



PACK DISCIPLINE

THE
LOVE OF
A MATE
KIM DARE



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IVALE
KIM DARE

A Total-E-Bound Publication



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The Love of a Mate

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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 LOVE OF A MATE

Kim Dare

Dedication

To Love.

Chapter One

Halfway through his shift from his lupine form into his human shape, Alfred sensed someone approaching from his left. His shoulders were barely formed when a blurry figure pushed against them, sending him staggering backwards.

“What the hell do you think you’re—?” Alfred stopped abruptly as his back hit the wall alongside the woodpile. All the air rushed out of his lungs, stealing any other words he might have wanted to snarl at his attacker.

The rough bricks bit into his suddenly furless skin, his palms skidded against them as he tried to catch his balance on two legs instead of four. So soon after a shift, his movements were clumsy, his co-ordination non-existent. It was several moments before he could even make his eyes focus on the man standing before him and the blur morphed into—

“Caden?”

Alfred glared at the other wolf in disbelief as the pretty blond stepped forward, closing the gap between them.

It was bad enough having to put up with being pushed around by Gunnar. Alfred would be damned if he’d allow the beta’s little brother to treat him the same way! A low growl building in the back of his throat, Alfred reached out to shove Caden away.

His hands quickly reached the place where the other shifter's shoulders should have been, but his claws only met empty air. There was no howl of pain as Caden stumbled and fell from the force of the blow.

A second passed slowly. One brain cell bumped gently into its neighbour inside Alfred's head. Werewolves didn't just disappear—they shifted. Alfred looked down, fully expecting to see a wolf looking back up at him, but Caden was still very much in his human form.

The gorgeous young wolf knelt prettily at Alfred's naked feet and returned his gaze as if that were nothing out of the ordinary.

Bloody bizarre was what it was. Alfred frowned as his sluggish brain tried to make sense of it and failed. He lowered his hands, not above striking someone who was already on his knees.

Caden leant forward. Without any warning, a pair of perfect pink lips wrapped themselves around the tip of Alfred's cock. For several long seconds, Alfred waved his hands uselessly in the empty air, as they stalled halfway to their destination. A strangled noise escaped from the back of his throat, but not one single thought managed to work its way through his brain.

Hot wetness suckled firmly around the head of his cock as Alfred quickly began to harden under its ministrations. A wave of pure bliss swept through him when Caden swirled his tongue in a complex little manoeuvre that lapped away all his strength.

Alfred's knees threatened to buckle. If the wall hadn't

been ready to support him, he'd have crumpled into a desperate heap right there next to the woodpile. The deep scratches the rough surface gouged into his back were a small price to pay for being able to keep his cock at the right height for Caden's mouth.

Delicate hands came to rest on Alfred's hips, steadying him further. Alfred tried to thrust forward as Caden dipped his head and took a little more of his cock into his mouth, but there suddenly seemed to be surprising strength hidden in the slim, artistic digits. His hips stayed firmly against the wall.

Growling his frustration, Alfred glared down at the other wolf. Their eyes met. For once, those stunning blue eyes seemed to be completely serious. Alfred was incapable of looking away. No matter what his place in the pack was supposed to be, he was helpless to do anything other than hold the other gamma's eyes and lose himself in the blue depths.

Caden looked away first, but it felt far less like a wolf offering another man his submission than a master technician dropping his eyes to pay better attention to the job at hand—or mouth, as the case may be. Gradually, Caden began to bob his head lower, taking more and more of the now-stiff shaft into his mouth.

His tongue danced along the underside of Alfred's cock each time he dipped his head. As he pulled back, he swirled his tongue around the glans, before rapidly taking the entire shaft back into his mouth, the tip sinking into his throat.

Without any warning, Caden looked up again. Caught off guard, Alfred could only whimper his admiration. The other wolf's lips were thinned out into a pale pink line, his cheeks slightly hollowed as he sucked, and somehow it all just made him more gorgeous than ever.

Alfred reached out, desperate to thread his fingers into the impossibly golden strands of hair and keep Caden exactly where he was forever. He was vaguely aware that one of the other wolf's hands had left his hip, but before Alfred had even had a chance to really notice that, Caden's fist was wrapped tightly around his wrist.

"What the—?" Alfred tried to say more, but words failed him as Caden's tongue lapped at the sensitive strip of skin where his foreskin joined his shaft.

As if nothing at all had happened to break his concentration, Caden calmly resumed bobbing his head over Alfred's crotch. At the same time, he guided Alfred to lean forward and rest his hand on his shoulder rather than in his hair. Alfred found his fingers clutching at the thin cotton shirt as he tossed back his head and howled his pleasure into the cold night air.

His hips bucked forward, and Caden was strong enough to stop him then. Alfred's vision blurred. The whole world condensed down into something more glorious than he could ever remember it being. Every fibre in his body whimpered its joy. Even his fingertips seemed to feel their share of his bliss as he came into his lover's mouth. Then, long before Alfred was ready to let go of it, the ecstasy faded away.

It could have been mere moments before he opened his eyes, it could have been hundreds of years. Alfred's brain wasn't working well enough to deal with complicated concepts like time. All he knew for sure was that Caden was still kneeling at his feet and suckling gently around his softening shaft when he finally managed to blink down at him.

Caden's eyes were peering back in return at him, apparently studying his every reaction very carefully. Seeming to realise Alfred was back with him, he leant back and delicately allowed Alfred's shaft to slip from between his slightly swollen lips.

Lifting a hand to his mouth, Caden ran his fingertips over his mouth, but not a single drop of cum had escaped his attention. Apparently satisfied he was as perfectly presented as ever, Caden smiled and rose gracefully to his full height.

More of Alfred's brain cells gradually remembered what they were supposed to be doing. He looked over Caden's shoulder. The very pissed-off wolves he expected to see heading their way didn't appear immediately.

"No one will have heard us," Caden said, his tone very soft and strangely intimate in the cool evening air. "They've all gone to the mating ceremony."

Alfred's forehead creased into a frown. "Gunnar and Talbot," he managed to remember through a haze of afterglow.

"Yes," Caden said, once more studying Alfred very carefully, as if waiting for his reaction.

Alfred's frown deepened. "Why the hell should I care?"

Caden's hand came to rest on Alfred's shoulder as if seeking to console him from some imagined hurt.

"At least now Gunnar won't be nipping at my tail every damn time I turn around," Alfred muttered. He tried to shake off Caden's touch, but the other wolf didn't seem to notice.

"I'm glad you feel that way," Caden murmured, leaning forward until his lips almost caressed Alfred's ear.

Struggling to turn his head and pull away far enough to see Caden's face, Alfred glared at him through narrowed eyes. "Why?"

"It wouldn't seem right for me to be mated to a wolf who had ever had real feelings for my brother."

"What!" Alfred damn near sent them both sprawling to the ground as he tried to jerk away from the other wolf.

Caden stubbornly refused to back away a single inch. "I said that it—"

"I heard what you said!" Alfred bit out. "I—You—What're you playing at?"

"I'm not playing," Caden said, with a sweet little smile and a flirtatious dip of his lashes. "I'm in love with you. I wouldn't joke about something like that."

Alfred couldn't bring a single word to his lips. All he could do was stare at the other wolf. Of course, he'd spent a fair amount of time staring at Gunnar's brother since the other two wolves had joined their pack—he was pretty sure everyone had. The guy was as hot as hell. But that was different. He'd just been staring at a sexy little parcel. Not even the damn alphas could have had a go at him for that.

Dropping his gaze, Alfred's attention fell on where his hand still rested on the other wolf's shoulder, tightly gripping his shirt in a white-knuckle hold. He couldn't have snatched his hand away from Caden faster if someone had actually put a flashing red warning light on his head and set off a damn siren. "You're not in love with me."

Caden's smile never faltered as he once more looked up at Alfred through his lashes. His other hand came to rest in the centre of Alfred's chest. As he spoke, Caden's fingers caressed up and down the centre line of his rib cage. "I know how I feel about you. I've known for a long time. And now that Gunnar has stepped aside, there's no reason why we—"

"There are plenty of reasons why we will *never* be mated," Alfred growled.

Caden blinked at him, a touch of hurt seeming to creep into his eyes. "You don't want me?"

"Of course I..." Alfred shook his head. Those teasing fingers were addling his brain. He caught hold of them in a tight grip and pointedly removed Caden's hand from his naked body.

Turning away, he squeezed past the other man. It was much easier to ignore the extra scratches the bricks had left on his shoulders than it was to avoid thinking about the erection he felt straining against Caden's jeans. It took all his resolve to keep walking away from him, making his way rapidly towards the house.

He'd be safe inside. Alfred wasn't entirely sure what he needed to be kept safe from, but that didn't slow his

retreat towards the building.

The other wolves seemed to be making their way back home, too. Alfred pushed a hand through his hair as he spotted them approaching from the opposite direction. Caden had said something about a mating ceremony, hadn't he? Yes, of course, Gunnar and Talbot.

Well, good! Alfred thought to himself. He hadn't wanted the blasted beta anywhere near him anyway!

One faltering step was all it took. Suddenly, Caden had caught up and was walking at his side, for all the world as if Alfred had invited him along for a pleasant stroll.

Studiously ignoring the other wolf, Alfred made his way into the old farmhouse and towards the stairs on the far side of the room. Caden was still at his side as he began to climb the steep treads.

"Alfred. Where are you going?"

Looking over his shoulder, Alfred spotted Marsdon glaring up at him from the base of the stairs.

"To get dressed. I've been for a run," Alfred said, with as much composure as he could manage. Right then, that wasn't much. He was acutely aware of Caden right behind him and it was almost impossible to believe that there wasn't a sign over both their heads declaring exactly what they'd just done. Something touched his palm.

Alfred glanced down. Caden's fingers were twined with his. He tried to fling the other shifter's hand away from him but Caden might as well have smeared both their palms with superglue.

"Come straight back down when you're dressed,"

Marsdon ordered.

Alfred nodded.

“Caden?” he heard Marsdon call out behind him. “Where are you going? You’re already dressed.”

Finally managing to wrench his hand out of Caden’s grip, Alfred made his escape while he had a chance.

“I’m going to help Alfred,” Caden called out from somewhere behind him.

A moment later, Alfred heard light footfalls rushing to catch up.

The other gamma appeared just in time to deftly catch the bedroom door when Alfred attempted to slam it in his face. Closing it softly behind him, Caden sealed them both into Alfred’s room as if it were something he did every day.

“I’m not a child.”

Caden smiled as he calmly made himself comfortable on Alfred’s bed.

Great, Alfred thought. The image of Caden all laid out there for him, ready and waiting, was all he needed while he was trying to get to sleep each night!

“I’d noticed.”

Alfred frowned. “What?”

“I noticed that you’re all grown up,” Caden said, softly, his eyes dropping pointedly to rest on Alfred’s crotch.

Feeling the blood rushing to his cheeks and his cock was a strange sensation. Alfred did his best to hide both reactions by turning towards the wardrobe in the corner of the room. He snatched up a clean pair of jeans and a fresh T-shirt.

"I'm quite capable of dressing myself," he growled. "I don't need your help."

"That's okay," Caden said cheerfully, as if he hadn't even noticed how pissed off Alfred was. "I'll just wait here, and admire the view."

The faster Alfred tried to scramble into his jeans, the more time the task seemed to take. The denim refused to co-operate. The buttons had a mind of their own.

Alfred snarled irritably as he finally pulled his T-shirt over his head, ripping the seam on the shoulder in the process. Not in any mood to bother with insignificant things like socks and trainers, he strode towards the door, only to hear Caden speak up at the last moment.

"I meant it when I said I'm in love with you."

Alfred glanced over his shoulder. "No, you didn't. I don't know what game you're trying to play with me, but it's not going to work. I'm no more interested in you than I was in your brother."

Caden pulled his legs up onto the bed in front of him and loosely looped his arms over his knees. He tilted his head slightly to one side as he studied him. "You really think you're that unlovable?"

Don't believe me? Ask any wolf in the pack, they'll tell you what a poor excuse for a mate I would be.

The words swirled inside Alfred's head, but he suddenly found himself completely incapable of bringing them to his tongue. He knew they were true. He was pretty sure every wolf in his pack knew it, too. But if Caden had somehow failed to get that memo when he joined them

then...

Turning his back on Caden, he quickly made his way out of the room. It was pointless to waste time on what-ifs and maybes. Even if there was some way Caden could form some sort of interest in him, there was no way in hell Marsdon or Bennett would ever give them permission to be together and—

Alfred's mind went blank as he reached the bottom of the stairs and looked across the room. Every wolf in the pack was staring at him. He froze, his feet refusing to carry him another step.

What the hell are you all looking at? Alfred swallowed rapidly, but he couldn't make his throat work, not even to growl.

A gentle caress along the outside of his arm made him look over his shoulder. Caden stood on the tread directly behind him. A tender smile came to the other wolf's lips as their eyes met. Alfred watched, trapped by his own uncooperative limbs, as Caden's fingers slid further down his arm and their hands became entangled once more.

Caden made a point of dropping his gaze first. Alfred looked sweet with that rabbit-caught-in-the-headlights look on his face, but it wouldn't do to spend too long admiring his expression—not when his actions could be taken as a statement of dominance.

Stepping past his soon-to-be mate, Caden led them silently towards the sofas where the other wolves were already gathered. An uncomfortable shiver tingled down his

spine, warning him that he wasn't the one who should be making the decisions for them or doing any sort of leading, but Caden pushed it away.

The other gamma tugged at Caden's fingers, apparently attempting to regain control of his hand. Caden tightened his grasp slightly in response, not so much that the other wolf would see it as a challenge, but maybe just enough to let Alfred know he really enjoyed holding his hand.

There wasn't room for both of them to sit on the sofa nearest the door. Caden had no doubt that was why Alfred had chosen to sit there. Not in the least bit daunted, the moment Alfred's backside hit the cushion, Caden climbed onto the sofa with him, to sit half next to him and half on his lap.

Still retaining possession of Alfred's hand, he rested his head on the other wolf's shoulder and gave a content little sigh as he rubbed his cheek against Alfred's T-shirt.

"Are you trying to get me killed?" Alfred snarled under his breath.

Caden lifted his head and looked up at him. "Why would I want to do that?" he asked, lacing his words with as much innocence and confusion as he could muster.

Alfred glared at him. He tried to squirm away but the only way he was going to be able to do that was by climbing over the arm of the chair in front of the whole pack.

"Caden?"

Turning to his alphas, Caden smile cheerfully across the room at them. "Yes?"

“Care to tell us what the hell is going on?” Marsdon asked.

Dipping his eyes with all due deference, Caden let his attention fall upon his and Alfred’s joined hands. “When I realised that Alfred isn’t as interested in my brother as I thought he was, I...” Caden paused for a moment to nibble at his bottom lip in a calculatedly pretty display of nerves. “I didn’t mean any disrespect to my alphas or to the pack’s hierarchy, but I had to tell him how I felt about him.”

“And how do you feel about him?” Marsdon asked, in the same tone of voice a man might use if he was watching someone mix chemicals from unlabelled bottles, and he had no idea when any particular combination might go bang.

“I...” Caden looked to Alfred.

“He doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” the other gamma snapped.

Caden was quick to agree. “Alfred’s right. We should probably get to know each other a lot better before we ask for permission to court each other formally.”

Alfred’s eyes narrowed. Caden held his gaze, careful not to let any sign of guile or manipulation creep into his expression. Love, that was the only thing the other gamma needed to see there. Love and, maybe, just a hint of willingness to follow rather than lead, as and when the time was right.

“Is that correct, Alfred?”

Alfred turned away from Caden and moved his attention back to the alphas with obvious difficulty. “Um...”

yeah, I mean..!” He cleared his throat, and glanced at Caden once more.

Nodding encouragingly, Caden squeezed the other gamma’s hand. Apparently not sure what else to do, Alfred echoed his nod.

“That’s...” Marsdon seemed to struggle to find the right word. “Good?” he hazarded, with a glance towards Bennett.

Caden smiled as if the alphas had given him the world on a stick, but he wasn’t exactly heartbroken when one of the other wolves was sent to retrieve Gunnar and Talbot from upstairs and attention shifted away from himself and Alfred.

There was something very comforting about simply being able to curl in against his lover’s side. Especially after the other gamma had seemed to get the hint that there was no escape and stopped squirming. His arm went hesitantly around Caden’s shoulders as he tried to get comfortable.

Caden let his eyes drop closed, eager to let every wolf in the room know he felt completely safe and at ease with Alfred—and even more determined to make sure Alfred saw it too.

When he finally blinked his eyes open over half an hour later, Caden knew there was at least one wolf that wasn’t buying any of it. Gunnar raised an eyebrow at him as their gazes met. Caden didn’t bother to blink innocently at him. That act never worked on his brother. He held the other wolf’s gaze instead, letting Gunnar see that he was serious

about his new undertaking and wouldn't allow any other wolf to mess with it regardless of their respective ranks in the pack.

"I'm going to bed." Alfred jerked himself up from the sofa seat so suddenly, Caden almost toppled over.

Righting himself at the last minute, he saved himself from falling flat on his face. "That sounds like a good idea."

"What?" Alfred span around to face him.

"I'm sleepy," Caden said, with as much ingenuousness as he could squeeze into those three little syllables.

Alfred hesitated for so long Caden was able to rise to his feet, say his goodnights and stroll across to the bottom of the stairs ahead of him. He was already at his bedroom door by the time Alfred caught up.

A rough hand landed on his back as he pushed the door open. Caden didn't try to resist. He willingly stumbled through the doorway when the other man shoved him forward. Bracing himself for a hard landing, he did nothing to stop his fall.

At the last possible moment, Alfred snatched at his wrist and kept him on his feet. But Caden had no doubt that owed far more to accident than design. The hold the other wolf took on him was nothing to do with keeping him safe.

"What the hell are you playing at?" Alfred growled, jerking Caden around to face him, each word vibrating with fury.

Caden remained silent and dutifully allowed himself to be thrown around like a rag doll as Alfred slammed the

bedroom door and pinned him against the woodwork.

“Answer me!” Alfred demanded.

Caden took a deep breath and tried to ignore both the ache in his cock and his instinctive desire to tilt back his head and bare his throat to a wolf he was quietly desperate to submit to. Swallowing rapidly, he forced himself to say the words Alfred need to hear rather than those he really wanted to utter. “I’m not ready for this.”

“What?”

Caden dragged another breath into his lungs. He had to close his eyes for a moment before he could make himself go on. “I’d have to know I could trust a wolf before I’d feel safe agreeing to play rough with him. So, I’m not ready for us to play this way yet,” he expanded.

Alfred snatched his hands away from Caden’s skin as if he was hot enough to burn the flesh from the other man’s bones. He took several paces back. “What are you talking about?”

Caden stepped carefully past him and took a seat on the room’s only chair. He had to tilt his head back to look up at Alfred. It would be impossible for the other wolf not loom over him, not to feel bigger and stronger than him. “I don’t mind if you want to be rough with me. I do like that,” Caden promised. “But...not yet.”

Alfred glared down at him as if he’d lost his mind. It was several minutes before he glanced at Caden’s wrist and the way he was pointedly massaging it with the fingers of his other hand. His frown deepened. Suddenly appearing hesitant, he rocked back and forth on his heels. “Did I hurt

you?"

Caden examined his wrist very carefully, turning it this way and that. No, he hadn't, but that wasn't because he was being careful with a less dominant wolf. It was only chance that he hadn't gripped the skin tightly enough to leave a vivid bruise in its wake, that he hadn't twisted the joint far enough to fracture the bones above it.

Alfred's grasp had been that of a brat having a temper tantrum rather than a dominant wolf taking a lover in hand, taking a more submissive mate under his protection. And it had to be dealt with now.

"My wrist will be fine," Caden finally said, with complete honesty.

