

The Slave Breakers

(Book 1)

Bran's Story

By Maculategiraffe

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Note: This book originally appeared as posts on LiveJournal and still contains some editing notes. The text is sexually explicit (including m/m and polyamorous situations) and is intended for adult readers.

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CHAPTER 1

Bran lay on the floor, naked, bound and gagged, listening with dull despair to the conversation going on over his head.

"I'm sorry for the poor lad, but I'm a very busy man," his master was saying, in the honeyed tone he had been using ever since the visitors arrived. Bran wondered if the strangers could hear the insincerity in it, or if it was only obvious to him because he knew what his master's voice ordinarily sounded like. "I simply don't have the time or resources to deal with this kind of thing. I'm sure you can understand that."

"Of course," said the blonde woman with just a touch of polite impatience. "That's why we're here."

"Yes, I understand you specialize in— among other things— breaking, shall we say, excessively independent spirits. Of course, given your own, er, history—" Bran could practically hear the leer in his master's voice, and swallowed past the constricting gag. The woman wouldn't be in a good mood later, which was very bad news for Bran.

"Right," she said, the contempt in her voice now barely concealed. "And your estimate of his market value, leaving aside the behavioral issues?"

"Well, he's eighteen, in perfect health— I'd put it at forty thousand."

"Mm-hmm," said the woman, sounding dubious, and they began a process of haggling. Bran listened with half an ear to the protests and estimates, praying to whatever gods might look down to kill him where he lay rather than send him home with the slave breakers.

"Done," said the woman finally, firmly enough to startle Bran back to attention. There was a rustle of papers above him. They had bought him, then. Bran felt his body, quicker on the uptake than his mind, begin to tremble.

Someone— the strange man, his new master— was kneeling beside him. He bent down, threaded an arm under Bran's shoulders and one under his knees, and lifted him up like a child.

"Can you carry him all the way to the car?" the woman asked as Bran blinked, disoriented, up at the man's face. He was a handsome man, perhaps in his forties, with dark hair threaded with silver.

"Sure," he said to his wife. "He weighs, what, ninety pounds?"

"One hundred and twenty, according to this," said the woman, somewhere out of sight.

"Yeah, I got him. Thanks for drinks, Lord Dunaev. Better get this young man home and see what can be done with him."

Bran's trembling worsened at the casual words. His new master glanced down at him, his face inscrutable. Bran lowered his eyelids and swallowed again, convulsively, trying to still his trembling as he was carried from the house to the courtyard outside. The master set him briefly on his feet, supporting him with one arm, while he opened the back door of a spacious and luxuriously appointed car, then lifted Bran inside, propping him in a sitting position on the floor of the vehicle, before getting in himself. The new mistress got into the driver's seat, started the car, and drove away.

"Son of a bitch," said his mistress viciously, and the master laughed. "How fucking rude can you get?"

"Pretty fucking rude, apparently," said the master, leaning down to a small nylon case that sat beside Bran on the floor and unzipping it. "I'm surprised he went for your history, though, instead of mine. Yours is practically prehistory."

"It'll never get old to these people," said the mistress, the irritation in her voice touched with amusement, as Bran watched his master's hands like a

rabbit watching a hawk. They produced, somewhat anticlimactically, a bottle of water.

The master reached down towards Bran's head, and Bran's throat constricted in panic, but the master only reached to the back of his head to undo the gag and peel it from Bran's mouth. Bran lowered his eyes submissively, his heart racing, as the master unbound his arms as well. Not knowing what else to do, Bran held them in position at his back. After a moment, the master reached out and moved them to his lap.

"Drink this," he said, not unkindly, handing him the bottle of water. Bran, his mouth dry, was grateful to obey. He drank slowly, not wanting to spill anything. When the bottle was empty he lowered it, and his gaze, to his lap again. The master took the empty bottle from him. Bran wondered whether he should thank his master, and opted not to risk speaking without permission.

"Are you hungry?" the master asked neutrally.

"Only if it please my master," said Bran softly without raising his eyes.

"Oh yeah," said his master, looking up at the mistress. "He'll take some serious breaking, this one."

Bran saw black. *Fuck!* What had he done wrong?

"Don't, Holden," said the mistress, barely audibly over the roaring in Bran's ears. "He's terrified."

Bran tried to bring his shaking under control as his master reached down and put a hand on the back of his neck. He knew his skin was clammy with sweat and that he must stink of fear. He hoped the master would explain his transgression at some point, because he had absolutely no idea what he had done to earn whatever was going to happen to him.

"Poor kid," said the master, almost gently, and Bran felt sudden tears of fright and frustration prickle in his eyes. He blinked furiously, not knowing whether the new master would be inclined to pity tears or punish them.

"He's crying," said the master. "Fucking hell."

Well, that answered that. The damage done, Bran let the tears flow. He did not dare lift his hands from where they had been placed to wipe them away; he had clearly landed himself in enough trouble for his first five minutes.

"He's practically catatonic," said the master. Bran didn't know the word, but he heard the anger in his master's voice and cringed. "Bran. Look at me. Look at my face."

Finally, a clear order that could be obeyed. Bran looked up so quickly he almost gave himself whiplash. The older man's face was grave and thoughtful, his eyes fixed on Bran's.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

Shit. He had to speak now, and his one brief speech so far, as respectful and uncomplicated as he knew how to make it, had made his master angry. He swallowed, his throat dry.

"Please, master," he said hoarsely, "I'm sorry I've displeased you, master."

"You haven't, kid," said the master. "I'm not angry with you."

More tears overflowed at the kindness in the older man's face and voice. He wanted to bow his head to hide them, but held his gaze on his master's face as commanded.

"You can look away now," said his master gently, and Bran dropped his gaze, trying to swallow a sob. "You haven't done anything wrong, Bran. You're being very good. Very obedient."

A wave of relief washed over Bran. He would have spoken his gratitude, but he hadn't been asked a question and still was not sure whether speaking was otherwise permitted.

"Good boy," his master said softly. "I can see you want to please me very much, don't you?"

"Yes, master," Bran said in a low voice.

"But you don't know how yet, because we've only just met." A pause.
"Yes?"

"Yes, master," Bran whispered.

"You'll learn soon enough, Bran. Try to relax a little."

Bran swallowed again. "Yes, master."

"Good boy," the master said again. "We should have brought Yves with us."

"The way Dunaev described the kid, I was expecting a bite-and-kick scenario," said the mistress. "I didn't realize he'd be... like this. I know they all get told that the 'slave breakers' are coming for them, but Dunaev must have laid it on pretty thick."

"He overestimated," said the master, and Bran shivered involuntarily as he felt a caressing touch on his hair. "This kid isn't a fighter."

"He did try to run away, and they said he fought like a wild thing when they caught him," said the mistress. "Though I'll admit it's hard to picture."

Bran was more comfortable with his new owners discussing him over his head, even on dangerous subjects, than with attention paid directly to him. And he definitely liked being petted while they talked. The hand that toyed

with his curls was gentle and unthreatening, reassuring in the extreme, and the sensation on his scalp was delicious. Without thinking, Bran moved his head into the touch.

"Oh, you like that," his master remarked with a smile in his voice, continuing to run his fingers through Bran's hair. "What the hell did Dunaev mean, unresponsive? He's practically purring."

"I guess Dunaev never played with his hair," the mistress laughed.

"Lean your head on my knee, lad," said his master, and Bran obeyed, again shivering a little at the pleasure of the unthreatening physical contact. The slim hand played with his hair, occasionally brushing his forehead and the nape of his neck. Bran was so comforted by the touch that, sleepy and dangerously relaxed, he turned his head and softly nuzzled his master's thigh. He froze immediately afterwards, his heart thudding painfully, but the hand in his hair continued to stroke.

"That's good, that's just right," said his master soothingly. "Gods, what a sweet boy. Dunaev is an idiot."

"You don't say," said the mistress dryly, as Bran, thus encouraged, resumed his nuzzling along the inner edge of his master's thigh. Tentatively he pressed a kiss to the warm skin— the master wore no hose under his long tunic— and then, unreproved, kissed further up along the thigh, nudging the tunic back. If his master's soft gasp of pleasure wasn't all the confirmation he needed that his service would be welcome, his nose-to-nose encounter with his master's nearly-erect cock came soon enough afterwards to encourage him to continue. Reverently he kissed the cock's tip— it twitched under his lips— and engulfed it expertly in his mouth, burying his face in the darkness of soft cloth and softer pubes, and eliciting a moan from his master.

His master had given no permission to use his hands— his master had, in point of fact, given no instructions at all— so Bran did the best he could with nothing but lips, tongue, and an acute desperation to please the slave

breaker. The hand slipped from his hair as he slowly speeded up, counting out the rhythm in his head. His new master's cock was smaller, which was a relief; Bran could easily take the whole thing into his mouth by letting the head press against the back of his throat. Being fucked would probably hurt less too, when it came time for that. *Focus*.

At last his master groaned with pleasure and came, seed spilling into Bran's mouth and down his throat with hardly a missed beat. Bran sucked the softening shaft for a while, milking it of ejaculate, and then pulled back respectfully, waiting with lowered eyes for his master's verdict. He knew he had done *something* wrong— this was a new master with new preferences, which Bran didn't know yet, and his clumsy guesses must be corrected— but childishly, and encouraged by his master's generosity so far with gentle speech, he hoped for praise as well.

"You *were* hungry," was what his master said, with a chuckle in his voice. Without meaning to, Bran looked up into his master's face unbidden. His master met his gaze, the smile fading from his face. Bran looked down instantly, fear flooding him again, but his master reached down and grasped his chin, tilting his face back up. He studied his slave with an unreadable expression.

"We're getting into Tenarus," said the mistress from the front seat. "I'd untie his legs. I don't think he's going to run. Just cuff his hands behind his back and put the chain on."

Bran's master examined him for a few more infinitely long seconds before following his wife's advice. He unwound the ropes from Bran's legs, whose nerves then sprang into agonized life; pins and needles jabbed into them at a thousand points and a sudden tearing cramp made Bran cry out in pain before he could stop himself. The master cursed angrily.

"What's wrong?" the mistress asked.

"The idiot tied the ropes too tight," said the master. "Cut off circulation. I

swear to the Ash, if there's damage, I'm suing the hell out of that fucker."

His movements were swift and angry as he pulled a pair of manacles and a long chain leash from the same nylon case that had held the bottle of water. Bran clasped his hands together at the small of his back without being told, and the master clipped the cuffs on.

Something was bothering Bran, something that didn't make sense, distracting him from the pain in his legs and from his fear of the anger that practically crackled from his master. He didn't quite understand what. Then he put his finger on it. Swearing to the Ash was part of the religion he had learned as a child— but it was the religion of peasants and slaves, not of nobles and slave owners. Nobles swore by the hands of God, or simply to God. Now that he thought of it, hadn't his new master made reference to gods, not God?

Perhaps his new master spent so much time with so many slaves that he had picked up some of their habits of speech, or even their religious beliefs. Bran wondered how many other slaves his master owned at the moment. His former master had said the slave breakers preferred to own very few slaves at a time, so they could give each one as much attention as he needed. Bran shuddered at the memory of Dunaev's inflection on *attention*.

"You all right there, beautiful?" his master asked gently, all trace of displeasure gone from his voice, and Bran suddenly could have cried with relief. The man was really pleased with him— pleased well enough to speak kindly and reassuringly to him even when he was in a bad mood, well enough to use an endearment that was also an entirely gratuitous compliment. Maybe he would survive this after all.

This surge of optimism lasted while the car pulled up in front of a largish, ordinary-looking house— nothing like the ominous palace of tortures Bran had vaguely imagined— and while his master helped him out of the car on shaky, still-prickling legs. It lasted while he limped up the stairs of the house and inside; while his mistress said briskly, "I'll telephone the doctor; you go

on and take him upstairs," even though his skin prickled faintly at the mention of a doctor (who needed– or was going to need– one?); and while his master's strong arm helped him up a flight of stairs and across a landing. When he saw the room they had entered, fully furnished and lined with whips, switches, floggers, clamps, vises, benches of various shapes with leather cuffs attached to them, and implements and structures of more obscure but definitely ominous function, Bran's optimism took a sharp hit, but it wasn't until his master had led him through that room and into a spacious bathroom with an enormous sunken tub that Bran began to feel its wounds were mortal.

CHAPTER 2

As his master bent down and set the water running, Bran recalled with horrible intensity the twenty-four hours between Dunaev's call to the slave breakers and their arrival, which had mostly been spent in Dunaev's gleeful recital of the tortures they would visit on Bran once they got him home. When Dunaev finally left him to sleep, it was the water torture Bran dreamed of. Hands chained behind his back, strong hands gripped him from behind and plunged him face first into water, holding him there, barely noticing his struggles, his lungs bursting, darkness rushing in on him, and at the last minute, lifted him out. Space for one breath, maybe two, no time to beg for mercy, and back into the water. He had woken gasping for breath, fallen back to sleep and dreamed of those same hands pushing him back under the water, splashes of color exploding behind his eyes, pain in his lungs. He hadn't quite understood why it was this particular threat he dreamed of all that terrible night— certainly it was horrible, but not really more so than several other things Dunaev had informed him they were sure to do to him. Perhaps it was because some part of him knew this was the first thing they would do.

He fell heavily to his knees on the cold tile floor and stared up at his master, who looked back at him in surprise. Bran was surprised, too, that he'd been such an idiot, assuming his master's playful gentleness with him in the car meant for one moment that he'd hesitate to torture Bran. That was what he did; he was a slave breaker. Had Bran really been stupid enough to think that a pretty face and an eager blow job would mean anything to a professional torturer-- would mean he wouldn't use those same hands that had toyed so delicately with Bran's curls to push him under and hold him there?

"Bran?" said his master. "What's wrong? What's frightening you?"

Bran looked up at his master, trying to read his face. Was this part of an interrogation process? Mockery? Or did the master not expect that Bran would understand what was about to happen?

"The water, master," he said.

"You're frightened of water?" his master said, sounding genuinely puzzled. "Why?"

Bran was sure he was being mocked now. He dropped his gaze to the floor and said nothing.

"Bran," said his master sharply, and Bran flinched. "Tell me why you're afraid."

"My master-- I mean my former master-- he told me how you use the water," said Bran, almost angrily.

"How we use the water," his master echoed. "And how is that?"

Bran stared at the floor. He was starting to be angry. Why was he being led through this elaborate charade? It must be part of the breaking process somehow, but Bran was damned if he understood what purpose it served to make him explain what was about to happen to him to the man who was going to do it to him. Why couldn't the master just drown him and have it over with?

Then again, Bran supposed that the best torture was designed to make the victim wish for death. And here he was, wishing he was dead before he'd even been touched. Not such a pointless tactic after all.

He knelt in stubborn silence, his eyes on the floor. He'd say whatever they wanted him to say in a matter of seconds, no doubt, but he wanted no more of the stupid mind games.

"We use the water for bathing, Bran," said his master finally. "We're old-fashioned that way. If Dunaev has developed some new and advanced use for water, perhaps that explains why you smell the way you do. But now that you belong to us, you're going to have to be washed before we put clean

clothes on you. Come here and get in. If you've never bathed before, I'll show you how."

Feeling battered between hope that his master was telling the truth and dread that it was all another mind game, Bran crawled, dragging the chain from his manacled hands, towards the edge of the pool and stepped down into the water, which was just above blood heat and set him shivering with the same kind of pleasure his master's touch had given him in the car. His master pulled off his own clothes in a series of swift, practiced motions, revealing an aging but still physically fit body, the cock Bran had sucked earlier limp and small-looking in its nest of dark pubes, and stepped into the water, kneeling down beside Bran.

"We call this soap," he said solemnly, reaching for a bar in a dish along the edge of the tub. "You lather it in the water-- like so-- see the pretty bubbles?-- and then--" He reached out with two handfuls of lather and rubbed Bran's naked arms. "Then you rub it all over you." The hands ran across his chest, grazing his nipples, down his belly, then back up his sides to his armpits, while Bran squirmed involuntarily, trying not to giggle.

"You're skinny as two umbrellas," his master said. "I swear I can count your ribs like this. What did Dunaev feed you, besides strange stories about water?"

Dizzy with relief, with the ticklish pleasure of the touch and the warmth of the water, and the light teasing tone of his master's voice, Bran grinned. His master stopped for a moment, looking at Bran, a slight smile on his own face.

"What a beauty you are," he said. "Turn around."

Blushing, Bran obeyed, turning his back to his master, who ran soapy hands over it.

"We'll have to feed you up," he said absently, and then Bran was being pulled over backward by his shoulders, pushed down towards the surface of the water, his hands locked helplessly behind him, and his panic was absolute. He cried out wordlessly and twisted violently out of his master's grip, struggling to get out of the water, but slipped and fell back, and without the use of his hands, his whole body slid, his legs kicking uselessly, under the surface of the water, and he could not breathe.

It could not have been more than a second before he was gripped firmly by the shoulders and yanked, dripping and gasping and nearly hysterical, up into the air again. He twisted again to get away, slipped out of his master's hands and lunged for the edge of the tub; he managed to get one leg up and over the edge before slipping with a shout of despair back in. He did not go under this time; his master caught him under the arms and lifted him easily out of the tub and onto the floor of the bathroom, where he jerked forward, escaping his master's hands for a third time, and ran for the door, only to fall with an ignominious and painful thud on his bottom; his master had managed to grab the chain that trailed from his manacles. Bran scrambled to his knees and jerked on the chain, trying to pull it out of the master's hands; the master jerked back, hard, and Bran cried out in pain as his arms were wrenched back and up. Then his hair was caught in an agonizing vise grip; the master yanked his head to the ground by a fistful of wet curls and pinned it there with one hand while he used the other to wrap the chain once around Bran's neck and pull it taut.

"Stop fighting," he snarled, as Bran continued to struggle, pulling agonizingly against the grip in his hair and weakening as the chain around his neck cut off his oxygen. He kicked out hopelessly one last time, then went limp. The makeshift noose stopped tightening.

Bran's master dragged him, coughing, to his feet by his hair and led him by it into the next room, where he clipped Bran's manacles to a ring in the wall, then chained his feet together as well. Bran made no resistance. His master stood looking down at him for a moment, then walked back into the bathroom; after a few minutes he emerged, dressed and carrying a large

towel. He knelt beside Bran and began, carefully and thoroughly, to dry him. Bran cooperated dully as his master toweled off his legs, his feet, his arms, his torso, his pelvis and ass, and finally, gingerly, his face and hair.

When he had finished, he disappeared into the bathroom again, then came out without the towel and carrying something else folded. He walked with it, as Bran watched, to a wide padded table with leather straps at all four corners-- unmistakably intended for a body to lie on, strapped down-- shook it out and draped it over the table. It was shiny, like oilcloth. Designed not to stain, Bran thought, and despite his dull despair these matter-of-fact preparations sent a cold chill through him. Would there be that much blood? His former masters had of course been careful not to leave scars, but the slave breaker--

--was kneeling beside him, and Bran snapped to attention.

"Bran," his master said quietly. "There's no way out of this house against my will. The doors are carefully locked, the windows are all sealed, and the neighbors know what business we're in. You can't escape. You'll only hurt yourself trying. Do you believe me?"

Bran nodded dumbly.

"What made you panic, in there?" his master asked.

Bran cleared his throat. "The water, master."

"The water again. Tell me what Dunaev told you."

Bran wasn't too terrified to feel like a colossal fool, but-- "That you torture with the water, master. Push-- push slaves under the water-- so they can't breathe--"

His master cursed fluently for several sentences. Bran hung his head. His trembling had caught up to him.

"Bran," his master said, and he sounded gentle again, "you seem like a good kid. But you've tried to run away twice, from two different masters, and now a third time, from me. Was it like this, the other times? Did you just panic and bolt, without thinking it through?"

Bran nodded miserably. He wished his master would just go ahead and start whatever he was going to do to Bran on that table.

"I'm going to unlock these chains in a second. What are you going to do then?"

"Whatever my master commands," said Bran dully.

"You're not going to bolt again."

"No, master."

"Why not?"

Bran answered honestly. "Because I know I can't get away, master."

"That will do for a start." His master undid the chains on his ankles first, then the cuffs behind his back. Bran sat still.

"Go lie face down on that table," his master ordered, standing up.

Bran moved to obey, clumsy with fear; his master reached a hand down to steady him and help pull him to his feet. He walked to the table, climbed ungracefully onto it, and lay down on his stomach, spreading his arms and legs to its four corners and laying his wrists inside the unbuckled straps.

His master sighed behind him. Bran waited, the oilcloth cold under him. Then his master's hands were buckling the straps securely onto his ankles

and wrists. Bran had stopped trembling, resigned to the inevitable, but the warm hand that touched his back then started him afresh.

"Relax, Bran," his master said gently. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Bran heard this without understanding. People were not strapped face down onto tables to not be hurt.

But his master stroked his back, gently, pleasantly, the kind of touch that came as a reward, not a punishment. He passed his fingers over Bran's shoulders, his neck, then dragged nails lightly down Bran's spine to his ass, which he touched and cupped sensuously, fingertips delicately exploring the crease where buttocks met thighs, and slipping slightly in between his cheeks. Bran held very still, wondering if he were about to get fucked. His ass was still sore and torn from the last one of his master's-- former master's-- friends to use him; but if fucking-- even dry fucking-- was all Bran's new master had had in mind when he laid down the stainproof cloth, Bran might just go ahead and orgasm from relief right now.

Remembering his master's positive response to his advances in the car, Bran ventured to arch slightly into the touch, wriggling his ass invitingly against his master's hand. His master chuckled.

"No," he said, "not now. Maybe later." His hand traveled back up Bran's back to his shoulder. "You're stiff as a board, Bran. Relax. I said I wasn't going to hurt you."

The hand on his back disappeared for a few moments, then returned, slick and warm; startled, Bran jumped slightly. His master's hands were on his back, at his shoulders, sliding easily on-- was that oil?-- the fingers expertly probing and kneading his rigid muscles. Bran could not decide which was more astonishing: that his master was apparently giving him a massage, or how gods-damned good it felt to be on the receiving end of one.

"That's right," said his master softly. "Good boy. Just relax. It's okay."

Bran moaned very quietly as his master's thumbs worked out a kink between his right shoulder blade and spine. His master made a humming noise of approval and continued to work on the knots in Bran's muscles. Bran knew the techniques-- all slaves did-- but having them practiced on his own much-abused muscles was such exquisite pleasure Bran could barely muster the energy to wonder what the hell was going on. He lay limp and quiescent while his master did things to his back that made him feel as if the table he lay on were made of clouds or cream.

"You've been afraid for a long time," his master said gently, still rubbing small circles in the cramped muscles on either side of Bran's spine, sending electric waves of relief through Bran, who could not quite manage to speak before his master continued. "I'm guessing Dunaev wanted you afraid, since Dunaev is just the kind of idiot who thinks a state of chronic terror improves a slave's behavior, which is why Dunaev's slaves run the fuck away from him at their earliest opportunity." He moved his hands to the nape of Bran's neck and rubbed; Bran's breath caught in something like a sob of pleasure. "Good boy. Loosen up for me. Nice and easy. That's right. I don't want you scared, Bran, and I'll tell you why: fear makes you stupid. I don't want you stupid. I want you smart, smart enough to figure out which side your bread's buttered on, because that's what makes a good slave."

The caressing hands slid back down to his shoulders, the thumbs hooking under his shoulder blades; it felt so good Bran thought he might cry.

"Slaves need their wits about them, Bran," his master went on, pressing the heels of his hands firmly on either side of Bran's spine; Bran heard a crack and felt warm relief flood his back. "More than anything, slaves need to be smart. Because it's dangerous being a slave, and that's exactly why you can't let yourself get so afraid. Scared slaves do the most unbelievably stupid shit, like making a break for it when they're naked and wet and manacled-- no, don't freeze up again, kid, relax. It's not your fault. It's that son of an acid-secreting toad, Dunaev, filling your mind with gods-know-what crazy ideas

about torture. We don't torture, Bran. And we don't want to break you. They call us the slave breakers-- but that's not what we do."

Bran was listening intently for an explanation of just what his new owners did do-- besides, apparently, bathe and massage their property-- when another man's voice spoke from the doorway of the room, out of Bran's field of vision.

"Hey, how come the new kid rates? I can't even remember the last time you strapped me down for sensual massage and a pep talk about the profession."

Bran's master laughed, continuing to rub Bran's shoulders. "Hi, sweetheart. Just trying to ease Bran's transition. He's been a little tense."

"Yeah?" Footsteps approached the table; Bran saw a flash of green cloth, then a friendly face, framed with sandy curls, with a few age lines around a pair of very blue eyes. "Hello, Bran. I'm Yves. Welcome to the jungle."

"Sir," Bran murmured.

"Sif, master, he's fucking gorgeous," said Yves, looking up with a grin.

"May I, uh, help ease his transition?"

The master laughed again. "Maybe. What did you have in mind?"

"Mmm. I'm sure I could think of something." The face disappeared and was replaced by a view of a green-cloth-clad waist as Yves stood up. A favorite, obviously-- his master must be very fond of him to keep him around at all at his age, let alone allow him such familiarity. Bran prayed Yves wouldn't take a dislike to him-- he knew from experience how difficult life got when your master's pet decided you were an annoyance or a threat, and it wasn't as if this master could just sell him. This was the end of the line.

"Did Alix get hold of the doctor?" Bran's master asked the favored slave, while he went on massaging Bran.

"Yes, master. My mistress said to tell you the doctor will be here in about an hour, and to ask if Bran had any visible wounds or conditions that should be attended to in the meantime."

"Aside from an acute case of terror, no, not that I've seen," said the master. "Bran? Is there anything wrong with you physically that I don't know about?"

It took Bran a few moments to register that he'd been asked a question, and longer still to figure out what to say. He knew his ass was raw and a little torn, but not whether that counted as "something wrong"-- his former master certainly would not have bothered with it, but there were obviously new rules here. The question was whether his master would be more annoyed with him for mentioning something that didn't count, or for saying nothing was wrong if it turned out it did count. The other thing that was wrong with him was that he was hungry-- he hadn't been fed either last night or this morning-- which he certainly wouldn't have even considered mentioning if his master hadn't kept talking about how skinny he was and how he needed to be fed up, which would seem to indicate an inclination to perhaps feed him sometime in the near future.

Before he could decide, Yves said, "Is he asleep?"

"Bran?"

"No, master," he said hurriedly. "I mean, yes, master. I mean-- I don't know if my master considers this worthy of mention, but my-- my anus is, uh, kind of-- torn a little."

After a moment, hands gently but firmly parted his ass cheeks, and one finger probed at the puckered hole. Bran bit his lip to keep from crying out.

"How did this happen?" his master asked, sounding angry.

Bran swallowed. "My master-- former master-- had friends over the other night, master, and they fucked me. One of them likes to dry fuck, and his cock is very large, so I always get a little-- hurt-- when he fucks me."

His master was silent so long that Bran started to worry.

"Why did you act like you wanted me to fuck you earlier?" he asked finally.

Shit, shit, shit. Bran was afraid he couldn't afford to hesitate again.

"Master, I thought you were going to-- when you put down the cloth-- I thought you were really going to fuck me up," he blurted. "For-- for-- I thought you'd, I'm sorry, I thought, I mean, when you try to run from normal owners you get sold to you, and I'd just tried to run from you, and this was, I mean the next thing, you strap me down and I thought, I was just hoping if you fucked me, at least it would postpone, I mean, and there was always the chance that you'd be pleased enough that you'd-- I, I wanted to please you, master."

There was another silence, while Bran's master stroked his hip a little absently and Bran considered that it might have been slightly more intelligent to pause for five seconds and then cut straight to that last sentence.

"He tried to run?" asked Yves curiously.

"If you could call it that," said Bran's master. "Had to be the most pitiful escape attempt in the history of slavery. I'm bathing him, right, in the tub, he's naked and covered with soapsuds, his hands are chained behind his back-- and it is this moment that the kid chooses as, you know, the absolute optimum moment to lunge for the exit like a crippled sea lion. Pure panic. Bran, I'm afraid you're not going to get fucked for a while-- not until that heals completely. I'm not risking infection, plus which I'm not really into fucking kids while they're screaming in pain. Not my thing. Not Yves' thing either, I don't think."

"No, master," said Yves cheerfully. "I prefer it when they're screaming for other reasons."

"Like with laughter, right?" There was a slight scuffle just outside Bran's field of vision. Bran was simultaneously amused and made very nervous by the extreme familiarity between his master and the older slave. The banter between them was not like banter between a master and even a highly favored slave; it was more like the good-natured raillery between Dunaev and the nobles he invited over for drinks and to fuck Bran till he bled.

"Anyway-- the doctor will be here soon and if there's anything that needs to be done--" His master patted his thigh reassuringly.

Bran took a deep breath. "Master?"

"Yes."

"I-- I haven't eaten, um, for a while."

"Oh, right," said his master. "I meant to ask you before-- when was the last time you ate?"

"Yesterday morning, master, before-- before I--"

"Loki venom-eyed," his master said between his teeth, already unbuckling the straps at Bran's ankles. "I'll kill Dunaev. I'm sorry, Bran, I didn't realize."

He undid the wrist restraints and helped Bran peel himself off the table and, shakily, to his feet.

"Take him downstairs and feed him, my dove," he said to Yves. "I have to make some calls."

"Uh-oh," said Yves, looping his arm through Bran's. "Lord Dunaev's in trouble."

"Damn right he is," said the master, scowling, as Yves led Bran from the room.

CHAPTER 3

"Lean on my arm," Yves said gently as they reached the top of the stairs.
"You okay?"

"Yes, sir," Bran murmured, letting the other slave's arm steady him down the stairs. "Thank you, sir."

"You don't have to call me sir," said Yves, amused. "Just Yves is fine."

"Yes-- Yves," Bran faltered; the older man so obviously outranked him that to address him by his first name seemed impertinent, but to disobey him seemed at least injudicious.

Yves gave his arm a quick squeeze as they reached the foot of the stairs.
"Come on-- the kitchen's this way. Think you can make it?"

