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In Their Own Skins: Shifting Sands

SCREWDRIVER

An imprint of Torquere Press Publishers

PO Box 2545

Round Rock, TX 78680

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Cover illustration by Pluto

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ISBN: 978-1-60370-577-6, 1-60370-577-5

www.torquerepress.com

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First Torquere Press Printing: December 2008

Printed in the USA

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In Their Own Skins: Shifting Sands
by Kiernan Kelly

Prologue

Idling, the bike growled like a hungry, black-and-silver predator, its headlight dark. Camouflaged by the night, only its distinctive rumble gave away its position. The naked rider crouched low over the handlebars, motionless, revving the engine and waiting with the patience of an experienced hunter.

The purr of an automobile was heard moments before the twin beams of its headlights cut through the gloom. It passed by, a darker blur against the blackness of the night, leaving exhaust-scented spoor in its wake.

A few heartbeats later the motorcycle roared, pulling onto the road and following at a distance.

Popping sounds and the screech of brakes reached Cain's ears as the car ahead of him hit the stop sticks he'd spread across the macadam about a half-mile up the road. His lips curled in a feral smile, white teeth flashing.

As the bike rounded a bend in the road, Cain spotted the car off to the side, its tires flat and shredded. Cain's eyes reflected the weak light given off by the moon, his exceptional vision giving him a clear view of the driver as the man angrily kicked the flattened tires of his car. The driver turned and jumped up and down, trying to flag Cain down as he passed. *Fool*, Cain thought, *it's like an antelope waving to get the lion's attention*. Passing the accident scene, Cain pulled off onto the soft shoulder of the road.

Dismounting, Cain stretched himself to his full height, nearly seven feet of rippling sinew and muscle. Tipping his head from one side to the other, he cracked his neck; the popping of his vertebrae was reminiscent of the sound the tires had made hitting the nail-studded sticks.

This was the moment he lived for, when he could allow himself to shed his flawed and frail human form and assume the one that was far stronger, far superior, and far deadlier. The form that would one day soon allow Cain to take the role that nature had intended for him. Supreme ruler. King. *God*.

Throwing his head back, he bellowed, his voice deepening, his body expanding and lengthening along with the volume of his voice until his roar rolled across the desert like a shock wave, and each step he took shook the earth like a seismic event.

Reptilian eyes focused on the tiny human who screamed piteously and tried to scramble away as Cain thundered toward him.

Soon all that broke the peaceful silence of the desert night were wet, crunching sounds as Cain fed.

Chapter One

Give me a mug of hot buttered rum, a crackling fire, and a lodge filled to the rafters with pretty boys in ski pants, and I'm good to go, Dakota thought, stretching his long legs up on an ottoman as he surreptitiously watched the ski instructors hobnob with the rich students who'd paid for their attention.

Today Dakota had opted to wear his sleek, formfitting, white jumpsuit, the one that kept him toasty warm and yet still managed to show off his finely sculpted body to perfection. It was one of his favorites as he knew it made a terrific contrast with his golden brown skin and long, sable hair, garnering him more than his fair share of attention from the ski staff.

Which, considering that Dakota had no intention of setting foot on any of the slopes, had never owned a pair of skis in his life, and barely knew the difference between a snowplow and a snowmobile, was his entire purpose in coming to the ski resort for a two week vacation in the first place.

There was no force on earth that would *ever* get Dakota to speed recklessly down a mountainside with nothing but a pair of flimsy ski poles between himself and the rocks, trees, and other skiers that littered the slopes. He simply wasn't built for it. Dakota was many things, but *coordinated* was *not* one of them.

He was big and muscular, not lithe and trim like most of the athletes who sliced through the powder here. They were like gazelles, gracefully swooshing over the snowy slopes.

Dakota didn't *do* graceful. Dakota did *lumbering*. He could be fast when he needed to be and was always powerful, but he was more like a bear than a gazelle -- a grizzly bear, to be exact.

That was the form he took when he shifted. Dakota was a werebear, and werebears did *not* strap thin strips of fiberglass to their overly large feet and launch themselves down slippery mountainsides. At least, this *particular* werebear did not. In truth, Dakota had no idea what other werebears did -- he'd never met any.

For that matter, he'd never met *anyone* who could re-arrange his or her body at the cellular level. He alone seemed to have that dubious talent.

He sipped at his hot toddy, sighing as the warm liquor burned a delicious path down his throat to his belly. The hour he'd spent outside loitering near the bottom of the expert slope watching the skiers swoosh down in explosions of white powder had been just long enough to put a rosy glow in his cheeks, but he still felt cold. It was one of the hazards of choosing to remain in his frail human form. The bear would never feel the cold like this. Then again, the bear would not be indulging himself in a weekend of spicy hot toddies and spicier hot sex at a popular ski resort. Not exactly a party animal, he'd be curled up in a nest of leaves in a dark cave, sleeping.

The hot buttered rum went a long way toward warming him, and as Dakota drank it he silently debated his choices.

Three male instructors were clustered near the huge, plate-glass window at the far side of the room that overlooked the slopes, deep in discussion. Two of them were gay. Dakota knew that for a fact since he'd bedded both of them -- at the same time -- the night before last. They'd been fun, but far too wrapped up in their sport to hold his interest past a quick, if athletic, fuck. When the pillow talk had turned to Moguls, Half-pipes, and Big Air, he'd gotten dressed and slipped out.

He turned his attention next to the bartender, a large man with muscles that bulged under a flannel shirt. He'd been giving Dakota double takes every time Dakota had walked through the bar. There was definitely an interest there. Brawny, he had a thick, black handlebar mustache that might prove quite interesting between Dakota's thighs. But the barkeep had just come on duty, and Dakota was horny *now*. He crossed the bartender off his mental list.

His eyes drifted along the length of the bar until they lighted on a man sitting on the very last stool, bent over a drink. His hair was a curious salt-and-pepper mix, although he didn't look old enough to be going gray. It bristled in thick, messy spikes all over his head, curling this way and that. From where Dakota was sitting, the rest of the man looked just as interesting as his hair. He was wearing a pair of old Levis that were so thin they molded to his body like a second skin, and a clinging, navy blue knit sweater that accentuated the muscles in his arms and back.

Immediately, Dakota's prick went into compass-mode, pointing north with painful accuracy. *Him. He's the one.* "Hel-lo, gorgeous," he whispered, draining the last of his toddy.

As if on cue, the man lifted his head, cocking it slightly as if he'd heard Dakota, although that was impossible from his seat across the room. Turning slowly, the man's piercing green eyes locked with Dakota's dark brown ones, electricity sizzling through the air between them. In a heartbeat the man's eyes darkened to a deep forest green, sparkling with lust.

Well, I guess that answers my first question, Dakota thought, licking his bottom lip. The man was gay, or at least bi-curious. There was an invitation in those eyes that was unmistakable, even from across the room.

Unfolding himself from the cushy armchair in which he'd been curled, Dakota ambled over to the bar, his lips tilting in a suggestive smile. Sitting down on the next stool over, he placed his empty mug on the bar and signaled the bartender for a refill.

"Hi," he said, deepening his voice just a little lower than it was normally, letting it slip into the range that could rumble in a man's bones. "I'm Dakota."

"North or South?" the man asked in a gravelly voice that reminded Dakota of a growl.

"Oh, never heard *that* one before," Dakota grinned, rolling his eyes. "Neither, just Dakota."

"Native American?"

"In a manner of speaking," Dakota smiled. It was true, although it might be closer to the truth to say that he was an *Original* American. After all, bears were here before *anyone*. The bartender set down a freshly filled mug in front of him and took Dakota's money in one smooth movement. The strong smell of alcohol and butter drifted up to tickle Dakota's nose.

"I'm Jax."

"Car or High?"

"Touché," Jax laughed, taking a sip of his own drink. It was a martini from the look of it, and from the look of Jax, not his first one that afternoon. "You're a skier?"

"Not really. I'm actually not too fond of the cold. Left to my own devices I'd just as soon hibernate all winter," Dakota replied. Jax was putting out a potent pheromone cocktail that smelled like a combination of vodka and male, and it was making Dakota's mouth water. "I'm just here for the sex."

Jax choked on his drink, wiping the back of his mouth with his hand. "Well, you're honest, I'll give you that."

"Always the best policy, as they say. How about you? Are you here for the slopes?" Dakota asked.

"I play on the slopes a little," Jax answered, slowly looking Dakota up and down. "But I prefer the peaks." His gaze lowered, staring pointedly at the bulge at Dakota's crotch.

"Now, that there would be an expert run," Dakota countered with a smile. "Sure you can handle it?"

"There's nothing I can't handle," Jax smirked, draining his glass. "My room or yours? I've got two queen beds in my room and a bottle of Tequila."

"Nice to see I'm not the only honest guy in the lodge!" Dakota grinned. This was going much easier and smoother than he could have ever hoped. He could practically feel Jax's mouth on his cock already. "I'll see your two queens and raise you a king-sized bed, an honor bar, and a private veranda with a hot tub."

"You win," Jax laughed, standing and fishing out a few bills from his wallet, throwing them down on the bar. Jax gave Dakota a hungry look, one that told him that tonight's menu was going to feature Dakota Tartar.

Dakota led Jax to the bank of elevators in the lobby of the hotel, pressing the button for his floor. No sooner had the elevator doors slid shut than Jax was on him like white on snow.

"Whoa," Dakota grumbled as Jax wrapped that hard body around him, backing him up to the elevator wall. A full head shorter than Dakota, Jax craned his neck, angling for Dakota's lips, but without Dakota acquiescing Jax was unable to reach them. Warm, moist lips kissed the tender skin of Dakota's neck instead, sending ripples down Dakota's spine and a wake up call to his cock. "I hate to break this to you, Jax, but this isn't my room. *This* would be the elevator. My room is somewhat bigger and has a window in it."

"*Need*," Jax growled, nipping at Dakota's throat. "Want you *now*."

"Full sentences, please. What are you, an animal?" Dakota laughed, prying himself free from Jax's embrace. That proved to be more difficult than Dakota would have expected -- Jax was strong even if he *was* smaller than Dakota. "All good things come to those who wait."

Jax leaned his forehead against Dakota's chest, huffing. "Can't help it. You smell so *good*, Dakota," he grumbled. Dakota could feel Jax trembling against his chest. "Can't this thing go any faster?" he asked, twisting away and jabbing at the floor number on the button panel.

"It's been all of fifteen seconds, Jax. Look, we're here," Dakota said, shaking his head at the man. On his worst day Dakota had never been *so* hard up that he hadn't been able to wait to get to his room. Not that Jax's eagerness was necessarily a *bad* thing, he conceded, smiling a bit conceitedly. Felt kind of nice to know that he turned Jax on so much that the man had practically dry humped him in public.

Arriving at his room, Dakota took out his wallet and hunted for the room card key. Behind him, Jax paced the floor, practically snarling with impatience. Dakota gave the guy an amused glance as he slid the key card through the slot, watching the green light flash. He opened the door and held it for Jax to enter the room.

Jax stalked in, shedding clothing as soon as he'd passed over the threshold. Jax's knit shirt hit Dakota squarely in the face as he stepped inside behind Jax, followed in short order by Jax's jeans, boots, socks, and underwear. By the time Dakota had shut and locked the door, Jax was standing near the bed completely naked.

Not that Dakota was complaining. He removed his own clothes at a much slower, distracted pace, as his eyes soaked up the sight of Jax's naked flesh.

Jax's body was lean and hard. His chest was broad for his height, his waist and hips narrow. A few strands of curling, black hair circled his cinnamon-colored nipples. Trailing the crease between the sharply defined muscles of his abdomen was a thin line of hair that led to a thicker patch at his groin. Dakota noticed that Jax's pubic hair was the same curious mix of salt and pepper as that on his head.

But it was what Dakota's eyes found at the end of that happy trail that held him spellbound.

Fully aroused, Jax's cock was thick, hard, and perfect, sticking straight out from his groin as if it was pointing at Dakota. Its tip was already glistening, making Dakota's mouth water in

anticipation. He knew that Jax had legs, but Dakota's eyes never made it past that engorged erection to see them. Jax's cock was hypnotizing, bobbing gently from its nest of crisp curls, beckoning to Dakota.

Like Alice in Wonderland's infamous bottle, it was irresistible. *Come here*, it seemed to whisper. *Eat me*.

Dakota dove for it, his knees practically leaving skid marks on the carpet.

He moaned around the head of Jax's cock as his first taste of Jax filled his mouth with musk and male. Jax was intoxicating, addictive, and had Dakota hardening at warp speed. There was a wildness in the taste that reminded Dakota of a primeval forest, something feral and heavy with raw power. Between his legs, Dakota's erection grew painful, the animal within him responding to the rich and spicy tang, thundering to be set free to dominate, to take, to mate.

Dakota could feel his willpower slip as his need to change battled against his self-control. His incisors lengthened, skimming the delicate skin of Jax's erection. He growled low in his throat, taking Jax in to the hilt, sucking hard. *Mine*, the bear growled in the back of his mind.

Jax's fingers were fisted in Dakota's hair, hips rocking, a deep rumble reverberating in that chest as Dakota released Jax's cock and took the soft sac into his mouth. It was as if Jax was seeking to control him, to set the pace, but the bear within Dakota's skin would have none of it. Dakota slipped his hands around Jax's slim waist, cupping Jax's ass in his large, strong hands. Squeezing, kneading the muscular cheeks between his fingers, he stayed Jax's hips, holding the man firmly as his mouth rolled Jax's swelling balls over his tongue.

Suddenly, Jax tore away from Dakota with a burst of strength that surprised him. Eyes darkened with desire, lips parting in a feral smile that was full of teeth and lust, Jax pulled Dakota to his feet and took Dakota's cock into one hand.

Dakota bellowed as Jax's strong fingers closed around his thick length, squeezing his cock, stroking it expertly. His arms encircled Jax's back, pulling Jax flush against his body, wanting to feel every inch of flesh, every hair, every sharp angle of bone and firm muscle.

He tilted his head, capturing Jax's lips in a scorching kiss, tongue pushing past Jax's willing lips to sweep Jax's mouth. Overcome with the taste of Jax on his tongue, the feel of Jax's body pressed to his, and the sweet torture of Jax's hand on his cock, he threw his head back and roared as he came in a spiraling explosion of ecstasy that threatened to loose the beast against his will.

Somehow, in the throes of unbelievable pleasure, Dakota's hand found Jax's cock, milking it, the sound of Jax's scream as the man came and the splash of liquid heat against his belly sending Dakota even higher until he finally, at last, crested and floated down, shaking with the aftermath of an incredible orgasm.

What the fuck was that? Dakota thought as he leaned his forehead against Jax's, panting and trembling. He felt as weak as a newborn cub, his skin rippling with the last vestiges of his

climax. *All he did was touch me! No blowjob, no fucking... just a couple of strokes and I spout a geyser like fucking Old Faithful? Who is this guy?*

Dakota pulled back to look into Jax's eyes. Still a dark forest green and soft with the lingering effects of his orgasm, they were wide and for the first time since Dakota had met Jax, unguarded. Dakota could see the same confusion in them that he was feeling. Then Jax seemed to remember himself, winking cheekily at Dakota.

"Pretty good, huh?" Jax asked, lips curling into a saucy grin.

"Not bad," Dakota said, unable to resist the urge to smile back. It didn't really matter who Jax was -- all Dakota knew was that he'd just had the best orgasm of his life, and it had come from a simple, quick handjob. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to actually fuck Jax, but he intended to find out.

Later.

Right now it was all Dakota could do to crawl up onto the bed, dragging Jax along with him, slip under the covers, curl himself around Jax's warm body and fall asleep.

Chapter Two

Dakota awoke to the sound of running water.

Blinking, he rubbed a weary hand over his eyes, trying to massage away the headache that had exploded in his skull the instant he'd tried to sit up.

He really needed to lay off the booze. Rum and grizzlies did not make for good bedfellows. They *did* make for Class A, top-of-the-line hangovers, though, and he'd awoken with a corker. His stomach was roiling, his head was splitting, and he had a sex god in his shower.

The last one he could happily live with, the first two had to go.

Easing himself out of bed, Dakota lumbered over to the dresser and slid open the top drawer, feeling around under his neatly folded socks and underwear for the bottle of aspirin he knew he'd put there. Popping a couple into his mouth, he chased them down with a bottle of Perrier snatched from the honor bar.

Naked, he slid open the sliding glass door and stepped out onto the veranda, sucking his breath in as the freezing cold air hit his sleep-warmed skin.

The night before had been amazing. Hell, *Jax* had been amazing. The guy might be smaller than him, but Jax had given him a couple of giant-sized orgasms.

The first had been the *Handjob From Heaven*. The second had been a blowjob that had come unannounced in the middle of the night. Dakota had been awakened from a sound sleep with Jax's hot, wet mouth on his cock. Dakota had decided that Jax had an incredibly talented tongue.

He also had really sharp teeth, Dakota thought, gently probing the love bites that were scattered across his stomach and inner thighs, including a few that had drawn blood. Jax was a real animal in bed.

"Morning."

Dakota turned to smile at Jax, who stood behind him wrapped in one of the hotel's fluffy, white, terrycloth bathrobes. Wet from the shower, his curious salt-and-pepper hair was plastered to his skull, and he smelled of Dakota's shampoo and body wash.

And sex. Even fresh out of the shower Jax smelled like sex on a stick, and hangover or no hangover, freezing cold or no, Dakota's dick shot up and saluted. "Morning. You hungry? Want some breakfast?"

"Yeah, that'd be good."

"Let me jump in the shower and we can head down to the restaurant." He noticed Jax eyeing his stiff cock with a hungry look in those eyes. Shit, if Dakota didn't have such a bear of a headache -- pardon the expression -- he'd offer it to Jax on a silver platter for breakfast. As badly as Dakota felt at the moment, however, an orgasm would likely blow the top of head clean off. "Back in a minute," he growled, padding off inside, heading for the bathroom.

The water was hot. Not scalding, but hot enough to turn his skin a nice, rosy red and sooth away some of the pain in his head. It did absolutely nothing, however, for his erection. Damn. He was so fucking hard that the hotel could use his cock as a diving board over at the pool. Stuffing *that* into his jeans was *not* going to be fun.

Dakota was debating making Jax wait a few minutes more and taking care of his problem while in the shower, when the curtain slid open and an arm snaked in. Long, tapered fingers wrapped around his cock, stroking it under the hot spray of the water.

Jax worked his cock masterfully, squeezing gently, stroking. Dakota braced his arms against the wall on either side of the shower spray, his head hanging low, water beating against the back of his skull and neck. Legs splayed, ass clenching, it didn't take long at all before he came, watching his seed mix with the water, swirling down the drain. It was a tribute to Dakota's strength that he didn't allow his knees to buckle and send him crashing into the porcelain tub.

"Man, that was fan-fucking-tastic," Dakota growled as the disembodied arm pulled the shower curtain back to reveal the rest of Jax, fully dressed and ready to go. Jax was truly the master of One-Handed-Wonders.

"Figured it would be faster if I did it. Hurry up and dry off. I'm hungry." Jax grinned.

Wow, Dakota thought. *I must be as transparent as a pane of fucking window glass.* "How did you know what I needed?"

Jax paused a moment, looking guilty, as if caught in the act of doing something wrong. "Are you kidding? With the weight of that boner you were sprouting I'm surprised you didn't tip over."

Dakota chuckled. Now that his headache was gone and his body was sated -- for the time being, at least -- he found that he was as hungry as a bear, and quickly finished showering.

From that moment on Dakota and Jax became inseparable, without either one making a conscious decision to stay with the other. It had been a seamless, natural progression that had happened without them realizing it. One minute they'd been strangers and the next it was as if they'd known each other a lifetime.

Jax was fun, thoughtful, and one of the best lays Dakota had ever had. He'd bristle when he felt his place threatened, though, and Dakota found himself teasing Jax at every opportunity just to

see the dangerous glint that would creep into those eyes. It was sexy, and never failed to give Dakota an instant hard-on.

"Oh, look at what we've got here," Dakota said, elbowing Jax. He nodded toward a curvy, blonde ski instructor who'd just entered the bar. "Man, you could bounce a quarter off that ass," he said, licking his lips. "Wonder how she skis with those boobs? Not exactly aerodynamic, you know?"

"Fucking snow bunny. Probably couldn't hold on to a cock with both hands and a tube of superglue," Jax growled, narrowing his eyes. They sparked, and Dakota could swear that he could see the hair on the back of Jax's neck stand up straight. It was adorable.

"Sounds like somebody's jealous."

"No fucking way. I'm just pointing out the obvious, that's all," Jax muttered, practically turning green.

"Really? 'Cause it sounds to me like maybe you are."

"No, I'm not," Jax snarled, flashing a heated look at Dakota. "I'm fucking *horny*. I'm going upstairs -- you coming?"

Of course, Dakota had happily followed Jax, knowing that when they reached Jax's room he'd be lucky if Jax gave him time to completely undress before fucking Dakota senseless.

Not that Dakota was content with always playing the bottom. His alpha side wouldn't allow it. Especially when Dakota's masculinity was threatened, like it had been the night before. Not that Jax had *meant* to hurt his feelings, but Dakota nonetheless had felt compelled to assert his dominance.

It had been well after dark. They'd been tossing back shots in the hotel bar -- and had gone one shot too many. Swaying on his feet, Jax stood up and announced that he was going skiing.

Stumbling out of the bar after him, Dakota trailed Jax through the dark to the bunny slope, the gentle incline used by children and those folks just learning how to ski.

But considering that heights were *not* Dakota's favorite thing, it loomed up like fucking Everest in his eyes. "Let's go back to my room, Jax. It's cold out here."

"C'mon you big chicken," Jax taunted, climbing up the hill. Dakota was too drunk to point out that it was full dark, and neither one of them had skis. All he heard was Jax's taunt. Chicken? *Him?* Dakota? He was a fucking *bear*, not a candidate for a bucket of the Colonel's KFC! He growled, following Jax up the hill.

"What do we do now?" he asked, trying not to look down at the bottom of the hill that seemed a million miles away. He felt dizzy, and not just from the booze. Dakota *hated* heights. He hadn't even climbed a tree since he was kid.

"We...we... aw, fuck! Where are my skis?" Jax slurred, looking around, as if expecting a pair to materialize out of thin air.

"You don't have any."

Jax looked perplexed. "Let me have yours, then."

"I don't have any either."

"Well, how the fuck are we supposed to ski without them?"

"I don't know. You're the one who dragged me up here."

"Where are you hiding them? Gimme my skis," Jax said, patting Dakota's chest, as if he had a hidden cache of ski equipment secreted under his turtleneck sweater.

Dakota brushed Jax off, growling. "I don't *have* your fucking skis!"

It happened very quickly. Jax lost his footing, slipping on a small patch of ice. He fell backward, and when Dakota -- none too steady on his feet to begin with -- reached out to break Jax's fall, he lost his balance.

Then everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

Tumbling head over heels, bouncing like a pair of rubber balls, the two men rolled down the hill, sliding uncontrollably over the hard-packed snow. It felt like forever to Dakota until they skidded to a black-and-blued stop at the bottom of the slope, groaning.

"Man, you can't ski worth a shit," Jax grumbled, sitting up. "What the hell were you thinking, dragging me up there? Don't you know better than to try to ski in the dark?"

That was it.

Dakota roared, launching himself at Jax. Rolling through the snow, Dakota finally managed to pin Jax down, using his full body weight to keep Jax immobile. Jax's eyes flashed up at him with anger, glittering like dark emeralds. His entire body was tensed beneath Dakota's, hard and muscular.

Then Dakota realized that their crotches were pressed tightly against one another, and that Jax had as big a hard-on as Dakota was sporting. A devious grin spread across Dakota's face as he leaned in and kissed Jax breathless.

Within minutes, ignoring the frigid temperature, Dakota had them both naked and Jax facedown in the snow as he rammed himself up to the hips in Jax's tight ass. Snow, Dakota discovered, might be freezing cold, but when melted by two hot bodies made an excellent lube.

Later, Dakota was surprised that there was still snow covering the slope the next morning. Things had gotten so hot between them that he would have sworn that they'd melted it all the night before.

Now he bustled about his room, tidying up. Jax would be there any moment, and he wanted the place to look presentable. It was their last night in the resort. Tomorrow they'd both be going their separate ways -- Dakota back to his job as a computer programmer, and Jax to his as a real estate agent.

Dakota wanted tonight to be incredible, a memory worth keeping. He'd ordered a cheese tray for them to snack on while they waited for dinner -- room service tonight, he'd decided. He didn't want to share Jax's time with anyone else on their last night.

The fireplace had been lit and was crackling merrily, casting the bear rug (faux fur thank goodness, or Dakota would have had nightmares for weeks) with flickering orange shadows. He'd found soft jazz on the radio, and had carefully laid out lube and condoms -- although he had to admit that the condoms were rather superfluous after their barebacking adventure in the snow. As a shapeshifter, he wasn't concerned about human diseases, but he couldn't explain why he didn't need condoms to Jax.

Settling down on the edge of the bed, he tried to relax as he waited for Jax to show up.

The minutes ticked by, each one as long as a lifetime. Dakota was hard already, his body keyed up with the expectation of melding his flesh with Jax's, of milking as many orgasms out of Jax as he could during their last night together. He fully intended to fuck Jax blind, to brand his scent and memory into Jax's body so that the man would never be able to forget him.

Dakota already knew that, sure as shit, he'd *never* be able to forget *Jax*. The thought of leaving Jax behind in the morning had the bear within growling with possessive anger. But it had to be that way, and Dakota knew it. He couldn't *ever* have anything more than a passing dalliance, a few days of incredible pleasure. There was no such thing as a permanent relationship for him. There couldn't be. Dakota would rather die than see the horror and fear that he knew would flash in Jax's eyes if Jax ever saw him shift.

Sighing with deep regret, Dakota swallowed the pain and sadness that welled up at the thought of never seeing Jax again, and waited for Jax's knock at the door.

Chapter Three

Jax arrived at Dakota's hotel room bearing a bottle of Tequila and looking like sin personified.

He was wearing a silky shirt that clung to his sculpted chest like a second skin, and a pair of stonewashed jeans that were ripped in all the right places. Patches of tanned skin peeked out through the shredded denim, temptingly lickable.

But it was the cockeyed smile on Jax's face and the gleam in those eyes that had Dakota salivating the moment he opened the door.

Oh, yeah... it was gonna be a long, *hot* night.

"Hey," Dakota said, smiling back. Dakota stepped aside so that Jax could enter, relieving him of the Tequila on the way, watching the way Jax's ass hitched in his jeans as he walked. It was mesmerizing, the way his cheeks moved under the denim. Smooth and fluid, with just enough of a twitch to make things interesting, it made a man want to rip those jeans down and get a better look at the mechanics.

All in good time, Dakota reminded himself. They needed to eat first. *Food, not each other*, he silently admonished his dick when it perked up, eager to go.

"The room service menu is on the table, Jax. Take a gander and see what looks good -- it's my treat tonight." Dakota set the Tequila down on the dresser. He opened the bottle, pouring them each a shot. "What do you feel like having?" he asked, handing one of the small glasses to Jax.

"Meat."

Dakota laughed, shaking his head. He tossed back his shot, feeling the liquor burn all the way down to his toes. *No more*, he warned himself. *Not until after you have something in that hollow leg you call a stomach. You don't want to pass out drunk and miss the last night you have with him.* Another sudden stab of regret twisted Dakota's gut as he reminded himself that it was their last night together, and it took a little doing to push the blues away before they could gain a toehold. "With all the red meat you eat, Jax, it'll be a wonder if you live past forty."

"Bullshit. I don't *only* eat red meat," Jax answered, grinning. "I eat chicken, too."

Dakota laughed, relenting and pouring them each another shot. *One more, but that's it.* He set the Tequila bottle back on the dresser, where he couldn't reach it easily, and joined Jax at the table. Peeking over Jax's shoulder, he glanced at the menu. "The vegetable lasagna sounds good."

"Ew." Jax's nose wrinkled in distaste. "I'm going to have the Porterhouse. Rare. Not even rare -- just tell them to show it a *picture* of the stove and set it on a plate. And a few of those garlic-roasted potatoes on the side, with cheesecake for dessert."

"No salad?" Dakota asked, raising an eyebrow at Jax like a disapproving schoolmarm. Receiving a small, begrudging nod from Jax, he smiled. "I changed my mind. I'm going to order the salmon, the Caesar salad, and a wedge of apple pie," Dakota said, taking the menu from Jax's hand, "with strawberry ice cream." He called room service from the bedside phone and placed their order.

Jax's fingers were drumming a beat on the arm of his chair when Dakota returned to the table and parked himself in the chair opposite. Jax looked a little uneasy, as if he wasn't sure what to do with himself.

Not that Dakota blamed him, not if Jax felt even a tenth of the remorse Dakota felt that their vacation had drawn to a close. He popped a cube of cheese from the tray into his mouth. "Been a great couple of weeks, huh?"

"Yeah. I can't believe that it's almost over already. You know, I'd decided to come up here at the last minute. It was sort of a fluke -- my reservation at a spa down in New Mexico fell through. Travel agent said that they'd overbooked, so I came here instead."

"Glad you did, Jax," Dakota said softly. His lips lifted in a bittersweet smile. "It's been... an adventure."

"Oh, yeah, that it has," Jax answered. He began to gnaw on the cuticle of his thumbnail, looking nervous.

"What's wrong?" Dakota asked, feeling his forehead crease in a frown.

"Nothing. I just get a little antsy when I've been cooped up for too long. We haven't left the lodge in two weeks, except for the one night we went skiing."

"You can't hardly call *that* skiing," Dakota snickered. "It was more like *falling*. A *lot* more," he grinned. "But the ending was pretty sweet."

"Yeah, I'll give you that," Jax replied, chuckling. "Cold, but sweet. Next time maybe we can do it in the hotel's deep freezer."

"Heh, yeah, next time..." Dakota's voice trailed off as he realized that after tonight there wasn't likely to be a *next time*. Jax seemed to be thinking the same thing, because his smile slipped a notch, and he turned his head to stare out the window.

Silence stretched between them, each of them lost in their own thoughts.

A knock at the door announced the arrival of their dinner, providing a distraction. The steward pushed the room service cart in, quickly setting it up and pouring them each a glass of wine. As he accepted a tip and the signed bill from Dakota, his dark blue eyes flickered back and forth between Dakota and Jax.

Interested, definitely interested, Dakota thought. The steward was tall and lanky, his body poured into his tuxedo shirt and pants. At any other time, Dakota might have been tempted to invite him back after his shift had ended, but not tonight. Tonight he had Jax for what was probably the last time, and he wasn't about to share the man with anyone.

A stiff smile ushered the steward out of the room, and Dakota turned his attention back to Jax.

For a while they ate in silence, two hungry men digging in with both hands, scraping their plates clean. Dakota poured them both cups of coffee and then sat back, watching Jax devour the cheesecake, his own dessert sitting untouched.

Watching Jax eat was an erotic experience in and of itself.

There was something honest and sensual about Jax when he ate -- if he disliked the food, he'd let you know in no uncertain terms. But if he liked it, as he obviously did the cheesecake, he'd eat it with a gusto that few men possessed. His enjoyment was plastered across his face, obvious in the way his lips moved, the way his eyes closed in pleasure. He'd place each forkful carefully between his teeth, closing his lips over the tines. He'd slowly withdraw the silverware from his mouth, often followed by his tongue, licking the tines clean. Watching him, Dakota could almost *taste* the creamy cheesecake; he could almost *feel* the silky texture and sweetness on *his* tongue.

"Aren't you going to eat your pie?" Jax asked, nodded toward Dakota's untouched plate.

"Nah. I guess my eyes were bigger than my stomach when I ordered," he replied, shrugging. All Dakota wanted to eat was Jax, any part of him that he'd care to offer up. His lips, a shoulder, a thigh, and especially that tender piece of meat Dakota knew lay under the zipper of Jax's jeans. He looked pointedly at Jax, his eyes shifting rapidly from Jax's eyes to his crotch.

"I'm stuffed. I sure could use a drink now, though," Jax said, rising from his chair. He grabbed the Tequila and their shot glasses and settled himself down on the small sofa near the sliding glass doors to the veranda. "Gonna join me?"

"Sure," Dakota said. Either he was giving out the wrong signals, or his communication skills had suddenly grown a thick layer of rust. Drinking was *not* what Dakota had on his mind. Nonplussed, he joined Jax on the sofa.

"To vacations," Jax said, raising his glass, touching it to Dakota's.

"To vacations, and new friends," Dakota replied. They drank, setting their empty glasses down on the table with a pair of loud *clinks*. Jax immediately poured them both another. "Hey, easy on that stuff. Maybe you didn't know it, but you don't have to get me drunk to get lucky tonight, Jax," he said with a smile. "Sex is pretty much a sure thing."

"I know it," Jax said, downing his second shot. "But I'm feeling a little tense. This is our last night together and... shit, I don't know hardly anything about you, but I *do* know that I feel

crappy about leaving in the morning." He set his glass down, looking sheepish. "There. Now you know how pathetic I am. Getting attached to a guy after only two weeks... what a fucking loser!"

"You're not a loser. Well, if you are, then I'm one, too. I feel the same way, Jax. I felt connected to you since I first saw you in the bar. Remember? When you turned and looked into my eyes I could swear something crackled in the air between us." Dakota was the one who poured the next round, needing a stiff drink to cover the blush he felt blooming in his cheeks.

Their glasses lifted and fell in unison, until Dakota felt the room spin pleasantly and his thoughts drift away from his troubles. By the time he felt the urge to speak again, the bottle was half empty. "Hey! Let's play a game. Troof or Dare."

"*Troof* or Dare," Jax corrected him, slurring the word *truth* just as badly as Dakota had. "You're drunk."

"So are you," Dakota retorted, pouring each of them yet another shot.

"And your point?" Jax giggled, downing his.

"Which one? Truth or Dare?"

"Um... dare."

"Okay... I dare you to... to call the front desk and talk dirty to the operator."

"What are we? Fifteen?" Jax snorted.

"That's the dare. Take it or leave it."

Jax grumbled, but went to the telephone and dialed "0." He stuck his tongue out at Dakota while he was waiting. Dakota blew a sloppy raspberry right back at him.

"Hello? Operator? Mud, mechanic's overalls, and septic tanks. Thank you," Jax said, and then hung up the receiver.

"What the hell was *that*?" Dakota laughed.

Jax shrugged, walking back to the sofa, swaying a bit. "You dared me to talk dirty to her. Those were all dirty things."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Then you should have been more specific," Jax grinned, sitting down and tossing back another shot. "Okay, my turn. Truth or Dare?"

"Truth," Dakota said, a little miffed that Jax had found a loophole in his dare.

"Fine. Tell me your deepest, darkest secret," Jax said, his lips curling in a wicked little smile.

Truth? He wants truth? He wants my deepest, darkest secret? Fine. This will teach him to be careful of what he wishes for, Dakota thought. He was still annoyed that Jax had cheated -- at least in Dakota's opinion -- on his dare. He returned Jax's smile with an evil one of his own. "How about if I *show* you instead of just *telling* you?"

Standing, Dakota walked around to stand in front of Jax, with the coffee table separating them. Stripping off his clothes, watching Jax's face color with an expression of expectancy, he hurriedly got bare butt naked.

And shifted.

His roar rattled the sliding glass doors and would no doubt send hotel security into a dither. He hadn't wanted to let loose as he had, but it had been so *long* since he'd allowed himself the freedom to shift -- not to mention that the alcohol he'd consumed had somewhat impaired his judgment -- that he'd bellowed his joy at the release of his wild child.

Amazingly -- no, *astoundingly* -- Jax wasn't screaming and trying to climb the walls in a panic as Dakota had expected he would. Instead, he was looking at Dakota with an unfathomable expression painted on his face. Jumping to his feet, he began stripping off his own clothing.

If bears had eyebrows, Dakota's would have shot up to somewhere between his ears when Jax, as naked as Dakota had been a moment ago, shifted himself into the form of a wolf.

A fucking *wolf* -- Jax was a goddamned, furry, four-footed, tail-wagging, silver-and-black timber wolf, and he was howling fit to beat the band right there in the middle of Dakota's hotel suite.

Chapter Four

Well, that explained the instant attraction he'd felt toward Jax from the first moment their eyes had met in the bar, Dakota reasoned. He was another shapeshifter! To say that Dakota was floored would be putting it mildly. Jax was the only person who held the same unique ability as Dakota that he had ever met in his life.

Jax jumped the coffee table in a smooth, effortless leap, landing at Dakota's feet, ears flat, his teeth bared and a ferocious growl rumbling in his chest.

Oh, so this is how he wants it, huh? Alpha wolf, my ass! Dakota thought, dropping to all fours and baring his teeth in return. He snapped as they began to circle one another, Jax feinting in and out, Dakota taking a swipe at Jax's head here and there with his heavy paw.

Dakota's bulk was not made for a hotel suite. As they danced their wild kingdom tango, the dining table was tipped over, plates, glasses, silverware flying, gooey apple pie and melted ice cream sprayed all over the rug. The luggage rack was flattened into a twisted piece of useless metal under Dakota's huge paws, and the lamp that sat on the nightstand was reduced to a lump of misshapen brass and electrical filaments.

In addition to the wreckage caused by Dakota's feet, Jax lifted his leg on the rug, the curtains, and the bedspread, and was followed in kind by Dakota, reclaiming his territory by utilizing the same method.

If they didn't stop soon, there wouldn't be anything left to salvage in the suite, Dakota realized.

Plus all the posturing was making him incredibly horny.

He shifted back into his man-form, naked, panting, and sporting a rock-hard erection. "Jax," he murmured as soon as he had lips again, "I *need* you. Gotta fuck, *now!*"

Jax, evidently, didn't need any encouragement. He shifted as well, launching himself at Dakota. They fell into a tangle of arms and legs on the faux fur by the fireplace, skin sliding against skin.

The fire crackled and hissed, sparks floating upward on the smoke as they explored one another's bodies with new eyes, looking for differences and similarities. Not surprisingly, they found few of the former and plenty of the latter.