Alfred pushed his hands into his pockets. "It's your fault anyway," he mumbled. "Acting like... Saying..." He took one hand out of his pocket and pushed it through his hair.

"All I did was tell you the truth," Caden said mildly, keeping his gaze down and his submission blatant. "I only acted the way I've wanted to act towards you since I first joined the pack."

Alfred paced towards the bedroom window, then back. He was on his third circuit when he suddenly stopped and span around to face him. "Did the alphas put you up to this?" His eyes narrowed. "Gunnar went off with Talbot, so you've been ordered to—"

"No!" Caden launched himself to his feet and hurriedly closed the gap between them, unable to stand hearing the pain in the other wolf's voice. "Gunnar's the one who always

thought arranged matches were a good idea. He might have thought he wouldn't care who he spent the rest of his life with, but I've always known I care."

Alfred retreated rapidly, as if Caden was suddenly a damn sight more frightening than his big, scary beta of a brother could ever be. He only stopped when the backs of his legs hit the edge of Caden's bed. He sat down heavily on the edge of the mattress.

Caden didn't waste a second before dropping to his knees in front of him. "I want to be your mate. I want you to be my mate." Every lupine instinct he had screamed at Caden to stop there. It took every ounce of human stubbornness at his disposal to push on. "But—"

Alfred let out a burst of harsh laughter that obviously had nothing to do with amusement. "I should have known there would be a but—"

Caden lifted one hand and put his fingertips against the other wolf's lips. Alfred immediately grabbed hold of his wrist, but he'd barely had time to take hold of it before he checked his own show of strength. His hand remained wrapped around Caden's wrist, but he made no attempt to move his fingers away from his lips or to speak up from behind them.

"I just need you to prove that I'm right about you," Caden said. "Please?"

Alfred's frown deepened.

"I know you're a good wolf, and the only thing I want to do is put myself in your hands and be your mate. I want to submit to you and belong to you and... And I just need you

to prove to me how right I am.”

Caden stared up into the other wolf's eyes, begging Alfred to understand, to believe him. By the look on his face, Alfred had never had anyone say anything like that to him in his life. Caden had no doubt that if he had hurled insults at him or tried to order him around and control him, Alfred would have railed against him the way he so often seemed to chafe at the hierarchy in the pack, but suddenly being treated differently seemed to have brought his mind to a complete stop.

Taking his hand away from the other wolf's lips, Caden stroked the back of his fingers down Alfred's cheek. The other gamma still didn't speak.

Dropping his hand back to his side, Caden bowed his head and simply rested it against Alfred's leg, making himself comfortable to wait patiently while the other wolf's brain caught up with events.

Within a second, Alfred had moved his hand to rest on the back of his head but, even as his fingers wound through the strands, Caden felt the other man tense.

“I don't mind,” he said, leaving his head where it was and accepting Alfred's caress. “It's only when I'm going down on you that having your hand on the back of my head makes me nervous.”

Alfred said nothing as his fingers carded gently through Caden's hair, no doubt making a hell of a mess of it. Caden smiled slightly at the thought of getting mussed up by the other wolf that way.

“I don't believe you,” Alfred finally announced.

Caden could tell that Alfred was doing his best to regain his usual recalcitrant mood, but the tone of voice just wasn't there. The words were half scared and half gentle, and not the least bit bratty.

Turning his head, Caden pressed a kiss against his lover's jeans. "I don't mind," he whispered. "There's plenty of time. You'll realise I'm telling the truth soon enough."

"You're bloody sure of yourself," Alfred muttered.

"No, I'm sure of *us*," Caden corrected, very gently but no less firmly for that. Just because Gunnar was the only brother who shouted and stomped around, that didn't mean he was the only wolf from their parents' pack who was determined to get his own way in the end.

Chapter Two

“What do you think you’re all looking at?” Alfred demanded as every wolf in the work party turned to stare at him at the same time. They’d obviously already been out there for some time, hard at work since first light.

Alfred didn’t try to hold their gazes or stare anyone down, but he made a point of looking away from his pack mates rather than towards the ground. He was in no mood to display his submission towards anyone that morning.

Even after he’d left Caden’s room in the early hours, he hadn’t managed to sleep for more than a few minutes in a row. A night spent tossing and turning and trying to ignore both the ache in his cock and the pounding in his head hadn’t helped his temper. But it was the uncomfortable feeling in the unexplored recesses of his mind that had his hand forming into a fist at his side.

There was something there, just out of sight, lurking in the deepest shadows. He could sense it creeping around, prowling in the darkness like a predator waiting for the perfect chance to pounce. If he dropped his guard for a moment, Alfred had no doubt it would launch itself into the front of his mind, then... And that was the problem. He had no idea what would happen then.

Alfred looked around the work party full of wolves once more, desperate to...to howl, to bite, to lash out at the

whole world. He longed to sink his teeth into his nameless, faceless nemesis and shake it until it finally gave in and left him the hell alone.

He wanted nothing more than to land punch after punch on whatever the hell it was that made his whole body ache like the changing of a season that never actually came. He yearned for the chance to keep pummeling, clawing, biting until long after there was any way a reasonable wolf could expect anything to be achieved by hurting the world.

Alfred wanted...

He growled. Not knowing what he really wanted didn't make him feel any friendlier towards the universe.

Picking up the last shovel leaning against the tree nearest the river project, he threw himself into their work digging the new channel with more determination than all the previous days he'd been assigned there put together. Every ounce of anger and frustration streamed through his body and into his task as if he couldn't think of anything he'd enjoy more than helping his pack divert the course of the river running through their lands.

By the time he looked up, perspiration dripping into his eyes, the sun was high overhead. Right on cue, the alphas had arrived to inspect their work. Leaning on his shovel handle for a moment, Alfred wiped the sweat and the dirt from his face with his discarded shirt before tossing the grubby garment back onto the bank. Glancing over to where his leaders were speaking to Francis and Steffan, he noticed that the other gammas were smeared with dust

and mud, too.

The alphas looked impossibly clean and fresh standing next to them, not to mention too bloody perfect by half. Lording it over the lower-ranking wolves as if they were something special, just because someone had looked at them when they were pups and decided they were going to be alphas when they grew up.

As if he could sense the angry glare burning into the back of his neck, Bennett suddenly looked over his shoulder. His eyes met Alfred's. Reluctantly lowering his gaze, Alfred forced himself to show due deference to the other wolf's rank in public, whatever his private feelings might be.

By the time he looked back up, the alpha was right in front of him. Bennett jumped easily down into the ditch alongside Alfred, handed him a cold bottle of water and casually took a seat on the muddy edge of the gouge being created in the landscape.

"Steffan tells us you've been working hard all morning."

Alfred shrugged well aware that no one really gave a damn what he said anyway. He glanced across at Steffan as he took a deep swig from the bottle of water. Perhaps if he'd been born that size, Alfred might have been the one whom the alphas had put in charge of the working party. Or perhaps if he'd been born growling, like Gunnar, he'd have been the one who had the beta role in the pack handed to him on a sodding plate.

If *he'd* been given that rank, he wouldn't have wasted

it. He wouldn't have disobeyed his alphas and fallen for Talbot, of all people. Cold water spilled over Alfred's hand as his grip tightened and crushed the fragile plastic.

Very carefully, he eased his hold on it. The bottle sprang back into shape. The level of the water within receded. Would a wrist recover that easily?

"It seems Caden is proving to be a good influence on you."

Alfred jerked back his head and met his alpha's eyes.

Bennett smiled slightly. "Neither of us had realised that you had feelings for each other..."

"We don't. I mean, I don't..." Alfred frowned down at the bottle. It hadn't actually sprung back into shape as perfectly as he'd first believed. The damage was easily visible once a wolf thought to look for it.

A gentle, teasing chuckle brought his attention back to his alpha, but Alfred's mood didn't change.

"There's no rush to work out exactly how you feel," the other wolf reassured him, as if he was nothing more than a silly little pup to be humoured. "Such things take time."

Alfred said nothing. It was the only way he could be sure to keep back the growl that threatened to escape from the back of his throat.

"But, if you keep working like this, I'm sure you'll soon be a mate that Caden could be proud to call his own." Without waiting for a response, Bennett jumped easily onto the bank alongside the ditch. "In a few days I'll speak to Gunnar and see if we can arrange for you and Caden to share the same duties. That should let you spend some

more time together.”

Alfred shrugged, just to make it perfectly clear he couldn't care less one way or the other, but Bennett merely smiled all the more, as if he thought there was something amusing about that.

As Bennett re-joined Marsdon and Steffan, Alfred caught the other alpha's eyes. At least there was one wolf he was sure wouldn't be amused by the idea of him and Caden. There was no way in hell Marsdon was ever going to do anything that involved smiling in Alfred's direction—that ship hadn't sailed so much as sunk without a trace a long time ago.

Quickly tossing back the rest of his water, Alfred flung the bottle aside and launched himself into his work with a fresh wave of anger to fuel him. There was no point in thinking anything was actually going to happen between him and Caden. Marsdon was never going to forgive him for causing trouble for Bennett all those months ago, and he sure as hell wasn't going to give his permission for him to be mated to a wolf like Caden.

Alfred's shovel cut deep into the earth. He wasn't sure who he was imagining tossing into the hole after he'd dug it so deep that they'd never be able to clamber up the steep sides, but he had the horrible feeling that, whatever he did, the only wolf who would end up at the bottom of it was him.

Hands that weren't used to being put to work with enthusiasm or for more than a few minutes at a time protested at the sudden onslaught against his palms, but Alfred wasn't in the mood to listen to them. There wasn't

enough work in the world to allow him to vent all his anger right then.

* * * *

If he'd had the energy, Alfred would have sighed. Of all the times for him to actually be proved right about something, it had to be today, it had to be about this. Just as he'd suspected, there was no less fury burning through his veins as he slowly made his way back into the pack's old farmhouse that evening. The work hadn't eased his desire to lash out at the whole world one little bit, it had just added a hell of a lot of pain into the mix of feelings swirling through him.

His whole body ached. His feet were too heavy to lift off the ground. His steps were more a shuffle than a stride as he crossed the courtyard. His hands burned where the handle of the shovel had bitten back in revenge for the rough treatment Alfred had levelled upon both it and the ground that day.

Apparently, whoever said hard work never killed anyone was right—apparently, it just made you *wish* you were dead.

“You're back!”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Alfred muttered, not even bothering to look over his shoulder as he made his way across the kitchen to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of cold milk. His hand screamed in protest as he tore the top

off it, but the cool liquid soothed his dusty throat as he drank down big mouthfuls. It let him hope that his next words wouldn't sound so much like a death rattle.

Apparently as oblivious towards polite hints to piss off as his older brother had ever been, Caden joined him by the fridge. Turning pointedly away from him, Alfred left the half-empty bottle of milk on the counter and attempted a painful retreat towards the living room.

"I heard that you've made much more progress on the river works than Gunnar thought you would," Caden said, as if it was the most wonderful news he had ever heard in his life. "You guys are almost a day ahead now!"

"Yay," Alfred muttered. Another feather in Gunnar's cap. Bully for him. The idea of needing to go back out there and do another day of the same was almost enough to make him want to cry.

Without any warning, Caden reached up and stroked his fingers through his dusty hair.

Alfred waited impatiently for his own arm to swing up and push the other man's hand aside in annoyance, but somehow it stayed by his side. The energy for that kind of reaction simply wasn't there. He had little choice but to let the other gamma fuss over him and pet him any way he chose.

"You must be so sore after working hard all day," Caden cooed.

Alfred shrugged, and tried not to flinch as his shoulders promptly reminded him why a noncommittal noise would have been a much better option.

“Let me make you feel better?” Caden requested, his voice dropping into an intimate, flirtatious tone.

“And how do you intend to do that?” Alfred snapped.

He was pretty sure the only thing that was going to make him feel any less like he'd been run over was a whole body transplant, and while there were a hell of a lot of things he'd have been happy to do with Caden's body, complicated medical procedures weren't at the top of his list.

A smooth palm slid against Alfred's sore hand. Caden stepped back and tugged gently at his arm, encouraging Alfred to follow him up the stairs. Too curious to protest, too knackered to resist, Alfred let the pretty blond have his way, just this once.

He had no idea how he actually convinced his legs to carry him up the stairs, but within a few minutes he was standing in Caden's bedroom, facing the other wolf.

“Take off your clothes and jump in the shower,” the other gamma ordered, with an enticing little smile. “When you're done, make yourself comfortable on the bed.”

There was only one part of his body Alfred hadn't worked to exhaustion that day. Within a fraction of a second, his cock was hard and making an obvious outline in his jeans. Alfred automatically ran his gaze over the other wolf's frame. Perhaps there was a way Caden could make him feel better after all...

Peeling off his clothes, Alfred dropped them carelessly on the floor just outside the bathroom door. Stepping under the spray he quickly rinsed the worst of the

earth and grit off his body.

His hands burned under the warm water. The soap ignited a full-blown blaze all along his palms. Alfred winced as he glared at the broken skin, but he didn't have time to worry about that. Did a little bit of pain really matter when Caden was waiting out there, ready and willing to make him all better?

Roughly towelling his skin dry, Alfred discarded the damp fabric on the floor and quickly made his way back into the bedroom. Halfway across the threshold, with one foot on the bedroom carpet and the other still lingering on the cold bathroom tiles, he came to an abrupt halt.

The curtains were closed. Tiny candles flickered on the bedside tables and along the top of the dresser. Alfred gazed at it all with something akin to horror, but as Caden stopped rooting around in a drawer on the far side of the room and glanced towards him, Alfred couldn't actually think of anything sarcastic to say.

"Jump on the bed and make yourself comfortable," Caden invited, that same smile still dancing around his lips.

He hadn't wasted all his time alone on silly romanticism. He'd also stripped off. Caden was bare-arse naked and, for once, Alfred found himself more than willing to do as another wolf commanded.

Shuffling towards the middle of the bed, he leant back against the headboard to watch as Caden finally rose to his feet and turned towards him. For a second Alfred's hand twitched, but he resisted the sudden wave of shyness and didn't rush to cover his erection with his hands.

Caden was stunning. Candle light danced over his skin, highlighting lines of lean muscle. It took Alfred a few seconds to realise the other wolf's lips were moving and words were coming out of his mouth. He only caught the tail end of the other man's sentence.

"...just roll over onto your stomach, and I'll get started."

Alfred frowned. "What?"

Caden held up a bottle of something. It didn't look like any brand of lube Alfred had ever set eyes on.

"Your massage," Caden reminded him.

Alfred looked from the other wolf's face to the bottle of oil and back again. He was serious. He was bloody serious! He'd actually invited him up there for a damn massage.

Turning hurriedly away, Alfred swung his legs over the side of the bed. He looked wildly around the room, but he couldn't remember where he'd tossed his clothes. Despite his humiliation, his cock wasn't the least bit daunted. His erection continued to flourish regardless. A drop of pre-cum slowly slid down his shaft as he leant forward and looked around the corner of the bed.

There! Finally, Alfred spotted his clothes. He pushed himself forward, but a strong hand landed on his shoulder and stopped him short before he could even stand up.

"If we try to do anything more than that straight away, it'll just hurt. You've had a hard day. Let me help you relax first?" Caden asked.

Alfred hesitated. "First?" he asked, suspiciously.

Caden smiled. Leaning forward, he brushed their lips

together. "Massage first. Then..."

Completely thrown off balance, Alfred didn't have it in him to fight against the suggestion, or to demand that Caden specify exactly what he was promising in return for his cooperation.

Alfred gave a mental shrug. He was tired. Just lying there and having Caden rub him all over didn't sound like too bad an idea, especially not when it seemed likely to at least end with some sort of orgasm.

Squirming around, he lay down on his stomach, keeping his legs pointedly together, just in case Caden hadn't realised who was going to be topping whom afterwards. It was damn near impossible for him to find a position where his cock wasn't trying to drill a hole in the mattress underneath him.

The blankets moved slightly beneath him as Caden rearranged himself behind Alfred. Holding his breath, he waited impatiently for the other guy to get on with it so they could move on to more interesting business.

"I've wanted to get my hands on you ever since I first set eyes on you," Caden whispered, as he finally placed warm, oiled palms on Alfred's shoulders.

Unsure what to say, Alfred made a non-committal sound in the back of his throat. There was no way in hell he was going to admit he'd wanted to screw Caden for just as long.

"You carry so much tension in the muscles," Caden murmured.

Alfred only just resisted the temptation to roll his eyes.

The guy was on about his bloody massages again. If the other man's hands hadn't felt quite so amazing, as they quickly found the first of a great many sore spots across Alfred's shoulders, he was quite sure he'd have shaken the other gamma off, pulled himself off the bed and stormed out of the room.

As it was, Alfred was quite prepared to put off his grand exit until after the other man had finished what he was doing, and until after Caden had let him screw him. Hell, he was pretty sure he could even put it off until after they'd both had a nice little nap, too. Even as the thought made its way sluggishly through his brain, Alfred's eyes slowly drifted closed.

So much tension...

Caden worked his fingers carefully into the muscles along Alfred's shoulders again and again, quietly cherishing each caress he was permitted to offer the other wolf. He hadn't been lying about seeing all that stress lodged in his body. His only falsehood had been one of omission. He'd completely failed to mention how difficult it had been for him to hold back and not try to ease Alfred's pain before.

Caden shook his head. His lover was as hard as a rock, and not just in those places he should be while getting naked with his future mate for the first time.

As he gradually coaxed the younger wolf to relax under his touch, Caden felt himself relax, too. The world was a better place when he was allowed to ease Alfred's

way in it. Dipping his head, he pressed a gentle kiss between the other man's shoulder blades.

"What're you doing?" Alfred immediately demanded, peering over his shoulder at him.

"I couldn't resist," Caden admitted softly. There was no hint of an honest apology in his words and he didn't try to fake one. "You're perfect."

Alfred tensed all over again, undoing every scrap of good Caden's massage had done over the previous hour. He obviously thought Caden was making fun of him. Caden's heart broke a little as he realised Alfred had good reason to feel that way.

No doubt there had been far too few comments and compliments offered in his direction over the years—heavens knew there hadn't been a single one Caden could remember hearing since he'd joined the pack.

Not for the first time, Caden struggled to push down the almost overpowering urge to throttle the whole damn lot of them, and their bugged-up hierarchy, too.

Pouring a little more oil onto his palms, Caden forced himself to relax his hands and let them glide across Alfred's skin with faultless technique. Very slowly, taking care not to miss a single knot of muscle, he made his way down the other man's back, across his arse and along his legs.

So much tension, so much pain, and if only the other wolves had enough sense to really look at the man in front of them, it could all have been avoided so easily...

A bitter taste filled the back of Caden's mouth. He had to clear his throat before he could even attempt to speak.

“If you’ll roll over, I’ll do your front now,” he said, very softly.

Alfred sluggishly did as he was told. His movements were already starting to become slow and sleepy as the massage seeped into his frame and maybe even, Caden barely dared to hope, because the kind touches from another wolf were beginning to soothe his soul a little.

Caden sat back on his heels with his hands clenched into fists at his sides as he watched the other man struggle to move a body exhausted by work far harder than it was used to doing. Alfred wasn’t ready to see any effort to help him as anything other than an accusation of weakness yet. But soon, Caden promised himself, soon Alfred wouldn’t be able to look at him and see anything other than love—Caden would see to that.

His gaze roved over Alfred’s body, taking in every detail until, finally, they came to rest on the other wolf’s erection. The younger wolf’s cock was harder than ever, his shaft curving back towards his stomach. Unless Caden was very much mistaken, there would be a wet patch on the blanket beneath him when he rose, where his pre-cum had seeped into the fabric.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” Alfred suddenly said, sitting up with obvious effort.

