

## Chapter 8 - Gardening

Ember walks his way through the dining hall, looking out through the windows at the garden and Voigt laying on his front as he works on the fountain. The plodding footsteps he makes, echoed by the gentle slap of his swollen cock as it swings from thigh to thigh. He opens the door to the vestibule and tries on a couple of pairs of jeans and shirts until ones fit his frame and finishes the look with Cal's boots. He opens the outside door with a sizeable bulge running down his leg, shuts it and wanders out into the garden.

"Voigt?" Ember says, hovering over his body to see what's going on. Thankful that the walking and rub of the denim helped to considerably reduce his erection.

"Just a minute." The older wolf responds as he attempts to measure something inside of the pipe using a flexible scope through the burst hole. He stands up a minute later, after having marked a notch on the pipe.

"Do you need to cut it?"

"Yeah" Voigt sounds disappointed. "Done all I can but the metal's fused, I can't budge it. I don't want to risk wasting more time trying to get it off so I'll just lop it off and extend it. Thankfully I have a die big enough to thread pipe of this gauge." He explains and carefully watches Ember slowly nod. "Anyway, you looking for work?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Good, because there's a couple of things need doing. You ever worked an electric hedge trimmer or a chainsaw?"

Ember shakes his head. "No."

"Ok. Because I can't supervise, I'll just give you shears then. The bushes around the garden all need trimming." Voigt walks over to one of the standing bushes near the fountain and tugs on some of the straggling twigs poking out. "See these, they all need chopping. Carry a bag with you and collect anything you snip off, just make sure to keep the shape of the bush in tact."

"Alright, I can do that."

"Good, come with me."

Voigt starts walking to the far end of the garden with Ember in tow. At the corner, a path that leads out and forks, one way going down a hill into the beginnings of the wood where Ember was guided up the night before, and in the other direction is a building the size of a garage with a single wooden door. Voigt opens it with a key and steps inside, turning on the light.

This is a room that could be described in the somewhat dated term 'man cave'. It has a comfortable fabric chair in the corner with a radio and small tv, mini fridge and a box of magazines. In all other corners of the room are shelves, cupboards, drawers, worktops, storage racks and boxes, all filled, and neatly organised with tools. In the overhead are larger items, wooden planks and rolls of plastic, dust, painters and weed resistant sheets, and more boxes. In the free floor space there are several electric lawn machines; a mower, trimmers of different types, chainsaw and others Ember doesn't recognise.

"Welcome to my home-from-home" Voigt says, splaying his arms and admiring the black wolf's face of awe. "Take a look around if you like, I need to get a couple of things."

"This is really neat, it reminds me of my cabin." Ember says, wandering over to the chair.

"Take a seat. Used to have one just like it back home."

“You mean before you came here?” Ember slumps down in the chair, finding that it’s got a reclining lever and pulls it. Voigt takes a second to respond, seemingly looking through one of his cupboards.

“Yeah ...”

Ember lays back in the chair and looks up at the rafters. “I don’t wanna get in any more bother by asking, so just tell me to shut up if I’m out of line, but what did you do before you came here?”

Voigt sighs and shuts the cupboard, leaning back against the counter. “It’s not really something I like to talk about, pup. I’m ex-military, though you’d be pretty dim to miss that. Ex-family man too.” He turns back around and pulls out one of the drawers. “Ahah, there you are.” He exclaims quietly, pulling out a cutting disc.

“Ex-family?” The black wolf kicks the footrest back in and sits upright.

“I don’t like to talk about it, so let’s leave it there, alright?”

Ember nods, even though the older wolf isn’t looking. “OK, I won’t pry.”

Voigt starts silently attaching the disc he found to a handheld rotary drill while Ember looks around from his claimed chair. He spots the box of magazines beside the chair and starts looking through them, lifting up the spines to see the covers. There are several issues of Dad’s Garden, which seems to be a series of comprehensive guides targeted to older men on how to design and create your dream garden and its maintenance. Also in the pile are similar informational booklets on housework and general DIY along with a couple of women’s fashion magazines, which Ember assures himself are just as educational.

When he lets the magazines flap down he notices the corner of another sticking out from under the box. He tilts the box and pulls it out finding that it’s actually a graphic novel. The black wolf immediately shifts his eyes back to Voigt, who thankfully still seems busy with his tools. What he finds is a comic entitled ‘Fire in the Pack War’ with an illustrated front cover of two male, anthropomorphic wolves standing back to back. One of them is looking stalwart off the side, while the other has his head cocked down with a face of sorrow. His eyes are looking up at the other wolf and Ember feels a deep sense of love in them.