Dakota could tell that Jax wanted to top, needed to assert his dominance. Facing Dakota in his bear form had humbled Jax -- his wolf couldn't hope to defeat Dakota's bear. It had been a blow to his ego. Dakota could see it in Jax's flashing green eyes, in the way his lip curled and his cock dug insistently into Dakota's belly, steely and burning hot. Dakota could smell the need to dominate in Jax's scent, felt it in the pulse that beat under the skin of his neck as Dakota nipped his throat.

Although Dakota's body was demanding that he *take*, that he pin Jax to the ground and bury himself in Jax's body until the two of them were indistinguishable from each other, he fought the compulsion. As much as it went against his grain, as difficult as it was for him, Dakota would stand down for Jax on their last night together. Dakota's submission would be his parting gift to Jax.

Pushing Jax away, he rolled to his back. Nodding toward the tube of lube and the condom that lay nearby, Dakota put his arms to his sides, bent his knees, and spread his legs for Jax.

Jax froze, but only for a heartbeat. Then he exploded into a flurry of motion, scrambling for the lube and condom. He put the foil condom package between his teeth, ready to rip it open, but paused. Taking it out of his mouth, he looked at it, then laughed and threw it over his shoulder. *No latex necessary*, he thought. If Dakota was anything like Jax -- which he felt safe in assuming was the case -- condoms were an unnecessary precaution. As a shifter, Jax couldn't catch or spread disease, other than maybe rabies. Besides, Jax wanted nothing to come between them tonight other than skin.

He knelt between Dakota's spread legs, admiring the view as he squeezed a healthy dollop of lube into his palm and greased himself. There, lying between Dakota's firm ass cheeks, was Paradise, and Dakota was offering it up to him, conceding to Jax's dominance. The thought of what Dakota was willing to give up for him tightened Jax's chest and brought a lump to his throat. He knew how difficult it must be for Dakota, especially on their last night together. Swallowing hard, Jax returned his attention to Dakota's naked flesh.

Russet brown, ringed in dark hair, the pebbled flesh of Dakota's asshole exposed to the air was an irresistible lure. Ignoring the fact that his hand and cock were slathered with lube, Jax scooted down between Dakota's legs, nosed aside the heavy sac, and pressed his lips to Dakota's hole.

Immediately, Jax's mouth was filled with the heady, musky taste of male, fueling the fire that was already burning in his gut. Like the animal he could become when he chose, Jax growled, lapping at the ridged flesh until Dakota groaned and took himself in hand.

Looking up, Jax watched Dakota stroke himself, his large hand sliding effortless along the length of his cock. Dakota was looking at Jax with hooded eyes, the pink tip of his tongue peeking from between his lips. The hungry look in Dakota's eyes shot straight to Jax's erection, making him so hard that he feared his skin might split. Rising back to his knees, he reached for the lube again. For a moment Jax wasn't sure he could hold off. Just slicking himself some more as he watched Dakota had Jax close to coming.

No way. Not a chance. Under no circumstances would Jax allow himself to spill outside of Dakota's body. Not tonight. Tonight he was going to make damn sure that his scent was so firmly engrained in Dakota's flesh that the man would never forget Jax.

Pushing Dakota's knees to his chest, Jax pressed the head of his cock against Dakota's asshole. Inch by torturous inch, he forced himself to push forward slowly, drawing out the pleasure of sheathing himself inside Dakota's body for as long as he could. Finally, when he was completely encased, and the silken, fiery walls of Dakota's body clenched around him, he paused, savoring the feeling.

"Move, Jax. For the love of God, *please* move..." Dakota eyes were dilated with lust.

Against his own desires -- Jax wanted to relish the feeling of being connected with Dakota for as long as possible -- he did. Slowly rocking his hips, Jax pulled out almost to the tip and then pushed back in to the root, agonizingly slowly, steadily. Each time he withdrew was torture; each time he slid fully inside Dakota was ecstasy. Jax ached for it to last all night, all year, for the rest of his life, but his body had other ideas. He could feel his control slipping, feel his scrotum begin to swell with his coming orgasm.

Picking up the pace, his hips slapped against the flesh of Dakota's ass as he pounded himself into Dakota's body. Angling himself, he hit Dakota's prostate gain and again, until finally Dakota arched from the floor, bellowing. Every muscle in Dakota's body clenched tightly as he came, his ass squeezing the semen out of Jax's cock. Stars exploded in the field of Jax's vision as an orgasm of cosmic proportions engulfed his entire being, reducing him to a bundle of exposed nerve endings.

Jax shuddered, body jerking spastically, uncontrollably, totally consumed by a pleasure so great that it bordered on pain. When it was finally over, when the last tremor passed through him, leaving him feeling wrung out and completely sated, he slid out of Dakota's body and crawled on top of the man.

Kissing Dakota softly, he laid his head on Dakota's chest, listening to that heart beating under his ear, breathing in the heavy scent of sex and male that hung in the air and clung to their damp skin.

It was more than the sex, Jax decided, although that had been outstanding. It was the way Dakota made him *feel*, protective and fierce, soft and loving, all at the same time. It was the knowing that they were the same under the skin, that Jax didn't have to watch everything he said or did to avoid his secret slipping out. Dakota *knew*, and wanted him anyway, and vice-versa. How the hell was Jax supposed to leave Dakota now?

The answer was simple.

He couldn't.

Chapter Five

Later they decided that it had been by mutual agreement, although Dakota conceded that it had been Jax who had first suggested that they separate only long enough to break their leases, quit their jobs, and pack up their belongings.

It came as a relief to Dakota. During the past two weeks they'd grown inordinately fond of each other, forging a bond between them that was stronger than merely the sexual attraction that sizzled between them whenever they were in the same room together. It would have been nearly impossible for Dakota to leave Jax, knowing that he'd never see the man again. The bear within Dakota had been furious that Dakota's human side was even considering it. Dakota knew that had he left Jax, he would have spent the rest of his life regretting it.

Dakota now knew the reason for his unfathomable attachment to a man he'd only known for two weeks.

He and Jax had mated.

Wolves mated for life, and while bears were less than strict about whom they bedded down with, Dakota's human nature and experiences had helped temper his animal desire to roam. He was content to be with Jax. In fact, his stomach knotted painfully if he even considered the *possibility* of leaving Jax, especially after that last night in the hotel.

He was hooked, plain and simple, and Dakota loved every minute of it.

Sitting on the hood of his car at the gas station where he was supposed to meet up with Jax, Dakota pondered the events that had brought him to this point in his life.

Rationally, Dakota understood why he'd bonded so quickly and so closely with Jax. Until that moment when Jax had shifted in Dakota's hotel room, Dakota had been convinced that he was the only person on the planet who had the ability to shift shapes.

Oh, sure, the movies were rife with werewolves and other skin-changing creatures, most of which were portrayed as monsters. In addition, Dakota had read as many fictional novels about shifters as he could stomach, and enough non-fictional medical tomes to fill a library. But *none* of them had come close to explaining why Dakota could shift.

In the movies and books, shapeshifters were almost always wolves, and were either the victims of a curse, the products of some unrealistically convenient hazardous waste accident, or a member of an entire race of creatures separate from humans. Dakota fell into none of these categories.

The medical community came no closer to pinpointing the cause of Dakota's abilities. They labeled shapeshifters as mentally or physically diseased. Dakota knew he wasn't deranged, he

didn't *imagine* shifting into a bear, and he knew that he wasn't sick. He didn't suffer from *hirsutism*, the medical condition that caused a person to grow excessive hair on their bodies.

He'd been born human, just like everyone else, a normal, healthy, bouncing baby boy. Dakota's mother had died early on, killed in a hit and run accident. His father, a cold, distant man who'd never fully adjusted to the fact that his young wife had died and left him with an infant son, had raised him. Not exactly Father of the Year material, but it hadn't been the worst life Dakota could have imagined. He'd grown up thinking that he was just a normal kid.

That is, until the year Dakota had turned fifteen. The year he'd suffered a growth spurt and his voice had cracked, Dakota had discovered that he wasn't *normal* at all.

Dakota had just gotten his first after school job working as a bag boy in the local supermarket. Considering the fact that his hometown was little more than a wide spot in the road between no place and nowhere, Dakota's securing a job of *any* kind was an achievement, and he was rightly proud of it.

Every day he'd show up for work, proudly don his apron and nametag, and spend the next six hours shoving groceries into paper bags.

Then one day, just a few months after his fifteenth birthday, things had gone horribly wrong.

Dakota had woken that morning feeling a bit peaked. Not really *sick*, not enough to stay home from school or work, but not really himself, either. He had an itch under his skin that simply wouldn't go away, no matter how much he scratched it. By the time he walked the mile from school to the supermarket, the itch had intensified to a nasty burning sensation. It felt as if his insides were on fire, and it was only his skin that contained the flames.

Still, he wasn't about to call in sick. Not when there were at least twenty other boys in the area who would jump at the chance to take his job from him. He resolutely went about his business, staunchly ignoring the rising discomfort of the burning sensation.

Then, just as he'd been walking out of the back door into the parking lot, grateful that his shift was over and he could go home and soak in a bathtub full of ice water, he'd shifted.

Without warning, the heat within his core reached nuclear meltdown. His flesh expanded, his bones elongated, his weight doubled, tripled, quadrupled, quintupled. His clothing shredded, falling in rags to the pavement. Dakota had fallen to the ground when it had started, slammed to his knees by the alien sensation of his body shifting its shape. When it finally slowed and then stopped, he'd stood up.

And had towered at least seven and a half feet from the ground.

Frightened and confused, he'd raised his hands to his mouth and discovered that they had changed into wide, flat, hairy paws. He'd screamed, but instead a roar had thundered in his ears, loud enough to rattle his bones.

Beginning to run, Dakota suddenly found it more expedient to drop to all fours, lumbering across the street and into the forest in a huge, silvery-brown blur. By the time he made it safely into the screen of foliage, his traitorous body changed back into his boy-form, leaving him shivering and naked in the cold forest.

To this day, Dakota swore that the worst mistake he'd ever made was telling his father about his experience. Terrified, unable to understand what was happening to him, he'd gone to his old man and had told his tale in a tearful, trembling voice.

Of course, his father hadn't believed a word of it and had accused Dakota of taking drugs. At his wits' end, his emotions ragged and his temper stretched to the snapping point, Dakota had shifted, right there in the living room, in full view of his father.

That's when his father had grabbed the shotgun he'd kept in a rack near the door and had started shooting. Luckily for Dakota, his father hadn't had the damned thing loaded, or Dakota's brains - human, bear, or otherwise -- would have been splattered all over the living room wall.

Dakota had taken off running and had been running ever since. It hadn't been easy, not by a long shot. That first year, he'd lived more as a bear than as a human, hiding in the forest, rummaging through trashcans at night for food. But he'd survived.

Better than survived. He'd pulled himself up by the bootstraps. Through trial and error he'd learned how to cage the beast, how to keep himself from shifting when his emotions ran hot. Coming out of hiding, he'd found work, saving money by hunting for food in his bear form and sleeping in the forest until he could afford an apartment. After a while, he'd managed to first get his GED and then his degree in computer science at the local community college. A good paying job had followed. Several years later, he had money in the bank, a handle on the entire shifting thing, and now he had Jax.

Jax's experience was quite similar to Dakota's, with only minor variations. He'd shifted for the first time in the basement of his house, and it had been his mother who'd wielded a weapon at him, said weapon being Jax's own baseball bat.

A car horn blared, startling Dakota out of his thoughts as Jax pulled into the gas station in his battered, white Suburban. He jumped out of the truck waving papers at Dakota, looking as excited as a little kid on Christmas Day.

"We got it!" he cried, running up to Dakota, throwing strong arms around him and hugging him tightly. "We got it!"

"The ranch? Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! Gave 'em a check and signed the papers this morning. Got the keys in my pocket. It's a done deal, Dakota!"

Dakota whooped, a real, deep, heartfelt bellow of joy. Their own place, where they could be themselves, in whatever form they chose, without fear of discovery. They'd even decided on a name for it already -- The Shifting Sands Ranch.

It was a dream come true.

Or it was until they actually moved in. Then it sort of turned into a nightmare.

The two-story, Alpine-style ranch house sat on nearly three hundred acres of thickly forested land, including a few acres of pasture. There was a good-sized barn and several smaller outbuildings scattered over the cleared section of the land.

Setting their luggage down in the center of the main room, Dakota and Jax looked around, their grins slowly fading from their faces.

Somehow on the walk-through they'd failed to see *exactly* how much work the house needed. They'd both been so excited to find something like this in their price range that even Jax, a real estate broker, had been blinded. But the moment they walked into it with the ink barely dry on the deed, the defects had become glaringly obvious.

There was a hole in wall of the living room that was the size of Dakota's head. A beam of sunshine shone in through it, illuminating the cracked and crumbling bricks of the fireplace.

The walls were gouged in places, deep grooves carved into the pine paneling. The floor was hardwood, but it was pitted and stained with age. In the kitchen, the appliances had last seen the light of day sometime in the seventies, and there was a squirrel nest in the sink.

The four bathrooms were tiny and encrusted with mold. The half-dozen small bedrooms had horrid cabbage-rose wallpaper that was faded and peeling, and rugs that had probably been blue at one time, but were now a worn, tired gray.

And *everything* was covered in a smooth, thick layer of dust.

"We must have been fucking blind when we walked through this place!" Dakota growled, flicking a dead fly off the kitchen windowsill.

"It'll be fine," Jax said confidently. "We can do most of what needs to be done ourselves. For the rest, we can call in a carpenter and a plumber."

"And an electrician, and a dry-wall guy, and septic tank service, and..."

"It'll be fine, Dakota. It's *ours*," Jax said, as if that made everything all right.

Funny, but it did at that. It had taken a huge chunk of their combined life savings, but they owned the ranch outright, lock, stock, and broken barrel. Dakota grinned, taking Jax's face between his hands and kissing the man soundly. He spent some time exploring Jax's soft, warm

mouth, greedy for the taste. "First time in our own place, Jax," he said, looking into Jax's eyes, wagging his eyebrows.

"First time anywhere in nearly a month, Dakota," Jax replied, a little breathless. His lips were slightly swollen from Dakota's kiss, and he looked every bit as hungry.

"I missed you," Dakota whispered, kissing Jax again, much softer this time. He threaded his fingers into Jax's hair, letting the smooth strands of salt and pepper run through them. Jax's palms pushing against his chest broke their kiss this time.

"Outside."

"What?"

"I want to make love to you outside, Dakota. Not in here. Not in this mess," Jax said firmly, swiping his finger through the dust that coated the kitchen counter.

Grinning, Dakota followed Jax outside, both men shedding their clothes as they went through the house, leaving a trail of tee shirts, jeans, underwear, socks, and shoes in their wake. By the time they stepped out of the front door, the dying rays of the sun hit their bare flesh.

Good God, he's beautiful, Dakota thought, taking a moment to appreciate Jax's body in all of its naked, unabashedly male splendor. The sunset cast his skin golden-red, darker shadows accentuating the curves and hollows of his body, delineating his muscles.

Dakota wanted to trace every inch of Jax with his fingers and tongue, until he'd burned a map of Jax's body into his memory.

Suddenly, the hauntingly beautiful sound of wolf song reached them from somewhere deep in the woods. Jax froze, looking over his shoulder toward the dense forest. Again the eerie strains rose and fell, as more voices joined the first.

When Jax turned back to Dakota, his cheeks were flushed, and there was a sparkle of excitement in his eyes. Dakota laughed, knowing that if Jax's tail had been in evidence it would have been wagging eagerly. "Go on," he said, nodding toward the forest. "Go see what they're up to. But don't you dare come home bloody and bitten, Jax. I'm not going to spend our first night here stitching your sorry ass back together because you got into a bitch session with another alpha." Dakota smiled.

Jax's face split in a wide grin, and a moment later he was loping toward the forest in a silver and black streak, melting into the brush.

Dakota rolled his eyes and shook his head, watching Jax go. Alone, he studied his erection forlornly. "Looks like it's gonna be a little while yet, old friend," he said, shrugging. "Can't blame him. I've been itching to do the same since we got here."

In the next instant Dakota was lumbering into the forest, fluid muscle moving under shaggy, silver-brown fur, just as eager to explore their new home as Jax had been.

Over the next two weeks, Jax and Dakota had scrubbed, beaten, scoured, swept, chipped, ripped, spackled, and painted practically non-stop. They'd replaced pipes, patched holes, laid down new linoleum in the kitchen, and relocated the squirrel nest from the kitchen sink to a tree in the front yard. They'd bought new furniture -- at least it was new to *them*. Most of it, except for their bed, had come from second-hand shops.

The house was slowly taking on their personalities, slowly changing from what used to look like the set of a creepy farmhouse horror flick to something that resembled a home.

In the damp, dank shed next to the house, Jax sat back on his heels, covered to the elbows in grease. He swiped his arm over his forehead, leaving a black streak behind. He'd been working on the generator, clanking, clanging, and swearing up a blue streak for most of the day and had finally gotten the genny to sputter to life. It groaned like an old man getting up after a long, cold winter night, wheezing and joints popping, but at least it was working.

"Hey! You got it started! That's great, Jax!" Dakota said.

Jax looked over his shoulder to see Dakota grinning at him from the doorway. Dakota was wearing a white, paint-splattered muscle t-shirt, and his skin glistened with sweat. There was a yellow stripe across his left cheek, and a glint in his eyes that Jax knew well. It was a look that told him Dakota was wanting to work up a sweat of a different variety altogether.

That was just fine by Jax. He was way overdue for a break. Tossing the wrench he'd been holding to the side, he stood up, wiping his hands on a rag. "Yeah, it'll do for now, anyway. We're seriously going to have to think about getting a new genny before next winter, Dakota. This one is being held together by spit, prayer, and a roll of duct tape."

Jax threw the rag over his shoulder, advancing on Dakota. He ran a finger across Dakota's broad chest, connecting the dots of color that speckled it. "Did you manage to get any of the paint on the walls? You look like a kindergartener's finger painting gone horribly wrong."

"Hey! I worked my butt off in the house painting the kitchen while you were in here tinkering."

"Tinkering! I wasn't *tinkering* -- I was performing the equivalent of open heart surgery on that bitch. Successfully, might I add."

"It sounds like it should be on life support. Can a generator sue for malpractice?"

Jax growled playfully and abruptly took hold of the neckline of Dakota's muscle tee. In one quick movement, he shredded it in two, baring Dakota's chest. "Oops. Look what you made me do!" He gave both of Dakota's nipples a quick pinch.

Dakota hissed at him, then grabbed the front of Jax's work shirt and ripped it wide open, sending buttons flying everywhere. He returned the favor to Jax's nipples.

Jax grinned, grabbing at the waistband of Dakota's thin sweatpants.

"Oh, no. Don't do it, Jax. Tear my pants and I'll rip a hole in *you*."

Rrrriipp.

Dakota's pants split, and having gone commando that day, his heavy cock was bared to the wind. Jax grinned evilly, licking his lips as he looked down at it.

"Goddamn it, Jax! They were my favorite sweats! You owe me a new pair." To anyone else, Dakota would have sounded angry, but Jax knew him better than that. He was playing, and Jax was more than up for the game.

"How about we take it out in trade?" Jax chuckled, easing himself down onto his knees. He looked up, admiring Dakota's rock-hard abs and sculpted chest, running his hands over Dakota's powerful thighs. *Oh, man, is there anything better than raw, sweaty man?* he thought as he eagerly opened his mouth and sucked Dakota's cock in.

Jax rolled his tongue over Dakota's softened prick, feeling it begin to fill. His fingers teased Dakota's balls, pulling gently, weighing the furred sac in his palm. Above him, Dakota moaned, arching into his hand and mouth.

"Oh, yeah, that's sweet." Dakota's fingers threaded into Jax's hair, hips beginning move. "More, baby. Give me more."

Ask and ye shall receive, Jax thought happily, sucking harder. He let go to run his tongue down the length of Dakota's cock, following the path of the vein that beat just below the surface of the velvety skin. Up again to the fat head, lapping in small circles around the tiny slit before swallowing him whole again.

Dakota tugged sharply on his hair. "Get up here. Want to touch you."

Jax yelped and let go of Dakota's cock. It bobbed before his eyes, glistening with saliva and drops of precome. Jumping to his feet, Jax unzipped his jeans and pulled his prick free. He tapped the head of his erection against Dakota's, slicking it with Dakota's juices.

He reached for Dakota's erection, stroking both at the same time. Dakota's hand covered his, working their cocks in an easy rhythm that slowly increased along with the fire in Jax's belly. Jax leaned up, searching for Dakota's lips. They met in a deep, open-mouthed kiss that was like throwing gasoline on an open flame. Jax's balls tightened instantly, and he found that he couldn't hold back. He broke the kiss, crying out, his orgasm rocketing through him.

Dakota came at nearly the same time, one feeding off the other, both watching their cocks spurting over their joined fists.

"Oh, man, Jax. Feel free to shred my clothes any time you want to," Dakota said once they'd both caught their breaths. He stripped off the tattered remains of the sweats and used them to wipe himself off, then handed them to Jax. "I like the way you pay your debts."

Jax grinned. "Yeah? Wait until you see what I do when I owe you money." He swatted Dakota with the remains of the sweatpants, then led the way to the house, Dakota trotting bare-assed behind him.

Chapter Six

"It stands to reason, Jax." Dakota was adamant, pressing his point, and Jax was becoming increasingly frustrated because he couldn't find a hole in Dakota's theory.

It *was* logical, but Jax's mind didn't want to wrap around the possibility. They'd been discussing it for hours. Hell, for *days*. Dakota wouldn't let it go, even though Jax had tried to change the subject a million times.

"There *must* be more people like us out there," Dakota said for the fiftieth time. "If you and I exist, then it makes sense that there would be others."

"Even if there are, what's that got to do with *us*?" Jax growled, folding his arms over his chest. Unable to argue his point rationally, he resorted to the old, reliable standby -- being pigheaded.

"Don't you remember what it was like, Jax? Before we met? When you were alone? I do," Dakota said, his expression softening. "How many kids are afraid right now, scared out of their wits by what's happening to their bodies? How many are alone? How many in danger?"

"Technically speaking, I suppose there could be others," Jax grudgingly admitted. "But even if there are, I repeat, what does that have to do with *us*?"

"We have all this land, Jax... "

"Oh, *hell* no!" Jax roared, sitting up straight, his eyes popping open wide. "You aren't suggesting that we bring people *here*, are you? *Outsiders*? You know how I feel about strangers, Dakota. This is *our* place, our territory. *Ours*, as in yours and mine."

"Don't you want a pack, Jax?"

"Oh man, playing the wolf card is low, Dakota. Besides, you're my pack," Jax grumbled, prickling.

"Pretty sorry pack with only two members."

"Dakota... "

"C'mon, Jax! Besides, you want to make this ranch viable, right? Well, we can't do that alone. We know next to nothing about ranching, other than the fact that there's too much work for two men to do alone. If we hire norms to work it for us, we can say goodbye to the freedom to shift whenever we damn well please," Dakota rationalized. *Norm* had become their catch phrase for anyone who wasn't a shapeshifter -- to date that applied to everyone else on the planet. "We'd be right back to hiding who we are again."

Well, Dakota had a point there.

"What makes you think that anyone would want to come back with us, anyway?"

"We won't know until we find someone and ask," Dakota said, smiling. He looked a little smug, as if he thought he'd won.

Stubbornly, Jax dug in his heels, refusing to give in so easily. "I wouldn't even know where to begin *looking*, Dakota."

"I've been thinking about that." Dakota smiled, rolling over onto his side. He bounced out of bed, snatching a newspaper from the top of the dresser. "Look at this morning's paper. I picked it up when I went to town for groceries."

Jax took the paper from Dakota's hand, shooting him an exasperated look. Honestly, if the man got any more hyper, Jax would have to peel him off of the ceiling. He looked down at the paper in his hand. "The *National Star*? Come on, Dakota... you have to be kidding!"

"No, look! It's right there on page one. Look at the headline, Jax! *Panther-woman Prowls Iowa Cornfields!*"

"Yeah, I see it. Right between *Aliens Ate My Rosebushes* and *Scientists Name Chocolate a Food Group*," Jax said, rolling his eyes.

"She could be real, Jax. Like us."

"Dakota... "

Dakota rolled over on top of Jax, nuzzling under his jaw. Warm lips sucked hard at the skin of Jax's throat, a hot, wet tongue licking the small hurts. Thick fingers teased at Jax's nipples, flicking and rubbing at the tiny nubs until they stood up at full attention. Then the fingers slid down Jax's belly and slipped under the waistband of his pajama bottoms.

"Dakota, you're not playing fair," Jax gasped as Dakota's fingers wrapped around his stiffening length. "This is blackmail. Coercion. Cruel and unusual--"

"I can stop if you want me to," Dakota said flippantly, releasing Jax's cock.

"Don't. Even. Think about it." Jax growled, grabbing Dakota's wrist and shoving his hand fully inside Jax's pajama bottoms again.

"Are we going to Iowa?"

"Dakota!"

"Are we going to Iowa?" Dakota asked again. His thumb slid across the head of Jax's cock, teasing at the small slit, spreading the moisture it found there over the rounded head.

"Oh! Oh... okay! You win! Goddamn it, Dakota, you don't play fair!" Jax hissed, his pelvis lifting up, trying to feed his cock into Dakota's hand. "Please, just don't fucking tease me anymore!"

"Me? Tease? *Never!*" Dakota laughed, ducking his head under the covers. The next thing Jax knew, his shorts had been ripped wide open and Dakota had swallowed him to the root, humming happily while giving Jax one of the most blindingly fabulous blowjobs he'd had in quite a while.

It was a blowjob worth a trip to Iowa. Hell, for a blowjob like that one, Jax would crawl there on his hands and knees and search every fucking row of corn in the entire state by himself, if that's what Dakota wanted.

They found Deidre in the cornfields, adjacent to a filling station just outside of Barnes City, Iowa.

Barnes City boasted a population of 210, which Jax thought hardly constituted a *crowd*, never mind a *city*, but it *did* have a gas station. That turned out to be a neat piece of luck for them, considering that the needle on the fuel gauge in their truck had been firmly in the red zone for the past ten miles or so. Another few feet and they'd have gone from driving to pushing, which would have *really* put Jax in a bad mood.

The station was a two-pump affair. There was a pyramid of old tires stacked higher than Jax's head to the left, and a grayed picnic table to the right, the station itself sitting like a small, oil-stained box smack in the middle of the two.

Dakota coasted in under the flickering, white lights of the awning that covered the pumps, turning off the engine. It sputtered and grumbled for a while in protest before finally falling silent.

While Dakota pumped a tank full of regular into the bottomless gut of the Suburban that he'd nicknamed *The Beast*, Jax decided to stretch his legs and utilize the facilities.

Said facilities were locked, necessitating a trip inside the station to procure the key. Jax accepted the key (chained to a hubcap, no less), and walked around the side of the building to the Men's Room. Just as he fit the key into the lock, the hubcap banging noisily against the door, a furtive movement in the fields that bordered the station caught his sharp eye.

Squinting a bit, Jax could make out the shape of something large and tawny slipping between the stalks of corn. Bending slowly, he set the key and hubcap down on the ground, making as little

noise as he could. He backed away until he'd rounded the corner, then broke into a run, hightailing back to the Suburban.

"Dakota!" Jax called in a hoarse whisper. "I think I found her."

"Who?" Dakota asked, setting the nozzle back in its cradle.

"Britney Spears," Jax replied sarcastically. "The panther-woman, you dumb-ass, who else? Come on! She's in the back field."

They turned the corner of the building, approaching the cornfield. Suddenly they froze in their steps at the low growl that rumbled from the rows. A pair of reflective eyes shone between the dark green leaves of the corn stalks.

"Maybe one of us had better shift, just in case she's not like us. If she's a real panther, things could get ugly pretty quick if we try to approach her."

"Swell. *Now* you think of that?" Jax snorted, shooting Dakota a dirty look. "I suppose by '*one of us,*' you mean *me.*"

"You're prettier than I am."

"Don't play to my ego. Fine. Here, hold this," Jax said, handing Dakota his wallet and keys. The growling in the corn increased in ferocity as he quickly shed his clothing, but when he shifted into his wolf it stopped dead, as if someone had pulled the plug.

There was a slight rustling of leaves and a moment later a woman's voice called to them. "Y-you... you're like *me,*" she said, her voice soft with astonishment.

"Yes'm, we are. I'm Dakota. I shift into a bear. This here is Jax. He's... well, you can see what he is."

"A wolf. He's a *wolf.*" The voice was still filled with awe, although the woman made no attempt to leave the shelter of the corn.

"That's right. Pretty, too, ain't he? 'Course, I don't want to tell him that too often -- he tends to get a swelled head." Dakota chuckled. Jax lifted his head toward Dakota and growled, then turned back, reassuming his non-threatening stance, his tail thumping the pavement.

"I... I'm a cougar."

"They're calling you the panther-woman," Dakota said, nodding.

Jax looked over his shoulder toward the gas station. Any minute now the attendant was going to round the corner looking to see what was taking the two strangers so long.

"*Cougar*," the woman corrected, an echo of a growl in her voice.

Okay. Evidently that's a touchy subject, Jax thought, whining a bit. He bumped Dakota's leg with his head. *Let's go, Dakota. Either get her out here or leave her, but let's go.*

"Are you hungry, ma'am?" Dakota asked, his hand absently stroking Jax's head.

"My name's Deidre," she volunteered, pushing aside a frond, peering out at them. "And I'm *starving*."

"How about we three go find us some grub and get to know one another a little bit better?"

The most pressing need common to *any* species -- *food* -- is what got Deidre into their Suburban, stretched out on the back seat, her head resting on her paws and her tail swishing nervously as they drove to a motel. Dakota paid for two rooms and made a quick run to the local diner.

Changed into her human form, a curvy blond, and wrapped in a hotel towel that barely covered her from breast to thigh, she'd told them her story in between bites as she devoured a dozen rare burgers, fries, and a liter of Coke.

Unlike Dakota and Jax, her family hadn't turned Deidre out when she'd changed. Then again, Deidre's family was far more comfortable with her ability than anyone else might have been. Her parents were shifters, both cougars.

Deidre had lived as normal a life as a family of shapeshifters could, up until a year ago. She'd been eighteen and still living at home when her parents had been killed in a car crash, victims of a drunk driver.

Her parents had been Deidre's entire world, and their deaths had nearly destroyed her. Turning her back on the rest of humanity, she'd shifted, and had spent the last year as a cougar roaming the cornfields of Iowa.

"My father was a genetic researcher, and his theory was that we were the next step in the evolutionary ladder. He used to say that because animals' natural habitats have been disappearing so quickly, and so many species were becoming extinct, that nature found it necessary to combine humans and animals into one species so that they could survive. I don't think my parents knew anyone else like us, though. I never met anyone who could change, except for us." Deidre popped the last bite of burger into her mouth.

"Dakota here thinks that there are a lot more of us," Jax said, helping himself to a French fry. He had to admit that Deidre's father's theory made sense, at least to him.

"We own a ranch up in Wyoming, Deidre. You're welcome to come back with us, if you like," Dakota offered, smiling warmly. "It's secluded, lots of privacy. There are acres of forest full of game, and we can shift whenever we want to without having to worry."

Jax could have bit him. They agreed to *look* for the she-cat, not adopt her.

Deidre narrowed her eyes at them. "What exactly do you expect me to do up there? You're strangers," she growled. "Why should I trust you?"

"See? She doesn't want to go. Let's go to our room and get some sleep, Dakota. We've got a long drive back tomorrow," Jax said, scraping his chair back.

"Sit your ass down, Jax," Dakota ordered, shooting Jax a black look. He turned to Deidre. "We expect you to pull your weight, helping us with chores and such, but that's it."

"I'm not sleeping with you," Deidre said firmly, folding her arms across her chest.

"Sister, trust me when I say that comes as a relief to us both," Jax said, bristling. There was a distinct odor in the air that told Jax differently. Given the chance, Deidre *would* sleep with them. She was in heat, and that made Jax exceedingly nervous. "C'mon, Dakota. I'm tired."

"Will you hush up?" Dakota grumbled at him. "Deidre, we don't expect you to do anything you don't want to do. Jax and me, we're a couple. Understand?"

"Huh?" Deidre said, cocking her head. Comprehension slowly dawned in her eyes. "*Oh...*"

"Oh, good. She's got it. For a minute I thought we were going to have to draw her a picture. *Now* can we get to bed?" Jax whined.

"Will you come back to the ranch with us?" Dakota asked, completely ignoring Jax.

I am going to take a huge bite out of your hairy hide when we get back to our room, Jax thought, folding his arms and sitting back in a snit.

"I guess. It'll beat hunting rats in the corn at any rate," Deidre said, smiling for the first time since they'd found her.

Dakota grinned at him, and Jax sighed in defeat, nodding. His pack, whether he wanted it to or not, had just increased by one member. "Welcome to the pack," he muttered, smiling wryly.

Chapter Seven

Their room smelled a lot like piss, beer, salt-n-vinegar potato chips, and mothballs, an unsavory combination to say the least. Dakota's nose wrinkled as he sniffed the air. Tracing the odor to the bright orange and pink bedspread, he ripped it off and threw it into a corner of the room. He'd be goddamned if he was going to let that filthy thing touch any part of his skin. Even bears had *standards*.

Jax hit the shower, leaving his customary trail of clothing scattered across the floor. Dakota rolled his eyes and picked up after Jax, thinking that for a wolf, Jax was a real pig. Jax's personal habits were something they were going to have to work on when they got back home.

Shedding his own clothes, Dakota sat on the edge of the bed waiting for his turn in the shower. It was too small for the both of them to fit in there, or he would have jumped in with Jax. Nothing was sexier than his wolf, wet and soapy. The thought of Jax's slick skin sliding against Dakota's with only a thin layer of water and lather between them made Dakota instantly hard. His cock thickened as he touched himself absently, lost in his soapy fantasy. He never heard the water shut off, or saw Jax slip into the bedroom.

Suddenly there was a head of black and white hair bobbing between Dakota's knees, and a scorching hot mouth covering the head of his cock. It was all Dakota could do to hold still as Jax's velvety tongue swirled over the tiny slit at the head, flicked under the ridge, and took long, languid trips back and forth along his shaft, tracing the thick vein from root to tip.

A slight tap at the window caused them to jump, and Jax's mouth to jerk away from Dakota's cock. Both of them tensed, turning toward the sound. They'd forgotten to draw the heavy blackout drapes closed. With the lights on, anyone walking by the room could see inside clearly. Beyond the window, nearly invisible in the dark, was a shadowy figure, fingers splayed against the cool glass.

It was Deidre, still wrapped in the hotel towel.

Watching them.

Dakota heard Jax growl, felt his fingers tighten on Dakota's thighs.

"Down boy. She doesn't mean any harm," Dakota said reassuringly, sliding his hand soothingly over Jax's back.

"She's a fucking pervert," Jax hissed, baring his teeth at the window.

"She's lonely," Dakota said firmly. "Come on Jax, have a heart. She's in heat, for God's sake. Don't tell me you couldn't smell it on her."

"I don't care. I'm *not* fucking her."

"Jax," Dakota said softly, tilting Jax's face up to meet his. "You're mine and vice-versa, but that doesn't mean we can't share the wealth now and then, does it?"

"You *want* her?" Jax asked. Dakota could hear the bafflement and a thread of pain in his voice.

"I want *you*, hon. *Only* you. But still, it bothers me to see her suffer." Dakota looked over toward the window, where Deidre was slowly lowering her hands. He could almost see the pain of rejection in her eyes.

"Goddamn it! I knew I should never have let you talk me into hunting down other shifters," Jax said through clenched teeth. "What am I supposed to do while you get a little cougar pu-tang? Hide in the bathroom?"

"Of course not. You're my mate, Jax."

"And that means what?"

"Watch us, or join us," Dakota said, his voice rough with excitement. The idea of Jax watching him have sex with a woman, maybe even fucking Dakota as he had at her, had him as hard as stone.

Jax frowned, but there was a sudden heat flaring in his eyes that Dakota didn't miss.

Grinning, Dakota ducked his head, giving Jax a quick kiss full of tongue and promise, before standing and going to the door.

"Deidre?" he called softly, poking his head out from the doorway. He couldn't run after her -- not dressed in his skin as he was. Six feet four of naked man running around the pool deck was sure to attract unwanted attention, even at a sleazy dive like the one they were staying in. "Come on, hon. Don't be afraid. We're not angry."

He caught a movement in the dark shadows near the soda machine. Deidre stepped out in the yellowed light, arms wrapped around her middle.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. I know I said I wasn't going to sleep with you, but... "

"I understand. You're in heat, aren't you?" Dakota said kindly, gesturing for her to come closer. "Come on in. Let us help you."

"Jax doesn't like me."

"Jax doesn't like *anyone*. It's an alpha thing, nothing personal. I'm his pack, and he has ownership issues. Besides, that's different now, Deidre."

"How?"

"Because now you're a member of his pack, too."

Dakota could swear that he could see Deidre's cheeks blush, even in the dark. She took a tentative step forward, obviously still unsure.

The door was suddenly wrenched open as Jax scooted under Dakota's arm and ran out stark naked into the dim light. "Will you come inside, already?" he growled, taking Deidre's arm. Her towel loosened, falling to the ground in a drift of white, exposing full breasts and a darker triangle between her legs. "It's late and we have a long drive ahead of us. Not to mention that I'm so fucking horny I might just implode."

"Y'all *both* better get in here before somebody calls the cops and they arrest your asses for indecent exposure." Dakota chuckled. Jax looked almost silly, pulling on Deidre's arm as his erection bobbed between his thighs. Deidre looked as though she might shift at any moment, but the nearness of a naked, aroused male was keeping her from changing shapes and running for the hills. In another moment or two they'd *both* shift, and then Dakota would have to try to keep a wolf and a cougar from ripping each other's throats out. Sighing, Dakota stepped outside, got between them, and herded them both into the room.

He closed the door behind them, locking it and sliding the chain across for good measure, before going to the window and closing the horrid drapes.

Jax stood in the middle of the bedroom, arms folded across his chest, taking turns scowling first at Deidre, then at Dakota. He was jealous, although judging from his erection, also just as aroused as Dakota.

