

# Blood on Sand



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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## BLOOD ON SAND

**By Ofelia Gränd**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. *The M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

There are two pictures, one of a humanoid lizard and one of a werewolf. The reptilian has fallen to his knees, his weapons are lowered, and he's bleeding from his right shoulder. Around him the battle is still ongoing, but he has given up. The werewolf's eyes are glowing, his mouth is open, and his clawed hand is ready to strike.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I've fought hard to win my freedom from the beasts who've enslaved me but no matter how many battles I win, they refuse to keep their word. I've finally given up. Now, after winning my latest battle, I'm on my knees still in my warrior form in front of the head beast. I know I'm about to die. With his claws out and ready to strike, I just can't bring myself to care. Please, Author, give me a story and a reason to live again.*

I'd really like it if the 'head beast' was the love interest after the initial harshness between the two. And if the story could have an overall 'intense' feel to it, that'd be great, too! Although, I'd prefer no sex, if possible, and absolutely no menage. Please and thank you!

*Sincerely,*

*Nikyta \*Miss Forgetfull\**

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal, contemporary

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# **BLOOD ON SAND**

**By Ofelia Gränd**



## Victory

Zoe fell to his knees. Every wheezing breath burned in his chest, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. *It would all be over soon.* The harsh glare from the spotlight made it hard to see anything beyond the blood-soaked sand in front of him, but it didn't matter. If he could endure only a few more seconds, a few more agonising breaths, it would all be over.

The cheering and booing turned into a buzzing sound and faded into the background. Spots swam before his eyes, and he could no longer see what was happening around him. *It didn't matter.* He'd done what he set out to do, and now he would die.

His opponent coughed and gasped behind him, still crawling around, but unable to get to his feet. He would live—if his master let him. Zoe lowered his wooden shield and broken spear, and waited for the strike to come. He kept his gaze down; he didn't need to see the top dog's face to know he was furious. His powerful claws were probably curled around the stone railing separating the spectators from the combatants at that very moment. The heavily muscled arms, or whatever they called their forelimbs, could snap his neck. He didn't think that would happen, though. Using his claws to rip Zoe's throat out would be far more entertaining—and people came here to be amused. Blood splatter would fly through the air, raining down on the viewers closest to him while he twitched and bled out on the arena floor. They would cheer in their growly way, and everyone would be happy with the result. Almost everyone. Even his hazy mind could sort out that the Alpha wouldn't be pleased.

He lowered his head and waited. *Could he have done anything differently?* It seemed like an awful lot of work just to get killed. He could have just cheated, stopped defending himself, but his pride wouldn't let him. This too was cheating in a way; fights were always to the death and he hadn't killed, nor had he been killed, yet. This felt more honourable in some way. Why he even cared, he didn't know.

The snarls coming from the first row of the tiered seating penetrated the buzzing in his head. He didn't understand these beasts in their changed forms, but he could sense their wrath.

*What was taking them so long? It should be over by now.* He'd forced their hand, and there was no other way out. They would have to kill him. If they

didn't, they would lose face, and he knew they'd never let that happen. He would've smiled, if he'd been able to in his lizard form. But he wasn't, and it didn't matter anyway. *It would soon be over. He would finally be free.*

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Wojtek's blood boiled. *That fucking crawler.* If the little maggot had thought he could play him, he was about to be sorely disappointed. Wojtek had no intention of losing his best warrior. Not like this. Not today.

All the lizardmen in his stable would pay for this disobedience. He would make sure they did, even if he had to do it himself. He didn't much like going down to the slave quarters, but for this he'd make an exception.

“Are you waiting for him to bleed to death all on his own? You have to kill him.”

Wojtek glared at Satul, his second-in-command, his Beta. “No. He wants me to kill him. We'll punish them, all of them, and then we'll see how he enjoys the slave quarters once everyone figures out he's the reason they're being penalised.”

“Oh, that sounds serious. Too bad you can't do it.”

Wojtek growled. He hated when Satul's sarcastic voice echoed in his head. In human form he could pretend he didn't hear him; that was not an option when they were shifted. He hated when he interfered, hated that he had to listen to him... He didn't have to do as Satul said, but things usually turned out for the better if he did. He hated that the annoying little fucker was one of his best friends, and that he liked him even though he was an annoying little fucker.

“You need to either kill him or convince him to finish Tedor's puppet. Though how you're gonna do that is beyond me.”

Wojtek glared at the lizardian on the arena floor. Blood was always red no matter the species, and it flowed freely down the lizardman's right arm and torso, pooling on the ground around him. The sand in the pit had a much darker shade now than it had at the beginning of the evening. The heady aroma of blood made his mouth water, but he could tell it was the wrong kind. It had the right musty saltiness but something was off—cold. You'd think it would be like a human's, since the crawlers resembled them even in their warrior form, but it wasn't. Wojtek had seen these reptiles run on all four legs, but most often they stood upright on two legs just like humans.

“If you wait any longer, you won’t have to do anything at all. He’ll bleed out right there. I’m not sure the punters will like that.”

Some of the intense green colours of the scaly skin seemed to fade as Wojtek watched. He didn’t give a damn about the creepy-crawlies he owned, but the thought of never seeing this particular one fight again made him fucking mad. *So he thought he could force me into killing him?* Well, the twat had obviously underestimated him.