The wolf opens the novel and glances at the panels as he flips through the pages. The detail of the art matches that of the front. Each page is filled with a somber tone as the story follows these two wolves who seem to be from opposing packs in the middle of a war who find themselves trapped in an illegal friendship. His eyebrows shoot up when he finds a two page spread of a clandestine meeting between the main characters who are ... working out their differences. He jumps when he hears a deep cough, and upon seeing Voigt standing much closer and looking down at him, the black wolf starts scrambling to put the graphic novel down where he found it.

“You know I’ve already caught you, right?” The grey wolf says, folding his arms.

Ember whimpers and drops his ears. “S-sorry, I shouldn’t have been so nosey.”

“It’s fine, it’s no secret that I read them, I just don’t like to leave them lying around for anyone to find.” Voigt unfolds his arms and picks up the shears and a bin bag, holding them out. “Come on, you have work to do”

Ember stands up quickly and takes them while Voigt unrolls an extension cord and carries the hand drill under his arm.

“I never thought you’d be into stuff like that”

“Why? Because I’m an old veteran?” Voigt shuts and locks the door to his cave and looks at Ember expectantly.

“Err ...” he looks away from the grey wolf’s piercing green eyes and shuffles on his feet.

“I’m just messing. I just like them, is that so bad?”

“N-no ... I didn’t say that.” Ember feels like he’s being teased, but because Voigt is so deadpan, it’s hard to tell if he’s being serious.

“Truth be told, I’m new to them.” Voigt bends down and plugs the extension cord into a plug protruding from the ground on a metal stalk. “It belongs to Hess, he recommended I give them a try. I think he was just being cheeky at the time, a gentle prod at my past, but he lent me the first one and I got hooked. That’s the third in the series; all unique stories but they follow the same love-on-the-battlefield premise.”

“He’s into comics?” Ember asks as the two of them start walking back to the middle of the garden.

“Oh yeah, graphic novels too, but don’t ask me what the difference is. He explained once and I zoned out” He laughs and Ember joins in albeit with half the effort.

“So ... were you on a battlefield too?”

“That’s my business for now, pup. Give me time to open up to you a bit more before I start telling you my backstory, alright?” Voigt plonks the extension down and connects the drill, dropping it on the ground by the hole he made to access the pipe.

“Sorry, yeah.”

“OK lad, enough chatter, get yourself in gear and start pruning.” Voigt checks his watch. “Do you have a watch?” He checks the black wolf’s wrists and sighs. “Alright, if you’ve not finished before I have to go in, I’ll whistle you back over.”

“Right” Ember nods and turns to the first of the bushes near him and starts lopping off the stray branches, collecting them in the bin bag.

Over the next half hour, Ember works his way around the garden in an expanding spiral, eventually getting to the perimeter hedge. As he trudges down the length of the bush wall, he thinks more about what he’s come to expect from the other wolves.

“None of them talk like they’re being manipulated,” Ember says to himself “or coerced into saying nice things about the place or the ‘master’. They all just seem content to just live here.” He sighs and lowers the shears. “Two months ... that’s such a long time. If I say I wanna leave, what then? I go back to my day job? I keep turning back into my wolf form at night and roam the woods around my cabin aimlessly. What do I really have out there that I don’t have right here? And more importantly, what do I get in here that I don’t get out there?” Ember looks out into the garden. The beautifully designed and tended garden, with a friendly old wolf slaving away on a broken fountain. His head moves again to the house.

“It’s lavish, warm, comfortable; it’s a little big for my liking, but it has everything I could need.” He looks back over to the other wolf. “And it has ... people like me. Voigt is some ex-army commander, but acts like a bit of a father figure to the other two. Except when he’s fucking them.” Ember grimaces, having chosen his words so poorly. “Cal is a sensitive soul, and seems to care a lot for Alek. But I suppose, living with anyone for nearly two years, you’re gonna get a bit attached. And then there’s ...” Ember gulps as he thinks about the encounter under the stairs. He throws his shears down and starts pacing around the bin bag half full of branch offcuts. “Why did there have to be all these damn sexy wolf men?” He fidgets his hands while he steps, wondering if his dick will even allow him to leave now it’s had a taste of Hess’s ass. He starts thinking about ways he could have both, maybe by leaving and being allowed to visit, or taking Hess with him, but he knows he wouldn’t agree to that.