Deidre had her arms wrapped around herself, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. Obviously, she'd had no experience with more than one man at a time, maybe little familiarity with any man at all. She looked frightened, and Dakota guessed correctly that it was only her cougar side, the one that was in the throes of her heat, that kept her from running to the bathroom and locking herself in. Her human side was battling with her animal side. Dakota decided that he'd need to take it slowly with her, ease her into the situation, or she'd lash out.

He knew of only one way to do that, one way that would calm Deidre down and take the edge off Jax's jealousy at the same time. Walking past Deidre, Dakota tipped Jax's face up and kissed him deeply.

Knowing that Deidre was watching gave Dakota an unexpected thrill. He discovered that he was a bit of an exhibitionist, *liked* the thought that someone was watching him touch Jax, and be touched in return. He could smell Deidre's arousal as he rubbed his erection against Jax's and slid his hands down to cup Jax's ass.

"He sure is pretty, ain't he?" he asked Deidre, looking at her from over Jax's shoulder. His hands parted Jax's ass cheeks, giving Deidre a peek at that hole. Dakota watched her bite her lip, knew

that she was wet for him. For *them*. Her breathing had grown ragged, and she was practically purring with need.

Jax growled, his cock wet and hot against Dakota's belly. Dakota could tell by his scent that he was getting off on being watched, too.

Dakota was surprised when Jax broke away from him unexpectedly. "Fuck her, Dakota. I want to watch you," Jax said, sitting down in a chair by the window. He took himself in hand, eyes hooded, slowly stroking his erection.

Deidre didn't give Dakota time to move a muscle before she was on him, climbing him, wrapping her long legs around his waist. Her mouth was sweet and soft as she kissed him, and her tongue boldly pushed past his lips, tasted him fully. The cougar had won and had no qualms about taking what she wanted.

Her body, so different from the hard angles and planes of Jax's, was silk and satin under his hands. Her breasts were soft, full, nipples hard against his chest. Carrying her the few feet to the bed, Dakota laid her down on the mattress, spreading her legs wide. Her scent drifted up to him in a cloud of pheromones, making his head swim.

Crawling on top of her, he kissed a wet trail over her stomach to her breasts, full and ripe. Taking one puckered, pink nipple into his mouth, he suckled her until she moaned, writhing under him, begging to be taken.

Not so fast, he thought. His eyes darted to Jax, who sat watching them through narrowed eyes. His erection, rock-hard and dripping, told Dakota that it was all right, that he was enjoying the show. He'd draw it out a little longer, Dakota decided, since Jax wasn't objecting.

Dakota licked and nibbled his way back down Deidre's body, leaving a trail of purpled love bites rising on her tawny skin. Each time he nipped her, she growled low in her throat, pumping her hips upward as if to give him a hint. She wanted him to fuck her, wanted his seed. The animal in her wanted his litter.

Although his bear wanted the same, instinct ordering him to spread his seed, Dakota's human side knew better. He reached to the floor for his pants, fishing out a condom from his wallet.

Latex in place, Dakota reared between her legs, pushing her knees to her chest. In one swift movement he sheathed himself fully inside her. Groaning as her soft, silky heat encased his cock, he began to move.

Dakota felt fingers trailing along his spine and realized that Jax had joined them on the bed. Surprised, he watched Jax lean down toward Deidre and cup her breast, tongue meeting hers in an open-mouthed kiss. Then Jax turned his face up toward Dakota, offering his mouth. Dakota grunted as he continued to pound himself into Deidre's body, meeting Jax in a wet kiss, both Jax's and Deidre's tastes mingling on his tongue.

Jax finally pulled away from Dakota's mouth, but only to move behind him. "I need to fuck you, Dakota. Need to be inside you." Jax's voice was husky, sensual.

Dakota stilled as he felt Jax's cock probing between his ass cheeks, waiting for what he knew was coming. He groaned loudly as he felt Jax slip inside him, felt the sweet burning and fullness as Jax's cock slid into his body.

Dakota's senses were reeling. Trapped between the wet silkiness of Deidre's body and the hard heat of Jax's, he began to move. It was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. Dakota had had men, and he'd had women, but never before at the same time. It was incredible -- each thrust drove him deeper into the velvety heat of Deidre's pussy while every withdrawal impaled him on Jax's thick cock. It wasn't going to be long, he realized. He needed to take care of Deidre, and fast. Jax, he knew, would take care of himself.

Struggling for control, Dakota's thumb found Deidre's sweet spot, the tiny nub of flesh buried between her folds, and began worrying it. He watched her face as he relentlessly drove her toward orgasm until she finally arched off the bed and cried out, screaming her pleasure. Her body contracted around Dakota's, pulsing with her orgasm, a wet gush setting fire to his cock.

Jax chose that moment to come, his bellow combining with Deidre's in orgasmic harmony, flooding Dakota's ass with liquid heat. The combination threw Dakota over the edge and he shuddered wildly as he came, slamming himself into Deidre until he was utterly spent.

They collapsed on the bed in a tangle of arms, legs, cocks, and breasts, all three panting, sweating, and sated. Then, before he could even gather his thoughts enough to speak, Deidre did it for him.

"Thank you," she whispered, kissing each of them softly. She disentangled herself, padded into the bathroom, and returned wrapped in another towel. Without another word, just a sweet, shy smile, she left.

"Hey," Dakota said, slipping his arms around Jax and pulling the man close. Dakota knew how hard it had been on Jax, even though he'd obviously enjoyed himself, to see Dakota being intimate with someone else. Dakota knew that Jax's alpha must have been straining at the bit, bristling and snarling. It was a tribute to Jax's self-control that he'd let Dakota set the pace once he'd sheathed himself inside Dakota's body. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Jax said, kissing Dakota's jaw. "Let's just not make a habit of that, okay? She's going to have to find her own bear. This one's *mine*," he growled.

"I'm glad you joined us," Dakota said, hugging Jax close. He kissed Jax's forehead, then leaned back, too tired to move. "It wasn't the same until I felt you inside me."

"Couldn't help myself. Damn, boy, but you are hot to watch, though. I love the way your ass moves when you fuck."

"Yeah? Well I love the way you move *in* my ass when *you* fuck," Dakota chuckled.

"No more talk. Sleep now," Jax grumbled, snuggling in closer.

"Yeah, I know. Long drive tomorrow morning," Dakota said happily. He sighed and closed his eyes, content to have his mate in his arms, letting sleep take him.

Chapter Eight

A knife blade flashed, the tip embedding itself deeply into the wooden tabletop, hilt quivering. A large, scarred hand worked the knife free, only to slam the blade in again, nicking another chip out of the already deeply pitted surface.

Ranger stood nervously next to Cain's table, feeling his bladder loosen each time the knife bit into the table. Cain was their leader, and he was not known for his mercy.

"Tell me again."

"We almost had her, Cain. We were so close I could smell her fucking pussy. Mouth and Weasel had the snare set and ready to go. All we needed to do was chase her into it," Ranger said, his hands clenching and unclenching, sweat dampening his armpits and dripping down his spine. *Never let 'em see you sweat. Yeah right. Impossible, when your boss was a badass motherfucker named Cain,* Ranger thought. "These two fuckers showed up out of nowhere and carted her ass off in their Suburban. They were shifters, too. At least, one of them was a shifter. A wolf."

"Tell me, Ranger," Cain said in his deceptively soft voice, "how did they manage to get away from three of my best deputies?"

"We couldn't help it, Cain. The cops pulled into the station right after they left. If we'd ridden out of the corn, they would have seen us. You said not to get seen, no matter what," Ranger replied, aware of the pathetically whining note in his voice. "The cops would have run our tags for sure."

Ranger felt an icy finger slide up and down his spine when Cain flicked those freakish eyes at him. As orange-red as the flames of Hell, the pupils were elongated, like a gator's. But Cain was nothing as ordinary as an alligator. When Cain shifted, he was like nothing else on the planet.

At least, he was like nothing that had lived on it for the past fifty million years.

"You *failed* because of a couple of *cops*?" Cain spat.

Again Ranger cringed. He knew that, to Cain, there was no word in the English language fouler than the word *fail*.

"We'll get her back, Cain. We got their plate number. We--"

"You. *Failed*." The knife struck the tabletop again and again, embedding itself in deeper each time, until it finally slipped in to the hilt, its blade slicing through the wooden table completely, clean through to the other side. "What is our prime objective, Ranger?"

"To increase our numbers, Cain." Ranger knew this. They all did. It was the first and foremost of the Laws, memorized by new members on their first day, tattooed into their memory just as permanently as the Family's insignia was inked on their bodies. Unconsciously, his hand patted his bicep, tracing the *Ultimate Predator* tattoo that lay under his leather jacket.

"And *why* is it so imperative that our numbers increase?" Cain's tone was even, patient, like a teacher quizzing a particularly slow student.

"So that we can take our rightful place at the top of the food chain," Ranger dutifully replied.

"And humans are *what* to us?"

"Food." That was Law Two, in the Universe According to Cain.

"*THEN WHY DIDN'T YOU EAT THE FUCKING COPS?*" Cain thundered. His face shifted partially, speech slurring as his mouth elongated and filled with razor sharp teeth. Reptilian eyes, cold and pitiless, turned on Ranger as a three-fingered hand equipped with long, curving, razor-sharp claws swung out, catching Ranger on the cheek. They sliced through skin and flesh like scissors through tissue paper, baring the whitish-gray bone of Ranger's jaw in a spray of blood. Ranger's scream was high pitched and undulating, echoing in the barn.

With a roar unlike any heard on earth since the Jurassic period, Cain shifted completely. In a heartbeat he became a solid wall of muscle and sinew encased in a pebbly, reptilian hide, growing until his huge head brushed the ceiling and the table he'd been sitting at was reduced to kindling.

Ranger screamed again, his cry of terror going unheard under the volume of Cain's thunderous roar. He scrambled to his knees, crab-crawling toward the door, trying desperately to put distance between himself and the fifteen-foot monster that reared over him.

A mouth as big and deep as a cistern yawned wide, another deafening bellow rolling across the barn like an audible shock wave. Sharp, serrated teeth, some as long as a man's arm from elbow to wrist, glistened in the light, and a wave of hot breath that stank of the charnel house swept over Ranger.

Cain's furious bellow had barely begun to fade before wet sounds filled the barn in its stead. In his final moments, just before Cain's cavernous mouth and dagger teeth snapped shut, neatly shearing him in half, Ranger remembered the third of Cain's Laws: *Eat or be Eaten*.

A sea of black leather jackets, each stitched with the logo for *The Ultimate Predators* -- a white tyrannosaur skull with flaming eyes -- swarmed outside of the barn. Fifty members stood silently drinking booze or smoking joints, eyes downcast as the scream that pierced the night was abruptly cut off.

These were the elite members of Cain's carnivore family, the ones charged with riding out and bringing back new members. Only predator shapeshifters were accepted. Prey was prey, as far as Cain and The Ultimate Predators were concerned. Shapeshifter, animal, or human, it didn't matter in the slightest. Cain would allow only the strongest -- the hunters -- to join their ranks. Everyone else was food.

Female predators were kept separate from the men. The healthiest of them, the strongest, were kept in Cain's private harem. The rest were paired off with one of Cain's favored lieutenants. Even Mouth pitied the ones that Cain took to mate.

Mouth exchanged a meaningful look with Weasel, both of them gulping nervously. Technically, they were as much to blame for the mission's failure as Ranger, although Cain had put Ranger in charge. Still, Cain rarely distinguished degrees of fault. If you failed, you were food. Period. Still, it boded well that they'd been told to wait outside while Cain debriefed Ranger. *De-boned him was more like it*, Mouth thought, stifling a shudder.

He turned his attention to his fellow riders. If he had to pick a replacement for Ranger, he'd probably choose Gar. Compact and well-muscled, Gar carried enough power in his human form to do a helluva lot of damage without breaking a sweat. In his cheetah form, he was a force to be reckoned with -- mean, fast, and always hungry. Mouth's leopard-form would be hard-pressed to beat him in a cat-on-cat fight.

His eyes skimmed the crowd. River, a vulture-shifter, stood apart from the others. As Mouth watched, he took a deep swig from a bottle of whiskey. River was as bald and as ugly as his namesake, and smelled nearly as bad. He was a scavenger for the most part and barely tolerated among the Predators. That he could and *did* kill for the sheer pleasure of it was the only reason Cain allowed him to live. Still, Mouth wouldn't trust River at his back.

Ghost might be an option. He was a loner, keeping to himself most of the time, yet Mouth had seen him in action and had been duly impressed. All speed and fury, he attacked without hesitation and always went directly for the kill. The other members of the Pack had nicknamed him the White Death. However, Ghost had limitations. His name itself was such a cliché that it would have been laughable had it not been for the fact that Ghost would rip the throat out of anyone who dared make him the butt of a joke.

Although Ghost was not technically albino, his skin was so pale that it was nearly translucent, his hair snowy white. His eyes were so pale a blue they were nearly transparent. Even in his human form he stuck out like a sore thumb. Not that it mattered all that much, since his skin was so ultra-sensitive to the sun Ghost spent most of his time in his white tiger form. Not an insurmountable problem, but not exactly convenient either, especially when traveling.

Another roar sundered the night, turning Mouth's thoughts back to Cain.

Where Cain had come from was a mystery to everyone. He'd never volunteered the information, and no one had ever had the balls to ask him. Cain was the biggest, baddest motherfucker around, and if he bit you there wouldn't be enough left to bite back. You didn't question Cain --

you obeyed him, instantly and without question. One look at him in his shifted form was enough to convince even the most hardened, bloodthirsty of them of that fact.

He'd first shown up in the West, appearing out of nowhere. Traveling up and down the left coast, from Baja to Washington, Cain had preached the Laws and picked up strays all along the way. If you were a predator and swore to obey Cain and the Laws, you were in. If you were prey, well... let's just say that Cain never knew a hungry day in his life.

Cain's Laws were simple. Dominate. Eat. Propagate. Period. It was Cain's belief that evolution had finally created the perfect predator -- creatures born with the ultimate camouflage -- the ability to walk among their prey, looking, smelling, and behaving no differently than the herd, completely undetected until it was too late. *Bestia Sapiens*, Cain called them.

The First Law, the most important as far as Cain was concerned, was *Increase the Pack*. His reasoning was simple. Each of them was deadly in their own right. In numbers, they would be unstoppable.

Every time word reached them of the possible location of another shifter, Cain would dispatch a team with orders to bring them in. Shifter-prey were simply dispatched wherever they were found. Cain did not want to risk exposure to the general public until he was ready to make a stand, to take his rightful place as the Ultimate Alpha. He wouldn't risk leaving shifter-prey running around, letting themselves be photographed or worse, caught. Any shifter-predator they found was brought back to Cain, with or without their consent.

Cain chose that moment to bellow for Mouth. He tensed, his animal instinct all but screaming at him to run. Taking a deep breath, knowing that no matter where he went he couldn't hide from Cain, he walked into the barn instead.

Slipping inside, he tried hard not to look at the lumpy, crimson puddle that was all that remained of Ranger. Cain, naked and covered in blood, casually licked his fingers clean before turning his red eyes toward Mouth, finally acknowledging Mouth's presence.

"What do you want us to do, Cain?"

"Take Ghost and Weasel. Find them. Kill the males and bring me the female," Cain growled, turning his back to Mouth, his eyes flaring red. "And Mouth? Don't fucking fail me this time."

Mouth shuddered. He heard the threat in Cain's statement as loudly and clearly as if Cain had screamed it into his ear. Should he fail, he would end up as Cain's next Blue Plate Special. Nodding, Mouth spun on his heel and left the barn as quickly as he could, barely managing not to break into a terrified run.

Chapter Nine

A week later, the three of them had settled in at the ranch as comfortably as possible. Dakota and Jax had given Deidre her pick of the upstairs bedrooms. She'd chosen the one furthest down the hall, a small corner room that caught the sun for most of the day. After living nocturnally since her parents had died, Deidre cherished the warm rays of the sun.

Deidre kept to herself, for the most part, to Jax's relief. He really hadn't minded sharing Dakota, had enjoyed it quite a bit actually, but that didn't mean that he planned on making it a habit. Dakota was *his* mate, and Jax didn't like sharing as a rule.

That morning found Jax pouring himself a cup of strong, black coffee and joining Dakota at the breakfast table. Dakota had his nose buried in the latest edition of the *National Star*, looking for any story that might lead them to another shifter.

"Anything?" Jax asked, watching Dakota from over the rim of his coffee mug. He was almost afraid of the answer. Part of Jax *wanted* to find new members for his pack, but another part of him wanted to yank the paper away from Dakota, burn it, and lock Dakota in the bedroom until the man forgot about finding anyone else.

"Well, there is a blurb in here about some pilot claiming that he was flying over Death Valley and spotted a rhino roaming the desert."

"A *rhino*-shifter? Forget it, Dakota," Jax said, sputtering coffee. "He's an herbivore."

"So am I, Jax," Dakota growled. "What's wrong with that?"

"No, you're an *omnivore*. There's a difference. Herbivores are *prey*. I'd have to eat him."

"Ri-ight. So, you think you'd have time to make a dent in his armored hide before he gored you?"

"I don't know, and I'm not going to find out. No rhinos, Dakota," Jax said firmly. He narrowed his eyes, engaging Dakota in a stare down.

Sadly, he lost.

"Come on, Dakota!" Jax finally blurted, lowering his eyes first and looking away. "Exactly how big of a vegetable garden do you think we'd need to plant to keep a *rhino* fed?"

"Doesn't matter. How lonely must it get in the fucking *desert*?" Dakota said, thumping his finger on the newspaper. "He or she deserves to know that there are others like us, and ought to have the opportunity to live with friends."

"*She*? Oh, no. Not another female. No way. One's enough. I'm not living with a houseful of hormone factories."

"Sorry. I didn't realize that the big bad wolf was afraid of a little estrogen."

"I'm not afraid!" Jax growled, bristling.

"Good. Then it's settled. I'll book us on the first flight out to California. We can rent a truck and drive into the desert."

"What? Wait, I didn't say--"

Jax's protest was cut off by Dakota's lips as Dakota leaned across the table and kissed him hard. Dakota's hot velvet tongue snaked into Jax's mouth, sweeping it, igniting a sweet fire in Jax's belly. Then he was gone, on the phone making reservations, leaving Jax sitting alone at the table, feeling shell-shocked.

How the *hell* did Dakota always manage to do that to him? Render him speechless with a simple kiss? *Because there was nothing simple about the way Dakota kissed, that's how*, Jax admitted silently. *Because Dakota's kiss is almost sex in and of itself.*

Jax smiled softly, knowing exactly how Dakota would say he was sorry for running roughshod over Jax. He'd say it with his hands and tongue and hard body, and all Jax would have to do was lie there and enjoy Dakota's apology.

The rhino turned out to be real enough. His name was Oscar, and Jax almost did the happy dance when it became apparent that the newest addition to his pack was male, and as straight as a two-by-four to boot. Plus, when he'd finally worn himself out chasing the two of them across the desert sands trying to gore them, he'd turned out to be a fairly nice guy.

In his human form, Oscar was on the short side and stout, with coffee-colored skin. Muscle-bound was how Jax described him, but *compact* was Dakota's preferred adjective. Jax had to admit it was a more than adequate description. One's first impression of Oscar was of a much larger man condensed into a five-foot, six-inch body.

Broad through the shoulders, with a short neck, Oscar's biceps were nearly twice as big around as Jax's own, and Jax was no small man by any stretch of the imagination.

Completely bald, his eyes were so black that the pupils were nearly invisible. He was rather taciturn, somewhat like his animal self, preferring to answer questions only when necessary, and then in as few words as possible.

Oscar was completely smitten by Deidre, and the feeling was obviously mutual. They'd become as thick as thieves lately. Jax rarely saw one without the other. Even in their animal forms,

although they were technically predator and prey, they couldn't stop touching each other. Thank God they kept their mating to the privacy of their bedroom. It was bad enough that he had to *listen* to it. He had no wish to see it. It was probably like some kind of twisted Jack Hannah wildlife documentary.

Lying in bed with Dakota at night, Jax was regularly treated to a symphony of growls, grunts, and the squeaking of a mattress from the room down the hall. Jax cringed to think about what Deidre and Oscar's litter might look like, if she should catch pregnant -- probably like something cooked up on the *Island of Dr. Moreau*. Wisely, he'd kept his opinion to himself. Oscar, while always helpful and one of the best carpenters Jax had ever seen, was also a bit on the short-tempered side. The last thing Jax wanted was to be spitted on the tip of Oscar's long, sharp, downward-sloping horn, like wolf shish-ka-bob.

The four of them were currently working in the vegetable garden. It was huge, covering nearly a full acre, planted with rows of wheat, lentils, and potatoes. Between the garden and the pallets of canned vegetables and bundles of hay they had laid by in the barn, they should have enough fodder to keep Oscar fed all winter. *If not*, Jax thought, *he can always chew on the furniture*.

"Hey, Jax," Dakota said, standing up next to Jax. He was stripping off his work gloves, smacking them against his thigh to shake loose the dirt. "Come on. I have something to show you."

"What?"

"Just come with me. It's important," Dakota said, his eyes flashing a look that Jax recognized as Dakota's *You'd better heel, boy... or else* look.

"We'll be back shortly," Dakota said to Deidre and Oscar. Jax grumbled under his breath about a bear who thought he was the alpha wolf of the pack.

But he still heeled.

The barn looked like a wholesale distributor had exploded in it.

Dakota led Jax through the barn, past pallets of canned foodstuffs and bundles of hay, threading their way in between crates of laundry detergent, soap, shampoo, and other nonperishable necessities, until they reached the rickety wooden ladder that led up to the loft.

"What do you need up there?" Jax asked when Dakota stepped up on the bottommost rung.

"Want to show you something."

"What?"

"It's something you have to see. Trust me."

Jax huffed, but followed Dakota up the ladder to the loft.

Each rung was a test of self-control to Dakota, who still suffered from a fear of heights. He kept his eyes on the loft, refusing to look down. He focused on going up, not even wanting to *think* about how he was going to get back down again.

His heart was hammering and there was a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead by the time he finally reached the top, his inner voice cursing a blue streak. Stepping off the ladder onto the plank flooring of the loft, he headed toward a large pile of fresh hay that filled nearly one entire side.

"Well?" Jax asked, standing next to Dakota, staring down at the hay. "What's so intriguing about this? It looks like a pile of old grass to me."

"Nothing yet," Dakota grinned. "But keep watching -- that pile of grass is about to get positively *fascinating*." Smiling devilishly, he deftly unbuttoned his shirt, slipping it from his shoulders, followed in short order by his shoes, socks, pants, and underwear. Naked, he threw himself backward onto the hay, arms and legs spread wide.

He watched Jax from under his lashes as Jax slowly stripped down, a smile growing on his face. "Living a little dangerously, aren't we?" Jax asked as he crawled up over Dakota's body. "You know that Deidre or Oscar could come up that ladder looking for us at any time."

Dakota bit his lower lip. His body was suddenly burning with need, a condition he'd come to expect whenever Jax's flesh touched his. "Don't care." He ran his hands over Jax's rock hard biceps; smoothed them over Jax's broad, finely muscled back. "Let 'em look. We'll give 'em a show."

"*You* are a pervert."

"And *you* love it."

"Damn straight."

If sex were food, Jax would be the Iron Chef, Dakota thought as Jax's mouth lowered over his cock. Moist and hot, Jax's tongue swirled over the rounded head of Dakota's erection, and then took him in deep. Dakota felt the soft texture of Jax's palate, then the silk at the back of his throat. Jax's lips pulled at the delicate skin of Dakota's cock, teeth grazing it, sending shivers rocketing up Dakota's spine.

"Jax," Dakota moaned, threading his fingers into Jax's hair, "I want inside you, love."

"Mmf. Mmmf," Jax mumbled around Dakota's girth. He swatted Dakota's hands away from his head.

Dakota gasped as Jax let his cock loose, tongue sliding down its length until Jax reached Dakota's balls. Without even pausing, he pulled Dakota's soft sac into his mouth.

"Jax, *please!*" Dakota's hands were fisting the hay, his entire body tensing. If Jax didn't stop sucking on his balls, he was going to come, and that was *not* what he'd had planned when he'd taken Jax up into the loft. He hadn't climbed the fucking ladder for a blowjob.

Jax let Dakota's sac slide out of his mouth, giving it a final lick before rising to his knees. Dakota looked up at Jax, panting, letting his eyes feast themselves on Jax's solidly muscled body.

There wasn't an inch of Jax that wasn't hard and sculpted, from his broad shoulders to his lean hips. Dakota knew that body well, had tasted every inch of skin. He knew the way Jax's pebbled nipples felt under his tongue, or between his lips when he sucked them. He knew the texture of Jax's pubic hair against his cheek, the delicate softness of Jax's inner thighs, knew Jax's flavor, the way Jax's seed tasted, hot, salty, and bitter. Dakota'd licked and nibbled every part of Jax, and yet never grew tired of him.

It was simple, Dakota decided. He was addicted to Jax.

Jax leaned down over him, mouth crushing against Dakota's lips. Dakota could taste himself on Jax's tongue as it swept inside, and he groaned. "Please, Jax. Stop torturing me," he moaned. He ground his hips upward, his cock pressing against Jax's iron-hard erection.

Smiling, Jax got up into a squat, reaching behind him and wrapping his fingers around Dakota's cock. Dakota bit his lip as Jax pressed the head of Dakota's erection against his hole, spreading the moisture that had gathered at its tip to ease Dakota's way in.

Jax was tight, mercilessly so. He grunted, his anus squeezing hard, fighting Dakota's girth every inch of the way as Dakota slid deep inside Jax's body. His cock was fully wrapped in molten silk from tip to root as Jax's asscheeks came to rest on Dakota's thighs. Dakota closed his eyes against the wave of pleasure that shot through him. Cupping Jax's cheeks in his hands, he helped Jax ride him.

Jax's teeth were gritted; his eyes closed as he bounced up and down on Dakota's lap. His nipples were perked, the tiny nubs hard and white against the darker areolas. Jax's cock beat against Dakota's belly, leaving trails of wetness against his skin.

Dakota wrapped his hand around Jax's erection, wanting his lover to feel the same pleasure Jax was giving him. He stroked Jax, loving the way the soft, heated skin in his hand mirrored the silky fire of Jax's ass that encased his cock. He rubbed his thumb across the head, knowing that Jax loved the feel of his fingers sliding across the small slit.

"Gonna come for me, Jax? Give it to me. I want to feel you come," Dakota whispered, panting, trying to hold off his own orgasm. Nothing felt better than when Jax climaxed while Dakota was

buried deep inside him. His ass would clench almost painfully around Dakota's cock as Jax came, pulsing, never failing to take Dakota with him.

"Now." Jax growled. "Coming now!"

Dakota cried out as Jax came in hot spurts across his belly, shooting his own load deep inside Jax's body. His climax seemed to go on forever, soaring higher and higher until his head swam, his heart raced, and his vision dimmed. Then he was drifting, riding the sweet currents back into himself.

Jax looked down at Dakota with a very smug, satisfied smile on his face, a hank of white and black hair hanging across his face.

"Proud of yourself, aren't you?" Dakota teased, tenderly pushing the hair out of Jax's eyes.

"Got a reason to be. You nearly blew me off you and through the side of the barn. You went off like a fucking fire hose, babe."

"Complaining?"

"Did that sound like a complaint? Or did that sound like a promise to do this again later tonight?" Jax grinned.

Dakota pulled Jax down onto his chest, unmindful of the mess, and tucked Jax's head under his chin. Lying there, arms around each other, Jax's heart thudding against his breastbone, Dakota let his eyes drift closed.

Three figures crouched, hidden behind a screen of brush just within the tree line halfway between the garden and the barn, eyes glued to the rectangular opening on the second floor and the figures that lay in the hay inside it.

It had taken Mouth weeks to track down the white Suburban, finally finding that it was registered to a Dakota Wells, co-owner of a ranch in Wyoming called *The Shifting Sands*. They'd been spying on the ranch for a couple of days now.

"Fucking fags," Weasel hissed, baring a mouthful of yellowed teeth. He turned his head and spat, as if to add weight to his opinion of the goings on in the loft.

"Exactly," Ghost grinned. Hooded to protect his sensitive skin from the sun, his face was cast in shadows, but there was no mistaking the lust that flared in his pale eyes.

"I don't like this. There are more of them than we thought," Mouth said, mentally tallying the people who were within sight. "At least four that we've seen, and there might more that we don't know about."

"So what? They're fucking herbivore dirt eaters," Weasel sneered. "What are they going to do? Fight us off with hoes and rakes?"

"First, we don't *know* if they're *all* herbivores, you fucking moron," Ghost snarled, wrenching his eyes away from the writhing bodies in the loft, glaring at Weasel. "At least one of them is a wolf, and the female is a cougar. Secondly, even herbivores may have guns, and thirdly, what if this isn't the only ranch of shifters? What if they're getting organized like the Ultimate Predators? Don't you think Cain would like to know their plans?"

"So, we keep one alive and torture her until we get the info we need," Weasel replied, an evil grin spreading across his face.

"Oh, that's a *brilliant* plan," Ghost whispered sarcastically. "Which 'her' did you have in mind? The only female we've seen so far? The one Cain wants us to bring back for him? Oh, he'd be tickled if we brought her back in pieces, wouldn't he?" Ghost turned and shot Mouth a sour look. "Is he really the best you could find? He's an idiot."

"How about if this *idiot* disembowels you and has your gizzards for lunch?" Weasel growled.

"How about if I do the world a favor and snap your fucking neck like a twig?" Ghost's hand shot out like white lightning, his fingers sinking into the soft flesh of Weasel's throat. They tightened until Weasel's eyes bugged out and watered, and his whimpers grew strangled.

"Knock it off!" Mouth hissed, separating the two with a hard shove. "Or I'll kill you both myself!" His eyes drifted back to the garden, where the female and another male worked. "I'm tired of this spying shit!"

"What the *fuck* are you talking about, Mouth?" Weasel asked, rubbing his throat, his eyes shooting daggers at Ghost.

"God, you really *are* too stupid to live," Mouth growled. "I mean that we attack. We're fucking predators, not mice hiding in the bushes! Those two are... occupied up there," he said with a sneer, nodding toward the loft. "We take out the male in the garden, grab the female. When the fags in the barn finally come down, we'll jump them. They won't even know what hit them."

"That's the worst fucking idea I ever heard," Ghost hissed. "We don't even know what animals two of them can shift into -- what if there's another T-Rex, like Cain?"

"*Nobody's* like Cain," Mouth said. "You know, if I didn't know better, I'd think you didn't *want* to attack them, Ghost. You've been coming up with excuses left and right. I think you're a fucking chicken."

"Yeah," Weasel agreed, baring his teeth at Ghost.

"Did you two ever stop to wonder what would happen if Cain successfully reproduced? What life would be like for the rest of us if we had a *herd* of Tyrannosaur-shifters running around? A dozen herds? A *thousand*? What's going to happen to shifters like you," Ghost continued, jabbing a finger in Weasel's narrow chest, "When they run out of prey?"

Weasel blinked, but only for a minute. "Traitor!" he hissed. "There's not going to be enough left of you to make a coat when Cain gets through with you!"

Mouth was already reaching into his pocket for his cell phone, flipping it open. "I'm going to enjoy watching Cain chew you up and spit you out--"

The growl that had been rumbling in Ghost's chest rose until it became a roar and his tiger threw off his human skin. Six hundred pounds of muscle and fury leapt at his prey, claws severing jugulars, teeth tearing flesh from bone.

Before Oscar and Deidre could react to the roar that rattled their bones, Ghost, his muzzle and chest dripping with blood, padded out of the bushes and dropped a mangled cell phone at their feet.

Chapter Ten

"Dakota! Jax!"

Dakota picked his head up from where it lay on Jax's sweat-dampened chest. Bits of hay were knotted in his hair, and a sated, sleepy look was on his face. He blinked, coming fully awake as the voice called to them again. "Jax? Something's going on. Wake up!" he said, shaking Jax's shoulder.

"Five more minutes," Jax mumbled, trying to draw Dakota back into his arms.

"Jax, there's trouble!" Dakota grumbled, shaking Jax harder. "Get up!" Jumping up, he reached the ladder and had one foot on the top rung before Jax managed to drag himself out of the hay.

"Hey, wait up!" Jax called. Dakota paused as Jax scrambled across the loft.

"*Dakota!*" It was Deidre's voice that was screaming his name.

Not even thinking about the distance that lay between the loft and the floor of the barn, Dakota swung his leg over the side and scurried halfway down the ladder before losing patience and jumping the rest of the way. He was in bear form and running at full tilt toward the garden before his feet hit the ground.

A flash of silver passed Dakota as Jax loped ahead, his lighter weight giving wings to his feet.

By the time Dakota reached the edge of the garden, he saw that Jax and Oscar were facing off against a bright red tiger. Only as he neared did Dakota realize that the tiger wasn't truly red -- he was white, and covered in blood.

Flashing into his man form, he roared at Jax and Oscar. "Stand down!"

The big cat snarled, backing up, his tail swishing. His muscles were bunched tight, ready to spring.

"Calm down. Let us help you," Dakota said soothingly. He took a step in the tiger's direction, but Jax snapped at him. "Back off Jax, he's hurt!"

"He dropped this, Dakota," Deidre said, handing a twisted lump of metal and circuitry. Dakota looked curiously at the ruined cell phone. "Change into your man form. These two won't let up until you do," he said to the tiger.

The cat's blue eyes flicked nervously from wolf to rhino, then back to Dakota. An instant later, a milky-skinned man stood in its place, smears of blood covering his face and chest, dyeing his wealth of long, white hair red.

"Who are you?" Dakota demanded, putting a calming hand on Jax's head. Jax's hackles were still raised, his posture threatening. "Explain fast, or our alpha wolf is going to lose his patience with you."

"They call me *Ghost*," the stranger answered in a deep voice. He looked down his nose at Jax. "And I just saved all your lives. So back the fuck off, whelp."

"Come on! You expect us to believe that there's a fifteen-foot Tyrannosaurus Rex-shifter thumping around in the South? Do we look like idiots to you?" Jax sniffed, glaring at Ghost.

"It's true. His name is Cain, and he calls his pack the Ultimate Predators."

"Impossible!"

"More impossible than a rhino-shifter, or a bear-shifter?" Ghost countered, his lip curling in disdain.

"T-Rexes are extinct!"

"Not anymore, they're not. Look, believe me or not, it's your choice. And your funeral."

"Why would you tell us this, if you're a member of his pack?" Dakota asked. They'd brought Ghost inside the house, against Jax's strenuous objections, when it became clear that he was burning badly in the sun. He'd been allowed to wash up at the sink, and given a glass of water, but that was the extent of their hospitality, at least for the time being.

Deidre had run upstairs and grabbed clothing for Dakota, Jax, and Oscar. Dressed in mismatched shirts and pants, they'd taken seats at the kitchen table, interrogating Ghost. Dakota took on the role of lead investigator, because if Dakota had allowed Jax his way, Ghost would have been tied down and any questions would have been asked with a whip.

"I *was* a member of his pack. Past tense. That ended the day I realized that his plan was to reproduce and use the earth as a private game farm for his spawn. Predator or prey, eventually we're all going to be on the menu if Cain has his way. That's why he wanted her," Ghost said, nodding toward Deidre. "He wants every female predator he can get his claws on -- to impregnate them. He's convinced that sooner or later a clutch of infants will be born that will be T-Rex shifters, like him. So far, he hasn't had much luck, but that might change at any time."

"He's already mated? What happened to the children--" Dakota asked, falling silent as he realized what had likely happened to any who weren't carnivores.

Ghost looked grim. "If they were predator-shifters, they were allowed to live. If they were prey..." Ghost's voiced trailed off ominously, looking directly at Deidre.

"Dear God," Deidre whispered in horror. Her face turned ashen, tears filling her eyes. Her hands drifted to her stomach, cradling it, as if to protect it.

Oscar hastened to her side, squatting down next to her, patting her hand.

"Is she okay?" Dakota asked, frowning.

"Yes, she's fine," Oscar said. His eyes never left Deidre's face. "Don't worry, hon. We won't let this Cain guy touch you."

Ghost's laugh was a harsh, bleak sound. "She wouldn't do him much good now anyway, considering that she's already pregnant."

"*What?*" Dakota cried, twisting his head toward Ghost. "How could you possibly know that?"

"I'm a feline, too. I can scent it."

Oscar's jaw dropped as he stared wordlessly at Deidre. Dakota could see conflicting emotions flash in his eyes. Confusion. Fear. Pride. When Deidre nodded, Oscar wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close.

"Is this true, Deidre?" Jax growled. Dakota could see his alpha bristling, angry that Deidre hadn't shared this news with him; guilty that in his ignorance he'd exposed a pregnant female to danger. Dakota was willing to wager that there was even a part of him, the alpha wolf inside Jax, which was furious that he wasn't the father. In the wild, only the alpha male and female wolves produced offspring. Jax was going to need a lot of understanding and comfort to get through this without trying to castrate Oscar.

"Let it go for now, Jax," Dakota said softly. He put his hand on Jax's shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze. "We have more important things to worry about." He turned back to Ghost. "You killed the others who were sent with you?"

"Yes. They wouldn't listen to reason."

"This cell phone," Dakota continued, indicating the jumble of smashed plastic that sat on the middle of the table. "Did it have global positioning system capability?"

"No, I don't think it had a GPS. Cain is huge, deadly, and smart, but practically prehistoric when it comes to technology. He won't even let Pack members use guns. He thinks that they're for puny humans who lack the weapons nature gave the rest of us -- fangs and claws."

"Good," Jax said. "I vote that we go on eBay and buy a few Uzis. Rocket launchers. Hell, maybe we should go whole hog and splurge on a nuclear bomb."

Dakota ignored Jax's outburst. "How do we know that we can trust you?" he asked Ghost.

"*What? We can't* trust him. Who said anything about trusting him?" Jax sputtered, baring his teeth at Ghost.

"He's right. You can't trust me. All I can say is that if Cain finds out that I've killed two of his right hand men and told you about his plans, I'll be getting a private tour of his digestive system," Ghost replied.

"No, Dakota. Don't even think it!" Jax growled, standing up. He pulled Dakota up by the arm, backing the man into a corner, snarling. "Forget it."