“You prefer to top?” Caden guessed, pulling his gaze away from the other wolf’s cock with some difficulty. His mouth was watering just from the sight of it. It would be so easy to just lean over, wrap his lips around the tip and lap up another taste of him.

“Yes,” Alfred said. “And—”

“Good.”

Alfred frowned. “What?”

“I’m glad,” Caden said. “Everything always runs so much more smoothly when there’s one wolf who much prefers to top and another that much prefers to be topped.”

Alfred blinked at Caden as if he couldn’t actually believe that any man in the world was capable of calmly stating such a preference.

“Most of your previous lovers preferred to top too?” Caden asked as he placed a hand on Alfred’s chest and gently pushed him back until his head rested once more upon the pillow.

Alfred shrugged.

Caden looked up and met his eyes. “I can understand why.”

“Tops don’t always look like Gunnar, or like Marsdon and Bennett,” Alfred snapped.

“True—you’ve got a much better arse than any of them, for one thing,” Caden said, with a smile.

Alfred glared at him. “Yeah, well, just you remember that you’re not going to get a piece of it and we’ll get along fine.”

Caden murmured contentedly as he stroked his palms down the other wolf’s chest. As his hands slid over Alfred’s stomach, he shuffled backwards and nudged his lover’s thighs until he was able to kneel between the other man’s spread legs in the perfect position for stage two of his plan for the night.

Leaning forward, he pressed a light, almost chaste, kiss to the base of Alfred's shaft, then another slightly lower down over his ball sac.

"But, I thought..." Alfred protested. He lifted his head. His hand left the mattress and moved halfway to Caden's shoulder, but the other wolf seemed too relaxed, too sleepy, to even complete the gesture. He might have thought he was going to get to mate with him properly, but he didn't seem to be in any condition to push the issue right then.

"Let me make you feel better?" Caden asked once more.

The simple fact that he had the sense to know Alfred would react far more kindly towards a request than an order or a demand seemed to be enough to swing the other wolf's decision in his favour. Alfred nodded once and let his head fall back onto the deep, fluffy pillow.

Keeping his movements slow and almost as lethargic as Alfred's, Caden bowed his head over the other man's cock and gently took the shaft between his lips.

The taste of him immediately filled Caden's mouth and there was no way he could hide his pleasure at that. He murmured around Alfred's cock as his eyes dropped closed to better savour the taste. It was just as glorious as it had been out by the woodpile, salty and more-ish. He was already addicted.

For several long moments Caden forgot all about his carefully laid-out plans. There wasn't a single part of him capable of remembering the blow job was supposed to be praise for working hard and acting like a good wolf all day.

All Caden knew as he lowered his head and took more and more of Alfred's hard shaft into his mouth was that he was going down on the wolf he loved. He didn't need an excuse to want to do that.

Alfred let out a little growl as he rocked his hips up, trying to get more. Caden didn't even hesitate. It wasn't in him to deny his future mate anything in that moment. The desire to submit sang out inside him so loudly he couldn't even hear his pounding heartbeat past it. Pleasing his lover was the only thought inside his head.

Suckling tenderly around him, Caden finally managed to remember he was experienced enough to have developed a bloody good technique over the years. Dipping his head over the other man's crotch again, he took him all the way to the base and made good use of his throat as well as his mouth. Caressing the length with his tongue on each descent and lapping at the tip each time he pulled back, he began to put all his experience to good use.

A frustrated moan escaped from the back of Alfred's throat as Caden pushed him to the edge and held him there, but the younger wolf didn't say anything. He didn't try to reach out and force Caden into hurrying up, either.

Alfred merely lay back and accepted what Caden was offering as if he instinctively understood that when someone gave another wolf permission to please him, he gave up a certain amount of control over what would happen next.

Caden glanced up at his lover through his lashes. Alfred was relaxed back in perfect comfort, the way any dominant wolf might once he'd realised that the man who

loved him would never be happier than when he was serving and servicing his mate.

A flurry of success rushed through Caden. Somehow, most of it decided his cock was a suitable final destination. His self-control wasn't quite sufficient to stop his hips rocking forward as he instinctively sought for something to hump against. There was nothing within reach. Caden's frustration doubled over and over again, but he was helpless to relieve it.

Of course, he could have wrapped his hand around his cock, but the idea of doing that without his lover's permission sent a shiver of uncertainty down his spine. He sucked harder around the other wolf's cock in response.

Alfred's hands suddenly clenched in the blankets on either side of his body. That was Caden's only warning before, with a jerky little thrust of the hips, Alfred spilled into his mouth.

Swallowing rapidly, Caden took everything the other wolf had to give him, unwilling to risk missing a single drop.

Barely a second later, Alfred reached for his shoulder. Caden tensed, sure that there would be a vivid bruise on that patch of skin the next day, but against all his expectations, the grip the other man took on him was gentle. It felt more like a request to stay there than an order to do so.

Caden knew it was stupid to think Alfred really could have learnt so much in so short a time, but as he moved to rest his forehead against his lover's hip bone, the tip of Alfred's cock still nestled between his lips, it was almost

impossible for him to believe it wasn't true.

Alfred was learning. All the potential Caden saw in him really was that close to the surface. The man he loved was soon going to be the wolf Caden knew he could be with just a little bit of encouragement.

Perhaps it wouldn't actually take as long as Caden feared it might to undo the damage the pack had done to him. Perhaps they could think about—

Alfred's hand slid over Caden's neck. Fingers twined in his hair and tugged him up the other wolf's body. Going with it, Caden let Alfred's cock slip from between his lips as his lover guided him up the bed and brought their lips together for the first time.

The kiss was so sweet, so sleepy, it was almost impossible for Caden to remember that Alfred was actually licking the taste of his own cum out of his mouth as one tender little kiss drifted on into another, then another.

Tilting his head to the side, Caden wasn't capable of doing anything other than offering up his lips for the other man to do with as he pleased. He'd done what he'd set out to do, and it was all going so well and, and he'd been watching Alfred from much too far away for so long, and...

Fabric brushed against Caden's back. He jerked in surprise. He tried to look over his shoulder, but that was impossible, because suddenly his shoulders and his back were both flat against the mattress and somehow, while he'd been paying far more attention to the kiss than his surroundings, their positions had reversed and Alfred was looming over him while Caden lay pinned to the bed.

Reaching up, he put his hands against Alfred's shoulders, but he didn't have the strength of will to actually push him away. His fingers merely stroked over the slight sheen the massage oil had left on the other wolf's skin, caressing rather than truly resisting.

Candle light flickered across Alfred's face as he stared down at Caden, lending a warm glow to the other man's expression, making him look far more affectionate and pleased with the world than Caden had ever known him to be before.

"We should slow down," Caden managed to whisper.

Candlelight be damned, a frown instantly flashed across Alfred's forehead. Tension rushed back into his body. "Who died and made you king of the bed?" he demanded, a touch of a growl in his voice.

Caden managed to push a little at the other gamma's shoulders as he sought mental space. Alfred's hand quickly wrapped around his wrist and pinned it to the mattress.

Too quick! Even as some annoyingly sensible part of Caden screamed that fact at him, the rest of him was more than happy to simply sigh in complete contentment.

That was exactly how things should be between them. It was what they both wanted. It was what both their natures needed to find in their mate. And...and it was still too soon for either of them to have what they wanted.

It almost tore something deep inside Caden's soul, but somehow he forced himself to shake his head. "We need to slow down," he repeated.

All his years of flirtation served him well. His tone of

voice was exactly what he wanted it to be. None of his inner anguish crept through.

“You’re saying you’ve never...” Alfred hesitated. As he pulled back, his hand left Caden’s wrist.

Caden blinked at him, trying to work out what the other wolf was talking about.

“I thought you’d have had dozens of guys,” Alfred said, with a somewhat suspicious frown.

Caden sat up as he realised what Alfred thought. “I have. That’s not why I want to go slow.” Looking up through his lashes, he met the other man’s gaze and held it. “But they weren’t important. You are.”

Alfred looked away. “There’s no need to make silly excuses. If you don’t want—”

“I want,” Caden cut in. He wanted it so badly he could barely take a deep breath, but his usual flirtations obviously weren’t going to be enough to convince the other wolf of that. Not knowing what else to do, he grabbed Alfred’s hand and clumsily wrapped the other man’s fingers around his erection.

Alfred’s anger faltered and gradually faded away, until only confusion was left.

“I want everything you do,” Caden promised. “But, I don’t want us to get ahead of ourselves. You, this, *us*—it’s too important to screw up by rushing into things.”

Alfred held his gaze for several long seconds. It took every scrap of strength Caden had to keep his eyes up and locked with Alfred’s rather than lowering them in submission.

Very slowly, Alfred began to move his hand, stroking Caden's cock with a slow, purposeful rhythm. Caden gasped. His eyes fell closed. "I..." His throat went dry. He was too close. He couldn't get another word out. Caden covered Alfred's hand with his own, in a request for him to stop.

"If you're going to try to tell me that that you really believe it's too soon for me to even jack you off, I'm going to call you a liar."

Caden whimpered. For the first time he could remember, there was a touch of real confidence rather than mere bravado in Alfred's voice. He deserved a reward for that. Caden was half tempted to believe that he deserved a reward too. Hell, he was pretty willing to believe anything in the world if it kept Alfred's hand moving around his shaft.

"Your hand must be sore after—"

"I'll be the judge of what I do with my own hands," Alfred cut in.

Helpless to do anything else, Caden gave in and nodded his willingness to alter his carefully laid-out plans.

"No. Not until you move your hand out of the way."

Caden blinked open his eyes. He looked down at where his hand still covered Alfred's. It would be a stupid thing to do. If he gave over too much control now, it would be so much harder for him to take back the reins when he needed to, and he knew he would need to at some point.

But, in that moment, it didn't really matter how much of a fool it made him, his hand fell to the blanket at his side and there was no way in hell he could stop it.

Alfred grinned as he seemed to sense that he really was the king of the bed right then. If there was any hierarchy on the mattress, it was all going one way. He began to move his hand once more, very slowly, rubbing his thumb against the head of Caden's cock, spreading the pre-cum over the sensitive tip.

Caden moaned. His hips thrust up off the bed.

He was a tease himself. He knew that. He was pretty willing to consider it one of his major life skills, but suddenly, Caden realised he had a competitor for the title of biggest tease in the bedroom, too.

The light in Alfred's eyes told him everything he needed to know. The other wolf had him in the palm of his hand, figuratively as well as literally, and he wasn't going to give that up until he was bloody well ready.

"Please?" Caden whispered, with his best-ever puppy-dog eyes.

Alfred chuckled. The slow, infuriating rhythm didn't change one bit. Caden bit down on his bottom lip. Obviously Marsdon had been right when he'd said that Alfred could be a sadistic little bastard when a man caught him in the wrong mood—or in the *right* mood. Caden's jury was still out on that.

Within minutes, teasing had turned to torment, as more and more bliss was forced into Caden's body and he was refused any form of release. Alfred's only response was to hum contentedly under his breath while he watched Caden squirm against the sheets. Bound more firmly by his own long-standing desire to submit to the other wolf than he

could ever be by any leather or metal, Caden was helpless to do anything but take it.

Pleasure built up inside him like an increasingly perilous tower. There was no way it could stand forever, no matter how hard he tried to strengthen it. Even as Caden realised that, a gust of breeze caught at the fragile ramparts and the whole thing came crashing down to earth. Pure ecstasy exploded inside Caden as it fell. Every cell in his body smashed into a million pieces, then somehow snapped back together.

And through it all, Alfred's hand never stopped moving. Caden's fingers fisted into the blankets. His body arched off the bed, thrusting uncontrollably into his lover's stationary grip. Then, as rapidly as it had picked him up and run with him, the bliss passed. Caden collapsed onto the mattress. Very slowly, he blinked open his eyes.

Alfred was leaning on one elbow, staring down at him, his eyes full of fascination. He stroked his palm over Caden's cock once more, pulling a whimper from him. Alfred must have known it was too soon for his touch to be anything other than painful, but he didn't stop and Caden couldn't scrape up the will to ask him to.

A dozen or more strokes later, Alfred finally took his hand away of his own volition and Caden managed to take his first full breath since he had come. Relaxing back against the pillow, he had to force his eyes to stay open. Afterglow always made him sleepy, but he couldn't allow that to make any difference right then.

He had to stay awake, stay in control...

Caden glanced at the other wolf. Alfred had rearranged himself with his head resting on his own pillow. The younger wolf wasn't ready to take over control of them both yet, Caden knew that. Alfred still needed time to heal. He still had to find a better place in the pack, and Caden had no choice but to remain his equal while he did that.

Tomorrow, Caden promised himself. Tomorrow, he'd get everything back on track and put his plan back on schedule and everything would be fine.

For now, just while Alfred was watching over him, he'd close his eyes, just for a few moments...

Chapter Three

“What the hell happened?”

Alfred tensed as he heard the alpha's angry voice fill the air. He froze in his task, knowing all hell was about to rain down around him, knowing he had displeased the leader of his pack. Fight or flight instincts bounced around inside him fast enough to make him dizzy, but neither seemed able to win out. All he did was freeze in place like a bloody rabbit caught in the headlights.

“Damn thing flooded,” Steffan called out from further down the field, where he was frantically working to stop more of the water rushing into the half-formed trench.

His words freed Alfred to snap back to the task at hand. Keeping his head down, he worked just as hard as all the other wolves, ignoring the ache in his joints and the protests from his muscles as he pushed himself to keep going long past the point of exhaustion, in the vain hope of preventing any more damage being done.

He didn't even have time to worry about what would happen when the frenetic activity levels subsided and Marsdon had a chance to ask all those questions that Alfred was dreading having to answer. Then, without any warning, the last of the temporary repairs were put in place and the moment was already on top of him.

“Who was supposed to be keeping a watch on the

dam?” Marsdon demanded the moment he tossed down his shovel. As he glared around the group of wolves before him, the alpha tried to push his hair back from his face. He used the back of his wrist, but mud was still smeared across his forehead in the process.

Alfred looked around the group. There was barely a patch on any of them that wasn't coated in the stuff. No one said anything.

The only sound Alfred heard was the frantic hammering of his own heart. There was a big rock half-covered in mud a yard or two to his left. Alfred moved his gaze to it and kept it firmly fixed there, doing his damndest to look as inconspicuous as possible.

A minute passed. A low growl escaped from the back of Marsdon's throat. “Alfred?”

“Why assume it was me?” Alfred snapped, tearing his eyes away from the rock and glaring back at his alpha with all the venom he could muster.

“Because if it was anyone else, they'd have had the balls to own up and take responsibility by now!” Marsdon bit out as he turned to face him. “Get back to the house.”

Alfred shook his head as guilt stabbed him in the gut and twisted the knife. His eyes ran over the mess all around him and, for the first time in so many years, he found himself looking for a way he could make things right rather than for a way to get out of being ordered to do that. “No, I can—”

The alpha didn't even wait to hear his offer. “Back to the house. Now!”

Marsdon didn't add that he didn't want to set eyes on Alfred for the rest of the day. He didn't have to. Alfred knew all that, and more, just from the tone of the older man's voice. All the others had to know it too.

He looked at the other gammas. They all stood in a ragged line with him, facing their alpha, leaning on their shovels as they tried to regain their breath. Not one of them was willing to meet his eyes. Their complete attention remained on Marsdon.

There was no help to be found. Maybe Alfred had never given them reason to want to help him, but as they all seemed to turn their backs on him with perfect synchronicity, he'd never felt more alone in his life.

He took a step back, more from the feeling of being without a pack than anything else. Finally, one of the gammas moved. Steffan's head began to turn towards him.

No! He couldn't let the big oaf see any hint of fear in his eyes, any suspicion of weakness in his stance. Far better to be considered a thoughtless bastard than a coward. Spinning away from them all, Alfred cast his shovel aside as he turned tail and ran.

He raced back towards the house, mud clinging to every inch of him. There was only so far he could run before his feet slowed to little more than a stiff-limbed shuffle.

He trudged on, but the cold and the damp seemed to seep into his body even further with every step. He wrapped his arms around his torso, although it did little to keep out a chill that seemed to come from inside him as much as from outside.

“What happened?”

Alfred slowly lifted his gaze from the ground. Francis was rushing towards him, his eyes open wide with worry.

“The area we dammed up before we started working on the river diversion collapsed,” Alfred informed him, knowing he wouldn’t get a moment’s peace from the stupid little fool until he answered all his damn questions.

“Is anyone hurt?” the other wolf asked, the colour already draining from his face.

“Steffan’s fine,” Alfred snapped, knowing that was the question the other wolf really wanted to ask. Francis just wasn’t honest enough to admit he cared more for his mate than for any other member of the pack.

Storming into the house and slamming the door behind him, Alfred couldn’t help but think that if he was half as good as Francis was at telling all those appropriate little lies, the rest of the pack might like him just as much as they liked Francis.

Stripping off his mud-soaked clothes, Alfred tossed them in the vague direction of the already-overflowing laundry hamper in the corner of his bedroom and scrambled into the shower.

Hot water poured down over him. He scrubbed at his skin, leaving scratches and scrapes in his wake as he frantically tried to wash away both the mud and his mistakes at the same time. Soaping his hands, he lathered his skin, but the bubbles didn’t make him feel the least bit cleaner or any less like the pack’s resident screw-up.

He’d only looked away for one stupid little minute!

One bloody minute when his thoughts of Caden had got the better of his focus on that stupid dam, and now...

Alfred shook his head, sending muddy water droplets splashing off his hair and running down the sides of the shower cubicle.

And now, reality was back. Forget about being Alfred the potential mate, Alfred the wolf that Caden might actually think was worth his interest. He was Alfred the screw-up, Alfred who couldn't be trusted to do a single damn thing right in his entire life.

Dropping his head forward, he let his temple rest against the cold tiles. One tiny little lapse of concentration and everything was back to normal. If only he hadn't been stupid enough to ever hope things could be different.

Alfred turned off the water and rubbed half-heartedly at his skin with a rough towel. Somehow, he gathered the energy to retrace his steps into his bedroom and pull on a fresh set of clothes, but his limbs felt like lead. Every movement took more effort than anything could ever be worth.

He was still sitting on the edge of his bed staring at nothing when he heard the rest of the pack arrive back at the house.

Taking advantage of those moments when they would no doubt be tucked away in their own rooms and cleaning themselves up, Alfred hauled himself to his feet. Within seconds, he'd sneaked unseen out of his bedroom, down the stairs and out of the house.

If Marsdon didn't want to set eyes on him, fine. If the

other wolves in the pack didn't want to treat him like he was one of them, then that was bloody well fine too. Alfred didn't need any of them. He scurried around the side of the building and quickly hid himself away in his favourite secluded little spot. No one was likely to come looking for him there. He sat down heavily on the overgrown grass and let out a sigh of relief.

The wall had been warmed by the sun. He was out of the fresh spring wind. And, most importantly, he was out of range of the rest of the pack's annoyance. Right then, Alfred was pretty sure that was the most he could hope for from life. Closing his eyes, he rested his elbows on his knees and cradled his head in his hands.

It wasn't that he cared what any of them thought of him, Alfred reminded himself. He didn't, not even a little bit. They could all go to hell and—

“Why?”

Alfred jerked his head up, a growl building in his throat. This was his one safe refuge, and—

There was no one there. Frowning, Alfred looked all around him again. Leaning forward, he risked a peek around the edge of the building, too. Nobody. Finally he looked up. He'd never noticed that the alpha's bedroom window was almost directly above his little hiding place before. Tucked away in the shadows at the base of the house, they wouldn't see him if they looked out, but he'd heard Bennett's voice, loud and clear.

“Why what?” And that was Marsdon—obviously still pissed off as hell.

“Why wasn’t he watching the water levels?” Bennett asked, patiently. “He must have known how important it was. If he took his eyes off it, then he must have had a good —”

“He stopped watching it because he doesn’t give a damn about anyone but himself,” Marsdon cut in.

