reason, that night, his hold on Steffan seemed to soothe him more than being embraced by a larger stronger wolf ever could.

## Chapter Six

"I want to tie you up."

"What?"

"I want us to have sex, but first I want to tie you up," Francis repeated with every scrap of certainty and self-assurance he could muster into his voice.

Minutes passed, and Steffan didn't say a word, he just stood silently in the middle of the room at the back of the cottage, a strange expression in his eyes.

Francis' grip on his walking stick turned white knuckled as he stood in the doorway and waited for his response. Above Steffan's head, there was still a wolf sized hole in the ceiling. Plaster dust coated everything in sight. Steffan had already acquired a layer of it on his clothes and in his hair as he'd begun to put the room in order.

"If that's what you want," Steffan said eventually, as he turned away from him.

It obviously wasn't what the larger wolf wanted. Francis had never seen him so pale, and that had nothing to do with the dust. Limping forward, he slowly closed the gap between them, until he could rest his hand on the larger wolf's arm.

"Before, you said you didn't want to get off on what we do?"

Steffan slowly raised his gaze and looked him in the eye for the first time since Francis had joined him.

"But what if it's not *just* about you?" Francis asked. "What if I want to do something you'd enjoy, because I really want to know what it would feel like to do that? What if I want to find out what you feel like inside my mouth, if I want to know what you taste like on my tongue as I swallow you down?"

Steffan shook his head. "You don't want —"

"I know what I want," Francis cut in, refusing to allow any trace of weakness into the words.

"Maybe...maybe when your leg has healed —" Steffan hedged.

"Today."

Steffan looked at his ankle as if it was the only thing that might be able to save him.

"You have to be sensible, you can't—"

"I can. It's not my ankle I want to suck you off with."

"Fran—"

"You said this was my experiment," Francis said, before he had a chance to get any momentum.

Steffan met his eyes. "Yes."

"Doesn't that mean I set the rules?" Francis asked. "Shouldn't I be the one who decides what happens between us?"

Steffan hesitated.

"If you want to stop because I'm doing something you really don't want," Francis promised. "We'll stop, but not just because you don't think you deserve to get off on whatever we do together."

Success rushed through Francis as he felt the other wolf's resolve falter. The idea that someone else would be in control, and he wouldn't have to worry about making any of the decisions obviously appealed to something inside Steffan. Maybe it even appealed to him as much as the idea of being the wolf who took control of his lover appealed to Francis.

Very slowly, the older man nodded his agreement. "Anything you want," he whispered. "As long as it doesn't hurt you."

Francis stared up at his friend unable to feel a little twinge of regret that it didn't even seem to occur to Steffan to ask his lover to make sure *he* didn't get hurt either. "So it's my show, my rules?"

Steffan nodded again.

Francis touched his cheek and made the older man look him in the eye. "Does that mean you're not going to pout if I get a bit bossy with you?"

Steffan managed a small smile at the teasing.

Francis smiled back, relief rushing through him so fast it made his head spin a little. Tightening his grip on his stick, he retraced his steps to the door and closed it firmly between them and the outside world. After a second's thought, he dragged a rickety chair across, and wedged it under the door handle for good measure.

"Francis..." Steffan began.

The words died on the other wolf's tongue as Francis turned to face him.

"Take off all your clothes. Fold them neatly, and put them on top of that box." Francis made no attempt to make the words sound like a request rather than an order.

Steffan only wavered for a moment before he did as he was told. Steffan liked doing what he was told, Francis had always known that. He hadn't realised how much he loved that fact about his friend before.

The older man quickly stripped himself down to his bare skin without showing the slightest hint of embarrassment. Francis smiled slightly, not sure why that surprised him. They'd never been shy around each other.

Maybe it was just because everything felt so different now that he had discovered a new way of seeing his friend—since he'd discovered a new reason to enjoy looking at his soon to be mate.

He'd always known Steffan was big and strong, but he'd never really taken the time to look and admire him as they grew up together. All of a sudden, he found himself quietly fascinated by the hard lines of muscle that covered the other wolf's body. He'd never realised how gorgeous he was.

As Steffan fidgeted slightly under his gaze, he watched the way his muscles moved beneath his skin, completely enchanted.

"Francis?"

Francis blinked and looked up.

Steffan was staring at him as if he'd lost his mind. Francis' smiled slightly, wondering what his friend would think if he knew what had been racing through his brain. Stepping forward, he placed his fingertips in the middle of Steffan's chest. Stroking a line down between his pecs, he felt the air stall behind the larger wolf's ribs.

Francis looked up. His friend's eyes had dropped closed as he seemed to savour the gentle touch. Rising onto his toes, Francis let his walking stick fall from his grip as he buried his other hand in Steffan's hair and guided the taller man down to be kissed.

Steffan parted his lips at Francis' demand and let him deepen the kiss without even a token protest. The kiss lead seamlessly into another then another, and Francis felt the larger wolf begin to relax. Allowing his other hand to wander over his new lover's body, Francis explored his back before moving down to caress his arse.

The larger wolf whimpered as Francis trailed his fingertips along the cleft between his buttocks. A second later, Steffan pulled back.

Francis didn't try to stop him. He merely stared silently up at his friend, waiting to see what the other wolf had to say.

"You said you wanted to tie me up first," Steffan reminded him. If he hadn't been more than a little breathless, he might have actually pulled off the polite, disinterested tone of voice he seemed to have been aiming for.

"You like the idea?" Francis asked.

Steffan shrugged. "It's your show, remember?" Steffan said.

It wasn't quite the answer Francis had hoped for, but he quickly pushed his disappointment aside. "Yes, it's my show." He looked around them and spotted another chair, much like the one he'd pushed under the door handle. "Move that chair into the middle of the room," he ordered.

Steffan did as he was told, almost.

Francis shook his head. "No, right in the middle."

Steffan considered the position of the piece of furniture compared to each of the four walls and moved the chair a foot to the left.

Francis nodded his approval. Turning to the rows of boxes he'd moved from the attic before his fall, he quickly found the one he was looking for and extracted a long length of rope from the dozens that he'd placed in there.

The surface was rough, but it was thick and strong, and that was the most important thing right then.

"Turn around. Put your hands behind your back."

Moving with glacial speed and sloth-like enthusiasm, Steffan obeyed. Determined not to be put off by his friend's uncertainty, Francis quickly wound the rope around his wrists several times before he knotted it securely in place.

It had to be a sturdy knot, tough enough to restrain a very strong wolf.

It had to hold firm. But more than that, Francis needed Steffan to really feel that it would remain strong as he pulled against it. He needed his friend to feel it securing him in place, keeping him exactly where his future mate wanted him.

"Too tight?" Francis asked as he checked the knot for the third time.

Steffan shook his head. "It's fine."

"Can you get out of it?"

"It's fine – " Steffan began to say again.

Francis stepped in front of him, ignoring the pain in his ankle as he concentrated on making each step strong and purposeful. "Answer the question, Steffan. Can you break the knot or can't you?"

Steffan stared down. "Yes. If I needed to, I..."

Francis frowned at the pain barely hidden behind the words. He reached out and stroked his fingers through the other wolf's dusty hair, needing to soothe him, even if he didn't know where his pain was coming from.

Steffan leaned slightly into his touch, making Francis smile. But the discomfort he saw in the other man didn't fade in the slightest.

"I'd never hurt you," Steffan whispered very softly.

Francis's smile died. "What?"

Steffan's gaze was fixed on the floor in front of his feet. "I understand why you think I'd be clumsy with you, but..." He swallowed rapidly. "I'd never hurt you."

Francis stroked his cheek with the back of his fingertips. "You'd never hurt me," he agreed. "I've never thought you would."

He tried to get the older wolf to lift his gaze, but Steffan wouldn't meet his eyes.

"You thought that's what this was all about," Francis realised, waving a hand towards the ropes.

"If it's what you need to feel safe with me then..." Steffan shrugged.

"I've always felt safe with you," Francis said, willing the other man to believe him.

He wasn't the one who needed help to feel safe, but right then it was obvious that Steffan wasn't ready to see that.

"Just, try for me?" Francis asked.

Steffan nodded.

Francis rose onto his tip toes and brushed their lips together in praise. "That's good. Now, try to get your hands free, darling."

Steffan gazed down at his friend. "But, I thought..." He trailed off. With his hands tied behind his back, he was finding it harder to think than ever. The sweet little kisses his friend kept offering weren't helping either. His head was spinning out of control with them.

"I want us both to know if you can get out of the ropes," Francis persisted.

Steffan reluctantly pulled very gently at the loops of hemp around his wrists. Nothing happened. Frowning slightly, he tugged more forcefully at the knot. A moment later he was yanking at the restraints for real. His bare feet shuffled against the mess that still littered the floor, but no matter which way he squirmed, his hands remained where they were. The ropes scratched against his skin and rubbed against his back, but they didn't fall away.

"You'll have to tie a different knot," Steffan finally admitted, more than slightly out of breath with his efforts.

Francis immediately moved behind him. Steffan stilled as he felt his friend's hands stroke down forearms and his fingers trailed over the knots of rope.

"No," the smaller wolf decided, after an entire lifetime seemed to have passed. "I like it tied like this."

Steffan looked over his shoulder at his friend. There was a new look in his friend's eyes—a light in his gaze that Steffan had never seen there before.

"I like *you* like this," Francis informed him.

Steffan couldn't make his brain work. He was sure that there were words he should be saying, protests that needed to be made, yet somehow, his lips stayed closed, and he remained silent.

"You told me this is my experiment," Francis reminded him. "Does that mean I can do whatever I want with you?"

Steffan nodded, still unable to say a single bloody word.

Francis' fingers hooked around his rope bonds. Steffan stumbled back a step as the smaller wolf tugged at them, then another until he felt the back of his legs touch the chair his friend had ordered him to place so carefully in the middle of the room.

A small hand came to rest on his shoulder and pressed down. Steffan obediently lowered himself into the chair. Francis' touch left him, then.