"He did do the right thing in the end, Jax."

"Well, bully for him! He's a regular hero. Chomps up his buddies and squeals on his Pack. Yeah, what's not to trust? Look Dakota, you can give him a medal. Give him a key to the city. Give him a fucking tickertape parade. But then get his hairy hide out of here!"

"Jax," Dakota said, shaking his head. "What we know now changes *everything*. Don't you see? It's no longer about finding shifters and giving them someplace to call home. Now it's about finding them and saving their *lives*." He nodded toward Ghost. "He's lived with the enemy. He knows them, Jax. Knows how they think. We need him."

Jax growled and then turned his back on the lot of them. "What *I* need is a good stiff drink." He hesitated, then turned back, going nose to nose with Ghost. "Listen up, Casper. If you stay, you're the omega wolf. Got it? I don't care if you're a tiger, a dinosaur, or a fucking Cadillac. If I howl, you jump. Got it?"

A small smile tilted Ghost's lips. "Yeah, sure, Jax. I got it. Omega. I can deal with that."

Jax looked back at Dakota. "This doesn't mean that I trust him."

Dakota smiled, feeling some of the tension that had been knotting his shoulders disappear. "Ghost? Take one of the upstairs bedrooms. We can talk more later. Deidre? Oscar? I think you two have a few things you should discuss privately." He turned to Jax again. "Come on, Jax. Let me buy you that drink you said you wanted. I have a bottle of Tequila in our room with your name on it."

As Dakota herded Jax into their bedroom over repeated protests, he realized that once again, Jax's pack had grown by one.

Three months passed without incident. Winter was coming, and coming fast. Late August had already given the pack of the Shifting Sands Ranch a taste of it with an early dusting of snow.

The crops had been harvested and stored, the vegetables canned for the long, cold season. A trip into Jackson and the football field-sized wholesale store had yielded stacks of boxes of non-perishable items and canned goods. Wood had been cut and piled into neat cords next to the house. The predators had been out hunting nearly every day, and the smokehouse was full of meat, as were the two deep freezers that had been installed in the kitchen. Chains had been put on the tires of the Suburban. They were as ready as they could possibly be for the snows that would soon blanket the mountains.

Dakota had been elected to learn everything he could about midwifery, to Jax's delight. If the job of midwife hadn't fallen to Dakota it would have been Jax's responsibility as alpha and that would have been a fate worse than death as far as Jax was concerned. The very *idea* of delivering Deidre's litter was enough to ice Jax's gut and send his testes scrambling for cover -- not that he'd ever admit it, not even to Dakota.

But Deidre's pregnancy was progressing normally and *someone* was going to have to deliver her baby when her time came. *Babies*, Jax corrected himself. From her girth, Jax was certain that she was carrying full litter -- the woman was *enormous*.

She would have to have a home birth. They couldn't risk anyone knowing about her or the babies for fear that it would expose them all to the human community, or worse, would somehow get back to Cain. Ghost had assured them that Cain would be looking for them, especially when none of the three men he'd sent after Dakota, Jax, and Deidre had returned.

Walking outside, Jax paused to admire the scenery. The surrounding forests and mountains were a riot of color; reds, oranges, and yellows blazed in the sunlight. The craggy peaks of the mountains were blindingly white with their fresh caps of snow. Overhead, the sky was an unbroken swath of bright blue, and the air was fresh and crisp with the breath of autumn. It was a perfect day.

Jax found Dakota sitting on the perimeter fence, looking out toward the mountains. Slipping up behind his lover, Jax snaked his arms around Dakota's waist, pulling him off backward. They tumbled to the ground, laughing.

Rolling, Jax pinned Dakota beneath him. Looking into Dakota's warm brown eyes, he smiled. "So, is my bear ready to hibernate?"

"Only if I get to do it snuggled up to you." Dakota smiled back.

"I think that can be arranged." Jax laughed. God, how he loved looking at Dakota's face, loved feeling Dakota's body beneath him. Dakota had been right, too, although Jax would never admit it. Jax *had* needed a pack, and their mismatched family was still growing. While the addition of Deidre's babies would mean more mouths to feed, Jax secretly looked forward to their arrival and the increase in the numbers of his pack.

Jax's attention was pulled away from his inner monologue by Dakota's hands slipping under his jacket and shirt and sliding over his bare skin. Dakota's hands were cold, but his lips were warm as Jax leaned down and kissed him.

Jax didn't know what the future would bring. He didn't know whether Cain would find them, or if they'd survive if Cain did. He didn't know whether they'd find any more shifters who were willing to join his pack.

All Jax knew, as his tongue slipped into Dakota's mouth and fought with Dakota's, was that he wouldn't face the future alone. He had Dakota, and together, he thought, they could do anything.

Chapter Eleven

Cain moved on from the abandoned barn, leading his pack further south for the winter. He hated the cold, detested it. Cold weather made him feel sluggish; made his bones ache and his blood thicken. His T-Rex was far more at home in the hot and humid southeast, where the air was warm and moist, and landscape was green with ferns and threaded with swamps.

The land in Florida where Alligator Alley cut a swath through the marshland was as close as he could get to the primeval conditions of the Jurassic; a place where black waters bred clouds of mosquitoes and nests of gators -- two of the few creatures that had remained basically unchanged since the days when the dinosaurs still ruled the earth.

And in that place where mammals were food for the reptile kings, Cain was a god.

He'd found a shanty town deep in the Everglades, a collection of ramshackle huts with metal-and-tar paper roofs, surrounded by miles of overgrown marsh and hidden by thick groves of mangrove trees. The mangroves' gnarled, twisted roots threaded through the shallow, murky water like thick snakes; their branches dripped with kudzu and Spanish moss.

Humans were few and far between there, and Cain had made short work of the ones that lived in the tiny, backwater community. From the looks of the gator skins, eggs, and heads that had been piled in neat stacks around the shacks, the men had been poachers. It angered him to think that the humans -- frail, weak, pathetic excuses for predators -- had been feeding off the gator population in the swamp, making boots and purses from their skins and tacky tourist souvenirs of their heads. Cain had been tempted to mount a few of the humans' heads on plaques to decorate the walls of the wooden huts, but in the end, he'd simply eaten them.

Settling himself on an old, wicker rocker on the front porch of the largest hut, the one he'd claimed for his own, Cain tried to relax. The air was warm and moist, heavy and still, and the sound of hissing gators nearby was comforting, but he couldn't unwind. He felt tense, edgy, the muscles in his neck so tight that his head ached.

It had been months since Cain had sent his team out to find the two shifters who'd stolen the pantheress from him, and he had had only one message from them since Mouth had left with Ghost and Weasel. The lack of communication left a sour taste of foreboding in Cain's mouth.

Something was wrong. Mouth knew better than to not communicate with Cain on a regular basis. If he'd been unable to track the shifters, Cain would have heard by now. Mouth would have returned to the pack, probably trying to foist the blame onto Ghost or Weasel for his failure -- not that it would have mattered to Cain who failed. All three would have met the same fate anyway, no matter who was at fault.

But Mouth would also know that returning to face Cain's wrath would still be preferable to what would happen to him if he ran, or worse, defected. He would know that Cain would never let it

rest, would hunt him down no matter what or how long it took, and that when Cain caught him -- and Cain *would* catch him -- Mouth's death wouldn't be as easy a one as Ranger's had been. No, Cain would draw it out, would keep Mouth alive for as long as possible, eating him one piece at a time.

Yes, something was definitely wrong.

Cain felt the rage that was always coiled tightly in his chest like an angry rattlesnake suddenly unwind, flooding his system. Jumping up from the chair, he leapt over the cracked and weathered porch railing, shifting in midair. His clothes tore, shredding as his muscles and bones grew, stretched, and rearranged. By the time his feet planted on the soggy ground, muck sucking at his soles, his head nearly brushed the tops of the twenty-foot trees. Jaws parting in a reptilian grimace, he snapped at the branches, limbs splintering like toothpicks between his dagger-like teeth.

His roar thundered through the swamp, answered by the bellows of a huge bull gator. It raised its triangular head and hissed at him, twelve feet of scaly hide heaving through the mud near Cain's feet.

One bite and the gator slid down Cain's throat to his gullet, teeth, claws, hide, mud and all.

There was only room in the swamp for one alpha bull, and Cain was *it*.

The small kill took the edge off of Cain's rage. Reclaiming his human-form, he returned to the porch, settling himself into the rocker again. Hot air caressed his naked skin as he rocked, calmer, better able to think now that his belly was full.

Mouse had failed. He was sure of it now. There was no other explanation. The shifters who'd stolen Cain's pantheress must have killed him, Weasel, and Ghost.

He wouldn't make the same mistake twice. Next time, Cain would go himself, find the shifters and claim the pantheress and any other female predators they had found. He smiled as he thought of the shifters' terror when faced with him in his T-Rex form. No matter what their shifter-forms were, be they wolves, bears, lions, or fucking porcupines -- none of them could possibly hope to stand against Cain.

It was going to be very entertaining. Well worth the loss of Mouse and the others, he decided.

He already knew from Mouse's single report that the shifters were somewhere in Wyoming. The snows had probably already started -- winter came early up there. Cain realized that unfortunately he had no other choice but to wait. He wouldn't go north during the winter -- the very thought of tramping through the snow chilled him to the bone. No, he'd need to wait until spring, or even early summer.

But then nothing would stand in his way.

The shifters were soon to become extinct -- they just didn't know it yet.

"Hey, Jax! Look at this..." Dakota's voice sounded eager, which in and of itself was enough to tell Jax to run the other way.

"No," Jax said, resisting the urge to bolt from the room.

"What do you mean, 'no?' All I'm asking is for you to look at--"

"No. En oh, no. I don't want to see it, Dakota."

"You don't even know what it is!" Dakota frowned, waving a piece of paper toward Jax.

"I know that look on your face, Dakota. I don't have to see what's on that paper you keep trying to shove in my face to know what it says. It has to do with a shifter, doesn't it? Admit it, I'm right. You found another one and you want to after him. So... no. Nein. Non. Não. NO!"

"Jax..."

He spun around to face Dakota. "Oh, do *not* make the puppy eyes at me, Dakota. In case you haven't noticed, it snowed last night. There must be three inches on the ground and they expect more tonight. We've taken in enough people already! Plus, Deidre is ready to start spitting out rhino-kittens at any moment. We're crowded enough in here as it is, Dakota. We are *not* going out to find another shifter, and that's final!" Jax roared, turning his back on Dakota.

"First, Deidre will *not* give birth to rhino-kittens. Her baby -- or babies -- will be born human, and you know it. No one knows what their shifter-forms will be, or if they'll even be able to shift at all. Secondly, for your information, it's not about another shifter," Dakota said. "It's a circus."

The paper slipped in front of Jax's eyes, bright red letters and a drawing of clowns filling his vision.

"A *circus*? Are you kidding?" Jax batted the paper away. He turned and looked up at Dakota.

"No, I'm not kidding. Look, we've all been cooped up at the ranch working our asses off, and we're starting to get on one another's nerves. And yeah, there's snow on the ground, but it was hardly a dusting. The roads are still clear. Given a good blizzard, those three inches may turn into three feet or more, and we may not be able to get over the mountains and down into town until the spring. This may be our only chance to have a little fun before we're snowbound together for good and real."

"Why the hell is there a circus up here at this time of year, anyway? Don't they all go south for the winter?"

"It's a charity event, I think. They're donating a portion of the ticket sales to the town's volunteer Fire Department. Come on, Jax... it's for a good cause."

"No. It's not a good idea."

"Think about it Jax -- being snowbound together in a small ranch house with a bunch of adult shifters and God-knows-how-many newborn babies... crying, pooping babies..."

"That's not fair, Dakota..."

"Crying, pooping babies spitting up all over your favorite sweaters..."

"I hate you sometimes."

"No you don't." Dakota smiled. "You only hate that I won't back down, oh Great Alpha Wolf."

Jax bit his lip as Dakota stuck his fingers underneath the waistband of Jax's jeans, wiggling them against his bare skin. His bear did not play fair at all.

"That's debatable," Jax squeaked as Dakota's fingers brushed the head of his penis. His body tightened, wanting more.

"Come on, Jax..."

"Keep doing what you're doing and I will," Jax said, pumping his hips a little. Damn, he never failed to get instantly hard every time Dakota touched him. Hell, he got hard every time Dakota *breathed* near him.

Dakota's fingers left him, but only to start unzipping his jeans, tooth by metal tooth. "I *really* want to go, darlin'." Dakota knelt before him, and Jax knew in that moment that his goose was cooked.

Dakota's breath was warm against the skin of his newly freed cock. Jax gulped audibly as the tip of Dakota's tongue touched the head of his penis. He closed his eyes and sighed as that sweet tongue tortured his cock and balls. "Go. Yeah, go, Dakota. Go."

"Good," Dakota said. "It's a date."

"Mmm... date. Yeah. Sure. More." Jax moaned, threading his fingers into Dakota's hair. Fuck! This wasn't fair! He couldn't be expected to think straight with Dakota's hot mouth sucking on him like that, now could he? It was a wonder that he could remember to breathe, let alone hold his own in an argument.

Oh... oh, *hell*.

Dakota's tongue licked a slow path over his balls to the tip of his cock, a shiver playing Jax's spine like a xylophone. Dakota's tongue curled, tickling at the slit, flicking under the ridge, and every muscle in Jax's body suddenly pulled taut.

Yeah. Dakota could take Jax's pack to the moon, if that's what he wanted. Jax would carry them there on his back if he had to, as long as Dakota didn't stop sucking him.

"More, please..." Jax moaned. He grabbed Dakota's head, feeding his lover cock.

He felt the beginnings of his orgasm stirring low in his belly: warmth, a tingling that rolled through him like a freight train. His head snapped back on his neck, tendons straining, eyes squeezed shut against the unstoppable wave of pleasure.

"Oh, baby. That was fucking phenomenal," Jax whispered hoarsely, panting hard as his body shivered in the aftermath of his climax. He noticed the shit-eating grin on Dakota's face and knew at once that he'd lost the argument.

"Fine, we'll go. But if we find a shapeshifting clown, he's on his own. Got it?" Jax said, irritated that he'd lost because he'd -- once again -- been thinking with his dick instead of his head.

"Sure, Jax, sure. Whatever you say, lover," Dakota replied as his grin grew wider. "No more shifters."

Jax eyed Dakota suspiciously. "Why do I not believe you?"

Dakota's laugh did nothing to relieve Jax's suspicions. Instead, Jax had the distinct impression that he'd been had.

Chapter Twelve

The Clancy Brothers' Circus -- despite the colorful, glossy posters that had been stapled to every telephone pole in town -- consisted of a single, tired-looking, faded and patched big top tent staked out in the middle of a field just west of town. Parked behind the tent were two yellow school buses that bore the circus' name in crude, hand-painted letters. Behind them and set slightly to the side were three livestock trucks.

Off to the left of the tent, an elephant stood in the middle of a hastily-erected, rickety corral, looking as tired as the rest of the circus. Children were lined up nearby, eagerly waiting for their turn to ride the back of the sad-looking beast.

There was a midway of sorts, set up to the right of the tent. A line of wooden booths draped with faded red, white, and blue bunting, sheltered barkers who called out for people to try their luck at the Milk Bottle Toss, or the Dime Pitch.

Snow had been cleared from the area, and the withered, winter-crisp stalks of brown grass crunched underfoot.

Dakota walked alongside Jax -- who managed to maintain a sour face even while eating a huge fluff of bright pink cotton candy -- taking in the sights and smells. Even though the circus was small and more than a little on the shabby side, obviously third-or-fourth rate, Dakota was enjoying every minute of it. The air was thick with smells of hot dogs and peanuts. A calliope played somewhere nearby, children laughed and screamed, and barkers shouted their pitches. From somewhere behind the big top, a lion roared.

It was a wonderful and much needed distraction for them all, as far as Dakota was concerned. God knew he needed a break from the ranch, and even though Jax had fought against the outing tooth and nail, he knew Jax needed it, too.

The only person who'd passed on the trip had been Ghost. He couldn't tolerate the sun, and a full day out under it, even with sunscreen, would have burned him badly. Jax hadn't been happy about leaving Ghost behind -- he still didn't fully trust Ghost -- but since Dakota wasn't going without him, he'd had little choice in the matter.

Deidre had eagerly come along, although she waddled much more than she walked, her huge belly making her obviously uncomfortable. Oscar stuck to her like a burr to a sock, staying protectively close. *There's true affection growing there*, Dakota thought, smiling. *Real love, blossoming right before my very eyes*. The looming birth would only serve to cement their relationship, he was sure. The soft look that came into the normally surly Oscar's eyes when he looked at Deidre confirmed Dakota's thoughts. He was hooked, pure and simple, and to Dakota, it was a beautiful thing.

But it also served to remind Dakota of his own obligations, and a slight frown creased his brow and dampened his high spirits a bit. He'd combed the Internet for any and every reference he could find regarding home births and natural childbirth, had scoured every online source for veterinary exotic cat births, but he still wasn't confident of his ability to deliver Deidre's baby.

What if there were complications? Dakota had read about far too many to delude himself into thinking that Deidre would have a textbook delivery. He could hope, but the odds seemed stacked against it. There were infections to worry about, fetal distress, pulmonary-whatsis and amniotic-whozits, and a plethora of ailments that Dakota couldn't begin to pronounce, let alone treat.

His was a heavy responsibility, and he shouldered it uneasily. It irked him that Jax had weaseled out of it and foisted it on him. Tomorrow, he decided, when they were back at the ranch, he was going to get Jax to agree to help him deliver the baby even if he had to tie Jax to the bed and fuck the man until his eyes crossed in order to get him to agree.

A smile dimpled his cheek thinking about sexing Jax up, and his body tightened. Truthfully, Dakota would tie Jax to the bed and fuck him sideways till Sunday whether he agreed to help Dakota or not. Loving Jax was Dakota's favorite activity, and he freely admitted it.

"What are you smiling about?" Jax asked him. His tongue was dyed shocking pink from the cotton candy, making Dakota laugh.

"You. In bed. Naked," he replied, watching Jax's cheeks heat to match the color of his tongue.

"You have a dirty mind."

"Complaining?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did that sound like a complaint? I meant it as a hint. As in, let's duck behind that piece of shit circus tent and get naked."

Dakota laughed, elbowing Jax. "Come on. Let's get our tickets for the show."

"How does buying tickets get us naked?"

"It doesn't -- yet. But I'd advise you to pay close attention to the trapeze artists, because you're going to need their skills when we get home. I plan to strap your ass to the ceiling fan over the bed." Dakota grinned.

"Ooh, aerial fuck-nastics. I like it." Jax laughed.

They headed toward a small ticket booth that sat outside the big top. Inside the small shelter, a woman with hair the color of ripe pumpkins sat with a huge wheel of tickets and a small, metal moneybox.

"Four, please," Dakota said, removing a few bills from his wallet. He slid the money through the cashier's cage and picked up the tickets the woman counted out.

"First show is in a half hour. Hold small children by the hand. Don't throw garbage into the ring or under the bleachers. The Clancy Brothers hope you enjoy the show," the woman recited in a bored voice.

Dakota passed out the tickets then glanced at his watch. "We've still got a half-hour before the show. What do you want to do?"

"Go home?" Jax asked. He grunted when Dakota shot him a dirty look. "Can't blame me for trying, can you?"

"I don't care what we do as long as it involves sitting down," Deidre said, rubbing her belly. "My back is killing me."

"Why don't you two go see what trouble you can get up to, and we'll go inside and save some good seats," Oscar offered, taking Deidre's arm.

"Okay," Jax said, a little too eagerly for Dakota's peace of mind. He nodded to Oscar and let Jax lead him away from the ticket booth, around the side of the big top tent.

"Exactly what did you have in mind, Jax?" Dakota asked. He got his answer as soon as Jax had pulled him into the shadows between two of the livestock trailers. Suddenly, Jax's soft lips were crushed against his, Jax's hands massaging his biceps.

"Mmm... you taste like sugar," Dakota said, before diving in for a second helping. He opened for Jax, letting Jax's tongue sweep his mouth, grinding his hips against Jax's groin. His palms cupped Jax's firm ass, squeezing those cheeks until Jax moaned.

"Need you, bear. Need you now."

"I wish. We can't -- not here."

"Why not? Who's going to see us? The elephant?"

"No, but how about the circus people? Or the locals? Shit, Jax! There are kids everywhere!"

"Better they learn it from us than from their parents."

Dakota burst out laughing, which sort of spoiled the mood, although it was for the best. His cock was already pushing against the fly of his jeans, eager to come out and play. If he let Jax tease him any longer, he'd have his pants down around his ankles in no time, and Dakota had no intention of performing in a pornographic sideshow act for anyone who happened to be passing by.

"Get those lions ready! The show starts in less than half an hour."

"But they already did a morning show! They need time to rest!"

The voices came from the trailer on their right. Dakota put a finger to his lips, warning Jax to keep his mouth shut and listen.

"I don't give a flying fuck what they need. Get them ready!"

"But George, they're getting old! Frick has arthritis, and Frack can barely see. They're too old to be doing two shows a day! Can't you get Walter to do the long version of his act? His monkeys have too much energy as it is -- they could use the workout."

"I'm not telling you again. Either you get those flea-bitten, mangy cats of yours to perform, or I'm going to put them down."

"You can't do that!"

"Watch me."

Dakota pulled Jax deeper in the shadows as a man stomped down the metal gangplank of the trailer and stalked off toward the big top.

Soft, crying sounds, punctuated by an occasional, gravelly lion's huff, filled the silence the man left behind.

Dakota's curiosity was piqued. He ignored Jax's whispered protests and crept closer to the livestock trailer, peering between a gap in the slatted sides. Inside the trailer were two cages that held what might have been the world's saddest excuses for lionesses. Both had whitened muzzles and mangy coats, and one had a bluish-white film that could have been a cataract covering one eye. A young woman, dressed in a red silk robe, sat between the cages, her face hidden in her hands. The lionesses seemed disturbed by her tears, one or another of them sticking a paw through the bars of the cages in an effort to reach her.

How sad. Poor things, Dakota thought. Forced to work in a two-bit circus and live in those tiny cages. His bear bristled at the thought of spending his life stuck inside a small cage, unable to taste freedom. How do they stand it? How do they survive?

Just as he was about to turn away, unable to watch the sad trio anymore, ready to rip his tickets up and go home rather than support a circus that mistreated their animals, the young woman slipped her robe free from her shoulders.

And shifted.

Young and sleek, the lioness chuffed first at one animal then the other, nosing each through the bars of the cage. Her tail twitched back and forth as she began to pace between the two cages.

Dakota turned toward Jax, but found Jax's palm held up to his face.

"No," Jax mouthed, shaking his head vehemently. "Absolutely not."

"But--"

"No!"

Dakota took hold of Jax's arm, pulling him bodily along behind him. He didn't stop until they'd reached a partially secluded spot near the elephant where they could talk without being overheard.

"They need help, Jax."

"They need Geritol, Dakota."

"Those two poor lions shouldn't be performing at their age. And the girl is one of us! What if they are, too? Can you just leave our people here in these conditions?"

"What people? At what point did every shifter on the planet become '*our*' people?"

"Since we found out that we weren't alone, Jax," Dakota countered, staring Jax down.

"The ranch is too crowded as it is!"

"What's three more? We still have open bedrooms, especially since Oscar moved in with Deidre."

"No, Dakota."

"You know that I'm going to win this one, Jax. You might as well give in now and get some great sex when we get back."

"Stop trying to buy me off with sex! I'm serious, Dakota. We can't afford to take anyone else in!" Jax growled. There was a hardened look in his eyes that took Dakota aback.

They stared at each other, but Dakota finally sighed and looked away.

Damn it. Jax is right, Dakota silently conceded. They were down to the last of their savings. Until spring when they bought some livestock and the ranch hopefully started to support itself, they couldn't afford to feed anyone else. "Okay, okay. I just think that--"

"Look, I know that you want to help. But if we pick up every stray we come across, we'll all starve. We can't, Dakota. I'm sorry, but we just can't this time."

Dakota sighed. Again, Jax made a good point. There seemed to be far more shifters than they'd first thought, more than they could possibly take in. But his heart still ached at the thought of leaving the lions to their fates.

"Look, let's go find Oscar and Deidre and get the hell out of here, okay? This place is fucking depressing." He tried to smile, but just didn't have it in him.

To his credit, Jax didn't gloat over his victory. He seemed as miserable as Dakota was over his decision. Dakota realized that for all his bluster, if Jax had thought they could do it, he would have agreed to take the lions in.

Handing over their tickets at the entrance to the big top, they stood for a moment looking over the bleachers, trying to spot Oscar and Deidre. The stands were crowded with locals shuffling for seating, and it took a few moments to find them seated halfway up in the bleachers on the far side of the tent.

By the time Dakota and Jax had reached them, the spotlights were on the one and only ring, where the ringmaster was beginning his spiel.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! Boys and girls! Children of all ages..."

"Shit. It's starting," Dakota said as the people around them began to shout for them to sit down. He pulled Jax down onto the bleacher next to Oscar and Deidre. "As soon as there's a pause in the action, we're out of here." He leaned over and whispered a quick explanation to them.

In the ring, clowns in colorful costumes and garish makeup were running around tooting horns and spraying seltzer at one another while two roadies set up the ring for the first act.

The act, of course, turned out to be the very one Dakota hadn't wanted to watch.

The lions' cages were rolled out into the ring, accompanied by the young woman, now dressed in a sparkly pair of pants and a sleeveless vest.

"Turn your attention to the center ring!" the ringmaster called out, as if there were more than one ring in the tent. "Kings of the jungle, these beasts are man-killers! Brought in from the wildest jungles of Africa, they've mauled more men than I can count! Together, they've destroyed entire villages! They're dangerous, folks! Keep your children close, and stay in your seats as the lovely Miss Cleo attempts to tame these ferocious, man-eating lions!"

"What a load of horseshit," Jax grumbled in Dakota's ear. "First of all, they're *queens* of the jungle, not kings. Secondly, anyone with eyes can see that they're so old they probably don't have teeth anymore. The only thing those two can kill is time!"

"This is so fucking sad," Dakota agreed, shaking his head. "I want to take that bastard in the top hat and show him how the lions feel by knocking every fucking tooth out of his head and then locking *him* in one of those cages."

The young woman opened the cages, coaxing the lions out into the ring. Dakota winced, swearing that he could hear the poor creatures' joints creaking as they heaved themselves to their feet and made their way out of the cages.

They both took a few steps, then lay at the woman's feet like a pair of oversized kittens.

The crowd began to boo.

"Hey! Those are the sorriest excuses for lions that I've ever seen!" A man a few rows away from Dakota yelled.

"They look like a pair of rugs!"

A soda can flew into the ring, narrowly missing one of the lions' heads. It bounced, landing at the woman's feet.

"Oh, *hell* no!" Jax growled. Dakota could feel the muscles in his arm flex, and put his hand on Jax's thigh to keep him from getting up.

"Not now, Jax. We can't -- not in front of everybody."

"How can you just sit there?"

"Making a scene won't help anything. We can't afford to draw attention to ourselves. Just let them get through the act," Dakota said, trying to calm Jax down. He was afraid Jax was going to shift right then and there. He could see the wolf snarling in Jax's eyes.

"Fine. But we're getting the hell out of here right now. I can't stand to watch this. It's too fucking painful," Jax said, standing up and pushing his way past the other people in the row.

Dakota, Deidre, and Oscar followed him out of the tent, and began walking toward the parking lot where they'd left the truck. They hadn't gone far when Dakota realized that Jax wasn't walking with them.

Turning around, he saw Jax walking toward the livestock trailers. Signaling for Deidre and Oscar to wait, he trotted after Jax.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not leaving them here," Jax said, folding his arms across his chest. He was scowling at the big top, as if he could see through the faded canvas walls.

"I thought we agreed that we couldn't take anyone else in?" Dakota said. "You said that we couldn't afford it."

"What are you -- a fucking parrot? I know what I said," Jax hissed. "But I don't care if I have to go on the hunt in ten feet of snow to keep us all fed. I'm not leaving them here."

Dakota grinned. "You, sir, are my hero."

Jax snorted. "I'm holding you to the ceiling fan thing when we get home."

"Honey, tonight you get me anywhere, any *way* you want me," Dakota said, leaning in for a kiss. He was still smiling when he followed Jax up into the lions' livestock trailer.

Chapter Thirteen

They hid behind a stack of crates in one corner of the trailer, crouched down in a pile of wet, moldy hay. Jax wrinkled his nose at the smell and shuffled his feet, trying to kick the mess to one side. He looked up at Dakota. "You'd better strip down."

"What? Are you crazy? How can you even think about sex at a time like--"

"I wish! Not for sex -- for show. It's your turn to shift."

"Shift? What are you talking, Jax?" Dakota looked confounded, and Jax couldn't help rolling his eyes.

Payback was a bitch, Jax thought, biting back a smile. "Dakota, she's going to need convincing that we're like her, and it's your turn," he whispered, jabbing a finger into Dakota's broad chest.

"Aw, shit!"

"Exactly. Now you know how I felt. At least we're inside. Last time I had to bare my ass in the middle of the fucking desert when we found Oscar."

"You're enjoying this!"

"No... well, just a little," Jax grinned.

Dakota growled at him, but began unbuttoning his shirt. The sight of his broad chest, nipples perked from the cold, caused a delicious tightening in Jax's groin. He couldn't resist leaning in and lapping at one pebbled nub. Dakota's growl intensified.

"Knock it off, Jax!" he whispered, twisting away. "Not now."

"Can't help it, lover. You show me your tits and I want to suck 'em. That's the way it works."

"I am *not* going to do this with a hard-on!"

"Aw, am I making you hard? Poor baby..." Jax cupped Dakota's sac for good measure the moment Dakota slipped out of his underwear. He had to. Dakota's cock was already semi-erect.

"Jax!" Dakota hissed. But there was a hint of pleading in his voice that belied the angry expression on his face.

Jax chuckled. "Okay, okay. I'll behave. Shh... I think I hear them coming."

He was right. Wheels squeaking, two roustabouts pushed the lionesses' cages into the trailer, one at a time. The woman shifter followed them in, pulling up the gangplank after they'd left the trailer. She slumped down on a chair between the cages and began to cry.

"Oh, shit. I hate it when they cry!" Jax said. Dakota's hand clamped over his mouth, but it was too late. She'd heard him.

"Who's there? Come out here right now, or I'll let the lions out!"

"What are they going to do? Gum us to death?" Jax asked, standing up and walking out from behind the crates. "Look, sister, don't panic. We're not here to hurt you. We're shifters, like you."

"Get out! I'm calling the police!"

"Yeah? On your imaginary phone? Can you call for a couple of pizzas while you're at it?" Jax retorted. He ignored the growls that rumbled in the chests of the lionesses. "I'm serious. My name is Jax, and I shift into a wolf. This is my mate, Dakota. He's a bear. Show her, Dakota."

Dakota stood up slowly.

"You're naked!" the woman squeaked, reaching for the bar that held the door to the cage on her right closed. "You freaks!"

"Takes one to know one, hon," Jax said as Dakota shifted into his bear. He towered over Jax, his soft fur brushing the back of Jax's neck.

"Oh, my God..."

"Yeah. Told you so," Jax said. Jax felt Dakota's form shrink, and realized that he'd shifted back into his man-form. Dakota ducked back behind the crates. Jax could hear the shuffling of clothing as he re-dressed. "Look, here's the deal. We saw you shift earlier, after that rank bastard told you to get the girls here ready to perform. Nobody should be forced to work in these conditions. Those two cats can barely walk, never mind perform! And it really sucked when the audience turned on you, by the way."

"You saw the show?"

"As much of it as we could stand, anyway," Jax said.

A soft look crept into the woman's eyes, making her look even younger than she was. "It used to be different," she said softly. "My family used to be among the best lion-tamers in the business. Nobody could match us in the ring."

Jax exchanged a surprised glance with Dakota. Until that moment, they'd thought Deidre was alone in her familial history of parent-shifters, but it suddenly seemed they were wrong. He felt

he knew what Daisy was going to say next, and beat her to it. "Because you were all really lions".

She nodded. "My father was a lion, but my mother wasn't a shifter. They died in a train wreck a few years ago, along with most of our lions. Frick and Frack are all I have left." She looked up at Jax. "I'm Daisy, by the way."

"Are they shifters, too?"

Daisy gave a short laugh. "No. They're really lionesses. They were the first two animals my parents adopted into the act. They raised them from cubs."

Dakota appeared at Jax's elbow, fully dressed again. "Daisy, we have a ranch up in the mountains here, where we and a few other shifters live. It's nice, peaceful and quiet. Nobody bothers us up there. We thought that you might want to join us, put these two girls into retirement."

Daisy blinked, a look of incredulity coloring her features. "Are you kidding?"

"No, ma'am. No more cages. No more performances. No more taunts," Dakota said.

"No more assholes throwing shit at you in the ring," Jax added.

"No more pain," Dakota finished softly.

Daisy looked from one cage to the other, then back at Jax and Dakota. "What do I have to do to live there?"

"Just be happy. That's the only thing we ask."

She frowned. "Bullshit. I may be young, but I've seen a lot traveling with this show. Cash, grass, or ass, nobody rides for free, you know?"

"True. You'd be expected to work for your keep. Everyone pulls their own weight at the ranch. There are vegetables to be grown for our herbivore-shifter, meat to be hunted for our carnivores. We can vegetables and smoke meat for the winter -- you'd be expected to help with that, too. We share all of our chores, so one day you might be saddled with washing the floors, the next with hunting. It's a lot of work, I won't lie to you. But we've found it's worth the price for the freedom we get in return," Dakota said.

Watching her, Jax realized that she didn't seem very surprised to find out that they were shifters, too. "Can I ask you a question? Have you met other shifters before us?"

"Sure. Lots of 'em. There are plenty of shifters on the circus and carnival circuit. Most of them are in the sideshows, but the best animal trainers are shifters themselves."

"Sideshow? Oh, man... they put themselves on display as *freaks*?"

"Don't you dare call them freaks! They're sideshow folks, and they're good people," Daisy retorted. "They work hard and earn a decent living. Who are you to judge them?"

"I'm not, I'm not!" Jax said, holding up his hands as if to ward off an attack. *Sheesh. Some people were so goddamn touchy*, he thought. "Look, do you want to come with us, or not?"

Daisy looked thoughtful for a moment, biting her lip. "Yes, but I can't just walk out of here with Frick and Frack. I have a contract with the bastard who owns this shit-show."

"When is the circus due to leave town?" Dakota asked.

"Tomorrow night. We'll tear down after the last show and be on the road before midnight."

"We'll have to sneak you out after the trailers have been hitched up, just before they pull out. Hopefully they won't notice that you're missing until after they get to wherever they're going next, and won't know where you jumped ship," Jax said. "And if they do find you, what are they going to do? Sue you for breach of contract? What are they going to get? The cages?"

"Frick and Frack," Daisy said. "George would take them and have them put to sleep just to spite me."

"Yeah? I'd love to see the bastard try to take them. Everyone at the ranch is a part of my pack. I protect what's mine," Jax growled.

"Once the snows really start up here, the roads are impassable. No one will be able to get to the ranch until spring," Dakota said. "If anyone comes sniffing around then, we'll take Frick and Frack up into the mountains and tell them that they died during the winter. Given their ages, it's believable."

Daisy hesitated, obviously trying to think it through. Finally, she nodded. "Okay. It's worth the risk to give them a few last years of peace," she said quietly. "Thank you. Thank you so much!"

"We'll see you tomorrow night, Daisy," Jax said, leading Dakota out of the trailer.

The Great Escape, as Jax referred to their plan to get Daisy, Frick and Frack away from the circus, went off -- shockingly -- without a hitch.

Luckily there was no moon that night, and once the tent was knocked down, the trailers hitched, and the circus folk settled aboard the two yellow school busses, the darkness was complete. The only light came from the headlights of the trucks and busses.

No one had batted an eye when Daisy announced that she was riding in the trailer with Frick and Frack. She'd done it before, preferring their company to that of the others.

When the engines of the trucks that pulled the trailers started, Dakota and Jax, with the help of Oscar, quietly lowered the gangplank of Frick and Frack's trailer. Daisy led the two aged cats down out of the trailer as quickly as she could.

Jax led the trio to the waiting Suburban as Dakota and Oscar lifted the gangplank and secured it, finishing just as the trailers began to move.

In a matter of less than ten minutes, they were driving up the dark roads toward the ranch, the circus unaware that it was shy three performers.

Ghost had a fire crackling in the hearth when they returned to the ranch, and the two old lionesses targeted its warmth like a pair of grizzled heat-seeking missiles. They stretched out on the faux skin rug in front of the dancing flames like two lazy, fat housecats, and quickly drifted off to sleep.

Introductions were quickly made, and although Ghost remained his reticent self, he seemed to accept the presence of the big cats with relative ease. Dakota gave him a few brownie points, since he'd been certain that Ghost's tiger would bristle at the appearance of a trio of lions.

"Where's Deidre?" Oscar asked.

"She went upstairs a while ago. Said she had a backache," Ghost replied. He stood and stretched. "I think the two old broads have got the right idea," he said. "I'm exhausted. I'm going to bed."

"Daisy, you can take the bedroom across from ours," Dakota said. "I'll show you where it is. Will they be okay down here?" he asked, nodding toward the dozing felines.

"Yes. They'll probably sleep all night. I've told them to behave themselves -- they won't cause any trouble."

Jax was already halfway up the stairs, pulling his shirt up over his head. "Come on, already! I'm tired, and I smell like lion farts. I'm going to take a shower."

Dakota smiled as he and Daisy followed behind Jax. No matter how tired Dakota was, he was never too sleepy for a wet and soapy Jax. He showed Daisy to her new room, then slipped into his and Jax's room, stripping out of his clothes before the door had fully swung shut.

He heard the pattering sound of water coming from their bathroom. Theirs wasn't the largest, but it was the only bedroom with its own bath. Dakota suspected that it had once been a closet because of its tiny size, but it was still better than having to share a bathroom with everyone else.