Alfred leant back against the wall just below their window and wrapped his arms a little more tightly around his knees. Words washed over him. They weren’t anything he hadn’t heard before. They weren’t lies, either. And he *didn’t* care about any of them, he reminded himself. Why should he?

“What the hell are we going to do with him?” Marsdon finally asked, a few minutes later. The alpha’s anger seemed to have drained away somewhat, or perhaps he had just run out of things to call Alfred. Even though Alfred hadn’t heard Bennett leave, Marsdon seemed to be talking more to himself than to his mate.

A frown grew between Alfred’s eyebrows as he stared at the ground right in front of his feet. The sadness in the alpha’s voice cut so much deeper than his anger.

Suddenly, Alfred heard Marsdon give a harsh little laugh. “I know that I’d like to throttle the little sod. But, since I’m pretty sure you’re not going to agree to just stand back and let me do that, tell me, pup—what are we going to do with him?”

Pup, Alfred thought, as he tipped his head back and let it connect heavily with wall behind him. Because, somehow, Bennett could act in ways an alpha wasn’t

supposed to and yet still keep his place in the pack. Somehow everyone still saw him as an alpha, while Alfred was stuck being a—

“Alfred?”

Alfred looked up, half expecting to see one of the alphas leaning half-way out of the window and glaring down at him. No one. Alfred turned his head. Caden stood just a few feet away. He was downwind. There'd been no sound as he'd approached. Alfred had no way of knowing how long the other wolf had been there, spying on him, eavesdropping on a conversation he had no right to be privy to.

Caden held out a hand towards him, inviting him to stand up and close the gap between them. In no mood to play nicely, or approach him only to see another wolf turn away from him in disgust, Alfred stayed exactly where he was.

Eventually, Caden stepped forward, his hand still extended towards Alfred. “Are you okay?”

Alfred shrugged. His grip on his own hands turned white-knuckled as he pointedly ignored whatever trap Caden was trying to lay for him. “Why wouldn't I be? Same shit, different day, that's all.”

“Francis told me what happened out at the dam,” Caden admitted.

Alfred said nothing. Pointedly staring past him, he refused to even glance at Caden's face, let alone reach out and put his hand in his. When gentle fingertips stroked along his jaw line, Alfred ignored that, too.

A chaste little kiss pressed to his opposite cheek was far harder to dismiss as entirely unimportant. Caden sat down next to him. His arm slipped around Alfred's waist, determinedly wriggling its way between his spine and the rough stone wall until Alfred gave in and arched his back to make it easier for him.

The other gamma's head came to rest on Alfred's left shoulder as he curled in close to his side, and Caden let out a soft little sigh, as if he was finally exactly where he belonged. "I'm sorry you had such a bad day. I know you wouldn't let something like that happen on purpose."

The gently spoken words made it damn near impossible to ignore the other man's presence. Not quite sure what to do with the sudden display of affection, Alfred looped his arm around Caden's torso and clumsily welcomed him against his body, patting him vaguely on the shoulder with his right hand.

His left hand, without even bothering to check with his brain for permission, slid straight down to rest on Caden's backside. Damn, but he had a glorious arse. Alfred's fingers slid into the back pocket of Caden's jeans and palmed the firm, round muscle.

His cock immediately began to harden behind his fly. All at once, Alfred knew exactly what he needed to distract him from his latest screw-up. And, since Caden seemed to be offering it up to him on a platter, it would hardly be polite to say no!

Alfred glanced down between their bodies. His wasn't the only erection straining against a pair of tight blue jeans.

Moving his right hand into Caden's hair, he tugged at the pretty blond strands.

Caden tilted his head back and offered his lips up to be kissed without the slightest protest. With success pounding through his veins, Alfred dipped his head and brought their mouths together. The other wolf's lips were soft and sweet against his.

Alfred lapped against them, eager to get more of that taste. Caden parted his lips willingly enough and mewed his approval into the kiss as their tongues slid against each other in an intimate little dance.

Hands roving more and more frantically over the other wolf's body by the moment, he tugged at Caden's clothes, desperate to yank them out of the way and get at the skin beneath. Caden's hands slid between their bodies and pressed against Alfred's T-shirt, but he didn't seem to have a clue what he was doing. His touch was hindering rather than helping.

Alfred growled his frustration into the kiss, nipping at Caden's lips as he sought for a way to remind the other man exactly who was in charge.

Caden mumbled something against his mouth. He pushed harder at Alfred's chest. Quickly losing all patience with him, Alfred twisted their bodies around so Caden was pinned down against the sun-warmed grass right alongside the foot of the house.

That should have settled everything. In Alfred's mind it certainly made everything very simple, made the whole world seem very right. But Caden merely wriggled all the

more, as if trying to squirm away from him. That was a bloody stupid thing to do. There was no logical reason on Earth why anyone would want to put even the smallest amount of empty air between two bodies that felt so marvellous when pressed tightly together.

He caught hold of Caden's wrist and pinned it to the grass. That felt so good. He did exactly the same with his other hand, trapping the slightly smaller man with his entire body as he tried to deepen the kiss.

Pleasure built quickly inside Alfred, pushing away the accusing looks from the other wolves and Marsdon's harsh words. None of that mattered when he was there with Caden, and—

Suddenly the other wolf wrenched his head to one side, breaking the kiss. For the first time, Alfred noticed that Caden was struggling to pull his hands out of his grip.

That was wrong. "What the hell?" Every instinct in Alfred's soul suddenly went into reverse. Letting go of the other man's wrists, Alfred moved both his hands to Caden's face and stilled his head. Tightening his grip as Caden railed against it, Alfred made Caden look up at him, determined to meet his gaze and find out what the hell was going on, why his lover wasn't submitting to him the way they both knew he should.

"We can't," Caden whispered. He closed his eyes for a moment, but not before Alfred saw the touch of pain in them.

Newfound impulses screamed at him to find out what was wrong with his mate's world and fix it. "What are you

talking about? We can't what? Why?"

Caden cleared his throat. When he opened his eyes, he looked up at the sky as if fighting very hard to concentrate on what he needed to say. "We can't do this."

"Why not?" Alfred repeated, impatience creeping into his voice.

Caden took a deep breath. "Today, at the works by the river—"

Alfred frowned. "You said you..." He snatched his hand away from Caden's face and scrambled away from him until there were several feet of empty air between them. Anger rushed through him, searing hot and desperate to burst out through the most vicious words he could frame, but he barely had time to open his mouth before Caden was speaking again.

"I said I knew you wouldn't let that happen on purpose. I know you're better than that. I know that you're a good wolf, a strong wolf," Caden said, as he sat up. "But, until I can trust that *you* know that—we can't do this, not...not like this."

Alfred looked down at the way Caden had wrapped his own fingers around his wrist as he fought for the right words. Alfred had held him like that, and it had felt so right, so perfect, and... He closed his eyes as he turned his face away from the other wolf.

He could hide from the sight of him, but there was no way to hide from Caden's scent. It howled the other wolf's desire for him. Alfred was almost willing to swear he could smell his desire to submit hanging in the air around them.

But that wasn't the only thing. Confusion. Uncertainty. Regret. There were so many other emotions—things that had no place being in either of their minds when they mated for the first time.

“Every wolf is born belonging to a pack,” Caden suddenly said.

“Don't you think I know that—?” Alfred began.

“But he's also born belonging to himself,” Caden went on, as if he hadn't even heard the interruption. When Alfred turned his head, the other wolf met his eyes without hesitation. “And some wolves keep possession of themselves for their whole lives, and they are happy that way.”

Alfred didn't try to speak up again when Caden paused. His throat had closed up so tightly, Alfred could barely push air, let alone words through it. The idea of giving up ownership of himself made him want to leap up and tear the throat out of the whole world. But the idea of taking another wolf under his protection and making that wolf his...

Caden seemed to think for a long time before he finally went on, and Alfred had no choice but to wait. “There are other wolves that can't be happy that way. They have to give away part of themselves and they have to hand over control of themselves to another wolf. I'm not happy belonging to myself, Alfred. But I won't put myself in your hands until I can be sure that you know what a good wolf you are.”

The thought of Caden belonging to him that way, of

him not just being his mate but of being *his*...

Alfred tightened his hands into fists, pulling blades of grass up by the roots as he fought against the urge to reach out, pounce on Caden and hold him so tightly no one would ever be able to tear them apart. A wolf like Caden could have anyone, and...

"You mean until I can convince the pack that—" Alfred stopped short as Caden moved closer.

The other wolf didn't bother to rise to his feet. He simply crawled forward until he was kneeling right in front of Alfred, almost touching him.

"Will the pack realise you're a good wolf once you realise it?" Caden mused. "Yes, I think they will. But it's not their opinion of you I care about."

Alfred could only stare into the very serious blue eyes in response. Caden's eyes were full of so many emotions it was as impossible for Alfred to decipher them there as it had been in Caden's scent. He had no idea what the other wolf might see in his own gaze—all he knew was that he needed to make sure there was never any pain, never any sadness in Caden's eyes, ever again.

That was his job now. And if the only way he could convince Caden to allow him close enough to be able to do his job properly was to play nicely with the rest of the pack, then...

"That's really what you want?" he checked.

Caden nodded, holding his gaze. His eyes and his scent both screamed he was telling the truth.

"What do I need to do to convince you?" Alfred asked.

Whatever it was, he'd do it. In that moment, Alfred had no doubt about his ability to do that. Screwing this up wasn't an option.

Caden hesitated. He dropped his gaze back down to where he grasped his own wrist with his opposite hand.

Alfred shook his head at himself. Suddenly, it was obvious he shouldn't even be asking Caden questions like that. He should be the one making the decisions. Proving he could do what he was told wouldn't mean anything. He had to prove he could make the right decisions for them both, that he could be the one telling Caden the right things to do.

What would a good wolf, a good mate, do now...?

"Maybe," Caden began.

"No," Alfred cut in. "It's fine." He pulled himself up to his feet. "I know what I'm doing. I can sort it all out. You don't need to worry about it."

Caden blinked up at him as Alfred stood over him, but it wasn't the usual flirtatious flutter of lashes. Very slowly, the other gamma nodded, as if he was more than willing to simply accept that pronouncement.

Success rushed through Alfred. He half turned away. Then, he hesitated. Unable to leave Caden's side without doing *something*, and knowing full well he couldn't do what he really wanted, Alfred crouched down and pressed a brief, chaste kiss against Caden's temple.

"Everything will be fine," he whispered.

As he straightened up and turned away from his future mate, Alfred repeated those words inside his head.

Everything will be fine.

They'd sounded a lot more confident when they were spoken outside his head than inside it, but he couldn't let that matter right then. The only thing he could think about was what a good mate would do, what a wolf who knew he was a good wolf would do.

* * * *

"You always have had bloody awful taste in men, but I think even you outdid yourself this time."

Caden stopped relaxing back next to the stream running through the forest and sat up straight. Leaning forward, he peered past the foliage just in time to see his brother step out from behind the bushes.

There was a growl in Gunnar's voice. Maybe it was from his recent shift, maybe he was just randomly pissed off. Caden didn't give the matter too much thought. Reclining comfortably back against the old tree trunk once more, he simply concentrated on the way the last of the evening sun caressed his bare skin and the pure wonderfulness of the world.

All he had to do was stay away from the farmhouse a little longer, give Alfred a little bit more time and space to decide on his next move, and he'd be able to make his way home to his future mate's side, all sleepy and snuggly.

"Don't you have anything to say?" Gunnar asked as he walked past him, his naked skin splattered with mud from

his run.

“Alfred’s a good wolf,” Caden offered. It was almost impossible for him not to grin like a loon as he said it. Who could ever have guessed that he’d come on so quickly—that just the mildest hints would have him leaping up and *sprinting* in the right direction?

True, pushing him away had been the hardest thing Caden had done in his life, but—

“You mean he will be a good wolf when you’ve finished screwing him into submission?” Gunnar demanded. Crouching down at the river’s edge he dipped his hand into the water and scooped up a few mouthfuls with his palm.

Caden’s eyes narrowed as he glared at his brother’s back, but by the time Gunnar had turned back to him he had once more schooled his features into something passive and more suitable for dealing with the beta. “What makes you so sure he’s the one who’ll be submitting to me?”

Gunnar let out a harsh burst of laughter. “Even you’ve got more sense than to let him play the dominant with you. The man’s a fool. No, worse than that—he’s a sadistic little bastard towards anyone weaker than him whenever he thinks he can get away with it.”

“Strange, then,” Caden mused, “that I’ve never known him to take a cheap shot at Talbot.”

“He wouldn’t dare,” Gunnar growled, immediately rising to his full height to loom over anyone who would even mention such a possibility.

“Not even before Talbot came under your direct

protection?" Caden asked, not in the least bit daunted by the other wolf's blustering.

"What?" Gunnar demanded.

"I'm pretty sure Alfred had no idea you were even remotely interested in our omega until you two were formally mated," Caden said. "But I've still never heard him snap at Talbot the way he does at everyone else. Don't you think it strange that out of all the wolves in the pack, it's the one that everyone agrees he should outrank who's never had anything to worry about where Alfred is concerned?"

"I think he's strange in far more ways than that," Gunnar said.

As Caden stared mildly up at him, the beta's hackles slowly seemed to go down.

"Why him?" Gunnar finally asked, as he crouched and brought them closer to the same height.

"I could ask you the same thing," Caden said, idly running his fingers through the moss at his side. "Talbot's no more my type than Alfred's yours."

"Even mentioning their names in the same breath is a bloody insult," Gunnar snapped, as he threw himself onto the ground next to Caden and glared up at the sky as if the pretty little patch of blue and the warmth of the sunlight had both been created specifically to annoy him.

"Alfred's a far better wolf than any of our pack realises," Caden told the clearing, the riverbank and anything else within earshot. They were all more likely to take any notice of his words than Gunnar was.

Right on cue, Caden's brother huffed his disbelief.

“I see more than you ever will when you look at him,” Caden said, resting his head back against the tree and forcing his words to remain calm no matter how much he wanted to howl them loud enough for everyone he'd ever met to hear.

“And what would you see if you looked at the mess down by the river? It was a simple job, Caden.”

“Far too simple for a wolf with Alfred's potential,” Caden pointed out. “But as for what I see...” He thought about that for a while. “I just see what any wolf would be able to see if they cared enough to look. I see a faltering step on a young shifter's path towards becoming a good wolf.”

“A damn spinning top would take a more direct route,” Gunnar muttered. With a half sigh, he pushed himself off the ground. He'd barely reached his full height when he started to morph back into his lupine form.

Caden held his brother's eyes as the more overtly wolfen side of the other man dropped onto all fours before him.

Gunnar turned away, obviously bored with the topic and intending to resume his run now he'd apparently confirmed to his own satisfaction his little brother wasn't going to do as he was told without one hell of a fight.

Caden waited until his older brother was at the tree line before he called out to him. “Gun?”

The wolf stopped and looked back towards him.

“You know the interesting thing about spinning tops?”

The wolf's gaze remained steady.

“They never set themselves spinning out of control. It's

other people who do that. The thing itself doesn't actually have any choice in the matter, does it?"

Caden took Gunnar's pissed-off growl as a signal that his words had been heard, even if he was sure their actual meaning had gone straight over Gunnar's head.

Pulling his knees up in front of him, Caden drew a line on the bare skin along one of his thighs. His fingertip went around and around in a complex little pattern. His eyes followed its every movement. Just like a spinning top, there was no real way for him to work out in advance where the pattern would go next, all he could do was watch carefully and pray.

Finally, Caden caught hold of the fingertip with his other hand and held it still, unable to watch its progress for another second. His eyes dropped closed. His grip on his own finger gradually turned painful. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he closed them tighter.

Perhaps it wasn't entirely impossible to give the top a little push in the right direction—if a wolf were careful and subtle and...

Caden opened his eyes. He'd been away from Alfred's side for quite long enough. Rising gracefully to his feet, he quickly completed his own shift and set off in the opposite direction to his brother.

Within minutes the farmhouse was within sight. He let his paws carry him straight through the kitchen door without bothering to turn back into his human form. Voices floated out from the main hall as he passed the kitchen table. Tilting his head slightly to one side as he forced his lupine

senses to pay attention and make sense of the human words, he made his way forward.

“...Alfred...”

That one name came through to him loud and clear. He shifted in the doorway, steadying himself on the frame as he swayed. “Pardon?”

Marsdon and Bennett both turned to look at him. “What?”

Caden pushed his hair back off of his face as he cleared his throat. “You were talking about Alfred,” he said, with a respectful little dip of the eyes.

“He’s gone. Disappeared without telling anyone where the hell he’s going,” Marsdon said, anger clinging to each syllable.

A shiver ran down Caden’s spine. He practically felt the blood drain from his face, too.

“We hoped he’d joined you on your run and forgotten to tell anyone. Hell knows what kind of mischief he’s got himself into now,” the alpha went on.

Caden turned away from them both without a word. He was back on four paws by the time he reached the door leading to the courtyard. His claws scrabbled against the cobblestones as he tried to rush across them faster than lupine legs could carry him. He vaguely heard someone call out to him, but he couldn’t stop.

The yells changed to barks and growls. A moment later, Caden felt the unmistakable sensation of running as part of a pack. Marsdon and Bennett were larger wolves than him, with longer legs. They easily caught up with him.

Caden saw them out of the corners of his eyes as they flanked him, running at either side of him as he rushed towards the river works.

That's where Alfred would be, Caden had no doubt about that. The only thing he was less sure about was what sort of condition the other man would be in when they found him. A wolf would have to be a fool to try to tackle that sort of work on his own. If he was less than up to his neck in river mud or ice cold water it would be a bloody miracle.

Caden knew he could make sure Alfred became a good wolf. He could make sure the man he loved found his rightful place in the pack, too. But he couldn't bring a wolf back from the dead.

There were some things even pretty blond hair or a charming smile couldn't achieve.

Chapter Four

Caden's paws slipped and slithered beneath him. He clawed at the mud, but there was no way he could gain any sort of purchase. On either side of him, he saw brief flashes of fur and dirt as the alphas skidded to undignified stops alongside him.

His own momentum pushed him on farther, until he finally stopped just short of tumbling into the deep trench. Perched right on the edge of the scar being cut across the field, Caden found himself completely unable to move. All he could do was stare.

Alfred!

The younger wolf was plastered in mud from tip to toe, but that barely registered in Caden's mind. He'd never seen anything more glorious in his life. The man he loved was unharmed. That was all that mattered.

Panting for breath, he ran his eyes over Alfred's form. One or two parts of him decided they were willing to believe there were other things that always mattered, beside the fact he was healthy and well, hard at work repairing the damage his lapse had caused earlier in the day. For one, Alfred's sodden clothes were clinging to his skin in a very interesting way.

As Caden dragged his attention back to the other gamma's face, Alfred's eyes went from him to each of the

alphas and back again, obviously trying to work out what the hell was going on.

While Caden remained trapped in his lupine form, unable to pull himself together enough to complete a shift, the alphas deftly transformed into their human shapes on either side of him.

“So this is where you disappeared to,” Marsdon said, pushing muddy blond hair out of his eyes.

“You were right,” Alfred said, his gaze now fixed firmly on the shovel in his hands. “It was my fault it overflowed. I should have been paying more attention. So it’s only right that I should be the one who fixes the damage.”

“In the middle of the night?” Marsdon demanded. “Without telling any of your pack where you were going?”

As Caden watched through lupine eyes, Alfred opened his mouth to respond—and no doubt to point out that it was far from the middle of the night, it was barely dusk. Or perhaps to inform the other man it wasn’t exactly uncommon for wolves to leave the house without their alphas’ permission. At the last second, Alfred turned his attention back to Caden.

Their eyes met. Caden held his breath. Alfred lowered his gaze for a second. He seemed to think very carefully before he finally spoke up.

