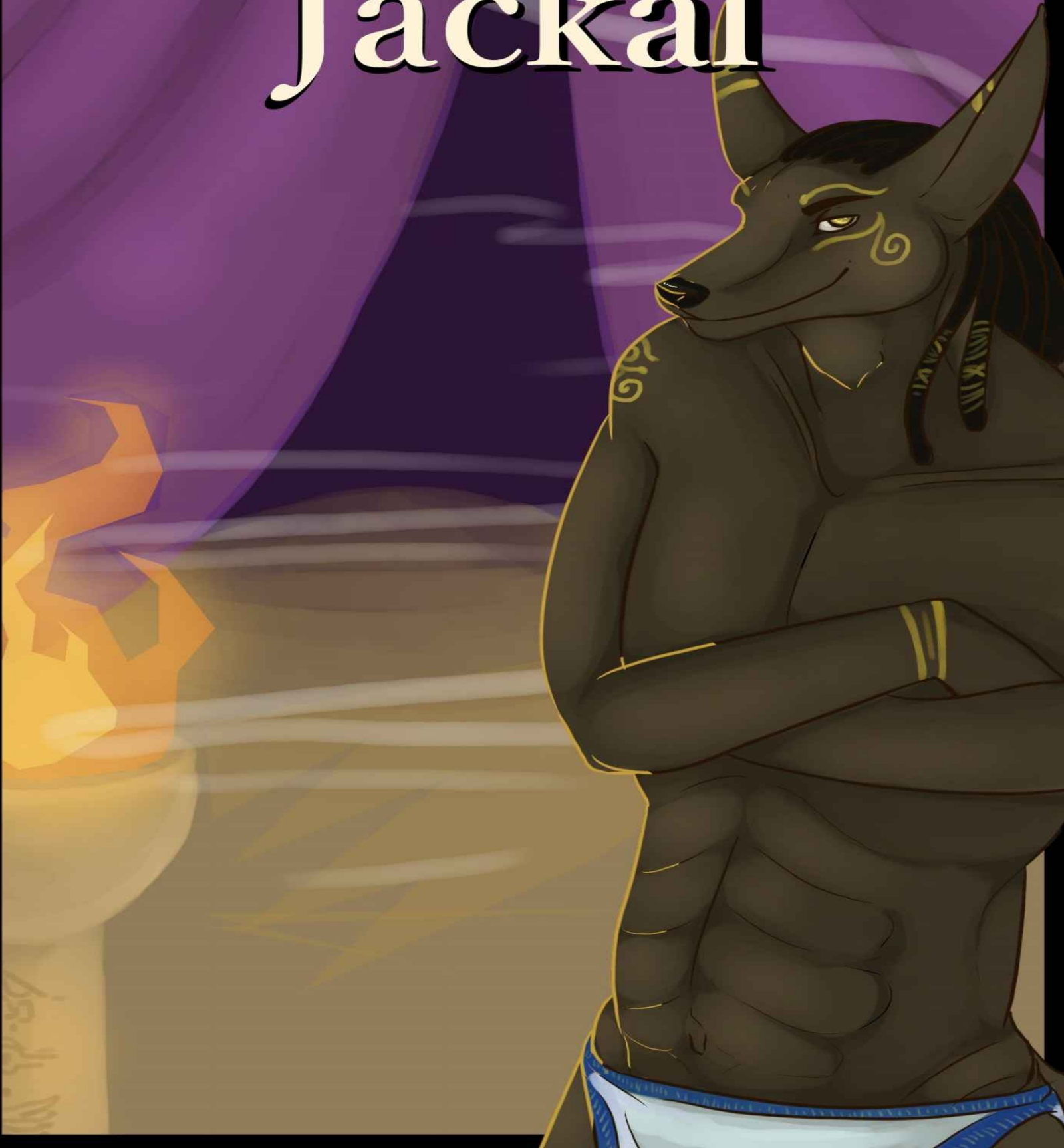


Brotherhood of the Jackal



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Brotherhood of the Jackal

I sank down into the dark leather of my friend's sofa and looked out at the den. Jeremy was going to be out of town for the entire month, and had asked me to watch his house. This, of course, was a mutually beneficial affair, since he rests assured that his home will be safe, and I get to live in relative luxury. There were steaks in the fridge and scotch in the shelf above, and I held in my hands a note declaring free access to all the pleasures I might find here. He'd also written some emergency contact numbers, a few chores... All standard stuff except for one strange warning.