The larger wolf looked over his shoulder just in time to see him unearth a much longer coil of rope from the box in the corner of the room. As Francis strode back to his side, his

attention was all on the rope. The younger man didn't even glance up at him as he knotted one end of it to one of the back rails of his chair.

While Francis' focus was elsewhere, Steffan took the chance to look at his friend, just as he had so often over the years. He was truly stunning when he gave all his concentration to a task. A faint crease grew between fair brows as he worked on fastening the rope to the chair in just the way he wanted.

Finally, he was satisfied. Steffan quickly dropped his gaze, not wanting to be caught staring, but Francis' attention still didn't turn to him. The smaller wolf began to walk slowly around the chair, taking the coil of rope with him. Unwinding it a little further with every step, Francis wrapped the rough hemp in crisscrossing lines around Steffan's torso, binding him securely to the back of the chair.

As the rope passed across his chest again, Steffan found himself taking a deep breath and trying to hold his rib cage out, as if there was some possibility Francis could tie the bonds so tight he'd find himself suffocated unless he kept room for huge amounts of oxygen inside himself.

He glanced towards the younger man as Francis passed in front of him a third time. Then he noticed the other wolf's stick on the floor several feet away from him.

"Your ankle," he blurted out. "You should —"

Francis' fingers came to rest against Steffan's lips. "If you say one more word about my ankle, I'll gag you."

Steffan's mouth opened behind his friend's touch. Then he hesitated. The smaller wolf looked very serious—it was obviously no idle threat.

"It's my responsibility to make sure no one gets hurt," Francis informed him. "Not yours. I don't want you thinking about that. I don't want you thinking about anything. Just let me worry about everything for a little while."

Steffan nodded. He had no idea how to actually do that, but when his friend demanded it of him in that tone of voice, not being able to do as Francis wanted didn't really feel like an option.

The younger wolf ran his hands over the strips of chest left visible between the ropes, his fingertips impossibly smooth compared to the hemp. Steffan's skin prickled at his touch,

glorying in the contrasting sensations until Francis' fingers left him in favour of winding the rope further down his body, all the way over his abs and to his waist.

The moment that rope was tied off, Francis was on his knees wrapping more restraining lengths around each of Steffan's calves, bidding his legs to the chair. Each extra foot of rope rendered Steffan that little bit more helpless, but even as more and more of his skin became concealed behind the hemp, each touch of Francis' hands made him wonder why the hell he'd ever want to break the bonds and get away.

Except he should want to get away. Even if he didn't want to be released, he needed to be freed. Beneath the ropes, his heart started to beat faster and faster as a hundred different scenarios flashed through his mind and the hemp that bound him to the chair failed to give way to any of them.

"Too much," he blurted out, as panic peaked inside him.

Francis looked up from the final knot he was tying off at his ankle. "Stef?"

"It's too much," Steffan repeated, wriggling as much as the rope would allow, until he was in danger of over balancing the chair. "Take it off."

"Look at me."

Steffan shook his head, automatically closing his eyes as he desperately tried to avoid seeing the disappointment in the other gamma's eyes as his friend realised he wasn't capable of playing this sort of game with him.

Francis' hands touched his face, his palms cradling Steffan's cheeks as he tried to make him look towards him.

"Steffan!"

Reluctantly opening his eyes, he forced himself to meet Francis' gaze. "I can't look after you like this," he whispered, unable to keep the words back.

"It's not your job to look after me right now, sweetheart. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

Steffan tried to shake his head, but the other wolf tightened his grip on him and refused to give him permission to move his head in any direction.

"I know this is hard for you, love," Francis murmured, pressing a kiss against his temple. "But can you try to trust me, just for a little while longer?"

"Francis..."

"Nothing bad will happen," the younger wolf promised him. His clothes brushed against Steffan's skin as he came closer until he was practically sitting on Steffan's lap.

His hand slid through Steffan's hair again, slowly coaxing him to calm down.

Steffan took a deep breath. Francis was fine. His friend was happy. The other man was safe and apparently in control of the whole world.

"You're not big, right now," Francis told him, very softly. "You're not strong. You're just you. And I'm just me. And things are exactly the way they should be. Just let go for me, love. Let go and don't try to be anyone but who you are."

The words didn't make any sort of sense, but they seeped into Steffan's mind and made some silly little part of him begin to relax. He couldn't remember the last time someone had whispered to him in that caressing tone of voice as he held him, weak and helpless in his arms. It must have been years, back even before Francis had joined the pack. His friend had been a pup then, Steffan little more than one himself.

"Let me look after you for just a few minutes?" Francis asked, the words barely more than a plea.

"I..."

"I'm right here where you can see me. I'm not going anywhere. I won't go out of your sight. There's nothing that can hurt me in here is there?"

Steffan looked around the room as if some part of him really expected something to suddenly leap out and attack them from one of the dusty corners.

"I really gave you a fright when I took that fall, didn't I?" Francis murmured, seemingly more to himself than anyone else. Stroking his fingers through his hair again, the smaller wolf encouraged Steffan to bow his head and rest his temple against his friend's shoulder.

Steffan forced a deep breath into his lungs as he tried not to imagine how heartbreaking it must have been for his friend to lie there hurt, and yet still desperately trying to send up the howl for help, just as he had when he was a pup in that crash.

"I knew everything was fine once I heard your voice," Francis whispered.

Steffan closed his eyes. That's what Francis needed—a strong mate, someone who he could rely on to keep him safe and look after him. He needed the kind of man who would hold him, who would murmur reassurances to him and tell him everything would be fine.

"Untie me," Steffan whispered.

"No."

Steffan lifted his head and looked up at his friend.

"It's my show, remember? And you're exactly where I want you."

Steffan dropped his gaze. "We shouldn't be —"

"There's no shouldn't about it. You're just doing as you're told, aren't you?" Francis asked. "And you do like doing that, don't you?"

Steffan tried to shift uncomfortably in his chair. Too late, he remembered that he couldn't risk squirming that way while Francis was on his lap and might fall. But, even before the thought entered his head, the rope remembered for him. There was no way he could move far enough to topple his friend while he was bound that way. Relief rushed through him. Against all logic, a fair amount of it went straight to his cock.

"This isn't supposed to be about what I want," Steffan reminded them both. It wasn't supposed to be about the pleasure he felt every time the hemp moved against his skin, forcing him to stay where he was, forcing him to just give in and go along with whatever his friend decided they should do.

"What if we want the same things?" Francis asked, as he pulled away and moved to stand in front of Steffan.

Unable to reach out to his friend, all Steffan could do was watch, helpless, as Francis' attention slowly made its way down his body to where Steffan's shaft curved enthusiastically up towards his stomach.

Nodding to himself, as if everything was turning out exactly as it should, Francis checked each knot and line of rope that bound Steffan's body to the chair one more time. Then, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, he lowered himself to the floor and knelt at Steffan's feet.

A moment passed before Francis, very calmly, reached out and wrapped his fingers around Steffan's cock.

"Fran..."

The smaller wolf made a murmuring sound in the back of his throat, as if curious about what Steffan intended to say next, but not so much so that he was about to stop what

he was doing to actually listen to him. His hand caressed Steffan's shaft again, in a slow, measured stroke.

Dragging a deep, shaky breath into his lungs, Steffan desperately attempted to remember what he was trying to say. Before he could summon up a single word, Francis leant forward and wrapped his lips around the tip of his shaft.

In that very moment, Steffan's felt every scrap of his self control disappear. His hips frantically tried to thrust forward and bury his cock deep inside the smaller wolf's mouth as glorious wet heat surrounded his glans. The rough bonds rubbed against his skin and bit into him as he squirmed. And Steffan sent up silent thanks for every strand of hemp that held him still.

Francis pulled back, letting Steffan's cock slip from between his lips. As Steffan tugged against the ropes, they warmed the skin beneath the loops and knots, but the strange caress only made him want to writhe all the more.

Staring down at his friend, Steffan watched Francis study his reactions with clear curiosity. Like a scientist conducting a complicated experiment and eager to double check all his findings, the younger wolf leant forward once more and took the tip of Steffan's cock into his mouth again.

Steffan whimpered as he fought to stay in control, to stay still, but within seconds it was impossible, his hips tried to push forward again, and only the rope kept him in place. All too soon, he realised here were some things even Francis' knots couldn't rule. Steffan closed his eyes so tight lights flashed behind his lids.

"Open your eyes." Francis had barely pulled back far enough to let Steffan's cock leave his mouth. The words caressed the head as he spoke, sending a shiver ricocheting up the older man's spine.

Steffan shook his head. If he opened his eyes he'd come, the sight and the sensations would be too much. One he might survive, both would be impossible. If he saw Francis down there on his knees servicing his cock while he felt the younger man's tongue dance against him, he'd come and there wasn't anything he or the ropes would be able to do about it.

"Who are you pretending I am?" The words were said in that same curious tone of voice Francis often used to investigate the world, but there was an undercurrent to them that shocked Steffan into opening his eyes.

"I wouldn't do that!"

Francis glared up at him as if he really thought there was any other wolf on the planet that he wanted down there on his knees for him, that he wanted anywhere near him.

As long seconds passed in silence, the other wolf seemed to sense the truth. He nodded his acceptance. Holding his gaze, Francis leant down and ran his tongue up the length of Steffan's shaft from base to tip.

Unable to look away, incapable of closing his eyes, Steffan could only watch as Francis very slowly, very thoroughly explored his cock and his balls with his lips and his tongue.

It was as if Steffan's ultimate fantasy had snuck out of that dark little place in the back of his mind, where he'd tried to keep it trapped for as long as he could remember, and had come to life in front of him. Except it wasn't a fantasy. Francis was real. He was frowning slightly as he concentrated, and seemed to have a habit of doing every single thing several times in succession.

Whether it was swirling his tongue around the tip of Steffan's cock or mouthing his ball sac, it had to be done over and over again, as if his teasing were actually part of his highly scientific process, and Steffan's reaction to every stimulus had to be checked before it could be filed away in Francis' brain for future reference.

