

Chapter 26 - Rehearsal

Ember lies back in the bath, thinking about Voigt's backstory, about how awful it must have been during all the conflict. His mind drifts through the timeline of events as the imagination fills in all the details. He wonders for the first time what he must have looked like before becoming a wolf, wearing all that military gear. His mind wanders deeper into the narrative, coming up with scenarios of him and his squaddies in barracks or ... in the showers.

He bites his lip, thinking about the idea of sharing a shower with a bunch of other guys, all casually chatting while their dicks flop about. He shakes his head, trying not to sexualise what must have been a very traumatic time for Voigt, and in compensation, his mind shifts to after he'd been discharged. Going through his first transformation, looking at his furry body for the first time. Ember wonders if he liked what he saw. Maybe not at first, but once he got past the shock, seeing that big snout, pointed ears, tail ... sheath -. He can only imagine what it's like for humans to see themselves for the first time after the initial transformation.

Not noticing that his hand had wandered below what was left of the bubbles, he muses on, teasing the tip of his penis as it threatens to escape the sheath. He moans gruffly, frustrated and very horny, but he knows he can't fap yet, not while he still has a free orgasm to use. Plus, he knows Hess would be upset if his dick smelled of violets, so he unplugs the drain and pushes himself to the knees so the water so densely packed into his fur has some chance to run off. Once lighter, he quickly hops into the shower to dump all the suds and air-dry his fur, being careful of the stitches in his head.

The door opens again as he's sat on the edge of the bath, towelling his feet.

"Ah, you're out." Voigt says, dressed in a tight fitting, grass-green t-shirt and some black corduroys. "I forgot to give you the bandage. I've put it on your bed."

"Oh, thank you." As the grey wolf is about to leave, Ember stops him. "Hey uh, I have a question."

"About my past?"

"Yeah, if it's alright?"

Voigt smiles and shuts the door, stepping over. "Sure, what else do you want to know?"

"I just wanted to know what you thought when you first saw yourself in wolf form?"

"Ahh." He grins and looks down at himself. "Well, I looked better than I do now."

"I doubt that," Ember says with a complimentary wink, tucking his hands between his thighs. Voigt grins wider at this.

"You're a sweet boy, but you probably won't be surprised to hear that I wasn't particularly happy about it. It was the reason I had to leave the army after all. However, I grew to be appreciative of it, especially since if I hadn't left, I would never have found Jess. Granted, I lost her as well because of this curse, but I still look back fondly on our time together. We still talk, on occasion, she and I."

"That's nice to hear. Thanks for humouring me again." Ember stands up and puts the towel back on the radiator. "I suppose I'd best get some clothes on."

"After you." Voigt gestures with his hand.

"You just want to watch me walk away," Ember accuses, swishing his tail gently as he slips past the older wolf.

"Of course I do." Voigt follows, two steps behind, barely lifting his eyes. "I will say, I always enjoyed the heightened sense of detecting arousal. I could always tell when I was in a bar if someone was horny before we even spoke."

"What's it telling you now?"

"It's telling me that you'd better get some clothes on before I make us late."

Ember titters and opens the door, amused at seeing Voigt having to tear himself away and trundle down the stairs. Hearing the susurrus of a small crowd of people downstairs, he quickly slips into his bedroom to get changed before anyone sees him. The bandage is laid on the bed next to the borrowed set of clothes he wore earlier, but wanting to try on something new he turns to the wardrobe. He settles on a pair of jeans and a blended blue and white t-shirt that reminds him of clouds on a midday sky, and a pair of boxers with a generous weave. After doing his best to contain his genitals, he slips on the ensemble. He also decides to refrain from wearing socks upon recalling that Voigt was barefoot before he went downstairs; assumedly to avoid slipping on the hardwood flooring.

Dressed again for the second time since being here, he makes his way back downstairs hearing the murmur of people in the dining room. After a shaky, deep breath, he gently opens the door.

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Several humans in a group who are talking amongst themselves turn to face the black wolf and then instantly go back to their conversation as though nothing was amiss. Ember finds this unusual, but ultimately very professional and is relieved to not be accosted by accusatory eyes. He walks deeper in with a stride he thinks appears natural, over to Cal who is busy adjusting the valet's coat.

"Ember, good. Stand over there in front of the table would you? I'll be with you in a sec," he insists, showing a stronger air of authority around all these strangers.

The black wolf moves as instructed and starts to experience an unfamiliar sense akin to the fear of letting someone borrow your phone. There is an unease caused by this invading presence of unknown persons. What his master said comes to the forefront of his mind; that these people are welcome here. They are guests, not intruders. But still he feels uncomfortable about it as the guard dog effect starts to kick in. 'Not a dog', he remembers Hess say, and smiles subtly to himself.