“I’m sorry,” he said, without even the slightest hint of his usual recalcitrant attitude in his voice. “I should have thought about that before I came out here. I didn’t intend to worry anyone. Next time I’ll...” He hesitated for a moment as if he really had to think about what he should have done

differently. "Tell someone where I'm going?" he hazarded.

To his left, Caden was vaguely aware of Marsdon opening and closing his mouth a few times. The entirely appropriate response was obviously the last thing he expected to hear falling from his cousin's lips.

Bennett quickly stepped forward on Caden's right, to fill in for his baffled mate. "That would be a very good idea. This kind of work can be dangerous to do on your own. It's always best to have another wolf working alongside you, just in case."

Alfred slowly nodded his understanding, his eyes politely lowered in due respect for a more senior-ranking wolf. "I won't make the same mistake again."

Still sitting in the mud on the edge of the bank, Caden barely held back a whimper as he fought against the desire to leap forward, pounce on Alfred and lick him all over like an excitable little puppy. His tail wagged back and forth in the mud as his enthusiasm got the better of him.

Bennett smiled his approval as he stepped forward again. He ruffled Alfred's hair as he moved past him to inspect his work. "You've done a lot already."

Alfred said nothing. He didn't even seem to know how to react to that sort of praise. Caden whimpered very quietly. No one seemed to hear him.

"Did you intend to do more tonight, or are you ready to come home?" Bennett asked.

"I want—" Alfred cut himself short. He didn't look towards Caden right then, but Caden could almost feel the other wolf's consideration wrapping around him while he

debated his next move—while he tried to figure out what a good wolf would say in that situation.

“With your permission, I’d prefer to finish this section this evening?” Alfred eventually suggested.

Bennett nodded his approval. “I’ll send someone out to work on it with you.”

Alfred opened his mouth as if to protest, but Bennett held up a hand.

“That’s not up for debate,” he said, with more gentleness in his voice than dominance. “I wouldn’t be acting like a good alpha if I left any wolf from my pack out here on his own. Someone will come out and help you. Until they get here, I want you to take a break.”

Caden barked excitedly. All three shifters turned to face him. Mentally reciting all the curses he could think of, Caden clumsily morphed back into his human shape. Scrambling backwards, he just about stopped himself from falling into the ditch.

Clearing his throat, he tried to speak again. “I’ll stay and help!” There was still more than a hint of excited yap in his voice, but at least he had made himself understood.

Bennett seemed to think about that suggestion carefully, but when Caden looked towards Marsdon, the other alpha’s brow was creased into a deep frown. He obviously wasn’t thinking about anything of the kind. After the way Alfred had welcomed Bennett to the pack, he was probably still far more interested in trying to work out what mischief Alfred was plotting.

Caden bit his tongue hard enough to draw blood. The

bitter metallic taste filled his mouth, but it did little to temper his desire to howl that if he just gave Alfred a chance, Marsdon might see just how wrong he was about the gamma.

“Fine,” Marsdon finally sighed, after some silent message passed between him and his mate. “Try to keep your minds on the work and not get each other killed. If you’re not back within the next two hours, we’ll send someone to find you.”

Alfred nodded. “Thank you.”

Marsdon gave them both one more suspicious look before turning away. Caden was only vaguely aware of the alphas leaving them alone alongside the river works. He couldn’t take his eyes off Alfred for long enough to actually watch them leave.

Alfred turned away first. His gaze went back to the shovel in his hands. That finally freed Caden to snap out of his day-dream. Stepping forward, he clumsily reached for one of the other shovels with hands that were still half sure they were paws.

“No.”

Caden’s fingers had barely brushed against the handle before the word made him snatch them back and hide them guiltily behind him.

“Don’t,” Alfred said, just a fraction more gently. “If our alphas want someone else to stay here in case I fall in the damn river, I’ll accept that. But I don’t want your help. I broke it, and I’ll fix it.”

Caden let his hand fall back to his side. Stepping

forward, he closed the gap between them until he stood directly in front of Alfred.

“You’re a good wolf,” he said softly, and pressed a little kiss against his somewhat muddy cheek.

Alfred coughed and cleared his throat. Caden was pretty sure that, beneath all that mud, the other wolf was blushing very prettily.

“You can sit over there until I’m finished,” Alfred informed him, apparently not willing to give in to the temptation of an enjoyable distraction right then.

The confidence and dominance that flooded into his voice in response to another wolf’s gentle praise made Caden smile as he quickly obeyed his lover’s command. Moving back to the same patch of muddy ground where he’d first sat staring at Alfred, completely unharmed and hard at work, Caden rested his elbows on his drawn up knees and resumed his observations.

Alfred had obviously walked out there in his human form. He was still wearing his jeans and his T-shirt, although all they seemed to be doing right then was soaking up more and more mud and water and making it ever harder for him to complete the task he’d assigned for himself.

His wet jeans had moulded themselves to his arse perfectly, and it didn’t matter how much Caden preferred to bottom, every single time Alfred bent over, there was nothing he wanted more than to pounce on his future mate. If Alfred would quickly roll them over and reverse their positions, and if Caden himself would be the one who’d end up pinned against the muddy floor while the other wolf

pounded into him with increasingly harsh and frantic thrusts, then that would be just so much the better.

Caden licked his lips at the very possibility. It was all he could do not to slip his hand down and wrap his fingers around his erection. It would feel so wonderful, with his hand all slicked with river mud, and he needed to come so badly he could barely hold back a howl of frustration. But he didn't have permission.

Looking down his body, at both the streaks of mud and at his rising shaft, Caden didn't move a hand to deal with either. Right there, right then, he belonged to Alfred—it felt safe and right that he should belong to Alfred. And, while that was the case, it wasn't his place to lay a hand on his own body, for any reason.

His more dominant mate would decide what was to be done with him, all Caden would have to do was obey and enjoy. And until Alfred was ready to turn his attention to him, all Caden could do was squirm in the mud.

His breaths sped up as he realised he might actually be able to hand over just a little bit more control to the other wolf in good conscience. A strange little mew of anticipation escaped from the back of his throat.

Alfred immediately turned to face him. "What's wrong?"

Caden swallowed rapidly. "I'm fine."

Alfred frowned. "Are you cold?"

Caden shook his head. He was pretty sure if he got any hotter his blood would start to bubble and boil inside him. If anything, he was so feverish with desire he was in

danger of drying out the mud he sat in, but he couldn't say that.

Sex was his one bargaining chip—and it would stay that way until it was completely safe for him to give it up forever. It was far too soon for him to admit he was just as desperate to get screwed as Alfred was to screw him. Once they were mates, then maybe the truth could come out, but until then...

Caden looked down his body once more. His gaze settled on his erection. Of course, it was just possible that the other man would notice how turned on he was without either of them saying a word.

"I like watching you work," Caden offered.

Alfred gave him a strange look.

Dipping his gaze, Caden smiled up at the other wolf through his lashes in practiced flirtation. "It makes you look more dominant than ever..."

Alfred turned away from him, a slight frown marring his brow as he returned his attention to his task. It was only a few minutes before he stopped again and glanced at Caden once more.

"This section is finished. I'll leave the rest until tomorrow when there's better light. I don't want you sitting out in the cold any longer than you have to." He walked across and set his shovel neatly with the others leaning against an old tree stump.

"There are other ways you could warm me up, if you wanted to," Caden offered, doing his best to keep a complete over-abundance of enthusiasm out of his voice.

Alfred was standing almost directly over him. From that angle he was huge and powerful and completely faultless in the more submissive wolf's eyes.

"Such as?" Alfred asked.

"I've heard that combining body heat can be a lot of fun," Caden suggested.

"Oh?"

Caden nodded coyly, as if it didn't really make that much difference to him if Alfred took him up on his invitation or not.

Crouching next to him, Alfred pushed Caden's hair back from his face. His hands were coated with mud. Caden felt dirt smear across his temple. Alfred stilled for a moment, as if something so insignificant could actually be considered a problem, but Caden quickly leaned in to his touch, desperate to make it clear he didn't mind getting a little bit messy in both a very good and potentially very erotic cause.

A touch to his other wrist caught Caden's attention. Glancing down, he saw Alfred's fingers trace a line over his skin, leaving a ring of mud around the joint. Lifting his hand, Caden offered his entire arm to Alfred and nodded his acceptance.

The other wolf quickly took hold of him. His other hand immediately copied the action around Caden's other wrist. Success radiated from Alfred's eyes in the darkness as he leant forward and brought their lips together.

Their balance was precarious to start with. The moment Alfred dipped his head to deepen the kiss, they

toppled, their bodies skidding in the wet mud. Caden gasped as his back hit the ground, Alfred landing on top of him and pressing him down into the soft earth.

Clothes made rough and cold with mud rasped against Caden's body, but that didn't matter. All that mattered was the friction they provided against his cock. Moaning his complete approval into the kiss, Caden parted his lips and hurriedly gave the other man whatever access he wanted.

Caden tried to reach out and pull the other man down harder against his body, but Alfred wouldn't allow it. His hands tightened around Caden's wrists, demanding they stay exactly where he wanted them to be.

Temporarily freed from any responsibility to pretend that was anything other than exactly what he wanted, Caden bucked his hips and rubbed their bodies together. Alfred's erection pressed back against him through the other wolf's clothes, but it wasn't enough. He wanted skin against skin.

Alfred growled as he thrust against him. The kiss turned fierce. The younger wolf nipped at Caden's lips and took total possession of his mouth. Shoes kicked against his bare feet as they both sought for any kind of leverage they could find in their slippery surroundings.

"Please?" Caden gasped the plea into the kiss.

Alfred only growled in response.

There was no way he could really be denying him anything in that moment. Even Caden himself didn't know what he was actually begging the other man for. Even so, the plea merely made the other wolf hold him tighter and

made his movements rougher and more perfect. There was no flirting, no prettiness, just raw sex, harsh need and dominance. Caden revelled in it.

Alfred's denim-clad leg slid between Caden's as he broke the kiss. Tossing back his head, Alfred howled his pleasure as he came inside his jeans. The slight change in angle was all Caden needed to fall into his own personal spiral of bliss. He was vaguely aware of his cum spilling between them and mixing with the mud, but the sensation was damn near drowned out by the way Alfred filled his senses and his world.

The other wolf's scent, his touch, the sight and the sound of him, all blended together and somehow managed to make Caden's pleasure deeper than anything he had ever known. Any desire he had to retain control and keep himself safe died in that moment.

As they fell still, Alfred remained on top of him, pinning him to the ground with his weight as well as his strength as they both fought for breath. Caden made no complaint.

Eventually, as his body recovered, Caden was able to lift his head a fraction. He lapped gently at Alfred's neck—the only part of his lover he was able to reach. The fact that the little patch of skin was just as muddy as the rest of him wasn't important. He could still taste the wolf beneath it all.

Alfred murmured his approval before slowly dragging himself upright. Reaching down, he helped Caden up, too. Of all the stupid things in the world, Caden found himself feeling silly and shy in front of the other wolf.

There was no need for that. It wasn't as if the other

man could really know how little control Caden had over himself—how much control he'd given away to Alfred in that brief encounter.

Swallowing rapidly, Caden pushed a hand through his hair. His fingers got stuck halfway. The mud was drying and matting the blond strands together. Caden winced and wrinkled his nose as he imagined how he must have looked right then. It was a wonder Alfred had even bothered with him while he was in that state.

“You're beautiful.”

Caden met Alfred's eyes for a moment. It was hardly the first compliment he'd ever received, but as they stood there on the half-formed river bank, it hit Caden harder than any flowery-worded statement ever had. A blush made its way to his cheeks, although he doubted it was visible under all the dirt.

“You're not so bad yourself,” he managed to whisper in return.

Alfred put his arm around his shoulders in a protective little gesture as he turned them towards the house without ever asking his lover's opinion on the idea. Caden merely smiled and accepted that as the other man's right that night.

* * * *

“Did you see Alfred and Caden when they got home last night?”

Alfred stopped at the top of the stairs. The door leading into the alphas' bedroom was open just the tiniest crack. No doubt both men had been 'resting' there, the way they often did in the middle of quiet days. Or at least days that were quiet until Marsdon and Bennett's howls of pleasure filled the air. They'd probably been in far too much of a rush to make sure the door was sealed behind them.

Marsdon laughed, a deep relaxed sound that indicated all was well in his world. "Yeah, I saw. They looked like they'd crawled out of the bottom of the river, there was that much mud on them!"

"And?" Bennett prompted.

"And who'd have thought that pretty little Caden could succeed where our big strong beta failed?" Marsdon asked, his tone still rich with humour and satisfaction.

Alfred frowned as he crept closer, careful that his shadow shouldn't be seen by any wolf on the other side of the door.

"They do seem to be well suited," Bennett said, his voice soft and sleepy—like a wolf who had *really* enjoyed his rest.

"More to the point, Caden seems to have brought the little brat to heel better than I ever hoped for."

"Marsdon..." There was just a touch of chiding in Bennett's tone.

"Well, someone has to. We couldn't have let him run riot forever, pup. We can't bring a mating pair into the pack until everything is stable, and we can't put that off much longer, can we? Little baby wolves have to come from

somewhere, you know.”

“I know, sir. I just...”

“You just want every wolf in your pack to be happy and content no matter what it takes?” Marsdon finished for him.

“Like you don’t,” Bennett replied.

Alfred could practically hear the smile in the other wolf’s voice, but he couldn’t bring a smile to his own lips in response. His frown deepened instead. He stared at the door until the sound of rustling clothing warned him that he’d be risking certain discovery if he lingered there any longer.

He’d already heard enough anyway. Turning away, Alfred quickly strode down the stairs, but the sound of his footsteps completely failed to drown out the echoes of the alphas’ words.

It almost sounded like it was all their idea—like they had been as much behind Caden approaching him as they had been instrumental in bringing Gunnar and Caden to the pack in the first place.

Alfred shook his head as his steps sped up. It wasn’t like that between him and Caden. With Gunnar it had been obvious he wasn’t really interested in being his mate, that he was just ticking the boxes of appropriate behaviour.

But Caden was different. He was only doing what he wanted to do. He wasn’t simply playing along and going through the motions because his alphas ordered him to. He couldn’t be.

Even as he wrote it off, a bitter taste filled the back of Alfred’s mouth at the possibility. The idea of Caden feeling like he had to trade his mouth and his arse to a mate he

had no real desire for, just to please his alphas...

Alfred's hand tightened into a fist at his side. It wasn't like that...was it?

Memories scrolled through his brain far too quickly for him to make any sense of them. Caden had certainly seemed enthusiastic. He'd really seemed to want Alfred as much as Alfred had wanted him last night. And he'd said he loved him and...

And he'd been very serious about the whole going slow thing. He'd been incredibly quick to make excuses for them not to have sex straight away...

And what kind of idiot could really believe that a wolf as perfect as Caden could actually want anything to do with a screw-up like me? a little voice from the back of Alfred's psyche piped up.

Striding quickly through the kitchen, Alfred peered around the courtyard, searching for any sign of Caden. The vague memory of someone saying they were going to work in the barn had him striding quickly across to the huge wooden doors, but, once again, he found himself slowing as he reached a small opening, just big enough to allow a conversation between other wolves to reach him as he stood on the outside peering in.

"It won't actually make any difference to you if I point out you're acting like a whore, will it?" Gunnar's growl was instantly recognisable.

"Do you think that's what Talbot is doing when you mate with him?" Caden's softer lilt asked in return.

"Not the same thing!" Gunnar barked.

Alfred peeked cautiously through the crack between the door and the old oak frame of the barn, hoping he wouldn't be spotted. Gunnar was pacing back and forth across the big dusty space, the same way he always did when he was pissed off with the world.

He kept disappearing and reappearing in the thin slice of the other wolves' world that Alfred was able to glimpse. Further back into the barn, Caden seemed to have given up trying to keep track of his brother and was resting back in the hay, staring up at the barn roof.

He was as gorgeous as ever, with the sunlight from a high window shining on his hair and his legs sprawled out in the hay. His whole body was an invitation for another wolf to pounce on him. If only Gunnar would stop walking about and blocking the damn view, it might have been a perfect sight.

"Not the same thing at all," Gunnar repeated.

"It's exactly the same thing," Caden said, twirling a piece of hay between his fingers as he smiled at his brother's obvious discomfort.

"Are you telling me that you're not trading sex for good behaviour from him?" Gunnar demanded, stopping to loom over his little brother.

Alfred's hand tightened into a fist as the urge to leap between them and protect Caden suddenly made itself known inside him, but the muscles lost all their strength as the beta's words sank in.

It couldn't be true. Alfred waited for Caden to speak up and tell the beta that, but Caden merely shrugged, his smile never faltering.

The breath caught in Alfred's throat as his faith in the unfairness of the accusation faltered, but even after everything he'd heard both there and at the alphas' bedroom door, some little part of him refused to believe it could actually be true.

"We all have our strengths," Caden told his brother, mildly. "Yours may be growling orders and bossing everyone around. Mine are..."

"Bending over for brats?" Gunnar suggested.

"Ever heard the phrase: you'll catch more flies with honey than vinegar?" Caden asked. "I can vouch for its accuracy."

"Unbelievable," Gunnar muttered, shaking his head as he returned to his pacing.

Caden sat up and brushed a few loose ends of straw from his shirt. "Where's the harm?" he asked. "If Alfred needs a little extra motivation to take a step in the right direction and become the sort of wolf his pack wants him to be, then is it really so terrible for me to use some less-than-innocent methods to nudge him in the right direction?"

Alfred didn't wait to hear Gunnar's answer. He couldn't listen to another word, couldn't stay there a moment longer.

Caden had... He and Caden had...

Alfred's feet carried him one step back, then another. His hand came up to cover his mouth as he fought back the conflicting desires to either howl, scream or throw up.

Spinning around, he rushed away as fast as his feet could carry him. Stumbling whenever he forgot to take due

notice of the ground passing rapidly beneath his shoes, he broke into a clumsy run.

His feet covered the grass more and more quickly as he headed instinctively for the tree line, but speed didn't help. It was impossible to outrun the words—they were already in his head and the wind whipping against his clothes and snatching at his hair didn't blow a single one of them from his mind.

Out by the wood pile, in Caden's bed, even out by the river—it had all been a game to Caden, some sick little game the alphas had arranged for the other gamma to play with him. On the edge of the woods, Alfred slowed down. Collapsing against one of the trees, he struggled for breath as his lungs burned and his muscles cried out in pain.

Stupid! He'd been such a fool to believe Caden had any real interest in him. Alfred swung his arm, lashing out at the world in general. His fingertips brushed against one of the tree's branches. Before he'd even thought about what he was doing, he'd caught hold of it.

It was a thin branch. It came away from the trunk easily enough. Desperate to share some of the pain inside him and make everyone else hurt too, he swung the branch at the tree trunk again and again, sending leaves and bark flying around him.

He keep swinging the branch until his lungs whimpered their lack of oxygen and his heart raced so fast he was sure it would leap straight out through his rib cage.

Finally exhausted, he slumped onto his knees and let his head drop forward to rest against the battered bark. He

closed his eyes, but it was impossible for him to hide from the anger coursing through him. He'd barely caught his breath before he turned back towards the house, fury burning in his eyes.

Chapter Five

“Alfred?”

Alfred heard Marsdon calling out to him just as he reached the kitchen door, but he was in no mood to heed his alpha. He wasn't capable of listening to anyone and even if he tried, he knew they would just lie to him, try to make him believe things that weren't true and—

“Alfred!” There was an added snap to Marsdon's voice that time.

Every lupine instinct Alfred possessed yelled that he should listen to the leader of his pack, but he pushed all that aside. Marsdon was the one who'd ordered Caden to...

Alfred growled beneath his breath. Marsdon had made the wolf he loved into a whore, and he deserved no hint of respect from anyone.