Head bowed over his crotch, the younger wolf worked diligently. Time and time again, he drove Steffan to the edge of his orgasm, only to change tack, just as he was about to come. Until, finally, he drove Steffan so close to the edge he knew there was no way he could hold back for another second, whatever his friend did next, it would be more than enough to make him come.

And Francis pulled away. No warning, no explanation. He just took his lips and his tongue away as if that was okay.

"Wh—" Steffan managed to stutter, as his fists clenched and unclenched behind his back.

"You're not allowed to come, yet."

Steffan blinked down at him.

"Do you understand, darling?" Francis leaned up so they were closer to eye level. Stroking one of his hands through Steffan's hair as the other came to rest on his cheek, he held him steady. "Understand?"

Steffan managed a nod.

"Say the words for me then," Francis coaxed.

"Understand," Steffan whispered.

"That's good, darling. Now, say the other ones too."

"Mustn't come."

Francis kissed him very gently on the lips in praise. "Perfect."

He wasn't allowed to come. Knowing that somehow took the option out of Steffan's mind. Yes, he wanted to. But he wasn't allowed to, so he couldn't. The world was a very simple place once those facts registered somewhere deep inside his brain, in a part of his mind he hadn't really explored before that day.

For several long minutes, Francis simply stroked his hands over Steffan's body, caressing the lines of muscle between the ropes, making Steffan sway and tremble within in bondage even as he regained the ability to take a deep breath without risking tripping himself over the edge and coming untouched.

"I'm going to suck you off now," Francis eventually announced. "And you're going to just relax for me."

Steffan stared down at him as if the younger man had suddenly started speaking another language.

"The ropes are holding you in place. You don't need to worry about moving. And you don't have to worry about holding back either, because you're going to be allowed to come — but only while I've got you in my mouth. Once I take my mouth away you won't be allowed another chance to come until tomorrow. Understand?"

"I...I understand."

"That's good, darling." And without another word, Francis lowered his head and took him back into his mouth, surrounding the topmost section of his cock with instant, liquid perfection. At the same time, he lifted his hand to cradle Steffan's balls in his palm, rolling them against his fingers and sending wave after wave of bliss through him as he pulled gently at the sac.

Steffan didn't know how long he had, how soon Francis might decide to take away his mouth, and his only chance to come along with it. Coming too soon would be a waste. Not coming soon enough would be a tragedy.

A moment later, the decision was made for him. Francis suckled enthusiastically around his shaft as he rubbed his tongue back and forth over that sweet little spot on the underside of the head. He murmured his pleasure as if he loved tasting him that way. A bolt of pure bliss shot down the older wolf's spine and there was nothing he could do but take advantage of the permission his friend had so graciously given him.

He pulled helplessly at every inch of rope, but it all held firm. Even as they bit into his skin, they kept him safe. For almost the first time he could remember, Steffan stopped worrying that he might be too strong or too big for the man he was with. He couldn't hurt anyone if he just let go and got lost in the moment. The hemp wouldn't let that happen.

A howl tore from his throat as he flung back his head and bucked against his restraints, allowing him to lose himself in the sheer joy coursing through him.

It seemed as if the moment would last forever, as if there would never be any point in his life where ecstasy wasn't exploding through every cell in his body, but eventually reality did make itself known.

Steffan's head dropped forward as the rush of adrenaline and endorphins slowly drained away. He opened his eyes. Francis remained there, suckling calmly around his cock, as he slowly began to soften in his friend's mouth.

As he looked up and met Steffan's eyes, Francis slowly pulled away. Running his fingertips over his mouth, Francis caught up the trace of cum he apparently hadn't been able to swallow down with all the rest.

Steffan whimpered as the younger man lapped it off his fingers with every sign of enjoyment. Francis smiled as he heard the sound, but just a moment later, he moved away. Within seconds, several feet of plaster strewn floorboards separated them.

That was wrong. The gulf between them seemed like miles. Francis should be close, he should always be close. Before Steffan had a chance to gather together the words to protest, the younger wolf reached down and rubbed the heel of his palm against his straining fly.

He was just as turned on as Steffan had been. And Steffan had just sat there selfishly and not done a thing for him. Suddenly, it was more essential than ever that he should do

everything he could for his friend. That he should have him safe and close, and most of all, that he should please him. "Untie me, so I can —"

"So you can leave the room?" Francis cut in.

Steffan swallowed as he heard the bite in his friend's words.

Steffan followed the movements of the smaller wolf's fingers as Francis ran his hand over his fly again, caressing the shaft through the fabric and massaging the tip of his cock through the denim.

"Let me?" Steffan whispered.

"No."

There was no arguing with the certainty he heard in the other gamma's voice. Steffan still had to try.

He opened his mouth, but Francis cut him off without even letting him stutter out a single word. "I won't let you touch me, but I won't run into another room and hide from you either."

It took Steffan's pleasure soaked brain several long moments to work out what his friend meant. He bit back a frustrated moan as Francis very carefully began to undo his straining fly. The metal teeth clicked apart one by one. Steffan stared, mesmerised, as Francis slowly moved his clothing aside and revealed himself to him as he knelt on the dusty floor.

Steffan's hands clenched into fists behind his back as he fought the urge to try and reach out to touch his friend, to repay him some tiny part of the joy he'd already given him.

Francis looked up and met his eyes.

"Fran," Steffan murmured.

"No," the other gamma repeated. "You're just going to sit there and let me look at you. That's all you're allowed to do right now." He seemed to be talking more and more to himself as he went on. "Damn, you look stunning wrapped up in that rope."

Steffan's gaze dropped to where Francis' hand worked rapidly around his cock. Stunning was too mild a word.

"No."

Steffan pulled his eyes back up to his friend's face.

"You didn't let me watch you," Francis reminded him. "So, you don't have permission to watch me either. You're there for me to rest my eyes on, not the other way around."

He was perfectly serious. Pleasure danced in Francis' eyes, but Steffan knew there was no way in hell his friend would ever go back on the decision he'd just made. They were playing by the other man's rules now.

The smaller wolf dropped his gaze, not in submission, but in admiration. And all Steffan could do then was stare helplessly at the expression on his lover's face, sure that the moment he tried to look at any other part of Francis' body, his friend would quickly catch him in his disobedience.

That would be wrong. He'd be wrong to disobey Francis. Steffan was more sure of that than he'd ever been of anything in his life.

Perfect. So bloody perfect. And he was all his. Staring at his friend, all bound up like the most amazing present anyone could ever get, perfect was the only word Francis could think of that came anywhere near describing how Steffan looked.

Perfect...

The gamma's hand tightened around his cock as he stroked the length faster and faster, caressing the head on every upstroke. He lifted his gaze and met Steffan's eyes for a moment. His friend stared powerlessly back at him.

The older wolf whimpered as their eyes locked. Smiling slightly to himself, Francis dropped his attention lower, just because he could. He ran his gaze over each line of rope that decorated his friend's body until his eyes fell on Steffan's cock.

He was rapidly stiffening again. Francis licked his lips as he remembered the taste of his friend when he spilled into his mouth for the first time.

Steffan whimpered in response but Francis didn't lift his eyes to look at him again. He kept his attention where it was and watched as the shaft grew and hardened under his inspection, while his own hand worked ever more frantically around his cock.

Pure ecstasy rushed through him, more intense than anything he'd ever known. He couldn't be sure how much of it came from his own hand and how much came from the vision before him. Knowing Steffan had no choice but to remain exactly where he was until he chose to untie him was far better than any amount of friction.

"Francis..."

His name on his friend's lips in that tone of voice was the last little push Francis needed. Thrusting his hips forward, he rubbed his cock frantically against his palm, glorying in his own freedom of movement as he bucked and came over the floor between them.

He bowed his head as bliss rushed through him with dizzying speed. But he wasn't so disorientated that he failed to hear the way Steffan gasped as he saw him come. And a few seconds later, he was easily in enough control of his senses to pay attention when his friend took another deep breath. Apparently, the other wolf was struggling to keep his reactions under control just as desperately as Francis was attempting to pull his brain cells back together.

It wasn't Steffan's place to try and control himself. Francis might not have been sure of anything else in those moments when his brain was so full of perfection and adrenaline it was impossible to make his mind work. But, he still knew that.

Francis slowly lifted his head. His friend was still staring at him. Calm and confident, as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had just happened, Francis fastened his fly and stood up.

Steffan dropped his gaze, still looking so confused by it all. Francis stepped forward and stroked his fingers through the older wolf's hair as he walked around him.

"I'm going to untie you now," he informed his friend.

Steffan nodded.

"But you're still not going to move without my permission, understand?"

The older man nodded again.

Francis leant down and pressed a kiss against the top of his head. He let himself rest his temple against him for a few seconds while his hands remained buried in his hair.

They'd done it. They'd taken the first step on a good path. The knowledge sung out inside him, making it impossible for him not to smile into his friend's plaster strewn hair. Steffan had done it...

Knowing his lover would pull away, mentally if not physically, if he even tried to tell him he was proud of him, Francis forced himself to keep the words back. Steffan wasn't ready to feel proud of himself for everything he'd accomplished that day. That sort of praise would have to wait.

"Good wolf," he whispered instead.

Even that made Steffan try to pull away from him a little, shifting his head within Francis' careful hold.

"Good wolf," Francis said again, placing another kiss against his dusty hair before he finally stepped back.

"Francis?"

He stroked fingers along his friend's shoulder. "I'm going to untie you now," he repeated. He wasn't sure who he was trying to convince. Steffan, bound up and helpless, didn't really need to be convinced one way or the other. Persuading himself to free the other man was a far more difficult proposition. Part of him wanted nothing more than to keep his lover exactly where he was forever, but, eventually, he reached for the first of the knots.