"Yes, sir-- Yves."

"We eat well around here. I'm not sure what's available right now, but I'm reasonably sure it will be better than what you're used to."

"Yes, Yves."

Yves laughed. "When I say you don't have to call me sir, I mean relax, kid. You can talk normally to me. I don't own you."

Bran flushed. "I-- it's just, you spoke so freely with the master, I didn't realize at first that you were a slave."

"Well, I've been his for seventeen years," said Yves. "We're pretty familiar by now."

"Seventeen years?" Bran echoed, stunned. That would make Yves, at an absolute minimum, thirty-two years old. Pleasure slaves did not get much

older.

"Yep," said Yves. "The mistress bought me as a wedding present for the master when I was nineteen. Lived here ever since. Here we are."

He was over thirty-five, then, Bran thought, allowing Yves to guide him to a kitchen chair and seat him carefully. Which was not impossibly strange, especially since a slave given as a wedding present might well have some sentimental value beyond his actual value as a pleasure slave, but what really didn't make sense was why he didn't seem the least bit threatened by Bran, who was young and pretty and clearly intriguing to their mutual master. Unless he was just trying to get Bran off his guard. Bran hunched his shoulders slightly, nervous, while Yves heated something on the stove, spooned it thickly into a bowl and set it down in front of Bran.

"Don't eat too fast," he said.

Bran picked up the spoon awkwardly-- it had been a long time since he'd handled one-- took the first bite without wondering what the food was, and was stunned at the flavor of the hot stew-like soup, which was better than anything he'd been offered a bowl of since his mother had died when he was nine. Bran ate slowly, despite the agony of hunger in his stomach, dazed at how good it tasted, desperate to make it last; when he had emptied the bowl, Yves refilled it. He finished the second bowl and put the spoon down awkwardly.

"Still hungry?" Yves asked.

Bran looked up shyly. "No, sir-- Yves, thank you."

Yves had opened his mouth to say something when they heard raised voices through the open door. Bran recognized the voice first of his mistress, then of his master, both sounding angry. Bran drew in on himself almost unconsciously.

"Hunger is not the same as damage, Holden!"

"It's not 'perfect health,' either! What if he gets sick because of a lowered immune system? Anyway, what about the actual damage? He's unusable until that heals. You don't think the price should reflect that?"

Oh Sif help me. The only thing more likely than a fight between owners to get an innocent slave hurt was a fight whose *subject* was said innocent slave. Bran listened, hoping against hope that the yelling was retreating and would end, upstairs, in violent make-up sex that did not involve Bran.

"He's only unusable because *you* prefer that sex not hurt him."

"Oh, and that's such an unreasonable preference!"

No, it was definitely coming closer.

"Not to me, but to Dunaev, yes! You can't expect Dunaev to make out a bill of health based on *your* standards."

"Gods damn it, Alix--" the master slammed into the room, followed by his wife-- "perfect health is perfect health!"

Bran dove to the floor so quickly when they came in that he jarred his knees and bumped his forehead hard on the wood of the floor. There was silence above him as he crouched, heart pounding, face pressed to the ground.

Footsteps came past him; the chair he had been sitting in was dragged a few inches, and a hand touched his head and twined itself in his hair, tugging lightly upwards. Flinching a little at the memory of a much harder yank earlier, Bran obeyed the wordless command and lifted his upper body, edging to where he could comfortably bury his head against his master's knees, avoiding looking at anyone or anything else.

"It's okay, Bran," his master said. "We're just having a little shouting match. Happens a lot. Don't worry, nobody will ask you to pick a side."

Remembering that the gesture had met with approval in the car, Bran pressed his lips to his master's knee in silent thanks for the reassurance, and was rewarded with a caress to his head.

"Did you feed him?" his master asked.

"Yes, master, a couple of bowls of that soup," said Yves.

"Is that enough?"

"He said he wasn't hungry any more. I don't think he's used to eating much at a time."

"Hmm," said his master dubiously. "Bran, how much are you normally fed?"

"One pound of food, twice a day, master," said Bran without looking up, "plus any food my master is pleased to give me as indulgence or reward."

Into the pause that ensued, a chime rang out through the house.

"There's the doctor," said Bran's mistress, sounding rather weary. "I'll let her in."

Shortly, Bran was back on the oilcloth-covered table, though not strapped in this time, making a supreme effort to hold still while a thin, prim woman in her fifties examined his bottom.

"I can give you some salve that should help prevent infection as well as soothing the pain," she said at last, "but I'm afraid you're right about intercourse. It would do worse damage and probably lead to infection, not to mention the pain it would cause him. You see, not only is there this fissure, but the entire anus is badly chafed, and the skin is so tender here that some of these minute abrasions have drawn blood as well. This is an excellent

demonstration of why lubrication in the matter of anal sex is never optional."

She sounded severe, and his master made an indignant chuffing sound.

"Tell that to Mikhail Dunaev!" he said.

"Oh, don't misunderstand me, sir. I quite realize that you yourself are not in the habit of such carelessness," said the doctor, taking her hands from Bran and bending down to rummage in her bag. "But one can never be too conscious of these things. With your permission, I'll clean the wound and apply the salve now. Please watch so you can do this for him yourself."

Something cold on his anus quickly turned into something that burned like fire. Bran gasped, more with surprise than pain-- it certainly hurt less than the original infliction of the damage-- and gritted his teeth as the whatever-it-was seared his tender area, then was followed by something cooling and soothing.

"That's a good boy," the doctor said, patting his bottom in a businesslike manner. "That's about it, ma'am. He's certainly underweight, and he has the usual symptoms of long-term stress-- tension combined with fatigue. It would probably do him good to sleep until morning. I can give him a mild tranquilizing shot if you like."

"Please," said his mistress. "I'm sure it will do him good to get some rest, and it's always hard to get to sleep, your first night in a new place." She patted Bran's head as the doctor swabbed his buttock with iodine.

"Remember *our* first night here?"

Bran was puzzled until his master's deep voice answered, "I don't remember *you* having much trouble getting to sleep."

Bran had had shots before; as they went, this one was not painful.

"I guess having a new owner is probably what's really unnerving," said his

mistress.

"Tell me, doctor," his master said, as Bran stifled a yawn, "would you describe this boy as being 'in perfect health'? I mean, if you were selling him at the moment?"

"Really, sir, not being in the habit of selling slaves, I am not quite competent to determine that."

"But what if I were selling him, and you'd just examined him, and I told you I intended to tell the next buyer he was in perfect health?"

"I would have to ask for a definition of perfect health to a slave owner, sir."

"But don't you think the word 'perfect' denotes a certain--"

"Let it go, darling," said the mistress sweetly. "Thank you, Dr. Carey. How much do we owe you?"

Bran didn't hear how much they owed her; he had drifted off into a sound and surprisingly peaceful sleep.

When he woke up, he was so ridiculously comfortable that only an urgent need to pee could have driven him to open his eyes. He was in a bed. He was actually lying in a bed, not by his master's side, as he had occasionally been allowed to do if he had pleased his master exceptionally well, but alone. And alone in the room, as well. And-- he tested carefully-- not chained or restrained in any way. A thrice-attempted runaway, his latest attempt only hours ago, and they'd put him to sleep alone and unchained. In a bed.

Who *were* these people?

Well, whoever they were, he had to pee, desperately. He climbed out of the

bed and checked under it for a chamber pot. Thank the gods, there was one; he peed gratefully and then climbed hurriedly back into the bed, pulling the covers (covers!) back up to his chin as he luxuriated in the soft mattress, the deep pillow, the smooth sheets, warm from his body, the sheer gorgeous sense of a space designated for him alone to rest in, no rough boots or elbows likely to nudge him awake and into instant service.

Bran lay there thinking about his master's voice above and behind him yesterday, talking about fear while he rubbed the tension out of Bran's muscles. *I don't want you afraid, Bran. Fear makes you stupid, and I don't want you stupid.*

Bran had never thought about it before, but it had the ring of truth; fear did make him feel stupid, thick with panic, unable to judge a situation. Fear would keep him from understanding his new household's rules, keep him blindly obeying what had been beaten into him by Dunaev and, before Dunaev, by Oreskovich. Fear would have kept him from the small gestures he had ventured so far that had delighted his master: kissing his knee, pushing his head against his master's hand; fear, he knew, blind, unreasoning fear, had made him try to run away yesterday, and his master was right that that was about the stupidest thing he'd ever done in his life.

I want you smart. Smart enough to know what side your bread's buttered on.

Was Bran smart enough for that?

He was certainly smart enough not to try to run from this house again, and not only because he believed he wouldn't succeed. There was nothing to run from here, at least not yet; there was certainly nothing better to run to elsewhere. He thought he was smart enough to notice and remember which things he did pleased and which displeased. That had to be a start.

He ran down the list so far. His master liked him to demonstrate affection, or pleasure. He'd liked it when Bran smiled. He'd liked having his cock sucked. He hadn't liked it-- obviously-- when Bran tried to escape, and he'd been

angry whenever Bran showed he was in pain, though that anger seemed more directed at Dunaev than Bran.

He said I was beautiful, Bran thought, thinking of his master's smile when looking at him. Yves had said the same thing-- *Sif, master, he's fucking gorgeous*. (Bran would have to find out whether he was allowed to sexually service Yves. He suspected it would make his life here easier if he were.) Bran lifted a hand, half consciously, to smooth back his tangled curls. If he was beautiful, that meant that just looking at him pleased his master. Dunaev had beaten him so often for this expression or that that Bran had learned to keep his face carefully hidden. But his new master-- *What a beauty you are*, Bran heard the man say in response to Bran's smile. And Bran hadn't smiled at him again all day. Stupid. Scared stupid.

The door opened, and Bran felt himself tense all over, his heart jumping into his throat, suddenly feeling a horrible certainty that he'd been put, or crawled, into this bed by mistake and was about to be punished within an inch of his life for it. He coached himself to breathe as his master came in, and started, clumsy again with the physical fear response, out of bed to kneel down on the floor, but, remembering what he'd just been thinking about, lifted his face to his master's instead of bowing it to the floor, trying not to let his fear show in his face.

His master smiled.

"Good morning, bright eyes," he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. Heart still pounding, Bran crawled to his master without a command and leaned his head against his knee, looking up again into his master's face for approval. His master smiled again and reached out to touch Bran's cheek with a gentle finger.

"Well, look at that," he said. "Less afraid this morning, are you?"

Bran smiled back, filled with relief that the gamble had paid off. "Yes, master."

"Gods, you've got a seriously great smile. I'm going to have to watch I don't spoil you rotten just to see it."

Bran's smile widened. What with the bath, the petting, the abundant and delicious food, the promise of no sex until he had healed, and the *bed*, he considered that it would be difficult to spoil him any more without making him a count of some small province.

"You seem awfully cheerful this morning," his master said, amused. "What's up?"

"I--" Bran hesitated for a moment, then plunged on. "I'm trying to-- figure out which side my bread's buttered on, master."

His master blinked at him for a second, then roared with laughter.

"You're not even a little stupid, are you, kid? Good. Really good. I wasn't sure, yesterday." He ruffled Bran's hair. "Not that I blame you for being scared witless, under the circumstances, but I'm glad to see you a little more lucid. Especially since I came in to talk to you about your place here, rules and so on. You ready to listen?"

"As it please my master," said Bran, looking up alertly into his master's clear brown eyes.

"Right, first things first. I told you yesterday that 'slave breakers' is a name other people've given us, not what we call ourselves. We call ourselves trainers. Trainers, and retrainers, because we work with new kids straight from their parents, and with slaves like you with such bad records that their masters can't sell them to anyone else."

Though his master's tone was not unkind, Bran dropped his gaze, feeling a sick sensation at the pit of his stomach at the words. His master leaned down and laid a gentle hand on his neck.

"With kids who have no previous record," he went on, "we just do a basic course, intro to slavery, what to expect, some sexual skills, pain tolerance, and if we've got a buyer with specialized interests we take care of that training as well. With delinquents-- that's you-- we work with the specific problem and try to fix it. Sometimes a slave isn't getting enough attention; sometimes he's getting too much, or the wrong kind, or can't tolerate sex, or punishment, or a certain kind of punishment. We can usually figure out what the problem is, and once we've figured it out, it's usually fixable. Then we do the same thing we do for the new kids: we look out for a good buyer, one who'll be a good fit, and we sell, at a considerable profit, due to the fact that we are very good at what we do."

Bran looked up apprehensively.

"What?" his master asked.

"It's just--" Bran swallowed. "You said 'usually.' What happens if you can't, uh, fix the problem?"

"You don't need to worry about that," said his master briskly. "You're doing fine. Now. The rules around here are fairly simple. Do as you're told. If you disobey a direct order from me or your mistress, you'll be punished. Behave with respect-- I don't think that's going to be much of an issue with you, honestly-- and no leaving the house without permission from me or your mistress. Not that you could, at the moment. So basically, do as you're told."

Bran smiled faintly. "Yes, master."

"Good. Just one more thing. It's confusing enough learning a new owner's preferences without having to learn two. Alix-- your mistress-- and I officially co-own you, and you will obey us both, but your service is to me. I'll be handling most of your retraining, and it's to me you should look when you have questions or needs. Clear?"

"Yes, master," said Bran readily. He had wondered where his mistress fit

into his new life, and was grateful for the clarification.

"Have you got any questions for me now?" his master asked, smiling at him.

Bran kept his eyes on his master's face again, half admiring the man's dark good looks-- if he hadn't been so old, forty or so, he would have been as pretty as a pleasure slave himself-- and half thinking hard. He knew better than to press the question of what would happen to him if it proved impossible to successfully retrain him; in any case, his master's unwillingness to answer told him enough in itself.

"You allowed me to offer my mouth to you yesterday, master," he said carefully. "May I always do so?"

"Yes. I might not always accept, but you may always offer. And that was good, yesterday. I'll teach you more about my preferences later, but you have a good instinct, a good touch. I enjoyed it."

Bran squirmed, pleased and embarrassed by the praise. "Thank you, master. I-- I hope my mouth will satisfy you until you can make use of me otherwise." It was an oblique apology for his damaged state, which had obviously displeased his master, though he didn't seem to blame Bran.

"Don't worry about that," his master said. "If I want to fuck, I've got other options. Not that I don't look forward to it." He winked at Bran, who grinned shyly up at him. "What else?"

"I was wondering, master, about my-- how I stand with Yves."

"He outranks you," said his master, "and you should treat him with respect. You don't have to obey him, though, not that he's likely to try to make you. And you don't need to be afraid of him. He likes you."

"Yes, master. I-- when it comes to sexual service--"

His master tilted his head slightly to one side, examining Bran intently. "You want to know if you can have sex with Yves?"

Bran felt himself blush. "I just-- I just wondered, master."

"As an appeasement tactic, is that it? Like with me, yesterday?"

Bran's blush deepened.

"No," said his master. "You and Yves both belong to me. If you enjoy each other, it will be on my orders, in my presence, for my pleasure. But no, you may not go around offering him favors that belong to me."

His voice was rather cool, and Bran, cursing himself for not knowing better, bowed his head in acceptance and apology.

"It's all right, Bran," the voice said above him, more gently. "I'm not angry at you for asking. It's a reasonable question. Look at me. Good boy." His master traced the line of his jaw with a delicate finger, continuing soothingly. "A lot of masters encourage their slaves to form their own sexual bonds, apart from the master. When I was-- I mean, I've seen elaborate ranking systems, hierarchies designed to let slaves explore power dynamics among themselves, and it-- seemed to work fine. But personally, I'm possessive as all hell, and it's better you know this about me now than after the fact. So it's good you asked."

Bran was not really reassured-- *possessive* sounded like a powder keg, and his brain was already busy manufacturing multiple nightmare scenarios where a careless spark struck in the wrong direction got him blown straight *to you don't need to worry about that*. To avoid showing his worry too clearly on his face, and to distract his master from whatever jealousy Bran had ignited, and because a master's orgasm seldom came amiss, especially in the mornings, Bran started to nuzzle his way between his master's thighs again.

"No," said his master again, putting a hand on Bran's forehead to stop him.

Bran swallowed hard, trying not to give way to panic at the rejection. Probably Yves had already serviced his master this morning. Probably it didn't mean his master was displeased with him. Probably.

"Stand up," said his master softly.

Bran rose promptly to his feet. His master did the same, and they stood face to face. They were nearly of a height, Bran perhaps an inch taller.

His master cupped a hand under his chin, leaned in and kissed him on the lips. Bran kissed back obediently, grateful for the gesture of affection, but the kiss went on, his master's mouth gentle but increasingly insistent on his, his hands slipping down Bran's body to grip him just under the arms. Bran was puzzled as he leaned pliantly into the touch; his master was behaving almost as if he wanted to use Bran sexually-- but if that was what he wanted, why had he just refused--? Teeth nipped softly at his lower lip as thumbs (accidentally?) grazed his nipples, and he breathed in sharply, trying instinctively to pull back as he felt his cock stirring with unexpected interest. His master made a soft, amused sound in the back of his throat and put his hands on Bran's hips, holding them in place as he pressed his own body closer, his erection pressing against Bran's through the thin layer of cloth that separated them, as the kiss deepened. Bran moaned involuntarily into his master's mouth.

His master broke the kiss lingeringly and kissed down the line of his neck; at a bite to the hollow of his throat, Bran's hips jerked against his master's pelvis, his cock now fully hard. His master turned them both around so that Bran's back was to the bed and, planting a firm hand between Bran's shoulders, laid him down on his back, still kissing his throat. Bran tried desperately to catch his breath and figure out what was happening as his master kissed down his chest; teeth caught at his nipple and he cried out, his hard cock grazed bewilderingly by soft cloth; his master pulled back for a moment, his eyes on Bran's face, but before Bran could begin to understand

his expression, his master's lips were around Bran's cock, sucking with an expert's skill, and the single conscious thought in Bran's mind was that he would never understand anything, ever again.

CHAPTER 4

In eighteen years of life and three of sexual slavery, Bran's cock had never been in anyone's mouth, let alone anyone who sucked it with more enthusiasm and expertise than Bran could have mustered himself. The sounds he found himself making sounded almost like sobs, as he fought hard to catch his breath, his master's tongue doing things that a tiny part of Bran's brain insisted conscientiously that he should be noting for his own future use. This suggestion was largely ignored, though, in favor of the more pressing issues of *what the fuck* and *oh dear sweet gods I'm going to come*.

And come he did, into his master's mouth, a sensation so... well... *sensational* that Bran barely had brain cells left over to notice the practiced ease with which his master swallowed.

An eager tongue lapped at the tip of Bran's softening cock before his master pulled back again and examined Bran's face, wiping his mouth unselfconsciously with the back of his hand, with a cat-that-ate-the-canary grin.

"Yeah? Was that good?" he said as if Bran had spoken instead of merely lying there, lips parted, flushed and sated and bewildered. Before Bran could muster a response, his master lay down beside him and pulled Bran easily into his arms, kissing his face. Bran moved instinctively into the embrace, nuzzling confidingly into his master's neck.

"Mmm," said his master appreciatively, and then, "For fuck's sake. 'Unresponsive.' Did Dunaev ever actually touch you?"

"He sure as hell never sucked my cock," Bran blurted out, and his master's laughter shook his whole body.

"No, I suppose not," he said finally. "Someone should explain to him that it's difficult for a slave to be responsive without anything to respond *to* except terrorist tactics. I'll make it a point to do that, as soon as my wife lets me

anywhere near the phone again."

Bran giggled, and his master pulled back slightly to look into his face with a smile of pure satisfaction.

"You're so lovely," he said softly. "You're not going to try to run away from me again, are you?"

"No, master," said Bran, very sincerely. His master kissed him quickly on the lips.

"Ask me one more question," he said. "Anything you want to know."

Bran took a deep breath.

"What's your name, master?" he asked quietly.

There was a pause, long enough for Bran to have panicked if his master hadn't still been cuddling him close, absently playing with the soft curled hairs at the nape of his neck.

"Holden," he said finally. "Holden Larssen."

Larssen? Bran considered this. It didn't sound like the surname of a noble, and his master hadn't appended "Lord," to the name. Bran supposed that made sense; his new owners were businesspeople-- professionals, like the doctor, who of course wouldn't be noble or have a noblewoman's name either. He wondered how they'd ever gotten into this strange business of theirs in the first place.

His master kissed him again.

"And my wife is Alix," he said. "Alix Jamesen. Jamesen and Larssen, Slave Training and Retraining, that's what it says on our card. Now let's get you

downstairs and get some food into this collection of restrung bones you're calling a body."

The breakfast table was set for five, and three were already seated: Bran's mistress Alix, Yves, and a pretty, rather plump red-haired woman a little younger than Yves, who smiled at Bran. Already self-conscious in the loose green tunic his master had dropped perfunctorily over his head before bringing him downstairs, Bran glanced at his master for a clue as to whether he was supposed to sit at the table. Holden nodded towards a chair, and Bran sat down in it, feeling awkward; he had never sat at the same table as his owners before.

"Good morning, Bran," said Alix, sounding amused. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, mistress," said Bran respectfully. "Thank you."

"This is Greta," Alix added. "I don't think you've met. She's mine."

Bran glanced up at the red-haired woman, who smiled at him again. She was very pretty, her skin fair and freckled, her hair still very red despite the tell-tale age lines at her eyes, and she wore a green tunic identical in color and style to Yves' and Bran's. Bran wondered how old she was.

A plain-faced young woman in black with nondescript hair came in from the kitchen, carrying plates of food.

"Fox," said Alix, "our newest acquisition, Bran."

"Bran," said the young woman, nodding to him as she set plates in front of Alix and Holden.

"Fox comes in twice a day to cook for us," said Alix. "We can make shift for ourselves, but nothing like what Fox can do."

Fox smiled but said nothing as she continued to serve. Bran wondered what she thought of her employers. She probably wasn't pretty enough to have been up for sale when she was fifteen, even if her parents were poor enough to need to sell her. She looked like the kind of quiet, unobtrusive girl who said little but took in a great deal. Bran imagined her sitting, prim and practically unnoticed in a boisterous gathering, and listening with private amusement to stories of the horrors that went on inside the house where she worked.

She set a plate down in front of him, and Bran, suddenly realizing how hungry he was, glanced at his master again, who nodded briefly. Bran began to eat, still awkward at handling the flatware.

"I assume you're going to want to stay in with him today," Alix said to her husband.

"Think I'd better. First full day and all. You're going over to Taganov's, right?"

"This morning. Then I need to go check on Kit."

"Who?" said Holden.

"You know. Will's little sister. You met her. She's fifteen next month."

"Oh, right," said Holden. "With the father."

"Yes. I'm trying to check in over there once or twice a week, make sure he remembers it's in his best financial interest to keep his hands off the girl for another three weeks. Asshole."

"Just don't get us up on kidnapping charges again," said Holden wryly.

Alix made the same "chuh" sound that her husband had made when the doctor had brought up unlubricated sex. "Kidnapping! The kid shows up on

our doorstep crying and bleeding, and it's kidnapping to let him in!"

"Well, you did knee the father in the balls when he showed up."

"That had nothing to do with kidnapping," said Alix indignantly. "Assault was a separate charge."

"Right," said Holden gravely. "My mistake."

Yves caught Bran's eye across the table and grinned. Bran choked on a mouthful of eggs and began coughing.

"You okay?" his master asked, patting him on the back. His eyes watering, Bran nodded.

"Do you want me to come with you, mistress?" Greta asked.

"If you want to. You could visit with Mona at Taganov's."

"I'd like that," said Greta. "I could do with getting out of the house."

"We'll leave the boys to it, then. And Yves, if you could get to the market sometime today, that would be great."

"Yes, mistress," said Yves readily.

Bran had already finished what was on his plate. Now Fox was at his elbow, removing his empty plate and replacing it with a full one. He looked up at her in surprise.

"Eat," said his master, catching the glance. "I'm serious about feeding you up. You heard the doctor say you were underweight."

Obediently, and not at all unwillingly, Bran attacked the second plate.

He enjoyed his breakfast, but when Holden led him back into the room with the padded table and the various implements, Bran swallowed, wishing he had eaten less.

"Don't freeze up on me again," said Holden, looking at him keenly. "I haven't hurt you yet, have I?"

Bran hesitated. Holden smiled slightly.

"Okay, so I might have hurt you a little when you tried to run. But you're not going to do that again, right?"

"No, master," said Bran quickly.

"This room scares you, I can tell," said Holden, sitting down on an ominous-looking bench and motioning to Bran to sit beside him. "Why is that?"

Bran sat gingerly down beside his master and considered the question.

"Because it looks like pretty much everything in here is designed to hurt, master," he said finally.

"But nothing in here can hurt you unless I make it," said Holden gently, "so it's really me you're afraid of, right?"

Bran nodded. "And of-- why you've brought me in here, master."

"What I did to you in here yesterday didn't hurt, did it?"

Bran smiled at the memory. "No, master."

"I can make pretty much anything in this room feel good to you, Bran," Holden said softly, and Bran shivered, looking up into his master's face. "And if I want to hurt you, I don't need one single one of these things to do it. So if you're afraid, what's the question you should ask yourself?"

"Do you want to hurt me?" Bran asked huskily.

His master smiled at him. "Good boy. We'll do fine."

CHAPTER 5

"Master?"

"Yes."

Bran had come to love the firm tone of that "Yes" in response to his respectful address. It wasn't a question, or even an invitation; it was an answer. Bran had been puzzled by the tone at first, and Holden had caught his hesitation, as he seemed to catch everything Bran did.

"Yes, you may speak," he said. "That's what you're asking, isn't it?"

That wasn't all there was to it, though, Bran had thought, then and since. The tone was not only decisive but strangely warm. *Yes, I like it when you call me that. Yes, you belong to me.*

Possessive as all hell. Bran had thought of his master's words often over the past two weeks, at a caress, a claiming kiss, an arm pulling him insistently closer. Bran had thought of possessiveness in association with a hair-trigger temper, storms of anger blaming Bran for someone else's appreciative gaze on him, but so far that hadn't been the danger of it at all.

"It's nothing personal," he whispered firmly to himself in his bed, which he was surprised to find himself thinking of as lonely, at night while his master slept curled around Alix or Yves or both plus Greta (Bran had the freedom of the house now, even at night, and one sleepless three o'clock had seen the four of them piled up in the master bedroom like a heap of contented puppies). "I'm his, that's all; that's how he feels about anything that's his. Once he sells me--"

But the last words produced a cold stab of fear, with the familiar sensation of constriction and inability to breathe. The next morning, when Holden came to wake him, Bran asked him about it. Holden was pleased with him.

"I wasn't sure if you were ready to talk about this," he said, "but I'm glad you brought it up. You're improving by leaps and bounds, and I'm going to be extremely proud to put you up for sale when the time comes. Not that I can really claim credit for your natural sweetness of disposition, but you wouldn't know it to hear Dunaev talk, so I'm going to rake in credit from my astonished clientele anyway. Are you worried about whom I'll sell you to?"

"Not really, master," said Bran honestly. "I know you won't sell me to anyone awful."

"Thanks for the confidence. Then what's worrying you?"

"I--" Bran hesitated, his mouth dry. "Forgive me, master, but I don't feel ready."

Holden laughed at him. "What, to be sold? You aren't, kid. Not by a long shot. This is only your second week!"

"How long will it take?" Bran asked, smiling a little.

"We'll see. Months, anyway." Holden reached out and ran a hand through Bran's hair. "I'm in no hurry."

Bran smiled gratefully at his master.

"And when it does come time," his master added, "you'll know it, because I'll talk to you about it, and if I think you're ready but you still don't feel like you are, we can talk about that. Nobody's going to drag you off kicking and screaming. Okay? You still look worried."

Bran swallowed. "What if I'm never ready?"

"That's not going to happen. Trust me. You're going to be one of Jamesen and Larssen's great success stories."

Bran smiled again, but he thought, *What if I'm ready but I still don't want to go?*

"Where are you going?" he asked now, watching his master pull on his boots.

"Out, kid," said Holden. "I've got a business to run." He looked thoughtfully up at Bran. "Want to come along?"

Bran smiled slightly, thinking his master was joking.

"You can if you want," said Holden. "I think you're about ready to leave the house, and you could make yourself useful."

"How?" Bran asked curiously, his heart beating a little faster at the thought of leaving his new home for the first time since he had arrived.

"I'm going to visit a man named Nikol Argounov," said Holden, sitting back down next to Bran. "He's an old-- friend, who helped us out a lot when we were first getting started in business. We don't need his financial support any more, of course, but he still takes an interest, and he's a good contact to have. He's also my daughter's godfather."

Bran sat up in surprise. "I didn't know you had a daughter."

"Yes, about your age. She's away at school. As I was saying, Nikol's invited me to meet a woman who wants to be added to our list of trusted buyers. If you come with me, you can help me size her up."

"Size her up?" Bran echoed, puzzled.

"People can look pretty different to a slave and to a slave owner," Holden said. "I'm not committing myself today-- this is just a social meeting-- so I wouldn't mind hearing what you think of her, later. If you're feeling up to it I can probably manage to leave you alone with her for a few minutes;

sometimes people's expressions change, then. I used to take Yves, but he's getting too old; it's obvious I adore him or I wouldn't still have him around, so they're careful."

"I'll come if you want me, master," said Bran shyly, both intimidated and excited by the prospect of what amounted to giving his master business advice.

"All right. Get dressed."

"Your boy is beautiful," said Lady Raskolnikova, looking down at Bran with frank interest. Bran moved instinctively a little closer to his master's legs.

"He is," agreed Lord Argounov. "Perhaps a little... skittish."

"He's had a hard time," said Holden. "But he's making great progress. You should have seen him when I first brought him home. Could hardly move for shaking. He's still shy, but some people like that."

"Oh, I do," said the young noblewoman eagerly. She was probably in her early twenties, Bran thought, and seemed anxious to impress Bran's master. "I think it's very sweet."

"I like a bit more fire," said Argounov, winking at Holden. "How long have you had him?"

"Just two weeks," said Holden shortly. "Lady Raskolnikova, I understand you may be interested in learning more about our business."