Naked, Dakota slipped into the small bathroom. He could see Jax's shadow moving behind the plastic shower curtain, steam rising out from the stall. Grinning, his body hardened as he thought of Jax's hands sliding a soapy rag across taut muscles, dipping between the crack of Jax's ass.

Watching Jax touch himself was almost as good as when Dakota touched him. Dakota pulled at a corner of the shower curtain, slipping into the steamy stall.

"About time you got here," Jax said, turning to face him.

Lord, but didn't Jax look like sex itself, soap suds clinging to his wet, slick skin. The hair on his body was plastered down into swirling patterns, shapes that Dakota was itching to trace with his tongue.

Dakota's body hardened further, his bear growling just beneath the surface, wakened by the smell of the musk-scented soap and of Jax's arousal. Ducking his head under the spray, he cupped Jax's face between his palms and kissed his lover hungrily. He pushed Jax back until Jax's ass butted against the cool tiles, grinding his hips against Jax's body, trying to cover every inch of it with his own.

Dakota's hands dropped from Jax's face, smoothing over his shoulders and hard biceps, skimming over his corded forearms. They moved to Jax's hips, tracing the cleft between his sharp hipbones and his thighs. Finally, Dakota slipped his hands around Jax's back, cupping Jax's ass in his palms.

"I love your fucking ass. Love to fuck your ass. Want to..." He breathed into Jax's mouth. "Turn around."

"Hey, who's the alpha here?" Jax laughed, breaking yet another bruising kiss.

But Dakota was in no mood for Jax's jokes. Nor was he in the mood to concede dominance. "I said, *turn around*."

Spinning Jax to face the wall, Dakota used his knee to spread Jax's legs. Dropping to one knee, he pried Jax's ass cheeks apart. *Oh, yeah. That belongs to me and nobody else*, he thought, eyeing Jax's hole. Ringed with dark hair, the pebbled flesh seemed to wink at him, flirting.

Dakota curled his tongue and touched it to Jax's hole, tasting, teasing, until Jax thrust that ass backward.

"More. Stop fucking teasing me!" Jax hissed over his shoulder.

Dakota growled and attacked Jax's hole with his lips, both hands squeezing those cheeks hard enough to leave fingerprints on Jax's skin.

"Dakota!" Jax gasped. Dakota noticed Jax's arm moving, knew that he was pulling on his cock, milking it.

Standing up, Dakota pressed the head of his erection against Jax's opening. "Ready, lover?" he asked, kissing Jax's shoulder. The only answer he got was a long moan, but that was good enough for Dakota. He pushed in, gritting his teeth against the pleasure as he slipped inside Jax's body.

He hissed through his teeth as Jax squeezed his length. "In you, babe. Inside you."

"Move, Dakota. Goddamn it... move!" Jax cried, backing up to meet his thrust.

Dakota was only too happy to oblige, picking up the pace, flesh slapping flesh, water spraying between their bodies. Dakota felt Jax's body shudder around him, the channel clenching around Dakota's cock as Jax came.

He couldn't hold back, not another moment. Jax was so hot, had him so hard, that he thrust once, twice more and came hard, spending himself inside Jax's body.

Shuddering in the aftermath of his climax, Dakota rested his forehead on Jax's back, letting the hot water beat at the back of his neck. "Jax, oh, man I love you."

"Yeah. Yeah, me, too."

Limbs feeling almost too heavy to move, they lumbered through the rest of the shower, soaping up and rinsing off as quickly as they could. Five minutes later found them damp and in bed, Dakota spooned up against Jax's back, one arm thrown over his middle.

Dakota was just dozing off, in that place before true sleep took him, when he felt two heavy weights dip the mattress of the bed.

"What the hell?" Jax yelled.

Dakota sat up – or tried to. A heavy body lay across his legs. It was all he could do to reach over and click on the nightstand light.

Two tawny bodies lay across the bed, effectively pinning Dakota and Jax to the mattress. Frick and Frack barely batted an eye at Dakota and Jax's shouts. One of them -- Dakota couldn't begin to tell them apart -- chuffed, but then they both closed their eyes like a pair of overgrown puppies.

"Shit. Get them off the bed!" Jax yelled. He strained, as if trying to kick the lionesses off of his legs.

Dakota laughed. "We'd need a crane. Got one handy? Personally, I can't move."

"Well, fuck! Now what do we do?"

"Go to sleep, I guess," Dakota said, switching off the light.

"Are you kidding? You're going to let them sleep with us?"

"I would guess that a pair of four hundred pound lions can pretty much sleep wherever they want." Dakota grinned.

"Shit. My legs are going numb!"

"Go to sleep, Jax. We're just going to have to remember to make sure that the door is closed when we go to bed."

"This is all your fault, you know."

"Me? How is it my fault? You're the one who wouldn't leave without them."

"You just *had* to go to the circus. We could've gone to the movies, instead. Or bowling. Or mini-golfing. But *no*. Dakota *had* to go the circus. I told you that it wasn't a good idea. I told you--"

"Jax?"

"What?"

"Shut up and go to sleep."

"Fine. But if one of them decides that my leg is a chew toy, I'm taking it out of *your* hide in the morning."

"Goodnight, Jax."

"Night, Dakota."

Chapter Fourteen

Luckily, Jax's legs were spared the agony of being gummed by either of the big cats. It was just before four a.m. when he felt the weight lift and the blood begin to flow to his feet again.

A roar brought both Jax and Dakota bolt upright in bed.

"Shit! Tell me they want to use the fucking litter box," Jax said, grimacing as his feet throbbed with pins and needles.

"I don't think so -- they seem agitated," Dakota said, turning on the nightlight.

True enough, the cats were pacing, tails swishing irritably. One roared again, stalking in and out of their bedroom.

"Think those circus people are here looking for Daisy?" Jax asked, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He reached for his jeans, pulling them on, along with a tee shirt.

"Could be. Guess we'd better go check it out," Dakota said, shoving his feet into his pants.

Jax shooed the lions out into the hallway. But instead of heading toward the stairs, they padded up the hall toward Deidre and Oscar's room. The light was on, and the door was wide open. The cats lay down in the hallway on either side of the door, like sentries.

"Oh, thank God!" Oscar said, coming out of the bedroom. He looked frightened. "I think this is it!"

"What's it?" Jax asked. "What's going on?"

"Deidre's in labor!" Oscar cried. He was pale and looked like he wasn't sure if he wanted to hit something or throw up. Jax decided that, based on the expression on Oscar's face, he might just do both.

"Okay, calm down, Oscar," Jax said. "Go... boil some water, or get some towels or something. Dakota, get in there. Do your midwife thing."

"Oh, shit! Okay. Okay. Come on, Jax," Dakota said, grabbing Jax's elbow.

"Come on, *where*? Not in *there*. No way. I'll go help Oscar with the water," Jax replied, trying to pull away. "*You're* the midwife."

"I know it, but only because *you* volunteered my services. You want to be the alpha of this Pack? Fine. You can march your alpha ass into the birthing room. I'm going to need you to assist me. I am *not* doing this alone, Jax."

"Oh, *hell* no. C'mon, Dakota..."

"*Now*, Jax."

"Aw, shit!" Jax said again. Reluctantly, he followed Dakota into Deidre and Oscar's bedroom.

Deidre was lying down on the bed, legs bent and spread, her nightgown pushed up around her hips. Her face was pale and a thin sheen of sweat glistened on her brow.

"Oh, man, Deidre! Why didn't you tell us?" Dakota asked, pulling Jax into the room behind him.

"It started as a backache earlier. Then all of a sudden, I was getting contractions," she said. Suddenly, she gritted her teeth, hissing. "Fuck! They're getting worse, Dakota!"

"How far apart are they?"

"I don't know... just a minute or so, I think."

"Jax, use your watch to time them," Dakota ordered. He moved to the foot of the bed, fussing at the comforter.

"Time what?"

"Her contractions. We need to know how far apart they are," Dakota replied. "I'll be right back. I need to get the kit."

"Wait! How am I supposed to know when one starts?"

"Deidre will tell you. Time how far apart they are and how long they last, okay?"

"Don't leave me here! What if she starts popping it out?" Jax cried, feeling panic tighten his chest. He could face hunters with dogs and guns, could fall asleep with a pair of lions lying across his fucking legs, but the thought of being left alone with a woman in labor scared the hell out of him.

"She won't. Jesus, Jax. We've got plenty of time. It's not like the baby is going to be fired out of a cannon! I'll be back in a minute."

Jax looked down at Deidre, who began to strain under another contraction. "Just hurry the fuck up," he said, glancing at his watch.

The contraction lasted for just over forty-five seconds. They were the longest forty-five seconds of Jax's life. It seemed that Deidre had just started to relax when the next one hit. This time, she screamed.

"Oh, God... keep your legs closed," he said. "Don't let them out until Dakota gets back."

"Come here, Jax," Deidre said, crooking her finger at him, her face ashen. "So I can rip your fucking head off." Another contraction hit her, stronger than the last. Her fingers twisted in the material of his shirt, pulling him down, as she screamed a stream of obscenities at him.

"Dakota!" Jax yelled, as Deidre hand left his shirt and grabbed hold of a fist full of his hair. "Dakota! I think we're out of fucking time!"

"I need to push!" Deidre screamed. She pulled hard on Jax's hair, making him see stars.

"Push what, where? You can't get out of bed! You're having a baby!" Jax yelled back, trying to untwist Deidre's fingers from his hair. If she kept this up, he'd be snatched baldheaded, and bald was *not* a good look for a wolf. "DAKOTA!"

Dakota appeared at Jax's elbow, holding a shoebox. "What the hell are you doing, Jax?"

"My hair was getting long, and I thought I'd have her take a little off the top. Get her off me, goddamn it!"

"I have to push!" Deidre screamed again.

"Breathe, Deidre, breathe. Remember? Like we talked about? Pant, hon. You can't push yet," Dakota said, sounding far calmer than Jax felt at the moment. Then again, Dakota didn't have *his* hair being ripped out by the roots.

Blessedly, Deidre let go of his hair and began to pant like a dog on a hot summer day. He followed Dakota to the foot of the bed and immediately wished he hadn't.

"Oh, good God... what the hell is *that*?" he gasped, looking at the hairy thing that was beginning to protrude from between Deidre's legs.

"That's the baby's head, Jax. Isn't it cool?" Dakota sounded awed, his tone reverential.

Jax thought it looked like someone had shoved a tiny toupee into Deidre's pussy.

"Gross. I'll be in the kitchen with Oscar," he said, turning to leave.

"Oh, no. Not a chance, pal. I need your help," Dakota said, snagging his arm. "Here -- hand me what I ask for, when I ask for it," he said, pointing at the shoebox that lay at the foot of the bed. Inside, Jax could see a pair of scissors, a length of string, and something that looked like a tiny turkey baster. Dakota had also brought up a couple of small, soft blankets that lay next to the box, neatly folded.

Dakota had his hands between Deidre's thighs, supporting the round, hairy thing that had slipped out. "Okay, hon, the baby's head is out. When you feel the next contraction, push!" Dakota said to Deidre.

"Push? Why? If it doesn't want to come out, why force it?" Jax asked, but his voice was lost in Deidre's guttural, teeth-grinding scream. Her face grew bright red, every tendon in her neck standing out in stark relief as she bore down.

"That's one shoulder!" Dakota cried, smiling. "Good job, Deidre! Keep pushing, hon!"

There was another scream, more pushing.

"Both shoulders are out! The rest will be easier, Deidre. Good girl!" Dakota grinned. Jax looked over his shoulder at the bluish-red body that was being squeezed out of her.

"Shit. Put it back. It's not cooked yet," Jax said, wrinkling his nose at the sight and the smell.

"Shut up and get the string ready for me," Dakota said as the rest of the baby slipped out of the birth canal. He used the bulb to suction out the baby's nose, swiped its mouth with his pinkie finger, and tapped the baby's feet. A bleating cry filled the room. "It's a boy, Deidre!"

Holy shit, Jax thought, his eyes widening as he looked at the tiny form that Dakota placed on Deidre's stomach. *It's a fucking baby!* Jax handed Dakota the string and watched him tie off the baby's umbilical cord in two places. Dakota took the scissors, and with a quick snip between the knots, the baby was -- for better or worse -- a living, breathing, independent person.

Dakota wrapped the baby in one of the blankets. "Here, Jax, hold him. There's another head crowning!" he said, thrusting the baby into Jax's arms.

Jax looked down at the scrunched up face. The bluish color was gone, replaced by a nice rosy pink. Bits of reddish goo still clung to the baby's hair and he smelled funky, making Jax realize that the kid needed a bath. Still, he felt something in his chest crack, and his breath hitch up. *Wow, I'm an uncle!* Jax thought, smiling.

Oscar poked his head in the door. "Is it over? Are they okay?"

"Hey, Oscar! Come meet your son!" Dakota grinned.

Jax's arms tightened on the bundle, suddenly unwilling to hand him over. But he forced himself to lay the baby in Oscar's arms and turn his attention back to Dakota and Deidre.

More groaning, more pushing, more string, and soon Jax held a second baby in his arms. Wrapped in a blanket, she added her cries to her twin brother's. "It's a little girl. She's beautiful," he breathed, looking up at Dakota. Jax's eyes burned, and he realized he was crying. *Shit. I'm never going to live this down*, he thought sniffing.

Deidre strained again, and for a moment Jax thought that she was delivering yet another baby. *Oh, no*, he thought, *she really is having a litter. How many did she have squirreled away in there?* But this time a soggy, stinky mass of tissue slid free from between her legs. Dakota dumped the afterbirth into the shoebox and slipped the cover over it.

Oscar looked a little shell-shocked, but had a goofy grin spread across his usually taciturn face. Deidre was smiling softly, her face glowing, and both of them were oohing and ahing over the twin bundles of joy.

"Come on, Jax. Let's leave the happy family alone for a while," Dakota said, tugging on his arm.

"Leave? We can't leave the babies with *them*. They've never had babies before. They won't know what to do." Jax said, frowning.

"They'll figure it out," Dakota said.

"But--"

"No buts. Come on," Dakota insisted. Jax let Dakota pull him from the room, but only very reluctantly.

"That was fucking amazing," Jax said, following Dakota to their bedroom. Frick and Frack looked up at them as they passed, yawning before settling their heavy heads back down on their paws. "*You were fucking amazing!*"

"Well, Deidre did all the work. I just caught them." Dakota smiled. "You were pretty great yourself, you know."

"Is it over?" Ghost leaned against the wall at the end of the hallway. Daisy stood next to him, looking nervous and rubbing her upper arms.

"Yeah. She had twins!" Dakota said with a grin. "A boy and a girl, and they're all doing fine."

Ghost nodded. He slipped back inside his room like a wraith without another word, closing the door behind him.

Honestly, Jax thought, *that guy is freakin' spooky.*

"I was thinking I'd go downstairs and make everyone some breakfast," Daisy said.

"That would be awesome," Dakota replied. "I could use some coffee."

"I could use a stiff drink," Jax said under his breath. He couldn't get his mind off the miracle he'd witnessed. The birth of the babies had really shaken him. They were the first members *born* to his pack. He almost felt as if he'd given birth to them himself. Leaving them behind with their

parents was one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do. He wanted to keep them with *him*, so that he could protect them, make sure that they were safe.

One thing he knew for sure. If anyone *ever* tried to harm either of the twins, Jax would rip the bastard to pieces.

Chapter Fifteen

Winter in the mountains of Wyoming was a bitter bitch.

Snow, lots of it, *tons* of it, fell in an almost continual curtain, or so it seemed to Dakota. Every week seemed to bring another blizzard, and each one seemed to last for eight days straight. The ranch had been quickly buried under a thick, white blanket that brushed the window sills and smothered the landscape. They'd been housebound for months, and there was no relief in sight.

Dakota was sick of looking out of the window to see nothing but a sea of white.

His bear was sleepy, his energy sapped. By March, it was all he could do to drag his sorry ass out of bed in the morning, wanting nothing more than to burrow back under the comforter and hibernate until spring.

As soon as this winter was over, he swore that he was moving the pack south to where it never snowed. Somewhere he could sunbathe on New Year's Eve and sport a year-round tan. He'd burn his insulated gloves and goose-down parka. He'd sell the ranch and buy a house with a swimming pool, and the only thing frozen in his life would be the margaritas he drank poolside.

Groaning at the weak, gray winter sunlight that streamed in from the window, he flopped back onto the mattress with an arm thrown over his eyes.

"Dakota? Are you *still* in bed? Get up! It's nearly noon," Jax said, pulling at the comforter.

Dakota growled, snatching it back and pulling the covers over his head.

"Quit being such a fucking bear, will ya?" Jax laughed.

"Leave me alone."

"Sorry, I can't do that, big guy. You're spending too much time in bed lately. Not that I mind it when I'm in there with you, but if I'm up... you're up. "

"Since when are we joined at the hip? Get out, Jax. Leave me alone. I want to sleep."

"You sleep too fucking much lately, Dakota. It worries me." Jax sighed. "Okay. I didn't want to do this, but you've left me no choice. You asked for it, bud."

Suddenly there were two bouncing bodies in bed with Dakota, pulling his hair, shoving sticky fingers in his eyes and mouth, giggling, and drooling all over him. Tai and Mal, the twins, were six months old, and twenty pounds each of pure, unadulterated energy. They were precocious for their age, perhaps due to their heartier shapeshifter heritage, already crawling and attempting to stand unaided.

Even more astounding than their early physical development were the signs of other powers the twins were exhibiting, the likes of which none of the members of Jax's pack had ever seen before.

Sitting squarely on Dakota's chest, Tai reached out her chubby arms and wiggled her pudgy fingers, a wide, nearly toothless smile on her face. Across the room, an empty bottle of beer that Dakota had neglected to toss into the trash wiggled, then rose and floated through the air to her.

Dakota snatched the bottle away, shaking a finger at her. "No, Tai. Not good for you, hon."

He caught sight of Mal, sitting near the foot of the bed, chewing on a plastic bottle of lube like a teething ring. *Damn*, Dakota thought, *I need to be more careful about what I leave lying around*. "Give me that, pal," he said, yanking the bottle of Astroglide away. He looked up at Jax, who stood grinning in the doorway.

"Jax, have a heart, okay? Give me a hand with them."

"Are you going to get up and shower?"

"Jax..."

"Up and showered and dressed, or you get to baby-sit all day."

"Okay, Okay... I'll get up," Dakota grunted. Truth was, he loved the twins and would do anything for them. They never failed to brighten his mood, and Jax knew it.

"C'mon, kids. Let's go find your mom and dad and let Uncle Dakota get his lazy ass up out of bed," Jax said, reaching for the babies.

"Ass!" Tai chirped, fisting a handful of Jax's hair.

Mal mimicked nearly everything his sister said. "Ass!" he cried happily, pulling on Jax's lower lip.

"Oh, that's just great, Jax. Nice vocabulary you're teaching them. Deidre and Oscar are going to have a fit if they hear them!"

"We'll just blame it on Uncle Ghost then, won't we?" Jax grinned. "Bad Uncle Ghost, always using naughty words around the babies." Although Jax had seemed to accept Ghost's presence in his pack as the winter had progressed, there was still no love lost between them.

"Bad Ghodz," Tai said, yanking hard on Jax's hair.

Jax winced, and Dakota laughed. "Serves you right. Okay, get 'em out of here and let me get dressed," he said, shooing them out the door.

A half-hour later, Ghost appeared in the kitchen where Dakota was pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Found something you might be interested in," he said, slipping a sheet of computer paper on the counter in front of Dakota. "I thought you might want to check it out, now that the roads are clear."

Dakota's eyes scanned the paper. The article Ghost had printed out was about a group of people who believed that they were werewolves. They held meetings in a store front in downtown Detroit, based on the Alcoholics Anonymous famous twelve-step program. He snorted, sliding the paper away. "You're kidding, right? These people are nuts!"

"Sure, most of them are probably short a few bolts, but it's not difficult to believe that a *real* shifter might gravitate toward places like this, looking for people like us. I thought you might want to check it out."

"No. The ranch is too crowded as it is, Ghost. We've already decided that we can't take anyone else in."

"That's a mistake, Dakota. Look, you have to listen to me. I can't talk to Jax. He hates me--"

"He doesn't hate you, Ghost. He just has trust issues."

"He hates me. That's okay, I can deal with that. It's an alpha thing. But he won't listen to me and I need to remind you two that there's someone out there who's big, nasty, and always hungry. Now that the warmer weather is coming, Cain is going to come looking for you," Ghost said. His pale blue eyes, almost colorless, were piercing as he stared hard at Dakota.

"Your T-Rex shifter?"

"He's not *my* anything. But he's real, Dakota. By now Cain has realized that Mouse, Weasel, and I aren't coming back. Believe me, he's not somebody who will forgive and forget. He wanted Deidre, and he'll come after her himself next time."

"So... what does he have to do with this screwy self-help group?"

"You need to find as many shifters as you can and bring them here. You need an army, Dakota."

Dakota laughed. "I need an *army* of shifters? Are you crazy?"

"Do I look crazy? I'm deathly serious. It's the only way you can protect everyone, Dakota. The only way you can protect the twins. Cain wants Deidre, and I'm positive that he would never allow her children to live -- her cougar won't allow her to become pregnant while she still has a

litter with her. When he comes, he'll kill them. You need to gather an army, because Cain already has one."

Dakota felt himself blanch. He looked past the kitchen door into the living room, where Deidre and Oscar sat on the floor playing with the twins. Jax sat on the sofa next to Daisy, watching them like a proud patriarch. Frick and Frack lay near the fire, as always, soaking up the warmth into their arthritic bones.

Ghost was right. If Cain came, he and Jax were going to need a lot more help than one tiger, a pair of new parents, two babies, a young woman, and a pair of elderly lionesses to fend Cain off.

"I'll talk to Jax," he said.

"Hi, my name is David, and I'm a werewolf."

"Hi, David!"

From his seat at the back of the small storefront room, Jax had a perfect view of the tall, skinny redhead who stood up shyly, gave a half wave to the rest of the group, and admitted to being to be a werewolf in a voice that still cracked with puberty.

Barely able to keep from rolling his eyes in disdain, Jax pulled the brim of his ball cap down a bit lower over his face, trying to keep his features in shadow. How he'd *ever* let Dakota talk him into attending this pseudo-twelve step program was quite beyond him. Making a small, disgusted noise in his throat, Jax sank a little lower in his seat and admitted to himself that he knew *exactly* how'd he'd allowed Dakota to talk him into it.

Sex, that's how.

That was how Dakota was able to get Jax to do *everything* he wanted Jax to do. The truth was that Dakota led Jax around by his pecker and always had, ever since the two of them had met. Not that Jax was complaining, mind you -- at least, not about the sex part. Someday he was going to have to remind Dakota that *he* was the alpha in the pack.

Jax's eyes cut across to meet Dakota's, throwing him a look that told him exactly what Jax was thinking at the moment. He was thinking that the entire trip to Detroit was a colossal waste of his time, that no shapeshifter in their right mind would ever attend this pathetic self-help rip-off, especially considering that any *true* shapeshifter would understand that their abilities were engrained in their bodies at the molecular level, and that no amount of psycho-babble would make the slightest bit of difference in their lives.

Jax went right on thinking that up until the moment a slender young man stood up from his seat nearby.

"Hi, I'm Aiden, and I'm a were-eagle," he said in a soft, tremulous voice.

Stone cold silence met the young man's confession. The audience didn't respond to him with their usual, bubbly greeting. Instead, they began to murmur amongst themselves in angry, quiet voices. Several turned around, their eyes shooting daggers at the young man who flushed a deep, dark red.

"Were-eagle? How *dare* you? This is a support group for serious-minded people, young man," a stumpy, older woman with a wide, low bosom that could have smothered half the city said, rising to her feet and looking over the rims of her half-moon glasses at Aiden. "Lycanthropy is a serious business, young man! This isn't some sort of role-playing group. These people understand that we all have an inner beast and are here to connect with the wolf within, to embrace their wild child. There is no place here for levity in any shape or form, and you insult the intelligence of everyone in this room with your nonsense. You need to leave."

Her comments were met by several shouts of agreement as the mood in the room turned decidedly ugly. Jax feared that the audience might break out pitchforks and torches from their canvas shopping bags and backpacks at any moment. He tossed Dakota a meaningful look as Aiden stumbled past him, heading for the door.

Rising at the same time, Jax and Dakota moved to follow Aiden out of the smoky storefront, but Dakota's hand on Jax's arm had held him back. Dakota was staring hard at the arrogant woman who'd spoken. Jax was certain that Dakota would have given his right testicle to be able to shift in front of her, just for the pleasure of seeing that pompous windbag piss in her bargain-basement shoes when confronted with a non-lupine shapeshifter.

To Jax's surprise, the usually reticent Dakota did allow himself one tiny jab at the roomful of lycanthropic-wannabes. Starting in his chest, a deep, rumbling growl grew into a bone-rattling roar, rolling past his lips and echoing off the walls of the small room.

On his way out of the door, Jax was pleased to note that the pompous windbag would be shopping for new shoes after all.

Chapter Sixteen

Dakota and Jax followed Aiden outside as the young man stalked down the street and turned up a narrow alley that ran between two buildings. They caught up to him just as he was about to scale the chain link fence at the rear of the alley.

"Hold up, Aiden! We need to talk to you," Dakota said, stepping in front of the young man and cutting off his access to the fence. Jax stood behind Aiden, effectively corralling the young man between the two of them.

"Who are you? Are you a couple of those jackasses from that meeting? Look, I left, okay? Leave me alone!" Aiden cried, his clear amber eyes darting from Dakota to Jax and back again.

"We're not with those bozos," Dakota said, holding his palms up in front of him to show Aiden that he carried no weapons. "We just wanted to talk to you. What you said in there was interesting. A were-eagle, huh?"

Aiden didn't answer, slowly sidling away from the two of them until his back was pressed against the bricks of one of the buildings that hemmed in the alley. The look on his face told Jax that Aiden was at the point of fight or flight and was leaning heavily toward the latter.

"Show him, Jax," Dakota said, reaching out and grabbing hold of Aiden's bicep in his large hand. Aiden resisted, pulling and pushing, but couldn't loosen Dakota's strong grip from his upper arm.

"Damn it, Dakota! Why am I the one who always has to shift? Can't you do it this time?" Jax grumbled, folding his arms across his chest stubbornly.

"Not now, Jax! Come on! We can fight about it later," Dakota shot back, obviously having a hard time keeping Aiden still. The kid must be stronger than he looked, Jax thought.

Beginning to panic, Aiden's eyes were widened with fear, spurring Jax into action.

Frantically unbuttoning his shirt, and losing several buttons in the process, Jax quickly stripped it off and kicked free of his shoes. Just as his fingers went to work on the button of his Levi's, he heard a ripping sound as Aiden's shirt tore in Dakota's hand. The young man was frantic, twisting and turning and sinking a fist or an elbow into whichever part of Dakota's anatomy he could make contact with.

"Hurry up, will you? He probably thinks we're getting ready to rape him!" Dakota hissed, now holding a struggling Aiden with both arms wrapped around the young man's upper body. "Calm down, Aiden! We aren't going to hurt you. We just want to show you something!"

Aiden's face turned toward Jax, the young man's eyes glowing golden in the dim light. He opened his mouth and a sharp, strident cry echoed in the alley.

"No, Aiden! Don't shift inside of your clothes! You'll damage your feathers!" Dakota warned, just as Jax managed to free himself from his pants and jockeys. "Watch him, Aiden!"

Jax waited until Aiden's gleaming, golden eyes turned toward him, then shifted into his wolf-form.

It obviously took a few heartbeats for Aiden's brain to translate what his eyes saw into anything that made sense, but when it finally did a look of awe coated his features and Jax was relieved to see him visibly relax. "You! You're like me -- sort of."

Jax sat back on his haunches, panting, his tongue lolling off the side of his jaw as Dakota released Aiden from the bear hug and stooped to pick Jax's clothes up from the filthy, litter-strewn ground. Standing up, he wrapped Jax's shoes and ball cap up in his underwear, shirt and pants, tucking the ball of clothing under his arm. Looking at Jax, he said, "From now on we should wear jumpsuits to these things, or something with Velcro. It took you entirely too long to get undressed!" Dakota chided.

Jax growled at Dakota and bared his teeth in annoyance before looking back up at Aiden and thumping his tail on the cement.

"We're both like you, Aiden. I'm a were-bear. There are several more of us back at our ranch in Wyoming. We've been looking for other shapeshifters like us. I remember how alone I felt before I met Jax. I thought I was a freak, and my family did, too. My father actually tried to kill me when I hit puberty and the Change came on me," Dakota said softly. From the look he received from Aiden, Jax knew that Aiden understood *exactly* what Dakota was talking about.

It seemed the common denominator among all the shifters they'd met, with the exception of Deidre. She was the only one they'd met who had had shifter parents, aside from the twins. It seemed to Jax like Aiden's story would be more like his and Dakota's -- sad, frightening, and as lonely as all hell.

Aiden's heart was still beating a rapid tattoo in his chest as he stared at the pair of shifters who'd cornered him in the alley. No matter that he'd gone to the lycanthrope meeting in hopes of finding someone else like himself, being actually face-to-face with another shifter was as frightening as it was exciting. After all, the only other shifters he'd known had not been of the friendly sort and he'd never found any others after them.

Aiden nodded slowly as his mind turned inward, reliving his own Change. Not fully trusting the wolf and the man who said he was a bear, Aiden gave them the sanitized version of his life.

"I was away at summer camp when it happened. I hadn't wanted to go, but my dad said that I needed to learn to be a man. Trouble was, that summer I learned to be an eagle instead," he said softly, with a wry half-smile. As the man named Jax shifted back and got dressed, he told them his story -- or at least the story he'd meticulously prepared for the Shifters Anonymous meeting. The one he hadn't gotten the chance to tell.

"The first time I shifted, I was in swimming class at camp. I'd just gotten out of the water, when it started," he said. It was true, too -- well, the swimming part was, at least.

It had begun with a horrible itch along his shoulders that had swiftly spread to the rest of his body. Feeling as if he'd rolled in a patch of poison ivy, the itch had intensified until Aiden had reached the point where he couldn't stand it. He'd run into the woods and ripped off his swim trunks, scratching frantically at every inch of skin he could reach and rubbing those parts he couldn't against the rough bark of a tree.

He'd nearly scratched himself raw and bloody when the itch had suddenly subsided as quickly as it had come, replaced by tingling warmth. The burning sensation grew quickly into an uncomfortable heat, engulfing his body from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. Just as he'd turned to return to the lake with the intention of flinging himself into the cooling water, he'd felt his world sway and shimmer.

Unaware for a few moments of his Change, Aiden had been confused and frightened. He couldn't decide if the world around him had suddenly grown larger or if he'd merely shrunk, but suddenly everything seemed *bigger* than it had a few moments ago.

His biggest shock had come when he'd started to run back to the camp to get help and instead had taken wing, flapping ungracefully a few feet above the forest floor for a few yards and banging his head painfully into the broadside of an oak in the process. Looking down at himself he finally realized that he'd Changed. His terrified scream was an eagle's cry that had filled the quiet of the forest.

"I left home when I turned eighteen. I haven't been back since," he finished quietly.

That had been two years ago, and Aiden had survived mainly in his eagle-form, catching rats and mice and nesting on the roof of the building that bordered the alley the three shifters were standing in.

"Your folks were afraid of you, huh?" Jax asked him.

"I... disappointed them," Aiden said, not wanting to explain. Jax and Dakota seemed to accept that at face value -- at least, they didn't question him further. They probably assumed that his folks had tried to kill him, too.

"Aiden, come back to the ranch with us," Dakota was saying. "You don't have to be alone anymore."

"Yeah, kid. We know what it's like to be different. That's why we founded the ranch. Right now, we have a cougar, a rhino, a lion, and a tiger living with us," Jax said. "We're one big happy family."

"Don't forget the twins. Tai and Mal are the children of two of our shifters. They're seven months old now, and a handful," Dakota chuckled. "You'll like them Aiden."

Aiden bit his lip, thinking. He'd been on his own for so long that he'd nearly forgotten what it meant to not be alone. Hadn't he dreamt about finding others like himself? Others who weren't psycho? Hadn't he prayed for it? Here was his chance, his opportunity to belong, something he'd wanted desperately for as long as he could remember, ever since he'd Changed.

But he didn't know these two. They could be crazy, or dangerous -- or both. Could he really go off with them to some mysterious ranch in the middle of nowhere?

Then again, a wolf and a bear couldn't follow an eagle if he took to wing. He could always fly away if he didn't like it there. And then, there was always the Other...

No, he'd promised himself he'd never do that again. Not ever, no matter what. It was the eagle, or nothing.

Aiden made his decision. He nodded and smiled. "Yeah. I think I'd like that."

"Great," Jax said smiling back, although to Aiden he sounded a little less than enthusiastic. "Welcome to the Pack."

Chapter Seventeen

Cain loved southern food, especially when it begged with such a delightful drawl for him not to eat it.

As pleasant as the woman's voice had been, it hadn't stopped Cain from devouring her, hat, purse, shoes, and all. Unfortunately, she'd been as skinny as a shadow, gone in less than two bites, and he was still hungry.

No matter.

There was an entire country full of food just waiting for him.

"Boss?" Gar's voice hailed him from the corner of the gas station. Cain had given him and the rest of the Predators leave to sack the station for whatever they could find in the way of food and money -- after Cain had eaten the proprietor. He noticed that Gar looked skittish, ready to run -- not that Cain blamed him. A predator could easily become prey if Cain was hungry enough. "We're ready to go whenever you are, Boss."

After re-assuming his man-form and licking his fingers clean, Cain dressed in black leather pants, a sleeveless vest with the Predator colors stitched onto the back, and steel-toed boots. He would have preferred to ride naked, leaving him free to shift at the slightest whim, but a naked man riding a bike in broad daylight would attract too much attention. Not that he was worried about the puny human authorities, but any confrontations would surely slow the Pack down. He aimed to get to Wyoming as quickly as possible. Given how often he had to stop for food -- he required huge amounts of protein to survive -- the trip was already going to take far longer than he would have liked.

Flying was out of the question. Cain couldn't tolerate being closed up in small spaces; he suffered from severe claustrophobia, a souvenir of his childhood. It was why he rode a motorcycle and not some huge, crushing, steel-encrusted Hummer, which would have better reflected his inner beast. He could barely stand to sleep indoors, and did so only when the weather was inclement. The very thought of being locked into a tiny cabin three hundred thousand feet in the air was enough to set his heart hammering in his chest. The consequences of him shifting into a fifteen-foot, seven-ton T-Rex while inside a plane would be catastrophic. It would be ripped apart in mid-air.

Not that he'd ever confided that fear to anyone, not even to his most trusted lieutenants. No one could *ever* know that Cain had a weakness of any kind. Instead, he'd fed them a line about technology being for those predators -- like humans -- that were ill-equipped by nature to hunt. The weak, the pathetic, those at the bottom of the food chain armed themselves with unnatural means. The Ultimate Predators needed no technology to do as nature had intended.

The lie served to keep guns out of the hands of his own Pack, thus dramatically cutting any chance that one of them might take it into their pea-sized brains to challenge him.

After all, Cain wasn't completely delusional. He knew that even a T-Rex could be brought down if the bullet was big enough.

Straddling the seat of his gleaming silver-and-black Harley, Cain kicked it to life, smiling as the beast roared under his ass, vibrations thrumming in his balls. Signaling to the others, he pulled out of the two-pump gas station parking lot and onto the lonely stretch of I-75, heading north.

He had received a fix on his prey just a few weeks ago. Byte, one of Cain's newer recruits, was a wolf-shifter with a real talent for manipulating the web. Byte had gone to an Internet café down in Miami and had successfully hacked into the Wyoming Department of Motor Vehicles database, tracing the license plate number Mouse had given Cain.

The plate traced to a Suburban belonging to someone named Dakota Wells. That much Cain had known from Mouse's last communiqué. Now he had an address to go along with the name. Wells had registered the Suburban to a ranch in the mountains outside of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Byte had Googled the address and had printed out a map.

"We're going to ride north. The bastards who have my female are living on a few acres of land in the mountains. We ride in, kill the males, and take the female back. I want her alive and in one piece, understand?" he'd announced to the Pack.

Cain had taken only a dozen of his most trusted men with him. Although he would have preferred taking his entire Predator army, he also knew that fewer men could move faster and were less likely to draw unwanted attention on the road.

He'd left the others, along with the females, back in the Everglades shanty town. Females were at a premium in Cain's Pack. That was the reason he was so keen on getting his hands on the pantheress. Mouse had reported that she was young, healthy, and strong. Well, that and the fact that he hated the thought that other shifters -- no matter how weak -- were organizing, banding together. That portended the possibility of competition, something Cain would never tolerate.

Currently, two of his females were pregnant, and he held hope that at least one of them would survive to give birth to a child with his unique shifting ability.

Impregnating females was difficult for him. During the mating process, Cain was prone to lose control, to shift during his orgasm and eat the females. Of the six times during the past year when he'd managed to restrain himself and had successfully implanted his seed, all had been failures. Two of the females had died during birth, along with the infants. None of the live births had produced a T-Rex like himself.

He would have known within their first year of life if any of the children he'd managed to sire over the years were like him -- Cain had first shifted on the day he'd learned to walk. Or so his mother had told him -- Cain himself didn't remember.

What he *did* remember of his young life was the cult into which he'd been born. Called *Children of the Beast*, his mother had been their high priestess. His father could have been any one of a number of the male members. They indulged in sex and acid on a regular basis -- usually in groups and at the same time. Cain had lost his virginity at a young age -- and afterward had eaten the woman who'd popped his cherry.

The camp had been located in a desolate area of the Mojave, a place inhabited by scorpions, tarantulas, vultures... and his mother's cult. He remembered the scorching heat, the cold nights, and the sand that blew on the hot wind and scourged his skin.

Cain also remembered the Altar: a sixteen foot high, twenty foot wide, steel-barred, cement cage in which Cain had spent his first sixteen years. After he'd reached puberty, they'd never allowed him outside of the Altar anymore. He remembered his mother and the others of their cult kneeling before his Altar, the prayers and the orgies, the drugs, and the virginal sacrifices.

Cain remembered the sacrifices most of all. They'd been young and tender, and screaming when his mother had shoved them through the small door into the Altar with him.