As he began to unwind the ropes, Francis started to reveal the marks they had left on his friend's skin. Pale red lines lingered everywhere the hemp had rubbed against him. Francis unwound the hemp further, more than a little enchanted by the idea that removing the bindings didn't really take away all evidence of their presence. It was as if the rope had started to seep into the other wolf's body, just as Francis felt it seeping into his own mind.

Piece by piece, Steffan's body was gradually revealed from behind the rope. He stayed very still throughout the whole process. Even though he watched the marks appear, too, but he made no comment upon them.

Finally, the last piece of rope fell away.

"You can move now."

Steffan nodded, but it took him a few seconds before he rose from the chair and took full advantage of that permission. Even then, he stood in the middle of the cluttered room for a full minute, as if he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with himself, now that he was allowed to move however he chose.

"Clothes," Francis suggested.

"Yes," Steffan whispered. He looked around blankly. When he finally spotted the neatly folded garments, he walked towards them with obvious caution, as if he wasn't entirely sure his legs would support him.

Francis carefully charted his progress across the room. There wasn't a lot he reasonably suspected himself to be capable of doing for his friend if the larger man did stumble. There would be no way someone his size could balance a wolf like Steffan. But he

still observed him very carefully, just so his friend could enjoy the sensation of someone he cared for watching over him.

The other gamma pulled his clothes back on. His every movement slow and almost sleepy, but he soon had the material in place around his limbs. The buttons, however, seemed to be presenting him with far more of a challenge.

Stepping forward, Francis moved Steffan's hands aside and did up the fastenings for him. And, when they'd walked the short distance back to the house and were finally able to sneak off up to his room to have some time on their own, Francis undid the buttons for his friend, too.

Francis stroked his fingertips over the lines left by the rope as they were revealed once more, and relief rushed through him. He'd been half sure they would have vanished during the short walk, healed even before they could be properly admired and tended to.

"Do they hurt?" he asked.

Steffan shook his head.

"The truth," Francis pushed.

"Just a bit sore in places," Steffan whispered. "It's nothing."

"It's beautiful," Francis whispered, knowing he sounded completely besotted by the marks he'd left on him, probably because he really was.

"They'll have healed by tomorrow," Steffan said.

"I'll put new ones there," Francis promised, tracing one of the rope marks with a fingertip. "In the mean time, there's a balm in the cabinet in the bathroom. Fetch it for me."

"I can do that—"

"No, bring it to me," Francis repeated.

Steffan disappeared into the bathroom for a moment, but he didn't try to hide in there and lock the door that night. He obediently returned and handed over the pot of balm.

Spreading a liberal amount on his palms, Francis slowly began to work the soothing cream into his friend's skin. Wherever it touched the rope marks, he felt the balm warm his friend's flesh as it seeped into the damaged skin and encouraged it to heal.

Those parts of his skin that were still pristine merely felt cool as the balm was applied to them. Francis smiled to himself, it was as if he could paint the lines all over Steffan's skin

again, in pure warmth and care. Realising that was almost as satisfying as catching his first glimpse of the pretty red lines.

His touch seemed to take his friend's breath away far more than the ropes wrapped around his chest had. He closed his eyes, but as far as Francis could tell, it did the other gamma little good.

Francis made sure every single line of muscle was completely coated in the balm before he allowed Steffan to return the pot to the cabinet in the bathroom. As soon his friend was out of sight, he rubbed the residue of the cream against his throbbing ankle and turned down the bed.

"Make yourself comfortable," he ordered when the older wolf came back into the room.

But Steffan didn't look the least bit comfortable. He looked more than a little bit freaked out by the whole world. Francis studied him carefully as they slipped between the sheets that night. He received the distinct impression it would prove to be far easier to convince his friend's body that they were a good match than it would be to convince his mind of any such thing.

## Chapter Seven

"May I speak to you?"

Bennett looked up from the maps of the pack's territory he'd spread out on the table in the main hall. If he was surprised at Francis' request, he didn't show it. He merely nodded. "Of course."

It took everything Francis had, not to look over his shoulder before he went on. "In private?"

Bennett nodded again and, after a glance around the main hall and through the doorways into the kitchen and the office he shared with Marsdon, the alpha led the way out of the house in search of an empty space. An old fallen tree trunk lay near a fence looking out over their lands.

Too nervous to sit, Francis rested his elbows on the faded wooden boards and looked out over the fields while Bennett sat comfortably on the log, stretching his legs out in front of him and crossing his ankles as he leant back against one of the fence posts.

"What can your alpha do for you, Francis?" the older wolf prompted as the silence stretched out between them.

"I'd prefer not to speak to you as an alpha," Francis said, choosing every word with great care.

Bennett raised an eyebrow. "Then as what?"

"As a mated wolf?" Francis suggested.

Bennett's lips twitched into a small smile. "Very well."

Francis stared out across the fields for several long minutes. It had never occurred to him the words would be so hard to find. That he'd find it so difficult to ask for help from one of his alphas.

"How are things between you and Steffan?" Bennett asked, eventually.

Francis wasn't sure what the right words for that answer would be, either. "Marsdon makes you happy, doesn't he?" he blurted out instead.

"Yes."

Francis half smiled. "It sounds so simple when you say it like that," he told the view. Bennett made Marsdon happy, Marsdon made Bennett happy. So simple.

"It's simple in some ways, not so simple in others," Bennett allowed. "I expect any mated pair would discover the same—or any pair who were working towards being mated for that matter..."

"I was going to ask Marsdon for his advice a few days ago," Francis admitted, staring down at the top of the fence as if it contained all the secrets of the universe.

"Oh?"

"I went to the barn to find him," Francis went on.

"Yes?" The alpha's tone had changed from mildly curious to ever so slightly wary.

"I saw you together." Francis risked a glance at his alpha.

Bennett's posture bore more relation to a coiled spring than the wolf who'd lounged back against the fence a few moments before. "And what exactly did you see?"

"You were beautiful together," Francis whispered. "I've never seen either of you so happy—so right in your own skins."

The expression in Bennett's eyes changed and softened slightly as he seemed to sense the truth in Francis' words. Leaning forward, he laced his hands together as he rested his elbows on his knees. "And now you want me to tell you what I do to make Marsdon happy with his mate?" he guessed.

Francis shook his head. "I'd much rather you tell me what Marsdon does to make *you* happy—what I might be able to do to make Steffan happier."

Bennett stared at him for a few seconds, his head tilted to one side as if trying to shift his mental pictures of them both. "You think Steffan is inclined towards taking a more...submissive role with his mate?"

Francis nodded. Submissive, yes. It was a good word.

"Did you know before you saw me and Marsdon together?" Bennett asked.

Francis considered the question for a long time. "I've always understood the hierarchy in the pack. But this...this is different—between mates, it has nothing to do with the pack or a wolf's place in it. It's..." He fumbled for the right words. "More like the humans we saw when we came to fetch you from that club," he hazarded. "It's..."

Francis didn't have the right words for any of it, but Bennett simply nodded, as if it all made sense to him.

"You understand," Francis realised.

Bennett smiled slightly. "Yes, I do."

"I don't think Steffan does, yet," Francis confessed. "He's so used to everyone thinking that because he looks big and strong he has to *be* big and strong all the time."

"It's not easy to let go of those sorts of ideas."

Francis studied the alpha as the seconds passed. The words didn't sound like simple agreement. They meant far more to Bennett than Francis thought he might ever be able to understand.

"You...when you're with Marsdon, you can let go?" he asked delicately.

Bennett's smile turned a little rueful. "It's not as simple as flicking a switch, Francis. If that's the road you decide you want to go down together, he'll have to work at it. You'll have to work at it too."

"I'll do anything." It wasn't until the words were out of his mouth, that Francis realised how true they were. "Anything."

Bennett's slight smile still hovered around his lips, as if he was remembering things no one but he and his mate would ever know about. "You should probably still expect to get it wrong—a lot," Bennett warned, as he pulled himself to his feet.

Francis nodded again. Marsdon got it wrong too. If the look in Bennett's eyes was anything to go by, he got it wrong a lot before he finally got it right.

Gently squeezing his shoulder on the way past, Bennett left Francis alone with his thoughts. And there was just one idea that occupied the very front of his brain right then. If Marsdon could get it right in the end, then he could to.

He just had to work at it. Francis silently nodded to the view across the fields. He could do that.

\* \* \* \*

"You look so beautiful in ropes," Francis murmured, as he stepped up behind Steffan.

Unless he was very much mistaken his friend was far more uncomfortable with the compliment than he was with the prospect of being tied up again.

Francis stroked his palms over Steffan's shoulders. While he knelt in the centre of the room, the other gamma was shorter than Francis, but not by all that much. And his shoulders were as broad as ever.

Tracing his fingertips back along the other man's muscles and down his arms, Francis felt the tension flooding through his friend's body double.

Dipping his head, he pressed a kiss onto Steffan's temple before he retreated across the room, to where all the lengths of rope he'd accumulated from various places around the farm were stored between those times they were able to sneak away and play with them.

Steffan had put them away very neatly, almost reverentially after the last time. Francis ran his fingers over several different lengths and thicknesses of hemp, nylon and some material he wasn't even sure of before he finally selected one. When he turned back to him, Francis found Steffan studying him vigilantly.

"Tell me what you want us to do today," he invited the older man.

Steffan frowned as if the order made no sense to him.

"Tell me what you'd like us to do," Francis repeated.

Steffan turned his face away. "It's your experiment."

"That doesn't mean you can't tell me what you think you'd enjoy," Francis pointed out, perfectly reasonably.

"Then I want you to stop all this nonsense, and turn your attention to Gunnar, the way you should have weeks ago," Steffan told him. But he didn't look him in the eye when he said it, and a touch of colour drained from his cheeks as the words hit the air. His knees shuffled against the neatly swept floor as if he had to struggle to keep back a protest at his own statement.

Francis took a deep breath. What his friend wanted, and what he was willing to admit he wanted, were obviously two very different things. The younger man slowly nodded to himself as he reached his own decision.

