

Chapter 23 - Impact

Ember, carrying two bags now, spends every couple of steps glancing down at the colourful woven scarf placed neatly atop his new wardrobe. The radiating warmth he feels from it adds a delicate float to his gait and makes him all but forget about the dreadful pull from being so far away from the manor. Cal often catches him looking at it and smiles to himself, happy knowing that he did a good thing.

They step into a footwear shop for men and find no other patrons at this time of day. Either that or news of two werewolves on a shopping spree had spread quick enough to evacuate the shops. A man in his thirties strolls over with a welcoming smile, he seems unfazed by their appearance.

"Hello Cal, always nice to see you again," the man greets warmly.

"Hey Stephen." Cal returns the smile, but seems more nervous about locking eyes.

"I wasn't expecting to see you again so soon, but if you want them now I can -" the man stops, seeing Cal's glare and shifts his eyes to the other wolf. Ember assumes this man thought he was privy to this exchange.

"No no, err, we're here to pick out some new footwear for my friend here."

Ember's ears perk and he glances at Cal, quickly turning away when the other wolf tries to return the gaze.

"Oh, I see." The man chuckles awkwardly. "Holler when you've picked something you like then." He walks back behind the till.

"You're a real networker huh?" The black wolf curls his lips into a sly grin.

"Heh, yeah ... I guess so. I just like talking to people."

"Is he another wolf enjoyer?" Ember asks subtly as they wander into one of the aisles.

"Eh," comes the cryptic response, accompanied with a dismissive shrug.

"Come on, I'm curious."

"Did you hear what happened to the curious cat?"

"Not applicable." Ember beams confidently, stroking his long lupine muzzle.

"Well I guess it's nothing you don't already know." Cal sighs and concedes to the pestering wolf. "His feet ... stink ... like, really really good. He gets discounts from work, gets himself a new pair, works them to death and I ... trade for them."

"I wondered if it might be something like that. This is a shoe shop after all."

"Sleuth wolf." Cal smirks and busies himself by looking at the end of the boxes on the shelves.

"I wonder what you could have to trade for them." Ember wonders purposefully aloud as he too pretends to look at the boxes.

"I clean his feet." He mutters, barely loud enough for the other to hear.

The black wolf looks around, switches a bag to the other hand and wraps his free arm around Cal's waist, so he can nuzzle against the neck.

"You're really cute." Ember says softly and pulls back, enjoying seeing Cal having to move the bag he's carrying over his crotch now and try not to show how bothered he'd become. "You made it seem like he wasn't really into wolves."

Cal takes a few seconds to compose himself and pulls a plain trainer off a shelf for Ember to inspect. "I guess he is, we just don't exactly do a lot. I ... do my thing, then I clean up the mess he makes."

"That sounds like a fun arrangement." The black wolf mulls over the trainer and puts it back, spotting a nicer one with an orange trim. "What am I getting anyway, what kind of shoes?"

"Three. Everyday trainers for coming into town, boots for the garden and walks, and formal shoes for events."

"Alright, I'll try these and these to start with." He pulls off two of the boxes off the shelves in his size plus a little extra for the wolf growth.

Ember sits down on one of the padded benches and takes off the borrowed boots and sets them on the floor beside. The scent coming from them is strong enough to perk Cal's interest, so he has to walk away before he gets distracted.

"I'll err, see if I can find you some smart shoes for tomorrow."

"OK, thanks," Ember says, pulling on one of the trainers.

He tries on several pairs of shoes of the three kinds and eventually finds a pair of each that he likes. A blue black pair of trainers with the orange strip on the seam, a set of tan worker boots with waterproofing, and a set of black leather shoes for the banquet.

"You know I'm almost surprised we have to wear clothes at the banquet." Ember says, putting the three boxes on the counter to be rung up.

"Why? With all the humans there, it makes sense."

"Yeah I know, but with the house rule and all. I dunno, he seems like the kind of person that would enjoy seeing us walk around naked at an event like that."

"Ha ha, you're not wrong, I see it too. But he is still a business man at the end of the day. I doubt it would be good for his image if he paraded nude werewolves around everywhere."

"Doesn't sound so bad to me," Stephen interjects, scanning the last of the boxes and putting them in a large bag.

"Oh yeah? Perhaps you should come visit sometime," Cal says grinning alluringly.