"Oh, please, call me Tonia. Yes, I'm very interested. I've only ever owned one slave, and I'm afraid it was an unfortunate experience for both of us. My husband said it would be more cost-effective to buy a girl straight from her parents, but I regret that now. The girl was... upset, I suppose, and difficult. Especially over-- well, when we did the, um, the sterilizing operation, she got very upset. I should have realized that an inexperienced mistress

shouldn't have an inexperienced slave... I wasn't very helpful to her, I'm afraid. My husband said I should discipline her better, but everything I tried just seemed to make things worse." Her voice was young and puzzled, her face sad. "And then, when I made up my mind I'd have to sell her to a friend, that upset her even more. Even when I told her my friend knew *much* more about how to deal with slaves than I did."

"What was her name?" Holden asked.

"Kira."

"Kira." Holden paused for a moment. "Is your friend Lady Brokova?"

"Good memory," said Argounov.

"I try. She's doing well, now, isn't she?"

"Very well," said Tonia, eager again, "so I can't have done too much damage, can I? And Lydia says that I just need a slave who's a bit more... educated."

"That's what we specialize in," said Holden. "But, Lady-- excuse me, Tonia-- my wife and I generally offer either quite young slaves, or ones with a history of behavioral issues. I'm not sure either one is quite what you're looking for. Why not just look around for an older, more experienced slave?"

"Oh, I am!" the young woman said quickly. "I am, that's what I'm doing. But--" She blushed. "Well, everyone who has a slave for sale wants to know if I'm, er, on your list."

Holden smiled. "Everyone? I rather doubt that."

"Everyone *nice*," said Tonia earnestly.

"And naturally you want to buy from someone nice," said Holden. "I see."

"And I'd never even *met* you. I mean, it's not that they *refused* to sell to me if I'm not-- you know-- but it's such an advantage, and I don't have many other advantages, so--"

"I understand," said Holden gently. "I'd like to oblige you, Tonia. Suppose you write to me and arrange a visit to my home where we can discuss your ideas and preferences more fully-- that is how we usually go about this."

"Oh, of course. Thank you, Mr. Larssen."

"My pleasure. And you might bring your husband. We do like to understand the *whole* situation."

"Of course," Tonia repeated, blushing again. "And I can meet your wife."

"She will be delighted," said Holden gravely.

The talk turned to social chatter, then, and Bran tuned out, leaning his head on his master's knee and watching the other two faces in the room. Tonia was reasonably pretty, in a round-faced, well-scrubbed way. Argounov was old, at least ten years older than Holden, with gray hair and a deeply lined face, and could not have been particularly handsome even in his prime; he smiled when he spoke, but his face in repose looked tired. Bran wondered how the two men knew each other at all, let alone well enough for Argounov to be godfather to Holden's daughter. Perhaps he would ask his master, later, if an opportunity presented itself.

"I should be getting back," his master said finally, stirring, and Bran lifted his head, "but before I go, Nikol, would you mind if I see Jer?"

"Of course," said Argounov, rising, and Holden rose with him. "Let me take you to him. Excuse me for a moment, my lady."

"Stay here," said Holden to Bran, who had started to get up to follow his master. "I won't be long."

Bran settled back as the two men left the room. Remembering what his master had said about leaving him alone with the noblewoman, he glanced up at her a little nervously.

Tonia sighed softly, then looked at Bran.

"Do you think he liked me?" she asked hopefully.

Bran tried not to laugh. "I think so, my lady."

"I hope so. He's very handsome, isn't he?"

"Yes, my lady," said Bran, grinning up at her.

"Not that that has anything to do with it," she added, suddenly prim. "I'm married, after all."

"Yes, my lady," said Bran, trying to stop grinning.

There was a silence, while he looked up at her pretty face under its childlike fringe of hair, and she seemed lost in thought.

"You like belonging to him?" she said finally, sounding wistful.

"Yes, my lady," said Bran sincerely.

"I'd like someone to like belonging to me."

Bran wasn't sure what to say to that.

"I'm sure anyone would, my lady," he ventured finally.

"Oh no. Not anyone. But someone might. I did *try*."

Another silence fell, this one only broken by the return of Lord Argounov and Bran's master. Holden looked tired and drawn, and motioned to Bran without smiling. Bran jumped quickly to his feet.

"Thank you," said Holden to Argounov. "And it was a pleasure to meet you, my lady. I look forward to hearing from you."

"Thank you," Tonia fluttered, as Holden bowed slightly to her and walked out, followed by Bran.

The first half of the drive home was silent; Bran stole sidelong glances at his master's face, but dared not interrupt his thoughts. At last Holden said, "So. What did you think of the little lady?"

"She seemed nice, master," said Bran, relieved that his master had emerged from what looked like a rather unpleasant reverie. "Very-- young."

"Very young," Holden agreed, smiling. "Maybe younger than some others her age. But nice, yes. So you wouldn't mind belonging to her?"

Bran was startled. His master glanced sharply at him when he hesitated.

"Um, I guess it could be worse?" said Bran cautiously.

"I'm not actually going to sell you to her, idiot," said his master affectionately. "You really don't like the idea of being sold, do you?"

Bran wasn't sure how to answer, but his master didn't seem to expect it, and neither spoke again for the rest of the drive home.

"How's Nikol?" Alix asked at dinner that evening.

"Fine," said Holden.

"Did you see Jer?"

"Yeah."

"How is he?"

"About like usual," said Holden, unsmiling.

Alix changed the subject.

After dinner, as on most evenings, the five of them sat in what Bran's mistress called the lounge. It was a quiet time. Alix sat at her desk, sorting through the day's mail. Greta nestled comfortably in a soft chair with knitting in her lap. Holden and Yves were seated at a low table, playing a game that looked like chess, but appeared to have different rules, or at least different stakes, judging from the tragic whimpers from Yves and unholy chuckles from Holden whenever Holden made a move, and the almost unnerving intensity with which Yves considered his own moves. Bran curled in an unobtrusive corner of the sofa; his first night he had sat there frozen, trying to watch everyone at once to figure out what direction the danger would come from, but tonight he was content to sit, ignored, and watch the changing expressions on his master's face.

"Letter from Val, darling," said Alix, offering it to Greta. Greta snatched it with pleasure, broke the seal and began to read as Alix went back to her desk to tackle the rest of the mail.

Interested (a letter to a slave?) but not quite bold enough to ask, Bran shifted his focus to Greta and was the first one to see the transformation in her placid face as she read. She went very white, so that her freckles stood out

startlingly against her chalky skin. Her eyes filled with tears and went red around the rims, her mouth looked red, and there were pink blotches on her cheeks and nose as the tears spilled down her cheeks, her face still impassive but for its colors.

Holden was the second to notice.

"Greta?" he said, getting to his feet in alarm. "What's wrong? Is something wrong with Val?"

Greta shook her head, swallowing a sob, then nodded. Holden strode to her, grabbed the letter from her hand and began rapidly scanning it. His face changed too as he read it, first slackening with shock, then hardening with grim rage. Bran felt an upsurge of unpleasantly familiar terror; he had not seen that look on Holden's face before, but he had seen it many times on Dunaev's.

"Holden," said Alix, starting up from her desk. "What's wrong? Is Val-- what's wrong?"

Holden handed the letter back to Greta with a controlled gesture.

"Seems the Marmeladov boy thinks he's too good for Val," he said tightly. "He told her they can't ever get married-- because he's the son of a noble and she's--"

He turned and with a sudden violent gesture sent the chess table flying across the room, pieces scattering everywhere. There were a heart-stopping few moments of silence, except for the chess pieces rolling to a halt on the hard floor.

"If he's that much of a prick, it's better she knows it now," said Alix calmly. "Anyway, she's got no business getting engaged yet. She's only seventeen."

"That's not the point," said Holden, turning on his wife with a ferocious

suddenness that nearly sent Bran diving to the floor as a matter of old habit. He made himself as small as possible in the sofa corner instead.

"Master," said Yves quietly, "you're scaring Bran."

Holden turned and looked at him, his face still hard and angry. Bran bowed his head submissively, his heart racing.

"Take him upstairs," said his master shortly.

Yves got up, came to Bran and held out his hand. Bran took it nervously, and Yves led him from the room, pausing on the way to grab the letter from Greta's slackened, unprotesting hold. Bran followed him up the stairs, and into Bran's own bedroom, where Yves sat down heavily on the bed and started reading the letter.

"Oh, that melodramatic little bitch," he said, half under his breath. "She knows just what buttons to push."

"Who?" Bran asked, shivering. "What's going on?"

"His daughter," said Yves, still reading. "Miss Valor."

"I don't understand," said Bran, feeling his voice go slightly higher with frustration. "The letter's from his daughter? Why was Greta reading it?"

Yves looked up at Bran, distracted. "Greta's her mother."

Bran blinked. "*What?*"

"Yeah."

"But--" Bran tried to make sense of this. "I thought--"

"All slaves were sterilized?" said Yves wearily, as if he'd had this

conversation too many times before. "Yes, well, sometimes-- when done by a doctor less competent than Dr. Carey-- the operation doesn't work. Not often, but it happens. Greta got pregnant when she was sixteen. It was just a couple of months after I came here."

"Pregnant by-- the master?"

Yves grimaced slightly. "Apparently."

"But why didn't she just have an abortion?"

"She didn't want to," said Yves.

"And they let *her* decide?"

"The mistress was madly in love with her, even then. Anyway, they kind of liked the idea of having a child. They knew they couldn't have their own, so- - It's worked out okay, except now apparently Val's little blue-blood boyfriend at that school they sent her to has dumped her because of her, uh, humble origins, and she's written to her mother all about how she's so miserable and will never fit in and wishes she'd never been born, which of course is exactly what her parents have worried about her entire life and she knows it, too, the little brat."

While Bran sat, head spinning, trying to take all this in, Yves looked up from the letter at the half-open door, a moment before Holden appeared in the doorway, his jaw set. Yves stood up.

"Need me?" he asked his master quietly.

"Yes," said Holden.

Yves went to him. Holden took him by the arm and started to close the door.

"Master?" Bran blurted, not knowing what he wanted to say.

"Not now," said Holden, and the door clicked softly to.

CHAPTER 6

The next time Bran woke, it was light out, and Yves was shaking his shoulder.

"Rise and shine, you lazy little punk," he said cheerfully. Bran sat up, startled, and examined Yves. He looked tired, and there was a pale bruise on his face, but he smiled at Bran.

"Come on," he said. "Time for breakfast."

"I'm coming," said Bran, getting out of bed. "Are you, um, okay?"

"Yeah, just sore as fuck," said Yves. "I got worked over last night. You can thank me later, when you see what a good mood the master's in this morning."

"What did he do to you?" Bran asked, horrified.

"Mostly just a good solid flogging. And this." Yves touched the bruise.

"But you hadn't done anything wrong!"

"Nobody said I had. Sometimes the master just needs to get his tensions out."

"But he's never hit *me*," said Bran, bewildered but insistent. "Not once. Not even with his hand."

"After just two weeks away from Dunaev? I should think not." Yves patted Bran on the back and handed him his clothes. "Pain's a funny thing, Bran. Like a catalyst. You know what a catalyst is?"

"No," said Bran, pulling his clothes on with unnecessary violence.

"Yeah, Dunaev probably wasn't much on spare time and access to a library. A catalyst is something that-- you could say it helps something else happen. Dunaev probably used it as a catalyst for your being scared out of your wits, since it seems like that was your ideal state as far as he was concerned. But it can catalyze other things. It can be... cathartic."

"Sorry," said Bran shortly. "Another big word I'm too dumb for."

"You're not dumb," said Yves automatically, then peered at Bran. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," said Bran. "I'm hungry. Let's go eat."

"Fine," said Yves after a moment, still looking at Bran curiously. Bran looked away.

"Bran," said his master after breakfast, "you're glaring at me."

Kneeling at his master's feet, Bran lowered his eyes to the floor. "I beg your pardon, master."

"That's all right," said Holden, sounding amused. "It didn't hurt. But what's going on? I've never seen you look so-- resentful."

They were in the same room where Bran's master had taken him after breakfast nearly every day since his arrival. They called it the training room, Bran had learned. He had gradually lost his nervousness at being surrounded by so many ominous structures and implements, since his master never used any of them to hurt. Bran wondered if this was where his master had brought Yves last night.

"Bran?"

Bran kept his eyes stubbornly on the floor. "Forgive me for contradicting you, master, but I'm not resentful."

"In my entire career you are truly the worst liar I've seen," said Holden amiably. "Most slaves are professional liars by the time they're your age. You must have a hell of a natural ineptitude. Come on, Bran, talk to me. Did Yves say something to upset you this morning?"

"No, master."

"What did he say?"

"I said no, master."

"You're lying."

Bran said nothing.

"Bran, are you trying to get me to punish you?"

"No, master," said Bran, his heart constricting sharply.

"I've never punished you yet," said Holden thoughtfully. "I haven't needed to. You're a good kid. But if you're going to get belligerent on me, maybe it's time."

"Please, master," Bran said desperately, looking up into his master's face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to displease you. Please forgive me. I beg you."

"Hey," said Holden with unexpected pleasure, leaning down to caress Bran's hair. Bran swallowed and tried to focus on the touch. "Look at you. You're looking at me, you're talking to me, you're afraid of me. Me, not Dunaev. This is real progress, kiddo. I'm proud of you." His fist tightened in Bran's hair. "Now stop fucking lying to me."

"I'm not lying, master," Bran whispered. "I swear."

His master stared into his face for what seemed like hours before he dropped Bran's hair and sat back, still examining Bran thoughtfully.

"Stay here," he said finally, stood up and left the room.

Bran knelt, breathing deeply, wanting to run.

No, for fuck's sake, he *didn't* want to run. Running was *stupid*. He'd get nowhere, and he'd be back at square one-- if not worse-- when it came to pleasing his master. No, definitely worse. Because he should know better by now. He did know better.

He still wanted to run, wanted it so badly that it was a strain to stay still. But he wasn't going to. He was going to kneel here and wait for his master to come back and do whatever he was going to do.

Bran didn't even know why he was so scared. It wasn't like he hadn't been through worse. He'd survived two masters whose idea of a good time he didn't like to remember, weathered their pleasures and their rages for three years, and now that he'd gone two weeks without so much as a slap, here he was cringing like a fifteen-year-old at the prospect of being punished again. Holden wasn't a brutal man; if he did punish Bran it wouldn't kill him.

Maybe it was because he didn't even know what the punishment would be *for*, exactly. Not that that was new, either. But it was new from Holden. Bran had been confused by his new master before, but explanations had always been forthcoming. Now Holden was acting as if Bran already knew something-- and he definitely didn't. He *wasn't* resentful. And he *hadn't* been glaring. And Yves *hadn't* said anything to upset him. Not really.

Bran sighed and shifted his weight restlessly. *Okay, maybe now I'm a little resentful.*

"Just get it over with," he whispered under his breath, but nothing happened. It occurred to him that Holden had probably gone to ask Yves about their conversation this morning. Bran laid his head on the bench where his master had been sitting and thought about Yves' bruise, trying to imagine Holden inflicting it, Yves' head snapping back with the force of the blow-- not too hard, the mark wasn't that dark, not a real punch, just a smack, across the face. Yves' expression, turning his head back to his master. Like his expression this morning. So fucking-- okay. Not scared, not angry, just...

Do you need me?

Yes.

Smiling.

Smug.

"Oh come *on*," Bran said aloud to himself.

Was he *jealous* of Yves? That was ridiculous. Bran knew what a flogging felt like, and he wasn't likely to volunteer for the receiving end of one, no matter what Yves said about cat- whatever. If that was how Yves got off, he was welcome to it. Bran was just lucky someone else was around for when his master needed--

--me?

Yes.

Bran sat back and drew up his knees under his chin, wrapping his arms around them and closing his eyes.

He *was* jealous. Not of the pain, but of the need. Holden didn't need Bran. Enjoyed him, sure-- Bran knew that. Even liked him. But he wouldn't hesitate to sell Bran when the time came; he'd made that clear.

Well, what was so awful about that? He'd sell him to someone nice, a good fit, and Bran would figure out how to be good enough to make his new master look at him the way Holden looked at Yves, and everyone would live happily ever after. No problem. No reason to start crying. No reason, *for fuck's sake, Bran*, at all.

But he was still crying when Holden came back in, silently sat down on the floor beside him and put an arm around him, and he cried for a while longer after that, with his master's arm warm and solid around his shoulders, and when he was finished crying, Holden leaned over and kissed his cheek softly.

"I know it's hard," he said. "Making the transition. I know how hard it is, Bran."

How the hell would you know? Bran thought bitterly, but he said nothing, only leaned his head on his master's shoulder, and was held. They sat in silence for a while longer. It was strange to be held when he was tired out from crying, strange and good and warm. Bran wondered vaguely if he were still going to be punished. Finally his master stirred.

"Your mistress and I are going out to dinner tonight," he said, "to the home of the lady who owns Greta's brother."

"Greta has a brother?" Bran asked thickly, and cleared his throat.

"A twin, in fact. Though they're not very alike. But they're fairly close, and Irina and Alix like to give them a chance to visit. So it will just be you and Yves left here tonight. Might be a good opportunity for you two to talk about... anything you have to talk about."

"Yes, master," said Bran, feeling annoyance flare again for a moment at the mention of Yves. Gods, he had to get that under control, and fast. Never mind all this emotional stuff; the plain fact was that making Yves an enemy

could get him killed. "I'll talk to him."

But when it was just Yves and Bran in the house, Bran, finding his imagination strangely possessed by Yves' bruise, and by the occasional slight wince when he moved, could think of nothing to say to him, before or during the meal they ate in wary silence in the kitchen, and after eating, went upstairs to avoid him. He lay down on his bed, wondering if Yves' back was striped under the tunic or an even sunburn red, imagining what had gone on last night between them after the door had closed on Bran, while Greta probably cried a little in Alix's arms. Yves would have cried out (or not?) and been strapped down (or not?) and he'd probably gotten fucked; masters liked to fuck a well-heated ass in Bran's experience. Had Holden kissed Yves' lips, his marks, had Yves smiled as he cried out under the leather, his master's cock opening him, hands digging into his welts, the pain *catalyzing*- what?

"Bran?" Yves called from downstairs.

Startled, Bran realized with some surprise that his cock was hard. He blushed, though there was no one to see, and smoothed his tunic self-consciously over his knees before getting up and going to the head of the stairs.

"Come down here and sit with me," said Yves. "I made coffee."

"Slaves can't have coffee," said Bran, unable to control the irritation in his voice. Was Yves so adored by his master that he'd completely forgotten the rules by which other slaves lived? "It stains your teeth and-- does something to your circulatory system."

"I got permission. For both of us. Come on, Bran. Don't be angry with me."

It was nice of him not to say "Don't make an ass of yourself" in so many

words, Bran thought, and came a little sheepishly down the stairs. Yves smiled kindly at him. Bran saw himself suddenly through Yves' eyes: an attractive but sullen child, with a childish crush on the man who'd rescued him from danger of death, and an equally childish resentment of Yves for being the one their master loved. He smiled back at Yves, his jaw hurting.

Bran's first cup of coffee was bitter but comfortingly warm, his second strangely enjoyable in its pungence. He didn't notice the effects of the caffeine until the sound of the front door opening nearly made him jump out of his skin.

"Mom?" called a girl's voice.

"Oh, great," said Yves under his breath.

A moment later the voice's owner, a tall dark-haired girl of about Bran's own age, hurried into the kitchen and stopped short. "Oh. Hi, Yves. Hi-- I don't know you."

"This is Bran," said Yves, rising. "What are you doing home, Miss Valor? I thought the term wasn't over for another two weeks."

"It isn't," she said, and came plunging across the room with a long-legged, faintly awkward gait to fling her arms around Yves and kiss him passionately on the lips. He winced slightly, kissing her back without surprise.

"What's wrong?" she demanded, pulling back and furrowing her brow at Yves' bruised face. She was tall, angular, and dressed in a plain traveling suit. Bran thought he could detect a resemblance to Greta in the green eyes and high cheekbones, but this girl was thinner and harder-looking, with a pronounced nose and rather severe eyebrows, and her skin was sallow, not creamy and freckled like Greta's. The dark hair must have been Holden's contribution, though otherwise Bran saw little resemblance. "Are you hurt? Did my dad beat you?"

"Yes, Miss Valor," said Yves in a voice unmistakably tinged with irritation. Bran bit his lip involuntarily as Valor frowned, not sure what would happen if the young mistress took umbrage at Yves' tone, but she only said, "Let me see."

Yves turned around, and Valor took hold of his tunic, pushing it up to display a welted back. Bran swallowed hard. Valor sighed.

"Poor Yves," she said, reaching out to touch the angry stripes with one careful finger. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, Miss Valor," said Yves again, looking marginally less annoyed, as she let his tunic fall and turned him around. "Thank you."

"He wasn't mad at you, was he?" Valor asked, worried, and Yves smiled a little.

"Your letter came last night," he said, and Valor's eyes widened before she dropped dramatically backwards into a fortunately located kitchen chair and buried her face in her arms.

"God damn the post office," she said, muffled. "I thought for sure I'd get here first." She lifted her head, looking worriedly up at Yves. "I'm sorry, Yves-- I wasn't doing well that night, I regretted it as soon as I mailed it-- do you hate me?"

"It's hardly the first beating I've gotten on your account," said Yves dryly, but when Valor covered her face again, he stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm fine, Miss Valor."

"How fine?" she asked, looking up again winsomely. Two dimples appeared in her cheeks, enhancing her resemblance to Greta. "Because I haven't had sex since I wrote that letter."

Yves shook his head at her. "You'll have to ask your father, you know that."

She flung one arm out and wrapped it around his waist, pulling him closer and burying her face against his stomach instead, and he smiled again, bringing a hand up to stroke her dark hair and looking down at her with fond exasperation.

"Where *are* my mom and dad?" she asked, her forehead still pressed to Yves' belly.

"Out to dinner with Lady Galenova and your uncle," said Yves. "May I get you something to eat?"

"I'm fine. I ate on the train. When will they be home?"

"I'm not sure," said Yves, "but it shouldn't be too long now. Bran and I were just having coffee." He didn't explicitly offer Valor a cup, which was something of a relief to Bran; considering the effect the caffeine was having on his own nerves, he didn't think he'd like to see what it would do to Valor.

"Oh, yeah," said Valor, lifting her head and looking at Bran for the first time with a frankly appraising gaze. "Hi, Bran. Gosh, he's adorable. Is he a delinquent?"

"Yes," said Yves. "And no, you may not have sex with him, at least not without your father's permission."

"I know that," said Valor indignantly. "But I bet Dad's thrilled. You are *so* his type," she told Bran, who blushed so hotly he thought his face might combust, not daring to look at Yves. "Any girls in the house right now?"

"No, Miss Valor," said Yves rather flatly.

"I'm *inundated* with stupid snob girls at school. Lisa's the only sensible one in the lot. Well, Gordon's sister has been really decent to me. But then, I

thought Gordon was really decent too, until lately. So what did you do? Brian?"

Bran cleared his throat, not quite daring to correct her on the point of his name. "Miss?"

"Why are you a delinquent?" she clarified.

Bran looked down. "I tried to run away, Miss. Twice-- three times."

Valor *tsked*. "And how's the retraining going?"

Before Bran could answer, they heard the front door open, and Valor leaped up as if a starting pistol had been fired and galloped from the kitchen. Rolling his eyes a little, Yves followed, and after a moment, so did Bran, hanging back just far enough to watch Holden, Alix, and Greta staring at Valor in surprise and a little alarm-- not that he blamed them.

"What are you doing here?" Holden demanded as Valor hugged her mother so hard she nearly lifted the shorter woman off the floor. "Don't tell me you've run off from school over that Marmeladov whelp. I won't have you ruining your future for calf love, young lady."

"Nice to see you, too, Dad," said Valor, and released Greta only to grab her by the shoulders. "Mom, listen, I'm sorry about that letter, I was upset, I didn't mean all that stuff I said. Gordon's a jerk, that's all. If he can't accept that I've got the best mom in the world, then fuck him!"

"Val," said Greta, pink but smiling. "Language."

Valor giggled, the dimples in her cheeks mirroring her mother's. "Sorry. Um. Nuts to him. How's Uncle Kai? Hi, Alix!"

"Hello, darling," said Alix with perfect equanimity.

"So you came home to tell us you didn't mean what you wrote in your letter?" Holden asked suspiciously. "Why didn't you just write again?"

"I was hoping to get here before it did so I could destroy it before you ever saw it," said Valor frankly. "You shouldn't have hurt Yves, Dad. I hate it when you do that because of me."

"Then you should think before you mail things," said Holden, looking up at Yves, who came forward and stepped unselfconsciously into the crook of his master's arm. Holden drew him closer, his arm resting lightly against Yves' back, and touched his lips to the bruise on Yves' cheek before kissing him softly on the mouth; Yves leaned into him, kissing back, in a moment that felt too intimate for Bran to have witnessed.

"Aw, aren't they sweet?" said Valor as the kiss ended. "Anyway, that's not the only reason I came home. Classes were over yesterday and exams aren't for another week and the ruckus in the dormitories you would not believe. I wanted a quiet place to study." She kicked a suitcase that had been dropped to the floor just inside the door; it didn't budge. "See? I brought home a million books. Plus--" She looked up at her father with an ingratiating, dimpled grin. "I thought it might speed the grieving process over Gordon if I could spend some time with Yves. He's a much better lover, anyway."

"I hate to break this to you, daughter," said Holden, still clasping Yves close, "but Yves is a better lover than anyone you will ever manage to have sex with without my explicit permission. You'll probably never marry; we spoiled you. Set your standards too high."

"Well," said Valor brightly, "you could give Yves to me for my graduation present like I asked."

Startled, Bran's eyes flicked to Yves' face, but he had turned it against his master's neck and Bran couldn't read the expression as Holden said amiably, "When pigs fly, young lady. Yves is *mine*-- and you haven't demonstrated that you're responsible enough to own *any* slave yet."

"Half the kids at school already--" Valor began indignantly.

"Half the kids at school aren't you," Alix interrupted calmly, "and their parents have different ideas about what constitutes responsible slave-owning."

Valor sent a quick, odd glance at Greta, and said, though grumpily, "Fine. Can I at least have Yves for tonight?"

Holden turned Yves' face towards his own with an inquiring look. The smile Yves gave him must have been satisfactory; he kissed Yves again, quickly, and let his arm fall from around the younger man.

"All right," he said to Valor. "But be *gentle*."

"I know, I know," said Valor, grabbing Yves' hand without any particular gentleness and hustling him up the stairs behind her.

CHAPTER 7

Bran stood with his back against the wall, half hoping to escape notice. Holden closed his eyes for a moment as his daughter disappeared up the stairs, then opened them and saw Bran.

"Bran," he started.

"No, no," Alix interrupted. "You're tired. Leave the boy. Come to bed."

Holden turned to her, smiling. "Will you soothe my fevered brow?"

"Don't I always?" Alix kissed her husband quickly on the corner of his mouth. "Kiss me, Greta. Are you staying up?"

"For awhile, I think, mistress," said Greta. "I'm not tired."

"Well, don't sit up too late. You know Val will want to drag you somewhere in the morning and tell you all her troubles, and you don't want to be yawning your head off. Spoils the illusion of maternal interest."

Greta smiled. "I won't."

"Make Bran go to bed at a reasonable hour, too," said Holden over his shoulder as Alix started up the stairs with her arm firmly laced through his.

Bran had never felt less tired in his life; caffeine still zinging through him, he looked at Greta.

"Come on," she said. "Keep me company. I'll make us something hot to drink."

"There's coffee," said Bran.

"Mmm. Bad idea. I'll heat up some milk."

"Already going into mommy mode?" Bran asked without thinking, then bit his tongue. *Yeah, coffee was a bad idea.*

Greta laughed. "Right. I could use a dress rehearsal before I try to talk to my daughter. Come on."

Sitting at the kitchen table with Greta was easier than sitting there with Yves, whether because Bran wasn't under orders to talk to her or because she didn't seem particularly curious about Bran's own mood. Or because Bran wasn't jealous of her, he thought moodily as she sipped her milk, looking lost in thought that had nothing to do with Bran.

"The master looked tired," he said, not particularly interested in getting lost in his own thoughts at the moment. "I mean, even aside from the whole daughter thing." The coffee had loosened his tongue, he knew, but he wasn't worried about Greta; she was quiet and always had a gentle smile for Bran, and as far as he could tell she hardly ever even spoke to his master. Bran still hadn't entirely adjusted to the shock of learning they had a mutual daughter.

"He and my brother had a fight at dinner," said Greta. Bran thought she looked grateful to be recalled from thought herself.

"A fight?" Bran tried to imagine a slave fighting with a noble, even one who didn't directly own him. Bran himself had once yelled "Stop" at one of Dunaev's friends, but he didn't really think that counted.

"Well, not really a fight. They just don't get on." Greta sighed. "They never have."

"How well do they know each other?" A thought struck Bran. "Your brother's a twin, is that right? Were you sold off at the same time?"

"Yes. We really gave Alix her start." Greta smiled. "I mean, the mistress. I called her Alix back then. She and I talked sometimes at the market when I was a kid-- she was twenty or so, which seemed ancient to me at fourteen, and she was sort of like the big sister I never had, you know, asking me about my life and about Kai-- that's my brother. Kai and I were very, very close, back then. Well-- I guess she got to feel a bit protective of me. Then my fifteenth birthday was coming up, and I had to tell her I wouldn't be coming to the market any more. She was so kind and worried that I cried a bit, because I knew they'd separate me and Kai-- we didn't look enough alike to get sold as a set-- and I was scared. She didn't say much, just hugged me and told me to be brave and it would be okay. I didn't know what she was talking about. I had no idea she had the kind of money lying around that it would take to buy both of us."

"Why did she?" Bran asked. He had never talked this much to Greta.

"Where'd she get it? I mean, she's not noble, is she?"