He'd given his future mate plenty of opportunities to get used to the idea on his own. Now it was time to take Bennett's advice, time to find a way to help his friend find that place where he could learn to enjoy not being big and strong for a while.

The only question now was how...

Francis stared at him as the minutes passed but the other man offered him no clue as to the next move he should make. If all Steffan was able to do right then was follow, it was up to him to lead. To lead in the right direction...

"Stand up."

Steffan pulled himself to his feet. Stepping forward, Francis wrapped one end of the rope around his lover's wrist. The larger wolf held his hand still as Francis deftly tied a knot against his skin.

Leaving several feet of rope looping down towards his feet, he repeated the process around Steffan's opposite wrist. Abandoning the remainder of the rope, Francis let it drop to the floor as he caught hold of the hemp that hung down in between the other man's wrists and pulled it taught so it tugged firmly against his friend's skin.

"I could tie it around one of those hooks," Francis mused, looking up at the beam above them. He had no idea what the hell they'd been put there for. Someone had said something about bacon, but that didn't really matter. They'd be perfect for his uses.

Steffan swallowed as he looked up at the beam, and Francis knew the older man was picturing himself there, his body stretching up towards the heavy wooden length, not too far away from the hole Francis had made in the ceiling a few weeks before.

It wasn't quite as dramatic a reaction as Francis had been hoping for. Something else then...

Leaving Steffan standing bound and naked in the middle of the room, Francis dropped the rope and walked slowly around the space, looking for ideas. Steffan had worked hard in there, there wasn't much left to be done but fix the ceiling. The alphas had to have guessed that they weren't working when they scurried away to the room together.

Still, if the way Bennett had 'accidentally' elbowed Marsdon in the ribs, when he'd tried to raise the topic the previous night was anything to go by, at least one of the alphas was content to pretend they were working hard in order to give him a little more time in which to convince his friend they could be happy together.

All the same, he knew that even Bennett's tolerance wouldn't last forever. And he couldn't keep Steffan permanently floundering around in no-man's land either. Francis ran his eyes over the neatly stacked boxes and the well-cleaned space around them.

There was an old leather bound chest in one corner of the room. He stroked his fingers over it as he tried to come up with a good idea. The room was so silent, Francis was able to hear his friend's breathing change. He looked down at his fingertips. The trunk stopped being a possibility and became an essential component in whatever they were going to do that afternoon.

And there was only one thing the box would be suited to. It was almost exactly the same size and shape as the box they'd seen that human bent over in the club Marsdon and Bennett had visited. He could easily imagine Steffan tied to the battered leather surface, his legs spread and his torso resting against the lid.

With his face turned to one side and his cheek laying on the scruffy brown surface, he'd look glorious as Francis moved behind him and...

Part of the gamma shouted that they shouldn't be even thinking about having sex there. Offering his friend his mouth in some scruffy, out of the way little room was one thing. Accepting his friend's mouth in return there was fine. More than that should be...It should be in a bed. Francis was sure of that if nothing else.

It should be in a bed. It should be soft and comfortable. Steffan should be surrounded by luxury and softness and...Francis knew full well there was something in Steffan that would hate all that.

No doubt there was some little part of his friend that would learn to love being cosseted and fussed over one day. But not yet. Steffan was nowhere near ready to let that part of himself out to play.

There would be time enough for that when everything was settled between them, when the mating ceremony had been completed and Steffan was undeniably his. Until then, it wasn't fair of him to expect his friend to give him that complete a form of submission.

Grabbing hold of the handle attached to one end of the chest, Francis tugged at it. Nothing happened. The trunk stayed exactly where it was.

Turning back to his friend, Francis smiled. There were some advantages to having a submissive far stronger than he was. He tapped on the top of the chest. "In the centre of the room, please." He stepped back and gave his friend room to work

Steffan didn't rush. His movements were very careful, as if he thought the trunk might assail him at any moment. As he reached out to the chest, the rope around his wrists

dragged across the floor. He looked across to Francis, apparently wondering if he was going to untie him.

Francis blinked at him, as if he had no idea what he could be trying to ask. Steffan silently turned back to the chest.

It was evidently heavy, even for Steffan. With his hands still bound, he couldn't spread his arms wide enough to even attempt to pick it up. He had to drag it, his hands remaining close together and fighting for every inch of progress. A sheen of sweat broke out across the older man's skin. His breaths became deeper. Francis had no doubt his friend's heart was racing more rapidly too.

Unless he was very much mistaken, that was only in small part due to exertion. Most of it was due to expectation. Francis felt his own palms grow damp as Steffan slowly dragged the box into the very centre of the room.

Steffan stared down at the top of the leather clad chest for what felt like several generations. It was exactly in the middle of the room. No matter how long he spent fussing with its position, that wasn't going to change. He fell still as he realised there was no longer any way for him to avoid that fact.

"Kneel."

Very slowly, Steffan's body did as the other wolf ordered. There didn't seem to be any commands coming from his own brain to either confirm or contradict them. More than ever, Francis was able to pull his strings without even appearing to need to try.

"Bend over the chest for me, darling."

Steffan's body leant forward slightly. Then his brain finally whirled into action. He stopped short and went back to staring at the chest as if he had never seen it before, or perhaps as if he had no idea why his friend might want him to bend over it.

One footstep sounded in the otherwise silent room, then another. His friend had dispensed with the walking stick a few days before. There was no extraneous noise to clutter up the footsteps now.

Steffan stayed perfectly still as he sensed his friend approach. Francis' hand came to rest on his shoulder. It didn't try to force the issue and push him down against the chest. It

just rested against his skin, the heat from the smaller wolf's palm soaking into his skin as if Francis thought he needed to be supported and comforted.

Steffan took a deep breath and let it out very slowly as he mentally called himself all the fools on earth. Francis shouldn't need to do that for him. He should be the one looking after his friend, not the other way around.

"You'll look gorgeous with the rope crossing your skin," Francis whispered.

Steffan swallowed. It wasn't as if he hadn't been expecting the moment to come, sooner or later. He'd always known they would move past the point of swapping mouths eventually. It wasn't as if he didn't want to, either, as if he hadn't spent half the hours they'd shared a room wondering if that day would be the day when Francis wanted more from him, when he'd finally find out what it would be like to feel his friend's cock slide into his arse and...

And now that it was the time, he couldn't seem to move.

It didn't matter how much his body loved the idea of sex with Francis—not when his mind knew full well it would also mark the beginning of the end of Francis' experiment with him. There was nowhere to go beyond that.

"Lay down for me, darling," Francis ordered.

Steffan closed his eyes. Pushing his fears away as hard as he could, he let everything but that one simple command drain out of his mind. Following his lover's orders made everything so simple, so easy. If the experiment was going to end anyway, he couldn't make it end with him saying no to his friend

The leather was hard and cold against his stomach as he leant along the length of the chest. Francis' hand pressed against the centre of his back, right between his shoulder blades as he guided him into the exact position he wished him to adopt, coaxing him to rest his weight against the trunk and trust it to support him.

The other gamma's hands disappeared then. Steffan was left bent over the chest, with nothing to keep him safely in place. Even the rope around his wrists wasn't attached to anything. He still had far too much freedom. Francis' shoe tapped against the inside of his knees, encouraging him to spread his legs until his knees lined up along the edges of the chest's base.

"Do you have any idea how hot you look like that?" Francis asked, as Steffan heard him step back to admire the picture he'd created in the centre of the room.

Heat raced to Steffan's cheeks, just as they both knew it would. Maybe it was just an experiment for Francis, maybe all his friend actually felt for him was a momentary infatuation for a wolf he'd suddenly discovered was honestly and deeply in love with him. But, the idea that Francis looked at him and saw something more than a safe place to rest when troubled by a howl in the night was still enough to make him blush.

"Stunning," Francis murmured.

His hands came to rest on the back of Steffan's neck as Francis knelt between Steffan's spread legs and reached along his body. In perfect symmetry, his palms stroked across Steffan's shoulders and down his sides. As they reached his backside, the hands massaged the dense layers of muscles in the full, round cheeks.

"So perfect," the other wolf whispered. His knuckles brushed across Steffan's exposed hole, back and forth, teasingly gentle.

"How does the leather feel against you?"

"Rough," Steffan said. The surface was so battered, it had started to crack and fray. It bit at his skin as he squirmed, trying to resist the temptation to push back against his friend's knuckles.

"Bad?" Francis asked.

Steffan shook his head. Even as they spoke, it was warming against his skin, as if it was beginning to accept his presence, maybe even starting to welcome him there.

"That's good. You're going to be there for quite a while," Francis informed him. "I've no interest in rushing."

"You said you'd tie me up," Steffan reminded him, and promptly hated himself for nagging his friend. It was supposed to be about Francis, not him. But at the same time...

"That's right, darling. I will," Francis promised. As he spoke, his hands slid down Steffan's legs, kneading the muscles as he went. All the way down to his ankles, then back up to the inside of his knees. Then, without the slightest warning, both his hands disappeared from Steffan's skin.

Before he could raise a single word of protest, Steffan felt a coil of rope being placed on his back. It settled something inside him, just feeling the hemp against his skin, knowing that his control would soon be taken away from him.

Steffan pulled gently at the rope around his wrists, relishing the way it slid against his skin while he waited for the real rope work to begin. He didn't have to be patient for too much longer. Within minutes, the coil of rope was gone from his back, and Francis had begun to wrap it around his limbs.

One deftly tied knot at a time, Francis slowly took every scrap of free movement Steffan had ever possessed away from him. More hemp wrapped around his arms, other lengths looped around his legs, holding his knees spread wide apart.

Even more than on those wonderful occasions when Francis had tied him to the chair, Steffan felt himself lose any sense of freedom. The chest was so heavy, and the way he was tied to it would make it so difficult for him to get any sort of grip on the bulky shape, there was no way he'd be able to lift it.

He was trapped, completely at his friend's mercy. And he'd never been happier.

"Test the knots for me, love," Francis ordered, just as he always did.