"You are the *One*, Cain," his mother and the others in the Family had always told him. "The others were too weak, they weren't worthy, but not you! The Beast has been reborn in you, Cain! You're going to tear down the false Church, make a laughingstock of the scientific community, and clear the way for the New Beginning. It is your destiny!"

He would do it, too. He'd started with the cult he'd been raised in. On the day he'd turned sixteen, his jaws still dripping with the blood of the latest sacrifice, he'd smashed the Altar to pieces under his enormous weight and had devoured everyone from his mother to the last lowly believer. He hadn't stopped since and had no *intention* of stopping until the entire world recognized him as the *One*, the Ultimate Alpha.

He'd decided long ago that the *Beast* his mother and her followers had worshiped was a joke, but *Cain* was the real deal.

Heading out from the desert, he'd traveled up and down the west coast from Baja to Washington, collecting whatever shifters he thought might strengthen his Pack and eating the rest. He gave them the three Laws, showed them how to best use the human camouflage nature had blessed them with to feed without being caught.

In return, they feared him and worshiped him.

Someday, he would spawn an entire herd of Tyrannosaurs like himself. Someday, the earth would again shake under the feet of dinosaurs, and he, Cain, would be King of them all.

If he'd planned the trip correctly, they should make Wyoming in about a month, given the number of times he needed to stop to feed and rest. One more month and the blood of Dakota Wells and whatever pathetic shifters he had with him on his ranch would splash the mountains

bright crimson. Four short weeks and the pantheress would be in Cain's bed. He had a good feeling about her. Perhaps she'd be the one to give him his first T-Rex infant. If not, well... there were always others to be found.

Leaning low over the handlebars of his bike, the wind whipping through his hair, he grinned.

Gar rode behind Cain, in the place of honor always reserved for Cain's First Lieutenant.

Yeah, hours spent on the road eating Cain's exhaust -- big fucking honor, he thought wryly, gritting his teeth. He cast a sideways glance at Byte, who rode next to him. New to the Predators, it was Byte's talent on a keyboard that had raised him in the ranks so quickly. Gar had had to wait until Mouth disappeared to move up.

Then again, Cain's exhaust beat the other thing Gar had been eating lately.

There was nothing about Cain that was small -- including his libido. His decision to leave the females back in the swamp had put a serious crimp in Cain's sex life. Not that Cain had let that stop him. He didn't really care who he fucked as long as he fucked. Gar had found out the hard way that being Cain's First Lieutenant entailed duties Mouth had never mentioned in the course of their conversations.

Namely, being Cain's bitch when they were out on the road.

The first time Cain had called him over to where Cain sat naked, his mouth still dripping with the blood of his last meal, Gar had nearly run screaming in the opposite direction. It had been all he could do to force his feet to carry him over there. They were all predators, but Cain was far more dangerous, more merciless than any of them. Gar felt queasy at the sight of him nude, body smeared with blood, the smell of his last kill clinging to him, knowing what monster lurked just beneath Cain's skin. Worse was the erection that reared between his legs -- one look at his hard prick and Gar knew exactly what Cain wanted from him.

Cain hadn't even spoken. He'd just spread his legs a little wider and leaned back on his elbows, closing his eyes.

Gar, ever mindful of the fact that Cain could literally bite Gar's head off if he displeased the predator, had knelt between Cain's legs and wrapped his fingers around Cain's thick cock. He tried to detach himself, to not think about what he was doing and to whom, but when Cain lifted that large head and stared hard at him, Gar got the message loud and clear. *Get into it, and don't fucking disappoint me*. Cain's eyes, flashing from human to reptilian and back again, gave that order no less loudly than if Cain had bellowed it at the top of his lungs.

Gar, as it turned out, had missed his calling. He was a consummate actor.

Licking, sucking, he'd devoured Cain's cock as if it was the only food on the planet worth tasting. And as conceited as Cain was, he'd believed Gar's performance. He'd come in great, sour-tasting spurts that had made Gar gag. He could still taste Cain, even now, a thick, burning sort of taste that coated the back of his throat.

Shit, Gar needed a beer in the worst way, just to gargle with and get rid of the ghost of the taste of Cain's spunk. Instead, he spat -- although it didn't do him much good -- and continued to breathe in Cain's exhaust.

Still, he had to admit that, despite everything, Mouth's disappearing act had been a stroke of good luck. It had pushed Gar's place up within the ranks faster than he could've climbed on his own. Patience wasn't one of Gar's virtues. He wanted power, deserved it, and would do anything to get it. Unfortunately, power within the Predators was directly proportionate to the sharpness of a man's teeth and the size of his balls.

Teeth, Gar had in spades. Balls were another matter.

Oh, his cheetah was a killer, speed and fury wrapped up in a spotted yellow coat. But he'd never hunted anything bigger and fiercer than he was before. Smaller things, especially smaller, soft things without fangs and claws, were his preferred prey.

As he stared at the back of Cain's leather vest, the patch of the T-Rex skull with flaming eyes seemed to taunt him. Being Cain's First Lieutenant wasn't good enough for Gar. He wanted it all. He wanted everything Cain had -- the respect, the power, the females... everything.

The only way to get what he wanted was for him to hunt something a lot bigger and scarier than himself, and to do it with as little danger to himself as possible. Taking Cain on directly would be foolish. But now, he had another way.

While he and the others had been ransacking the last gas station, he'd found a few extremely interesting things the owner had had hidden in the back room. He'd stuffed them underneath his jacket, carried them outside, and had secreted them away in his saddlebag.

Enjoy it while it lasts, Cain, he thought, grinning into the wind. This ride is going to be your last.

Chapter Eighteen

Ghost sat on the porch, cleaning a shotgun he'd picked up in town. It rested on his lap, twin barrels gleaming in the brilliant, May sunset. Over the past month and a half, he'd visited over a dozen shops in the surrounding area, amassing an arsenal that any militia group would be proud to call their own.

Shotguns, rifles, handguns, and an assortment of ammunition were now stockpiled neatly next to the cases of food and supplies in the barn. They'd need them all if -- *when* -- Cain found them.

He wasn't sure if Dakota and Jax truly believed him about Cain. Anyone, Ghost admitted, who hadn't seen Cain shift with their own eyes would have trouble believing it was possible for a man to shift into a Tyrannosaurus Rex. But Ghost had seen him, had smelled the carnage on Cain's breath and had seen the bloody puddles he left behind.

For the first time in his entire miserable existence, Ghost had people he cared about, who cared about him -- even Jax had become almost a friend. He'd be damned if he'd let Cain take that from him. Hence the stockpiling of weapons and daily firearms lessons and target practice he'd been giving the others.

Now he had another reason to fight.

Squinting in the dying rays of the sun, Ghost watched the eagle circle slowly in the sky streaked with reds and purples. Aiden was incredibly graceful as he rode the currents of air above the ranch.

So majestic... so beautiful.

Aiden was sweet and gentle in a way Ghost could barely remember being himself. He smiled as he recalled the first night Dakota and Jax had brought Aiden home. Looking for an empty bedroom, he'd slipped into Ghost's room by mistake.

Ghost had been naked, lounging on his bed, reading one of the gay romance novels he'd found piled in the back of his closet. Given the serious dearth of reading materials in the house, he'd picked one up out of desperation and had been surprised when he'd been drawn into the plot. The books were his dirty little secret, stashed under his mattress during the day like a teenager's collection of porn.

He'd looked up, startled, when Aiden had barged into his room without knocking.

"Oh, man... I'm sorry! I didn't know anyone was in here," Aiden had said. He'd blushed a bright red, standing in the doorway staring wide-eyed at Ghost, frozen like a deer caught in a hunter's searchlight.

Ghost had pulled a comforter over himself. "No problem. You must be Aiden. Dakota told me about you when he called this morning. I didn't realize you all were back from Detroit."

"We... uh... just got here. Jax told me to take an empty room, and I didn't realize you were in here. You must be Ghost."

"Guilty."

"Oh, hey... I've read that one."

"Huh?"

"Your book. *The Ways of Men*. I've read it. Do you like it? I used to get to read a lot of books at the library. I really liked Zevo, the main character in that one. I thought he was hot. Have you read *Love Has Wings*?"

"Uh, no..."

"You should. It was good, too."

Aiden was as golden as the sunlight Ghost could never enjoy, and he couldn't take his eyes off of the guy. It might have been that, or the fact that he'd readily admitted to sharing Ghost's reading interests, but Ghost suddenly hadn't been in a hurry to regain his privacy. In the next breath he'd invited Aiden to share his room with him.

Later, Ghost told himself that it had only been practical. Ghost's room had twin beds, and after all, Dakota and Jax were still searching for more shifters. He'd have to share his room with someone sooner or later. That someone might as well be Aiden.

It had nothing at all to do with the hard-on Ghost had had since the moment he'd first laid eyes on Aiden.

It hadn't.

Yeah, right.

Aiden circled once more and then came in for a landing, alighting just feet away from the front porch. Shifting, he stood in all his naked glory for a moment, backlit by the setting sun. Blond hair, amber eyes, with smooth, golden skin covering a surfer's body -- he was truly magnificent, and Ghost couldn't tear his eyes away.

"Hand me my clothes, dude," Aiden said, walking up to the porch. "Hurry up, before Daisy or Deidre comes out here."

Ghost's cheeks heated as he tossed Aiden his jeans and tee shirt. Although it was May, the evening air still held a chill, and Aiden's nipples were hardened, white peaks against golden

brown areolas. More than anything, Ghost wanted to reach out and touch them, or better still, worry them between his teeth. But he didn't even know if Aiden would be interested in him. How could he be? Ghost was so fucking pale, unable to go outside during the day except for short times, had little social skills -- what could someone who looked like Aiden find attractive in someone like Ghost?

And Ghost wasn't about to ask. He kept his desire hidden, stuffing it deep down inside himself along with the rest of his emotions. That was the one thing his father had taught him, and he'd learned the lesson well. If you didn't show emotion, didn't acknowledge it, you couldn't be hurt.

"Show no emotion, boy! Emotions make you weak! Suck it up and keep going!"

The phantom of his father's voice rang in Ghost's memory. He'd been called Joshua back then, a million years ago when he'd been the young son of an army sergeant. A military brat, Ghost had spent the first fifteen years of his life shuttled from base to base, city to city, country to country. By the time he was twelve he could speak six different languages fluently, understand a dozen more, and handle a rifle like a pro.

But he'd had no friends. He'd never had time to make any before they had to move again. Not that his father would have approved if he had.

William J. Potts was an army man through and through, and all he wanted was for his son, Joshua, to follow in his footsteps. In his son, he would create the perfect soldier -- an unemotional robot with razor sharp reflexes and great endurance. He'd begun training his boy the moment Joshua had taken his first steps, training that had involved both physical and emotional abuse. What he couldn't drill into Joshua's head, he beat into it.

By the time Ghost was nearing fifteen, he was almost six feet tall. His body was already honed into lean, hard muscles and quick reflexes. He had outstanding hearing and eyesight, more endurance than any man under Potts' command, and was a crack shot. Potts had every confidence that his son would be the soldier he'd always dreamed of siring.

What Potts hadn't counted on was his son transforming into a white tiger before his very eyes shortly after Joshua's fifteenth birthday. Nor had he counted on the tiger tearing his throat out when Potts had tried to shoot it.

Ghost had been born that day, the day he'd killed his father. He'd buried Joshua on the same day he'd buried his old man, and he'd been running ever since.

"Penny for your thoughts."

"Huh?" Ghost realized that he was still staring at Aiden, and that Aiden had noticed. "Uh, nothing," he mumbled, looking down at the shotgun that lay across his lap, then toward the door, anywhere but up at Aiden's handsome face.

"You were staring at me."

"No, I wasn't. I'm busy. Go find someone else to bother, will ya?" Ghost said, refusing to look up at Aiden.

"Right."

A hand on his knee made him jump. Ghost blinked, looking into Aiden's warm, amber eyes. Aiden had crouched down on his haunches, to be eye level with Ghost. It was impossible for Ghost to break eye contact with Aiden crowding into his personal space.

"I know you were looking at me. You always do, and then you pretend you're not the minute I look back. I'm tired of playing this game, Ghost," Aiden said.

"What game? You're crazy. I'm not--" Ghost never finished his sentence. Suddenly Aiden's lips were on his, Aiden's hand sliding under Ghost's shirt, warming his skin. His tongue pushed against Ghost's lips, licking, teeth nipping.

Ghost's tiger roared, not in anger, but in need. How long had it been since Ghost had taken a lover? He couldn't remember. It had been before he'd met up with the Ultimate Predators, long before he'd come to the Shifting Sands Ranch. His body hardened instantly, desire flooding him in an unstoppable wave.

He opened for Aiden.

Aiden's tongue slipped into his mouth, sweet and hot, his long fingers tearing at Ghost's shirt. Ghost set the shotgun to the side and slipped his hands around Aiden's neck, pulling the man in closer.

"Aw, for God's sake, get a room."

Ghost broke away, glaring up at Jax, who merely shook his head at them and walked down the steps into the front yard. Frick and Frack followed closely behind him. Neither of the lionesses spared Ghost and Aiden a look as they passed.

Frick and Frack seemed to have developed an unfathomable attraction to Jax, following him everywhere, constantly trying to trip him with their paws and bodies. If they succeeded in knocking him to the ground, they'd pounce on him, licking and rubbing against him. The sight of Jax sprawled on the ground trying to fight off the two aging lionesses was usually good for a laugh, but Ghost was far too preoccupied from the waist down to be amused at the moment.

"Come on," he said to Aiden, standing up. He nodded toward the house. Jax did have a point, he conceded. A room sounded like a pretty good idea, and he just happened to have one available -- one that had two beds that could be pushed together and had a nice, sturdy lock on the door.

Ghost heard Dakota's voice floating out of the kitchen as he led Aiden up the stairs to the second floor. He silently berated himself for feeling like a schoolboy up to no good, stealing up the stairs as if he was trying to avoid his watchful parents' attention.

He was a grown man, as was Aiden. *Well*, he admitted, *I'm a bit more grown than he is, but he's over eighteen. I think. I hope.* Ghost realized that he'd never asked Aiden his age. Suddenly, it seemed imperative that he know the answer. "How old are you?" he whispered over his shoulder.

"What? Why?"

"I need to know. I don't like robbing the cradle."

"You're joking, right?"

Ghost stopped dead on the second stair from the top of the flight. "Do I sound as if I'm joking?"

"Do I look like a kid?" Aiden asked. Ghost found his frown returned with one of Aiden's own.

"Frankly? Yes."

"I'm twenty, almost twenty-one. Does that make it easier for you to fuck me?"

"Whoa! That was--"

"That's why you're so concerned with my age. You don't want to sleep with a guy who might be too innocent, who might make demands on you afterwards, right?"

"What are you talking about--"

"Oh, just shut up, Ghost. You know, I thought you were different. But you're just like the rest of those pretty, shallow assholes, aren't you? You want a fuck buddy! Friends with privileges, right?"

"What kind of freaks did you hang out with before you came here, Aiden?"

Aiden froze, staring at Ghost with his mouth hanging open, looking like all the blood had suddenly rushed from his head to his feet. Ghost thought that Aiden might actually faint, but then Aiden seemed to recover, brusquely brushing past him. Aiden disappeared into their room before Ghost could say another word, slamming the door. Ghost thought he heard the lock turn.

What the fuck just happened? One minute Aiden had been hot to get into Ghost's pants, and the next he was locking Ghost out of the bedroom.

Out of Ghost's *own* bedroom, he reminded himself, growing angry. It had been *his* before it had been Aiden's, after all. Who the hell was this kid to lock Ghost out of his own room? Scowling,

Ghost stomped to the door and jiggled the handle. "Let me in, Aiden!" he called through the door.

"Get lost!"

"Aiden, let me in! You say you're an adult, but you're acting like a fucking child! Let. Me. IN!" Ghost roared. He was just about to put his shoulder to the door and shove when he heard the lock turn again.

It swung in slowly. Inside the room, Aiden was a whirlwind of angry energy, rocketing around the room, shoving various articles into his duffle bag. "Just give me a minute. I'll be out as soon as I get my stuff," he yelled.

Ghost stepped inside and kicked the door closed with his heel. Folding his arms, he leaned back against the door, crossing his feet at the ankles. "Tell me."

"Tell you what? That I'm leaving? I'd assumed you'd be able to figure that one out by yourself."

"Why? What did I do?"

"Just leave me alone, Ghost," Aiden said, although Ghost could see that his spurt of furious energy was waning.

"Nope. Not gonna happen. All I did was ask how old you were, Aiden. Not exactly the most prying question one man can ask another. You need to tell me why that set you off."

"I don't need to tell you a fucking thing."

"If you want to get out of here you do, because I'm not moving until you tell me."

Aiden glared at him, amber eyes almost glowing. In the blink of an eye, he ripped his shirt off, exposing his smooth, golden chest. His muscles flexed in preparation of shifting.

"Think your eagle can take my tiger?" Ghost asked, unbuttoning his shirt and slipping it off. "I can shift just as quickly as you can, and I have the home turf advantage. You can't fly in here. There's not enough room."

"I don't want to fight you, Ghost. You don't know me," Aiden growled, stepping out of his pants and underwear. Naked, he was almost enough to distract Ghost from their argument.

Almost.

Ghost bit the inside of his cheek and doffed his own pants and boxers. "Good. Then don't. Just sit down and talk to me, instead, because if you shift, I shift, and I don't want to have to explain a mouthful of eagle feathers to Dakota and Jax."

"Yeah? Well, I feel the same way about a beak full of mangy tiger hide."

"*Mangy?* I'll have you know my tiger is *sleek*," Ghost retorted, running his palms over his pale chest and stomach. He noticed Aiden's eyes following his hands as they smoothed over his skin. He bit back a smile. Rage or no rage, there was no hiding the erection that was stiffening at the apex of Aiden's thighs.

Aiden was a show-er, and he was showing plenty at the moment.

"Look, Aiden, I'm not sure why what I asked you made you angry. I'd like to understand, though. Talk to me, okay?" he asked, sitting down on the edge of the bed. He patted the mattress next to him.

Aiden sat, although he kept a distance from Ghost. Leaning over, he rested his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands. "I'm sorry, Ghost. God, you must think I'm such a fucking baby, going off on you like that."

"Nah. I just think that you had a really bad experience. Wanna tell me about it?"

Aiden didn't know how long he sat with his face in his hands. He was fully aware of Ghost's presence, though. He could feel the heat from Ghost's body, even though a foot of space separated them -- or maybe that was just Aiden's imagination. Either way, it was distracting.

Ghost was distracting.

He was beautiful. Oh, not in the conventional way, Aiden knew. He wasn't pretty-boy handsome, even though Aiden had used that particular term to insult him. He wasn't movie star-handsome, either, not rugged or exceptionally well-built. But there was something about him, his unique coloring, or his silky, white hair, or his pale blue eyes, or the air of danger that seemed to cling to him like a cloak that made him beautiful and fascinating, at least to Aiden. He'd been captivated by Ghost, ever since that first moment when Aiden had blundered his way into Ghost's bedroom and found the man lying naked on the bed.

When Ghost had asked him to share his room, Aiden had been so happy.

So *horny*.

Maybe happy and horny went hand-in-hand, like bread and butter, Aiden thought. But the more he got to know Ghost, the more he thought that one fed off the other. He was horny because he was happy, and vice-versa.

And it was true -- Ghost did watch Aiden, all the time. Not that Aiden minded -- he watched Ghost just as much as Ghost watched him. Then Aiden had kissed Ghost, and Ghost hadn't pushed him away. As a matter of fact, if they'd managed to get upstairs without Aiden's little

outburst spoiling everything, they'd probably be well on their way to being sweaty and spent by now.

The problem wasn't with Ghost. It was that Aiden didn't know how -- or if -- to tell Ghost *why* he'd gotten so upset.

It was his secret -- the big, ugly *thing* that Aiden kept stuffed deep down inside himself and never let out. It was wearing on him, eating him alive.

He'd never told anyone his secret before.

Not even Dakota and Jax, who'd taken him in. He'd lied to them, to everyone.

He *was* a freak, even among other freaks, and Ghost's use of the word had sliced through the last tenuous hold of Aiden's self-control.

Oh God, how he wanted to tell someone, to come clean about everything. But he was so afraid! After all these years, he'd finally found people who accepted a part of him that he never really believed anyone could accept -- people who were like him. Or as close to being like him as he supposed anyone could be.

If they knew, he was afraid they'd throw him out. Call him for what he was -- a monster.

"Aiden, in the time we've known each other -- and I know it hasn't been all that long, but still -- have I ever lied to you?" Ghost's voice was soft, barely more than a whisper.

"No."

"Then you can believe me when I tell you that no matter what you say, I'll keep it between us. I swear it. Nothing leaves this room unless you want it to."

"Not this, Ghost. If I told you, you wouldn't want to be in the same house with me, never mind the same room," Aiden replied, knowing in that instant that he would tell Ghost everything, that he couldn't keep it bottled up anymore.

"I doubt it."

"I don't." Aiden took a deep, shuddering breath, standing up. He couldn't be near Ghost now, didn't want to see the look on Ghost's face when he told the man. He turned his back to Ghost, walking to stare out of the window. "I lied, Ghost, to you, to Dakota and Jax, to everyone."

"Lied? How so?"

"The whole story I told Dakota and Jax about the camp and my parents was a lie. It wasn't really a camp. It was a commune."

Ghost laughed. "That's your big secret? Its okay, Aiden. I'm sure that wherever you were when you discovered you could shift--"

"That's not it. There's more. I'm not like you guys."

"What do you mean?"

"The eagle isn't the only thing I can shift into. My other form is... horrible. And that's not even the end of it. There's more. You're going to hate me."

Silence rang as loud church bells knelling his fate. This was where Ghost either called him a liar, or worse, a monster.

Instead a warm hand clasped his shoulder, forcing him to turn around. Sympathetic, pale blues eyes looked into his, and then he found himself in the comforting circle of Ghost's arms. "Tell me, Aiden. I promise, nothing you tell me can make me hate you."

Aiden trembled. "Oh yeah? How's this? The guy you've been talking about, the one that everyone's afraid is going to come here? Cain? I know him. He's my cousin."

Chapter Nineteen

Dakota sat close to Jax, facing Aiden and Ghost at the kitchen table. He didn't know what Aiden had to tell them, but whatever it was, it wasn't going to be good. He could tell by the forbidding look on Ghost's face and the miserable one on Aiden's.

"I was born in a commune in the Mojave desert," Aiden said softly. He wouldn't meet Dakota's eyes, but Dakota noticed that Ghost was holding his hand, squeezing it gently.

"I don't know who my father was, but my mom was the sister of the high priestess of the cult. They called themselves the *Children of the Beast*."

"Great. Sounds like the plot of some cheesy B-movie," Jax grumbled. Dakota hushed him and asked Aiden to continue.

"My aunt was a genetic researcher whose work had been scoffed at by academia. She'd published a radical paper on what she called the newest development in human evolution. She claimed that children were being born with the ability to shapeshift."

"Doesn't sound so preposterous to me," Dakota said with a small smile.

"I know. But she was laughed at, called a fool by her peers. First she lost her credibility, then her job at a major pharmaceutical company, and finally her mind," Aiden said. "She decided that the scientific community was right -- it wasn't evolution. It was the work of Satan. The Beast. According to her, he was trying to find a way back into the world, searching for the perfect vessel. She gathered a number of gullible people -- including my mother -- and started a commune in the desert."

"Okay, so you were born in a commune full of nut cases. That doesn't make you bad, Aiden. I can understand how you wouldn't want to tell that story to perfect strangers," Dakota said, feeling relieved that it was nothing more serious than a white lie.

His relief was short lived when Aiden shook his head and continued with his story.

"You don't understand. My aunt wasn't content to wait and see what form the Beast chose -- she decided it was up to her to create one for him. She encouraged the women in the cult to get pregnant and then experimented on the fetuses. I was one of her marginal successes. My cousin was her masterpiece."

"Your cousin?"

"Cain," Aiden said softly.

Jax jumped to his feet, and it was all Dakota could do to get him to sit again. "Jax! Knock it off. Listen to what he has to say!"

"Are you crazy? This Cain guy is the one Ghost has been warning us about, and we've got his *cousin* living here with us? For all we know, he's a spy!"

"Jesus, Jax. You've watched James Bond movies too many fucking times," Dakota said, putting a firm hand on Jax's arm. He turned to Aiden. "You're not a spy, are you?"

"No!" Aiden cried, shaking his head forcefully. "I hated them all! Hated how they lived and what they did, and especially what they made me."

"What did they make you, kid?" Ghost asked quietly, patting Aiden's hand. He slipped an arm around Aiden's shoulders, pulling him close. "It's okay. You can tell us."

"The eagle isn't the only shape I can assume. I think it's the one nature intended for me to have because it's the most comfortable for me to take, and it feels right. But my aunt's experiments gave me the Other."

"The Other?" Dakota prompted.

"I don't know what you'd call it -- or if it ever existed outside of my aunt's lab. The closest I can get to a description is a combination of a pterodactyl and a dragon."

"A *dragon*? Come on, there's no such thing!" Jax scoffed. Dakota's hand tightened on his arm. Something reptilian flashed in Aiden's eyes that told Dakota that he wasn't exaggerating.

"I can show you," Aiden whispered. His face was pale and drawn, at odds with the affronted look that colored his features caused by Jax's offhanded dismissal.

"Okay. Let's go outside," Dakota said.

"Come on, Dakota! You don't really believe that he's a fucking *dragon*, do you?" Jax snorted. "He said he comes from a commune. He was probably weaned on LSD and God-knows-what-other-kind-of-shit those hippies used."

"*Hippies*? Where are we? Haight-Ashbury? Jax, did you listen to *anything* he just said? His aunt wasn't a hippie -- she was a scientist. Let's go outside and see what Aiden can do before we make up our minds about whether or not it's the truth," Dakota chided. Honestly, Jax could be infuriatingly close-minded sometimes.

"Come on, Aiden. Don't worry. I'll be right there," Ghost said softly. The fact that all the two of them wore were their pants and that Ghost kept his arm around Aiden's shoulders was not lost on Dakota. *Good*, he thought. *The kid needs a friend right now. Especially if what he says is true -- Jax is gonna freak.*

Outside, Aiden and Ghost led them to the far side of the barn where there was plenty of open space. Aiden had been chewing on his lower lip -- it was bleeding, Dakota noticed. It was a sign

that he was seriously distressed, and that made Dakota believe that what he'd said was true -- or at least that *Aiden* believed it to be true.

Aiden trotted out about fifty feet away from them and stripped out of his pants. "Don't say I didn't warn you," he called to them. "For the record, I really liked it here. I'm not like Cain. I'd never hurt anybody. It's why they gave up on me and concentrated on him."

Then he shifted.

"Holy fucking shit!" Jax cried, his fingers digging into Dakota's arm like talons. Dakota didn't say anything -- he couldn't. He was too busy trying to breathe.

It happened almost instantaneously, as did Dakota's own transmogrification when he shifted, but shock had a way of slowing time down. Aiden seemed to stretch before his eyes, growing longer and wider, heavier. His golden skin turned a mottled green-brown; his body elongated like a serpent's. Aiden's head grew longer as well, his jaws extending until they took the form of a long beak full of dagger-like teeth. Great leathery, membranous wings sprouted from his back, so dark that they looked black.

Aiden took a running step, his wings flapping hard. His heavily muscled legs launched his body into the sky, and he soared toward the forest.

It took a moment for Dakota to realize that something was happening aside from Aiden's incredible transformation.

"How the hell... he's a fucking dragon!" Jax cried, at the same time Ghost yelled, "Shit! He's running!"

"He's not running. He's flying," Dakota said, still in shock over Aiden's dragon form.

Out of the corner of his eye Dakota saw Ghost strip off his pants and take his tiger form, running hard in the direction Aiden had flown. "Ghost!" Jax called out. "Where are you going?"

Dakota blinked as what Ghost had said finally penetrated his brain. "He's going after Aiden to bring him back."

"Back! Bring him *back*? What is he, crazy?" Jax cried. "No way are we having a dragon living here, Dakota! What about the twins?"

"What about them? Aiden loves the twins. He'd never hurt them."

"How do you know that?" Jax growled at him.

"I know that because if Aiden wanted to hurt anyone, he had plenty of time to do it before now. For once, Jax, forget about the alpha shit and think! You're threatened by his size, by the fact that

he's stronger than you. Aiden isn't going to challenge you for leadership of the pack. He's scared and now he's running. I just hope Ghost can catch up with him."

Ghost's sides ached, and breathing became unbearably painful. Tigers were sprinters not long distance runners, and he'd been forcing his body to keep up the speed for far longer than he should. But he had to catch up to Aiden. He couldn't lose Aiden -- not now.

He'd kept his eyes on the dark silhouette above him, frantically trying to keep Aiden in sight as he crashed through the underbrush of the forest. Finally, just as he'd thought that his lungs and heart were going to burst, he'd seen Aiden begin to circle lower for a landing.

Thank God. He stumbled through the brush and out of the forest into a large clearing, dropping to the ground, unable to take another step. He shifted, feeling the cold, crisp grass scrape his bare skin. He felt the sun's rays already beginning to burn him, but he was too exhausted and overheated to move into the shade.

"Why are you following me, Ghost?" Aiden appeared next to him, hunkering down on his heels.

"Um... tag, you're it?" Ghost reached out and tapped Aiden's chest. He even managed a wan smile in between gasps for air.

"I'm serious. Why are you following me?"

"Where did you think you were going? Home is in the other direction."

"Not my home. You saw Jax. He was really pissed, Ghost. No way will he let me live with you guys now that he knows what I am."

"Did he say that?"

"I wasn't waiting around to hear him."

"Bullshit. You were too afraid to wait and hear what he had to say. Look, this dragon -- or whatever it is -- is a part of you, as much as your eagle is, and as much as my tiger is a part of me. It's part of who you are, Aiden. And no matter how hard you try, you can't run from yourself. Come home, Aiden."

"Do you really think they'll let me stay?" Hope shone in Aiden's eyes, tentative and fragile, and it touched Ghost's heart.

"Nothing has changed, Aiden. You're still *you*. Of course they'll let you stay. And if for some reason -- although I really can't think of any that have merit -- they don't, then I'm leaving with you."

Aiden dropped to his knees next to Ghost. "You'd leave? Why?"

"Because you were right -- I *was* watching you. And I really liked what I saw. What I *see*," Ghost amended, reaching for Aiden.

Aiden came into his arms, but pulled away just as quickly. "You're burning! Shit, Ghost, come on!" he said, pulling Ghost to his feet and back into the shadows of the forest.

Ghost gratefully let Aiden lead him into the shielding thicket of branches, sinking down onto the cool, soft matting of moss and leaves that blanketed the forest floor. They lay side by side, both wanting the other but neither one quite sure where to begin.

It might have been Ghost tipping his head forward just a hair, or it might have been Aiden wetting those lips in anticipation, but regardless of who made the first move, when they came together, lips touching, it was magical.

At least, that's how Ghost chose to think of it, as corny as it sounded. Two bodies, one as golden as the sun, the other as pale as the moon, entwining in a dance as old as time itself -- ordinarily such purple prose would have made Ghost laugh, but for some reason, here with Aiden, it seemed poetic and he whispered it against Aiden's soft, yielding lips.

Aiden didn't laugh, either. Instead, he made a sound that was more like a gasp and slipped his arms around Ghost, pulling Ghost flush with his body. One leg wrapped around Ghost's thighs as he kissed Ghost deeply.

Then all thoughts, poetic and otherwise, fled as Ghost lost himself in the taste and texture of Aiden.

Aiden was a living, breathing contradiction, Ghost realized. Hard and soft, sleek and lush, cool and hot, demanding and tender, all these sensations and more existed in harmony, side-by-side in Aiden. They were in the velvet of Aiden's skin under Ghost's palms, in the strength of Aiden's muscles as they played beneath his touch. They were in his kiss, and in the gentle way his hands explored Ghost's body.

Ghost trembled. He wasn't used to slow and gentle. He was used to rough and quick, to men who took what they wanted -- to *him* taking what he wanted -- without much thought to the person he was taking from. Ghost had never had a reason to wonder what might happen to him and his lover afterward. There'd never been an afterward to worry about. He'd always moved on quickly, slipping out after the sun had set, often while the taste of the man was still on his tongue.

Not this time.

He was through with running, through with hiding in the shadows watching while the rest of the world danced in the sunlight. For the first time in his life, Ghost set aside his defenses and allowed the light to wash over him. Aiden burned him, seared him so deeply with each feather soft caress that Ghost was almost surprised that his skin didn't begin to smolder.

"Ghost, want you..."

Even Aiden's voice was blend of contradictions -- the need Ghost heard in it was hot and sultry, and at the same time, as rough as broken glass. It cut through Ghost, slicing through the armor Ghost had erected around his heart. His body reacted forcibly, hardening until he cried out against Aiden's skin. Hips rocking, he ground their erections together, velvet friction building, burning, until he couldn't hold back, didn't want to, he was coming, his teeth clenched to keep from screaming as a white-hot spear of pleasure tore through him.

The splash of liquid heat against his belly and Aiden's husky growl drove Ghost even higher. He tightened his arms as Aiden came, muscles growing rigid under Ghost's hands, his body shuddering. Ghost held Aiden long after they'd both stopped shaking, because he wanted to, because he was loathe to let Aiden go and their connection to end.

"Wow."

Ghost smiled, his lips pressing against Aiden's forehead. "Yeah. *Wow* is right." He cupped Aiden's chin in his hand, tilted that head so that he could sample Aiden's lush lips again. "Wow, indeed."

"I guess I was behaving like a kid, huh? Running away like that, I mean."

"Nah. It's understandable. But do me a favor, Aiden. Promise me that you won't run again. My tiger can't keep up. I thought I was going to have a fucking heart attack for a minute."

Aiden laughed softly. "Promise. Next time, I'll just pick you up and take you with me."

"Flying? Are you serious? Thanks, but no thanks. This cat likes to keep his paws on the ground."

"How would you know whether you'd like it or not, Ghost? Have you ever flown before?" Aiden asked, nuzzling under Ghost's jaw. Damn, if the kid kept it up, they'd be going for round two. Dakota and Jax would think that Aiden ate him if they didn't get back to the ranch soon.

"Yes, I have -- although I did have a plane under my ass at the time."

"That doesn't count. There's nothing like it, Ghost. The speed, the ground rushing by below, the freedom..."

"Maybe someday I'll let you give me a ride." He grinned, thinking that the ride he had in mind had nothing to do with flight, and would be exceedingly dangerous -- if not impossible -- to execute in mid-air.

Ghost's double entendre wasn't lost on Aiden, because he nipped playfully at the tender skin of Ghost's throat. "Maybe *you'll* be the one giving *me* the ride."

"Mmm... maybe. Folks say it can be dangerous to catch a tiger by the tail, though," Ghost replied, giggling. Shit! When was the last time he'd *giggled*? *Never*, he thought, *not even as a kid*. It felt far better than Ghost would have thought it would.

Aiden snorted at his silliness, standing and pulling Ghost up along with him. He laughed outright, brushing at the bits of leaves and moss that clung to their skin. "Jesus, we're a mess."

"Yeah. Worth it though," Ghost smiled, leaning in for another kiss. "Let's go home and get cleaned up so we can get dirty again." Aiden's laughter was sweet and uninhibited and warmed him from the toes up. He shifted into his tiger, rubbing his head against Aiden's thighs until Aiden shifted into his eagle.

If tigers could smile, Ghost would be grinning. What a pair they made, he thought as Aiden's flew overhead. Ghost noticed that Aiden kept his body between Ghost and the sun, trying to keep Ghost in his shadow, trying to protect Ghost.

Turnabout was fair play. Ghost would do the same for Aiden, protect him, even if it meant going up against Dakota and Jax... or Cain.

Chapter Twenty

Motors growling like metal beasts, the bikes lined up neatly in a row at the edge of the road that wound through the mountains. A thin, dented, silver guardrail was all that separated the riders from a drop of several hundred feet down the side of the sheer cliff to the valley far below. The view was spectacular -- had any of them been of a mind to admire or appreciate it. The sheltered valley, green with new growth, was thickly forested and nestled between rugged, gray-green mountains under a perfect, cloudless, blue sky.

Of all the members of the Pack, Gar's cheetah had the most acute vision. Squinting, he picked out the shapes of three people walking across a short clearing to a bright red barn in the one small section of the valley that had been cultivated.

"I see three of 'em, Cain," he said. "I think two of them might be female. Maybe -- it's kind of hard to tell from way up here. But they have two lions with them that must be shifters, too."

Cain grunted. Gar couldn't tell if he was pleased or displeased with Gar's report. "Anyone else?"

"I don't see anybody, but there might be more inside the house."

Another grunt. "We'll ride halfway down to the valley then walk the rest of the way in. I don't want them to hear us coming."

"Sure, Cain. Good plan... uh... then what?" Gar asked.

One baleful look from Cain gave Gar his answer.

Then Cain would eat.

Gar almost felt sorry for the shifters below in the valley. Their life spans could be counted in minutes -- except for the females, of course. He would have felt sorry for them, too, except that he didn't plan on Cain surviving long enough to rape them.

No, he'd save that pleasure for himself. He smiled, thinking of the grenades he had stashed in his saddlebag, the ones he'd found in the gas station owner's private arsenal. He'd also scored a nice .357 and a box of Winchester *Black Talon* hollow points to go with it. The bullets were a fantastic find -- they did so much damage when they exploded that they'd been recalled from the market in year 2000 by the manufacturer. The bullets had been specifically designed to decimate flesh. They could do a helluva lot of damage, even to something as big as a T-Rex. Enough to slow him down long enough for Gar to use the grenades at any rate.

Backing his bike up, he revved the motor, then followed along the winding road behind Cain. The blacktop ended when Cain took a left onto a dirt road that led down toward the ranch in the

valley. Roots and stones made for treacherous riding, the bike bucking in protest under Gar's ass, forcing him to a slower speed.