Do not, under any circumstances, enter the guest bedroom.

A very peculiar warning, especially since I was technically his guest. He'd nonetheless consigned the master bedroom to me, so why would I complain?

Even with the television on, the house was quiet. A storm was passing over Oregon and so sheets of ice-cold rain drummed down on the pave outside. It was as if the whole house was held in hush, and it was making me restless.

This wasn't weather to go out in. The pool needed to stay covered, the garden would survive, and I couldn't stop pacing the halls.

The more I looked at the place, the more peculiarities I noticed. He had no pictures of family anywhere, but had plenty of other oddities. Paintings of desert rivers at sunset. Little statuettes of black and gold jackals, or cats, or other Egyptian gods all peered out from me from bookshelves and counter tops.

I picked up one of the Anubis statues and stared into his painted golden eyes. There was something bestial about him, but I always liked the way he was portrayed. His thick black body, his rippling muscles, the thick silken loincloth the only thing protecting his manhood from prying eyes...

A strange weight pulled against my chest. I certainly had imagined stranger things, but for a moment the attraction seemed so very real. It was almost as if somewhere from the beyond, the beast's gaze was burning into me. Daring me to look longer, to dream a little more. To think of his power over me...

I put the statue down and turned away, wiping sweat from my brow.

The quiet must be getting to me, I thought.

Later I tried to clear my head with a long bath. It left me cleaner of body but not of mind, and my head still spun with images from my earlier daydream. Best, I thought, to go to sleep and plan out just how big of a party I could throw and get away with it.

The master bedroom was at the end of the second floor hallway. The guest room was beside it. I had one foot into my own room when I heard a thump from across the hall.

And then another. I smelled something burning--incense?--but clearly burning. Someone was in that room.

The warning couldn't have been clearer, but if there was an intruder, or even a fire, I had to look. That was my responsibility as a caretaker.

At least that's what I told myself.

I turned the knob on the door and jumped back in surprise. It was locked when I had come earlier; now it was open. Smoke billowed outward as I pushed my way in, filling my throat with the scent of sandalwood and river grass. My eyes burned from the smoke, and I rubbed them as I stumbled into the dark.

The light from the hallway barely penetrated that place, but I could see it almost as if it were in a dream. The walls were draped with purple curtains, the floor covered in red and gold rugs. There was not a single piece of furniture, but instead mountains of cushions and pillows. Tapestries hung from the ceiling, and on them Egyptian hieroglyphics. I couldn't possibly read them, but somehow my mind understood.

The living shall go no further. The dead shall be welcomed with open arms.

I pushed past the warnings, parting the heavy curtains. The incense both muddled my thoughts and soothed my nerves. My pulse slowed and I felt far away as I plunged further into the strange room, which by its depth could not have possibly existed in that house.

At the end I found myself facing a single small chamber sinking down into the floor. Smoke rose from clay bowls, devoid of any incense or fuel, which formed a circle around a single pillow, and on it, Him.

A man.

A beast.

A god.

The jackal sat facing away from me, staring into the void of the wall, and I observed him in silence. He was taller than any man I'd ever known, broad at the shoulder and all the way down. There was not an inch of his black-furred hide that was not taut over corded muscles. An Atlas in front of me, and he wore not a single shred of clothing, though for all of his bareness, all I could see was the sculpted curve of his buttocks. Even his bushed tail, completely still, seemed to be taunting me with what I could not behold.