Steffan did as he was told. There were even lengths of hemp crossing over his back and tied off against the ring shaped handles on the sides of the chest. He couldn't even arch his spine as he struggled against the bindings that decorated his skin and found every single one of them to be immovable.

"Good wolf," Francis whispered as he stroked his fingers over those patches of Steffan's skin that remained exposed between the ropes. Steffan fell still, collapsing against the surface of the chest, letting his muscles go slack as he realised they were of no use to him, anymore.

Francis' hands moved gently over his buttocks until his fingertips brushed against his hole, once more. They disappeared for a moment, then returned, slicked with lube. Steffan whimpered and turned his face into the surface of the chest to rest his forehead on the leather, suddenly feeling stupidly vulnerable under his friend's tender touch.

"You don't have to be so careful with me," he whispered. "You can just..."

Francis made a distinctly unimpressed noise in the back of his throat, almost like a growl.

"I've done this before," Steffan blurted out, before he could think better of it. Guys were always surprised when he told them that. They always assumed they'd be the first man to top the big strong wolf. He'd become used to seeing how disappointed they were when they discovered that he already knew he was happiest on the bottom.

As soon as the words left his mouth, Steffan wanted to claw them back. Other wolves being disappointed in him was one thing, they weren't important. Francis was important. He was the only wolf who would ever be important.

"This time it'll be different," Francis said, not even sounding particularly surprised by his admission. "You didn't really belong to any of the wolves who screwed you before. I'll take better care of you than any of them ever could have."

Steffan lifted his head and looked over his shoulder. "I don't—"

Francis reached out with his left hand to put a fingertip over Steffan's lips. "Right here, right now, while you're wearing these ropes—you belong to me. If you're not ready to believe you're going to be my mate, and you're going to belong to me this way for the rest of your life, that's one thing, but don't you dare doubt that you do belong to me, right now."

Steffan swallowed. His friend was waiting for an answer. He didn't know what else to do but nod his agreement with everything the younger man had said.

"Good wolf," Francis whispered.

The fingers of his right hand stopped resting idly against Steffan's hole and began to stroke teasing circles against the tight ring of muscle until one finger finally slid inside him.

Steffan tried to stay still, but he couldn't. He pushed back the merest fraction of an inch his ropes would allow. A whimper escaped from the back of his throat, a soft, submissive sound that he was completely incapable of keeping back.

"That's right," Francis whispered to him. "Doesn't it feel much better when you take a bit of time to relax first?"

Steffan nodded, rubbing his cheek against the leather beneath him.

Finally, just as Steffan was ready to howl with frustration, the digit started to move properly inside him. One finger, then two and finally three, stretched him wide open as he continued to writhe as far as his ropes would allow. When Francis took away his hand, Steffan pushed helplessly back against the empty air.

The tiny thrusts of his hips pushed his cock against the top of the chest. He was tied down so tightly, his shaft was trapped beneath him, pressed so hard against the leather it was almost painful. The tiny bit of friction he could grant himself wasn't enough. He needed more. He needed Francis.

His lover didn't leave him empty and desperate for long. His hands soon settled against Steffan's body once more, his palms resting on his hips, between the bindings. His fingers were surprisingly strong as they held him, but more than that, there was a certainty in his touch. It gradually allowed Steffan to summon up the strength to still and wait on his lover's pleasure.

An eternity later, Francis' cock pressed against his hole. The smaller wolf forced them both to stay very still for an impossibly long time. In Steffan's mind, it was easy to believe he was there for years, waiting for his lover to decide to thrust forward and finally bring them together for the first time.

Just when some tiny scared part of Steffan was starting to believe his friend might actually change his mind, at that very last moment, Francis began to move. Very slowly, inch by inch, the younger wolf pushed into him, filling Steffan completely, making him moan and whimper with need as he was stretched open even further than he had been by the other wolf's fingers.

Another inch forward and Francis' hips came to rest against Steffan's arse, his cock buried as far inside him as it could ever get. The zip on Francis' jeans rubbed against Steffan's buttocks as the smaller wolf stilled again.

Francis' hands moved from his hips to stroke his skin, smoothing through his hair, caressing his back and his shoulders between the ropes as Steffan felt himself slowly adjust and relax around the other wolf's shaft.

Just when he was ready to beg, when he was sure he'd go crazy from the way the need to move and the need to stay motionless warred inside him, Francis began to rock his hips.

His movements started slow, but as Steffan became unable to hold back his mewls and whimpers of pleasure, his friend's rhythm sped up. One hard thrust after another, he took over Steffan's mind and his body until the only things in Steffan's world were the

movements of Francis' cock against his prostate, the ropes biting into his skin and the leather covering the chest rubbing against his shaft.

"Come on, darling, that's right. Come for me, now." The words were half coaxing, half growl, and entirely perfect.

The order slid down his spine, straight to his cock and exploded inside him as he came against the chest. His hole clenched tight around his friend's shaft and, just a second later, Francis let out a howl of triumph as he bucked and spilled inside him.

The smaller wolf collapsed forward and rested the weight of his torso against Steffan's back as he slowly recovered his breath. Steffan felt each lungful of air his friend took as their bodies moved gently against each other.

As the seconds passed, even as they lay there together, it became more and more difficult to ignore the fact there really wasn't anywhere further for Francis' experiment to go. The end had begun.

There was nothing Steffan could do about that. Closing his eyes, all he could do was push reality away as hard as he could and simply savour the closeness while it lasted.

\* \* \* \*

Gunnar was glaring at him again.

The beta's gaze itched at the back of Steffan's neck, sending prickles down his spine. He ignored it for as long as he could. Finally, it became impossible. He turned away from the kitchen sink for a moment and met the other wolf's eyes.

Gunnar made no comment, he merely dropped his attention to Steffan's forearm.

He'd pushed his sleeves back so they didn't get wet as he washed that evening's dinner dishes. The marks Francis' ropes had painted on his skin earlier that day wound up his arm, all the way from his wrist to where they finally disappeared beneath his rolled back sleeve.

"It's just a game," Steffan muttered, hoping the other man might lose interest if he acted as if they were no big deal.

Gunnar didn't say anything. He just kept staring at Steffan's arms as if he'd never seen anything like them before.

Steffan turned away and pulled his sleeves down to cover them, in case the beta should somehow tarnish the marks, simply by looking at them. "It's nothing to do with you."

"Everything that happens in the pack is —"

"You wouldn't understand," Steffan cut in.

"I've spent more time among humans than either of you. I understand the games they play better than you or your mate ever will."

"Francis is not my mate!"

"He's just the man you allow to tie you up for fun?" Gunnar asked.

Yes, he was. Steffan closed his eyes. More than ever before, the part of him that loved the feel of the ropes as they mixed with his friend's touch, warred against the side of him that knew it was wrong. As he stood in the kitchen, it all bubbled up to the surface in one huge confusing ball of emotion.

It was all Gunnar's fault anyway. He was the one who got him into this mess.

"He does tie you up, doesn't he?" the beta pushed.

Knowing the other man wouldn't let it go until he got his answer, Steffan forced himself to nod. "Happy now?"

"If you don't like being tied up," Gunnar began. "If you didn't agree to —"

"It's not like that," Steffan said, turning to face the beta again.

Gunnar glowered at him, his arms folded across his chest. "What is it like then? You obviously don't want —"

"He shouldn't have to!" Steffan yelled, suddenly unable to keep the words back.

Gunnar's frown deepened. "What?"

Steffan swallowed rapidly. "It's not wrong because I don't love every second of it," he bit out. "It's wrong because...he shouldn't have to. He should be playing these sorts of games with you, not me."

"If you think I'd let him tie me up —" Gunnar began.

"No," Steffan whispered as he smoothed the sleeve of his shirt more neatly over his forearm. "If he was with you, I think he'd be the one with rope marks."

"Damn, right he..." Gunnar hesitated as he finally seemed to understand what Steffan was trying to say. "You think that's what he really wants?"

Steffan turned back to the sink. His hands came to rest on the edge of the counter top, his knuckles turning white as his grip on everything he held dear began to fail him.

"Do you know what he promises me when he ties me up?" he finally whispered. "He tells me that I don't have to worry about anything anymore. All I have to do is relax, and he'll look after me. And feeling everything slip away from your control...It's so perfect, so beautiful. Don't you think Francis deserves to have someone who will make *him* feel that way?"

Gunnar glared at him for several long seconds as if he'd never set eyes on him before.

Steffan stared back, unable to drop his eyes. He was so eager to see something in the other man's expression that would tell him he was right, he couldn't look away, and he didn't care if it seemed like a challenge.

"What makes you so sure he wants to feel that way?" the other wolf asked, his expression entirely unreadable.

Steffan dropped his gaze back to the dishes still lingering in the sink. "I may not know so much about human games, but know more about being a gamma than you ever will."

"And you're sure all gammas are the same?"

"Yes." Steffan had no doubt about that.

He knew what Francis wanted. He knew what his friend needed too. And he was going to make sure Francis got it. He wasn't going to see his friend end up with someone who couldn't give him the kind of leadership he must long to find in a mate, not for anything, not even for the pleasure of seeing his own dreams come true.

"What if you're wrong?" Gunnar asked.

"I know Francis," Steffan whispered. It took him a few seconds before he could go on, even then his voice was cracking under the strain. "He needs someone like you, and I'm nothing like you."

"But what if you're wrong?" The words didn't come from Gunnar.

Steffan spun around.

Francis stood in the doorway leading in from the courtyard. "What if you're wrong?" he asked again.

## Chapter Eight

Francis was vaguely aware of Gunnar striding out of the room, leaving him alone with his future mate, but he couldn't drag his gaze away from Steffan to watch him go.

The larger wolf stood on the other side of the kitchen, as pale as a sheet and staring at him as if the sight of his friend was far more terrifying than any ghost could ever be.

"I'm not wrong," Steffan finally said. "You'll be happier with someone like Gunnar than you could ever be with me."

"Gunnar and I would both be as miserable as sin if I was mated to him," Francis said, as he slowly moved forward, gradually closing the gap between himself and Steffan.