A rough hand landed on Alfred's shoulder and span him around as he reached the centre of the kitchen. The larger wolf tightened his hold on him when he tried to squirm away. There was no escape. Jerking his head back, Alfred glared up at Marsdon. “What?”

“Why didn't you stop when I called you?”

“What the hell made you think I would?” Alfred shot back.

“Alfred...” The word was a clear warning. The growl in Marsdon's voice wasn't the least bit playful or paternal.

“Since when are you surprised I don’t listen to a word you say?” Alfred threw at him.

The image of Caden on his knees before him, and the way that beautiful picture was tainted by the knowledge that Caden hadn’t really wanted to be there, that he was just whoring himself out on an alpha’s orders, made it impossible for him to hold back anything.

He pushed at the alpha’s hands, struggling to get away from him, but Marsdon merely shoved him back against the kitchen cabinets and held him there as if he had a right to do that, as if his rank gave him the right to do whatever the hell he wanted with any wolf in his pack, no matter who got hurt in the process.

Writhing against the hard edge of the cabinet, Alfred kicked out, shoving against Marsdon’s body with all his might, and achieving no movement whatsoever.

That just made Alfred angrier than ever. Helplessness rushed through him, whipping up the storm inside him into something stronger than he’d ever felt in his life. The fight to get Marsdon’s hands off his shoulders morphed into a fight for survival inside his head.

Lupine claws crept out of his fingers. Marsdon’s shirt tore. There was no way his actions could be anything other than a challenge, but Alfred was past caring.

The alpha’s hands suddenly moved to his wrists in a sickening mockery of the way he’d taken hold of Caden, back when some stupid part of him had actually believed the other gamma could enjoy being held that way. The alpha’s fingers wrapped tightly around Alfred’s skin and

span him around so his back was to Marsdon's chest.

He was trapped then, his hands useless, his struggles futile.

"If you have any intention of remaining a member of this pack, you'd best learn to control that temper. There's only so much any alpha will accept."

"Maybe I don't want to be part of your bloody pack," Alfred screamed. "Maybe I don't want to be part of any pack!"

Not if that was the price Caden had to pay for him to be accepted, not if—

"Alfred?"

Marsdon spun them both around to face the softly spoken word.

Caden and Gunnar stood in the doorway leading in from the courtyard. A frown spread across Caden's brow as Alfred's eyes met his, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

"What?" Alfred demanded. "You really thought a few blow jobs would make me into a brain-dead little zombie, prepared to jump at every higher ranking wolf's command?"

Caden stepped forward. Alfred desperately tried to back away, but there was no getting past Marsdon while the alpha's grip on his wrists kept him trapped and helpless.

Very slowly, the other gamma settled his palm on Alfred's cheek. He tried to jerk his head away. All he succeeded in doing was head-butting the alpha's shoulder.

"Tell me what's wrong?" Caden asked, gently. There

was so much emotion in his eyes, and it looked so much like real concern, like how another wolf might look if he really did love him.

Alfred closed his eyes as he turned his face away from all the lies. “Get your hands off me.”

“Alfred,” Caden began.

“It’s over.”

“Over?” Caden repeated, blankly.

“Yes, over!” Alfred yelled, unable to keep the words back. “I have no interest in being your mate—no intention of being blackmailed and bribed with the possibility that you just might let me screw a fine piece of arse at some point. What is it that you don’t understand about that?”

“Alfred!” Marsdon snapped.

For just the briefest moment, the alpha’s grip on him eased. Jerking away from him, Alfred wrenched himself out of his hold and lurched away from the other man. He stumbled forward until he found his way blocked by the long kitchen table.

“That’s all you are,” Alfred growled at Caden as he span back to face him. He didn’t know if he was trying to convince Caden or himself, but the words tumbled out faster and faster regardless. “You’re just a pretty piece of arse. Well, I have no interest in being mated to some silly little slut who’ll cheerfully whore himself out whenever he wants to get his own way. Understand?”

The blood seemed to drain from Caden’s face. There was no hint of the pride or smugness that Alfred had overheard in the barn anymore. “I... You...” He dropped his

gaze as he trailed off into silence.

“That’s enough.” Suddenly Gunnar was standing in front of Caden, big and stupid and worse even than all the others in the pack.

A growl built in the back of Alfred’s throat. For a moment, his muscles tensed. His body screamed its desire to leap forward and claw each inch of flesh from the other man’s face. At the last moment, the tiny little part of Alfred that still remembered what it was to be part of a pack won out. He threw himself towards the door rather than the other wolves.

Bennett was in the courtyard, making his way towards the house, just as Alfred emerged through the doorway. He said something, but Alfred didn’t really hear it. The world before him was flooded with tears, but that didn’t matter. He didn’t care where he was going, as long as it was as far away from Caden as he could get.

* * * *

“Would anyone like to tell me what the hell that was all about?” Marsdon demanded as a stunned silence settled over the kitchen.

Caden barely even registered the question. All he could do was stare at the door Alfred had run through, unable to bring a single word to his lips in order to frame an answer.

“Caden?” Gunnar’s voice tugged at the edge of his

consciousness, but even that failed to rouse him from his stupor right then.

Alfred thought that he was nothing more than a—?

Big, strong hands landed on Caden's shoulders. He was turned forcibly away from the kitchen door and made to face his brother.

Gunnar glared down at him. His expression was angry, but he was nowhere near as furious as Alfred had been. And Caden knew his brother well enough to be able to see that beneath all of Gunnar's anger was a hell of a lot of concern. He hadn't seen any hint of that in Alfred's eyes—all he'd sensed in Alfred's scent was hatred.

"I..." Caden couldn't think of any other words to add to that one, lonely little syllable.

Alfred had all the potential in the world to be a good wolf, to be the kind of man any shifter would be proud to call his mate. But it had never occurred to Caden that a wolf with so much potential wouldn't want to be mated to someone whose main talent lay in fluttering his eyelashes.

He swallowed rapidly, trying to make his throat work, even if his brain wouldn't. Looking up, he saw everyone staring at him. "He didn't mean it," he whispered. Alfred couldn't have meant it. Could he?

Lifting a hand, Caden shook off his brother's touch and pushed his fingers through his hair. There was no mud to stop them now. If Alfred had wanted him when he looked like a muddy little mongrel, it stood to reason that he must still want him when he was all clean and pretty. "He's probably just having a bad day and—"

“Don’t stand up for the little bastard!” Gunnar growled.

Caden quickly lifted his gaze and met the beta’s eyes.

“It’s not all his fault.”

“Then whose fault is it?” someone asked, very calmly, from behind them.

Caden turned towards his alphas. Bennett was at Marsdon’s side now. His words sounded like an honest question, but the answer was far too dangerous to say out loud.

Even with panic swirling through his veins and the possibility of Alfred not wanting to be mated to anyone who only had a pretty face to recommend them hanging over his head, Caden knew it was something that simply wasn’t said. Not by wolves. Not within a pack.

“Yours.”

And the word was out, hanging in the air between them. It was too late for Caden to snatch it back, and as a damn near deafening silence settled over them, he found he didn’t want to. Who cared how dangerous anything was when the worst had already happened?

“What did you say?” Marsdon snapped, stepping forward and blocking Caden’s view of the other alpha.

“Not Bennett in particular,” Caden corrected, as he realised what Marsdon thought. “All of you—all of *us*. The entire pack is to blame for the way Alfred acts.”

Marsdon folded his arms across his chest as he squared his stance. “Gunnar’s right—trying to make excuses for him and blaming everyone except him every time he screws up isn’t going to do—”

“Don’t you mean *if*?” Caden asked, his voice perfectly calm and controlled now that there was no going back. He hadn’t meant to have the conversation like this. Hell, he’d hoped he could have got away with never needing to have it at all. But, if it was happening, he knew he had to make sure it happened right—he had to give Alfred that much of a fighting chance.

Whatever was destined to happen between them, whatever Alfred really thought of him, he owed any wolf he loved that much.

Marsdon frowned. “What?”

“Don’t you mean if he screws up rather than when?” Caden asked again. “Is it really fair on him that you always assume he’s going to screw up right from the start? Doesn’t that just tempt fate and make it all the more likely he’ll do something wrong?”

Bennett stepped forward before Marsdon could say anything, and laid his hand gently on his mate’s arm. “I think we’d best sit down. This sounds like it’ll take a while.” He moved forward and pointedly took a seat at one end of the long pine table. Marsdon silently claimed the seat next to him.

Feeling very much like he was crossing quicksand, Caden sat next to his brother, opposite the alphas. Folding his hands neatly on the table, Caden stared down at them for a long time, trying to find the best possible words.

“Have you ever wondered why Alfred has never settled into your pack very well?” he finally asked.

“Because he’s a selfish little brat who couldn’t care

less about anyone but himself,” Marsdon suggested. “Because he’d rather stir up trouble than be a useful member of anyone’s pack.” The alpha was sitting back in his chair, his arms folded across his chest, and didn’t appear to be the least interested in hearing anything that contradicted that view.

“Could any wolf really be happy living that way?” Caden asked, forcing himself to keep every word polite and softly spoken, making sure his body language screamed out that he wasn’t trying to challenge anyone. “Would any wolf really want that?”

“No, no wolf would want that,” Bennett said. “But if no one tells us anything else, that’s the only thing we can believe.” He leant forward, all his attention on the conversation. At least one of the alphas seemed willing to listen.

Caden took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I know it’s usually obvious what rank a wolf is most suited to from the time he’s a little pup.”

“Oh?” Marsdon said.

“But what if someone made a mistake? Or what if there are occasions when something happens to make the alphas of a pack wonder if someone’s first impressions of a pup weren’t entirely right?” Caden said to his neatly clasped hands. His knuckles were slowly turning white as he struggled to push forward. He was pretty sure he’d cut off all the circulation to the fingers on his left hand. They were starting to feel numb.

“If you have something to say, say it,” Marsdon

snapped. "But I'm telling you now, if you've acquired Alfred's habit for trying to stir up trouble then—"

"I think you've assigned Alfred the wrong rank among the gammas in your pack," Caden blurted out.

The challenge should have made Marsdon launch himself to his feet in fury. Caden was braced for it, willing to receive the full force of the other wolf's anger, even while nerves made him sure he was going to throw up long before the end of the conversation.

There was no furious howl. The other wolf merely tilted his head to the side and considered him in silence for several moments.

Caden risked a brief glance up and met Marsdon's eyes. From there, he turned to Bennett. When he saw the complete lack of emotion in his other alpha's gaze, Caden suddenly realised what they had both thought he was going to say.

"I know you're a good alpha," Caden said to Bennett. "I've never doubted that. You're both good alphas, good wolves. But if someone forced you to live in another rank, maybe you wouldn't be such good wolves. Perhaps, if there was something that made you doubt you were living out your right role, you'd be more like Alfred. Maybe you'd find there was something that screamed inside you, making you desperate to rock the boat hard enough that you might find yourself in a different place when everything settled after the storm."

"You think that's what Alfred has been trying to do?" Bennett asked.

"I think he's spent his whole life feeling as if he's out of place, as if he can't settle into his pack, or even into his own skin, because every wolf around him has been pushing him to be something he's not. Everyone assumes he's not that different to our omega—that he should be treated much the same as Talbot."

"He's nothing like Talbot!" Gunnar snapped to Caden's left.

"You're right, he's nothing like our omega," Caden said, and barely missed a beat before he pushed on. "He's much more like our beta."

"What?"

Caden hadn't heard his brother's voice reach that pitch since it had first broken and descended into its habitual deep growl. The beta launched himself to his feet. His chair tumbled back and clattered onto the tiles behind him.

"If Talbot was pushed into a different role, he'd worry and fret and struggle to please the people around him, even though it hurt him in a million different ways," Caden said, shoving back his own chair and squaring off against his brother without the slightest hesitation. "But if *you* were forced into a lower place in the hierarchy, we all know you'd give the whole world hell until you got moved to where you wanted to be. Tell me, who do you think Alfred is more like?"

"Sit down, both of you."

Caden glanced towards Marsdon out of the corner of his eye.

“If I have to get to my feet in order to make you both sit down and stop acting like silly little children...” the alpha warned.

Caden slowly did as he was told. The conversation was far too important to derail just because his brother was a jerk. Gunnar would still be there, and no doubt he’d still be a jerk, tomorrow. He could be dealt with then.

Gunnar picked up his chair and sat back down with a huff.

“You believe that Alfred might flourish if he was moved up the ranks among the gammas?” Bennett asked.

Caden nodded.

“Even without any...bribery taking place?” the alpha asked, quite gently.

“Alfred was angry—he lashed out.” Caden wasn’t entirely sure who he was trying to convince. Right then, a pretty face and a good technique didn’t seem to count for a lot.

“And you still wish to be mated to a wolf who is inclined to lash out that way?”

Caden’s lips twisted into a slight smile. “When he realises that he outranks me, he’ll stop.” He made sure all the other wolves saw his confidence in that fact, even if it wasn’t built on an entirely solid foundation.

“And if he doesn’t?” Marsdon cut in.

“Then...”

Caden’s gaze dropped to Marsdon’s forearm and the mark cut into the skin there. It was a huge risk to take. But if it was the only way to make his point, then...

“As things stand, I don’t trust him to reach out and touch the back of my neck. I know that will change when our respective ranks change, but if for some reason it doesn’t, then we’ll have to...find a way to live our lives just with me reaching out for his forearm?” he suggested.

For several minutes the whole world seemed to wait and watch the alphas, to see what their reaction would be. Caden could hear his own heart pounding so loudly in his ears he was sure everyone else in the room had to be able to hear it too, but no one mentioned the racket.

It wasn’t as if every wolf in the pack didn’t know what it meant when Bennett reached out and touched the scar on his mate’s arm, or what Bennett was offering Marsdon when he did that. Everyone knew there would soon be howls of pleasure emanating from the barn or the alphas’ bedroom.

And when Marsdon touched the scar on the back of Bennett’s neck, Caden had no doubt that he was asking his mate to submit to him, to hand over control to him for a little while, that Marsdon was telling his mate what he needed from him when he offered him that particular caress.

“That has nothing to do with a wolf’s place in the pack,” Marsdon said, each word enunciated very carefully.

Caden ignored him in favour of meeting Bennett’s eyes and holding them. “Would you let Marsdon reach for the back of your neck if he wasn’t secure in his place in the pack?”

“That’s not the same—”

Marsdon stopped short when Bennett held up a hand.

"No," he admitted. "I wouldn't."

Caden held his breath.

"I think I understand what you're trying to say."

"But—" Marsdon began.

"He's not insulting me," Bennett cut in, before the other alpha had time to build up any sort of momentum. "He's not insulting anyone." Still holding Caden's eyes, he nodded slowly. "I think it's time someone went to fetch Alfred."

Gunnar immediately pushed back his chair. "I'll get him."

"Don't get into an argument with him, but don't take no for an answer when you tell him he's to come home either," Bennett commanded, as Gunnar made his way to the kitchen door.

The beta nodded his understanding. Unless Caden was very much mistaken, his brother was supremely glad the mushy stuff had now been taken care of and he could get back to doing the kind of thing he did best.

As the door closed behind the beta, Caden was left alone with the alphas, the sole focus of their attention.

"You're very observant," Bennett said.

Caden made no reply.

"And now," Bennett went on, "I think both your alphas would like to know exactly what you've observed."

Quickly looking from Bennett to Marsdon and back again, Caden weighed up his options. "I've noticed the scars mean a lot to you," he offered as an opening bid.

"Yes," Bennett allowed, and nodded for him to continue.

“I think, when you touch the scar on Marsdon’s arm, you’re asking him to take control for a while, telling him that you’d like to follow his lead the next time you mate.”

Neither alpha moved nor spoke.

“And when he touches the scar on your neck, he’s asking for you to let him take control that way.”

The room remained still and silent.

“I don’t know what signals you use when you want to take control of Marsdon or he wants to give up control to you,” Caden said. The moments the words hit the air, he knew he had stumbled on exactly the right thing to say, and it wasn’t exactly a lie, there was no need to add he was pretty sure such a gesture had never been used.

Bennett smiled slightly. “I think we all know those signals don’t exist.”

“Bennett!” Marsdon wasn’t smiling at all.

“It’s not a problem,” Bennett told his mate. “Caden’s never had any intention of questioning my ability to lead this pack, have you?”

Caden shook his head. “I have no doubt you’re an alpha. But...I think you’re an alpha who knows how much it can hurt when something makes you doubt where you belong in a pack.”

Bennett looked down. “If you’re right about this, Alfred deserves all our sympathy.”

“Yes,” Caden agreed.

“And if you’re wrong?” Marsdon asked.

Caden dropped his gaze. The answer was obvious, although he found it impossible to admit it out loud. If he

was wrong, he was going to be screwed—and not in the way he'd been hoping for.

* * * *

“Put me down, you bastard!” Alfred did his best to shout the words, but it wasn't easy while Gunnar's shoulder seemed to be determined to knock the air out of his lungs every time the beta took a step.

“Careful, brat, those are Caden's parents you're questioning the morals of, too,” Gunnar warned as he marched on.

Every step bounced Alfred on his shoulder. For someone who seemed to be covered in muscle, he was incredibly bony. The other wolf's grip on him wasn't painful as such, but it was immovable as hell. His biceps stayed locked over the back of Alfred's legs no matter what he did.

Alfred hit against Gunnar's back and kicked out as hard as he could. Nothing made the damnedest bit of difference.

Looking around as best he could while hoisted over the other wolf's shoulder, he realised they were making their way back to the farmhouse. “Let me go!”

Gunnar simply ignored him and held more tightly to his legs, preventing Alfred's kicks landing hard enough to do any real damage.

Alfred's upside-down view of the courtyard, then the kitchen, suddenly span. He was deposited

unceremoniously onto the cold tiles in the middle of the kitchen floor. Glaring up at Gunnar, Alfred opened his mouth to hurl another insult at him.

His eyes fell on Caden instead. Every thought, every word, fled from Alfred's head. He closed his mouth and ground his teeth together as fresh anger flooded through him.

"Good of you to join us," Marsdon said.

Alfred scrambled to his feet and turned to face the alpha.

"Save it for the challenge ring," the older wolf advised, before Alfred could even part his lips.

"What?" The single word hung in the air, small and lonely as Alfred's mind reeled.

"No! This isn't what—" Caden rushed out.

Alfred glanced in his direction just in time to see Marsdon silence him with a look.

"But," Caden tried again.

"You were right," Marsdon informed the other gamma, before turning back to Alfred. "It's time you found your rightful place in the pack—whatever that might be."

For once, Alfred failed to see the usual anger spinning in the other wolf's eyes. Marsdon looked almost...curious? But that wasn't important.

"You're throwing me out of the pack..." Alfred took a step back, cursing himself for his stupidity in being surprised, in letting his shock creep into his words.

He'd known from the start that he didn't really belong there, that he didn't fit into Marsdon and Bennett's pack the

way all the other wolves did. He should have expected this. He should have been ready for it.

Perhaps if he had anticipated it, his heart wouldn't have broken a little at the sudden realisation he was about to find himself all alone in the world, without a pack. Even a pack who felt nothing but contempt for him was better than that. And Caden was—

Ice solidified in his veins. Alfred jerked his gaze up to meet his alpha's. "Only me?" he demanded. "I'm the only one being sent into the challenge ring?"

"Is there anyone you believe should join you there?" Bennett asked.

"No!" Alfred rushed out. "Only me." He nodded then, purposely not looking at Caden. There was no way the other gamma could go into the ring. Caden had to be kept safe. He couldn't be punished because even he couldn't make Alfred worthy of a place in the pack.

"Only me." Alfred managed another nod.

Marsdon's eyes narrowed a fraction. He looked to Caden, but when he turned his attention back to Alfred, all he said was, "Collect up the others and get to work. We all know you know how to make a ring."