"You are not supposed to be here," he growled, barely above a whisper, but his voice shaking me to my core. I knew. I'd been warned, and I had silenced any part of my brain that would have drawn me away. I took a step back and the jackal exhaled.

"But it is too late," he said, gesturing with a finger. "Come. Greet me properly."

I came closer. The cushioned floor swallowed the sound of my footsteps, my shaking. All I could hear was the soft rise and fall of his breath. When I was two steps away he turned his head and looked right through me. His golden eyes burned as invisibly as the incense. When he smiled it was faint, and the thin curl of his blackened lips lifted to reveal the hint of teeth.

"Anubis?" I asked quietly.

"Lord Anubis," he corrected, and then laughed with such volume my heart nearly stopped. "No, no. He would not be in such a place." The jackal upturned his palm. "I am just a servant. A son."

"Then what should I call you?"

"You will call me Master."

I feigned a laugh, and swallowed it as the jackal growled again.

"I am not joking, Adam." As he spoke my name, I felt an unseen force tug at my chest and I stumbled towards him. He squeezed a blackened fist around my throat. "You will call me master. If I decide I like you, I will call you apprentice. And if I do not, I will call you pet."

My lungs burned as I rasped for breath. I knew if I addressed him, he would release me, but I wanted to feel it a little longer. His strength and heat so focused on me. The press of his body against my throat. My heart pounded and I waited until I was seeing stars before using the last of my air to whisper, "yes, master."

Those thick black fingers uncurled and this time found my cheek. His touch was gentle, his gaze still fierce, unbroken from mine. He must have known I was not merely submitting. The jackal knew that his touch alone thrilled me.

A hundred questions swirled in my head but I held them back. More than anything, I needed to know what he wanted next.

"I know you want to meet my father," he said, stroking my face. "Want to worship him. To feel him stealing the breath out of your fragile mortal body."

I nodded a little. He took my dipping chin and leaned close, until his long face pressed against my own. The heat of his breath washed over my face and he kissed me deeply. His long, silky tongue pressed into my mouth. I whined softly as it filled my throat, sucking on it like a proper bitch. Then as abruptly as he

had kissed me, he pulled back calmly, leaving me breathless.

"You are not worthy," he said, "and not able. Not yet."

Yet. The idea made me tremble with excitement, but it felt strange. Why should I think of Anubis when I already had a master? Of course, he was my master's master. Of course I would serve them both, gladly.

"What do I do to become worthy?" I asked.

The jackal smiled. He did not reprimand me for my curiosity, for speaking-- or at least speaking the right words. "I will teach you. Mold you into something greater than you are now. You are a mere mortal, but that life of yours is so very intoxicating." His pink tongue washed over the points of his teeth and he leered at me. "Do well and I will reward you. Displease me and I will punish you. Insult me, and I will feed your soul to Ammit."

"Yes, master."

He chuckled. He'd begun to enjoy being called this way.

Without warning, his hand left my cheek and grasped my wrist. He pulled until I stumbled against him, and then kept pulling, until I could feel the heat of his intentions. He pressed my hand against the back of his arousal, which stood erect between his legs.

How could I have missed such a glorious thing? Now I could see him up close, ember lights reflecting off the black of his body. I felt so small against him, and his manhood enormous even before I closed my fist around it. It was blacker than he was, if there could be such a thing. How large was it--a foot, at

least! I could feel his need just pounding beneath his skin, but the jackal remained still and calm.

"I will grant you my essence. It is a gift not given lightly, and it will bind you to me. As long as you have it, I will have power over you, but you will be able to come and go from this realm freely."

As he spoke, he guided my hand to stroke over his flesh. I did so slowly, almost painfully slow, committing his warmth, his smoothness, the give of his thick skin to memory. I wanted to remember the way that his heat felt against my face forever.