"How many of you guys are there?" He asks, handing over the card reader.

"Four now, Ember here is our newest."

"So is he ... an ally?" Stephen asks looking at the introduced wolf.

"More than me, I think." Cal turns to the black wolf. "Are you gay or just male leaning?"

Ember is startled by the directness of the question and shifts his eyes between the two.

"Uh ... g-gay."

"Neat. Seems like you all are up there." Stephen hands the receipt over.

"I believe everyone leans one way or the other to a small degree, it's all about circumstance. Myself, Voigt and, to a lesser degree, Hess, would all enjoy a woman's company. But we all like men too."

"Must be pretty wild in that house sometimes."

"Can be." Cal grins and looks at the black wolf who chuckles awkwardly. "Well we'd best go, still more to buy."

"I'll see you soon," Stephen says, waving them goodbye.

The two wolves exit the shoe shop and make their way across the road. Ember looks over at the taller wolf, seeing how confident he is being amongst all these other humans and feeling foolish for being so nervous.

"What was it like ... when you first came into town?" He asks quietly.

"Terrifying. Just like you, I was worried I was just going to pounce at the first person who came close." Cal smiles and shakes his head, thinking about how much he's changed. "It was a good month or two before master brought me here, so I was already pretty well trained by then. I'd got used to the cleaners and chef being in the house, but I was still on edge whenever I saw them."

"The whole guard dog effect thing?"

"Yeah big time. Especially if one got close to the master. But he wanted me to start getting more accustomed to it, and brought me here when he thought I was ready." He stops outside of the tailors, and opens the door to go in. "I didn't think I was, but I believed him more than myself."

"And now here you are being friendly with several shop owners."

"Funny ain't it?" He smiles and walks up to the counter to ring the service bell.

"Just a minute," a heavy female voice sounds.

They put their bags down in front of the counter while they wait. The shop itself is empty of people, with only mannequins in various states of dress to busy the floor. Ember looks around at the racks of pre-made jackets, shirts and trousers and all the different swatches of textiles, colours and patterns. He does a circuit of one of the aisles knowing better than to assume a size among them would fit. While flipping through a book of sleeve designs when an overweight woman with curled brown hair works her way out of the back room door.

"Oh ... what do you want?" She asks impatiently, becoming immediately dismissive upon noticing the two werewolves in her shop.

"Good morning. I need a full suit for my friend here by tomorrow morning."

"Oh!" She brightens instantly, knowing that she'll now be getting custom. "What's the occasion?"

"A private function up at the manor. Distinguished, but comfortable and nothing flashy please."

"Of course." She comes around the counter with her tape measure and instructs Ember to stand in unusual poses so that she can take measurements.

"Forgive my asking, but where is the gentleman who usually runs the shop?" Cal asks curiously, looking around as if expecting to see him.

"Oh, I'm sorry. My father died last month. Did you know him?"

"Only as a customer. That's awful, I'm sorry for your loss."

"Yeah, sorry to hear it," Ember adds, trying to sound compassionate for a man he never met.

"You're sweet to say, thank you. We've known it was coming for a long time, but that doesn't make it that much easier when it happens." Her face drops sombrely as she finishes the last of the measurements, writing them all down on a pad.

"So you've taken over the shop then?"

"I ran the shop long before. My father was the face, but I did most of the work. Though I haven't a head for business so my son is doing the accounting until we can afford to hire one."

"Oh I see. Well you've always done fine work, mine is a dream to wear."

"Thank you. I did wonder why we got such unusual measurements a few months back. Was that one of you?"

"Ah yes, that'll have been Voigt."

"It fit him well?"

"Oh yes, like a glove. Though it's a little loose now from all the work he's been doing. Lost a chunk of his weight since he joined us."

"Please feel free to bring it in and I'll re-fit it for a discount." She says, making a few final measurements to double check the size.

"I'll remember that, thanks."

"Right. It's not going to be cheap with such short notice, but I'll start work on this right away and have it ready for tomorrow morning. Delivery or collection?"

"I understand. Delivery please."

Cal pays for the suit and they say their goodbyes, leaving the shop with all their bags. They walk up the street a little further to a greengrocer with baskets and boxes covering the outside wall. Cal picks up a plastic bag and starts adding all the fruit and veg that was on Hess's list before taking it over to an old lady cowering behind a desk and making an attempt to pay for the produce. Ember loiters outside with the bags, looking around at all the other shops and the people passing by. Nearly all eyes are on him, but never while he's looking back. As soon as his gaze moves away, the heads turn back to him.