Now slumped down on the ground, the black wolf sighs to himself and lies back, realising that there isn't much point in thinking about these things. He can't escape without getting homesick, and can't even think about escaping without feeling actually sick. And two months is a long way off, so he may as well just pick the shears back up and get back to his work, but only because he knows it will make Voigt happy. He looks over at them laying on the grass and remembers the frequent sleepless nights he'd have back at the cabin. Whenever his thoughts troubled him, he'd wander to the lake nearby and lie down to watch the clouds drift overhead. He knew he could never sleep there, in case he were ever caught, but being so close to nature in his wolf skin, always allowed him a brief peace.

Pushing the memories away, Ember grabs the tool, stands up and continues cutting his way up to the corner leading to the shed. He hears a sharp whistle from the middle of the garden and sees Voigt waving him over, so he puts the shears down on top of the bag in case the wind picks up and walks back to the fountain. The older wolf is brushing himself off, trying to get some of the dirt off his clothes.

"Ember my boy, walk with me." He says cheerfully and starts in the direction of the side door with the other wolf at his side. "It's almost my turn to see the master and I'd like you to come with me so you'll know where to go come seventeen hundred."

"Thank you, I was wondering"

"While I'm away, I'd like you to finish the hedge and put the shears and the bag of clippings into my shed." Voigt hands over the key and Ember drops it into his pocket. "Just don't spend the whole time reading that comic, alright?"

"Ha ha, I'll try"

Ember kicks his feet and rubs the bottoms of his boots on the scraper by the door, waiting outside while the older wolf starts to strip. He's startled for a moment when he's suddenly presented with another butt so soon after the last, before remembering that they've been naked the whole time. It's going to take a little time getting used to seeing these three be so naturally ... natural all the time. Once there's more room he steps in and removes all of his clothes as well.

"I know you can't tell me what happens when you're in there, but can you tell me what I might expect today?" Ember queries hopefully as he follows along through the dining hall.

"I can, but it won't be a lot. You need to be entered into the master's system for the archives, and be made an official servant of the house."

"Official servant?" Ember laughs. "You mean, this is 'above board'" he air-quotes.

"More so than you'd think. Let the master explain, I'm not sure what he'd like me to say about it all until he's had chance." Ember sighs, frustrated that information is being held back from him once again, but he holds his tongue. "Only one more hour, then you can ask all the questions you like, and get some real answers." Voigt continues as he ascends the staircase.

"I hope so"

"That I can promise."

They get up to the first floor landing which swings around the balcony overlooking the staircase with a long hallway extending adjacent down the length of the house with doors on either side. Voigt continues around the banister over the stairs to a set of doors in an alcove.

"This is the master's office." He says, stopping beside one of them. "At precisely your time, you will knock at the door and wait to be called in." He notices the concern on Ember's face and places a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, the master is a good man."

The grey wolf turns and knocks on the door. A moment later he's granted entry from Alek's voice and he steps inside, glancing back with a smile as he shuts the door. Ember backs away from the office door with a long exhale and about-faces to get back to the garden. But before he goes back to the stairs, he looks out down the hallway at the array of doors spotting some unique signage on some of them. Looking around and trying to hear if anyone is nearby, he assumes from the quiet that it's safe for him to go have a peek and wanders down the hall.

There are four doors on the left, and three on the right. The first, on the left is plain with nothing denoting its significance, however its opposite has a beautiful wooden plaque with hand-engraved lettering spelling 'Master Alek'; and in three of the four corners of the plaque are cartoonist depictions of Cal, Hess and Voigt's faces all smiling. Ember can't help but smile back at the cute carvings and admire the detail that was put into their likenesses.

He turns again to continue down the hall when the master's study door opens again and out walks Hess. But this is not the Hess that Ember is used to seeing. He's slouched, trudging, and weary. Each step he takes makes him look like he's dragging a marble boulder in chains. He barely registers the presence of the other wolf and slowly drags himself past towards one of the doors on the left.

Stunned by his manner, Ember watches right up until the door closes, and lets out a long breath he didn't realise he'd been holding in. Then panting is all he can do to keep himself from passing out as he starts panicking at the thought of what happened to Hess in that room. What kind of exertion, or worse, torture, could have reduced that stocky wolf to a crumbling wither of his usual self? Ember's head races with the dangers that could await him in that room, disregarding all the comforting things everyone else has said as brainwashing and throws himself towards the stairs. He doesn't know what he's planning, or where he will go, but all he knows is he wants to get out of this house. He races down the steps, swings on the banister knob and rams himself into a tall white wolf carrying a basket of laundry. They tumble to the ground together and skid along the wooden floor in a shower of bedding as it unfolds in the air.