I did not need told. I knew what my master wanted and was eager to give it. Even with both hands, I could not hold all of him. I tried and tried but it only seemed to swell larger in my grasp.

He would not wait for long. The novelty of my interest was waning into his lust and he let me know with one dull growl. I bowed my head and moved until I was on my knees in front of him, dwarfed by his physique. The jackal grasped my head and pushed it hard towards his lap, until I felt his swollen crown kissing between my lips.

I wasted no time. I kissed it and let it invade my mouth, stretching my lips and jaws wide. He tasted almost smoky, almost salty, purely masculine. I barely got the hang of it before he tugged my head further, grasping my hair. I drew a deep breath and began to suck on him hard.

The jackal was both rough and gentle. He rocked his hips slowly, only

feeding a few inches of himself at a time to me. His hands held my head, and then my shoulders, his claw-like nails digging into my skin. He let me hold onto his thighs as I went down on him. His breath was ever slow, almost meditative, his expression one of focused fury. Only I could taste the lust that burned hidden inside his ebony flesh, and the pitch-like splashes of liquid inside my mouth. I wished I could look up at him, to see his eyes, his approval, his pleasure... but he only permitted me to see the curve of his belly and his thick fuzzy sack holding guard between his legs.

He lasted longer than any man could. My mouth ached and his head kept bumping insistently against my throat. It seemed like he might never come, but I knew better. He was beginning to rock harder, through the knit of my fingers and into my face. He dragged his nails over my back, leaving streaks, and when I whined out in pain, he dug them in and held me against him.

Thrusting, thrusting, the wetness seeping out from my lips until he finally relinquished a gasp. His whole shaft sprung in my hands and I could hardly keep hold of it as he flooded my mouth with his seed. I reveled in the taste of it, eyes rolling back, letting it fill me before gulping greedily down. I drank his essence until I could take no more. I pulled off with a gasp and the black behemoth sprung back, splattering the jackal's torso with the last few bursts.

Were he not catching his breath, he would have scolded me. Instead he just lifted my head, and then pressed it against his chest. I slipped into his lap and began to lick him clean, obedient, even as the fur of his hide tickled against my

tongue.

"I've decided." He folded his massive arms around me. The jackal wrapped me up and pulled me against him. It was sweltering, his strength intense, but I was in bliss. I licked the last of him off of my lips and looked up into his eyes. He smiled and ran a claw over my jawline. I knew he would not stoop so low as to kiss me after what I'd done.

"I will teach you," he said, "but you will also be my pet. I trust you will find this arrangement agreeable."

"Yes, Master," I said.

The jackal grimaced. "Master Coal, at the very least," he said. "You are to obey me. Not to bore me."

"Of course," I stammered. "I will... I will..."

"For now, you will rest."

The jackal pulled me deeper into his lap. His arousal had faded, receded, and somehow this only made him all the warmer. He returned to his meditations, but now with me held tight in his embrace. Each breath he took sunk into me, each rise and fall of his chest lulled me deeper into a trance.

And deep inside of me I could feel his seed shift. Like a spark of frost it jolted through me. I felt my body falling away, and in its place, I imagined becoming like him. I felt becoming like him. Power and feral instinct coursed through my veins. I felt the rushing river in my blood, the strength in my muscles. For a fleeting moment I was strong. Connected to all things, the dead

and the living, the wild and the still, and most of all to him. The howl of the jackal rang in my ears. I felt the gaze of Anubis upon me for but a moment, and then fell into a deep slumber.

I awoke the next morning with a faint headache and a warm buzzing in my belly. As my vision faded in, I was not in the guest room, nor any form of it, but buried deep in the fur blankets of the master bedroom. Painted black cats peered at me from paintings, but all was as it should have been. I thought it was just a dream, before the quiet throb of scratches along my shoulder and back proved it to me. I had met the man and I had loved him, however briefly.