"He's a good wolf," the other gamma reminded him. "A strong wolf. He'd —"

"You're the strongest wolf I've ever known," Francis cut in. "And it has nothing to do with you being bigger than the other wolves in the pack."

Steffan shook his head, stubbornly refusing to listen, to see the truth.

Francis grabbed his lover's wrists as he reached Steffan's side. He held them both as tight as he could, until the skin turned white beneath his fingertips. "Listen to me!"

Steffan shook his head, but he didn't try to extract himself from Francis' grip.

"I love you. I'm *in* love with you," Francis added, before any of that brotherly love bull could get in the way. "I love you the way a wolf loves his mate."

Steffan did pull at his wrists then, but all his strength seemed to have deserted his body. Francis held his friend in place as easily as he'd pin down a clumsy little pup. "I know you can't see it, darling," he whispered. "But I do love you — so much."

Steffan shook his head again. "You need a strong —"

"I can be that strong," Francis rushed out. He hadn't even realised what he intended to say until the words hung in the air between them. Then, it was so obvious. "I can show you the sort of strength you see in Gunnar."

"What?"

"I'll show you that I can be just as strong as him," Francis promised, as the idea took real shape inside his head. "I can lead you just as well as he ever could." No trace of doubt lingered in the words.

Steffan shook his head. "You don't have to—"

"No!" Francis let go of the other wolf's wrists and put his hands either side of Steffan's face, making the taller man look down and meet his eyes whether he wanted to or not. "You're not listening, Stef. I'm telling you that I don't want a beta as a mate. I don't want someone who can lead me."

"You—"

Francis didn't give him a chance to build up any sort of momentum to whatever argument he was going to try to make.

"Yes, I want a strong wolf," Francis told him, every word ringing with certainty. "But I want your sort of strength. I want a mate who has the strength to follow me, not to lead me. I don't want to be an alpha or a beta, and I have no interest in leading a pack. But I do want to lead my mate—more than anything."

As he said the words, Francis felt a true understanding of everything he said settle into place inside him. It was the missing piece, and he'd found it while eavesdropping in the doorway.

"I like holding you safe and close and knowing you'll put yourself in my hands and let me take you anywhere we need to go. Putting that sort of faith in your mate takes strength, it takes courage," he told the older man.

Steffan closed his eyes.

"I couldn't do what you do," Francis admitted as he stared up at his lover and saw the fear and the uncertainty swirling inside him. "When I see the way you give yourself to me, sometimes I wish that was in me, but it's not. I couldn't offer myself to any wolf the way you can offer yourself to me. Not to Gunnar, not even you, love."

Steffan blinked his eyes open. "You need—"

"I need you." Part of Francis hated having to say those words. He hated the tremble in his voice even more, but he pushed on regardless. "I need you to be exactly the wolf you are. I need you to let me know I keep you safe when I curl up next to you and I need you to make

me feel strong when you kneel at my feet and offer your wrists up to be bound. I need you..."

Steffan stared down at him. He looked so baffled, so uncertain about everything, and his pain clawed at something in Francis.

"I love you." He didn't know what else to say, how else he could explain it to his friend.

"You should..." Steffan trailed off as if he no longer had any idea what to tell him he should do.

Francis nudged the larger man backwards until he sat on the chair by the kitchen table. Leaning down, he pressed a tender kiss against his lips. Standing between the other wolf's legs so he could get closer to him, he soon found himself in exactly the same wonderful position he'd discovered that first day in the kitchen.

"I should find a way to convince you to be my mate and spend the rest of your life with me?" Francis suggested. "I know I should, love. I'm working on it."

Steffan closed his eyes.

Momentarily unsure what to say, he just rested his temple against Steffan's hair and wrapped his arms around the older man for a few minutes, offering him what comfort he could.

His scent filled Francis' senses, just as it always did when they held each other close, just as it did every time he'd gone to Steffan's bed, ever since they were little more than pups. He closed his own eyes for a second as he thought over every visit he'd made to the other man's room.

"Do you know why I come looking for you every time the alphas howl?" Francis whispered, not sure how he could when he'd only just worked it out for himself.

"You get scared."

"Yeah," Francis admitted, as he opened his eyes. "That's why I have to check you're okay."

Steffan pulled back a few inches and blinked up at him.

"I couldn't keep them safe, Stef," Francis whispered. "They were right there in the front of the car, and I couldn't..."

Steffan reached up and touched his cheek.

Taking a deep breath, Francis forced himself to go on no matter how hard it was to get the words out. "They were right there, and they were dying, and I couldn't even summon up a loud enough howl to bring help."

"You were just a pup!"

"But, I'm not a pup anymore," Francis said, forcing some strength back into his voice. "I can look after the wolves I love now. I can be there to take care of you, and I can come and find you whenever I hear a howl go up. I don't creep into your room so you can keep me safe, Stef. I go there because I want to look after you."

Steffan just stared up at him.

Francis stroked his fingers through the other man's hair, very gently. "I don't think I ever understood how I really felt about you until we went to that club and saw the way the humans played together. But now that I do, I'm sure I've been in love with you for as long as I can remember – more sure of it than I've ever been of anything in my whole life."

"I..."

"I love you," Francis said again. "I want you to be my mate."

As he stood there in the kitchen with his friend, he knew there really was nothing else he could possibly say. He'd told the other gamma the direction he wanted to lead him in. There was nothing he could do now, but pray the older man would be willing to follow him.

Decades seemed to pass before the other wolf reached his decision. "You're sure?" Steffan checked.

"Always," Francis agreed, putting every ounce of conviction he could into the word.

Steffan nodded, just once.

"Shall we go and see the alphas, love?" Francis asked, hope and caution fighting for control of every word.

Steffan offered him another nod. "If they think...if they agree that we should be mated then..."

Francis pressed a kiss onto the top of his friend's head as he heard the words his lover didn't say, as well as those he did. If the alphas thought Steffan was good enough to be mated to him, the other gamma would take their word for it.

He didn't rush his lover to face Marsdon and Bennett immediately. A few more minutes sitting there with his mate stroking his hands over his skin would do him the world

of good. Even if Steffan didn't make any sign of wanting to leave the kitchen, his breathing eventually evened out, his heart rate slowed and Francis could feel his soon to be mate find some sort of peace with what was about to happen.

Finally, when he knew Steffan was as calm as he was going to get. Francis stepped back and took his lover by the hand.

Marsdon and Bennett were stretched out in a tangle of limbs on one of the big battered sofas in front of the fire in the hall. Marsdon looked up when he saw them come into the room. He nudged his mate. Bennett caught Francis' eye and smiled as he seemed to sense there was an announcement to be made.

Hand in hand with Steffan, Francis stood before his alphas. "We respectfully request that you grant us permission to be formally mated."

Bennett turned to Steffan. "This is what *both* of you want?"

Steffan nodded, a little jerkily. "If you think we would suit."

Francis watched Bennett's eyes as he assessed the other submissive, wondering if the alpha could see that Steffan's words were a simple request for approval, to be told that he was good enough.

The alphas stood up. Each man held Francis' gaze for several long seconds. They each studied Steffan too. Francis tightened his grip on his friend's hand, showing him his silent support, letting him know everything would be fine.

Marsdon's gaze dropped to their hands as he caught sight of the move. He smiled. The alphas glanced at each other for a moment before Bennett turned to the other wolves in the pack, where they were all lurking around waiting to see what would happen next.

"Everyone stop what you're doing and come outside," the alpha ordered. He looked back to Francis and Steffan and smiled. "There's a mating ceremony that needs to be performed!"

Steffan watched as his friend's hand reach out to him in slow motion. As if from floating above himself, Steffan saw himself copy the gesture, until their palms slid together and their fingers entwined.

Their alphas' palms soon covered their joined hands, sealing them together, encouraging them to begin to form a bond with each other that could never be broken.

"Alpha to gamma, wolf to wolf, we offer you the chance to form a new life, a new bond, a new pairing within our pack."

As the alphas said the words, Steffan found himself unable to look away from Francis. It was actually happening. They were actually going to...He and Francis would be...Francis really wanted to...

He did his best to force some air into his lungs. It didn't really help. His head still spun.

"An unmated wolf, takes a mate and forms a bond with another unmated wolf from your pack," Francis said, very seriously. "A bond that can never be broken."

There was no denying the truth in the other gamma's words, no denying the strength in them either. Steffan had to swallow several times before he could repeat them back to his friend...to his mate.

The alphas' hands fell away, leaving Steffan's palm in Francis' grasp. While Steffan stayed perfectly still, Francis rose onto his toes and brushed their lips together in a gentle little kiss.

"Mine," the younger man whispered.

Steffan closed his eyes as he nodded his agreement. When he blinked open his eyes, Francis was staring up at him with pure triumph in his eyes. He was so stunning, Steffan forgot how to breathe.

Francis smiled as he tightened his grip on Steffan's hand, as if he really could support someone twice his size that easily. Even as they were surrounded by the other wolves, all of them offering them their congratulations, the only wolf he could focus on was his mate.

"You should both go back to the house now," Bennett ordered a few minutes later.

Francis turned and said something to him. Steffan didn't take in the words. His mate's tone of voice, calm and confident as ever, seeped into his spine and soothed him though. It was easy to believe that everything was going to be fine when Francis sounded like that.

Francis led, and he followed. Before he knew it, Steffan found himself in his friend's bedroom. Their bedroom now, he supposed. He looked around the room as if he'd never seen it before.

"We're supposed to solidify our bond now," Francis reminded him.

Steffan nodded.

Francis guided him back until he sat on the edge of the bed. Steffan fidgeted, moving his hands around, not at all sure what to do with himself or his limbs.

“Nervous?”

Steffan shrugged. “We’re not doing anything we haven’t done before, right?”

Francis smiled down at him as he stood directly before him. “Everything still seems different though, doesn’t it?”

Steffan nodded.

Francis brushed their lips together. “Relax, and let me look after you,” he ordered.