"No. And she really *couldn't* afford it, not properly. She had some money in the bank and was living on the interest, but she had to take out about half her capital to get me and Kai. The master was furious. This was before they were married, though, so he didn't really get a say."

"And then they got married? And he and Kai didn't-- and is that why they sold him?" Bran didn't know exactly why the thought chilled him. Such things happened all the time; people got married and rearranged their households. But if Alix had spent money she couldn't afford to keep the siblings from being separated, and then sold Kai anyway-- because she got married? What did that say about Holden, exactly?

"Not exactly," said Greta, looking curiously at Bran, who tried to look calmly interested. "They got engaged about a year later. Kai didn't take it well. I didn't either, to be honest. The master's mellowed out a lot now, but back then he was-- you didn't want to belong to him."

"Really?" Bran asked. "Why?"

"Oh-- he was just sort of-- impatient, I guess. And possessive. He's still possessive, but-- he didn't like me; he was jealous of how much Alix-- the mistress loved me. He said she spoiled me. I suppose she did. When I first came here I was-- quite inexperienced, I'd sort of spent my whole life wrapped up in Kai, and I'd never been with a woman, and I was-- shy. So she didn't touch me, and she wouldn't let him touch me either, until I was ready, and he raved at her about how I was keeping her fascinated and playing her like a fish and--" She gave a deprecating little laugh.

"He must have been really insecure," said Bran, trying to imagine it.

"Well, yes, I think so," said Greta with an odd little smile. "Kai hated him. When the mistress told us they were engaged, he begged her to sell us before she married him. She'd agreed that if she ever sold us it would be to someone who wanted us both. And Lady Galenova *would* have bought us both, but I-- I didn't want to go. I was happy here, despite-- and I adored her, and I thought things would be okay once they were married. As soon as she told me-- I went to him and offered to sleep with him. I knew I had to-- surrender, to satisfy him. I thought it would satisfy him, to know I accepted him as my master."

"Did it?" Bran asked.

"No. But it did get better. Especially after she bought him Yves. It took a bit of pressure off. But he still fucked me like he was planting a flag." She took a deep draught of milk. "When I got pregnant, I thought he was going to kill me."

"But why?" Bran asked. "He'd know it was his, right?"

Greta shook her head. "He'd know it couldn't be."

Something clicked gently into place. Bran's mouth opened.

"He was a slave," said Bran, stunned. "*Her* slave. Before she married him. Wasn't he?"

Greta smiled patiently at him. "Yes."

"I can't believe I didn't figure it out before. He was jealous of you because--"

"I was a better slave than he was," said Greta, grinning a little. "I was very sweet and shy and gentle. He was headstrong and needy and temperamental. She still loved him best, of course, but even after she married him he couldn't stop thinking of me as a threat. And when I got pregnant, well. It wasn't his. Couldn't be. He was sterile."

"Yeah... But so were you, right? I mean--"

"Oh, I suppose there was the remote possibility that his surgery had somehow been botched as well. But it wasn't. I was sixteen, and lonely, and stupid, and how was I supposed to know I would get pregnant?"

"You were *cheating* on them?" Bran gasped.

"I was their very first delinquent," said Greta solemnly. "They hadn't quite gotten the hang of it with me, though, so instead of fixing me for resale or-- anything else-- they just kept me. They've wised up now, though, so don't get any ideas."

Her tone was light, but Bran didn't bother to smile.

"Gods, I was so scared when I found out," said Greta, folding her hands around her cup as if for warmth. "I was trying to work up my nerve to kill myself before they figured it out-- I thought that would be better than waiting for them to kill me. That happened a lot more back then-- masters killing slaves, I mean, when they'd done something to ruin their resale value. Nowadays they know it's more cost-effective to sell them to the slave breakers, and there are so many nightmare stories circulating about what

happens here that it's got about the same deterrent effect."

She winked at Bran, who was privately thinking that he'd never be stupid enough to sleep with someone without his master's consent. And he wasn't even a *girl*. Sterility or not...!

"Uh-huh," he said.

Greta's eyebrows went up. "Oh, I guess you've never done anything stupid, runaway."

Bran looked down quickly. "Sorry, I didn't mean--"

"You should learn to control your expressions," said Greta coolly. "Saves a lot of trouble."

"He keeps telling me that," Bran admitted, looking back up. "He said, hasn't that gotten you into trouble before? But I never had anybody who wanted to look at my face, much."

"Really? A pretty kid like you?"

Bran blushed. "I guess." *And he keeps telling me that, too.*

"Anyway," said Greta. "He figured it out before she did. I guess he's more naturally suspicious. He came to me and asked me about it-- not angrily-- just, 'You're pregnant, aren't you?' and I fainted, which pretty much confirmed his suspicions-- but when I came around he just told me quite gently to pull myself together and we'd talk to Alix and figure out what to do. So that's what we did."

"And what *happened*?" Bran demanded. "Why did he-- what, did he *adopt* her?"

"No. He's officially her father," said Greta. "It was easier, legally. I don't

know, Bran. I think just the fact that I'd fucked up so badly made him like me a little better. It was Little Miss Perfect Slave he hated and was jealous of. I don't know. I was hysterical and begging for my life and the life of my baby, and Alix was crying and blaming herself for not paying more attention to me and not having noticed something was wrong, and he was just-- calm. He just said, 'Look, we can sort this out.' And it turned out we could."

She smiled at Bran again. "I wasn't entirely joking when I said I was their first delinquent. I think that's what gave her the idea. She bought me and Kai on a whim because we were afraid to be separated, and then a year later Kai was okay with being sold off without me, and now he's perfectly content with Lady Galenova, who adores him. And then I fucked up and did something that most masters at the time would have killed me for, and they worked it out so everyone was happy, and I think she just thought, what a waste, so many kids who could be just fine if only someone reasonable took charge and showed them the ropes. And she had him, and when she saw how good he was in a crisis-- so he does the delinquents, mostly, and she does the new kids, and here we are today. And here *you* are, runaway, sentenced to the horrible fate of staying up late listening to an old woman's prattle."

"How old *are* you?" Bran asked. It was the only thing he could think to say.

"Almost thirty-four," said Greta absently, looking at Bran. "You really like him, don't you?"

Bran looked down again. "What?"

"Suddenly looking away isn't really a substitute for controlling your face," said Greta, amused. "It's a dead giveaway, actually. Does he know?"

"Probably," said Bran, suddenly feeling very tired. "He seems to know most things."

They sat without speaking for a few minutes.

"Can I go to bed?" Bran asked finally.

"You don't need *my* permission," said Greta. "In fact, you should hurry before I get in trouble for keeping you up all night telling you my life story."

"No-- thanks," said Bran, getting up. "It was interesting."

Greta smiled at him. "You're a sweet kid."

Bran smiled back dutifully, then paused on his way out. "Greta? What did he and Kai fight about, tonight?"

"Valor," said Greta. "It's usually Valor. I don't think Kai will ever forgive Holden for getting me pregnant. And not insisting on a nice, safe, early abortion."

"But he didn't," said Bran, puzzled. "Get you pregnant, I mean."

"I'm not sure either of them remembers that at this point," said Greta dryly. "Go to bed, runaway. We've both got people to deal with in the morning."

CHAPTER 8

Bran dreamed that night that Valor came into his room, naked and with her belly grotesquely swollen, and demanded that he confess he was the father of her baby. Bran wanted to protest that he'd never slept with her and couldn't have gotten her pregnant even if he had, but no sound came out of his mouth. Valor lifted her lip at him, showing a row of pointed teeth, and shouted for her father; the door was gone and Dunaev came in with murder in his eye. Bran sucked in his breath as he came closer, managed to scream one word, and woke up. He was still panting when the door opened in reality and Holden came in, sleep-rumpled and naked in the moonlight from the high windows of the little bedroom.

"What is it?" he whispered, coming to Bran's bedside.

"I'm sorry," said Bran, his voice shaky.

"Was it a dream?" Holden sat down on the edge of Bran's bed. "I heard you shout 'master.' Me or Dunaev?"

"Dunaev," said Bran, realizing as he spoke the word that it was the first time he'd ever said his former master's name aloud. It felt oddly powerful.

"Ah." Holden stroked Bran's forehead, pushing back locks of hair that had fallen into his eyes. "You miss him, huh?"

Bran grinned briefly, still trying to catch his breath.

"Give me your hand," Holden said, and Bran obeyed, offering his right hand for Holden to clasp in both of his. "You're trembling."

Bran nodded, biting his lip to keep from crying at the concern in his master's voice. Holden lifted Bran's hand to his lips and kissed it gently.

"Shove over," he said.

Bran moved over, and Holden got into the bed beside him, under the bedclothes. Bran waited, still shaking, until Holden reached for him and pulled him close; then he moved gratefully into the clasp, snuggling against the warm skin of his master's chest and neck with a small, involuntary sigh.

"Technically obedient," said Holden, stroking Bran's back, "before this... incident, but sullen, unresponsive." His tone was an overly-sweet parody of Dunaev's company voice.

"Is that what he said?" Bran asked, almost laughing.

"You start to pick up on what they're really saying, eventually," said Holden, his voice pensive and drowsy in the darkness. "They talk in code. Not about the big thing, the biting or running away or sleeping around or whatever. But the little things they add, to demonstrate how they're at their wits' end. Sullen, insolent, unmanageable, unresponsive. Sullen means quiet, insolent means talkative, unmanageable means completely fucking confused and pissed off about it, and unresponsive... well, that normally means someone who's going to assume everything is a trap and anything he does is going to get him hurt. I've dealt with that before. But you..."

Bran lay, pressed close against his master, listening. His trembling had subsided. He hoped Holden would stay with him for a little longer, anyway, talking like this, holding him close.

"Even when we were first bringing you home, when you were frozen stiff and stupid with fear of whatever shit Dunaev had told you about where you were going-- when I touched you gently, you *responded*. You've got this innocence about you, Bran, this strange-- hope, that just comes leaping out at the slightest provocation. You still don't smile a lot, but when you do you look so damn happy, it's like the sun coming out. And that little sigh you give when I hold you, like--"

Despite the warmth and comfort of Holden's arms, Bran had begun to shiver

again.

--like everything's okay. Bran?"

"Master?" Bran whispered.

"You're trembling again. Did I upset you?"

"No, master. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about," said Holden, and yawned.

Bran took a deep breath. "I'm okay, master, if you need-- if you want to-- I'm sorry for waking you. You don't have to stay with me."

"I know that," said Holden, sleepily amused. "Don't worry about it. Kids get-- nightmares--" He yawned again. "Just remind me-- in the morning-- I've got something to ask you."

"Yes, master," Bran said quietly.

"My good boy," Holden murmured, and Bran slept in his master's arms.

When he woke to the morning's first light, Holden was still asleep beside him, his lips slightly parted, looking oddly young and vulnerable. Bran tried to imagine his master as a slave, angry and frightening because frightened, fiercely jealous of the child Greta-- how old would Holden have been at the time? Twenty or so, not much older than Bran. Bran moved close enough to kiss his master's faintly lined forehead. Holden stirred and smiled without opening his eyes, and Bran, possessed with a strange daring, pressed his mouth to Holden's.

Holden's lips moved, kissing him back, and Bran pulled back as his master's

eyes opened, blinking at him.

"Well," he said, smiling slowly. "And good morning to you."

Bran blushed hotly. "I-- forgive me, master, I--"

"If you think I'm one to mind being kissed awake by a pretty lad, you haven't been paying as much attention as I thought," said Holden lazily. "You haven't kissed me before, have you? I mean, on your own initiative. Bravo. Could you do it again, do you think?"

Bran leaned in and kissed his master's lips again. Holden kissed him back, softly, undemandingly, then broke the kiss.

"Mmm," he said. "But that doesn't count; I told you to do that. Try it again sometime, when I'm not looking."

"I thought a slave must wait to be commanded, master," said Bran curiously, and Holden smiled at him, pleased. With Dunaev the mere implication that his master's instructions had been unclear in any way got Bran, at the least, backhanded across the face for defiance. The first time he saw Holden detect puzzlement in his unguarded expression, Bran had flung his arms reflexively over his head, and Holden's chagrined "Oh, for fuck's sake" hadn't been particularly reassuring at the time.

"Not always," Holden said now. "That's why you learn to judge a situation. It also depends on the master. But when I sell you, Bran, I'm going to sell you to someone who appreciates your many sterling qualities of character, including how naturally affectionate you are. It's hell for anyone to live with someone like Dunaev, but for someone as sweet as you it's got to be fucking unbearable."

Bran looked away. Holden lifted his arm and ran a hand over Bran's hair.

"There you are getting all quiet again when I talk about selling you," he said.

"And that reminds me-- did you and Yves get a chance to talk last night, before my dear daughter barged in on you?"

"No, master," said Bran, looking back alertly into Holden's face. He didn't look angry, so Bran hurried on. "But Greta and I talked, after the rest of you went to bed, and she told me-- some things-- I hope you don't mind that I know."

"What did she tell you, exactly?" Holden asked after a pause.

"That-- that you used to belong to the mistress-- as her slave," said Bran nervously, the words themselves suddenly seeming unsupportably impudent.

"Ah. That." Holden leaned back and smiled at the ceiling. "Yes. Explains a lot, doesn't it? You know, about my intimate inside knowledge of a slave's various dilemmas. Also, my expert cocksucking."

Startled, Bran laughed more loudly than he meant to. Holden lifted his head and squinted at him.

"I hope you're laughing in agreement. It's not good manners to mock your master's sexual prowess."

Bran covered his mouth, trying to stop laughing long enough to make the called-for compliments, but only succeeded in making himself laugh harder. Holden was grinning at him.

"I like that I can tease you now," he said, "without scaring you. I bet eventually you'll even tease back. You can do that, you know, with a master you trust. I used to tease Pavel; he liked that."

"Pavel?" Bran echoed.

"My first master," Holden said, sitting up and stretching. "We had some good times, before he broke my fucking heart. But that's a long, depressing

story and you don't want to hear it."

"Yes I do, master," said Bran boldly, and Holden glanced down at him thoughtfully.

"If you're interested," he said, managing a shrug while leaning back on his hands. "It's all a thousand years ago. Pavel was a nobleman's son and I was a slum rat, and we met while he was out slumming-- probably skiving off his falconry lessons or something equally expensive. He was terribly clever and learned and funny and fascinating, and I-- I guess I was pretty enough. We swore an oath of eternal friendship and all that, and I lived for the times when he managed to throw off his retinue of tutors and come spend a few hours teaching me the Greek alphabet and saying poetic things about my eyelids." He lowered the eyelids in question at Bran, smirking slightly. "He even wrote me a *sonnet* once, I swear, something about my hands like gentle gravel on his skin-- gods, I was horribly self-conscious about touching him after that. *His* hands were smooth as silk, of course-- never did a day's work, wore gloves when he went out riding.

"Anyway, when my fifteenth birthday was coming up, so was his eighteenth. Our birthdays were only three days apart-- three years and three days exactly; of course we thought that was significant and romantic as all hell. So we hatched this great plan that he'd ask his dad to buy me for him, for his eighteenth. It all went off without a hitch, and there I was, sold into slavery and transported into bliss, dining with the gods in heaven-- the one god, really. It was pathetic how I worshipped him."

"What happened?" Bran asked after a few moments of silence.

Holden grimaced. "He got married. To a nice noble girl. That didn't bother me-- it had nothing to do with the depth and purity of our love. Or so I very sweetly thought, until one day his bitch wife sold me. Just like that. A gentleman came over for tea and left with me on a leash. I didn't even get to say goodbye."

Bran gasped. "That's horrible!"

"You're telling me," said Holden. "Poor Alix had to deal with the fallout from that one for years. *Oh, sure, you say now that you love me, but what happens when, et cetera.* She finally married me just to shut me up. Not that I recommend that as a general tactic, mind you, but Alix has never been much of a negotiator."

"How did *she* come to own you?" Bran asked.

"You're extremely inquisitive this morning," said Holden, cocking an eyebrow at Bran, who blushed. "Aren't you hungry? Enough ancient history. Let's get up."

Neither Valor nor Yves had appeared at the breakfast table by the time Fox had served the meal. Holden looked across at the empty places laid for them with raised eyebrows.

"Should I even ask?" he said dryly.

"I knocked on her door earlier," said Alix. "No answer. I thought I should let them sleep. If they're asleep."

"Yes, well, we wouldn't want to interfere with our daughter's apparent conviction that we run a combination hotel and brothel," said Holden with some asperity. "I thought she came home to *study*."

"Maybe Yves is helping her study," Greta deadpanned to her plate, and Bran grinned.

"If they're not down by the time breakfast is over," Holden began, then looked up in surprise as Yves hurried in, looking sweaty and disheveled, and dropped to his knees at Holden's side.

"Sanctuary," he said. "Asylum. Home base. Please."

"What did she do to you?" Holden demanded, as Alix choked and started laughing.

"Nothing," said Yves. "It's what she makes *me* do to *her*. Over and over and over again. I'm only flesh and blood, master, and I'm not as young as I used to be."

Holden looked as if he were trying not to grin as he stroked Yves' hair.

"Poor Yves. Try to consider it a compliment of sorts."

Yves laid his head wearily down on Holden's knee. "She hasn't let up since last night. What happened to that sweet little girl who was so shy about holding my hand when we went for walks?"

"Puberty," said Holden, scratching the back of Yves' neck. "But she'll be all right. She's just on the rebound."

"It's not her I'm worried about," said Yves darkly.

"Well, I am. I thought we'd taught the brat better than this. Sit down and eat something, for heaven's sake. No-- *drink* something. You look dehydrated. I'll give Val a talking-to when she comes down. If she ever comes down."

Yves bowed down and fervently kissed Holden's feet before getting up and beginning his meal with alacrity.

"I can't believe she asked for you as a graduation gift," Holden continued.

"I know," said Yves, and swallowed. "I'm probably twenty years older than any of her friends' slaves."

"She got very emotional about it, actually," said Holden. "Said you were her

first and no one understood her like you and it would mean everything to her and she'd take good care of you, honest, cross her heart. It was quite touching. What? Why are you looking at me like that? I think I've made it pretty clear that I have no intention of losing you to my inconsiderate wench of a teenage daughter!"

"Yeah, well, I'm a little light-headed right now," said Yves, some of the color coming back to his cheeks. "Just watch you don't lose me to a heart attack, master."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," said Holden. "Keep eating. Oh, look who decided to join us," he added, as Valor wandered in, looking grumpy and tousled in an inside-out robe and nothing else.

"Um," she said, a bit guiltily, encountering Holden's glare. "Hi, Dad."

"Don't 'hi, Dad' me, young lady," said Holden sternly. "Yves is worn out. If you can't take any better care of my property than this, what would make me think you're responsible enough for your own?"

"Oh gosh," she said. "I'm sorry, Dad. Sorry, Yves. I guess I lost track of the time."

"Mm-hmm. Sit down and eat something. I don't want you run down for your exams."

Valor sat obediently.

"Sorry," she said again, addressing Yves in an undertone. "You should've said something."

"It's not his place to say something," said Holden. "He's a slave. Making sure he's okay is *your* job. Have we taught you absolutely nothing?"

Valor flushed. "I said I was sorry."

"Yes, well. We can always buy you a car for graduation. You don't have to stop and check on them as often."

"Dad!" Valor wailed. "I didn't hurt him! I just..." She hesitated and looked appealingly at Yves. "It wasn't *that* bad, was it?"

Yves tried rather obviously not to laugh. "No, Miss Valor."

"See," said Valor, turning back to Holden. "If he'd been really in difficulties, I would've seen it. Honestly. I'm responsible, I really am!"

"We'll see about that, young lady," said Holden grimly.

Valor glared at her plate.

"Good morning, darling," said Greta gently.

"Oh-- morning, Mom," said Valor, looking up penitently at her mother. "Morning, Alix. Hi, Brian. Sorry I was late, everybody."

"That's all right, love," said Greta. "We all know how it is to be young."

"Yes," said Holden irritably. "We were all young once. Do forgive us for sometimes failing to understand how hard it is to be *you*."

"Very funny," Valor said, trying to pout, though her dimples were suddenly very much in evidence, "but it's perfectly true. None of *you* ever had to take exams, or worry about grades, or a career, or who they were going to marry. You could never understand how difficult my life is, burdened with choices and parents and stability and beautiful men to sleep with. I don't know how I manage it."

She heaved a dramatic sigh and took a fortifying gulp of orange juice as Holden tried not to smile.

CHAPTER 9

After Valor had eaten, quickly and somehow impatiently, she turned back to Greta. "Mom, we've hardly talked since I got here. I've got so much to-- can we--?"

"Of course, my love," said Greta, smiling. "Do you want to go out? We could go shopping, eat lunch somewhere--"

"Sounds nice," said Valor, smiling back at her mother, then looked somewhat reluctantly to Holden. "Dad? Can we--"

"Sure, you're seventeen, you're immortal, you don't need sleep. Go on."

When mother and daughter, arms affectionately around each other's waists, had left the room, Holden sighed deeply and leaned his chin in his hands.

"I love the little brat," he said, "but gods, she can get on my nerves."

"I remember when I was seventeen," said Yves meditatively. "It's a hard age. Awkward. Trying to figure out where you fit. Miss Valor's not doing so badly, considering."

"When I was seventeen, I still belonged to Pavel," said Holden, "which would probably make me even more sheltered and spoiled than Val is now. Still."

Bran glanced automatically at Alix, but she didn't offer a corresponding reminiscence. Instead she said, "Holden, we should let Nikol know Val's in town. I'm sure he'll want to see her, and so will Laura. We could have them over for dinner."

"Oh," said Holden without enthusiasm. "Yes, sure."

"It won't be so bad," said Alix. "You know Val will dominate the

conversation. And we can ask them to bring Jer."

"Yeah," said Holden. "Write them."

"Lord Argounov," said Valor happily, running to put her arms around the older man, who hugged her back with every appearance of pleasure.

Lady Argounova, who looked about her husband's age, with fairly obviously dyed auburn hair, bowed gravely to Valor, who nodded rather awkwardly in return. "My lady."

"Hey, good-looking," said Holden softly to the tall, quiet man in a white slave tunic who smiled at him from slightly behind Nikol. That must be the mysterious Jer, Bran thought, looking at him with interest; he was old, even older than Yves, perhaps as old as Holden, and there were gray hairs among the nondescript straight brown that framed his face in a round cut, but his smile at Holden was strangely boyish.

"Welcome," said Alix. "Please, sit down, everyone. Dinner will be served in about half an hour. May I offer anyone a cocktail?"

"Sherry," said Lady Argounova, seating herself on an upright chair as her husband sank comfortably into an armchair. Like Yves, Bran stood back against the wall at proper attention, noting out of the corner of his eye that Jer was doing the same, instead of sitting down at his master or mistress' feet as a visiting slave might be expected to do. Greta, he supposed because of her position as Valor's mother, was seated by her mistress, her eyes demurely downcast.

"Nothing for me, thanks," said Nikol. "Oh, there's your pretty lad— Bran, isn't it? I was telling you about him, Laura."

"Very pretty," said Lady Argounova, with a cool, appraising glance at Bran.

“Laura and I thought perhaps you might offer him to our Valor, once he’s fully rehabilitated,” Nikol said cheerfully. “He’s rather your type, isn’t he, lamb?”

“He’s adorable,” said Valor, “but I haven’t even been allowed to touch him. Dad’s so protective.”

“Your father is very good at his job,” said Argounov, smiling at Holden, who nodded in acknowledgment, unsmiling. “No doubt the boy’s still transitioning, but once he’s ready to go back on the market, who knows? What would you think of belonging to Miss Valor, Bran?”

Startled and frightened at the sudden direct address, Bran blinked for a moment, and everyone in the room laughed. Even Valor grinned reluctantly.

“Oh, come on,” she said, as Bran stood blushing under everyone’s amused regard. “I’m not that bad. He’s just really nervy still.”

“Come here, Bran,” said Holden, and Bran went to him gratefully, kneeling at his master’s feet and accepting his affectionate caress.

“See?” said Valor. “Protective, like I said. Anyway, I’ve got to graduate with top grades before Dad will even think about giving me anyone, so I’ve been studying my head off.”

“Good,” said Nikol heartily. “Good girl. That’s what we like to hear. Tell us about what you’re studying.”

Valor needed little encouragement to chatter the time away until Fox arrived to announce dinner.

As it was a formal occasion, Bran, Yves and Jer ate separately in the kitchen, with Fox scampering past them periodically, laden with dishes and trays.

“How are you?” Yves asked Jer.

Jer smiled at him. “Fine. I’m fine. How are you? Not feeling neglected, are you?”

The two older men turned simultaneously to look at Bran.

“No,” said Yves. “I mean, yes, the master’s quite taken with him lately. But he doesn’t neglect me. Some kids tire him out, you know, but Bran’s all sweetness and humility and sensibility, aren’t you Bran?”

Bran hesitated, and Jer chuckled.

“I thought he hated that kind,” he said. “You know. The good manipulators.”

Yves smiled. “Maybe it’s not manipulation with Bran.”

“We’re slaves,” said Jer cynically. “Everything we do is manipulation.”

“Not when we’re eighteen,” said Yves.

“Gods.” Jer sighed. “Eighteen. No wonder he’s so beautiful. I was beautiful, too, when I was eighteen.”

“You’re still beautiful,” said Yves gently.

“I’m decrepit,” said Jer. “I was past my prime when this kid was born. But I’m better at everything I do than any of your lithe teenage whippersnappers, and my master’s old enough himself to value that, so I don’t worry too much. Develop a real skill set, pretty boy,” he said to Bran. “It will serve you well when your looks are gone and you don’t blush as easily.”

Bran looked down. “Yes, sir.”

“Don’t upset the kid,” said Yves. “You’ll age him early, and that really

would be a shame.”

“Sorry,” said Jer. “Let's talk about something else. That daughter of your master's is a little firecracker, huh? Must be fun to have her home again.”

Yves laughed. “Oh, you have no idea.”

Bran was sitting on his bed with his knees drawn up, thinking about Yves and Jer's half-comfortable chatter, the after-dinner farewells and Jer and Holden's awkward parting kiss— a lingering yet nervous affair where they both looked as if they were expecting to get caught-- when Valor came in without knocking. He jumped nervously to his feet, eyeing her with some trepidation.

“Don't freak out,” she said, flopping down on his bed. “I'm not going to rape you. I just want to talk to somebody my own age, okay?”

Bran sat warily down on the edge of his chair.

“You are my age, aren't you?” Valor continued, looking him up and down with frank interest.

“I'm eighteen, Miss Valor,” Bran answered respectfully.

Valor reached out and ran a hand through his hair. “How do you like it here?”

The gesture wasn't unlike Holden's habitual caress, which Bran loved, but Valor's touch made him somehow uneasy. Perhaps it was the memory of his dream about her. He held still with an effort.

“Very much, miss,” he said softly.

She withdrew her hand, looking away.

"It's a madhouse," she said. "But you just think it's normal when you're growing up, you know? I mean, when you were living with whatever asshole messed you up, you probably just kind of thought that was normal, right?"

"I suppose so, Miss Valor," said Bran.

"Sure." Valor lay back on the bed, examining the ceiling. "And when I was a kid I thought it was normal for your dad's wife to legally own your mom. Of course, that was before I found out he wasn't even my biological dad, and things haven't really gotten less weird since then. You know about all that?"

"Yes, Miss Valor," said Bran. "Your mother told me."

"Yeah. But I mean, he is my dad, though. I don't know who my biological dad is-- my mom told me he never even knew she was pregnant. And Holden's the one on my birth certificate, and all. Did you know, it's actually illegal for a master to adopt a slave's child-- because it would encourage black-market slave breeding. 'Accidents' where, oops, the slaves weren't properly sterilized after all, and, well, I'll just 'raise' this kid as my own, and suddenly discover a pressing need to sell him off when he's fifteen. That kind of thing. So he had to claim to be the real dad, to keep me."

She rolled over on her side and dimpled at Bran. "I decided I'm going to be a lawyer myself, when I get through school. I've had enough practice just trying to figure out what the hell I am. All these laws are *utterly* obscure, you have to dig through mountains of ancient books to find them, because slaves aren't supposed to get pregnant, and if one does, of course the master either gets her an abortion as quickly as possible, or if he doesn't think it's his or doesn't want to bother, sells her to Alix and my dad, for-- what's it-- um, unlawful fornication."

"What do the master and mistress do about it?" Bran asked.

"Oh, you know," said Valor. "Explain nicely to the girl how ill-advised it is to sleep with someone besides her master-- or get raped by someone besides her master, which half the time is what happened."

"But what do they do about the pregnancy?" Bran asked.

"Abortion," said Valor. "I mean, you're pretty much useless as a pleasure slave after giving birth. Scars and stretch marks and-- that's one reason they sterilize you; it's not just because of the ban on breeding. It's one thing for my mom, because keeping me in the first place was Alix's idea so she can't exactly complain, and anyway she's not trying to sell my mom-- but nobody much is going to buy a woman who's had a baby."

"What if it's too late to abort?" Bran asked. "Has that ever happened?"

"I dunno," said Valor, squinting at him, and Bran quickly dropped his gaze to his lap. "They don't tell me everything. So, it was weird tonight, huh?"

"Yes, Miss Valor," said Bran, his eyes still lowered to hide his slight irritation at her change of subject. He supposed there was only one answer to his question. The woman's death would be painless, no doubt, and as kind as possible, but there was only one way to deal with a slave who could not be put back on the market under any circumstances. He had understood that from the beginning, when Holden told him not to worry about what would happen if he couldn't be rehabilitated. It would be a hard decision for Holden and Alix to make, no doubt, but they had a business to run. And he could easily believe they didn't have to make it very often.

"And I mean, especially with Jer and all. You know about them? I mean who he is and all? How long they've known each other?"

Bran shook his head, distracted.

Valor rolled over on her back and drew up her knees. "God, then you don't even *know* how weird it is when they all get together like this."

"Is it?" Bran asked vaguely.