I didn't know what to make of it, what to make my life. I fought the headache with a bottle of water from the mini fridge beside the bed and when that failed I took a shower so hot that the steam left my skin reddened. It made me feel more awake, but no less certain about the future.

Was Coal still there, lurking somewhere behind the walls of the house? I wrapped myself in a towel and approached the guest bedroom, giving the knob a twist. It resisted me, refused to turn. The smells, the smoke, the strange feeling that had come over me before was now completely gone.

Somewhere in the middle of searching the house for keys, the phone rang. I jumped up, as if I had forgotten even another human being existed in the world, and snapped the receiver to my face.

"Jeremy North's residence," I said, "this is Adam speaking."

"Ah, you're there. Good sign."

I sighed softly in relief. It was Jeremy. No having to answer endless questions about his whereabouts this time.

"What's up?" I asked. "You've only been gone a day. Afraid I'd burned the place down?"

He laughed, and I could hear the sound of a train rumbling by somewhere on his end. "Maybe. Just wanted to see if you're settling in okay."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said. More than fine. I thought about asking him about the jackal, and then realized how ludicrous that would be. Even if he knew about Coal, what could I possibly say? "How's the trip?"

"Too much work, not enough play. Gonna drive me crazy. Good to hear things are in one piece though."

"You can count on me," I assured him.

"Great. I got to go, but do you need anything?"

"Nah," I said, then hesitated. "Wait. I gotta ask, what's in the guest room?"

He became quiet, long enough I thought he'd hung up, and then sighed. "Just a bunch of stuff my family is making me store there. Total mess, and I don't want anyone going through it."

"Oh," I said. "Okay."

"Why? You haven't been in there, have you?"

"No, no," I lied. Did I lie? The room I was in was so disconnected from the reality of the house it may well have been true. "It just sounded really weird on

the note."

Jeremy laughed. "And now?"

"Really, really boring," I admitted. "Don't worry about it."

"Good," he said. "Sounds like you've got the place under control."

After that he seemed to relax. I didn't know whether or not to believe the simplicity of his answer, but there was nothing more to do about it. I let him to his trip and tried to focus on enjoying my time remaining there. All of my plans seemed stupid, though, and so much as driving to the store left me feeling numb and distant. I had to meet the jackal again. I felt it like an inevitability. But how? If I was connected to him, there must have been away. I just had to find it.

I spent the better part of the day looking for something I could use to get in that room. When that failed, I began feeling my way around the house, eyes closed, probing with my mind. It was stupid, but if I could only reach out to my master, I could see him again. Or so I thought.

The intense concentration didn't help my headache, and I eventually had to break it off. The better part of the day wasted, I decided to wrap it up by making use of the swimming pool. Now that the rain was gone, the back yard was a small slice of paradise.

Lilacs and lilies grew along prepared gardens, tucked away between rising rocks and larger hedges and trees. You could barely see the iron fences through the lush growth that stood dominant over the garden. The pool seemed pressed

up against the house, the only vacant spaces before being left to the urban wildlife.

As the sun set, birds began to sing from within the garden and insects hummed. The light lost from the sky returned in bright pearlescent lamps scattered throughout the garden, and though it should have been getting cold, it was maintaining an almost tropical heat.

Even after an evening swimming laps, I didn't feel tired. I stood at the edge of the pool wearing only a thin canvas of shorts and stared at my reflection. I had remembered myself being lighter, less canine, and having nowhere near this stamina. Now I barely knew who I was just days ago. Was I becoming someone else? The thought terrified me--and excited me greatly.

I thought I heard the sound of a river running here. Not the pump on the pool and its filters, but real rushing, wild water somewhere far away. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine it. The waning desert heat. The soothing, life-giving roll of the river. The smell of smoke and musk.

When I opened my eyes again, I was still in the garden, but it seemed different, as if someone had sliced that one place away from the world and dropped it in a place entirely its own. And the Jackal walked alongside the length of the pool, dragging the tip of an old golden staff through the water, leaving trails of ghostly blue in its wake.