Alfred obeyed the command more quickly than he had followed any order the alpha had ever given him. He rushed out of the kitchen before he dragged Caden down with him. It didn't take long to find the others. They had all congregated well within shouting distance of the kitchen, every one of them needing to know what was going on in their pack before they had any chance of resting easy in

their own skins.

They trailed behind Alfred as he stormed down to a patch of grass that they'd all visited once before, what felt like several lifetimes ago.

The sun shone. A gentle breeze caressed Alfred's skin. There were even bloody birds singing in the trees. It wasn't quite what he'd thought hell would look like, but he had no doubt that was exactly where he was. And he quickly set about making it into something capable of casting him down into even hotter flames.

By the time the alphas, Caden and Gunnar joined them, the circle was complete, the grass within it trampled down to make a spacious fighting area. Unable to trust himself if he looked towards Caden, Alfred's attention focused on Bennett. The alpha seemed so right in his role it was impossible to believe he had ever been accused of being anything but exactly what he was, that Alfred himself had been the one to send him into the ring.

"Into the circle, Alfred," Marsdon ordered. "Everyone else, move across to the other side."

The wolves all obediently took up their positions, all except Caden. When Alfred glanced over his shoulder, the other gamma seemed rooted to the spot. He stayed right there until Bennett retrieved him and led him to stand with the rest of the pack. Unable to risk looking higher, Alfred watched Caden's shoes move to stand right the middle of the pack, surrounded by wolves that would look after him.

That was good. Alfred took a deep breath. Caden was safe. That was the most important thing. That was the

only thing.

“You are now in limbo,” Marsdon announced. “Each wolf in our pack will pass through the challenge circle, and you will each have the chance to find out where your natural place will be within our hierarchy if you remain in this pack. When the matter is settled to both your satisfaction, that wolf will pass through to the other side of the circle. Any questions?”

Alfred shook his head.

Marsdon turned away. A look passed between him and Bennett. Each wolf nodded his acceptance of whatever plan they'd silently come up with.

“Francis—you're up first.”

Alfred quickly turned his attention to Francis. The other gamma wasn't much bigger than him. Any fight between them would be a close call on the best of days. Alfred pushed his hand through his hair. There was so much adrenaline rushing through his body he was practically shaking, and no one had even landed a single blow.

Very slowly, Francis began to circle him. Alfred matched him move for move as they gradually closed in on each other, their feet passing easily over the trampled-down grass. “What the hell's going on?” Francis hissed, ducking his head to keep the words just between them.

Alfred shrugged.

“Tell me,” Francis commanded. “You're not the only one this will affect!”

“You have no right to issue orders to me,” Alfred spat.

Anger flashed in Francis' eyes. He lunged forward. Alfred reacted just in time, stepping to the side and neatly dodging the attack. Twisting around, he caught hold of Francis' arm and used the other wolf's own momentum to send him crashing to the ground. Pouncing on him, Alfred pinned him down against the flattened grass.

"I'm not Steffan!" Alfred growled into his ear, his brain unable to keep any of his instincts in check for a moment longer. "He might like taking orders from you, but I don't!"

Francis bucked. The world span. Alfred landed heavily on his back. His head thudded against the earth. Before he could focus, Francis was gripping his shoulders. "Maybe if you acted like you could make a good decision on your own, I wouldn't have to—"

"When have I had the chance?" Alfred bit out, twisting and almost managing to throw the other man off.

"What?"

"I can't make a good decision if I'm never given the chance, can I?" Alfred growled.

Francis stared down at him as if he really didn't have a clue what was going on. "You want to move up the hierarchy. This is all just because you want to outrank me?"

Alfred swallowed, but the answer that bubbled up inside him came from a part of his brain that was too ancient to understand words. He nodded, careful not to tilt his head back too far and display any sort of submission.

Francis' guard seemed to falter. The same instinctive part of Alfred's mind that had told him to nod prompted him into immediate action. The world tumbled around them.

Their positions were once more reversed.

Alfred's hands quickly found Francis' wrists and pinned him to the ground. The other wolf tensed, completely unable to hide how much he hated being held down. A frown passed across Francis' brow as he seemed to fight against his revulsion in an effort to think more clearly. He was always thinking, always studying the world around him, weighing up the evidence.

Against all logic, Alfred somehow found himself pulling back from a certain victory. Releasing the other wolf's wrists, he merely loomed over the prone wolf, casting a shadow over Francis' body as the sun beat down on the back of his neck.

If he was to have any chance of convincing Francis he deserved to outrank him, he needed to gain his respect. There would be no triumph in being accepted simply because doing that would be the quickest way for Francis to get out of a position he loathed.

Francis stared up at Alfred, studying him for what felt like an eternity with no hint of submission in his eyes. Alfred could damn near see the wheels in the other wolf's head turning.

Finally Francis nodded. "I have no objection to seeing what you could do with a higher rank," he allowed. Even though he chose his words with obvious caution, his tone practically screamed that he really didn't care one way or another where he actually stood in the hierarchy between the gammas.

For several seconds, Alfred was speechless.

“But that doesn’t mean I won’t make your life a living hell if you hurt Steffan—in this ring or out of it,” Francis added.

That was what he really cared about. His mate. For the first time in his life, Alfred didn’t think the other man a fool for that.

Francis dropped his eyes, just once and just for a moment, but it was enough. Success rushed through Alfred, unlike anything he’d ever known. As he pulled himself to his feet, he found himself instinctively offering to help the other wolf up, too.

A hint of surprise made it into Francis’ eyes, but he didn’t say anything. He merely nodded to him before turning away and making his way to the opposite side of the challenge circle.

Alfred turned back to the wolves on the other side of the ring. Their expressions varied tremendously, but the most common ones by far were shock and curiosity. Alfred’s guard was down as he looked across the line. He forgot why he wasn’t supposed to risk looking one particular wolf in the eye.

Caden was so pale, it seemed as if it was only Bennett’s arm around his shoulders that was keeping Caden on his feet. His eyes seemed very big, even bluer than ever. As Alfred watched, Caden swallowed rapidly, as if he was barely keeping his emotions in check. Alfred took a step forward, his hand already rising from his side as he instinctively reached out to Caden.

“Steffan,” Bennett suddenly said.

Alfred blinked. He turned his attention back to the rest of the pack just in time to see the big wolf move forward to take his turn.

Stepping into the circle, Steffan squared up against Alfred, just as tradition suggested he should, but Alfred couldn't seem to make his muscles work. He remained exactly where he was. Turning his head, he looked from the pack, to Francis, and back to the other wolves once more.

No one there wanted to see the gentle giant hurt, not even Alfred himself. If it were Caden in there, then... The very idea of it sent a wave of horror through him, turning his stomach. He'd want to kill anyone who raised a hand to his mate. He could hardly blame another man for feeling the same way.

Without making even the vaguest attempt at a fighting stance, Alfred stepped forward and closed the gap between himself and the larger wolf.

Steffan hesitated. He looked to Francis for guidance, his eyes flicking quickly from his mate back to Alfred, as if he wasn't sure if he was about to be caught in some sort of trap or not.

"We all know you're stronger than me," Alfred said. As hard as the words were to utter, he knew there was no avoiding them. "Every wolf in the pack knows who would win any fight against you, if that was all the challenge circle was about."

And, for so many years, every wolf in the pack had automatically assumed Steffan should outrank him because of it. Pushing down that knowledge, Alfred kept his chin

tilted up and his eyes on Steffan's face. The longer he stood in the circle, the more clearly his thoughts seemed to settle into his head. Size and strength meant less than nothing.

Steffan remained silent. Their eyes were locked. The other gamma didn't lower his gaze, but Alfred could almost feel his desire to do so filling the circle.

"Do you care what your rank in the pack is?" Alfred asked. "Or how many gamma wolves outrank you?"

Steffan looked across at Francis for a brief moment, then back to Alfred again.

"Francis isn't going to love you any more or less if you keep trying to give me orders or if I start issuing them to you," Alfred pointed out.

Steffan's lips curved into a slight smile. "I know."

All Alfred could do then was wait. Steffan knew what Alfred was asking him to do. He had to realise it was all in his hands, whether he wanted it or not. It seemed to take a lifetime for the huge wolf to make a decision, but finally, Steffan's gaze dropped to the trampled-down grass.

Alfred could have kissed him for that tiny little sign of submission. He resisted the temptation. There was no need to make Francis charge back into the circle in a fit of jealousy—no need at all to piss off either of the two wolves who suddenly seemed willing to give him the chance he'd been waiting for his whole life.

Steffan took a step towards the other side of the circle to join his mate, carefully walking around Alfred.

"Wait there."

Alfred's attention snapped towards Marsdon. Steffan turned to face the alpha too, a guilty look creeping into his eyes, as if they'd been caught doing something dirty.

"Tradition states that wolves have to lay a hand on each other while they are in the circle."

Alfred turned back to face Steffan once more. The other gamma was obviously waiting for him to decide what their next move should be. Alfred hesitated. He already outranked the other wolf. The idea of lashing out at a man below him in the hierarchy filled his mouth with a bitter taste.

Without even tapping into the part of his mind that understood anything above instinct, he found himself holding his hand out towards Steffan. A much larger hand engulfed his palm as they politely shook hands.

Alfred glanced towards Marsdon. One nod confirmed that the letter of the law had been satisfied. As Steffan moved towards Francis, Alfred looked to the others.

For reasons best known to themselves, Marsdon and Bennett seemed to have given him the easiest challenges first. Steffan and Francis had always had less interest in rank than any other wolves he'd known. No other member of the pack would be so easy going.

"Gunnar—you're up next."

Alfred didn't curse. He kept his lips tightly shut and avoided uttering a single word to make sure that would be the case.

So, this was where it really started. He felt the atmosphere change and realised that everyone else knew

it too. They were all well aware of how much Gunnar hated him—and how much he had wound up and pissed off the beta during their time there.

Talbot touched Gunnar's arm, stopping the beta before he could actually step into the circle. Dipping his head, Gunnar whispered something into the little wolf's ear before pressing a kiss to his temple and resuming his progress towards Alfred.

Pure confidence swirled around the beta like a tornado ready to destroy anything in its path. There was no doubt that he cared enough to make up for Francis and Steffan's near-ambivalence about rank. There would be no token challenge.

Alfred took a deep breath. If he didn't square up against the beta it would just hurt all the worse when the other man charged at him. Gunnar took a fighting stance and raised an eyebrow at Alfred, as if warning him that no one would be playing bloody silly games this time around.

Alfred took the hint and took up a suitable posture. He tried to take yet another deep breath, but all the air rushed out of his lungs as he hit the ground hard enough to make his teeth rattle in his head.

When he opened his eyes, Gunnar was right there, his nose an inch from Alfred's face, a deep growl emanating from the back of his throat.

Chapter Six

Alfred dipped his gaze without wasting time on a first, let alone a second, thought. Instincts were flying through him now, freed of all the anger that had bubbled inside him for as long as he could remember.

Gunnar was a beta and Alfred knew right then, in a way he never really had before, that it was the rank Gunnar belonged in. He hadn't been given the rank because he looked like a beta, he'd been given it because he was a beta right down to the core.

Even as Alfred turned his head and stared down at the battered grass to his left, he began to understand what it was to want to belong to a pack where there were wolves that outranked him, not because life was unfair, but because they should outrank him. In one blinding flash it felt both right and safe to know that there were wolves in the pack that were above him, watching over him and the other gammas.

"Now?" Gunnar demanded, still barely an inch away from his nose. "Now you decide you want to stop acting like a brat?"

Alfred risked a glance up. The other man was so close he was blurry.

"No," he whispered. "I just realised that I don't want to be a beta."

“And that makes everything okay?” Gunnar growled. “It makes what you said to Caden a few minutes ago okay?”

Alfred swallowed rapidly. The other man might as well have thrust his fist straight into his chest and squeezed his fingers around his heart, stopping it from ever taking another beat.

Everything he had said to Caden played back in his head, and there was no way to escape it. “I was wrong to say that,” Alfred whispered.

“Yes,” Gunnar bit out. “You were.”

“I love him.” Alfred had had no intention of saying those words to anyone, and to Gunnar least of all, but suddenly they had already been spoken and it was too late to change that. Each syllable hung in the middle of the challenge circle, all pink and fluffy with pretty little hearts and sparkles decorating the air around them.

The beta growled again, but there seemed to be more frustration than anger in his grumbling now.

Alfred watched Gunnar carefully as the beta pulled back. Every muscle in the more dominant wolf's body was bunched up so tightly, it was almost impossible to believe he wasn't going to explode and lunge at him at any moment.

Gunnar wasn't looking at him in return. His attention was on the wolves still waiting to cross the challenge circle. He growled again as he turned back to Alfred.

“Just because I've no interest in seeing someone my brother is stupid enough to care about being thrown out of the pack, that doesn't mean I like you or that I forgive you for

anything,” he bit out.

The beta was still crouched down, as if ready to attack, but Alfred somehow managed to gather up every scrap of courage at his disposal and sit up.

“If you ever hurt Talbot or Caden, I’ll make you wish I’d killed you in this circle,” Gunnar warned.

Alfred slowly nodded his understanding.

Gunnar jerked himself abruptly to his feet and strode over to the far side of the circle without a word, leaving Alfred sitting all alone in the centre of the flattened grass.

The next wolves to pass through the circle were the other gammas. They’d all seen what had passed between him and the first three visitors to the circle. A little bit of rough and tumble was a small price to pay for seeing four more wolves move past him to the other side of the circle.

A couple of sneaky blows from men he had taken his own fair share of digs at over the years weren’t so entirely unexpected. He took them with all the grace he could muster, knowing he probably had them coming. But it was only when he failed to return them that the other wolves retreated in apparent confusion.

As he watched the last of his fellow gammas leave the ring, Alfred wiped the blood away from his split lip with the back of his hand. His ribs burned from a well-aimed kick. His head span from a harsh blow. He knew that by morning, there would be a dozen other parts of his body that would be calling him a fool for not hitting back, but it was hard to believe that any of that mattered.

Success pounded through him like the heartbeat of

the universe. Gunnar was the only wolf who had refused to yield his place in the hierarchy to him. Alfred stood in the middle of the challenge ring, the highest ranking gamma in the pack.

Except he wasn't actually part of the pack right then. Wolves still stood ready to challenge his newfound desire to belong and be a piece of something larger than himself. If the alphas refused to accept him into the fold, it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference what the gammas all thought.

"Talbot."

Alfred's eyes snapped towards the little omega. He'd been slowly gaining confidence since he'd been mated to Gunnar, but right then, he seemed to be back to where he had been several months ago, a bundle of nerves and anxiety barely held together by his fragile frame.

A memory presented itself in Alfred's mind of when Bennett had been in the circle. He'd let Talbot pass through with barely a word. Alfred dropped his gaze to the grass in front of him. Suddenly, he understood why.

"You're a good omega," Alfred said, as he looked up.

Talbot lifted his gaze, his expression all shock and no challenge. He stood on the edge of the ring as if he was more than ready to jump back out of it at the first sign of anger from his opponent.

Alfred stepped carefully forward, keeping all his movements calm, making sure there wasn't even the slightest hint of a threat in them. Finally, he reached the omega.

“You’d be wasted as a gamma.”

Talbot said nothing.

“We need someone to balance out Gunnar and the alphas,” Alfred went on. “You do that perfectly. I couldn’t, neither could anyone else in the pack.”

A little touch of colour rose to Talbot’s cheeks. “I don’t want to challenge you,” he admitted.

Alfred swallowed and cleared his throat. “Do you want me to be part of your pack?” Heaven knew he hadn’t actually given the omega any reason to want him within miles of him over the years.

Talbot nodded. He smiled slightly. He really seemed to mean it.

“Why?” Alfred blurted out.

“Because omegas aren’t the only wolves a pack needs,” Talbot said very softly. “And because Gunnar might never have noticed me if he hadn’t been pointed towards a wolf who was the exact opposite of what he needed in a mate.”

“Shake on it?” Alfred suggested, trying to hide his relief as best he could in order to appear strong and reassuring in the other wolf’s eyes.

Talbot held out one small hand.

Alfred shook it. At the same time, he ruffled the omega’s hair with his other hand. It was a clumsy attempt to copy a gesture he’d seen the other wolves bestow on Talbot so many times over the years, but Talbot seemed to sense he was doing his best. The little guy didn’t even flinch at his raised hand.

Dipping his head, Alfred dropped his voice to a whisper. "You'd better go to your mate, before Gunnar has a fit waiting for you to get out of the circle."

Another smile reached Talbot's lips as he quickly did as Alfred commanded.

The omega had barely left the circle when Bennett stepped forward. He strode into the centre with complete confidence and Alfred's mind immediately raced back to the last time he'd faced Bennett there.

There'd been no quiet little conversations with wolves he'd known his whole life for Bennett. The challenges to an alpha's place in the pack were never that simple.

"I'm sorry," Alfred said.

Bennett didn't say anything for a long time.

"I didn't know," Alfred whispered.

"Yes, you did," the alpha corrected. "You knew exactly what you were doing when you challenged me, and you know exactly what would happen once you sowed doubts in the other wolves' heads."

Alfred swallowed. When he met Bennett's eyes for a moment, he knew there was no way in hell he'd be allowed to hide behind even half-lies right then. "Yes," he admitted. "I knew."

"So tell me why," Bennett ordered, slowly starting to circle Alfred.

Unable to turn and keep his attention on the other wolf without risking making himself so dizzy he'd be unable to keep his footing, Alfred stayed very still.

"Because they all respected you. Because they

accepted the fact you should outrank them without a thought. Because..." Alfred closed his eyes for a moment, but when he opened them, he forced himself to meet the other man's eyes. "Because if I had acted that way with a lover, they'd have taken it as a sign that I really belonged at the bottom of the pack. It wasn't fair that you should be able to do that and keep your place while I..."

"While you were forced to live in a rank your nature isn't suited to," Bennett finished for him.

"I just knew I was angry," Alfred said, with a frown. "I don't think I even really knew why until..." He waved a hand at the circle beneath their feet, unable to find the right words to go on.

Bennett nodded as if that made perfect sense. His hair fell forward into his eyes, but he made no attempt to push it away. "That's what a challenge circle should be used for."

Alfred stared at the trampled-down grass. The scent of it filled his lungs as he took a deep breath.

"To make a pack stronger, not weaker," Bennett went on.

Alfred nodded. His eyes fell closed.

"To allow a wolf to find his rightful place in the pack."

Another jerky little nod was all Alfred could manage.

"Do you have any hesitation in accepting me as your alpha today?"

"No!" Alfred had never been more certain of an answer in his life.

"Then from this moment on, you're part of my pack."

And Bennett turned to leave the circle as easily as that.

“Wait!” Alfred rushed forward and caught hold of his sleeve. “That’s it?”

The alpha smiled slightly. “You mean don’t I want revenge for what happened last time we stood in this circle?” Bennett shook his head. “That’s not what being an alpha is about.”

The thin cotton slipped from Alfred’s fingers as the alpha turned and walked away. He stared after the other wolf, trying to think of something to say. He knew he deserved to be hammered black, blue and any other colour Bennett fancied for putting the alpha in the circle all those months ago. He was equally sure that a good wolf would take his punishment and maybe he’d be able to move on after it, but if Bennett wouldn’t go along with that idea then

Without any warning, Alfred’s legs were swept out from beneath him. He landed heavily on the grass. His fingers clawed at the blades as he stared up at Marsdon.

The older wolf crouched in front of him, resting his forearms on his knees, the gentle breeze catching at his hair. “When you step out of this circle, you’ll be given a completely fresh start, an entirely clean slate. Nothing that happened before that moment will count against you. So, this is your last chance. If you want to take a swing at a member of your pack, do it now.”