"It really is," said Valor. "Lord Argounov, he's one of those really rich people who kept— I think six or seven pleasure slaves at a time, back in his heyday. All just lying around waiting for his attentions. Which was just the problem— to hear Alix tell it— because *Lady Argounova* kind of *also* wanted his attentions, and it was all getting a bit much for him. I mean, a man only has so much to give, you know? And complicating this was that he really loved her, I mean, *in* love, not just like I love Yves but like my *dad* loves Yves, real oh-never-leave-me kind of love. And his wife didn't like that one bit."

"Wait," said Bran, who had only been half listening. "He really loved whom?"

Valor turned to look at him solemnly. "Alix. Alix was his slave back then. You didn't know? And he was *wildly* in love with her."

"*What?*" said Bran.

Valor chuckled, delighted at his surprise. "Yes! So Lady Argounova gave Lord Argounov an ultimatum. She said either Alix went, or she went. And Lord Argounov picked his wife, because, well, she was his wife. But he couldn't bring himself to sell Alix. So he freed her instead. Not only freed her, but bought her a house-- this house-- and set her up with a nice little bank account, and, *and*, offered her a gift, so she wouldn't get too lonely all by herself in this big old house. A well-trained pleasure slave from his own personal collection."

She paused for effect. Bran blinked at her.

"My dad," said Valor, nodding.

"Wait," said Bran again. "They *both* belonged to Lord Argounov?"

"Yep. It was one of those setups-- if someone has that many slaves they have to sort of rank them, you know? Set up these little hierarchies, just to keep everything from going to hell, because the master can't watch everyone at once. Alix was right at the top of the pecking order, because of the whole thing where her master was in love with her, and I think she'd sort of made my dad her bitch, in a romantic way."

Bran laughed. Valor grinned at him.

"I mean, it had to be at least a little romantic," she said, "because then there was the whole fairy tale ending where she freed him and married him and they lived happily ever after. *Anyhow*, Jer belonged to Lord Argounov back then too, and they-- he and my dad, I mean-- were really close. They fit together well-- Jer's so quiet and my dad talks a mile a minute-- like me-- and Jer just sort of quietly adored my dad, and my dad was all protective of him-- I dunno. And Lord Argounov didn't exactly consult either of them before he gave my dad to Alix, and they weren't very happy to leave each other. My dad even tried to buy Jer once he had the money, but Lord Argounov won't sell."

"That's terrible," said Bran indignantly.

Valor shrugged. "Yeah. I think they all used to be madder at each other, before I was born. But when my mom got pregnant, my dad wanted me to have every advantage I could, considering the insane circumstances, so he bit down and asked Lord Argounov to be the godfather. And the Argounovs have been absolutely wonderful to me. They're paying for my school, and they'll give me a real coming-out when I turn eighteen. I think Lady Argounova kind of hates me, but she puts up with me because helping me makes Lord Argounov feel less guilty about the whole thing."

"You're right, Miss Valor," said Bran fervently. "I had no idea how weird it was."

Valor grinned at him. "Don't I know it. You're really cute, Bran."

Bran looked down. "Thank you, Miss Valor."

"You wouldn't *really* mind belonging to me, would you?" she asked, sounding almost shy. "I'm pretty nice once you get to know me. And I'd be good to you. I really would."

Bran sat frozen, staring at his knees.

"Bran?" Valor asked softly.

"I— however my master chooses to dispose of me will be..." said Bran vaguely, trailing off.

"You completely hate the idea, don't you?" Valor said wistfully. "Is it me? I mean, am I awful? You can tell me. Or do you just— not like girls? Or something?"

Before Bran could think of a reply, the door opened again and Holden came in. His eyebrows went up at the sight of his daughter sprawled on Bran's bed.

"What are you doing?" he asked Valor, who sat up quickly.

"Just talking," she said.

"I don't know why you don't get laryngitis with all the talking you do," said Holden. "Your mother's looking for you."

Valor hopped up and was gone without a backward glance at Bran. Holden glanced Bran over somewhat absently, as if checking for damages, and was turning to go as well when Bran said quickly, "Master, may I ask you something?"

“Certainly you may,” said Holden, turning back at the door frame, his eyes friendly and attentive.

Bran took a deep breath. “I was just wondering why— why you haven’t, uh, fucked me yet.”

He had Holden’s full attention, now; his master looked surprised and amused, and— pleased? “No special reason. You haven’t been healed for that long. Why, do you want me to?”

Bran looked down. “I want— I want whatever you want, master. I just— wondered.”

He waited nervously while his master said nothing for an eternal few moments.

"All right," Holden said finally, in a businesslike tone. "Get yourself cleaned up and ready-- you know how to do that, right?"

Bran nodded, red-faced.

"And come back here. I'll be waiting."

And he was waiting, sitting naked on the edge of the bed, when Bran came in, naked himself, still flushed with nervousness and— he admitted to himself— excitement.

“Come here,” said Holden lazily, putting out a hand. “Have you ever enjoyed being fucked?”

"I-- not really, master," said Bran honestly.

"I sort of thought not. You had some luck with masters, kid." Holden drew Bran down onto the bed beside him, running a hand down his back; Bran arched slightly into the touch. “But I’m glad you asked me. It shows you

trust me. Don't you?"

"Yes, master."

"Good boy. I need you trusting me for this, because if you're tense, it will hurt, and if it hurts, you're going to tense up more, and it's going to hurt more, right?"

Bran nodded, biting his lip as Holden turned him so that he was lying on his side, facing away from his master. Holden's hands were still on him, touching and kneading his shoulders, sliding gently down his body to his hip bone.

"And it shouldn't hurt, Bran. If I do it right, it should feel really good. I still enjoy it myself, from time to time. Being fucked."

Surprised, Bran turned to look at his master. Smiling, Holden gently turned him back, repositioning him.

"It's not as rare as you might think," he said, one hand on Bran's shoulder as the other stroked down his thighs, playing with the crease where one leg lay on top of the other. "Masters liking to be topped. It's one of the specialized tastes we train for, if the buyer likes. Pavel liked to be topped. So I've been doing this for a while. If that helps."

Bran couldn't begin to think how to answer, especially since his master was playing with his perineum, hardening his cock at the same time it increased his trepidation. After a pause, Holden went on, "Anyway. The point is, it's supposed to feel good. So if it hurts, say 'ow' and I'll change what I'm doing. Understand? Don't get all stoic on me. I don't want you getting damaged or spooked again."

Bran nodded. "I understand, master. Thank you."

Holden cupped his buttocks and let one finger stray slightly between them.

Bran fought not to clench up.

"Have you ever been with a woman, Bran?" Holden asked, his touch disappearing briefly-- Bran didn't turn around to look this time, though he wanted to.

"No, master," he said.

The fingers returned, slippery with lubrication, easing between Bran's cheeks. "Would you like to?"

Bran breathed deeply. "I... guess I'd sort of be curious..."

One finger touched the puckered rim of Bran's anus. "Have you ever fucked a man?"

Bran's gasp came out as half laugh. "No, master..."

"Never?" said Holden softly, his finger slipping past Bran's first tension; Bran's mouth opened slightly and he moved instinctively, pushing himself backwards a little, so that Holden's finger sank in deeper. "Oh, you like that?"

Bran whimpered slightly as a second finger slipped in next to the first.

"So you've never fucked a man, never fucked a woman, and didn't you tell me you'd never had your cock sucked?" Holden went on, his fingers pressing deep into Bran, and Bran felt a flicker of something, something whose edge Holden was just grazing, indefinite and frustrating. "Damn shame, a fine strapping young man like you, with his cock just withering away from lack of use. You like this?"

"Yes," said Bran, his voice lower and huskier than he expected.

Holden's fingers withdrew, and Bran tensed up again. The fingers felt good,

but Holden's cock, while not as large as Dunaev's, was still considerably larger than two fingers. Whatever Holden said about not hurting... but no hands moved him into position for fucking, and it was the same two fingers that paused at the ring of tight muscle and slipped themselves back in. Two fingers. Then a third.

"Oh gods," Bran breathed before he could stop himself.

"That's right," said Holden softly, and the hand not half inside Bran reached over his jutting hip and closed, warm and slicked, around his hard cock. "You do like it."

His fingers rippled down Bran's cock, and Bran jerked his hips again, impaling himself on the three fingers with a groan.

"That's right," said Holden again. "You want more, don't you? You want my cock in you."

"Yes," Bran gasped, and he meant it, though it was only by focusing very hard on the hand that stroked his cock that he managed to keep from clenching up as the fingers slid out of him. He started to move to his hands and knees, then waited, telling himself he didn't know Holden's preferred position, but really hoping for his master's gentle, firm hands moving him, placing him, keeping him in this moment, safe and easy with those flickers of pleasure at the edges of his consciousness.

"Good boy," said Holden, and the head of his cock, slick and feeling larger than it did in Bran's mouth, was pushing between Bran's cheeks. Bran startled and Holden stopped, pulling back slightly.

"You okay there, beautiful?" he asked, and Bran flashed on their first meeting when Bran, chained and shaking, had stumbled after his new master up the stairs of their home. The hands on him, the warmth, the sweet anticipation, suddenly overwhelmed him. He licked his lips.

"I-- yes, master, I'm fine. I just thought you'd put me on my-- face or my back or--"

"Next time maybe," said Holden. "This is good. Just need a little..." He squeezed Bran's cock again, wrenching a moan from his throat and making Bran squirm so that Holden's cock was pressed between his cheeks.

"...mmm, yes... cooperation."

Bran obediently thrust back against his master's cock, and Holden chuckled softly.

"Didn't think it would be a problem with you," he said. "Still nice and relaxed? That's my boy." He pulled at Bran's cock in long, slow, firm strokes, and with every one Bran gasped and pushed back against him. "Ready for me?"

Bran moaned acquiescently, a sound that deepened to a groan as the head of Holden's cock nudged inside him. He pushed himself, slowly and carefully, back onto it, gasping and whimpering a little as it opened him up bit by bit.

"Good?" said Holden in his ear, as Bran, his own cock tortured with the slow stroking, jerked impatiently, his hips rocking in an effort to get Holden to go faster. Holden obliged, and they found a rhythm, Bran pushing back as Holden thrust into him, the pleasure from Holden's hand on his erection enhanced by the pleasure he had only felt twinges of before, the spot inside him stroked over and over with a hot sweet agonizing pressure. He moved automatically, used to that kind of response, listening to his master's heavy breathing behind him, building helplessly between the pressure inside him and the rough, accelerating strokes to his cock, until he caught his breath and came into Holden's hand, breaking his rhythm and suddenly frightened. He had never come while being fucked before. Was he supposed to? What was he supposed to do?

"Don't stop," said Holden urgently, "don't--" and Bran obediently continued rocking back onto his master's cock until with a hard pulse and a soft moan

Holden came inside him, pushing deeper for a moment or two afterwards before carefully, slowly pulling out. Bran lay still, trembling, until Holden reached out and rolled Bran over to face him, smiling.

"See?" he said.

Bran smiled back at him, still panting.

"That was good, right?" said Holden, looking closely at him. "You look a little shellshocked."

"It was good, master," Bran managed. "I didn't-- I didn't know if I was supposed to come before you."

"I would have told you if you weren't, sweet boy. I loved how it felt when you came. Did you like having me inside you?"

"Yes, master," said Bran, rather enjoying the novel sensation of answering that particular question both affirmatively and truthfully.

"Good." Holden kissed him softly. "I liked it too. I'm glad you brought it up."

Everything we do is manipulation, Bran thought, hazily and perhaps irrelevantly, as he opened his mouth to another kiss.

CHAPTER 10

Bran couldn't say he was sorry to see Valor go back to school for her exams, nor to hear that she planned to spend the first three weeks of her real holidays with a friend from school. He liked her well enough, but her quick mood swings made him extremely nervous; it was like having a reasonably friendly but not quite reliably tame tiger in the house. Her mood for the last few hours before Alix drove her to the train station had been foul; Bran had been shadowing Holden as closely as he dared to avoid finding himself alone with her, and he thought Yves had been doing the same, though he couldn't be certain. Certainly the three of them were sequestered in the house's small library, Holden and Yves reading from the same book (an appallingly cozy habit of theirs Bran had noticed before) and Bran curled on the floor at Holden's feet, when Valor slammed the door of the house behind her, cutting off the sound of her shouting at Alix, something about the amount of luggage she'd brought home. Holden heard Bran's tiny sigh of relief and grinned down at him.

"That's my fault," he said. "She's in a snit because I told her she needs to grow up more before she owns anyone else. *Oh, but Dad, all the other kids*—as if she doesn't know how well I know nobles buy kids for their kids without caring about the fallout."

Bran glanced up at his master, thinking of Pavel, but Holden's face showed only generic exasperation.

"Like my first master," Yves said, nodding. "That was a really fun two years. After one stare of disbelief, I don't think he ever really looked at me again."

"His loss, my gain," said Holden, and kissed Yves on the nearest cheek. "If he'd ever looked at you I'd never have gotten hold of you."

Yves smiled. "It's hard to distract a teenager in love, even calf love. Especially calf love. That's the hardest to shake. Anyway, if his father had

paid any attention to his own son he would have known I wasn't his taste. He liked them dark and languid."

"Like Val," said Holden absently.

Yves snorted. "Half right, master, but she's only languid when she's been fucking for sixteen hours straight."

Bran laughed, and they both looked down at him in mild surprise.

"This boy," said Holden to Yves, ruffling Bran's hair. "Who would have thought."

"He's very resilient," Yves concurred, smiling down at Bran. Bran looked down, blushing. "By the time Miss Valor gets back from her friend's house, he might even be ready to take a little of the work load off *my* back. So to speak."

Holden chuckled. "Maybe. Or maybe this Kit girl will be far enough along—Valor's never shown much interest in girls, though, at least not yet. Though now that she's going home for three weeks with this Lisa—"

"I think it's just a friend, master," said Yves. "Miss Valor likes to do a thing thoroughly— she probably won't turn to women until she's exhausted the possibilities of men."

"Emphasis on *exhausted*," said Holden. "Speaking of the possibilities of men, how would you feel about fucking Bran for me sometime soon? He's been doing wonderfully with me, but I need to get him used to other people, too."

"My pleasure," said Yves, eyeing Bran with interest. "He looks a little alarmed at the prospect, though."

"He'll be fine. I'll talk him through it. It's nothing to worry about, Bran. I'll

be there the whole time.”

Bran relaxed slightly as Holden's hand caressed his head again.

“Strictly in a supervisory capacity, of course,” Yves added, winking at Bran. “Not because he'll enjoy watching, or anything.”

“Fuck off,” said Holden amiably. “Of course I'll enjoy it. I'd have to be dead not to. I'm getting hard just thinking about it.”

“I might be able to help with that, master,” Yves purred, his voice dropping a register.

Feeling his master's hand go still and slightly heavy on his head, Bran slowly tilted his head back so that the fingers slipped down over his face, kissing his master's palm and then the tips of the fingers of his hand, and parting his lips so that one of the fingers slipped between them. He kissed and licked it with instinctive sensuality. When Holden did not pull the hand away Bran took the finger deeper into his mouth, liking the slightly rough texture of it, the faintly salty taste. He thought of Pavel's sonnet to Holden's work-roughened hands as Holden gave a gentle sigh of pleasure.

“Neat trick, kid,” said Yves without rancor.

“He's a natural,” Holden agreed, and sucked in his breath as Bran gently bit his finger.

Yves leaned over, lifting one hand to cup along Holden's jaw, and covered his master's mouth with a deep, slow, sensuous kiss. Bran watched, still licking and sucking his master's fingers, taking more of them in as he let his own fingers trail, suggestively, along the soft skin of Holden's inner thigh, under his clothing.

“Boys,” said Holden lazily. “There's no need to fight.”

“We’re not fighting,” said Yves, and kissed Holden’s throat just under the jaw. “We’re competing.” He licked his way down to Holden’s shoulder. “And you love it.”

Holden closed his eyes. “Do I?”

“Does he, Bran?” Yves asked softly, as Bran’s hand closed around Holden’s erection. Bran didn’t answer. “Oh, sorry. Your mouth’s full.” He ran a hand across Holden’s chest, making Holden arch slightly as fingers grazed his cloth-covered nipples, and jerking his cock slightly forward into Bran’s fist. “He got to your cock first, master. Does that mean he wins?”

“Depends on what he does with it,” said Holden, opening his eyes again and grinning at Yves, who grinned back unselfconsciously as Bran let Holden’s fingers slip from his mouth and buried his face between his master’s legs.

“Oh, look at that lunge,” said Yves somewhere above him, as Bran sucked eagerly and carefully, putting everything Holden had been teaching him to good use. “Right out of the starting gate. But I wonder– master– mmm– about his *staying* power–?”

Preoccupied, Bran had forgotten about Kit's approaching birthday until, late into the afternoon of the next day, he wakened in the middle of his own rumpled bed with the pleasantly post-coital feeling that was becoming more and more familiar. Looking for Holden, he wandered into the training room and found a young girl, with hair so fair it was almost white, clear blue eyes, and a freckled, up-tilted nose, sitting pensively cross-legged on the table with straps, already dressed in the house’s green.

“Hi. You must be Bran,” she said, smiling hopefully at him. “I’m Kit.”

“Yes, I’m Bran. Nice to meet you, Kit,” said Bran, smiling back at the younger girl. “How are you?”

“I’m happy to finally be here,” said Kit frankly. “I hate my father. Alix is much nicer. Oh, I should say ‘my mistress’ now.” She beamed at Bran. “How long have you been here? Do you like it?”

“Three weeks,” he said, rather liking the feeling of being the older, more experienced one. “Yes, I like it. I’m nervous about being sold, though.”

“Oh, why? I’m looking forward to it. This is just sort of orientation. It will be nice to get really settled in to a new life, you know?”

“I suppose,” said Bran dubiously.

“Sure it will. You’re just nervous because you had bad masters before. Alix told me. But they only place you with okay people here. You’ll be glad to be somewhere more permanent. You’ve been working mostly with Holden— I mean the master, right? What’s he like? I’ve only met him once.”

“He’s nice,” said Bran, with a softer smile, sitting down on a convenient bench.

“Oh,” said Kit knowingly. “Do you have a crush on him or something?”

Bran squinted at her.

“It’s totally normal if you do,” said Kit reassuringly. “Alix said lots of the new kids get crushes on her. She said it’s a natural byproduct of the training process, where you sort of learn to trust someone and you confuse trust with love. You’ll get over it. Oh— master.” She jumped up and curtsied prettily as Holden came in.

“Hello, Kit,” he said. “Your mistress wants you in the bedroom for now.”

“Yes, master,” said Kit demurely, and winked at Bran before tripping merrily past Holden and out the door. Holden shut it behind her and looked quizzically at Bran.

“She’s very cheerful,” Bran said flatly, and Holden smiled.

“She is that,” he said. “Though, not to be cruel, but based on long experience, I’d be willing to bet money that Alix will be up all night tonight comforting her while she cries for home and some boy she’ll never court and the babies she’ll never bear. We all cope differently. How was it for you, when you were sold?”

“Hard,” said Bran, rather shortly.

“Ah.” Holden sat down next to Bran and put a casually proprietary hand on his back and another on his thigh. Bran settled into the touch, comforted as he always was by Holden’s caress. “Don’t want to talk about it?”

“I will if you want me to, master,” said Bran, looking up into Holden’s face.

“Sweet boy. But no, it doesn’t matter. I can fill in the blanks. I wish your parents had brought you to us. Though I suppose I wouldn’t have seen as much of you then; Alix would have handled you... Bran, there’s something I’ve been putting off.”

Bran tried to make his face show only polite expectancy as he waited for Holden to continue. He more or less knew by now that such casually cryptic statements didn’t preface an intention to sell him immediately— Holden’s frequent references to what still needed to be done had come to form a comfortable barrier in his mind between now and any thought of sale— but he still couldn’t stop his heart from pounding at the words.

“One of the things we do here,” Holden said with a strange reluctance, “is training in pain tolerance.”

Bran almost laughed. “Do you really think I need that, master? After Dunaev?”

Holden smiled at him, stroking his back. "Not the way the younger kids do. What you need is training to dissociate pain from fear. Does that make sense?"

Bran considered. "I— yes, master, I think so. You've taught me to dissociate a lot of things from fear."

"Like breathing," said Holden, and Bran grinned. "Right. But do you understand what I'm saying? I've never hit you or hurt you, not since that first day. I never needed to. Certainly never wanted to. But I need to now, soon. Not because you've done anything wrong, but because it's part of everything I'm doing with you, to get you ready to sell."

"It's okay, master," said Bran steadily. "I understand. I'm not afraid."

"That's just the thing. You will be. It's not your fault; it's a trained reflex, and you're so responsive to training, kid, I just know that panic is going to be crouched and ready to spring— Bran, you trust me, right?"

"Of course, master," said Bran sincerely.

"Then I need you to trust me enough that when you get scared, when you start to panic, you tell me. Okay?"

"Yes, master. Of course," said Bran, amused despite himself at all of Holden's careful concern. If there was one thing he knew the ins and outs of, it was physical punishment. "I can handle it."

"I'm not sure I can," said Holden, and Bran glanced at him in surprise. "No, of course I can, I've done it often enough. But you're so— Never mind. Do you want to do this now, or do you need some more time to get used to the idea?"

"Now is fine," said Bran, thinking, *I'm so what?*

In short order he lay, surprisingly relaxed, on the table where Holden had strapped him down on his first day. He was strapped in again– “Takes the pressure off you,” said Holden– and, again, naked. Holden’s hand caressed his back for a moment, then was gone.

Bran heard the crack of leather against flesh an instant before the burning pain burst across his back. He breathed deeply, trying to picture Holden’s face, wishing he could watch it as another stroke landed, then another; Bran didn’t count as they progressed, his heartbeat and breathing speeding up despite himself. He pulled against the bonds, letting his body struggle to get away, the way it wanted to; it was bad form, but since Holden had restrained him to save him the trouble of remaining still by himself, he might as well take advantage.

The pain was building, its acceleration familiar to Bran as the fear that surged with it, unbidden and– at least to Bran– unexpected. He knew Holden wasn’t angry with him, but another part of him knew just as surely that every new stroke that fell, searing across his naked thighs now, meant more anger on his master’s part, more failure on his own, and that if he moved it would be worse– he couldn’t move, he tried to remind himself, yanking against the bonds to reinforce the point, but he couldn’t think, the pain was too bad, the sound too loud and relentless against his screaming flesh, and it didn’t stop, wouldn’t stop, wasn’t this enough, what would be enough, what would ever be enough?

He had meant– despite his casual promise to his master– to wait it out entirely, but it occurred to him now, dimly and without words, that Holden might not stop until Bran stopped him, pleading panic. In which case– but Bran couldn’t think it out properly, though it seemed horribly unjust because what if he didn’t panic at all and the punishment went on and on even though Bran was keeping his promise, and the injustice of that, as he struggled against the bonds, was unbearable.

“Bran,” said Holden quietly, and Bran realized the lashes had stopped, and, horribly, that he was crying. “Are you all right?”

Bran struggled harder, anything he might have said to explain himself lost in waves of bitter shame and inadequacy, wanting only to get away somewhere and hide from his failure. He was sick with his own disappointment in himself, with his humiliating weakness. Holden's hand was stroking his hair.

“Shhh,” Holden said softly. “It's okay, Bran. Everything's okay. You did very well.”

“No,” said Bran hoarsely, still pulling futilely against the restraints.

“Yes,” said Holden firmly. “Lie still. That's my boy. My good boy.”

“But I'm fine,” Bran insisted, his words coming back to him in a rush. “I didn't ask you to stop, master, it wasn't that, I just, I don't know why I was crying, but I can take more, I *can*.”

“Show-off,” said Holden, his voice warm and sweet with amusement. “We'll do this again, and you can take as much as you like. But not now. Relax, Bran. Lie still.”

“Master—“

“Yes, sweetheart.”

“It wasn't, I wasn't thinking about you. I wasn't afraid of *you*. I was just—feeling—”

“I know,” said Holden. “That's enough for now.”

It was a week later, unrestrained and kneeling in perfect position as the cane

landed across the backs of his thighs, that he suddenly said, “It doesn’t—*intensify*—“

Holden stopped, standing over him. “What did you say?”

Bran held position as he answered almost dreamily.

“Yves said the pain intensifies things. What you’re feeling. But it’s not that. It just makes it so you can’t think straight, so all you can *do* is feel—“

“And doesn’t that intensify the feelings?” Holden asked, as if they were two friends engaged in light philosophical chatter instead of master and kneeling, striped, naked slave.

“I suppose, master. But it’s more— bringing them into focus— that’s why you’re doing this, isn’t it— because the fear’s still in me, just hidden deeper, and you’re peeling me back— digging it out—”

“What do you feel now?” Holden asked after a pause. “Fear?”

“No, master,” said Bran, looking up at Holden. “Just— you.”

Holden didn’t answer. After a moment Bran bent his head back into proper position.

"That's enough," said Holden again. "Get dressed, Bran."

Bran obeyed quickly, puzzled and slightly alarmed by an odd tension in Holden's tone. He knelt back down when he was dressed, waiting.

Holden sighed. “Look, this isn’t going to be easy, Bran— I’m just going to say it.”

Bran’s heart skipped a beat as he stared at his master with full attention sharpened by dread. He was “doing well,” he knew, but doing well enough

to please his master without doing so well his master considered him ready to sell was a two-edged sword, a balancing act requiring finesse he was never sure he possessed, and he constantly dreaded overbalancing one way or the other. And it was so perilously easy to relax around Holden, so easy to forget to weigh his words, so... nice... just to be with him.

"I think you think you're in love with me," said Holden.

The too-kind tone, more than the words, hit Bran like a slap. He looked away, swallowing.

"I can understand why you'd think that," Holden went on, while Bran stared at his hands, hardly breathing, flushed with humiliation and rage. "But I think you're-- mistaken."

Bran's head snapped up and he glared at Holden, but without trusting himself to speak. Holden sighed.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "I'm doing my best. I don't want to sound-- condescending." His eyes on Bran's face, he gave a sudden wry smile.

"So much for teaching you to school your face," he said. "You couldn't have said 'too late, asshole' any plainer if you'd screamed it. All right, fine, I'm condescending. I'm your master and I'm old enough to be your father and I'll condescend to you if I damn well please. You've got a crush on me. I don't mind that a bit-- in fact, it's quite flattering-- but I don't want you building up a lot of romantic ideas, because that's only going to make it harder on you when I sell you."

He laid slight emphasis on the last four words. Bran clenched his jaw.

"Yes, master," he said tonelessly. "I'm sorry."

"No, Bran, don't apologize, there's nothing to-- oh, kid," said Holden, and his

voice was so tender that Bran, to his fury, felt his eyes prickle with tears. "I couldn't be more pleased with you, with how well you've adjusted and how quickly you've learned. You're the sweetest boy I've kissed in a long time, and I really like you. I just don't love you. And I never will. I'm sorry."

"*Why?*" Bran asked, forgetting all dignity in a raw sob.

"Bran, this is my job. *You* are my job. If I let myself fall in love with you, or any of the kids I work with-- I have a wife, and I have Yves, and I have the kids who come through here and then leave, and we manage to keep that in balance. I'm not-- I don't trust myself with more, Bran. Things could get messy."

"I wouldn't be any trouble," Bran said, hating the begging note in his voice. "I wouldn't need-- you wouldn't even have to pretend-- you loved me. If you would just, if I could just stay."

"You know that wouldn't work, Bran," said Holden, the pity in his voice whipping the blood up into Bran's face. "And it wouldn't be fair to you. You only think you love me because I'm the only owner you've ever had who's treated you gently and taken the time to understand you. But I'm not the only one who ever will. I promise you, Bran, promise by the Ash, that I won't sell you until I find someone who'll appreciate you as much as I would, if I were your master."

"You *are* my master," Bran said forcefully.

"No, kid," said Holden, very gently. "I'm just your trainer. That's what I do. I train."

"You break," said Bran indistinctly.

"I *break?*" Holden repeated. "What do you-- oh."

"May I ask a question, master?" Bran said, after a pause to get his voice

under control.

"Yes." Holden sounded tired. "Yes, of course you may."

"Why tell me all this?" Bran asked. "Why not-- I mean, why not just let me keep hoping, so I'd wear myself out trying to please you, to make you love me back?"

"Gods' sakes, kid," said Holden, staring at Bran. "I'm a selfish bastard, but I'm not *evil*. I wouldn't do that to you."

Bran nodded.

"Thank you for being honest with me," he said finally, looking up into his master's concerned brown eyes.

"Bran--" Holden looked away. "I-- gods." He got up quickly and left the room without looking back, leaving Bran to look intently at his own hands, thinking about nothing in particular.

[This is a missing scene - it belongs chronologically somewhere in Chapter 10]

"He's so thin," said Yves, running a hand along Bran's ribcage and making him shiver involuntarily. They lay side by side in Holden's bed, naked. Bran stole sidelong glances at Yves' body while Yves' glance, frankly appraising as his touch, slid over his own.

"Not as thin as he was when we got him," said Holden, who was sitting at the foot of the bed, clothed and watching with interest. "I swear, even the ones who are smart enough not to leave scars don't seem to realize that malnutrition can damage a kid just as much."

Yves brushed Bran's hair back gently and looked into his eyes. "You nervous?"

"A little," said Bran softly, trying not to let his gaze drift down to Yves' cock.

"Well, don't be," said Yves. "You like being fucked by our master, don't you?"

"Yes," said Bran with a small involuntary smile, thinking of the feeling of Holden's body pressed close to his, his cock inside Bran and his arms wrapped around him.

"Mm-hmm. So did I, until you showed up. Can't quite remember what it feels like now."

"You hush your lies," said Holden, amused. "I just fucked you last night."

"Night before, master. See, he can't even remember which one I am anymore." Yves kissed Bran's cheek. "Don't tense up, kid. I'm just teasing. I don't mind having a pretty young thing in the house... especially when he's kind enough to share."

Bran swallowed. "Thank you."