For a moment he seemed not to notice me, and I drank in the sight of him. His hair was done up in braids now, fluid as the rest of his motion and his fur

was now painted with golden powder, marking a mask on his eyes and intricate pattern down his bare belly. To my disappointment, he wore a white and blue-gilded loincloth that fell all the way down his calves, and though heavy, swayed silently and seamlessly with his steps.

"I tried calling out to you," I said.

The jackal did not look up at me, but continued sweeping the water with his staff. I thought he could not even see me, until he paused in front of me and clasped my shoulder.

"I heard you," he said. "I will see you when I have need for you, and no other time."

"Yes, Master Coal," I said. The disappointment must have been tangible, for he leaned down and nipped my neck. A warning, perhaps, but it still made me gasp and fluster.

The jackal took my hand and placed it against the rod he carried. I clasped it with some puzzlement and looked up at him.

"You did not think yourself merely a bedroom toy, did you?" he asked. "Do as you have seen me do."

I nodded. I didn't understand the significance, but I remembered the semi-circular patterns he stroked in the water. I walked, and he walked beside me. As I stirred the pool, small currents began to emerge. I could feel a cool presence beneath us.

"There are spirits here?" I asked.

"You can feel them already?" The jackal's eyes brightened. "Good. It seems my investment in you has not been wasted."

I smiled. It felt good to be complimented, though I was more and more beginning to wonder at the significance of my 'training.'

"We are at a crossroads," he explained, "but a quiet one. Like two paths crossing in the dunes as the wind covers up every track. It is a quiet place, and why it is suited for our training. We will be safe here, but there are still those who wander through."

As he spoke, little things about the world shifted. The garden seemed to stretch on forever, the trees grew larger and palmed. The pool was no longer a pool, but a wide river stretching on as far as I could see.

"That is good," he said, taking the staff back from me. As soon as he did, I could no longer sense the spirits in the water. "It is important to maintain the flow."

"Where does the water flow?"

"It is too soon for you to know that," he said. "Too soon for many things, but I see you are capable of making that journey."

The jackal paused at the edge of a palm, which itself sat in a small cushion of dark green grass. He propped the staff against its branches and sat in the cross of the roots. I knelt in front of him, on my knees. I felt right, submitting to him like that.

"I want to make this journey," I said. "With you."

He chuckled and drew his long fingers up underneath my chin. "I know," he said. "Not even knowing what you are getting into, and yet you are already dedicated. But what you don't know is that you will not always be beside me, if that is your path."

My heart sunk. This world was already strange, frightening, and he was my anchor within it. I was under his power, but I knew there had to be so much more to this place. If I followed him, it might consume me. But if I turned away, I knew I would never see him again. I couldn't dream of it.

"Besides," he said, drawing his hand away. "You would be my responsibility. I don't know if I want to take on such a burden."

I instantly folded across his lap and gazed up at him. "Then make me your pet," I said. "I can't bear to think of being away from you."

The jackal jerked up, genuinely surprised, and then laughed. "Really! You would throw away everything, just to follow me for an eternity? Sating all my demands, tending all my whims?"

"Yes," I said. "It pleases me to call you master."

He leaned down and kissed my brow. "And it pleases me," he said, "but I would not be able to live with myself if I squandered your talents."

I didn't know how to feel about that. Saved, or rejected?

Before I could dwell on it, Coal snatched me up in his arms and pressed a kiss upon me. Deep. Long. I grabbed onto him with a force unbecoming a pet and surrendered myself to the lush heat of his mouth and tongue.

A trespass, yes, but he did not break the kiss and reprimanded me instead with a swift smack on my ass, to which I groaned and sunk deeper against him.

"I have tolerated your desire," he said, licking his lips as he pulled back from the kiss. "While holding back my own. No longer."

"Master?" I gasped.

"The first time I took you was for the sake of ritual," he said, voice deep and husky. He locked his eyes on me and this time I could see his intention burning unrestrained. "This time is for me."