Cal shoos the valet, sighing, and turns to face the new wolf. Ember takes a moment to appreciate how cute he looks wearing that perfectly tailored shirt, waistcoat and pinstripe trousers. Even if it's only a rehearsal, he seems to put the effort into his looks, perhaps to better illustrate his rank over the temporary staff.

"How are you doing?" The white wolf asks more casually, stepping closer.

"I feel strangely on edge, but mostly fine."

"It'll pass. The master will be down shortly, and when you see him it should help to persuade your mind that nothing's amiss."

"Thanks. So what happens now?"

"The boring bit, for you. You won't have anything to do out here before the meal is served, but then I'll be bringing you under my charge until the guests leave. It's important that everyone knows what everyone else is doing so it's important to have us all present. Some very rich people will be showing up tomorrow, and if someone is out of place, it will be noticed."

"These all sound like horrible people."

Cal chuckles and nods slowly. "There are some nice ones. I'll try to introduce you to Lord Cartwright, I'm sure you'll love him."

"Gosh, will I need to know all their names?" Ember asks worriedly.

"Oh dear me no, that's my job. Remember you aren't allowed to talk until spoken to anyway, so there will be very little communication for you to do anyway."

The doors to the dining room open again and Alek walks in causing the conversations to peter out. He is smartly dressed, wearing a maroon blazer and strolls casually over to the table. Cal calls out for all the staff to align in front of him in their designated groups; his voice so expertly controlled into a loud and commanding tone surprises Ember. Once the staff have fallen in line, he speaks out again.

"With everyone here, I'm going to run through the schedule, rules of etiquette and finally everyone's roles." Cal stands straight in front of the staff just as a general addresses his troops. "You will all arrive at 12pm sharp. You may arrive casually dressed, but due to the changing space being limited to the downstairs bathroom I would advise that you show up in your uniform to avoid bottlenecking.

"The invitations advertised 1pm but we must be ready to accommodate guests by 12:30 for any that decide to be early. The two valets will park their cars and the two porters will assist the guests with coats or other heavy apparel. One of the security detail will serve as doorman. The concierge will take their names before passing them to a house-servant who will lead them into the drawing room where they will be asked to wait until called for dinner. Please do not permit smoking in this room or anywhere else inside the property. You may serve cold beverages and hors d'oeuvres in this room but do not offer hot foods. If they request hot food or drink, come to me and I will talk to them directly. Weather permitting, the guests are allowed into the garden, please make sure they are aware of this before you depart. Voigt and one servant will be stationed in this room. No security staff are allowed to leave their post, unless they are called away by a senior member.

"When all guests have been accounted for, I will call them into the dining room at 2:30 to take their seats. The band will now start playing. Voigt will then ensure the room is clear and follow the guests while a replacement security member will stand in the hallway blocking the door to the drawing room. He will then stand by the patio door. Four house-servants will be present at the corners of the table to assist with food and drink demands and I will serve as head waiter during the meal. I will manage distributing the food and when everyone had finished eating, my master will signal to me and I will clear away his place first and then the rest of you will follow suit.

"Once the meal is over, the guests will likely mingle around the dining room floor space or go outside. Coffees and teas are available at this point. I expect about third of the guests to leave at this point while the rest mull around for another hour or so. When one of them is due to leave, they will speak to the concierge who will wish them safe travels and ensure they get all their belongings. They will then be passed to the porter to take them back to the car which the valet will fetch for them.

"All guests are permitted to use the bathroom on the first floor, but they must never be directed to the one here on the ground floor as that is for staff only. There will be two security details upstairs, preventing access to the hallway and the master's study and a thin perimeter set-up around the building.

"Any questions on the schedule?"

Cal looks around the staff who all shuffle and look at each other as they independently shake their heads.

"Right, etiquette. You will address the guests as Sir or Madam unless told otherwise. You may not converse with each other in the presence of the guests, except to relay information relating to

guest inquiries or handovers. Should something more urgent need to be passed between you, such as an incident or concern, you must pull the other aside and speak in hushed tone.

"You will ensure your clothes are clean and neat at all times. If you should dirty them, remove yourself at once to get it replaced. We have one full set of large and medium on standby in the washroom should they be needed. You will present yourself upright and walk with dignity and you will bow your head before and after all interactions with the guests.

"You will address all senior members of staff by their proper titles. Mr Goodwater," he gestures to himself, "Mr Vogt," he points to Voigt, "Mr Keystone," then to Hess who is standing by the kitchen door, "and Mr Cord." Ember never thought that he would be classed as a senior staff member, but he feels warmer inside knowing that he is.