But Cain never slowed down, quickly outdistancing Gar and the others, taking the dips and skirting rocks recklessly; as if he was certain that the road was as intimidated by him as everyone else was. By the time Gar finally caught up to him halfway down the mountainside, Cain had already dismounted and was stripping out of his clothing.

"Move it," Cain hissed at them. "I want to hit them before dark."

Gar knew why Cain wanted to strike before the sunset -- as a T-Rex, the cool night air made Cain sluggish, slowed him down. Plus, not all of the predators he'd brought along had acute night vision. He wanted no disadvantages brought on by the night to interfere with his revenge.

Making their way through the thickly set trees, Cain led the Predators down to the edge of the valley. Gar watched him carefully, waiting for his signal to shift. They crouched in the brush, hidden by a screen of bushes, watching three people and a pair of lions strolling out of the barn. Gar had been correct -- it was a male and two females. The man had his arm around one of the female's waist. From Mouth's description, Gar felt positive that the woman was the pantheress. *Shit, Cain was going to rip the man into human confetti for daring to touch his woman*, Gar thought.

The other woman said something that made the others laugh, as she patted the heads of the two lions.

Then Cain gave the signal and all hell broke loose.

Tai and Mal had grown quickly, far more so than any human infants. By the age of eight months they were walking, learning to talk, and generally wreaking havoc on the ranch like a pair of pint-sized tyrants.

"Oscar! Deidre!" Jax's voice roared from the bathroom. "Control your spawn!"

Dakota ran into the room from the bedroom, freezing when he spotted Jax, naked and pinned to the ceiling, his dangly bits... well... *dangling*, like the string of a kite. On the floor nearby, the twins twittered to each other in a language only they knew, platinum blond heads bent close together.

Although the twins spoke, their grasp of language was still restricted to basic words and the expression of simple needs. But between them, as was fairly common between human twins, they had developed a full and complex language that only they understood.

"Dakota! Get me down!" Jax called. He seemed to struggle against invisible bonds that kept him tethered to the ceiling.

"What did you do to them, Jax?"

"What did *I* do to *them*? Nothing!"

"Jax..."

"Deidre asked me to give them their baths. And this is what I get for trying to help!" Jax snarled.

"If you were bathing *them*, then why the hell are *you* naked?" Dakota asked, trying to control himself.

"*Why*? Have you ever tried giving these two a bath? Oh, wait... no, you haven't. You always manage to disappear at bath time, don't you? Well, for your information, it's like trying to bathe a couple of eels during a tsunami." He glared down at Tai and Mal. "Now let me down, you pair of--"

"Jax!" Dakota cut in sharply, before Jax could call the twins what Dakota was certain would be a less than affectionate term of endearment. He hunkered down next to the twins, smiling. "Hey, guys. How about letting Uncle Jax down?"

"No baf," Mal said, grabbing a pudgy handful of Dakota's hair.

"No baf," Tai echoed, pulling on Dakota's ears.

He grinned. "No bath. Promise. Well, not unless Mommy or Daddy gives you one."

Jax fell from the ceiling like a brick, landing in the tub with a tremendous splash, swearing a string of expletives. He popped up with murder in his eyes.

"Jax, calm down. They're only babies," Dakota warned, standing up with a twin cradled in each arm.

"I know and it's a good thing, too. I like 'em bite-sized," Jax growled. He rubbed his ass, wincing. "I think I broke something."

Dakota laughed. "Come on, kids. Let's leave Uncle Jax to lick his wounds and go find your Mommy and Daddy."

"Yeah? See how soon Uncle Jax licks anything *but* his wounds," Jax grumbled behind him as Dakota left the room with the twins in tow. "Traitor!"

Dakota met Aiden in the hallway. "Dee and Oscar went for a walk with Daisy, Frick, and Frack. I'll take them for a while, Dakota," he said, reaching for the babies.

"Cool. I think Jax needs a little TLC right now," Dakota smiled. "Be good for Uncle Aiden, okay?" he said to the twins, wagging a stern finger at each of them. *It's funny*, he thought as Aiden disappeared into his and Ghost's bedroom with Tai and Mal. *These kids have four uncles who other people might consider terrifying -- a wolf, a bear, a tiger, and a... well, a dragon -- but in reality, Tai and Mal have all of us twisted tightly around their pudgy little fingers.*

And what was more, he had the feeling that by the time they reached adulthood, Tai and Mal would need little protection from anyone. Not for the first time, he wondered whether they would have the ability to shift, and if so, into what animals. Secretly, he hoped that they'd turn out to be herbivores like their father. Something smaller than Oscar's rhino, though -- rabbits or squirrels, perhaps. The thought of the two of them shifting into powerful predators -- or God forbid, something like Aiden's dragon -- combined with their powers of telekinesis, was daunting.

He followed Jax into their bedroom, where he found Jax standing in front of their dresser mirror, twisting this way and that, trying to see the reflection of his ass.

"It's bruised, isn't it? Black and blue? Dammit! My tail is one of my favorite parts of me. I swear, Dakota, if I shift and my tail is broken..."

"It's not broken, Jax," Dakota laughed, wrapping his arms around Jax's middle. "It's still as pretty as it was the day I met you."

"Flattery will get you laid, but it won't fix my butt."

Dakota grinned and cupped a double handful of Jax's ass, albeit gently. He *had* taken quite a fall, after all. "How about I massage it a bit?"

Jax purred against his shoulder, butt cheeks clenching. "You know, my rear end wasn't the only thing that got bruised in that fall. I could do with a little massage in other places, too."

"Your pride was the only thing that really got hurt, Jax." Dakota laughed again. "And I can feel at least one part of your anatomy that seems to be in perfect working order."

"I don't know..." Jax said doubtfully. "I think we should test it, just to make sure."

"You might be right at that. Taste test?" Dakota grinned as he sank to his knees. His hand skimmed the backs of Jax's thighs, feeling Jax's hair crinkle against his palms. Jax's penis, thick, hard, and ready, bobbed before Dakota's eyes. He breathed deeply, filling his lungs with Jax's scent, familiar and lusty. It awakened a hunger in him, tempting him to sample Jax's flavor.

He opened his mouth, eyes lifting to meet Jax's. They looked back, narrowed, hiding under thick lashes. Jax's full lips were parted; his tongue peeked out to wet them as his fingers threaded into Dakota's hair.

Dakota didn't taste -- he devoured Jax, taking Jax in all the way. He growled low in his throat, feeling the sound vibrate around Jax's shaft, rewarded by Jax's answering rumble and the tremors that ran through the muscles of Jax's legs.

"Oh, man... oh, Dakota..." Jax's voice was tight, deep; it unleashed Dakota's need, filling his cock.

"Dakota!"

Redoubling his labors, he sucked hungrily on Jax's cock, wet sounds mingling with Jax's voice, filling the room with the music of sex.

"Dakota!"

He was so wrapped up in his efforts to please Jax that it took Dakota a few moments to realize that it wasn't Jax who was calling out his name.

"Shit," Jax grumbled, pulling away from him. "What's wrong now?"

"I don't know. That sounded like Daisy," Dakota said, standing up. He reached for his pants, half-hopping toward the door as he struggled to pull them on. He heard Daisy screaming his name again, and Jax's. Her voice sounded brittle with fear. Dakota hit the stairs running, jumping over the last half-dozen. He reached the door and froze, Jax right behind him.

He didn't see Daisy immediately, but what he *did* see stopped him cold, freezing his blood in his veins.

The yard between the house and the barn was filled with animals, at least a dozen, most of whom Dakota didn't recognize. He spotted a cheetah, an orange tiger, an alligator, and several wolves among others. All Dakota could think was that Jax was going to be pissed when he spotted the strange wolves in his territory.

Two of the wolves faced off against a tawny cougar that Dakota recognized as Deidre. The tiger had leapt on Oscar's back, his long, downward-sloping horn sweeping up dust as he swung his head in arcs trying to reach the cat. Frick -- or Frack, Dakota couldn't tell which -- was snarling, keeping a vulture from landing near Daisy's lioness as she fought off a pair of hyenas. Daisy's other lioness lay nearby, frighteningly still.

Then something huge rounded the corner of the barn, something that cast a shadow over the entire yard. Fifteen feet high, with a head as big as a tractor, jaws full of wickedly long, sharp teeth, the roar that it loosed rattled Dakota's bones and the porch under his feet. Powerful legs supported its immense weight, although its forearms were comically small and stunted. Still, there was nothing puny about this creature; Dakota's first impression of it was death on two legs.

A fucking Tyrannosaurus Rex.

In their front yard.

Cain.

"What is it?" Jax hissed at his side. "Oh, sweet motherless fuck! Dakota..."

Dakota was already stepping out of his jeans. "Get Aiden and Ghost! Hurry!" he yelled, pushing Jax back toward the stairs. Then his bear was charging out into the fray, jaws snapping and heavy paws swiping at anything that wandered close enough. He instantly found himself fighting off a pair of gray timber wolves and the cheetah. One paw made contact with a wolf; it whimpered as it flew through the air to land in a crumpled heap ten feet away.

Pain sliced into his left arm as the other wolf's teeth sank deeply into the muscle. Dakota roared, rearing up on his hind legs. He walked a few feet before another set of jaws clamped down on his right shoulder, the pain enough to bring him down to all fours again. He felt the weight of the cheetah land on his back, claws digging in deep through his dense fur.

He could smell blood in the air, his own, coppery and thick, and wondered if this was how he was to die -- in his own front yard, under a mountain of teeth and claws.

Don't come out here, Jax, he thought desperately. Take the twins and run!

Chapter Twenty-One

Jax took the stairs three at a time, but Aiden and Ghost met him at the landing. Already naked and ready to shift, they nearly knocked him over backwards in their haste to get downstairs and outside.

"It's Cain!" Jax gasped, steadying himself. "Where are the twins?"

"Safe. Locked in their room," Ghost said as the three of them ran downstairs to the door.

A booming roar, so deep and loud that it hurt Jax's sensitive ears, filled the air. Cain, moving faster than it seemed his bulk would allow, thundered across the yard toward the spot where Dakota was being attacked by three smaller shifters.

Suddenly, Jax's sight narrowed to a pinpoint, the edges of his vision graying until all he could see was Dakota, red streaks marring his silvery-brown fur. With a ferocious snarl, unmindful of the behemoth stomping toward them, he rushed out into the yard.

His teeth sank into the nape of the neck of the nearest wolf that had been biting Dakota's arm, feeling bone snap in his jaws. Shaking it like a rag doll, he tossed the body to the side. Leaping up, he faced the cheetah that was struggling to reach Dakota's jugular vein.

A tremendous shadow passed overhead, momentarily blotting out the sun and causing the cheetah's eyes to reflect a greenish light. Spitting at the sight of Aiden's dragon, the cat backed off. It jumped from Dakota's back and sprinted for the protective screen of bushes at the perimeter of the yard. Jax instantly put the cat from his mind and attacked the last wolf.

Dakota was down, but not quite out. His paw swiped at the wolf, his claws gouging deep grooves in its side and knocking it away before Jax could engage it. But it seemed that attack took the last of Dakota's strength. He slumped to the ground, his large, shaggy head resting in the dirt, eyes drifting closed.

Jax nosed Dakota. *No, no, no*, he whined, *get up, Dakota! Don't you dare die on me! Don't you dare!* He nudged Dakota's head harder, his body growing icy with fear. *No, please!* Jax's mind screamed.

Dakota's head moved slightly, his eyes fluttering open. He whuffed softly and touched his nose to Jax's.

Jax felt a huge wave of relief wash through him. Thank God, Dakota was still alive! Giving Dakota a quick lick on the snout, Jax turned to face the rest of the Predators.

All around them, roars, barks, yelps, growls, and hisses melded into a symphony of anger and pain as the shifters fought. Deidre had leapt to Oscar's defense, helping him shake loose the tiger

that had been attacking him, but the battle wasn't over yet. The tiger's teeth and claws had scored deeply in Oscar's thick hide.

Daisy and Frick were fighting a hyena and an alligator, while a vulture dive-bombed them both, vicious, curved beak scoring more often than not in their flesh. Frack lay nearby, motionless, next to the body of another hyena. Ghost had waded into that fray, his powerful jaws making short work of the remaining hyena.

Cain roared again, drawing Jax's attention. Aiden's dragon circled around Cain's head, keeping just out of reach of Cain's jaws. He couldn't seem to get close enough to get a bite in, but at least he was keeping Cain occupied.

Jax had to figure out a way to take Cain down, to expose his soft underbelly to Aiden's wicked mouthful of teeth. *I've got it!* Jax thought excitedly. He licked Dakota again and loped through the melee toward the barn.

The barn had been partially decimated by Cain. One entire side had been smashed, as if Cain had forced his way in through a wall after something inside. *Deidre most likely*, Jax thought. *He must have been watching and knew she was in the barn.* He shifted back into his man-form, climbing over debris to get to the back of the barn. He had to waste some time moving bales of hay and broken boards to get to what he needed. *Please let it work! Please don't let it be broken!* Jax prayed.

Climbing up into the seat of the John Deere tractor, Jax cranked it over. There was a moment when it sputtered and his heart sank to the soles of his feet, but then the motor caught. Throwing the machine into gear, he floored the pedal and drove the tractor through the barn into the yard.

Topping out at twenty-five miles per hour, the tractor wasn't enough to kill or even hurt Cain's T-Rex, but it was enough to make him lose his balance when Jax slammed it into the back of Cain's knee. He jumped free from the tractor and ran as Cain's towering bulk crashed to the ground, smashing the machine into a lump of twisted metal.

The instant Cain was down, Aiden darted in and attacked. Long jaws lined with serrated, dagger-like teeth took a large chunk out of Cain's soft belly. Cain's cry of pain and fury was deafening. But the wound wasn't enough to keep him down and he struggled ponderously to his feet.

Suddenly, shots rang out. Looking up at Cain, Jax saw several small holes appear in his scaly hide, all bleeding profusely. Cain roared again, teeth snapping at the air. More shots rang out, all scoring in Cain's chest and abdomen. Looking across the yard, Jax saw a man he didn't recognize, naked, holding a handgun in a classic, two-handed police stance. In what appeared to be slow motion, the man swung the muzzle toward Jax.

From the corner of his eye, Jax saw Dakota rise to his feet, running toward the man with the gun. Eight hundred pounds of grizzly hit the man full force. The gun flew out of the man's hands as he was freight-trained, ground into the dirt under Dakota's weight.

As Jax ran to Dakota, the man heaved himself to his feet and shifted into the cheetah, running off into the trees. "Coward!" Jax bellowed out after the cat. He threw his arms around Dakota's shaggy head, burying his face in the thick fur. "Shit, you scared me back there!"

Dakota shifted in his arms. "No time to get mushy. We've still got huge problems! Aiden is keeping him busy, but he can't get close enough to Cain for another attack," he said, wriggling loose. "How the hell are we supposed to bring that bastard down?"

"The cheetah had a gun. Where'd it go?" Jax asked, scanning the dirt for the weapon. He spotted a saddlebag discarded nearby, the corner of a box of ammunition sticking out. Picking it up, he peered inside. "Holy shit!" he breathed, shoving his hand into the leather bag. He brought out a hand grenade. "Cheetah-boy came prepared for World War III," Jax said. "Think these might work on Cain?"

Dakota grinned at him. "Hell, yes!" He took it from Jax's hand.

"Whoa, wait up! I'll do it," Jax said, taking it back. "You're injured."

"I'm fine, and you're too short," Dakota countered, swiping it back.

"I'm not too short, and you're not fine. You're bleeding."

"Now is not the time to pull that alpha shit on me, Jax," Dakota rumbled.

"No, now is the *perfect* time to pull that alpha shit on you," Jax grinned. Jax grabbed the grenade away from Dakota, ducked under his arm, and darted away toward Cain.

"Okay, asshole! Come and get me!" Jax yelled, waving his arm at Cain. He clutched the grenade to his chest with his other hand.

His heart hammered in his chest as Cain swung the massive head toward him. Running almost parallel to the ground, Cain opened his mouth and roared as he zeroed in on Jax.

Jax pulled the pin on the grenade, wound up, and let it fly directly into Cain's gaping maw. He ducked and rolled underneath Cain, narrowly missing being swatted by Cain's heavy tail.

"Everybody duck!" Jax yelled, hitting the dirt an instant before an explosion ripped through the air, a shower of dirt, rocks, and bits of gore falling in a cloud all around him.

The earth shuddered again as Cain fell, dead before he hit the ground, a large part of his skull blown off. It took a minute before the rest of Cain's body realized that it was dead, his hind legs and tail twitching in the dirt.

Rising to his feet, Jax breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Dakota pick his head up from the ground. All around him, shifters from both sides were sitting up, looking at Cain's body with wide eyes, as if in shock.

The vulture was the first to realize that the Predator's leader and best defense was gone. He turned tail, flying toward the forest, quickly followed by the remaining members of Cain's gang.

Jax shifted, running after them.

"No, let them go," Dakota said, blocking Jax's path.

Shifting back again, Jax growled, "Are you crazy? They attacked us!"

"I know. But our friends need our help right now. They're hurt, and we've got the babies in the house to worry about. For now, Cain is dead, and the others are running scared."

"But--"

"Let them go, Jax," Dakota said again.

Looking around, Jax saw that the Predators had all vanished into the forest. Meanwhile, their friends were starting to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and take stock of the damage.

Aiden had landed and shifted and was checking Ghost's injuries. Ghost's tiger seemed to have fared well, with just a few scratches.

Deidre and Oscar were a collective mess. Oscar had deep gashes and puncture wounds on his back from the tiger that had attacked him, and Deidre was bruised and battered, her lip split and one eye nearly swollen shut. She was limping as she struggled to help Oscar to the porch.

Daisy was on the ground, her body thrown over Frack's, sobbing. That didn't bode well for the old lioness, and Jax felt a lump in his throat over her loss. Frick looked lost without her sister, her own fur bloodied.

Against his better judgment, Jax relented, sliding his arms around Dakota's middle and resting his head against Dakota's chest. He needed to hear Dakota's heartbeat, feel the warmth of Dakota's body, just for a minute. He needed the reassurance. He'd come so close to losing Dakota that his throat tightened when he thought about it. "Oh, man. If you ever scare me like that again, I'll kill you myself," he whispered. "Come on, let's get everyone patched up, you included."

"I'm fine."

"Yeah? Tell that to your hide -- it's bleeding all over me."

Dakota chuckled, but there was little humor in it. "God, this day really sucked, didn't it?"

"Yeah," Jax grunted, slipping a shoulder under Dakota's arm as they started walking toward the rest of the shifters. "First thing I'm going to do after we clean up is build a fence. A fucking big one. Electrified, maybe. With a moat. Machine gun towers--"

"I get the picture," Dakota laughed. "Although I doubt that we'll see the Predators again now that Cain is dead," he said as they gave Cain's grisly remains a wide berth. "Thank God there are no more like him, huh?"

"You can say that again."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Clean-up was a nightmare.

The next two days were spent burying the bodies of the shifters who had died during the battle -- two wolves, two hyenas, and a huge mountain of flesh that had once been a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Jax had wanted to burn them all, or better yet, drag them up into the mountains for the carrion-eaters to dispose of.

But Dakota, being a soft-hearted sap in Jax's opinion, had felt very strongly about honoring their humanity, even though the Predators had attacked them with the intention of killing them all.

"Jax, they were *people*. Misguided, warped, and as nutty as a jar of Mr. Peanuts, but people just the same. We need to bury them," he'd said. "They deserve that much."

"They deserve jack shit! They were thugs. Murderers! They came here to *kill* us, Dakota. Why should we break our backs digging holes for them? It's not like anyone is going to put flowers on their graves."

"Stop being such an asshole, Jax." Dakota's jaw had set, and that stubborn look that Jax knew so well came into his eyes.

"Aw, shit. You're really going to make me do this, aren't you?"

"Yup," Dakota had said, holding out a shovel.

"Good thing I love you," Jax had muttered under his breath, yanking the shovel out of Dakota's hands, "or my teeth would be sinking into your hairy hide right about now."

In the end, they'd dug the graves in a clearing in the forest, well away from the ranch. On that, Jax would not give. He would not allow the Predators to be buried anywhere near his pack. Dakota had presided over the ceremony -- such as it was -- saying a few words and reading a passage from the Bible that referred to forgiveness. Jax, unable to contain his sophomoric streak, grumbled under his breath throughout the entire thing.

There was no burial for Cain. They couldn't even begin to *move* the mountainous carcass from the middle of the yard where he'd fallen, much less dig a hole big enough to bury him in, not without desecrating the corpse. Not even Jax wanted to be the one to hack Cain into manageable pieces. On that count, Dakota conceded to Jax -- they'd built a pyre around Cain and had solemnly watched as the flames engulfed him.

They'd buried Frack just beyond the barn, in an area they'd squared off with a neat, white picket fence and planted with brilliantly colored azaleas. A stone lion, ordered from a specialty garden

shop in Cheyenne, marked her grave along with a simple granite headstone that Dakota and Jax had had engraved. It read, "*Frack, Queen of the Jungle and of Our Hearts.*"

Jax had been surprised at the wealth of emotion that had him choked up so badly during Frack's burial that he couldn't speak. He'd grown accustomed to her and already missed the way she and Frick had followed him around like a shadow, knocking him down, rough tongues rasping his face raw.

Frick hadn't been the same since. She stuck close to Daisy, but could just as often be found sitting in the yard, staring at the place where her sister had died. Even though the lioness wasn't a shifter, she was obviously suffering from grief, and Jax's heart went out to her.

They all grieved. Not just for Frack, although they all felt badly that the lioness was gone. They mourned the loss of their innocence and the feeling of security that they'd had, living on the remote ranch. All of them had suffered before coming to the Shifting Sands, but always at the hands of humans. Never had any of them, with the exception of Ghost, had to fight their own kind.

Jax was determined that never again would he expose his pack to attack. He ordered fencing and began plans to construct a perimeter fence the very same day they'd buried Frack.

The only bright spot in their lives was the twins, but they shone so brightly that they often extinguished the pall of despondency that hung over the ranch. Precocious and precious, they were spoiled by everyone.

One afternoon a few weeks later, Jax and Dakota sat at the table in the kitchen. Jax held Tai, trying to interest her in a bowl of oatmeal. Dakota held Mal, balancing the chubby toddler on his knee while reading the paper.

"Jax?" Dakota said, as Mal slapped sticky hands on the tabloid newspaper that was spread out on the table. "Look at this! *Wisconsin Man claims flock of Canadian geese are aliens from another planet!*" he read excitedly. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Jax spooned oatmeal between Tai's rosebud lips, gently scraping the excess from her chin. "I doubt it."

"Come on, Jax! Canadian geese? Aliens? Maybe they're shifters!"

"Uncle Dakota has a death wish, Tai. Yes, he does," Jax said in a singsong voice, spooning more oatmeal into Tai's mouth. "He hasn't learned his lesson. No he hasn't."

"Jax..."

"Tell Uncle Dakota that Uncle Jax says 'no,' Tai."

"No!" Tai chirped, instantly parroted by Mal.

"Jax..."

"Uh oh. Uncle Dakota is being a bad boy. I think he needs a time out," Jax said, shooting a glare across the table at Dakota.

"Uncle Jax seems to think he's in charge," Dakota growled, glaring back. "He forgets that we're partners here."

"Uncle Dakota is delusional, kids. Can you say, 'delusional'?"

"Ooo-shun-ul," Tai giggled.

Dakota smiled wickedly and leaned down, whispering into Mal's ear. A moment later, the bowl of oatmeal rose up from the table and hovered in midair for a moment before upturning and plopping its contents on Jax's head.

Jax flicked a clump of oatmeal out of his eyes as Deidre and Oscar came into the kitchen.

"Dakota, I swear that the minute I get you alone I'm going to--"

"Oh, *hell*, Jax! What are you teaching them now?" Oscar growled, taking Tai from Jax's arms as Deidre scooped up Mal.

"*Me?* I'm the victim here!"

"You? A victim? Please," Deidre scolded, shaking her head at him. "Honestly, sometimes I think that the twins are more mature than you are."

"Am I not the one sitting here with a head full of Quaker Oats?" Jax argued, jabbing a finger toward his head. "If you're going to yell at someone, yell at Dakota!"

"Unc 'Kota is ooo-shun-ul," Tai said importantly, tugging on Oscar's ear.

"Now *that* sounds like something *you* would teach her," Oscar said to Jax. "Please, Jax, for God's sake, don't talk to the twins until they're twenty-one, okay?" With a final shake of his head, he and Deidre carried the twins out of the room.

Jax folded his arms across his chest, glaring at Dakota, although the oatmeal that dripped down the sides of his face softened the effect.

Dakota lost his battle to keep from laughing. "Okay, okay. I take full blame for everything. I'm sorry, hon."

"You're *sorry*?" Jax scoffed, cocking an eyebrow at him.

"I am. Really sorry."

"How sorry?"

Dakota grinned at him. "Sorry enough to take you upstairs, clean you off, and then spend the next couple of hours apologizing."

Jax cracked a smile. "Sounds like my kind of an apology."

"And afterward, we can discuss taking a trip to Wisconsin."

Jax rolled his eyes. "You're not going to let me win this one, are you?"

"Nope."

"Damn it. Okay. But if these geese of yours shit on my Suburban, you're cleaning it up."

"Deal," Dakota grinned and walked over to Jax and licked the oatmeal off the side of his face. "Let's go upstairs. I'm thinking that I'm really hungry for oatmeal all of sudden."

"Good. I just happen to have some on me," Jax laughed, ducking in for a kiss. Dakota's mouth was warm and soft and inviting.

Regardless of everything that had happened, nothing had really changed and Jax doubted it ever would. Dakota would always want to find more shifters and Jax would always argue with him. That, it seemed, was destined to be their life together -- butting heads at every turn.

Both of them were going to love every minute of it.

The summer sun beat relentlessly on the metal roofs of the swamp shacks. The small interiors heated up like soup cans on an open flame, the air thick, hot, and humid.

On a cot set against one wall in the largest of the shacks, a woman thrashed in the transition stage of her labor. Her screams carried outside, disturbing the usual lazy silence of the swamp.

Sixteen hours of hard labor had left the woman weak, she'd lost a lot of blood and her attendant doubted that she'd live much longer. She'd already delivered one baby; its twin would probably prove to be the death of her.

Finally a second slick body slipped from the woman's birth canal into the attendant's hands. "Another boy," she told the mother. "Like the first."

Whether her body had simply reached the limits of its endurance or the news about the second birth had sapped the mother of the last of her will to live, the attendant would never know, but at that moment the mother's eyes rolled up white and, with a single hard shudder, she died.

Shaking her head, the attendant cleaned the baby boy, wrapped him in a blanket, and laid him on the bed next to his twin and his mother's lifeless body. She walked to the front door, signaling for one of the men.

"She's dead," the attendant said. "Someone has to go out and find a wet nurse. The babies have to eat."

"Are they males or females?" Gar asked, picking at his nails with a knife. He hadn't survived the Shifting Sands Ranch only to be bossed around by a woman. He was in charge, not her.

"Male, both of 'em."

Swearing, Gar pitched the knife blade-first into the dirt and followed the woman inside the shack. Two tiny bundles lay side-by-side on the filthy mattress next to their mother's body. Their thin arms waved small fists, tiny faces scrunched up in anger.

As he leaned over the last two of Cain's children, they quieted.

Two sets of reptilian eyes blinked up at him.

And Gar smiled.

The Sound of Home
by Kiernan Kelly

Sébastien Gaston Orignaux sniffed delicately at his glass of wine -- or at least, what his waiter insisted was a glass of wine. Sébastien wasn't so certain. It was red, oui, and liquid. That seemed to be where any similarity between the viscous fluid in his glass and vin ended. He suspected it was vin de table, poor quality table wine, and he held serious doubts it would meet with his palate's approval.

He swirled the liquid in his glass, watching it wash the clear bowl with an ugly, purplish-crimson stain. Nonetheless, he took a small sip, swishing it in his mouth, breathing in its bouquet, examining it for subtleties.

And immediately spat it back out again.

"Mon Dieu! This is not wine... this is gasoline! How dare you affront my palate with such a horror? Are you trying to poison me? Take it away," he sniffed, gesturing toward the glass as if the very sight of it revolted him.

"Listen, mister, I done told you this ain't no fancy restaurant. We have beer, whiskey, soda pop, and plain ol' tap water, but you came in and made such a big stink about wine that, being neighborly, I sent Walter down to the package goods store to buy you some. Now, you don't have to drink it, but I sure as shit ain't taking it off the bill."

Sébastien glared at the waiter with as much contempt as he could muster, which was a considerable amount, then sighed. What did he expect from such a place, after all? They'd served him cheap wine (no doubt from a bottle with a twist-off cap!) in a glass mug. The tables were covered in plastic sheets, and the silverware displayed in a mason jar. There were no napkins -- only a roll of coarse, brown paper towels. Peanut shells littered the floor. Mon Dieu... he thought, I am in Hell.

He tried to put the fermented disaster behind him, and ordered a salad and a vegetarian plate for dinner, which immediately instigated another galling debate with the waiter.

"We got some tasty meatloaf, mister. Cook makes it up with mushroom gravy."

"I do not eat meat."

"How about a burger, then? Comes with tomatoes and lettuce, and a side of fries."

"Non. No meat," he'd hissed between tightly clenched teeth. "I will have a salad, and vegetable plate." Imbécile! Which word did he not understand -- the "no" or the "meat?"

"Well, for corn's sake, mister, why don't you just go outside and chew on the damn front lawn?" The waiter and several other diners laughed. "Save me the trouble of carting it out here on a plate."

The waiter's barb bit deeply, although Sébastien covered his discomfiture with a sneer. "Is this a restaurant or no? Do you have vegetables, or do you need to send Walter to the store again?"

Sébastien's platter arrived, plopped in front of him unceremoniously by the waiter. He could feel the man's disdain, could see derision in the waiter's eyes and movements. Crétins, one and all, Sébastien thought, staring down at the white clot of potatoes, wilted green beans, and slightly withered corn on the cob. A small, foil-wrapped rectangle of butter sat next to it, along with a slice of white bread. The salad looked no better -- the lettuce was browning, limp, and the tomatoes colored a pale, yellowish-orange.

I should have let Pierre kill me. It would have been a more merciful than being poisoned in this sad excuse for an American café, he thought, curling his lip in distaste. His stomach chose that moment to rumble, angrily reminding him that food -- even overcooked, tasteless food -- was better than none at all. He gingerly plucked a fork from the mason jar of silverware, wiped it off with a paper towel, and began to eat.

Sébastien heard the bell over the café's door tinkle as it opened, felt the blast of hot outside air but paid it no attention, concentrating on methodically chewing and swallowing. He took no joy in his eating, felt no satisfaction. The food was bland and unappetizing, but he needed to eat to live and he refused to find sustenance the other way. He listened with half an ear to the conversation around him.

"Well, if it ain't Shiloh Thunderfoot! Hey, Shy, where you been, boy?" Sébastien's waiter called out cheerfully, slapping his hands flat on the counter. "Ain't you a sight for sore eyes!"

A deep voice answered him. "Been around, Sam."

"What'll you have, Shy?"

"Gimme a brew, Sam." Sébastien heard the jingle of coin hit the counter, and the crack of an aluminum can's pop top. "Anybody seen David Feathermoon lately?"

"Nah, I ain't seen David in near as long as I've not seen you, Shy. Hey, did you hear about that motorcycle gang passed through a while back? Call themselves the Ultimate Predators, or some such. Sheriff thinks they might be responsible for a murder in the area. A whole family found torn to pieces near the Interstate, poor souls."

"Yeah, I heard. That's why I'm looking for David." Shiloh's voice was grim. "I'm wondering if he had anything to do with it."

Sébastien's ears perked up. Talk of murder, particularly one as savage as the waiter described, brought him to ramrod attention. He'd fled Manitoba because of such an atrocity.

Could it be Pierre has tracked me here? His appetite suddenly gone, Sébastien set down his fork with a trembling hand, and stared into space, lost in memory.

He'd been with Pierre for years, since they'd first found each other as youngsters. Sébastien thought Pierre had conquered his inner demons, but he'd been terribly wrong.

Sébastien remembered their last, horrible night together with excruciating clarity. Pierre had come home naked, covered in blood, and in a rage. "Sébastien!" he'd screamed, picking up a vase and smashing into a wall. Pierre's eyes were eerily glowing green, a demon's eyes, reflecting the lamplight as a wolf's might reflect the moon. "You are a coward! Hiding in your human skin, afraid to take what belongs to us!"

Pierre bared a mouthful of bloodstained teeth at him. "I've tasted power, Sébastien. I've unleashed the animal within me and he's shown me my path! No more hiding! I will not feed off the scraps from human tables, surviving on offal like a jackal! I want warm blood, living flesh! No more small game -- I have found the perfect food!" He shoved bloody fingers toward Sébastien's face. "Do you know what this is, Sébastien? It is freedom, power... my destiny!"

Sébastien felt his gorge rise as he watched Pierre lick his fingers clean. "Merde! Pierre, we agreed! To subject ourselves to our base instincts will mean our deaths!"

"That's the human in you talking, Sébastien," Pierre growled. "That is the real beast in us, you know -- the human half. I disavow it from this moment on. Humans are food to me, nothing more."

"The law will hunt us, Pierre! They will not sit idly by while you kill!"

"Humans were not created to be our keepers, Sébastien, but food for our kind!" Pierre roared. A hand swung out, catching Sébastien's cheek, rocking his head on his neck. "You're pathetic! A dirt-eater, no better than the human cattle!"

Insanity blazed in Pierre's eyes, sending a bolt of terror tearing through Sébastien's soul. This was not his companion, his friend -- this was a monster wearing Pierre's skin. He backed away, bumping into his desk, feeling behind him for a weapon. His fingers closed on a heavy paperweight. In one smooth movement, he picked it up and threw it with all the force he could muster. It hit Pierre at the temple, a thin trickle of blood oozing from the wound. Pierre slumped to the ground, conscious but stunned.

Sébastien reacted on instinct, dodging around Pierre and running out of the house, into the night, tearing off his clothing and shifting as he ran. His hooves pounded the ground as he headed into the thick forest surrounding their home. His sides were heaving, gasping for air when he finally slowed, deep in the wilds of Manitoba.

Pierre's bellow carried on the wind, reaching Sébastien's ears even though he'd put a mile or better between them. "Traître! I will find you, Sébastien! No matter where you run, I will find you and kill you!"

Sébastien gasped as a hand clamped down on his shoulder, startling him out of his memories.

"You okay? You look a mite peaked. Told you them vegetables weren't going to be enough. You want a burger, now?" The waiter, Sam, looked down at him with a smirk on his face.

"N-non, no thank you," Sébastien managed to stutter. His heart was beating wildly in his chest as the vestiges of his memory began to fade. "A glass of water, s'il vous plait."

Sam huffed, muttering something about damned vegetarians, as he walked away. Sébastien felt another pair of eyes on him, and turned to look over his shoulder.

The man called Shiloh rested against the long counter that ran the length of the café, watching Sébastien. He was tall, lean, and extremely broad through the shoulders. His face was ruggedly handsome, and his dark brown eyes stared at Sébastien from under the wide brim of a gray cowboy hat. Sébastien noticed his hair, black and shaggy, hung in uneven lengths to brush his collar.

He suddenly pushed off the counter and walked toward Sébastien's table, his movement strong and purposeful. Whomever this man Shiloh was, Sébastien decided, he exuded strength from his every pore. It was all Sébastien could do not to shrink away when Shiloh pulled out a chair and sat across the table from him.

"I can smell you," Shiloh said in a low whisper. "What are you?"

Sébastien felt the blood drain from his face, leaving him feeling slightly chilled and woozy. "I don't know what you're talking about. I came in here to eat. I have eaten, and now I will take my leave." To distract himself from the chocolate brown eyes staring at him as if they could see into Sébastien's soul, he dug out his wallet and removed a couple of bills from the fold. His finances were skeletal; soon he would either need to find work or...

Non! Never! I will not lower myself to do such a thing ever again! Then another thought followed quickly on the former's heels. This man knows what I am! Did Pierre send him? Is Pierre nearby?

Panic flared in his heart. He jumped out of his chair and practically ran to the register, shoving the money at the startled cashier, before pushing out through the door into the intense heat.

He would never willingly have come this far south. The high temperatures didn't agree with his constitution, and the vegetation was alien to his palate. The landscape was too wide-open, rolling hills and wide, windswept fields, with little cover. Only the fear that Pierre followed closely behind him kept Sébastien moving southward.

A second shadow joined his, stretching across the asphalt parking lot. "Running from somebody?" Shiloh's voice was very close, and Sébastien's instinct, knowing the folly of turning your back on an enemy, forced him to spin on his heel to face the man. He found himself locking gazes with warm brown eyes glittering with compassion and a trace of humor. "Well you sure as shit ain't a predator, not with the way you tucked tail and ran."

"Disparaissent la baise vous-même, Monsieur!"

Shiloh blinked. "Huh?"

"I told you to kindly go fuck yourself," Sébastien said snidely, fighting to stand tall and glare at Shiloh, ready to fight even as he shook inside, barely resisting the nearly overwhelming urge to run. To his shock, Shiloh chuckled.

"Ain't that something! Somehow, it don't sound as insulting in French."

"That is because French, unlike the vulgar American English, is a sophisticated language suitable for genteel tongues and ears," Sébastien said, lifting his nose in the air haughtily.

"You're a piece of work, mister. You're standing here acting all highfaluting, and all the while stinking of fear." Shiloh took a step closer, and it was all Sébastien could do to hold his ground and not back up. His eyes narrowed. "What are you so afraid of?"

"I am not afraid!" Sébastien yelled, the tremor in his voice belying his brave words. "Where is Pierre? Why does he not come out to face me?"

"Who's Pierre?"

"Do not play games with me. The murder... you asked what I was... surely, you know him!"

Shiloh's large hand grasped Sébastien firmly by the upper arm. Sébastien fought, but couldn't shake Shiloh's grip. "Listen up, mister. My name is Shiloh Thunderfoot. I've been looking for a man named David Feathermoon because I suspect he's the one who committed the murders. Him, a man named Cain, and his gang of motorcycle maniacs he calls The Ultimate Predators. How does this fella Pierre you keep talking about fit in?"