The jackal leaned in and clamped his mouth on my neck. I gasped, moaned out, craning my flesh to the prick and scrape of teeth and the lashing velvet of his tongue. He drank my heat, my taste, growling all the while and his hands took my shorts. In his impatience, he stripped me in one swift tug, casting the garment aside into the sand.

"Offer yourself to me."

Unable to catch my voice for a proper reply, I nodded. I scrambled from the cloth of his lap, which was already swelling in the middle. The grass was both soft and sandy beneath my legs and scraped at my skin. I didn't care. I bent on my hands and knees and stuck my rear end back towards him. I offered my body, just as I offered the rest of me, and prayed that he would accept.

Coal did not leap upon me, but instead growled in delight and licked his jowls again. He calmly unbound his loincloth and let it fall to the base of the tree. I watched over my shoulder, eyes widened as I rejoined the sight of him,

gloriously nude, ebon phallus standing like a spire in the desert night.

As if sensing my urges, he snapped his jaws. "Do not move, pet."

I wanted to so badly. I wanted to crawl to my master and taste his manhood again, to feel him on my body. Inside of me. But he commanded I wait, and so through the torture of my need, I waited.

The jackal produced a small clay pot from the tree and popped open the lid. Then he dipped his fingers down into it and brought up a slick of shiny, clear slime. I could only watch as he rubbed it onto himself, pumping it over his flesh, a slow fist moving from glans to the fur scrunched against his belly.

"You tempt me to make you my servant," he said. "The thought of you beneath me, always..."

He trailed off with a snarl and stepped closer. I could feel the earth move with the weight of his steps until he cast his shadow over me. Then he leaned down and smacked both lube-stained palms against my ass, squeezing it up into his fingers.

"Please, take me master," I begged. I thought I could see him smile, but he did not reply.

The shadow that stretched from his body wafted around me like a fog. Then I felt a grip, his grip, warm and strong reach out from the shadows. It wrapped around my ankles and my wrists, holding me tight to the ground. If I wanted to escape, I could not.

I would never want to flee.

The jackal answered my begging by leaning down and shoving one thick finger against my tender entrance. I grunted out, losing breath as he thrust. The first stung, and the second a little less, and then a little less still as he stretched me out. A second finger, and then thrusts... one, two three.

That was all the courtesy he gave me. The shadows twisted and held my legs apart, my exposed backside aimed right at his waist. The jackal leaned down, closer, closer, until I could feel the hard round of his jackalhood pressing against me.

Coal was not gentle, but he still took me slow. He eased his weight against me and pried my soft muscles open with his shaft, plunging with a wet sound into the velvety grip of my guts. I moaned out in pleasure, gasping for breath. Closer, closer still he came, and with him more of his manhood. I felt myself spreading, stretching, outlined in pain and lanced with pleasure with each inch he fed into me.

Black heat swelled at me from the inside, and soon I began to tug at my shadowy bonds. He was big. Bigger than anything I'd ever taken before, and he just kept coming.

"W-wait," I gasped, but he did not reply.

The jackal's hips flexed and he filled the depths of my belly with his girth, not stopping until I felt the kiss of his groin against my strained ring and his body was on top of mine.

As he held me below, so he held me above, pinning my wrists beneath his

hands. He framed me entirely with his bulk, and the intense weight of his body pressed down into the curve of my back. I could feel his breath rasping out slow on my ears, a guttural growl building as he stirred himself inside of me.

For the roughness of his penetration, he began to kiss me upon the neck. Each time his hips moved, his tongue rasped across my skin. I could not catch my breath, for what pleasure his sheer size stole from me he returned by gripping me against him, not as one possessed a toy but as one possessed a lover.

Soon the sharpness of the jackal's breath joined my own. He loosened only a few inches from me before slamming deep again, a swell ended by the firm slap of his sack against my belly.