As he is waiting, he feels a sudden sharp pain at the back of his head causing him to keel and stagger. The rock that hit him tumbles to the ground with a maroon shine on one of its edges. The wolf turns around with his lips curled up in a snarl and glowers at the group of three teenage boys. They instantly start screaming and run as fast as their legs will carry them down the road, away from the beast. Ember growls, swinging his body around to scan the faces of the people who dared to bear witness, who all jump and scurry into the nearest shop when his eyes lock on them.

"Ember?" Cal shouts, hearing the screams and runs back out into the street. The black wolf turns and immediately relaxes his face when he's met with the calm, yet concerned look on his friend. "Ember what happened?"

"Some ... kids," he spits "... threw a rock at me." He reaches up to touch his head and pulls away a bloody hand, grimacing.

"Shit, let me see." Cal goes around and gently parts the fur so he can see the wound. "It's alright, it looks worse than it is."

"Doesn't feel it." He winces. "I wanna go back now."

"Aww my poor boy." Cal kisses Ember's cheek and rubs his arm.

"I'm not a baby," he grumbles, pulling away.

"Oh, so you don't want a bath and some ice cream when you get back?" Cal grins, knowing he's won the argument when Ember attempt a forceful pout that his wagging tail betrays. "Wait here a sec, I left the food on the counter, I'll be right back."

Cal trots back into the shop, and dumps a bank note on the table which he knows is significant overpayment but he has no smaller change and the woman is being too stubborn to tally up the cost. Cal takes a mango and a couple of apples as compensation for the loss and returns to his injured wolf.

"Come on then, let's grab that pipe for Voigt and head back."

Ember doesn't want to look as excited as he is, but he can't feel more glad to be going back to the mansion. Not just because of the persuasion of the collar, but he's quite had enough human interaction for one day. He is happy at least that he got to meet some kindly ones, even if they are a significant minority.

"Oh, that's Mr Hendricks' shop by the way," Cal says while they walk, pointing to a pet supplies store. "He loves animals."

"Especially wolves."

"Especially wolf men." Cal corrects with a laugh. "Our leashes are from there."

"Heh, I'll bet he sussed what they were for right away."

"Pretty much."

They continue on back down the street, collect the pipe from the timid hardware store owner and make their way back up the drive to the mansion. Cal shuts the gate behind them and they're soon back in through the main door.

"Hey Cal?" Ember starts as he puts down all the bags in the foyer. "When we were out ... you ..." he wets his lips as he struggles to speak the words. "You called me your friend."

"Well of course, dear, I couldn't think of you as anything less at this point." He steps closer and pulls him into a tight hug.

Ember feels the happiness well up inside him again and holds the white wolf. "I feel the same. For you and Hess and ... maybe Voigt."

"Heh, he's a good man. I'm sure you'll be friends soon enough, you just need to spend more time together." Cal pulls away but keeps them held at arms length. "I'm sorry you got attacked, I turn away for one minute. They must have been stalking us, waiting for one to separate."

"You give them too much credit. They were just kids who got a lucky shot. I'm ok."

"Yeah, but you looked like you were about to go charge after them."

Ember sighs and dips his head. "I won't lie, I imagined it, but I held back because ..." he fidgets and looks away, pulling his arms back to his sides. "I knew it would have upset you."

"You're so sweet." Cal says softly. "And we're all very lucky to have you here." Ember giggles with a sniff, and the hands on his shoulders are pulled away. "Right, take your things up to your room and get undressed. But then come right back down because it's 11:50 now and lunch will be nearly ready. I'll go give Hess and Voigt their stuff."

"You promised me ice cream and a bath," Ember pines half-jokingly.

"I haven't forgotten, dear, don't worry. You can have one after lunch and I'll make sure you get ice cream for dessert." Cal chuckles and strokes the side of Ember's face. "I might get Voigt to look at your cut too, just in case he needs to stitch it."

"Oh ... alright." Ember shows his nervousness toward the idea of stitches but thanks Cal nonetheless, watching him take the grocery bag and pipe into the dining room. He picks up all his new clothing and heads upstairs to put them away and undress more appropriately, per his master's decree.