"I don't know these others you speak of -- only Pierre. I left Canada because of him, came south across the border. I kept moving south because I can feel in my bones that he pursues me. He will kill me if he catches me."

"You said there was a murder up north like the one we had here?"

Sébastien nodded. "Pierre went wild one night, lost control. He killed several people, and... Mon Dieu, it is unspeakable, what he did to them. Let me go, please! I must go, before Pierre finds me!"

Instead of relinquishing his grip, Shiloh's hand tightened on Sébastien's arm. "Calm your little ass down. There ain't nobody here named Pierre -- if there was stranger around, I'd know about it, just like I knew you were in the café." His deep voice lowered into a whisper. "I know every shapeshifter in the county. If'n this Pierre was here, somebody would've caught wind of him."

"S-shapeshifters?" Sébastien repeated, feeling his eyes widen. "You... are you...?"

"Sure. So are you. Told you I could smell it."

"Y-you're wrong! I am not like Pierre! I am not a beast!"

"Whoa, settle down. Nobody said you were an animal. We're just different, folks like you and me. What's your name? You do have one, right?"

"Oui. Sébastien Gaston Orignaux."

"Heh, more of that fancy French, huh? My tongue would tie itself up in knots if I tried to say it. Think I'll call you 'Bas' for short. Now, Bas, listen up. You got nothing to fear from me. See that hill over yonder?" He pointed to a rise several hundred yards to the east of the café. "My place is just on the other side. We're going to head over there, sit down, and talk about this."

"We have nothing to talk about! I am not like you, and you cannot hold me here!"

"I can't let you run off half-cocked, either, not with murderers running loose. Besides, if there's a chance this asshole Pierre is coming after you, I need to know about it. Now come on. I'll brew us up some coffee, and we'll talk."

Although Sébastien ranted and raved, struggled wildly, and cursed Shiloh Thunderfoot and every member of his family tree, past, present, and future, he couldn't stop Shiloh from dragging him across the parking lot, up and over the hill, and down toward a cabin tucked among tall pines. His grip was like an iron shackle around Sébastien's upper arm, unbreakable. He pulled Sébastien behind him like an errant child throwing a tantrum.

Sébastien found himself inside the quaint cabin, which reminded him a great deal of the one he'd left behind in Manitoba. It was small, two bedrooms, a bath, and a living area/kitchen

combination. The ceiling, walls, and floor were fashioned of warm, burnished pine, the furniture simple and functional. Shiloh hung his Stetson on simple hook behind the door.

Not that Sébastien was in any mood to appreciate the décor.

"What is wrong with you? This proves my point about monsters like you! You act like the animal you are!" he yelled. Shiloh chose that moment to release him, and Sébastien stumbled backward toward the door.

"If you open that door, I'll just drag your ass back in, and this time I'll hogtie you," Shiloh said in a low, dangerous voice.

"Do not threaten me!"

"That ain't a threat, Bas. That's a promise."

Sébastien made a rude noise, but remained where he was. He had no doubt Shiloh would make good on his promise.

"You might as well have a seat," Shiloh said, pulling a can of coffee from the freestanding pantry in the kitchen. The smell of fresh coffee wafted through the room, reaching Bas' nose. Not that he held any hopes Shiloh would have the slightest idea of how to make a real cup of coffee. He hadn't enjoyed one since he'd crossed the border.

He watched Shiloh add water to an old-fashioned perk pot, and set it on the stove. "Now, while we're waiting for that to brew, suppose you tell me about this Pierre fella. Who is he, what does he shift into, and why do you think he's after you?" He leaned against the kitchen counter, his arms crossed over his chest, biceps straining at the fabric of his long-sleeved shirt.

"Why do you care?"

"I'm the law around these parts. I don't mean human law -- I ain't with the sheriff's department -- but among our kind, I keep the peace."

Sébastien sighed, and seated himself on the sofa. He suddenly felt extremely tired. "Pierre was my friend of many years. We found each other when we were quite young, soon after we'd both discovered the monsters living under our skin. We spent our lives battling it, but this past spring, Pierre lost his fight."

"You're not a monster, Bas."

Sébastien lifted his chin defiantly. "I know. I will not allow myself to be."

"That ain't what I mean. Tell me more about Pierre."

"He began to allow his inner beast out more and more often, no matter how I pleaded for him to keep it caged. At first, he was content with meat purchased in shops. Then he began to hunt for himself -- still acceptable, if a bit barbaric for my tastes. Soon, this too was not enough, and he began to hunt humans."

Shiloh's eyes flashed wide. "He killed people and--"

"Ate them. Oui. He boasted about it to me, told me it was his destiny -- and mine -- and that humans were food."

"You weren't keen on that idea, huh? You're a vegetarian."

"Oui. I do not have it in me to kill."

"Yeah, I hear that. Me, neither. So, your wolf went rogue, became a man-killer. What makes you think he's following you?"

Sébastien smirked. "He is not my wolf. Once he was my friend. Now he is my enemy." He waited for Shiloh's nod before continuing. "If you had been there that last night as I was, had seen the insanity in Pierre's eyes, the bloodlust, there would be no doubt in your mind that he would follow. He is fou, crazy."

"You haven't seen or smelt him since you left Canada?"

"Non. I have kept moving."

The coffee perked musically. Shiloh carried two steaming cups to the living room, handing one to Sébastien. He sat in a chair opposite the sofa, stretching his long legs out in front of him. "Why do you think the animal part of your nature is wrong, Bas?" His warm, brown eyes gazed at Sébastien over the wide brim of his cup as he took a sip.

Sébastien tilted his cup to his lips, putting off his answer. The coffee was surprisingly good -- strong and full-bodied. "I was orphaned as an infant, and raised by the Sisters of Charity. It was in the orphanage that the animal overtook me. The Sisters were convinced it was a devil in me, a demon. They held an exorcism, but could not rid me of the beast."

"Oh, Lordy," Shiloh interjected, shaking his head sadly. "Bas, it ain't the devil. It's just a part of who we are. There are quite a few folks like us. Nearly a dozen right here in this county alone. Some are predators, like cougars and wolves; others are herbivores, like deer and horses."

"And you, Monsieur? Need I fear you ripping my throat out?" Sébastien asked the question most on his mind.

"Nope. Told you before -- I'm an herbivore, through and through."

Sébastien sniffed. "I suppose you spend most of your time as a beast."

"No. I'm a man first. Sure, there are times when I feel the urge to run free, and I do, but I'm most comfortable in this form. Don't you ever let go, Bas? How do you do it? If I couldn't shift once in a while, I'd lose my mind!"

"It... is not easy," Sébastien said, letting his eyes slide away. "Painful, sometimes."

"Then why deny that part of yourself? Because a bunch of misinformed people told you it was wrong? They just didn't understand, Bas. Not many who aren't like us can. That doesn't make it a bad thing -- just different."

"But Pierre..."

"There are aberrations and sicknesses of the mind among our kind, just as there are among humans. Being a shifter didn't cause it. Your lover would've killed whether he was fully human or a shifter."

"He was not my lover!" Sébastien exclaimed. "He wanted no part of me that way. Never."

A slow grin hitched Shiloh's cheek. "Pity, that. His loss, as I see it."

Sébastien felt his face grow hot. Shiloh's eyes darkened, the brown turning black as his heated gaze swept over Sébastien from head to foot. He asked a question to deflect Shiloh's obvious interest. "What of these others the waiter spoke of, these Ultimate Predators? Who are they?"

"Don't know too much about them, just that they rolled through the county a week or so ago, and the murders were discovered shortly after they'd moved on. Led by a guy named Cain, there were folks here who smelled shifter on them."

"Your friend, David? He left with them?"

"David isn't my friend," Shiloh said. "Ain't seen him since the gang pulled out."

"He was your lover." It was a statement of fact; Sébastien could see the pain in Shiloh's eyes when he spoke of him.

"We went together a while back, then he turned bad. Got into trouble with the human law, went rogue. I think he may have hooked up with the gang, and left with them. I also think he might be responsible for the murders here. At the end, he was violent." Shiloh cleared his throat, as if talking about such intimate matters made him uncomfortable. "Listen, Bas, I don't know if this Pierre fella is following you, but I do know that if it wasn't David, then there's a murderer running loose around the county. You don't know the area, and I can tell by your clothing that you've been on the road for some time. Cash must be running a little short. I think you should stay here for a while, at least until the murderer is caught."

Sébastien blinked. Shiloh's offer was the last thing he'd expected to hear. "Here? I couldn't possibly..."

"Sure you can. Got two bedrooms, and I know Sam could use somebody to work at the café a couple three days a week. It'd give you a chance to fatten your wallet before you move on again."

"Why would you do this? You do not know me, and I admit, I have been less than friendly to you and your friends," Sébastien demanded. "Why help me?"

"I've been in your shoes, that's why. My old man tried to shoot me when he found out I could change. Swore he'd hunt me down, and I spent a lot of years running, looking over my shoulder. It ain't easy being alone."

Sébastien returned Shiloh's steady gaze, and saw sincerity in their glistening brown depths. He didn't know why, but ever since he'd stepped over the threshold of Shiloh's house -- after he'd calmed down enough to appreciate it -- he'd felt at home. Safe. He nodded. "Then I will accept your generous offer. Merci beaucoup."

A month passed, far more quickly than Sébastien thought it would. He worked three days a week in the café, and during the other four days helped Shiloh around the cabin, planting gardens and doing minor repairs. Nights were spent in an easy camaraderie, drinking coffee and watching DVDs on Shiloh's small television, or playing cards.

This afternoon Sébastien wore a frayed apron tied around his waist, and was in the kitchen arguing with Cook over the proper way to prepare vegetables. "Mon Dieu! They should not be limp. They should be fresh, and crisp. Steam them, monsieur, do not boil them. Comprenez-vous?"

"Bas? You back there bothering Cook again?" Shiloh's voice, heavy with good-natured humor, carried to him from the dining area of the café.

"I am merely trying to encourage him to cease serving slop," Sébastien said, poking his head through the kitchen's pass-through window.

"Gosh darn fool thinks he's in Paris, France! Wants me to put something called potage on the menu. I don't even know were to find a potage, never mind how to cook one up, for corn's sake!" Cook yelled.

Sébastien rolled his eyes, and called back, "Its soup! I told you before!"

Cook's voice floated from the kitchen. "Then why don't you just call it that?"

"Come on, Bas. Let's go. It's quitting time, and I'm hungry," Shiloh said, laughing.

"Oui. I'm coming," Sébastien said. He pulled his head out from the pass-through, untied his apron and tossed it to Cook, ignoring the way Cook stuck his tongue out at him. Cook was as dense as his cast iron cookware, and Sébastien refused to butt heads with him anymore that day.

The sun was setting, and it colored their backs red and orange as they made their way over the hill to Shiloh's house. They had developed a comfortable routine. Sébastien would take a shower first, and then he would cook while Shiloh washed up. They would eat together, and Shiloh would wash the dishes afterward, and make coffee.

Sébastien made himself comfortable in the living room after dinner, but to his surprise, Shiloh didn't make coffee. Instead, he carried in a pair of glasses and a bottle of whiskey.

"You and me, we have to talk, Bas," he said, pouring them each a healthy helping of amber liquid. He handed one to Sébastien, before taking a long swallow of his.

"Something is wrong," Sébastien said quietly. He stared down at the glass of whiskey in his hand. "I have overstayed my welcome. There have been no more murders, and Pierre has not come. I will leave--"

"Huh? No! No, it ain't that at all," Shiloh said, shaking his head. He sat down on the sofa next to Sébastien. "Just the opposite, in fact."

Sébastien blinked as Shiloh rested one large hand on Sébastien's thigh. He could feel the heat from it burning his skin through the denim of his jeans. He looked up and met Shiloh's eyes. "What is it, mon ami?"

Shiloh didn't answer. Instead, he downed the rest of his whiskey, took Sébastien's glass from his hand, and drank that, too. "I've got... needs, Bas."

Sébastien watched him carefully. He was tense; Sébastien could see it in Shiloh's expression, in his posture. The edges of his full lips were pulled downwards, and there were shadows under his eyes. "These needs... would they have to do with me?" he asked in a quiet voice. He felt a stirring low in his belly as his body reacted to the warmth of Shiloh's hand, and ache he heard in Shiloh's voice.

"Wee," Shiloh answered, his lips tilting in a half-smile.

Sébastien chuckled; Shiloh tried, but he always mangled Sébastien's language, even that one small word. It still pleased Sébastien that he tried at all. "Tell me."

Shiloh licked his lips. The sight of his pink tongue flicking out sent a shiver rocketing through Sébastien. He had needs, too, needs he hadn't tended to -- except by his own hand -- since he'd left Canada.

"Keep thinking about you. Keep wondering if you ever think about me."

"Oui," Sébastien confessed. "We are friends, but I often wonder if perhaps we could be more than--"

He never got the opportunity to finish his sentence. Shiloh's hands whipped out, trapping his face between them, crushing his mouth to Sébastien's in a fiery, no-holds barred kiss. He felt Shiloh's weight pushing him backward; his body complied, allowing Shiloh to bear him down onto the sofa cushions.

Sébastien felt every inch of Shiloh's hard body pressing against him, including a hard lump rubbing against his thigh. It matched his own growing erection, and answered any questions Sébastien might have held about Shiloh's sexual preference, or his interest in Sébastien.

It was as if their passion had spent the last month in an incubator, heating, growing, and expanding until that moment, and given the slightest opening, exploded into a frenzy of grabbing hands and hungry mouths.

Sébastien moaned as Shiloh's lips left his mouth to find purchase at his throat. Teeth nipped at soft flesh; fingers slipped under his shirt seeking skin. He inhaled the fragrance of Shiloh's hair, earthy and scented by male, as the strands tickled his nose. His cock strained behind the zipper of his jeans, aching for friction. "Mon ami, we are not dressed for the occasion. Perhaps something less... restrictive, oui?"

"If'n you're talking about getting naked, then yeah." Shiloh's words blew against the skin of Sébastien's throat in a warm breath.

Sébastien's back arched against Shiloh's weight. "Oui."

They sat up, toed off their shoes, and began unbuttoning their shirts. Sébastien's hands slowed to a stop as he watched Shiloh's shirt slide off, baring golden skin liberally dusted with dark hair. Strong muscles moved fluidly under his taut skin, each movement flexing his arms, his flat stomach, and back.

Shiloh pulled down his pants and kicked them away, his erection heavy and dark. He stood before Sébastien, looking at him expectantly. "This ain't a one-man show, you know."

Sébastien blinked up at him. "I'm sorry. I've thought often of how you would look nude."

"Disappointed?"

"Mon Dieu, how could I be? You are magnificent, l'homme parfait, the perfect man."

Shiloh laughed, although his cheeks grew ruddy. "Aw, I don't know about how perfect I am. Sure would like to see more of your skin, though." He sat on the couch, looking up at Sébastien. His hand slid to his groin, fisting his thick cock. "Your turn to give me a show, Bas."

This time Sébastien laughed, although his voice was low and husky. "I fear I am not so talented," he replied, although he did his best to give Shiloh what he'd asked for by teasing his shirt buttons free, and slowly peeling the material from his shoulders. His hips pumped slowly, erotically, as he slid his belt from the loops and wriggled out of his jeans. His prick was engorged, ready, and pointing directly at Shiloh by the time he was through with his striptease.

"Oh, Lordy. Want a taste of that," Shiloh said, leaning forward.

Sébastien gasped as Shiloh's mouth closed over the head of his cock, and twisted his fingers into Shiloh's thick hair. It had been too long; after only the most fleeting moments of sweet torture, he felt his balls draw tight. He tried to warn Shiloh, tried to pull away, but Shiloh would have none of it. He refused to let Sébastien go.

Sébastien hands tightened in Shiloh's hair as his climax roiled up, reaching his throat in a series of low grunts. He let go of himself as he rarely had before, not caring what he looked like or sounded like. A primal groan, deep and raspy, voiced his pleasure as he came.

He felt hot splashes against his legs, and looked down; he watched as Shiloh fisted himself, coming moments after Sébastien's climax waned. He voiced his release also, the sound deeper and louder than Sébastien's but no less satisfied.

"Too fast, too fast," he breathed, bending over, reaching for Shiloh's lips. He kissed Shiloh deeply, fingers sliding again into his thick hair.

"Next time will be slower. We needed this, I guess."

"Oui," Sébastien agreed, feeling inordinately happy that Shiloh seemed to think there would be a "next" time between them. It implied Shiloh wanted Sébastien to stay longer, something Sébastien was more than willing to do. He would be happy staying in the small cabin with Shiloh for as long as Shiloh would allow him.

If only he could forget about Pierre, and his own inner beast that was continually trying to escape his control, he might actually begin to enjoy his life.

"Bas, there's something we have to talk about," Shiloh said one day, about two weeks after the first time they'd stripped and brought each other to release. It was the first time of many -- making love became a part of their routine; the part of their day they both looked forward to most.

Sébastien looked up from the paper he was reading. "What is it?"

"After that first day, when I brought you back here, we never talked about shifting anymore. We have to, Bas. It's sitting here between us like a fucking white elephant. We both know its there, and we're both trying to ignore it."

"I do not wish to speak of this," Sébastien said, raising the newspaper to shield him from Shiloh's glare.

Shiloh's hand swatted the paper away. "We have to deal with this, Bas. I told you straight up that I need to shift from time to time, and don't think I haven't noticed how edgy you've been lately. You're feeling the urge, too. Time to let it out, my friend."

Sébastien sighed as he saw the inevitability of having the conversation he'd been dreading. Once Shiloh saw him, knew what he was, he'd never want to touch him again, and the thought nearly brought tears to Sébastien's eyes. He'd grown very fond of Shiloh over the past six weeks; he was beginning to believe he might just be falling in love with Shiloh. Showing Shiloh his inner beast would ruin it all.

Still, he owed it to Shiloh to be truthful. "Oui. There is a pressure in my soul that is difficult to ignore. Listen to me, mon ami. The beast living within me is not like those of your friends you have introduced me to since I came here. Horses, panthers, deer... they are charming creatures. Even Pierre, for all his faults, was beautiful when he shifted. His wolf was graceful and handsome. It is not so with me."

Shiloh's eyebrow quirked, but he nodded. "Okay, we're being honest. That's good. I'm not exactly pin-up material when I shift either, Sébastien."

"I cannot believe that. You have not told me the name of your beast. What do you shift into?"

Shiloh shook a finger at him. "Oh, no. You didn't tell me what you are, either."

"We must tell each other sometime, non?"

"You first."

"Non. You first," Sébastien said, stubbornly.

Shiloh stared hard at him for a moment, then grinned in a way that made Sébastien very nervous. "I've got an idea. Come on." His strong hand grabbed Sébastien's arm, pulling him to his feet. It reminded Sébastien of how he'd dragged him to the cabin on the first day they'd met.

This time, Shiloh brought him outside the cabin, into the wide yard cut into the stand of pine behind the cabin. With a growing sense of horror, Sébastien watched Shiloh strip down to the skin.

"Get naked, boy," Shiloh growled. "We're going to shift at the same time. Might as well get it over with -- you see me and I see you."

"Absurde! I do not wish to shift. You know my feelings on this--" He was cut off by Shiloh's mouth clamping over his, kissing him until he weaved unsteadily on his feet.

"This is part of who we are," Shiloh said softly. His hand cupped Sébastien's cheeks, refusing to let him look away. "I love you, Bas. There. I wasn't sure if I should say it, but if that's what it takes you to trust me with all of your secrets, then so be it. I love you. I want you to stay, but you have to take all of me, and you have to believe that I'll accept all of you."

"Oh," Sébastien breathed. "Je t'aime, Shiloh. I love you, too." As soon as he'd said the words, he felt the truth of them in his heart. "What if you are so repulsed by me, you do not want me anymore?"

"This is about trust, Bas. If you love me, you have to trust me, just as I have to trust you."

Sébastien nodded slowly. "All right. But do not say I didn't warn you." He stripped out of his clothing, folding each piece and placing them in a neat pile nearby.

They faced each other, both equally naked and nervous. "On the count of three," Shiloh said. "One, two, three."

In the space of a heartbeat, two incredible creatures stood staring at one another. One was seven feet tall at the withers, with long, gangly legs, and a large, heavy head. He had a drooping upper lip, a wattle of skin hanging at his throat, and a pair of huge, palmate antlers growing from the crown of his head. Although Sébastien carried a great deal of weight in this form, nearly fifteen hundred pounds, he looked positively svelte standing next to Shiloh.

Shiloh was much heavier, although at six-foot-six at the shoulder, stood shorter than Sébastien. Two curving black horns sprouted from his head, and a mane of heavy, curly black hair covered his powerful forequarters, and the large hump on his back. The rest of his body was short haired, but stocky. Shiloh weighed in at close to two thousand pounds in this form, and seemed to dwarf Sébastien, even though Sébastien was taller.

The Canadian moose and the American buffalo stared at one another for a few long minutes. Then Sébastien called to Shiloh, a low, reverberating sound, and Shiloh answered in kind with his own, deeper call. Sébastien felt it rumble in his bones, and to him, it was a sound calling him home.

Mother Blue's Bar and Grill
By Kiernan Kelly

The bar sat on the edge of Highway 37 like a squat, dull pimple on the flat face of the desert. A faded sign tacked to the front of the building read, "Mother Blue's Bar and Grill -- Cheap Beer and Good Food". The winding ribbon of sun-bleached blacktop that stretched in both directions seldom brought traffic, and even more infrequently, a customer. There was nothing in the area to draw tourists -- no towns, no houses, not even a bus stop. The bar stood alone, surrounded by miles of rarely traveled highway and inhospitable, sandy terrain, and that was just the way Mother liked it.

Dressed in his usual uniform of a white wife-beater, jeans, and steel-toed work boots, Mother (short for Motherfucker, a name he'd been saddled with the first time he'd snapped the arm of a troublemaker during his days as a bouncer in the city and had stuck with him ever since) sat at a table, put his feet up on the chair across from him, crossed his muscular arms over his barrel chest, and waited.

It was the night of a full moon, and Mother knew from experience that full moons usually meant trouble. It seemed that on those nights his regulars, those few stalwart souls who eked a living out of the brutally unforgiving desert and dropped in every night to wash the sand from their throats with a cold bottle of brew, grew tempers as sharp as the prickly pears that dotted the landscape. Cross-eyed looks could bring flashes of metal blades and flying fists, broken bottles and heads, and visits to the emergency room nearly fifty miles away.

Mother was used to it. He'd once read somewhere that it had to do with the moon and the tides and the pull they had on the human body. No matter the cause, trouble came like clockwork during full moons, as inevitable and unstoppable as the wind that whistled through the canyons.

His job was to keep the arguments from deteriorating into murder. Nothing killed a night's receipts like dead bodies piling up by the jukebox.

It was nearly eight o'clock in the evening before the first customers began trickling in. They were miners, men who drove huge earthmovers and operated dragline excavators for Ajax Mining, scoring deep gashes in the ground, strip-mining. They were hard men with big thirsts, their clothing still dusted with pale sand and stained with sweat from a hard day's work. Mother knew them all by name, and they knew him well enough to know not to fuck with him or his bar -- usually. On nights of a full moon, though, all bets were off.

Mother had served several rounds to his regulars before the door opened again and a stranger slipped inside the bar. He made his way silently to the back of the room, ignoring everyone else, and took a seat at the last empty table. Tall and broad through the shoulders and chest, his size rivaled Mother's own. He was dressed in a long, black leather coat despite the heat outside; it flared behind him as he stalked through the bar.

There was something strange about him, something odd, different. Mother knew it immediately, could smell it in the air, a tang, sweet and coppery like blood. The man looked over toward the bar and his eyes, so dark that they seemed to swallow light rather than reflect it, met Mother's. He didn't say a word, didn't raise a finger or beckon in any way, but Mother felt an odd pull in the center of his chest. It urged his feet toward the man's table as if one end of a rope had been tied to his guts and the man held the other, pulling hard, reeling him in. The next thing Mother knew, he standing next to the man, mesmerized by those bottomless, dark eyes.

"A beer, whatever you have on tap." The man's voice was deep; Mother could feel it almost as well as he could hear it. It rumbled through his bones like a tremor deep in the earth, not powerful enough to unsettle anything, but strong enough to let you know it was there. Mother's prick certainly noticed it. It jumped up, suddenly wide awake and interested.

Mother grunted in response, unnerved. He tore himself away, heading back to the bar to fetch the beer. There was something about the man that was familiar. Not his handsome, rugged face; Mother was sure if he'd seen the man's striking features before, he would have remembered. It was something much more subtle, like the faint scent of sex on the sheets the morning after, or the taste of a lover's kiss that lingered on the tongue.

The night ticked by slowly, but with surprisingly few incidents. Old Feely Thompson, a miner in his sixties, took a swing at his best friend Walt Jenkins over the gap-toothed woman who sat between them. Olsen Pritchard got tanked and tried to take a piss behind the bar. Weaver Lewis and Fen Nickelson butted heads over something or other -- they were so plastered that Mother doubted even they knew what they were arguing about.

He dealt with each incident swiftly and decisively, although only half his mind was really paying attention. The other half was still focused on the handsome stranger who sat quietly nursing his beer. Those dark eyes hadn't left Mother all night; the heat in them kept Mother's dick stiff and hard against the zipper of his jeans.

It was well after midnight when the last of Mother's regulars left the bar. The only one who remained was the stranger, only halfway done with his second beer of the night. Mother finally gave in to temptation, threw his bar rag down, pulled out a chair at the man's table and straddled it. "Do I know you? You seem familiar."

"No, don't think so."

"You got a name?"

"You can call me Bull."

Bull? His name suited him, Mother thought. He looked muscular, his body straining the tight black t-shirt he wore under his leather coat. Powerful. Sexy.

"I'm Mother. This is my place."

An amused smirk lifted Bull's cheek. Mother would ordinarily be tempted to wipe it off with a hard fist, except it made Bull's dark eyes twinkle with a light that zapped Mother in the pit of his belly and hardened his cock painfully enough to make him gasp.

"Mother? I take it you weren't named for your nurturing nature. There's something familiar about you, too," Bull said, draining the last of his beer. "I felt it the minute I walked in here."

They stared at one another for a long minute, the heat between them unacknowledged, but scalding nonetheless.

"Where are you headed?" Mother finally asked when the silence got too uncomfortable. It was getting late, but he didn't want to throw Bull out. Lord knew Mother had gone without long enough, and even if Bull didn't want to dance that particular two-step, Mother wanted Bull's face and smell imprinted firmly in his head so he could drag it out later, when he was alone on his cot upstairs. He wanted to remember Bull's hands, long-fingered and tan, the way his shoulders filled out the soft black leather of his coat, and the way his hair fell to brush his sleek eyebrows. How his nostrils flared when he drank, the way his Adam's apple bobbed, and especially the way his very presence left a wet spot on the fly of Mother's jeans.

"Why do you ask? Maybe I'm not headed anywhere."

"Everybody's going somewhere. Nobody has this place as a destination. There's not enough going on around here to draw flies."

Bull snorted. "Yeah, I guess that's so. I'm headed to the West Coast, California. I hear there's a group of people out there led by a man named Cain. Sounds like they might be my kind of folk."

"Yeah? What kind of folk might that be?"

"Maybe I'll show you... later. Right now, I have a problem that I really don't want to have to solve all by my lonesome, if you get my drift." His hand slid over his chest and lower, dancing his fingers over the large bulge between his thighs. Mother could see the outline of his erection under the thin denim.

"Could be I do. I happen to have a similar problem."

"Yeah? You thinking maybe we could help each other out?"

Mother let his lips curl in a suggestive smile. It seemed Bull wasn't a stranger to the two-step after all. He stood up and peeled off his wife-beater, watching Bull's eyes skip and jump over his

pecs and chiseled eight-pack. Mother ran his hands over the skin of his chest and stomach slowly, rocking his hips, giving Bull a show. If the way Bull was biting his lower lip was any indication, he was enjoying his front row seat.

"Pretty, baby. So pretty," Bull whispered. "More."

"Gonna show me some of your own, or am I doing a solo act?"

"In a minute. I want to see you first."

Okay, Mother could live with that, particularly since Bull had pushed back from the table, spread his legs wide, and was rubbing himself through his denim. Even with his clothes still on, he was giving Mother a damn fine show.

Mother unbuckled his belt and unzipped his jeans. He reached in through the open fly and pulled out his cock, hard and hot. Damn it felt good to hit the air, to be free from the constricting denim. He stroked himself slowly, thumbing the tiny slit at the head.

Bull whistled softly. "Ain't that the sweetest thing I've seen in a good, long while," he said. Mother watched as he flicked open the top button of his jeans, unzipped, and pulled out his long, heavy cock. It was rosy red, and curved back slightly toward the patch of black hair at Bull's groin peeking through the denim.

"You're not bad yourself. I want to feel those sweet lips on my cock," Mother said, his voice gone from deep to raspy. He needed, and he needed now. He walked around the side of the table, shoved his thumbs into the waistbands of his jeans and underwear and yanked them down past his hips. Holding his cock, Mother touched its head to the prickly stubble on Bull's cheek.

"Yeah, want some of that for sure," Bull grinned. Mother's eyes rolled back in his head as Bull made good on his word, his lush lips closing over Mother's prick, sucking hard. Mother threaded his fingers through Bull's thick, dark hair, hips pumping his cock into the hot wetness of Bull's mouth.

Bull spat him out long before Mother had had enough. His tongue traced a path down the underside of Mother's shaft to his swollen sac, licking each ball before sucking them into his mouth one at a time. Bull's fingers slipped around Mother's hips, digging into the firm flesh of his ass, spreading his cheeks, letting air hit his hole.

"Gonna let me have some of this?" Bull asked, his voice blowing warm air over Mother's wet balls, making him shiver. "I'll return the favor if you do."

Getting fucked by Bull sounded like a mighty fine idea, almost as good as Mother doing the fucking did. One massive arm swept the tabletop clean, Bull's beer glass hitting the floor. Mother didn't care at all that it shattered against the hardwood. One glass is a small price to pay, he thought as he bent over the table, presenting Bull with his ass, especially if his cock feels half as good as it looks.

He watched over his shoulder as Bull ripped his T-shirt up over his head and pushed his pants down around his ankles. Lord! Bull had a body like a tank -- powerful and impressive, all hard edges and steely muscle.

Mother watched Bull spit and felt wet fingers probe between his cheeks, slicking the way. Bull's long, low moan as he slipped his cock into Mother's body sounded very much like the bawl of the animal for which he was named. Mother's eyes rolled back in his head, his hand working his cock, keeping it hard. He didn't care that Bull hadn't bothered with a condom -- he couldn't catch anything from Bull anyway, and now wasn't the time to pretend he could. It was too late -- he should have thought of it earlier. He let the thought drift away, concentrating on the hard cock that filled him.

Bull was big, but not uncomfortably so; his cock slipped into Mother's asshole without much discomfort. Mother's body took him in all the way, until he felt the prickly hair that dusted Bull's low, full balls as they bounced against his cheeks. "Better move now, Bull. I'm not gonna last much longer and I want a shot at your ass before we're through."

Bull groaned. "Gonna fuck you into the floor, baby."

Mother had to give him credit -- Bull surely tried to do exactly as he'd promised. His hips slammed against Mother's ass, cock thrusting in to the root, again and again, the table underneath Mother's stomach squeaking and shuddering as the tempo quickened. The music of flesh slapping flesh filled the bar, overpowering the tinny strains from the jukebox.

Bull suddenly bellowed long and loud and pulled out, spraying Mother's back with splashes of wet heat. He laughed a little, rubbing the head of his cock against Mother's ass cheeks, smearing them with moisture. "Sorry. It sort of snuck up on me there."

"S'okay. My turn," Mother said, the heat from his groin making it all the way up to his larynx, turning his voice smoky. He was so hard he thought he could split wood with his dick. "Over you go." He stood up and moved awkwardly to the side, his movement hindered by his jeans. He felt Bull's come dripping into the small of his back, but that only turned him on more, made his cock jerk in response. "Hurry up."

"My pleasure," Bull grinned. He leaned over the table, presenting Mother with an ass that was dusted the same dark hair as on Bull's head.

Mother slicked his cock the same way Bull had, and plunged right in without any preamble. He was too far gone to worry about any prep work. He wanted in, wanted to fuck Bull inside out and sideways 'til Tuesday.

"Oh, holy fuck!" he cried, slamming in to the root. Bull's body squeezed around him like a red-hot vise fashioned from silk. Grunting, Mother pumped himself wildly into Bull's tight hole. It didn't take long at all, over far too quickly in fact. He came, pulling out just in the nick of time,

although it took all of his self-control to do so -- he wanted to spill inside Bull's ass so badly he could practically taste it.

Bull stood up, squatted, and licked Mother's cock clean. "Man, that's sweet. I want you naked, Mother. I'm not done with you yet."

Mother grinned. Funny, he felt the same way. He wondered how long it would take him to wear Bull out -- he could go all night, literally, but doubted Bull had the same stamina. He'd never met anyone else who could go as long or as often as himself.

Turned out, Mother had met his match in Bull. He met Mother stroke for stroke, needing only short rests between rounds. Asses, hands, and mouths, every part of them got a workout at some point during the long night. They fucked on the floor, on the bar, over the jukebox -- practically every available surface in the joint was dribbled with sweat and semen by the morning's light.

The last round took place outside, in the small garden Mother kept behind the bar. It wasn't much -- the sandy soil and arid weather precluded anything lush and tropical, but he'd managed a few brilliantly colored poppies and sweet-smelling primroses.

Afterward, as the sun rose and heated the sands, their bodies covered in sheens of sweat, they sat quietly for a few minutes, shoulder to shoulder.

"Gonna have to hit the road, I guess," Bull said, picking at a few weeds that poked up through the soil between the flowers. "Got a lot of miles to cover."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Mother agreed. Inside, he was bellowing for Bull to stay. No one had ever made him feel the way Bull had, exhausted and satisfied to the point of stupor. He shrugged, trying to make the movement seem offhand. "I suppose you could hang around for a few days, bunk in with me and rest awhile before moving on."

"I guess I could," Bull said, nodding. He wouldn't meet Mother's eyes. "Trouble is, there are things about me that you don't know, things I've never told anyone else. If you knew, you'd be looking for a shotgun instead of offering me a bed."

Mother barked a short laugh. If Bull only knew, he thought. "Nah. Trust me, Bull. There's nothing you could be hiding that could be any worse than my own secrets."

"Yeah, there is. You have no idea."

Mother eyed Bull. He was upset, his shoulders tight with tension. Whatever his secret was, it was eating him alive. All Mother knew was that he really, really didn't want Bull to leave -- not yet, anyway. He made his decision quickly, with less worry than he'd ever thought possible. After all, what did he have to lose? If Bull left anyway and started talking, who in their right mind would believe him?

"Here's the deal. Promise me that you won't freak out, and I'll show my secret. Then you can tell me yours, and we'll be even, okay?"

Bull nodded, but Mother could see the mistrust in his eyes. He didn't blame Bull -- they hadn't even known each other a full day yet. Still, if what Mother was going to show Bull didn't form a fast bond of trust, he didn't know what would. Standing up, he gave Bull one last, reassuring smile... and shifted.

Mother had never shifted shapes in front of anyone before -- not since he'd changed in front of his Pop when he was a teenager. It had been a mistake -- his dad had run him off, shouting nonsense about the devil and black magic. Then again, his old man had been a nutcase even before Mother had developed the ability to shift his shape.

It had been a secret that Mother had never told another living soul -- not through his stint in the Marines, or as a bouncer in the gay club in the city, or out here, at his own place in the middle of nowhere. He felt a little awkward, a lot worried, and yet strangely excited as he stood in front of Bull, pawing the earth and snorting.

His Brahma bull was powerful, but didn't seem to be scaring the piss out of Bull -- Mother took that as a good sign. He'd expected Bull to scream or run away or both.

What he hadn't expected was for Bull to laugh.

After a moment or two of staring at Mother with a dumbfounded look on his handsome face, Bull had begun laughing, holding his sides and flopping onto his back, tears forming in his eyes.

Mother shifted back, squatting down next to Bull, feeling a trifle put off. "What, might I ask, do you find so incredibly funny? That wasn't a trick, you know. I can really change shapes."

"S-sorry," Bull snorted, wiping his eyes as he sat up. He grinned at Mother and rose gracefully to his feet. "This is why I found it so funny."

The next thing Mother knew, he was nose to snout with a gigantic, black Angus bull, rippling with muscle. Warm breath blew in his face, making him blink. "Holy shit! You, too? I never met anyone else who could shift!"

"Me either! We're both bulls, too. That's amazing!" Bull said as soon as he'd shifted back into his human form. "I heard about these people on the West Coast who can do it, too -- the ones I told you I was going to meet, remember?"

"Yeah, you mentioned some guy named Cain. Wow. I'm totally blown away, Bull. At least I know now why you never bothered with a condom."

"Why would I? I've found that I can't catch anything. No wonder you were so fucking incredible last night."

"Hey, I'd like to think that was all me, thank you very much."

"Oh, it was all you, baby," Bull grinned. "I meant that I was surprised I didn't wear you out like I thought I would. So, do you want to come with me? To California, I mean."

"I can't, man. I have this place, built it with my own two hands. I've been pretty happy here."

"Yeah? I can understand that." Bull nodded, looking away. Mother felt something tug at his heart, something he'd never expected to feel, had never felt before. It was camaraderie, a connection with someone like himself that made him want to take hold of Bull and not let go.

"The offer still stands. You could stay here for a while. I mean, that Cain guy isn't going anywhere, right? You could catch up to them later."

"Yeah, if they exist at all -- I only heard rumors about them, urban legends, but I was so desperate to find somebody like me that I took off running." When Bull turned back to Mother, there was a softness in his dark eyes that rocked Mother to the core. He touched the side of Mother's face lightly. "I think I'd like to stay."

"Good. That's real good. Stay," Mother whispered, leaning in for a kiss.

They stayed that way, side by side, sharing a sweet kiss every so often, until the sun was high enough to start burning their bare skin and they retreated into the cool dimness of the bar.

The next week, Mother nailed a new sign to the front of the building.

*Mother Blue's Bar and Grill
Cheap beer, good food, and a whole lot of bull.*

End