"Furthermore, you will address the master as Master Warden. Are we all clear on etiquette?"

There is a wave of bobbing heads throughout the rows of staff which Cal observes intimately. Satisfied he turns to the master who gestures for him to continue.

"Right, now onto the roles. First the security detail, stand forward please." A small group of five men, obviously standing out among the others from their larger frames, step out from the group. "You will be working very closely with Mr Vogt. Please stand over here for him to give you your assignments." They do, walking around the table to where Voigt had decided to sit down.

"Next up, the culinary staff. I believe there is only one chef this time," he gestures to the lady wearing kitchen-appropriate attire who steps forward. "Operationally, Mr Cord is your superior, however, culinarily he is your sous-chef due to your experience. You will still address him appropriate to his title, but he will answer to you and Mr Keystone in the kitchen. Please go stand over there."

"Yes, Mr Goodwater," she says and walks over to a particularly sleepy-looking Hess leaning against the wall.

"The rest of you are under my jurisdiction. Please follow me and I will assign your positions." Cal turns to the hallway entrance and the sum of waiters, porters and other house-servant staff follow him to be delegated.

As soon as they leave, Voigt stands and has his squad turn to attention. "As Mr Goodwater has mentioned, one of you is to be stationed at the front door, however, I won't have one of you so servile, and will place you standing guard instead. He has enough able bodies to commit one to opening and closing a door." The men chuckle sensibly. "Two of you will be stationed upstairs. It will be very boring, but be glad you have each other to talk to, provided of course that no guest overhears. If you hear footsteps on those stairs, I don't want a peep out of you."

"Yes Mr Vogt," they say in broken harmony, some struggling with the word and one sounding more like 'Vogged' which makes Voigt wince.

"There will be one stationed outside of the dining room door before dinner, who will then move to block the drawing room once the guests are called through. One of you will be allowed to circuit the house outside and of course I will oversee the guests myself. Every hour you will rotate position by number which I will assign. We all good?"

"Yes Mr Vogt."

"Good, with me then lads." Voigt commands his troops follow and leads them out the same way as Cal.

Alek turns towards Hess who takes his sous-chef into the kitchen, leaving him alone with Ember.

"How do you feel?" He asks, taking his usual seat at the head of the table.

"Overwhelmed honestly," Ember admits, leaning back against the table. "But also impressed."

"Cal takes his job very seriously, which I admire in him." Alek looks at the wolf curiously, as if searching for other, more subtle emotions. "Feel any ... anxiety, or anger towards the humans?"

Ember looks out into the empty dining room and back at his master. "Maybe a little, I don't know what the name for this feeling would be. But that diminished a lot when I saw you."

"Good, that's comforting. Tomorrow is going to be difficult for you my boy, but you being assigned to the kitchen for the most part will grant you some seclusion from the hubbub."

"Yeah, and then I'll be following Cal around, oh Mr Goodwater." Ember smiles, never knowing any of their surnames until today.

"You know us all by full name now, Mr Cord. Treat the information well." Alek smirks and gets up from his chair.

"Yes Master Warden." He grins cheerfully, and bows his head for effect.

"Just master is fine."

Cal comes back into the dining room, talking to the remnants of his entourage about the flow of the event and how the overall presence of staff should be 'accessible, but not oppressing'. He goes about assigning members to the corners of the table, positioning one by the kitchen door to assist with food delivery and trolley driving, and one by the patio doors for when people may want to go outside.

"The rehearsal will be in a minute," Alek says, breaking Ember's attention from the ballet. "Come with me, you can be my escort." He holds out his arm expectantly and the wolf nervously steps over to interlock his own.

They walk together into the hallway, seeing several staff dotted around at strategic points to accommodate the guests however necessary. They go to the front door and out into front garden where two valets and porters are waiting at the bowl of the teardrop drive. When they reach the drive, he turns to face the mansion with Ember still at his side. He feels silly for being in this position with all these humans watching, but also cannot deny the warming sensation radiating from his master's physical connection.

Cal appears at the front door and signals to the two of them. Alek nods and hands some imaginary keys to the valet who imaginarily takes them and bows.

"This way sirs," one of the porters say, also bowing and leading them up the path to the house.

"We are being treated like guests," Alek explains. "After being seen by the concierge, ask to use the bathroom and attempt to bypass the guards. Assuming they do their job, you will be restricted access to the bedrooms and my study."

"Yes master."

"Hardly a befitting pet name for a husband don't you think dear?"

Ember flushes instantly and feels his legs wobble as the idea of pretending to be his master's husband fills him with an odd sense of fulfilment. He coyly stutters, unable to pull the words out as the front door is opened for them and they are offered to have their coats taken. Alek hands the jacket over which is promptly hung up and they step over to the concierge standing in the foyer.