Again and again he came against me, my muscles tensing at the crest of his motions and making him groan out loud. His pleasure delighted me. I pressed against his back, into his arms, grinding myself against his powerful thighs.

"Tell me how I feel, pet," he whispered in my ear, and then bit it.

It took me a gasp and a moan before I could even think to answer. "Big," I said. "And hot... and so good. Like I was made to be taken by you."

He grit his teeth against my neck and chuckled. "Good, my pet... good."

I could feel his heartbeat pounding through me, and mine raced, chasing his. The heat of his body was almost unbearable. Soon we were mating hard, his body pounding mine with the swiftness of the river and the warmth of the noon sun.

The pressure was getting to me, the strokes and swells within me making

me throb with pleasure. Without a touch to me, he was driving me wild, and it was all I could do but to bury myself back against him and plead for more. I did not say it, did not ask, but he did as he willed.

When I thought I would go numb with ecstasy, I began to feel the changes again. Inside first, and then my hands and feet where he held me grew thicker. My skin drew dark as the shadow, and then lush with hide and pelt. The wildness he'd evoked in me before returned and this time I changed beneath him. I knew it was real.

This only seemed to arouse him further. He howled as fur raced up my back, tickling him. Every aspect of him filled my senses, his dark, incense-like musk filling my new nose.

As soon as I was more jackal than man, he came. His dark flesh swelled and jerked inside me, but he did not stop his wild thrusting even as his seed surged up inside me. Again I felt the warmth of his essence, like the heat from a hearth, taking me up from the inside.

"Master!" I cried out, cut off as he bit down hard on my neck. I felt the scissoring pressure of his teeth but even then it did not break my new hide. My new body could take all the punishment my old one could not.

My climax caught me by surprise, electric and sudden. My eyes went wide as pleasure exploded inside of me and I felt I might burn up entirely. He moved his hand and caught almost every drop of my cream within it before licking it off with his long, black tongue.

Then as soon as his climax ended, he fell atop me in a heap. I sank into the sand with an exhausted grunt, panting.

The moon was far overhead before we even thought to move. He did not pull out or away, but turned onto his back and pulled me against his belly.

I could not help but think that he liked me more this way, more like him than the man I was before. And to tell the truth, I liked it as well.

His thick, trunk-like arms wrapped around my middle and held me against him. The desert night could not hold back the furnace of heat we created together.

"What's happening to me?" I asked, after our breathing had completely calmed.

He picked up a pinch of sand between his fingers and crushed it, winding something magical between it, and began to trace little circles around my eyes.

"You're taking the first steps," he said, "to becoming a Brother of the Jackal."

My face flushed and I closed my eyes, letting him mark them with the golden patterns. "Are you doing this?"

"A little of you, a little of me," he explained, working my new mask over my face. "You will still be a man, but once the changes are complete, you will be able to cross into other realms on your own." He paused and tickled a finger between my lips. I kissed it obediently, and he laughed.

"And," he said, "once you are changed, I could not possibly make you my

slave. Right now I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to stop myself."

I pushed back and rubbed my face against his chest. The truth was, I probably could not resist that either. "You can always call me pet, Master Coal."

His arm grew tighter around me. "Of course I will."

We laid together there all throughout the night. I feared I would wake up alone, as before, sudden and unexpected, but the moment lasted. He explained, with some reluctance, that my changes would lead me into more powers and responsibilities. More understanding of our worlds, given enough time. We would not always be able to be together, and when we were, we would not always be allowed to enjoy each other.

After he confessed this, he rutted me again as we lay, right in the moonlight.

And when we'd said all that we could think to say and no will yet burned in our bodies, we succumbed to sleep.

The next morning I awoke in bed again, once more a man. But this time I could feel his presence just beyond my own. I could feel the jackal inside of me, a little of him, a little of me.

The future was uncertain as could be, but I knew we would meet again soon, and I would feel the embrace of my master and teacher again. That was enough.