Steffan glanced towards the door. “We can’t take too long. They’re all waiting for us down stairs and –”

“No, they’re not. I heard Marsdon order them to get out and get some work done. It’s just us and we’ve got all the time in the world.”

Steffan swallowed. All the time in the world, because Francis was his mate and that meant he’d never have to step back and allow a better wolf to step in and take the man he loved away from him.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” Francis asked.

Steffan nodded.

His mate brushed their lips together again. “I wonder what I can do to make it feel even better,” he mused.

Steffan smiled back as he felt Francis grin into the kiss.

“In the wardrobe,” Francis whispered as he moved away. “Bring it to me.”

Steffan went to the wardrobe and opened the door, even though he had no idea what his mate wanted him to fetch. His eyes went straight to a long length of rope coiled on the floor beneath the rail of clothes, and any confusion he felt vanished.

Picking it up, he carried it silently back to Francis.

Francis smiled and stroked his cheek with the back of his fingertips before taking the rope and placing it on the edge of the bed. Their clothes soon fell away as they wordlessly helped each other to remove every garment.

The moment they were both naked, Francis quickly looped the rope through the head board. Steffan remained by the side of the bed, waiting until his mate was ready for him.

Just a minute later, Francis turned and held his hand out to him. Neither of them spoke as he guided Steffan to lay back on the bed and offer his wrists up to the rope.

Francis leaned over Steffan's larger frame to tie his hands in place. A few seconds passed, and the smaller wolf frowned. Shuffling his knees across the bed, Francis straddled Steffan's chest as he sought a better angle to work at.

There was hardly any weight to the younger man. Steffan didn't give supporting the smaller wolf a second's thought, but other details required a great deal more reflection.

Francis was already hard. When he leant forward, the tip of his cock pointed straight towards Steffan's mouth. It wasn't Francis' intention to tease. Steffan knew that. His mate's attention was firmly on the ropes, and the younger man's desires had been pushed aside in order to better concentrate on getting it all just right.

Steffan tried to resist the temptation, he tried to simply let all the control and all the decisions drain away, as they had so many times over the previous weeks. Francis leant forward to tighten one of the knots just a little bit more. His cock bobbed even closer to Steffan's lips.

It was almost like an offer—almost like an order. The older man lifted his head and welcomed the tip of his mate's shaft between his lips.

Francis gasped. His hips instinctively thrust forward. Letting go of the ropes, he immediately threaded his fingers into Steffan's hair, cradling his head at just the right angle.

His hips rocked again. All of Francis' attention was on his lover as pre-cum leaked onto Steffan's tongue. He swallowed it down as fast as he could, eager for everything his mate was willing to give him. Francis' fingers stroked his hair again, but a moment later he pulled him away with a reluctant groan.

Steffan dropped his head back to the pillow and looked up at him. Francis' eyes had glazed over slightly. He had to take a moment to pull himself together before he was able to turn his attention back to his knots.

Slowly, he took up the ropes again. They soon wound down Steffan's arms and crossed his torso. A loop or two later the older man's knees were pulled back towards his chest. The rope supported him perfectly, spreading his legs and tilting back his hips as they offered his arse up to his more dominant mate.

"Amazing," Francis whispered as he knelt back between Steffan's legs and looked him over.

As Steffan stared up at him, Francis' gaze came to rest on his erection. The younger man smiled. A moment later his lips covered the tip. Steadying the shaft with his fist, Francis took Steffan's cock deeper into his mouth.

Steffan tried to wriggle, but there was no leverage, no way for him to writhe his way out of his predicament. He couldn't move towards the stimulation, he couldn't pull back from the lapping tongue that called to his orgasm, trying to coax it out of his body before he was really ready for his release, either.

"Fran," he whimpered.

Francis looked up at him. Steffan groaned as he saw the look in his mate's eyes. He shouldn't have tried to suck the other wolf off without his permission. Part of him had known that, even as he felt his lips close around the velvety soft skin. Just because it wasn't an experiment anymore, didn't mean all the rules that had grown around what they did in that room would disappear.

Turn about wasn't just fair play, it was brain meltingly wonderful. Francis' mouth danced around Steffan's shaft, reminding him exactly who was going to be making the decisions for them both in that bed. Any scrap of control the older man had possessed a few moments before, vanished.

"Can't," he bit out.

With a final lick, Francis pulled back, letting the cooler air of the room wrap around his shaft. Steffan gulped in oxygen, as if that would somehow stoop him falling over the edge. Francis watched all his reactions with that same intense expression that Steffan loved so much, as if everything he did was being studied and noted for future reference.

Right then, Steffan knew without any doubt, that he was the only wolf in Francis' world...in his mate's world.

Their bodies brushed together as Francis reached for the lube from the bedside drawer. Steffan tried to arch up against his lover, but it was impossible.

A frustrated little whimper escaped from him, almost like a complaint, as if he didn't love every moment he'd ever spend with his mate no matter how frustrating it proved to be.

Even with the memory of the ceremony fresh in Steffan's mind, everything still seemed to be balanced precariously on a knife edge. It was almost impossible to believe that it all wouldn't be snatched away from him any moment. He closed his eyes against the possibility.

"Open your eyes, darling. Look at me."

Steffan did as he was told. He held his lover's gaze as Francis slicked his fingers and diligently prepared him.

There was nothing in the wolf's eyes to suggest he wasn't just as happy to be with his mate as Steffan was to be with him. When he slicked his cock with extra lube and settled himself between Steffan's restrained legs, the only thing Steffan saw in Francis' gaze was pleasure.

Without saying a single word, Francis thrust forward, sliding into him in one, swift motion and burying himself inside him to the hilt.

Steffan gasped, his hands clenched into fists above the restraining ropes, but he still didn't look away from his mate's face. A flash of pure bliss rushed across Francis' expression as he stared back at him. He stilled inside him and let more of his weight rest on Steffan's body then, freeing his hands to touch Steffan however he pleased.

Unable to reach out to him in return, Steffan had no doubt just how much Francis loved being able to explore his body that way. Even when he sensed his lover adjust and begin to rock his hips, Francis' hands didn't leave him.

Rather than steady himself against the mattress, Francis made the most of Steffan's size and strength. Taking a tight grip on him, he used Steffan's own limbs as leverage as he delivered one hard thrust after another.

The younger wolf held nothing back. He was as free as Steffan was bound, and in that moment, Steffan knew that was the way his lover should be. He'd never have found the sort of bliss that filled his expression now, if he was with a wolf like the beta.

A follower rather than a leader...a wolf who preferred to be bound rather than to bind his mate to the bed frame...a gamma rather than a beta... The kind of mate Francis really needed was exactly the kind of mate he had — was him.

Permission or no permission, the thought pushed Steffan over the edge and sent him spiralling down into his orgasm. He came, and there was nothing he could do to stop himself.

Almost at exactly the same time, Francis threw back his head and sent up a howl louder than any Steffan had ever heard.

As the younger man thrust into him again, Steffan helplessly joined him, his howl blending together with Francis' voice until it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

No matter where the other wolves were on the pack's lands, they had to have heard it. As the sound faded from the air, Francis collapsed on top of him, just as he had when they were out in that crumbling cottage. The connection Steffan had cherished was still there. The love was still there.

But this time it all remained as Francis untied him and cleaned them both up. This time it was all different. Francis' calm acceptance of every single part of him, of every desire he had, even of those that might have seemed strange in a wolf his size, sang in Steffan's veins as his mate untied him.

As the last bit of rope was pushed off the side of the bed, Francis crawled under the blankets with him and pulled them up tight around their shoulders. Steffan hesitated.

"If I free your arms, it's because I want them wrapped around me," Francis informed him pointedly.

Steffan obediently held his lover close, cradling the smaller wolf against his bulk the way he had on so many other nights.

"That feels good too," Francis said, a sleepy little sigh making its way between the words.

Steffan nodded. It felt good. It felt right. For the first time in his life, it really felt possible deep inside him that Francis felt that way too.

\* \* \* \*

A howl tore through the darkness of the gamma's bedroom.

As Francis squirmed against Steffan's body, the older man automatically held his friend a little tighter. "Hush, it's okay."

The smaller wolf's cheek moved against Steffan's shoulder as he smiled.

"Yes, it is," Francis whispered back to him. "Isn't it?"

Steffan hesitated. He knew how things progressed after a howl. This wasn't the way it happened

"Everything's right with the world," Francis murmured.

He sounded so sure, Steffan couldn't quite believe that it wasn't true right then, either.

Francis wrapped his hand around Steffan's wrist, apparently for no better reason than he loved holding him that way, and Steffan found himself smiling too, at the simple fact that who he was seemed to make his mate so happy.

Everything was quiet for several minutes until Steffan heard a little sound escape from the other gamma. For one horrible moment, he thought it was a sob. He thought he'd lain there feeling so fantastic about himself, while his friend was hurting, but was so caught up in having to be strong for his friend that he couldn't show it.

"Francis?" he whispered.

"Sorry," his friend murmured. The same noise escaped again as the smaller wolf turned his face into Steffan's shoulder. It sounded strangely like a chuckle.

"You're...laughing?" Steffan asked.

"I was going to say, since we're both awake, do you want to work on 'developing our bond' again. But then I thought, maybe it would be even better if we curled up close and just rested together for a little while first."

"If you're tired then—" Steffan said quickly.

Francis shook his head. "I just thought we might let the alphas fall asleep before we send up our own howl. Let them be woken up in the middle of the night for once!"

Steffan smiled in the darkness. It sounded like a very good plan, and anyway, who was he to refuse to follow wherever his mate chose to lead him?

## About the Author

Kim Dare is a twenty-seven year old full time writer from Wales (UK). First published in December 2008, Kim has since released over thirty BDSM erotic romances.

While the stories range over male/male, male/female and all kinds of ménage relationships and have included vampires, time travellers, shape-shifters and fairytale re-tellings, they all have three things in common – kink, love and a happy ending.

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