"And you've got good manners, too," said Yves, tracing a finger down Bran's belly to his pubes as the other hand stroked his chest. "That's always nice." He bent his head and took Bran's nipple in his mouth; Bran caught his breath and looked over Yves' head at Holden, who met his wide-eyed gaze with a smile.

"What, you thought I was the only one who liked nipples?" he said, and Bran's cock jumped as Yves' hand closed around it.

"It's a crime for a sex slave to act so surprised when people want to touch

him,” said Yves, his mouth still close to Bran’s skin, and Bran tensed up again involuntarily at the sharp tone. “No, it’s not your fault, I mean your master– masters?– must not have been much for foreplay. Didn’t they ever want you to come for them?”

“No,” said Bran almost angrily. He didn’t want to think about his former masters, not now, with Yves’ fingers rippling gently at his cock, his mouth traveling over Bran’s skin, giving him goosebumps. He realized he was shivering continuously now, and closed his eyes to try to relax again.

“You poor kid,” said Yves, and a soft kiss on the lips surprised Bran into opening his eyes again. “It’s like seducing a virgin. Or one of these really young married ladies who’ve never been with anyone but their husbands, like what’s her name, that bought Tim.” He nibbled Bran’s earlobe. “Except they usually touch back. You can, you know.”

“I–“ Bran hesitated. “I will, but I don’t know what– pleases you.“

“Well, I don’t know exactly what pleases you yet either, do I?” said Yves, between spine-tingling kisses and bites to Bran’s neck and collarbone, while Holden watched without speaking. “That’s why I’m trying stuff out with one hand on your cock. Just touch me. You must know some seduction techniques, or did they really just always fling you down and fuck you?”

Blushing, Bran reached down to put a hand gingerly on Yves’ cock. He was concentrating so hard on Yves’ reaction that he forgot he was being touched in turn. Yves stopped, looking at Bran curiously, and Bran pulled his hand away, thinking he had done something wrong. Yves shook his head and looked up at Holden.

“Now I’ve lost him,” he said, chagrined. “Is he this jumpy with you?”

“He trusts me,” said Holden. “He doesn’t know if he can trust you yet.”

“What’s he think I can do to him, with you sitting right there? Scowl?”

“Something like that,” said Holden. “It’s not about fear of punishment, I don’t think. But he trusts me to— enjoy him. You know how starved he’s been for approval.”

“Yeah,” said Yves, looking back at Bran with an oddly gentle expression. “Okay. It’s okay, kid. You’re doing just fine, don’t worry. In fact—“ He took Bran by the shoulders and turned him over onto his belly. “Just relax. I’ll drive.”

Bran laughed a little as Yves kissed the back of his neck, then kissed each of his shoulders.

“You like being kissed, yeah? And petted, I can tell.” A gentle hand ran its way down his spine all the way to the cleft of his buttocks; one finger slipped a little further. Bran arched automatically into the touch, pushing back against the finger.

“You ready for me?” said Yves softly.

Bran tried to think how to answer. “No” didn’t seem very diplomatic, and it wasn’t exactly true either; he wasn’t really scared, and Holden had gotten him used enough to being fucked again after the weeks of disuse that he probably wouldn’t get hurt. But he *was* enjoying Yves’ kisses and caresses, and didn’t want them to stop yet. He thought Yves was enjoying them too, but if Yves was just trying to relax him so he could fuck him without damaging Bran and annoying Holden, Bran knew it would be in his best interest to be as low-maintenance as possible.

“Sif’s sake, kid,” said Yves, “it’s not a trick question.”

“Be patient, sweetheart,” said Holden. “He just wants to get it right.”

“I know, and he’s about to break my heart, which is not really the mood I’m going for. Look, Bran, is this going to be easier for you if I stop asking you

questions and just do what I want?"

"Yes," Bran said gratefully. "Please."

"Okay. But if you want me to stop doing something, or do something else, just say so, yeah? I won't be mad, I promise. I want this to be good for you."

Yves kissed his way leisurely down Bran's spine, licking and sucking at each individual vertebra while Bran tried not to squirm at the small shocks of pleasure Yves' mouth sent through him, then reached his ass and gently parted his buttocks. Bran cried out softly with astonished pleasure when he felt the tongue lick along his crease and down between his legs; Yves lapped at his balls, and seemed to linger forever, kissing and licking and sucking at the tender skin between Bran's legs and biting softly, then sharply enough that Bran had to suck in his breath, at his inner thighs.

"You and your oral fixation," said Holden, while Bran made fists in the sheet and tried desperately to hold still, unable to decide whether the sensations were delicious or maddening. Both, he decided, and moaned aloud as Yves' tongue returned to his hole, pushing delicately inside. Bran's cock, pressed between him and the bed, struggled to harden, and he lifted his hips very slightly to try to gain some friction against the sheets, whimpering softly with frustrated arousal.

Yves pulled back— Bran bit his lip, hoping he wasn't annoyed by the squirming— took Bran by the hips and lifted them gently; Bran pulled his knees up automatically, folding them under him and spreading them wide, and Yves licked again, fucking Bran with his tongue before he pulled away again and Bran waited, shaking, spread. Yves' cock pressed, slick and hard, against him for only a moment before slipping gently inside. Bran let out the breath he had been unconsciously holding.

"Oh, fuck yeah," said Yves, startling Bran into moving back against him. He laughed, gripped Bran's hips and held them in place, sliding in with unbearable slowness, then withdrawing almost completely before starting to

push slowly back in. Bran groaned with wordless frustration, waiting for Yves to speed up, but he didn't. The slow, slow stroking went on. Bran held still as long as he could, but when his body disobeyed him and tried to rock back against Yves, Yves' hands still held him in place.

"Please..." Bran said finally, his voice shaking.

"Please what?" Yves said innocently, pulling back. "You want me to do something different? I told you, just ask."

Bran went hot with embarrassment. He had never asked for anything like this, but... "Please... faster..."

"Do what faster?"

"*Fuck* me faster," said Bran, his face so hot he felt feverish. "Please. *Please!*"

Nails digging into the skin of his hips, Yves drove into him, and Bran cried out with agonized pleasure, his cock throbbing to the hard, swift rhythm of Yves' thrusts.

Yves' orgasm came without warning or fuss, just a last forceful shove into Bran, and he had barely pulled out when with one swift motion he had Bran on his back and Bran's aching cock in his hot mouth, sucking as if he were starving. Taken off guard, Bran almost screamed as he came into Yves' mouth. Yves sucked and swallowed and sucked again at Bran's spent, sensitized cock, until Bran gasped again, the word coming easier this time, "Please, *please* stop!" and Yves pulled back again, licking his flushed lips, his eyes dark with pleasure, turning to Holden, looking like a cat in cream.

"You think you're done?" Holden growled, and grabbed a fistful of Yves' hair, yanking his head down towards Holden's own groin. Yves was still laughing as his lips closed around his master's cock.

“You’re never done when you’re this good,” he said, a little breathlessly, after Holden had released him. “By the way, master, I win.”

“That you do,” said Holden, a flush of pleasure coloring his own cheeks, and reached out a hand to Bran, who was already half hard again after watching Yves work. He crawled awkwardly across the bed and curled up where Holden touched the bed, his head in his master’s lap, feeling some residual tension leave him as Holden laid a hand on his back and added, “Fair and square.”

“*Thank you,*” said Yves. “That took all I had. I was starting to think he actually preferred being fucked at glacier speed.”

“You did very well,” said Holden to Bran in the warm, almost tender tone that affected Bran like an opiate. “Even if you did lose me a bet.”

“A bet?” Bran echoed, half turning his head to look up from one man to the other.

“I bet him I could make you beg,” said Yves with satisfaction. “And you came through. Twice! Does the second one count, master? I mean, after he came?”

“Sure, why not?” said Holden good-naturedly. “It was worth it just to hear him.”

“Worth what, master?” asked Bran, who had been both the subject and the stake in bets before, though never ones he had enjoyed settling, or where both gamblers seemed almost equally delighted with the outcome and with him. “What was the wager?”

“Nothing you need to worry about,” said Holden, grinning, and Yves slapped Bran’s hip, making him flinch reflexively before he realized the smack was celebratory.

“I owe you one, kid,” he said cheerfully. “And I enjoyed the hell out of it, too. Did you? Or do you just know how fucking sexy you are, making all those little cries and moving like you’re trying not to move but you can’t help it because I’m just that good?”

Bran was glad he was lying down; the rush of blood to his face made him slightly dizzy.

“Thank you,” he managed, as Holden stroked his overheated cheek affectionately.

“Make sure you sell him to someone who’s good in bed, master,” said Yves, winking at Bran. “What a waste otherwise.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” said Holden as Bran nestled involuntarily a little closer to him. “I’ve got quite the list of criteria for whoever gets this one.”

CHAPTER 11

He wasn't sure how long he'd been kneeling there when someone came in and knelt down beside him.

"Bran," said Alix softly, "are you all right?"

Bran looked up at his mistress, realizing with an odd shock that he hardly knew this woman. She had known Holden as a slave, owned him, loved him, married him, ran a business with him-- but he had barely looked into her face since the day she had gotten into the driver's seat while Holden stroked Bran's hair in the back. Even now he had trouble seeing her. Graying blonde hair, pinned up securely against her head. Small, regular features, crow's feet around her wide-set, greenish eyes. Primly dressed, as usual, in a high-necked blouse and a long skirt. Pretty, yes, almost beautiful, even if aging. Holden's wife.

"You love him," he said to her, jealousy and sympathy warring within him and leaving no room for proper respect. But Alix looked as if she understood. She settled down next to him on the floor, her pretty face kind and a little sad.

"Yes," she said. "It's not easy, is it?"

Startled, Bran looked into her eyes, which looked more green than ever at that moment. "You believe I love him, mistress?"

"I don't know, Bran," said Alix. "I'm sure it's not easy either way."

"He thinks it's a crush," said Bran bitterly.

"And you can see why, can't you?" asked Alix gently. "I'm not saying I don't believe you really love him, Bran-- gods know I'd understand if you did, I've been in love with him for longer than you've been alive-- but a crush would be perfectly natural under the circumstances. Compared to anyone you've

ever belonged to, anyone even halfway decent would look like a hero. And, forgive me, but you're very young, and young love is notoriously-- fickle. Look at Valor. Heartbreak on Monday, cheerful as ever by Friday."

"How old were *you* when you fell in love with him?" Bran asked rudely, then flinched reflexively, but Alix only looked amused.

"Touché," she said. "I was about eighteen. But he was only twenty himself. Do you know how we met?"

Bran nodded. "Miss Valor told me... Mistress? Did he-- did he love you right away?"

"All-Father, no," said Alix, smiling. "But I didn't love him right away, either. Oh, Bran, who knows what throws people together, what makes them-- I just felt very protective of him in the beginning. He wasn't a very good slave, you know. Maybe he was with Pavel, I don't know. But not since. I tried to look out for him, once I had some influence with our master. And he got to like me. He'd sit and talk to me for hours-- he told me about Pavel, and about how he felt about Nikol, and Jer, and-- other boys who belonged to Nikol, and it was-- it wasn't that he loved me more, but he could talk to me like he couldn't talk to them. He could say anything to me."

Her face was pensive now, her eyes distant.

"It's hard to imagine him with Pavel. How he must have trusted him. I would have given anything-- You know, I thought owning him would be perfect. He loved me, after all, he wanted to please me, and I loved having that power over him, loved how secure I felt." Her eyes refocused on Bran, bright with a sudden, transient gleam of mischief, and in that moment Bran could picture her at twenty, glowing with the pride and pleasure of her new possession. "And it was nice to be able to beat him when he was being impossible.

"But he couldn't... handle it. It was as if he could either relax or behave, but

not both-- not like you, Bran. I've seen you; you're like me, like I was. Every muscle in you relaxes when you know you're doing well. But it scared him to be doing well. It was as if he knew he couldn't keep it up. Praise only made him need more reassurance that if he didn't behave well I'd still love him..."

"And you did," said Bran, aching with jealousy at the sorrowful tenderness in her voice.

"Yes," said Alix, rather wistfully. "I loved him enough to free him. And he married me of his own free will. He does love me very much, in a way. Not the same way he loves his boys. But then, he'll never love anyone in the same way he loved Pavel. We're all damaged goods, Bran. I think we all just love, as best we can, whoever we think can give us what we need. And he needs me."

"What can I give him, mistress?" Bran asked, looking into Alix's eyes. "What can I offer? I don't know what else I can do."

"I don't think there's anything you can do," said Alix quietly. "I think he simply has no room in his life for you. I'm very sorry, Bran."

They sat in silence for a few moments.

"Did he ask you to come in here and talk to me?" Bran asked finally.

"He's worried about you," Alix answered. "Can I tell him you'll be all right?"

"I don't know, mistress," said Bran bitterly. "Do you mind lying to him?"

"Not a bit," said Alix briskly, getting to her feet. "That's part of what he needs me for. The gods know none of you boys seem capable of it."

Bran was getting a headache. He had been taught the basics of reading and writing as a child, but had had so little occasion for it since that deciphering the words, let alone the meaning, of poetry wasn't exactly his idea of a relaxing evening. But poetry was what the book he had randomly plucked earlier, under Holden's curious eye, from the library shelves, had proved to contain. It seemed to have something to do with death, and flowers, and someone grabbing someone by the hair. Bran blinked and looked up, rubbing at his temples irritably. As a distraction from the fact that Holden was now studiously answering letters at the desk while Alix played contentedly with Kit's tow-colored hair, poetry was a failure.

Bran knew he was on his way out— *transitioning* had been Argounov's word. Even so, the presence of the new girl, who kept giving him cheerful grins every time he caught her eye, and Holden and Alix's accompanying shift in evening routine, hadn't bothered him, until Holden had insisted on clarifying the issue. It was considerate of him, but Bran could have done without that clarity.

Nothing seemed to have changed between them in the week since. Holden treated Bran with as much casual affection as ever, and Bran responded as naturally. But he slept with difficulty, and his dreams when he did sleep were troubled not-quite-nightmares where strangers stroked his body possessively while asking questions or giving orders in a language he didn't understand, or he found himself bound and gagged in the back seat of the car while someone— Valor, Jer, Kit— cheerfully drove him away from the house. What was constant was that he could not make anyone understand what was surely all a mistake, and he woke anxious and unhappy, reluctant to go back to sleep even if it were the middle of the night. He wished he need not always sleep alone— often on those nights he thought wistfully of the night when Holden had come to his room to soothe his nightmare and fallen asleep with Bran clasped close in his arms. Once Holden had asked him, with a sharp eye to his occasional lassitude and the dark shadows that had begun to develop under his eyes, if everything was all right, and Bran longed to confide the problem of his troubled nights in his master. But pride, and a

certain taut determination to show Holden how very little trouble he was to keep, prevented him. He only said he had been sleeping very lightly and waking easily, and Holden did not press the issue. Bran tried not to let himself hope that if the problem persisted, Holden might worry enough to come to him some night.

Yves was reading an alarmingly thick book with every sign of absorption. Bran scowled back down at his own book, sleep threatening behind his eyes.

“How’s our girl?” Holden asked Greta, who was smiling over a letter in Valor’s sprawling, exuberant hand.

“She has a crush on her friend’s brother,” said Greta, laughing a little. “Actually, she describes herself as ‘madly in love.’”

“That was quick,” said Alix, amused. “Is it mutual?”

“She hasn’t said. Oh, here we are— ‘I know David is The One,’ capitalized and underlined, ‘and he feels the same way about me. We have absolutely everything in common. Lisa is thrilled,’ underlined, ‘but we haven’t told anyone else yet, not even Lord Kareyev.’”

“What?” said Holden sharply.

“I don’t know what they haven’t told anyone,” said Greta, scanning further. “Maybe they’re already engaged.”

“Over my dead body, she’s too young,” said Holden automatically. “No— what was that name you said?”

“David?”

“No,” said Holden impatiently. “The last name.”

“Oh, the father’s name?” Greta looked back down at the letter. “Kareyev.”

“She doesn't mention his first name, does she?”

“No, master,” said Greta, puzzled. “Why, do you know him?”

Holden sat still for a moment, lost in thought, then said "No."

He turned and picked up another letter from his desk.

"Something from Nikol," he said, and Alix nodded absently. Bran bent his head to the poem again. *Queer something death to something me by the way, Your blossom deem me, grip me by the hair, One something moment, on a silly dare, From—*

A clatter startled Bran; he looked up in time to see Holden, standing, his chair toppled behind him, his face white and taut. Bran watched as he crumpled the letter in his hand, threw it furiously in Alix's direction, and stormed out of the room.

Alix, looking only mildly surprised, put one comforting arm around an alarmed Kit, murmuring soothingly to her as she smoothed out the letter with her other hand and read it quickly.

“Stay here, dear,” she said to Kit, rose and hurried out after Holden.

“What now?” said Yves, sounding more resigned than worried. “Bran, where are *you—?*”

Bran paid no attention as he went after his master and mistress.

Neither of them saw him when he came out of the hallway into the dim foyer, where Holden was putting on his boots while Alix stood, holding the letter in one hand and watching him with pity on her face. Bran stood with his back against the wall, half in shadow, watching.

“That sick son of a bitch,” said Holden, yanking a boot on so viciously Bran thought the leather would split. “I’ll kill him.”

“Holden, he means well,” said Alix softly. “He thinks Jer would be happier with you. It’s rather— sweet, in a way.”

“Sweet,” Holden repeated incredulously, straightening up and rounding on his wife. “Yeah, Alix, that’s the sweetest damn letter I’ve ever read. Dear Holden, Jer is too old and ugly for me to keep around any more, so I thought *you* might want him. Love and kisses--”

“He didn’t say that,” said Alix wearily.

“What’s the difference? Jer is *my* age, Alix, as if it weren’t enough of a *fuck you* to offer him to me after all these years now that he’s, in dear Nikol’s charming phrase, *past his prime*, there’s the ever so delicate insinuation that so am I, that even if Nikol had given enough of a shit about me in the first place to keep me instead of dumping me off on *you* like another one of the baubles you took a fancy to at his place, he’d sure as hell be looking for somewhere to dump me *now!*”

“I’m sure that’s not what he meant to convey,” said Alix. “He just didn’t think, Holden. You know how he is.”

“You’re damn straight I know how he is, I ought to, I belonged to the asshole for long enough, and so did you! Why the hell are you defending him?”

“I’m not defending him,” said Alix softly. “I just think you take things too personally.”

“Too--” With terrifying suddenness, Holden grabbed the front of Alix’s high-necked blouse and ripped; Bran cringed against the wall as buttons went flying and Alix gasped. Holden jabbed a finger at the center of Alix’s chest, where a livid, complicated scar showed against her skin even in the

half-light. "He chiseled his fucking name onto you, Alix. That's kind of personal, don't you think? Intimate, even. NIKOL in scar tissue where I have to look at it every time I undress my fucking wife."

"I wanted it," said Alix steadily.

"You wanted it because it meant he'd never sell you."

"And he didn't sell me."

"I give up," said Holden, releasing her with a gesture as violent as the one with which he had seized her. "You're hopeless. I could murder you in your sleep and your ghost would come back from Valhalla just to assure me you didn't bear any ill will. I'll be back."

"Wait," Alix said, drawing the edges of her ruined blouse together over her scarred chest as Holden turned towards the door.

"Wait for what? Do you think Jer's spending another fucking night in that house?"

"No," said Alix gently. "But if you go now, and Nikol looks at you crosswise, you'll brain him with a chair leg, and that won't do any of us any good. I'll go, love. I'll bring Jer home to you, I promise. Just give me five minutes to change my shirt."

"Alix--" Holden suddenly looked very tired, and older than usual. "All right. Thank you."

"Why else do you keep me around?" said Alix wryly, still holding the edges of her blouse together as she lifted her face to Holden's kiss before turning and disappearing up the stairs.

When she was gone, Holden sank down as if exhausted on the second step, then saw Bran, huddled against the wall.

“Bran,” he said, startled. “What are you doing there? Come here.”

Bran came on unsteady legs. He had seen Holden and Alix quarrel often enough, the flares of Holden's passionate temper leaping and spending themselves quickly against Alix's cool exasperation, but the scene he had just witnessed had shaken him. Though he would not have blushed at stumbling on anyone in the house naked, or even mid-coital, the thought of Alix's scar, livid between the edges of her torn clothing, filled him with an obscure and fearful shame, as something he had had no right to see. He hesitated for a moment before kneeling on the floor at Holden's feet. Holden put a hand on his shoulder.

“How long were you there?” he asked.

“The whole time, master,” said Bran guiltily.

Holden nodded and looked away.

“I've got to start looking for a buyer for you, kid,” he said after a pause.

“What?” said Bran in disbelief. “Master, no, please, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have eavesdropped, but—“

“Bran,” said Holden, looking down at him with a strange expression in the half gloom. “It's not a punishment, sweetheart. It's just that I'm going to have my hands full here in a bit. Yves and Jer get along okay, but— and under the circumstances, I don't think Jer's going to handle me dividing my time between him and a pretty teenager that well. You're ready anyway; you've adjusted so well, I've just been putting off the next step because I enjoy you so much. But now—”

Bran clutched at his master's knees in a sudden desperate gesture.

“Please,” said Bran. “Master, please. I’m *not* ready.”

“Sure you are,” said Holden soothingly. “You’re just nervous.”

“No, master, I– I mean, please don’t make me leave you, I can’t stand the thought of belonging to anyone else, I– please.”

“Bran,” said Holden, much too gently. “We talked about this.”

Bran dropped his head on Holden’s knees, half to avoid his master’s face, half to hide his own.

“Shit, kid,” Holden said worriedly, and his hand was warm on the back of Bran’s neck. “I’ve got to get you past this. Look– it’s a long process, all right? No one’s just going to show up and take you home with him. I’ll have someone over to meet you, and he’ll–”

He trailed off and Bran lifted his head as Alix passed by them on soft footsteps down the stairs, wearing a different blouse. Bran saw the high neckline with new eyes, remembering that all her clothing was made that way– even her nightgowns clasped her throat with a soft folded collar. Holden hesitated, watching her as she moved across the atrium and out the front door, as silently and sure-footedly as a ghost in the dimness, and closed it behind her without a sound.

“And afterwards,” he resumed finally, but slowly, fumbling for his train of thought, “you can tell me what you thought of him... and I’ll decide whether to follow up. If anyone... spooks you, he’s out of the running, even if he’s our best customer. *Especially* if he’s our best customer, considering the way you deal with being spooked. It wouldn’t do much for our reputation if you ran away on your first day after the sale.”

Bran couldn’t smile.

“Will it definitely be a man, then?” he asked in a small voice.

Holden looked down at him, surprised. “We haven’t trained you for women, so it would take a bit longer to get you ready for one, unless she had... specialized tastes. Why, do you have a preference?”

Whatever takes longer, Bran thought desperately, though in the next moment he wasn’t even sure of that. If he had to be sold, it might be better to just get it over with. No matter how hard he tried not to be any trouble, Jer would be here in a matter of hours, and from now on. And just like that, Bran would go from luxury plaything (had his master really said *because I enjoy you so much?*) to worrisome encumbrance, to be shifted as soon as possible. That was what Holden would see now when he looked at him, what he would think: *I’ve got to find a buyer...* Bran lowered his head again to his master’s lap, unable to keep his face from twisting with a sick and helpless rage: at Argounov for the letter he had written, at Jer for existing, and at Holden, for making room so instantly and unquestioningly for someone else in the life that held no room for Bran.

Holden stroked his back and Bran closed his eyes, trying not to think about anything but the touch. Holden’s generosity with physical affection had comforted and calmed him ever since Holden first offered it in the car on the way home from Dunaev’s, back when any touch that didn’t actually hurt was such an unexpected kindness that Bran was ready to weep with gratitude. He would have done anything then for the promise of what Holden was offering him now: a new owner, picked from a list of those who had proven themselves responsible and gentle towards slaves; even a voice in the matter, if a limited one. Now here he was, a bare five weeks later, cringing from the prospect, begging for more from the man who had offered him far more than he had any right to expect. Begging for *love*. *Spoiled brat*, Bran told himself. He meant to lift his head and apologize, but his head felt heavy, he was more tired than he had realized, and Holden’s hand was so gentle on his back, his cheek pillowed so securely on his master’s thigh, that in a moment more he had drifted off to sleep.

Laura Argounova was stroking him, kissing the back of his neck, her red hair pouring over her shoulders as she turned him to face her.

“Such a fine strapping young man,” she said, opening her legs. “Fuck me, Yves.”

Bran tried to explain that he wasn't Yves, but Valor grew impatient and turned him over, her cock pressing between his legs. “Then I'll show you how, stupid...”

Women didn't have cocks, so of course it wasn't Valor behind him, it was her husband. He touched Bran's back gently. Bran turned his head and saw the gleam of the scalpel.

“You want it,” said Argounov. “It means I love you.”

“No,” said Bran, but he hesitated before struggling, confused, because he'd said I love you, and the blade cut softly into his back.

CHAPTER 12

Drifting in and out of uneasy dreams filled with voices both real (Yves', sounding upset, Holden's low explanatory murmur) and imagined, Bran must have slept for some time, because when he woke with a start and sat up, it was just as the front door opened and Jer came in behind Alix, still dressed in the white tunic he'd worn as a member of Nikol's household, his face a composed blank, expressionless as a wall. He looked at Holden without a change in affect, but Holden was already on his feet and in a few eager strides had his arms around the other man, hugging him close. Jer tensed for a moment, then relaxed into the embrace, laying his head down on Holden's shoulder as a brief spasm crossed the controlled features. Holden was already talking, his tone urgent and tender.

"Jer, sweetheart. He's an idiot. I'm so sorry. But I'm glad, because I finally get to have you. I've always loved you— you know that, don't you?— I've always wanted you here with me. And now I've got you."

"And only about ten years after I was last worth having," said Jer dully. "Though it's nice of you to pretend otherwise."

"Don't you fucking dare talk like that to me," said Holden fiercely, grasping Jer by the shoulders and holding him at arm's length. "Do you know I'm older than you are?"

"By all of two and a half months, I think," said Jer with the ghost of a smile.

"So? Did you lose all interest in me ten years and two months ago?"

The smile became more pronounced, though it still didn't reach Jer's eyes. "If I had, it wouldn't be very diplomatic to say so *now*, would it— master?"

"I don't give a shit *what* you say," said Holden roughly. "Your ass is mine now, and if you think it or any other part of you is too old to turn me on—" He gripped Jer's hips and took a step forward, pressing their pelvises

together, as he had done with Bran some weeks ago. Jer was startled into a real if momentary grin. "I have every intention of proving otherwise."

"You're just fantasizing about that kid," said Jer, his eyes drifting over Holden's shoulder to where Bran sat silently watching from the floor. "What's his name. Bran."

Holden didn't even glance in Bran's direction.

"What I'm fantasizing about," he said, "is getting you the hell out of *this*." He flicked contemptuously at the white tunic.

"Oh, yes," Jer said vaguely. "You'll want me in green."

"Eventually," said Holden, turning Jer firmly around and nearly dragging him up the stairs.

Alix came and offered Bran a hand to help him up. He took it and scrambled to his feet, hoping for a word or at least a sympathetic look from her.

"You should go to bed," she said, already turning away.

Bran went.

The next morning no one came to wake him. He hurried down to breakfast, a little late, to find Holden's place empty, and another empty place set, presumably for Jer. Kit caught him looking and, inexplicably, winked. Bran glared at her. Yves looked pale but composed. No one spoke a single word for the entire meal.

Bran was in the library later that morning, staring at the bookshelves, when Jer came in, in green.

“Hi,” he said tentatively.

Bran looked back at him with the same blank stare he had been giving the shelves.

“So you pretty much hate me, huh?” said Jer philosophically, sitting down opposite Bran. “Okay. I guess it’s because you’re getting sold early to make room for me.”

“I’m not getting sold *early*,” said Bran coldly. “He said I was ready. And I don’t hate you.”

“Wow,” said Jer ruefully. “I think the temperature in here just dropped thirty degrees. If you pull that face and voice on the right master, you can have them scrambling to figure out what’s wrong without ever realizing you’re doing it on purpose.”

“I’m not doing it on purpose,” said Bran, even more coldly. “And I’m not taking slave lessons from *you*.”

“Hey,” said Jer, looking away. “Try to keep it above the belt.”

“Okay, I’m sorry,” said Bran. “But– Jer? You know what you said when we met before, about manipulation, about everything being manipulation? It didn’t– it doesn’t work, does it?”

“It should work for you,” said Jer, cocking an eyebrow. “It only quit working for me because I’m way past my expiration date. You’re eighteen and clear-eyed and lithe-limbed. You should be able to get anything you want.”

“I can’t,” said Bran with difficulty. “I tried.”

“Tried for what?” Jer asked curiously.

“To—“ Bran looked down. “To make him love me.”

“Oh,” said Jer. “*Oh*. So *that's* why you hate me. Here you are in the first flush of romance, and here's me, jaded old wreck that I am, and he loves me, not you. It's not fair, is it? Sorry.” He paused and gave a strange little chuckle. “But not that sorry. I kind of needed to win this one.”

“It's not a competition,” said Bran, hating himself for having shown weakness in front of this mocking man.

“Yes it is,” said Jer definitely. “It's always a competition. I'm sorry, Bran, but it is. He had time for you, and now he doesn't. That's how it goes. My—Argounov didn't have time for his wife and Alix, both, so out Alix goes. Pavel gets married and out Holden goes. I know you don't believe me, because you're eighteen and you think love conquers all. Well, maybe it does, but there's never enough to go around. Someone always gets fucked over. Maybe this time it's you. And I'm sorry about that, I am. But—“

Unexpectedly, he swallowed and leaned forward a little. Bran looked into the aging face, still strangely, boyishly rounded, the tell-tale lines at the eyes and on the forehead and down the cheeks. Jer wasn't that old, really. Younger than Holden— and Holden wasn't old. But Jer looked older. Or maybe, Bran thought, he only looked more hurt, and for longer.