“I didn’t hurt them,” Alfred blurted out, with a glance towards the other members of the pack.

“I know. I didn’t think you had it in you, but you acted

exactly as the top-ranking gamma should. But, if you need to fight *now*, you can. I'll fight you. I'll see that you don't get too badly hurt in the process, and I'll see that you don't hurt me too badly, either."

Alfred stared up at him. That was another part of being an alpha, he saw that now too—it was just the opposite side of the same coin that Bennett had offered him. Alfred closed his eyes to hide a wince. Right then, the other wolf's kindness hurt far more than any blow from him ever could.

Several minutes passed before he was able to force himself to meet the alpha's eyes. The anger he'd seen there last time the challenge ring had been formed wasn't there now, but as Alfred thought back to that day, he understood why Marsdon had hated him so much ever since.

"I'm sorry," he whispered for what felt like the millionth time that day.

"For anything in particular?" Marsdon asked, still crouched next to him.

"For making you watch Bennett in the ring." Alfred looked down. "I didn't know how hard it would have been, to watch a wolf you loved... I just..."

"Well, kiddo, I think you're about to find out exactly what it's like. I'm not the last wolf you have to convince to accept you back into the pack." Marsdon stood up. He walked away.

Alfred didn't watch him go. His attention was all on the lone wolf still standing on the other side of the ring. Caden's

pretty blond hair was blowing in the breeze, his lips were as pink and kissable as ever, but his normally stunning eyes were full of tears.

The blood drained out of Alfred's face at the sight.

Caden's feet stepped forward and carried him across the grass. He wasn't sure what was controlling them, but he knew it couldn't be his brain. His mind had shut down completely the moment he had seen Alfred step into that ring.

Reaching the centre of the circle, Caden lowered himself to his knees next to Alfred but he couldn't bring himself to believe he had the right to reach out to the other wolf. Not after he'd screwed up so badly. Not after he'd put the man he loved in limbo. If he'd only had the sense to stick to fluttering his eyelashes and left the more serious matters to other men. If he'd just kept his mouth shut, then...

Caden closed his eyes very tightly and felt fresh tears run down his cheeks. The only thing he could hope for now was that the circle would help Alfred find his true place in the pack. Wasting hope on himself and trying to believe they still had a future together would have been unforgiveable.

"Caden?"

He didn't look up at the sound of his own name. When Caden opened his eyes, he kept them fixed firmly on the blurry little patch of ground between them.

A hand appeared in his field of view and moved cautiously towards his cheek and wiped away a few of the

tears.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. You know I’d never want to hurt you, right?” Alfred whispered as he pulled himself up off the ground and knelt right in front of Caden, their knees touching.

Caden still kept his gaze lowered. Alfred’s jeans were dusty and grass-stained after his scuffles. That was his fault, too. It was all his fault—everything in the whole damn world was his fault. “I’m sorry.”

“Isn’t that my line?” Alfred asked.

Caden frowned at their knees.

“What are you sorry for?” Alfred’s hand on his cheek dropped down to his throat. Slipping it under his chin, he gently forced Caden’s head back.

He had no choice but to meet Alfred’s eyes then. “I never meant for them to put you in limbo. I just wanted them to give you a chance to find where you really belonged in the pack.” Caden swallowed rapidly. He’d never heard his own voice sound so weak, been so unsure of his ability to talk another man into liking him.

Alfred stared at him in silence for a long time. Even while their eyes were locked, it was impossible for Caden to know what he was thinking.

“Thank you.”

Caden blinked. More tears fell.

Alfred wiped them away. “Even if you didn’t do it on purpose, whatever you said to our alphas put me here. It was where I needed to be.” He stroked Caden’s cheek again. There wasn’t the slightest hint of anger in his voice

or his eyes. His scent confirmed it all.

Finally, Caden remembered how to breathe. Closing his eyes, he tried to bow his head as pure relief made him dizzy

“No, don’t.”

It was more a request than an order, but Caden couldn’t refuse the other wolf any more than he could disobey him.

“I love you.”

Caden blinked in confusion at the words, but Alfred didn’t. His eyes remained open. He held Caden’s gaze as if both their lives depended on it.

“After what I said to you earlier,” Alfred said, the tiniest hint of uncertainty creeping into his voice. “I know I’ve no right to hope that—”

“Always,” Caden cut in. He offered the other man a hopeful little smile.

Alfred grinned back, but Caden’s view of that expression only lasted for a fraction of a second because within a moment their lips were together and his eyes were dropping closed to better concentrate on the wonder of the kiss.

Without needing to engage his brain, Caden found his hands sliding into Alfred’s hair. He tumbled back, but Alfred somehow managed to brace their fall. The grass was soft beneath them, the scent of the crushed blades hung in the air, and it was soon joined by the scent of their rising desire.

Desperate to deepen the kiss, Caden leaned up so

far that they rolled over. Alfred let out a playful little growl and kept them tumbling over until Caden was once more on his back, his lover pinning him to the ground.

Feeling the cut on Alfred's lip made Caden whimper. He tried to hold Alfred's head still so he could lap at the wound and kiss it better.

Strong, determined hands wrapped around his wrists and pushed them to the ground. Alfred seemed to still then, as if concentrating very hard on Caden's reactions, needing to be sure he noticed even the tiniest signal his lover was trying to send him.

Caden mewed his pleasure into the kiss. Lifting his hips off the grass, he rubbed a flourishing erection against Alfred through their clothes as he quickly sought to prove how much he loved it all.

A rumbling little growl of pleasure from Alfred was filled with more triumph than Caden ever remembered hearing before, even in the loudest howl from any other wolf.

Whimpering gently, Caden tipped his head back, eager to display any sign of submission he could before the wolf he loved. Alfred immediately pressed a kiss against his neck and—

“I think that more than fulfils the touching requirement.”

Caden jerked his head around to face Marsdon as the alpha's words forced their way into his senses. He and Bennett were still standing on the edge of the challenge circle. So were all the other wolves.

“That's not quite the kind of rolling around you're

supposed to do in there,” Bennett added.

Caden looked warily up at Alfred. Whatever anger and annoyance he expected to see on his face was entirely absent. The only thing in his eyes was pride and possession. He liked that they had all seen them together. He liked that they all knew who Caden was going to belong to soon.

“Yes, we all get the point,” Marsdon said. “You suit very well. We don’t need a complete demonstration. But, if you’ll put each other down for two minutes we can make it official. Then you can go continue in private.”

Alfred sprang up from the ground so quickly, dragging Caden up onto his feet with him, Caden’s head spun.

“—?” was all Caden managed to say, because suddenly Alfred was pulling him forward.

A moment later, just as Caden was starting to catch up, Alfred stopped abruptly. Still trying to make an arousal-addled mind work properly, Caden looked down. The edge of the challenge ring barred Alfred’s path.

“You’re both very welcome in our pack,” Bennett said, all frivolity suddenly leaving his voice.

Marsdon nodded his agreement, his expression just as serious as his mate’s.

Alfred took a step forward, crossing the line in the grass. A little cheer went up from the other wolves. Caden glanced at his lover out of the corner of his eye. From the look on Alfred’s face and the slight blush on his cheeks, it was the first time anyone had ever cheered for him in his life.

Alfred's grip on Caden's wrist tightened, as if his sudden change of fortune had taken away all his bearings and Caden was now his only solid point of reference. Leaning into the other wolf's body, Caden encouraged his soon-to-be mate to slip an arm around his shoulders and allow him to wrap an arm around his waist in return.

A smile that didn't seem to be entirely as confident as it purported to be hung on Alfred's lips as they all made their way to the spot where all the other mating ceremonies in the pack had been conducted.

It took all Caden's strength of will to step away from the other wolf for long enough to be formally mated to him, but it was he who made the decision to separate their bodies. Unless Caden was very much mistaken, it would be the last decision he needed to make on that score for quite some time. Alfred had more than proved he was ready to step forward and take care of them both.

Even when he allowed Caden to step away, Alfred kept hold of his hand. As they faced each other, his grip on Caden remained as tight as ever. The alpha's hands covered theirs, sealing them together, offering them their complete blessing and their unwavering approval.

Caden held Alfred's gaze. He saw every flicker of emotion, saw what the alphas' actions meant to him. Alfred's grip tightened around his hand even further, completely cutting off the circulation to three of his fingers, as if he was scared Caden might try to pull his hand away.

"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,” the alphas recited.

“An unmated wolf takes a mate and forms a bond with another unmated wolf from your pack,” Alfred said, each word full of triumph and confidence. “A bond that can never be broken.”

Caden lifted his gaze. His own brand of strength flowed into his words as he repeated them back to his lover. There was no flirtation, no pretence in there—just honesty, just love.

The alphas barely had time to release their hands before Alfred jerked Caden into his arms. The grip he took on him was almost painful, almost—there was just a touch of control mixed in with the strength, more than a hint of reassurance woven through the possessive gesture.

Other wolves patted Caden on the shoulder and ruffled his hair, but there was little else they could do while Alfred held him like that. He heard congratulations flowing around them, but couldn't lift his head to meet anyone's gaze.

“Don't make me break you up by force,” Marsdon eventually said, laughter dancing in his voice.

When Alfred let him go with obvious reluctance, Caden forced himself to turn away from his mate and accept congratulations from the pack properly.

“If you can keep each other from getting into too much trouble, I guess it's a good thing,” Gunnar muttered as he stepped forward.

“Yeah, I love you too,” Caden told his brother, letting his smile grow into a grin.

Gunnar humped and turned away, leaving Caden momentarily alone. Instinctively seeking out his new mate in the crowd, Caden spotted Alfred on the other side of the pack, listening very carefully to what the alphas were saying to him.

He tried to track the way Marsdon and Bennett's lips moved and work out the words, but it was impossible, and he had to give up any attempt at it when Talbot stepped forward to shyly offer up his own congratulations.

Caden wrapped his arms around the little wolf and gave him a brotherly hug.

"I'm glad you're both so happy," Talbot whispered. "So is Gunnar. He's really pleased you've found a mate. He's just..."

Caden laughed. "He's just Gunnar. You're the only wolf he'll ever admit he gives a damn about."

Talbot blushed, but it was hard to focus on the pretty pink hue in the younger wolf's cheeks, because there was a low, jealous growl coming from right behind Caden's back. Turning around, he found himself once more face to face with his mate.

Before even a fraction of a second had passed, Alfred's hand was wrapped around his wrist. Caden grinned over his shoulder and waved goodbye to the rest of the pack as he found himself being dragged hastily back to the house to solidify his bond with his mate.

The other wolves laughed, obviously as amused as hell at the show of jealousy, but no one tried to stop them.

The ceremonial spot had obviously been chosen for

its prettiness rather than its closeness to the house. By the time Alfred's bedroom door slammed behind them, Caden was more than a little out of breath after keeping up with his mate's frantic pace over that distance.

Collapsing cheerfully across the other man's bed, he smiled up at the ceiling as if it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life. The view was improved even further when Alfred joined him on the mattress, leaning over him and filling his field of vision.

"My mate," Alfred said, with surprising tenderness.

"Yes." There was as much triumph in Caden's voice as he said it, as he'd ever heard in Alfred's.

The other wolf's moved his hand to Caden's wrist and stroked his fingers softly over the skin there. Caden's arms had fallen to either side of his head as he tumbled onto the bed. It was damn near an invitation to pin him down, but Alfred didn't immediately accept it.

"Whatever you want," Caden whispered.

Alfred's eyes left his wrist. He held Caden's gaze for several long seconds. Caden tilted back his chin, baring his neck and offering up his complete submission.

Dipping his head, Alfred pressed a kiss to his throat. He nipped softly at the tender skin. The touch of teeth sent a wave of adrenaline rushing straight to Caden's cock.

His hips rocked up. He already felt as if he'd been hard for several lifetimes. Now that he was finally free to let his instincts take control, it was impossible for him to hold anything back. A needy little whimper escaped from his throat. "Please?"

“Tell me what you want.”

Caden shook his head.

Alfred frowned slightly, obviously not the least impressed with his mate saying no to him in that particular matter.

Caden smiled slightly. There really was more dominance in him than any of the other wolves in the pack realised. Gunnar was going to be kept on his toes by the wolf just below him in the hierarchy.

“If you’re hurt after fighting the other wolves, then—”

Alfred’s frown deepened. “I’m going to hurt like hell tomorrow, but nothing is going to stop us being together tonight.”

“Then I just want you to do whatever you want with me. That’s what feels right,” he said.

Alfred’s frown slowly faded away. A smile twisted his lips. It obviously felt right to him, too. When their mouths came together it was even better. Caden parted his lips and offered complete access to his lover without any hesitation.

Clothes fell away. Caden wasn’t entirely sure who took them off. One minute they were there. The next moment, the world was full of beautifully bare skin. Caden ran his hands over Alfred’s body, glorying in finally being in the other wolf’s bed and being able to truly be himself with his mate.

“Perfect,” he whispered.

Alfred shook his head, but Caden caught his face in both his hands and made him stop.

“You’re perfect,” he repeated, holding his mate’s eyes as he said it, needing him to know he meant it with his whole heart.

Alfred caught hold of his wrists and held them easily against the bed. “You’re the perfect one. You’re gorgeous.”

Caden didn’t deny it.

Alfred chuckled as he seemed to realise that Caden had been told it often enough to believe it. “And all mine,” he added.

That made Caden blush in pleasure. It was something he hadn’t heard before—or at least never believed to be the truth when another man said it.

As they kissed, their bodies rubbed together, and their hard cocks were quickly teased to the edge of orgasm between them. It was all so simple, all so perfect. Until Alfred suddenly pulled back.

Caden let out a whimpering little protest.

“No. Not this time.” Alfred said, in a very determined tone. “This time we’re both going to last long enough to actually have sex.”

Caden wasn’t about to argue with that plan. “Do you have lube?”

Alfred hastily retrieved it from his bedside drawer.

“Shall I?” Caden asked, holding out his hand for it. “Or do you want to?”

Alfred’s fingers curled around the tube as if he was horrified by the possibility that Caden would try to steal it and the right to take care of his mate away from him.

Dominant down to the core...

With his lips curving into an easy smile, Caden rolled over onto his stomach, happy to offer his arse to his lover to do with as he pleased. Alfred seemed to lose any sort of inclination to rush, then. He stroked his palm over the full, round muscles, gently squeezing them as he caressed.

Caden looked over his shoulder and blatantly wiggled his backside in invitation. The move made Alfred smile, but it didn't make him hurry the hell up. Pulling one of the pillows forward, Caden bunched it up and rested his head on it, looping his arms around the softness as he finally let all his attempts to control the situation slowly fade away. With his cheek resting on the soft cotton, he had the perfect vantage point from which to observe his new mate over his shoulder.

He really was glorious. Even as Caden watched, he seemed to settle more easily into his newfound role in their relationship. He was in charge and he was thriving on it.

"I didn't try to be a better wolf because you're gorgeous," Alfred suddenly informed him.

Caden peered over his shoulder at Alfred.

The other wolf was still staring at his arse as he caressed him. "I did it because you believed in me."

Caden squirmed under the other man's hand, not sure what to say.

"A pretty face and a fantastic arse aren't your real strong points," Alfred said as he looked up and their eyes met. "It wasn't your flirting that made me want you, it was those times when you forgot to flirt and I saw the honesty in your eyes."

Caden turned his head, half hiding his face in the pillow. In that moment he had the strangest feeling that he looked exactly the same way Alfred looked when he heard words no one had ever bothered to say to him before.

Finally, as the silence stretched out, Alfred slicked his fingers and slid them between Caden's cheeks. His touch was so gentle, so careful, and Caden loved him for taking care with him—even if there was really no need for him to treat him like a scared little virgin.

He tried to be patient and let the other wolf tease and play with him for however long he wanted, he did his best to simply let Alfred's dominance reign, but eventually he had to reach out and put his hand on Alfred's arm.

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be, love." He was careful to just offer the information. There was no demand, no suggestion regarding what the other man might want to do with that knowledge. And there was no attempt to flirt his way into getting what he wanted either.

His restraint was immediately rewarded. Alfred's hands went to Caden's hips and pulled him up so his knees were underneath him. The moment his arse was offered up high in the air, Alfred had the tip of his slicked shaft against Caden's hole.

There was no hesitation. One jerky thrust had Alfred inside him. Caden tensed at the sudden stretch and he felt the atmosphere change as he let out a little gasp.

"I'm sorry," Alfred blurted out. "I..."

"It's fine. I'm fine. And I like it a bit rough," Caden admitted, twisting around and managing to glimpse his

mate over his shoulder.

Alfred didn't look convinced.

"With a wolf who I can trust, with a mate who I know would never really want to hurt me more than I enjoy, I like it a bit rough," Caden repeated. Keeping any attempt at manipulation out of his words was damn near the hardest thing he had ever done.

Alfred nodded, very slowly.

Caden dropped his head back to the pillow. As his body relaxed and accepted the other wolf, he nodded, letting Alfred know he was ready for anything his mate wanted to throw at him.

The next thrust made him gasp again. His mate had taken him at his word on his preferences. The following thrust took his breath away completely. He clutched at the pillow as wave after wave of sensation rushed through him, almost too quickly for him to process. His back arched as he closed his eyes and automatically pushed out his arse for more.

Alfred's grip on his hips tightened as his cock pounded deeper into Caden's hole again and again, laying claim to him over and over in the most basic way another man ever could.

Caden's eyes fell closed. All that existed then was pleasure—it existed only when Alfred wanted to provide it, and it was all the more blissful because of that. Caden pushed back into every thrust, desperate to come, and even more desperate to make his mate come deep inside him.

He clenched his hole around the other wolf's shaft, trying to milk the orgasm out of him as best he could. When Alfred reached around Caden and took his cock in a firm grip, he knew neither of them would last much longer.

It barely took a few strokes for Alfred to have Caden howling and clawing at the pillow as he came on his lover's command. Alfred's howl soon blended in with his. The habitual discordant note was completely absent from the other wolf's howl now. The realisation seemed to keep pleasure swirling through Caden's veins for far longer than he had thought possible.

Wave after wave of bliss stormed the shoreline of his psyche, almost breaking it down and washing it away, before he collapsed, exhausted, onto the mattress.

The world was slow and sleepy then. Unable to summon up any desire to move of his own volition, Caden merely allowed Alfred to arrange them as he pleased when the other gamma finally separated their bodies. He soon found himself lying with his head on the other wolf's chest, the world around him gently rising and falling according to a rhythm of Alfred's choosing.

No one spoke for a long time—not until a memory picked that moment to jump up and down in the back of Caden's mind and demand his attention, regardless of the lethargy in both his body and his brain.

"What did the alphas say to you after the ceremony?" Caden whispered, his voice softer, sleepier and less flirtatious than he ever remembered it being.

Alfred made a vague noise in the back of his throat as

he encouraged Caden to curl in more comfortably to his side.

“Just before you got all jealous over me and Talbot,” Caden reminded him.

Alfred growled at the memory.

That made Caden smile against his lover’s chest, but it didn’t completely distract him. “What did they say?” he asked again, being careful to make it a request rather than a demand for information.

“That it’s amazing what the love of a mate can do for a wolf,” Alfred admitted.

Caden lifted his head. There was just the tiniest touch of uncertainty still in Alfred’s eyes.

“They were right, you know. I do love you.”

Alfred smiled slightly, but the uncertainty stubbornly stayed put.

“I’m going to keep telling you that every day until you believe me,” Caden promised.

“I love you, too,” Alfred whispered back, with just the hint of a blush on his cheeks.

“I believe you already,” Caden said. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t want you to tell me every day anyway.” There was no flirtation in his voice then. For the first time that he could remember, there didn’t seem to be any need for it.

Alfred chuckled as he pulled him down for a kiss. Caden smiled as their lips met. It was just possible that their mating would prove to be the making of them both.

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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