"May I have your names, sirs?" He says politely, pretending to hold a clipboard.

"Mr and Mr Warden," Alek confirms, grinning slyly which he knows Ember will pick up on, and feels a sluggishness to the weight on his arm.

"Thank you, please follow our servant to the drawing room. You will be called at 2:30 for dinner, but please don't hesitate to ask for refreshments." He bows again and they are handed to the servant who attempts to steer them. Stopping, Alek looks towards the wolf on his arm and raised an eyebrow, seeing a blubbery, red-faced mess, hobbling in his grasp.

"My dear you look a fright, why don't you go freshen up and meet me there?" He pulls himself away, and the arm that was held on drops as it realises it no longer has purchase.

"R-right." Ember turns to the stairs, fighting each one as he pushes his body against gravity.

By the time he reaches the upper landing, the blood has managed to circulate away from his penis and back to the brain, bringing a little cognisance back. Two burly men of the security detail, as instructed, are standing authoritatively and preventing entry to the hall and study. Ember, by his masters directive, attempts to go past them.

"Uh, are you playing as a guest?" One of them asks dimwittedly.

"Yes," the wolf says, realising that even with their shorter bodies, they act quite firmly against the sight of a werewolf.

"Then I'm sorry, this area is off-limits. If you need the bathroom, it's the door behind you."

"Oh, silly me," Ember feigns and turns in through the door. But then feeling actually silly for having followed the narrative and entered into the bathroom without actually needing to.

He decides to splash a bit of water in his face while he's here to try and get the idea of being the master's husband out of his mind and quickly towels down his fur before heading back downstairs. The servant who directed the master is back at the bottom of the stairs, waiting to escort Ember that way as well, and once in, Voigt announces his presence. The older wolf is stood at ease but still has the strong presence of a military guard, staring forward and unmoving. Ember turns back to the room and sees Alek mulling over a writing desk in front of the window. Realising instantly that he'd left all his drawings there, he tenses, having no preparation for the conversation that might ensue.

"Are these yours?" Alek asks, sliding the paper aside to look at the ones beneath and turning it around into different perspectives.

"Yes master." The wolf mutters sheepishly, stepping tentatively closer and remembering how awful they all are.

"They could do with some work, but I like your slotted tile concept."

"My what?" He asks, having forgot most of what he'd scrawled down and scans over his blueprints.

Sure enough, Alek has his finger pointing at one of his designs, very poorly illustrating an idea to have removable metal tiles along the length of the collar. This allowed for the required hot-swapping and better flexibility than the single bent plate they have currently.

"It's a good concept, but the joint would be a problem. We can workshop ideas together in my study later."

"Really master, you think so?"

"I wouldn't say it otherwise, pup. Is this your drawing too?" He points at the much more superior sketch of a 3D collar.

“No, Hess showed me how to use a pencil better.”

“Ahh I should have guessed. He is an artist after all.”

Cal enters through the doorway and announces officially, “Sirs, please follow me to the dining hall. You may be seated now.”

He reverses back into the hallways and Alek and his temporary husband follow. Voigt gives Ember a subtle wink as they go past which makes him tremble again.

Voigt then swaps places with the guard across the hall and tails the ‘guests’ into the dining room, before taking his final position by the patio doors. All the waiters and servants are positioned around the room and stand purposefully still. Alek takes his seat at the table head and Ember takes his usual place. They simulate ordering drinks and are told the menu.

Here the theatrics become a bit more absurd as the trolley is wheeled around and empty plates are put in front of them. They act their parts until Alek does his signal and Cal clears his dishes away first and then a different waiter takes Embers. They get up and not needing to act going outside, they head back to the hall to see themselves out. Ember notices that a different guard is standing by the door and assumes they did a test of the rotation. Their names are stricken from the list, Alek’s jacket is retrieved and they are led to the drive by the porter where the valet returns the key.

“That all felt very daft,” Ember says as they walk back up the drive.

“But it was necessary. We need to make sure everyone knows their place inside and out, and I’m very pleased with the result. Cal will likely make adjustments, and run a few more as himself, but I wanted you to see it first hand.”

“Thank you master. It did help me understand everyone’s role a little better.”

“It was fun seeing you react to being my partner. I might have taken greater pleasure from that than I should.” Alek giggles.

The wolf laughs nervously. “Yes ... master.”

“Anyway, I’ll see you for the evening meal. Hess will no doubt need you in the kitchen until then anyway.”

“No doubt.” Ember sighs, dreading the amount of labour he has ahead of him and watches his ex-husband climb the stairs.