“You don't understand. You have— everything— your whole life ahead of you, your whole future, youth, beauty, even— ideals. My life hasn't been easy, Bran, and this— there's no way you could understand how I feel right now. Like a carcass. Like I've died and they're discussing over my head how to dispose of the body and the only one who realizes there's someone still *in* here is—“ He looked up into Bran's eyes, and his own pleaded for understanding. “I need him, Bran. More than you do.”

Bran nodded, shaken by the glimpse of bottomless hurt in those slate-gray eyes.

“I understand,” he said. “I do. I’m really glad– you have this. I’m even glad he loves you. I just wish– “

“Oh, hell,” said Jer. “You really are a sweet kid. I’m sorry I’m such a cynical bastard, Bran. I didn’t mean to get this fucked up. It just happens sometimes.”

“Hey,” said Holden from the doorway. “Who’s saying you’re fucked up?”

“Me,” said Jer, and Bran liked the way Jer’s face relaxed as he smiled at Holden. “We’re being civil. Actually, he’s being downright nice, and I’m trying not to claw his big, limpid eyes out.”

“Good,” said Holden, approaching Jer and leaning down to kiss him. “That would kill his resale value. Speaking of which, Bran, I’ve got someone coming in this afternoon who might be interested in buying you.”

Bran almost choked. “*This* afternoon?”

“I just spoke with him on the phone. He’s very anxious to meet you. There will be quite a demand once it’s known I’m looking for a buyer; I gave Taganov the chance to be the first. He’s a good man, Bran.”

“Master...” Bran whispered hopelessly.

Jer shifted uncomfortably as Holden came to stand by Bran, looking down at him with compassion. He put a hand on Bran’s shoulder, but Bran held himself stiffly instead of moving into the touch as he usually did.

“All you have to do is meet him, Bran,” said Holden gently. “Give him a chance. You might like him more than you think. I know you’re scared right now, and I don’t blame you, transitions are hard, but don’t you think it might help to meet someone and be able to at least– imagine a future away from here? A more permanent one? If you hate him, you’ll never have to see him again. And who knows? You might love him.”

Bran nodded, though the words stabbed. "May I go now, master? I need— I guess I need some time alone. To get used to the idea."

"Of course," said Holden. "You're a good boy, Bran."

"Thank you, master," said Bran, getting up and leaving the room without looking back.

"Holden— I mean, master," he heard Jer say behind him, and he paused out of sight in the hallway, listening, "you're not selling him just because of me, are you?"

"No, not just because of you," said Holden. "Why?"

"I don't know. When you said that about a buyer, he looked so stricken and... and young. I'd feel sort of shitty if it was all my fault. Hell, I don't mind having him around. He was here first. If you were going to like him better, you already would, right?"

"Right," said Holden affectionately. "I'm glad you feel that way, sweetheart. I've still got to sell him, though. He's been getting too attached to me, and I'm pretty sure that's only going to get worse the longer I keep him."

"He seems pretty far gone," Jer agreed.

"You know how kids are," said Holden. "I'm glad you don't mind having him around, because it might take me awhile to find the right buyer and get him resigned to the idea, and I hate the idea of rushing him. But I really have got to get the process started."

"Yeah," said Jer. "Okay. Just so I don't have to feel responsible when he gets that kicked-puppy expression."

"You don't," said Holden, rather sadly. "I'm the one kicking him. I just wish

he could understand that it really is for his own good.”

Bran moved silently away down the hall.

Pausing at the foot of the stairs, he listened. Judging from occasional high-pitched shrieks from behind its closed door, Kit and Alix were in the training room. A low murmur of voices from the kitchen indicated that Yves and Greta were both in there, perhaps commiserating on their mutual if temporary abandonment. Bran went up the stairs as noiselessly as possible, and slipped into his master and mistress' bedroom, where, swiftly though with fumbling, sweaty hands, he went through the armoire, pulled out a respectable, inconspicuous blue tunic and folded it under his arm. He moved quickly from the room and into his own room, where he pushed the tunic under his mattress, beside the knife.

He thought of both as Holden led him, that afternoon, into the more formal parlor, where Taganov, a tall, lean young man, perhaps in his late twenties, rather dressily clad, sat waiting for him.

“Oh, wow,” he said, looking at Bran. “Come here, Bran.”

Bran went obediently and stood before the other man, his eyes appropriately lowered and his hands clasped behind him in the form Holden had taught him. Taganov reached up to caress his face and Bran stood absolutely still, fighting not to shrink away from the too-familiar touch.

For fuck's sake, Bran, he told himself, you're a sex slave, not a fucking bride.

“Kneel for me,” said Taganov, and Bran sank gracefully to his knees, hands still clasped and head still lowered. Taganov cupped his chin and turned it upwards, and Bran looked into the young nobleman's face. Longish dark-red hair framed an interested face with delicate features, pale smooth skin and frank, light blue eyes. It wasn't a cruel face, at least. But of course it wouldn't be; Holden wouldn't sell him to anyone cruel.

Taganov looked past Bran at Holden. “Shy, isn't he?”

“Very,” said Holden. “He's had a hard time, you know, and he's naturally a bit reserved until he knows he can trust you. But once he does— he's got the most gorgeous smile. It will break your heart.”

Bran kept his eyes on Taganov's face, though he wanted to turn and look at Holden.

“Might take some time, though?” said Taganov kindly. “That's all right. He's quite a beauty, even with that serious look. Could I see him naked?”

Bran swallowed. Taganov caught the slight convulsive movement and, before Holden could speak, said quickly, “Never mind. Later, maybe. But he isn't scarred anywhere, is he? Or permanently damaged in any way?”

“Luckily, no,” said Holden. “His former masters did at least have enough sense to refrain from that.”

“And he's fully trained? Sexual service, all that?”

“Fully. Unless there's anything specialized you'd like us to teach him.”

“Oh, I'm easy,” said Taganov lightly. “Nothing but the basics for me. I don't even hit. Have you got anyone else looking at him?”

“You're the first,” said Holden. “He's too precious to offer to anyone without the taste to appreciate him.”

Bran went hot at the adjective; to his surprise and amusement, Taganov also blushed slightly. “Aren't you kind. Bran?”

“My lord?” said Bran, a little hoarsely.

“Will you do something for me?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Bran, who found himself rather liking this oddly awkward young man, “if my master gives me leave.”

“Will you give me a kiss?”

Bran did turn then to look at Holden, who was leaning against the wall, watching closely; he nodded. Taganov leaned down and Bran lifted up his face obediently. The kiss was gentle, Taganov's lips dry and slightly cool; Bran parted his own lips in a wordless offer, and Taganov deepened the kiss almost shyly. Bran kissed back dutifully. Eventually Taganov pulled back, looking pleased. Bran lowered his eyes.

“That was nice,” said Taganov. “Look at me, Bran. You look very somber.”

“I'm sorry, my lord,” said Bran guiltily, looking up into the young nobleman's kind blue eyes, but he could not muster a smile.

“There's nothing to be sorry for,” said Taganov. “You're shy, all right, but that was a lovely kiss. He *is* a treasure, Holden. And I think he likes me. That's enough for now. Next time I'll bring Mona; maybe she'll be able to coax a smile out of him.”

“Maybe,” said Holden, amused. “Come here, Bran.”

Bran rose and went to stand before his master. Holden put an arm around him, kissing him quickly— but not perfunctorily— on the lips.

“Good boy,” he said. “You may go.”

Bran bent his head, his master's kiss burning on his lips, then hurried from the room and slipped quietly upstairs, listening all the way.

Shoes were the most nerve-racking step. He wouldn't get far without them,

but they wouldn't fit under the mattress and were far too likely to be spotted or missed if he took them too soon. There was no time to try them on, but he and Holden were much of a size and he trusted they would fit well enough to serve. He stashed the pair he had chosen under his bed, moving away from it just in time; little Kit, her face pink with whatever Alix had been doing with her, came hurrying in and plopped down on the bed. Bran flinched.

"You met the buyer!" she said excitedly. "Will you tell me all about him? Was he nice? Did you like him? Is he going to buy you?"

"He was nice," said Bran tensely. "I liked him. I don't know yet if he's going to buy me."

"Aren't you excited?" Kit demanded, wide-eyed.

"Ecstatic," Bran snapped. "Don't you see me jumping for joy? Piss off."

Kit stared at him, her eyes huge with hurt. Bran sighed.

"I didn't mean to be nasty," he said. "I'm just nervous, I guess." That was true enough, especially with Kit sitting on his bed, on top of everything he had carefully stolen.

"But you said he was nice," Kit protested. "I don't understand why you don't want to talk about it. And why are you mad at me?"

"I'm sorry, Kit. I'm not mad at you. I'm just in a bad mood."

"You're always in a bad mood when I'm around," said Kit, almost tearfully. "You act like you don't like me, and I've never done anything to you! I'm nice to you! I don't even take *his* attention away, but you act like I did something bad to you just by existing!"

After a moment, Bran sat down beside the unhappy girl on the bed and put an arm around her; she stiffened but did not shake him off. "Kit, did your

parents ever tell you bedtime stories?"

"My mom did," said Kit sulkily. "But she died when I was seven."

"But you remember the stories she told you, right? Like, Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess named Kit?"

Kit peered up at him. "That's not a story."

"No? She never told you the one about the adorable princess who lived in the castle with her terrible, wicked foster brother Bran?"

Kit cracked a smile. "No."

"Really? And how the little princess smiled all the time and was happy and fun and friendly, and everyone loved her, except her evil, awful foster brother, who was horribly jealous of her because a witch had placed a curse on him at birth."

"What curse?" Kit asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

"The terrible curse of the bad attitude," said Bran solemnly. "The princess had a wonderful, glorious, sparkling attitude in every color of the rainbow, and everyone said ooh and ahh and what a great attitude! But her brother had such a bad attitude that even the king, whose special pet he was, just sighed when he saw it and said, 'It will get better with time, my boy.'"

"I do have a good attitude," said Kit defiantly.

"What a coincidence," said Bran, "you're just like the princess in the story."

Kit lowered her eyebrows at him, but she was trying not to smile. "I'm fifteen, Bran, not five."

"I'm just trying to fill in the gaps in your education," said Bran. "So do you

want to hear all about the buyer, or what?"

He lay still after the house had gone to sleep, wide awake, thinking about Kit's smile after he told her of Taganov's gentle kiss, about the kiss itself, about Jer's eyes, gray and wide and full of bewildered pain. He didn't think of Holden, except to worry vaguely: if anyone came to him in the night—

No one did. He waited until an hour after all movement in the house ceased, then dressed himself carefully in tunic and boots, stuck the knife in his belt, and crept inch by inch down the stairs and out the front door, which Holden and Alix no longer bothered to dead-bolt from the inside. With any luck, he'd have six hours' head start before anyone noticed he was missing. It was a night of bright moonlight, and he knew his direction, and as he walked away from the house, running down the checklist— clothed, shod, dry, unrestrained, and unobserved— he congratulated himself on a fairly auspicious start.

CHAPTER 13

The sun was high overhead when, deep in a forest out of sight of the city of Tenarus, exhausted, hungry and beginning to suspect he was going in circles, Bran first allowed himself to seriously consider the possibility that he wasn't going to find the place.

For the thousandth time he dragged up the memory, faded and essentially worthless but still somehow comforting, like the scrap of his mother's old dress that he had carried secretly after her death. He could still picture the girl, skinny and high-cheekboned, older than him (had he been fifteen? or already sixteen?), with large, piercing green eyes that glinted even in the darkness of the sleeping quarters at Oreskovich's. Cats' eyes, Bran had thought, and her hair was black and short and sleek like a cat's fur, and once he had actually heard her hiss at Oreskovich, a wordless spit of contempt that got her knocked dizzy and bleeding to the ground. Not for the first time. An unlucky girl, wild and rebellious, dangerous to know. Bran tried to see himself at the time, younger, softer, still with some semblance of faith that if he behaved himself, things would eventually get better.

Try as he might, Bran couldn't remember the girl's name. Oreskovich had usually addressed her with such tender epithets as "bitch" and "cunt," and Bran couldn't remember ever having spoken her name himself. He was practically certain it had started with an L. Leila? Lana? Lisa?

She hadn't bothered much with him in any case, not until that one night when she moved close to him in the dark on the floor where they both slept, put her thin arms around him like a lover, and whispered in his ear.

Bran, can you keep a secret?

He had frozen, and then, half mad with loneliness but still too scared to speak aloud, nodded. She felt the motion of his head. Her breath was hot on his cheek.

There's a big forest outside the city, her voice rasped against his ear. (Which city? He couldn't remember. Was he even in the right forest?) There's a house there. People who help you. If you've run away.

Bran hadn't answered, hadn't asked how she knew, hadn't even moved. He was too frightened. They both knew what happened to runaways who were caught.

I know you're not ready to come with me tonight, she whispered. But it's there, okay?

She kissed him softly on the cheek, her arms slipped from around him, and she was gone.

And next morning she really *was* gone, their master in a towering rage, and he'd never seen her again. Had certainly never, in his three idiotic, panic-driven runaway attempts, gotten as far as the forest. If this was even the right forest.

He had known from the beginning, of course, that it wasn't likely he'd make it. Even if the place really existed, even if he made it as far as the forest, even if it was the right forest. It was a big forest, and it wasn't as if Bran was trained in wood-craft. He was soft, an indoor slave. The kitchen knife he had stolen had been more of a gesture to some unknown observer— *look, I even thought of this*— than anything he seriously believed he'd be able to use to defend himself. He'd probably be eaten by any number of wild animals, or poisoned when he got too hungry to resist any likely-looking plants, or die of exposure, before he found the place. Even if there really was a place.

Still, he'd made himself hope, made himself plan as if he'd reach it. He wasn't suicidal. It took the thought of a real if hazily imagined destination— *people who help you*— to keep him planning his escape at all. He'd even thought about meeting the girl again. How proud of him she'd be. *Little Bran, all grown up. Only took you three years.* If she'd made it. If the place was real. If this was the right forest.

He shook his head to dislodge the thoughts that were becoming obsessive and made himself walk on, after cutting a strip of bark from a familiar-looking tree with his knife. As long as he was walking, he might as well be sure he was getting somewhere new.

He cursed when he passed the tree again, and sank down miserably at its root, too tired and frustrated to walk on. Immediately, as if they'd been panting at his heels and his pause to rest had let them catch up, he was flooded with nightmare images of his immediate future— of the oncoming night, the dark, the animals. Worse, of possible pursuit. Or lack thereof.

Holden and Alix would have discovered he was missing by now. He hadn't let himself think yet of their reaction. Holden would be furious, of course, would rail at Alix while she tried to calm him down. She'd be angry too, but more practical. What would she say they must do? Alert the authorities to his escape? Try to think where he might have gone? (He'd never told anyone what the girl had said. They wouldn't think of the forest, surely.) Would they go to Dunaev, to Oreskovich, looking in vain for parents, for anyone he might think to run to? Or would they simply write him off as a loss?

Bran had to admit to himself that this last seemed most likely. A fourth escape attempt, when he had come to them with two on his record and made a third within fifteen minutes of his arrival at their home... and this one was a thousand times worse than the others. They'd discover his thefts: the clothes, the shoes, the knife; they'd know this one was premeditated. And Bran had no illusions. After all they'd done for him, after Holden had developed such faith in him, been so sure he was doing well that he'd actually put him on the market, this would not be forgiven.

If they did come after him, then, it would most likely only mean a quick and merciful death, as opposed to the lingering one he was likely to enjoy if they didn't. Holden might retain enough gentleness towards him, even now, to want to give him that. Not that he knew where Bran was, but if Holden *did* still care enough to worry, there were plenty of places where a runaway

slave could end up praying for death to end it. But the trouble of a pursuit, for someone who would only be discarded anyway... he wasn't sure he'd be looked for at all. And he was pretty sure that even if he was, he wouldn't be found. So.

There was, of course, one completely insane but unkillable spark of hope in him that he would be found and given another chance. Any punishment, however savage, would be worth it and more if it meant he'd be taken back into the household, that the process of retraining would begin over again, buying him time, Holden's time. But, realistically... Bran gave a small sigh. If Holden didn't have time for a well-behaved kid, he certainly didn't have time to spend breaking in a near-hopeless reprobate.

But he had gone over all this already, quite sensibly, before he made up his mind to run. It was only the pictures that were more vivid now, harder to resist as he grew hungrier and more discouraged. He hauled himself wearily to his feet, determined to keep moving at least until dark.

He stopped again, though it was still only late afternoon, when he came to an oak whose roots supported an overhang above a hollow just large enough for a boy to creep into. Too tired to keep his promise, even to himself, Bran crept gratefully in, lay still, and, despite everything, fell immediately into a dreamless sleep.

"Wake up, boy," said a woman sharply, shaking his shoulder. Bran opened his eyes, tried to figure out where he was, remembered, and gasped, staring up at the woman with considerable trepidation. She was thin and muscular, with graying mousy hair cut in a short practical bob, a rough homespun smock belted with rope, and a businesslike manner.

"It's okay," she said. "I'm here to help. You're a runaway, right?"

Bran blinked at her, petrified.

"It's okay," she said again. "I can take you somewhere safe. My name's Tara. My brother and I live nearby. Come on. Are you okay? Can you walk?"

Bran struggled to his feet, brushing off leaves and dirt. The sun was low in the west. Tara looked him up and down carefully.

"Are you hurt?" she asked briskly.

"No," said Bran, his wits slowly returning. "Are you— are you the people in the forest who— who help you if you've run away?"

Tara smiled at him then, a brief pleased grin. "That's us. Come on, walk with me. It will be dark soon."

She set a brisk pace; Bran hurried after.

"Will your owner have people out looking for you?" she asked, glancing efficiently about as if ready to dispatch possible pursuers with her bare hands. Bran glanced at the hands in question; they were large and square, and looked quite capable of knocking out at least a smallish pursuer unaided.

"I... don't know," he said, speeding his steps despite his weary muscles.

"Okay. Just walk fast. It's not too far."

"Yes, ma'am," said Bran, impressed with her air of authority.

"Don't call me ma'am," she said sharply. "It's Tara."

Bran walked quickly after her as she picked her way with astonishing speed and ease through the tangle of woods. They walked for some little time as dusk fell around them-- long enough for Bran, still hungry and sore, to take serious if silent exception to her claim that it wasn't far— but he made himself keep up with the strange woman. He felt oddly numb to his good

luck. He should have been euphoric-- he'd been found, Lily or whatever her name was had been right, he was well on his way to a successful escape, after all this time-- but he felt nothing but his hunger and fatigue, and a negative sort of relief. At least he wouldn't be eaten by a bear.

Finally they came in sight of a small house in a clearing, its windows glowing cozily against the dark trees. Tara strode up to the door, produced a key, and unlocked it, turning to Bran.

"Come on," she said, and Bran stepped nervously inside.

The room he entered was large and had an airy feel to it, despite the fact that the only windows were small and high up. A grizzled man sat at a workbench at one side of the room, carving something of wood, which he set down quickly when Bran and Tara entered. He rose and came forward, smiling.

"Found him asleep under the overhang," said Tara.

"Handy little spot, isn't it?" said the man affably to Bran. "Sit down, lad. You'll be all right now; it's safe here. My name's Karl. My sister and I take in runaways."

Bran glanced around involuntarily for signs of other inhabitants in the small cottage. Karl laughed.

"No, lad, we don't keep them here-- not for longer than we have to, anyway. We'll get you well away. Over the border, where the law can't follow. We've got friends there who can help you get on your feet, start a new life. Here, I'll take that; you won't need it."

He pointed at Bran's knife, whose handle he was absent-mindedly fingering as he looked around. He pulled it out and handed it to Karl, who laid it aside atop a tall chest of drawers.

"Will your owner be looking for you?" Karl asked, turning back to Bran.
"Sit down, sit down. You look exhausted. How long have you been walking?"

"I left home about... one in the morning, sir," said Bran respectfully, and sat down in the chair Karl indicated, looking up at the stranger, who smiled paternally down on him. "And I don't know if they'll be looking for me or not. I'm not— worth much."

Karl nodded understandingly. "Sick? Scarred? Do you need medical attention?"

"No, sir. Just, uh, chronically ill-behaved."

"Were they going to sell you to the retrainers?" Karl asked shrewdly, and Bran flushed, which Karl seemed to take as an affirmative. "But you took the initiative, did you? Bold lad." He sounded admiring. "Did you know we were here?"

"I'd, uh, heard of you," said Bran. "Kind of. Heard there was a place in this forest." Something was odd about what Karl had just said, but he didn't have the energy to figure out what. "Someone told me."

"Good," said Karl, beaming. "Good to know word still gets around. Remember who told you?"

"I can't remember her name," he said sheepishly. "It was two or three years ago— a girl with big green eyes, very very green, sort of cat eyes, and short black hair."

"Lena," said Tara, her face suddenly softer. "You knew her?"

"Not very well," said Bran, "but we belonged to the same person for a while, before she ran away. She was coming here."

“She stayed here a while,” said Tara, rather wistfully, “but she moved on in the end.”

“I’m glad she made it,” said Bran, closing his eyes briefly, then opening them again hastily; the last thing he wanted was to fall asleep now.

“And I’m glad you found us,” said Karl heartily, “–I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

"Bran, sir."

Karl blinked at him for a moment, then looked at Tara as if for confirmation of something.

“Bran,” she repeated, sounding puzzled. “That was the boy. Eighteen. Bought from Dunaev. Three-time runaway. But that was-- what-- six weeks ago?”

Karl nodded, his eyes back on Bran. “Should I call them?”

“I guess you’d better,” said Tara.

Bran belatedly lunged to his feet; Karl stepped much too swiftly in front of him, blocking the exit.

"Don't run," he said gently. "You won't get far. It's dark out, and Tara and I know these woods better than you do. It's all right, Bran. It's going to be all right. Sit down."

Bran sank back, less in conscious surrender than because his legs suddenly seemed to be made of jelly. Karl reached for a telephone that sat on a small end table beside Bran's chair and dialed, as Bran realized too late what had been odd about Karl's mention of “the retrainers.” Someone who knew of Holden and Alix only from the talk of runaway slaves should, of course, have thought and spoken of them as “the slave breakers.” *But that's not what*

we call ourselves.

"Hi, Alix," Karl said into the phone. "It's Karl. Yeah. Yep, he sure is. No, just— oh, hello, Holden. Missing someone?"

He sent an amused glance up at Tara, who cast her eyes at the ceiling in irritation, and patted Bran absently on the hand. Bran stared at the telephone through a darkening mist of despair.

"No, he's fine," said Karl into the phone. "Scared out of his wits at the moment, but— no. Yes. Yes. No, not yet. Oh— now, you mean? Sure, okay."

He held out the receiver to Bran, who stared at it as if it were a hissing snake, then took it and held it to his ear with much the same trepidation.

"Bran?" said Holden's voice.

Bran could not speak.

"Bran, I need you to answer a question, okay? Say okay."

"Okay," Bran whispered obediently.

"Good. I'm about to leave. I can be there in less than an hour if I drive fast. I need you to still be there when I arrive. The question is, do you want me to tell Karl to chain you up? I know you're probably panicking right now; if you feel like you're going to do anything stupid, I'd suggest you say yes."

"Master, I—"

"No small talk, Bran. Trust me, once I get there we'll have a very full discussion of exactly when and how you completely lost your fucking mind. Do you need to be shackled until then, yes or no?"

"Yes," said Bran.

“Good boy,” said Holden. “Now give the phone back to Karl.”

CHAPTER 14

"I hate those things," said Tara, looking with distaste at the manacles that clasped Bran's wrists together behind his back and the shackles that connected his bare feet, which Karl had stripped quite gently of Holden's shoes.

"He asked for them," said Karl, who had produced them rather reluctantly from behind a great deal of other dusty junk in the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers on top of which Bran's knife lay, mocking him.

"I still think they're barbaric," said Tara, "and besides, I was going to ask him to help with dinner."

"I wouldn't let him near anything sharp or hot right now," said Karl, as Bran glared at him.

"He could shell the peas," said Tara. "Though with the way he's shaking they'd go all over the floor."

Karl put a hand on Bran's shoulder. "He *is* shaking. Cheer up, lad. It's going to be all right."

"You keep saying that," said Bran, his voice trembling despite himself. "This is my fourth escape attempt. Do you know what happens to slaves who can't be... retrained?"

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact," said Karl, and Bran could have sworn he detected amusement in the older man's voice.

"Then why?" Bran shouted, goaded past endurance. "Why? Why are you doing this to me? You're some kind of— what, bounty hunters, or something? Tricking people into thinking you're going to help them and then calling their owners on them? You're fucking sick!"

"It's not a trick, Bran," said Karl quietly, sitting down opposite Bran, "and we're not bounty hunters. We do what we said. We take in runaways and help them get out of the country. But we've known Holden and Alix for a long time, and we help each other out."

"You help each other *out*?" Bran yelled. "A runaway shelter and a slave training operation? How does *that* work?"

"When they have a slave who really can't be trained, or retrained," said Tara, and Bran swung around to look at her, "for whatever reason-- too damaged, physically or emotionally, or too pregnant, or completely temperamentally unsuited to slavery, which some are-- I think they would have found Lena was, for that, if they'd ever tried her-- anyway, they give her to us to get out of the country and settled somewhere else. It helps keep up their reputation for exacting standards. In return for our trouble, they keep us up financially. There's no profit in this kind of enterprise, of course, and travel and so on add up. They pay our expenses."

Bran sat stunned, staring from Tara to Karl and back again. Karl nodded.

"They always let us know when they're getting a new kid in," he said, "so we know to look out for them. A lot of fifteen-year-olds try to run away their first week, and one or two have even made it this far. We weren't expecting you, though, not at this point."

"I didn't-- know," Bran managed.

"Well, it's not exactly something they advertise," said Tara dryly. "Naturally everyone assumes that the ones who vanish have gone where problem slaves usually go, or went, before Holden and Alix set up shop. Even their little girl doesn't know about us. Alix says they're waiting until she proves she can keep any sort of a secret."

Karl patted Bran's shoulder. "It's true, lad, so don't look so white-faced. I expect-- since you've got that history of escape attempts-- they'll be wanting

us to get you on out of the country. Incurrible, and all. But he'll want to have a bit of a talk with you first, to see what went wrong. They like to know that."

Bran, huddled as close in on himself as he could in his shackled state, tried to take all this in.

"Is that— did he tell you that?" he asked finally. "That that's what he wants?"

"No," said Karl, giving Bran a curious glance. "He didn't say. I guess he may want to take you back with him. Give you another go, see if he can't hammer out the kinks."

"And you couldn't have *asked* which?" Bran almost laughed, then found himself blinking away tears.

"It will probably depend on that talk when he gets here," said Tara, and got up abruptly. "I'm going to go start dinner."

"Sorry I can't help," said Bran, rattling his chains perversely.

"So am I," said Tara with another displeased look, and disappeared into the kitchen.

With a long, thoughtful glance at Bran, Karl went back to his workbench and continued the carving work he had been doing when Bran came in. Bran was breathing deeply, trying not to cry; he knew from experience that crying while manacled was an almost unbearably humiliating and sticky experience. A few tears escaped nevertheless. An owl hooted outside. Bran looked at the window and saw only the reflection of his own pale, scared face.

"Don't look like that, lad," said Karl pityingly. "Most likely he'll just want to talk to you."

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” said Bran dully.

Lost in thought some unmeasured length of time later, Bran nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of a key in the door.

“That’ll be him,” said Karl, giving Bran a worried glance. “Easy, lad. Don’t faint on me.”

Bran sat stock-still as his master came in and, without stopping to greet Karl, came to stand beside Bran’s chair. Bran kept his eyes on his feet.

"Look at me," said Holden, and Bran obeyed.

Holden reached down and brushed Bran's hair back from his forehead, then touched his cheeks with gentle fingers, smoothing away the residue of tears and catching a fresh one with the pad of his thumb as it threatened to spill over. His eyes, unreadable in an immobile face, rested on Bran's.

"All right then," said Karl, after Holden had stood there silently looking down at Bran for several long moments. "I'll leave you to it. Let me know what you decide."

"Thanks for calling me, Karl," said Holden without taking his eyes off Bran, as Karl shut the door to the kitchen behind him, leaving Holden and Bran alone in the room, and in a silence that lasted until Bran rather wished Holden would hit him.

Instead Holden turned away, then turned back with his jaw clenched, then turned away again as if trying to get himself under control, and when he spoke again, he sounded calm and matter-of-fact.

"I assume Karl and Tara told you what they do for us," he said. Bran nodded numbly. "Is that what you want? You want me to just leave you, go back,

write you off, let them do their thing? I can do that. But first you have to tell me what the hell you were thinking, Bran. I can afford the money loss. But I can't afford to have been completely and utterly wrong about you."

"You weren't," said Bran pleadingly. "I can-- I can explain."

"Please do," said Holden courteously.

"I was scared," Bran began, rather lamely. "Of being sold."

"Okay," said Holden, after a pause, and under his master's measured tone Bran heard the barely controlled anger. "Sure. I know that. Because you think you're in love with me, and you don't want to leave me. And I know being scared makes you stupid. But this wasn't mindless panic, Bran. You planned this. You had time to think. And you're not stupid when you give yourself time to think. So I must be the one who's stupid, because I've been turning this over ever since we realized you were missing this morning, and I still have no idea how you decided the logical solution to the problem of not wanting to leave me was to run *away*."

"Because I couldn't stand the thought of belonging to anyone else," said Bran, and as the tears threatened he dropped his head again and pulled miserably at the manacles, wanting desperately to hide his face in his hands. "I just couldn't. I-- I thought about the money you'd lose, and I'm sorry about that, but I thought it would be worse for your business if you sold someone who couldn't-- couldn't behave himself, couldn't give himself-- and I couldn't, not with anyone but you, not remembering you. I really *would* be-- sullen, and, and, unresponsive. I thought it would be better if, you know, I was just an incorrigible runaway, instead of you selling me to someone in all good faith with your reputation on the line and then I--" He swallowed. "I didn't know what to do, and you don't believe me and you wouldn't want it even if you did and you only ever wanted to get me back on the market, but I love you, I'm sorry, I can't help it, and I didn't want to fuck up your business reputation."

The silence grew. Bran didn't dare look up.

"If I understand you correctly," said Holden finally, "you are claiming to have stolen my clothes and shoes and run away *for my own good*."

"You were going to sell me for my own good," Bran shot back, stung. "Why shouldn't I run away for yours?"

"I'll leave that little paradox to your obviously superior powers of philosophizing," said Holden, "though I suppose the layman's answer would be that I *own* your sorry delinquent ass."

"I know that," said Bran, lifting his tear-stained face defiantly; the faint trace of amusement that underscored Holden's control now was harder to bear than the anger. "But— master, please listen. I did think about this, I really did. You know, Jer keeps saying, I don't know if you've heard him, but he says he used to be like me. Not just young and pretty, but— I don't know— sweet, and not— not all— And I look at him and I see what I could become. If I tried to go on living, serving someone without— without love, or hope or— for years and years, for a lifetime, growing old like that. If you wouldn't keep me, if you were really going to force me to leave you, to go somewhere where I could only *live* by pretending none of the things I feel for you are— are important, or real, or— those are the best things about me, master, they're all for you. Trying to kill them would— it would *break* me. I couldn't— I had to run. If I got caught and killed, okay. I'd rather—" He swallowed. "I'd rather die than belong to anyone but you."

Holden said nothing.

"Anyway," said Bran, suddenly almost too tired to hold his head up. "I tried. And I fucked it up, and now I've wasted even more of your time. I'm sorry you had to come out here, master. I'm sorry for-- for all your trouble."

"The funny part," said Holden finally, and he didn't really sound as if he thought anything was funny, "is that you've probably been the *least*

troublesome delinquent in the history of the business, until now. And now-- Jer needs a fuckton of attention to keep him from collapsing on me every hour about how useless he is, Yves needs a not inconsiderable pile of reassuring that Jer isn't replacing him, I've got a business to run while Alix is busy with Kit, my daughter's coming home for her summer holidays in a week with yet another The One-- and you pick *this* moment to climb a pillar and martyr yourself for calf love. You've got piss-poor timing, Bran."

"I didn't exactly pick the moment," said Bran, closing his eyes wearily.

A hard palm cracked across his face. His eyes snapped back open as he jerked to attention, stunned.

"Don't do that," Holden said tightly. "Don't go all slack like that, you're so pale you look-- and anyway, since you *have* decided to cause me all this trouble you could have the decency to stay awake while I try to figure out what the fuck to do with you. Leaving you here would be such a criminal waste that I think I'd have to retire early from the shame of it, but apparently selling you is going to destroy your soul, while hanging on and trying to babysit you through your first crush is just-- not a good idea. So help me *think*, Bran."

Bran sat listening, his cheek burning with pain from the slap. Holden had never hit him in anger before. It was both frightening and strangely exhilarating; Bran's pulse was racing, and he no longer felt sleepy.

"Why isn't keeping me without selling me a good idea, master?" he asked clearly. "I mean-- if it *is* calf love, if I'm just a stupid kid with a stupid crush, then I'll just... get over it, eventually, right? And then you can sell me. *Then*. I won't fuss, I'm not spoiled, but I just-- maybe I just need time. Like Kai and Greta needed time to get over each other, remember?"

"Kai got over Greta so he wouldn't have to live with *me*, and Greta went into a sulking fit and got herself knocked up," said Holden grimly. "It's not a chapter in history I'm anxious to repeat."

“I promise I won’t get pregnant, master,” said Bran, and Holden, surprised, almost smiled. “So what have you got to lose? If you give up on me now you get nothing— so what have you got to lose?”

“Something, I think,” said Holden, staring at Bran, then shook his head slightly. “How many times do I have to say it? It wouldn’t be fair to you. I don’t have the time right now to give you what you need.”

“Master, I won’t be any trouble, none. I swear by the World Ash, I’ll be so good, you won’t even know I’m around. And Yves and Jer, I’ll do anything they say, I’ll serve them too, I’ll be happy to. You can do whatever you want with me, whenever you want, or just ignore me, I won’t mind, I won’t ask anything of you—”

“Bran, stop it.” Holden had begun to pace restlessly. “Don’t you see it wouldn’t work? It wouldn’t--“

“Be fair to me?” Bran interrupted fiercely. “How is it fair not even to give me a chance? You just assume I couldn’t handle it?”

“I don’t know if you could handle it or not. I was going to say, it wouldn’t matter whether you were asking anything of me or not. Just the fact that you were there would be— you make me too--“

Bran’s mind immediately suggested half a dozen adjectives— *worried, protective, nervous, horny, tired*. He sat with his tongue between his teeth, waiting for Holden to finish his sentence.

“Happy,” said Holden finally.

The word hit Bran harder than Holden’s palm had, knocking the wind out of him. He sat staring at Holden, breathless.

“Oh, yes, you make me ridiculously happy,” said Holden, sounding more

angry than happy at the moment. "I can't ignore you, don't you understand, I'd be wanting to be with you all the time, you're so— and the sound of your voice and the way you look at me, like right now, you look like a damn sunrise, all hope and dawn and light and— fuck, Bran—" He laughed, suddenly, shortly, a queer bark of laughter. "I can't think straight, not with you looking at me like that. I don't— I honestly don't know what's the right thing to do."

"What do you *want*, master?" Bran demanded suddenly. "Forget the right thing. Do you *want* to keep me?"

"Forget the right thing?" Holden repeated incredulously. "Bran, haven't you learned anything in all these weeks of collecting all our depressing stories? You *know* what happens when masters let themselves— What do I want? You're asking me what I want? I want to fucking kill you, you little shit, you put me through absolute hell today, I've been picturing you dead, raped, scared, alone— when Karl called I thought I was going to have a heart attack. I spent the drive over here trying to figure out whether I wanted to beat you senseless or take you in my arms and promise you everything you wanted from me. And it would be so fucking easy, just to make your gorgeous eyes light up. But I don't have the luxury of just doing what I *want* with you, Bran. I have responsibilities. To my family, to Jer and Yves, to the business— and to you, not to make you any promises I can't keep."

"I'm not asking for promises," said Bran, trying his best to keep his voice under control. "I don't need you to write me sonnets or cut your name into my skin. I don't need to be as important to you as your family or Yves or Jer or your business. I don't even need you to— to tell me you love me. Just— please, master. You just said I make you happy. That's all I need. I swear. Please— just take me home."

Their eyes locked, measuring each other's resolve. Holden looked away first.

"If you ever fucking run away again," he said between gritted teeth, "I am

not coming after you.”

Bran laughed, dizzy with adrenaline and the beginnings of a wild, white-hot joy. “Sure *that’s* a promise you can keep?”

Holden stared at him for several moments before seizing Bran by the arm and yanking him roughly upright amid a merry rattle of chains. Bran braced himself for another well-deserved slap, but Holden’s mouth was on his, as violently as a blow, and Bran whimpered as his head was yanked back by the hair and fingers dug into his upper arm hard enough to bruise. Then Holden pulled away, glancing at the door to the kitchen, then back at a panting Bran.

“You insufferable brat,” he said, and his voice nearly made Bran buckle at the knees. “Just you wait until I get you home.”

CHAPTER 15

“This was a mistake,” said Holden grimly, staring at himself for the hundredth time in the mirror over Alix’s dressing table. Bran and Jer exchanged rueful glances as Yves took Holden by the hand and gently turned him away from the mirror.

“You look beautiful,” he said softly.

“I look eighty,” said Holden peevishly. “I swear I’ve aged ten years for every night since Val browbeat us into issuing this dinner invitation.”

“Come on, Dad,” said Valor, catching the tail end of this as she bounded into the room with Greta rather reluctantly in tow. “You’ve got to meet them sometime. And you’re not busy for once, I mean with the business, now that Kit’s placed and that one boy’s birthday isn’t for a week. And David’s the *one*.”

“Yes, daughter mine,” said Holden, running his fingers tensely through his thick, graying dark hair. “You can stop talking me into it now that they are actually on their way. You’re sure the mother is dead?”

“She died in childbirth with Lisa,” Valor confirmed, dropping her mother’s hand and plopping down on the bed between Bran and Jer, who both moved over automatically to accommodate her.

“I like Lisa already,” said Holden darkly.

“Master!” said Greta, scandalized.

“Sorry.”

Valor was running her fingers up and down Bran's spine, more absent-mindedly than lasciviously; lately she seemed to have lost interest even in Yves, preferring to talk at length about David to anyone who would listen or

shut herself up in her room writing long letters to him. The promise of seeing him tonight had clearly energized her. Bran's cock stirred automatically at her touch, but the rest of him paid no attention; he was watching Holden, who ran his fingers distractedly through his hair again, then let his hands drop to his sides and turned to Yves.

“I’m trying to figure out what this fantastically stupid coincidence *means*. Does it already count as cosmic irony, or is that only if she does the right thing by her old dad and drives young David to suicide by her eventual coldness? Which is the only way you can repay me, by the way, young lady, for making me invite Pavel Kareyev over for dinner.”

“Don’t be silly, Dad. He probably won’t even remember you,” said Valor bracingly.

“You’re too kind.”

“I mean he won’t recognize you. That was more than twenty years ago.”

“Valor, darling, please shut up,” said Greta, as they all heard the doorbell chime through the house. Holden bit his lip.

“We’d better go down,” he said. “Alix will let them in, but we can’t leave her stranded with them for too long.”

Greta was looking troubled as well. “Master, are you *sure* you want me sitting at table with the guests? It doesn’t seem appropriate.”

Before Holden could answer, Valor hopped up, ran forward and took her mother by the shoulders.

“Don't be stupid, Mom,” she said tenderly. “You're my mom. Of course you should.”

“It's very sweet of you, love, but--“

“No, no, no buts. We've been over all this, Mom. They know my mother's a slave. It doesn't matter to them. And if David's really the one, he's got to be okay with you right from the beginning, and his family, too. I learned that lesson with Gordon. Come on.”

“She's right, Greta,” said Holden. “And if Pavel's going to recognize me he might as well do it now. I'll be a model of decorum and we can just— Come on, Bran. I'm not a beautiful boy any more, but I can at least have one gazing adoringly up at me.”

Bran moved to get up, trying not to grin; Jer smacked him lightly on the back of the head as he stood.

“Wipe that smirk off your face,” he said, “before I change my mind about being okay with you.”

“Sorry, Jer,” Bran murmured with a convincing look of remorse, and brushed too closely against Jer as he passed so that his hip rubbed lightly against the older man's groin. “Will you let me know how I can apologize? Later tonight, maybe?”

“I said come here, you shameless little slut,” said Holden, as Jer, laughing, smacked Bran again, this time on his ass, and Bran scampered to Holden's side. “I swear I used to tell people you were shy.”

“Not when I'm at home, master,” Bran said cheerfully while Yves reached out and brushed his tousled hair back from his forehead. “But I'll be very shy for company, really.”

“Don't get *too* shy,” said Valor, who was undergoing a similar last-minute smoothing by her mother. “I need you to seduce Lisa for me after dinner, so David and I can, um, talk undisturbed.”

“No one is seducing anyone, before, during, or after dinner,” said Holden

irritably, looking in the mirror again. "I don't care if David Kareyev is the One or the Twelve Dancing Princesses. If I have to sit through a polite evening with the man who broke my young heart, you can damn well sit through an evening without sex."

Jaw set, he held out his arm to Greta, who blushed as she took it awkwardly, and jerked his head to Bran. "Let's go."

Bran hung back respectfully as they entered the formal parlor, where Alix was already seated. A pair of handsome chestnut-haired adolescents, boy and girl, rose a moment before the man seated between them on the divan. Bran examined him, fascinated: so this was Pavel, Holden's first love, and his betrayer. He was still handsome and slender, with an aristocratic profile, a sensitive mouth and large, heavy-lidded hazel eyes that his children had inherited, but he looked at least ten years older than Holden, rather than the three Bran knew separated them. His hair was completely gray, and his face fell into lines of sadness and fatigue. He bowed slightly, lifted his head to greet them and stood perfectly still, staring at Holden.

"Here they are," said Alix.

"I beg your pardon," Kareyev said, confused, and addressing Holden. "You look very like someone I once--"

"Owned?" said Holden, holding out his hand with grave courtesy. "Hello, Pavel."

Kareyev went white to the lips as he stared at Holden, ignoring the outstretched hand. "It can't be."

"Through a curious series of circumstances," said Holden gently, withdrawing his hand, "it is."

“Oh, my God.” Kareyev swallowed. “Holden.”

“Dad?” said the girl beside him, puzzled.

“You must be Lisa,” said Holden. “A pleasure to meet you; Valor's told me so much about you. And this must be David, the young man who's captured Valor's heart. Your father and I were acquainted once, but we haven't seen each other for many years.”

Kareyev suddenly stepped forward and seized Holden's hands in his, searching his face hungrily.

“Holden, I— look at me, look at me, dearest— it's really you. Say something—
“

Holden held the grasping hands, meeting Kareyev's gaze, but said nothing.

“You're angry with me,” said Kareyev, and with a small shock Bran saw that there were tears in his eyes.

“No,” said Holden, and his voice was still calm. “It's too long ago for that. But under the circumstances I don't think it's polite for you to call me ‘dearest.’”

“Of course you're angry, and you should be. But look at you— God, you're still so beautiful, how old are you now, I'm forty-four so you're— forty-one— and you, what, you live here?”

“This is my house,” said Holden politely. “This is my wife. This is my daughter. I believe she knows your daughter.”

For the first time since he had seen Holden, Kareyev seemed to remember that there were other people in the room. He looked around, still clinging to Holden's hands as if for dear life.

"I'm sorry," he said to Alix. "I— I didn't know." He looked back at Holden. "But you knew, you're not surprised, you were expecting me— why didn't you write me, why didn't you tell me who you were?"

"I didn't know you'd care," said Holden coolly.

"Don't say that," said Kareyev fiercely. "You can't have thought that. I nearly went mad trying to imagine what you *were* thinking about me, after Maria played that filthy trick— and she wouldn't even tell me whom she'd sold you to— and when I finally managed to find out and went to the brute's house to get you back, they wouldn't even let me in, some smirking minion just kept reciting a speech about all sales being final--"

Holden jerked his hands out of Kareyev's and took a step back. "No. Don't do this."

"--and I begged and begged just to see you, just to talk to you, but he wouldn't let me by, and I came back the next day and it was more of the same— I even tried to shove my way in, but Argounov must have hired professional bouncers to open his door, they wouldn't hit a nobleman but they weren't budging either— and I wrote to him and got a very very polite letter back about how well you were settling in and he didn't think it wise to disturb you—"

"Stop talking," said Holden, and his voice frightened Bran.

"—and I went to the police but they said there was nothing they could do, the sale was perfectly legal. Which it was, of course, because I was an idiot, Holden, I'm so sorry I didn't protect you better, I should have kept your title in my name alone when I married, I should have freed you, anything, but I trusted Maria, I knew she didn't like you but I never thought she'd— oh, God, I can't believe it's really you. I thought you'd be, I don't know, *dead* by this time, I've had dreams, nightmares—"

Holden's face was white. "No. No. I don't care that you sold me, it's too

long ago to care, I'm not angry, I don't mind being civil, but this is really fucked up, Pavel, this— as if you still—"

Kareyev was crying. He held out his left wrist to Holden, pulling back his sleeve, and Bran craned his neck trying to get a better look at the thin, dark bracelet that encircled it. Whatever it was, it had a galvanic effect on Holden. He took two more quick steps backward, staring at Kareyev, said jerkily, "I'm sorry-- I--" then turned and almost ran from the room.

Alix said, swiftly and courteously, "Please excuse me for a moment—" and hurried after him. After a moment's hesitation, Kareyev followed them. The door swung shut behind them.

There was a pause.

"Who the hell is Maria?" said David Kareyev, to no one in particular.

"From context," said Lisa, in a pleasant, rather husky voice, "I think she must have been married to Dad before he married our mom." She was a pretty girl, with regular features and her father's large, deep-lidded eyes in a peaceful heart-shaped face.

"I have no idea what's going on," said David. He was thinner and more angular than his sister, his sharp corners and high cheekbones even more definite than Valor's. "Are our dads in love with each other? Isn't that going to be kind of awkward?"

"We'll figure it out," said Valor, smiling weakly at him. "Sorry, guys. I try to prepare people for my family, but they always end up achieving even greater depths of weirdness than I expect. David, Lisa, this is my mom, Greta."

"It's wonderful to finally meet you, Greta," said Lisa warmly. "Val talks about you all the time. I have to admit I'm a little jealous of her for having such a wonderful mom. I don't even remember mine. David does, a little."

“Well, I remember her name wasn't fucking Maria,” David muttered.
“Sorry. It's really nice to meet you, Greta.”

“And it's lovely to meet Valor's friends,” said Greta, a little dazedly. “I do apologize for the— disturbance.”

“I think it was at least as much our fault as yours,” said Lisa, looking at the door. Her eyes snagged on Bran on the way back, and she went slightly pink.
“Oh... Val, you didn't introduce—“

“That's Bran,” said Valor. “You know.”

Lisa smiled at Bran, and he lowered his eyes respectfully.

“I'm sorry everything got so weird,” said Valor again. “I knew they used to know each other but I didn't know *that* was going to happen.”

“See,” said Lisa kindly. “You're always saying how weird *your* family is, but look at ours. We had no idea our dad was still carrying a torch for the slave his first wife sold out from under him.”

“Yeah, right,” said Valor. “And that's totally as weird as the fact that my adoptive father and my mother's mistress met and fell in love when they were both slaves belonging to my godfather.”

“Ex-godfather, I believe, darling,” said Alix, coming back in. “We may be able to talk your father out of killing him, but I'm afraid we're going to have to find another way to finance your debut. Lord David, Lady Lisa, dinner is served if you'd care to eat. Your father and my husband have a great deal to talk about, and we thought it best that they do so in private.”

Everyone murmured politely, looking relieved to have some semblance of civilization restored. Bran moved close to Alix as she turned towards the door.

“Yves and Jer are already in the kitchen,” she said to him in a low voice before he could speak. “Run along, dear.”

The three men sat in silence around the kitchen table after Bran had finished his account of what had just happened.

“Well, shit,” said Jer finally.

“You don't think—“ said Bran nervously. “I mean, he wouldn't just—“

“No,” said Yves firmly. “This is his home, this is his family, he loves us.”

“He loved Pavel first,” said Jer grimly.

“But there's more of us,” said Yves, laughing a little. “Don't be ridiculous, you two. Jer? Bran? Come on. Even if he is still in love with the guy— he doesn't think with his cock.”

“Hm,” said Jer with a pointed look at Bran.

“Not about important stuff,” Yves amended. “Not that you're not important, Bran, but you being here hasn't completely fucked up anyone's life or anything.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Bran meekly.

But Yves ate no more than Jer or Bran, and he said almost as little for the rest of the meal.

After dinner, when Fox reappeared in the kitchen and shook her head briskly— *not down yet*— in response to their anxious inquiries, Bran successfully wheedled her into letting him help her wash up. True to his

promise to Holden to demand little of his attention, he had gone prowling for ways to keep himself busy and, when possible, useful, at the numerous times when his master was otherwise occupied. Fox often let him help her with the cooking, but washing the good china was something she only allowed him to do after a series of dire threats concerning what would happen if he broke anything, although the one time he *had* broken something he had hidden unfairly behind Holden, who was laughing too hard to hand him over to Fox's righteous retribution. He was glad no one had ever told her who had stolen her sharpest kitchen knife and left it in a cottage deep in the forest.

He scrubbed at a sticky residue of sugar at the bottom of a coffee cup, grateful for the diversion both for himself and for Yves and Jer, who were still sitting at the kitchen table.

"Well, I did tell him to learn a skill set. I guess he plans to be Fox when he grows up."

"Yesterday, the master's bed. Today, the kitchen sink. Tomorrow, the world."

"Do you think he comes with a vacuum attachment?"

"I thought you were testing that out yesterday."

"Bran?" said Valor, putting her head in at the kitchen door.

Bran looked round at her, startled. "Miss?"

"You're washing dishes again? You're hilarious, Bran. Come sit with us kids in the lounge. Lisa wants you to; she thinks you're cute."

Bran hesitated, then dried his hands rather reluctantly. He wanted to be with Holden, but as long as Holden remained unavailable, he wanted to be with Yves and Jer, who understood exactly how shaken he felt just now. But, obediently relinquishing the sink to a rather relieved-looking Fox, he

followed Valor to the lounge, where David had stretched out on the sofa and Lisa sat in Greta's usual chair, smiling shyly at him.

"Hi, Bran. Valor's told me a little about you," she said as David made room for Valor on the couch, "but I didn't know you were so—"

"Gorgeous?" said Valor, grinning. "Isn't he?" Bran glanced with some trepidation at David, but he only smiled and nodded slightly, as if agreeing with the assessment without being particularly interested. He obviously had eyes only for Valor.

"Come here?" said Lisa uncertainly to Bran. Bran went to her and knelt down at her feet, and she blushed, taken aback. Not used to slaves, then, Bran thought, interested. So Pavel didn't keep them. Perhaps the memories were still too painful, or perhaps he hadn't really been the slave-owning type. He and Holden had, after all, been more like lovers than like master and slave.

"He belongs to your dad, right?" said David idly to Valor.

"Yeah. He's crazy about him," said Valor rather ambiguously. "He was supposed to be sold a couple of months back, but my dad decided to keep him for awhile. Alix was kind of freaked out at first, but now she just says that as midlife crises go, at least Bran is well-behaved. You can touch him if you want, Lis'."

Lisa went even pinker and reached out a tentative hand to touch Bran's hair. He moved into her touch encouragingly, smiling up at her to put her at ease, and she smiled back, stroking him as if he were an impressive animal she had been assured was tame.

"You have... nice hair," she said awkwardly.

Bran grinned up at her. "Thank you, my lady."

“Speaking of midlife crises,” said David, “I guess our dads are still talking, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Valor. “Let’s talk about something else, okay?”

Bran awoke, he didn’t know how much later, slumped on the floor with his back against Greta’s chair and his head resting on the empty seat, a warm weight on his lap, numbing his leg. He stayed still, with his eyes closed, listening to the quiet voices that had wakened him.

“Are you sure you don’t want to spend the night?” Holden was saying. “We could always just throw blankets over the kids and leave them here.”

“No, no,” said Kareyev. “I couldn’t– I need to get them home. Holden, I--”

“It’s okay,” said Holden. “We’ll see each other again, all right? Soon.”

“All right,” said Kareyev shakily. “Ah, look at them. Isn’t it strange that our children should– And, my goodness, Lisa and your young man look rather friendly as well.”

Lisa stirred as her father spoke, lifting her head from Bran’s lap and prompting a rush of pins and needles to his numb leg. He winced and opened his eyes, encountering Holden’s raised eyebrows as he glanced from Bran to Lisa. Bran blushed and looked away.

“Hi, Dad,” Lisa said drowsily, getting to her feet and brushing off her skirt. “What time is it?”

“Past your bedtime,” said Kareyev. “I’m sorry. I’ll wake your brother and--”

As he went to shake David gently by the shoulder, Lisa turned back to Bran with a sweet smile. “It was really nice to meet you, Bran.”

“My lady,” Bran mumbled, blushing hotter.

David had fallen asleep with his head on Valor's shoulder; he woke reluctantly, gave his father and Holden a suspicious look, then kissed a half-awake Valor deeply, almost defiantly, before breaking away and getting up to follow his father and sister from the room.

“I'm awake,” Valor mumbled.

“Go to bed, love,” Holden said firmly, and for once she obeyed without protest, looking too sleepy to argue.

Holden looked after her for a few moments, then turned back to Bran and reached out a silent hand to help him up. He took the hand and scrambled to his feet, but put weight on the wrong leg and lost his balance. Holden caught him, steadied him, and then swept him up in his arms.

“Good gods,” he said as Bran blinked up at him, smiling, “no more food for you, kid. You must have gained fifty pounds since the last time I tried this.”

But he carried Bran all the way up the stairs and into Bran's own moonlit bedroom, where he laid him carefully down on the bed and kissed him on the mouth. His lips tasted salty.

“Master,” Bran whispered, “are you okay?”

“I think so,” said Holden softly, and, to Bran's relief, sat down on the bed next to him. “Just... sad. Gods. Poor Pavel.”

As Bran's eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, Holden looked down pensively at his left hand, which was closed in a fist. Bran glanced at it curiously; Holden saw the look and opened his hand, and a band of moonlight illuminated the dark bracelet that had encircled Kareyev's wrist. Bran leaned closer and saw that it was composed of several intricate braids of some dark,

glossy, slightly coarse fiber, with delicate gold clasps at either end.

“I made him give it back to me,” said Holden, still gazing at it intently as if trying to divine some hidden meaning in the braids. “It’s way too fucking weird for him still to be wearing it.”

Bran looked again at the bracelet, then up at Holden. “Master– is that your *hair*?”

“I didn’t have anything else to give him,” said Holden ruefully. “But he kissed me and thanked me and took it to a real jeweler to have the clasps put on– ah, Bran, he really did love me, you know?”

“Yes,” whispered Bran, picturing a shy, dark-haired boy younger than himself, offering the bracelet to his almost-as-young master, blushing with happiness as Pavel put his arms around him in thanks.

“And I really thought,” said Holden, closing his hand over the bracelet again and looking at the fist, “back when it happened, that I’d never love anyone ever again. I thought I was broken for good. But he’s the one who broke. He divorced Maria right after it happened, and he never really let anyone else in, not even those kids’ mother– he liked her fine but he never– Maybe that wasn’t because of me, maybe it’s because he trusted Maria and she– but it’s so *sad*, Bran, he wanted me to come home with him, he talked about how empty his house was now that the children were growing up. And I felt so sorry for him I was almost tempted. Can you imagine?”

Bran said nothing.

“It was so hard to tell him I didn’t want to, had my own family, my own life– I cried more than he did. But he understood, he’s glad for me. He’s hardly changed at all, he’s still the same Pavel, just so much sadder. I think we’ll be friends, I think we can manage that, after all this time. Maybe now he knows I’m all right he can move on. Find someone else to love, to fill up that empty house a little– even if he doesn’t turn it into a damn three-ring

circus, like I have.” He looked up from his closed hand at Bran, grinning suddenly. “Do you know how strange it was trying to explain who *you* were?”

“Who am I?” Bran asked, feeling immeasurably relieved and rather silly. “I mean, what did you tell him?”

“Wouldn't you like to know?” Holden tweaked his ear teasingly. “Speaking of which— have *you* finally moved on? I saw you in there, all cuddled up with the Kareyeva girl.”

“I was not!” said Bran indignantly.

“Shhh,” said Holden with a chuckle. “You'll wake everyone. So she *didn't* fall asleep with her head in your lap?”

“Miss Valor told her to tell me to play with her hair,” said Bran, lowering his voice, “and we all got sleepy waiting for you and— we dozed off. That's all.”

“No need to get defensive. If you two hit it off that's all to the good. Maybe by the time Valor's thrown David over, you'll have gotten over me, and I can sell you to Lady Lisa to really kick off the next generation of fucked-up family dynamics.”

“Maybe so,” Bran said, grinning despite himself, then remembered something. “Uh, master? Do Jer and Yves know— what you talked about with Lord Kareyev?”

“Not yet,” said Holden. “They'd already gone to bed when we came down. Alix was still up, but she's asleep now. I thought I'd sleep here, so I wouldn't wake anyone else up. Why?”

“I doubt you'd be waking them up,” said Bran, after a brief inner struggle where a powerful desire to shut up and let Holden sleep with him lost to his better nature— and to the awareness that Jer and Yves would be in much

better moods in the morning if they slept securely tonight. "They might be— a little worried. I think we all were, a little— that now that Lord Kareyev had sort of found you again, the two of you would— that you would want to, um— leave us."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said Holden, sounding genuinely surprised. "Even *Yves* was worried?"

"He tried to act like he wasn't, but he was," said Bran. "You loved Pavel an awful lot, master."

Holden shook his head. "I did, but— gods. I was a child."

"No more than I am now," Bran reminded him.

"Yes, and you wait until you're forty-one," said Holden. "See how sentimental you are over me *then*. I'll be— sixty-four? That can't be right."

"But Pavel still wanted you," said Bran, trying not to giggle at his master's look of chagrin. "After all this time."

"He didn't really," said Holden. "He just thought I was still someone else." He sighed. "All right, I'd better go tell Jer and Yves they're idiots. You're a good boy, Bran. Give me a kiss."

"I love you, master," said Bran peacefully when Holden had pulled away from the kiss. Holden looked back at him thoughtfully.

"Does it hurt you, that I never say that back to you?" he asked.

Bran shook his head. "I just like saying it."

Holden touched Bran's face gently. "You know, Pavel yelled at me, tonight. I felt about fifteen again. He said I should have known he'd never sell me out like that, didn't I know he loved me. But... no, I didn't. He could say it

all he wanted, but for all I knew— once he'd, once it was over— it was just a noise he'd made to make me smile. Because I had such a pretty smile. I won't lie to you, Bran. I do care about you. But I won't say what I don't mean."

"I know, master," said Bran seriously, looking up into Holden's face. "It's okay. You don't have to say it."

The corners of his mouth turned up irresistibly as he added, "But I think you're— mistaken."

Holden blinked at him for a moment, then tilted his head back and shook with silent laughter.

"You are such a fucking smartass," he said finally, wiping tears from his eyes. "And to think you used to be too scared of me to open your mouth."

"Actually, I opened my mouth pretty quickly for you, master," Bran grinned, and Holden shook his head. "No, I *was* scared, but you-- you made me feel safe. You always make me feel safe. And-- like I'm okay, like I'm-- good."

"You are good," said Holden, sobering. "You're also young and naive and idealistic and romantic and you fell head over heels for the first person who petted you instead of backhanding you. But you're not stupid. You're right, you're safe with me."

"I know, master," Bran said again, smiling.

"All right, then," said Holden. "Go to sleep, sweetheart. I'll see you in the morning."

THE END

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