“Throw him in the fridge and stitch him up once he’s in a daze. Better yet, throw them all in the fridge,” he mused. They’d built a room-sized refrigeration unit next to the slave quarters just a few years ago, and it was the best thing they’d ever done. Reptilians hated the fridge—the beauty of cold-blooded animals.

Satul hunched down by his side, showing his submission. Wojtek wanted to snarl. Satul never showed submission unless he was about to say something Wojtek didn’t want to hear, and right now he didn’t want to hear anything. But that didn’t matter. Satul’s voice was there inside his head again.

“We can’t do that. You need to deal with this, and you need to do it now before Tedor demands it of you. It’s our puppet misbehaving. If you don’t take care of it, there’ll be consequences. We’ll be considered weak. You have to kill him.”

Wojtek glanced at Tedor on the other side of the stage floor. It might be wrong to say werewolves were pretty. The only hair on their doglike bodies was the Mohawk each of them sported all the way from the top of their heads down to their tails. Their skin was a bit rougher, sturdier, than in their human form. It varied a bit in colour, but most of them had a brownish shade. Satul was almost completely black, though, and where everyone else’s eyes glowed yellow when they were shifted, his were blue. Icy blue. Koray, his bodyguard, also stood out. His fiery red hair was easy to spot in the crowd, but he had that in his human form too, so it felt natural that he’d be red when shifted.

But it didn’t matter what colour they were, or that they looked like something fit for a nightmare, because compared to Tedor and his men they were all fucking beauty queens. The multiple horns on Tedor’s head were twisted in different directions, his hair matted into dreadlocks, his almost human face completely ruined by a cow muzzle that lifted his upper lip and revealed large, crooked teeth that grew on top of each other. He was a beast of a man when he was in his human shape, now he was a man-beast.

They were always in their shifter forms at the arena. Everything here was about power, and being human made you vulnerable. It made for some communication problems since none of them could talk to other species in their shifted forms. But, even though it was impossible for him to understand the bellowing sounds coming from the minotaur, he understood the wild gestures perfectly.

*Why the fuck did the crawly twat need to do this today? Couldn't he have picked a day with a smaller audience? He looked up at row after row of tiered seating. It was a good night; the stands were crammed. There were fur, claws, and teeth everywhere, and the snarls and growls grew louder by the minute.*

The rules were simple—one of the fighters had to die, and until one did the match was still ongoing. His lizardman hadn't killed his rival; he'd surrendered—lowered his weapons and bared his neck. One of them had to die. That was the rule. And if a fighter refused to fight, it was up to his master to kill him. Wojtek didn't want to kill his fighter. With a sigh he turned to Satul. "How do we deal with this?"

"You have to kill him."

"And if I don't want to kill him?"

"Then you have to trade with Tedor." Satul looked like the words had a bad taste to them, and Wojtek knew they probably did. Nothing good could come from trading with that fucking cow. He would look weak. Tedor already had too much power as it was, since he was the only other party allowed to bring in warriors, and—because he was the owner of the other fighter—it was his right to demand that Wojtek kill his own. *The crawler had disobeyed his instructions for fuck's sake. There was no excuse.*

Maybe he could make a deal with Tedor, though. The punters would be pissed off, of course. *It wouldn't look good.* But for once, Wojtek didn't care.

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## Forcing the Hand

Zoe waited and waited. He had a hard time remaining on his knees. At first, he'd lowered his head as a sign of resignation, but now he didn't have the strength to lift it even if he'd wanted to. The blood puddled around him, running down his body in a steady trickle. He couldn't keep his eyes open, and he was so thirsty he thought he'd die from that rather than the chief dog ripping his throat out. *What was taking him so long?* Zoe had done everything he'd planned to do, and now he deserved his reward—he deserved to die.

The sun warmed his skin, and he could smell the humid air, the vegetation, and the stones and rocks he'd sunbathed on when he was young. His tongue scented the air as the twittering from the birds started sounding more and more like growls. Zoe jerked, finding himself in the unforgiving spotlights. There were no chirping birds. No sun. And if the air had been humid he wouldn't have been so thirsty. He wasn't sure if the world tilted or if it was only in his head. It was almost as if he could see himself from above, yet he was unable to sort out what was happening around him. Every sound roared in his ears. There were people in the ring. He could feel one creature or another moving around, but no one was close to him. *Why didn't they kill him?*

His shield thudded as it fell out of his grip and onto the sand-covered cobblestones. He was cold, so cold. Why wouldn't they just finish him? *Wouldn't it be entertainment enough to see the king beast sink his enormous fangs into the unprotected skin of his throat?* He'd thought that would be enough to amuse them.

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Wojtek had hurried to shift and get dressed once he'd managed to make Tedor understand that he wanted to talk. But as he glanced at the lizardian from the imperial box, he wondered if they'd been too slow. Tedor was in no hurry; that was for sure. The giant man had come sauntering a good five minutes after Wojtek and Satul had showed up. And he'd been brushing his hair as he walked—as if they didn't already know what an ugly creature he really was. They had more urgent matters to attend than Tedor's hairdo.

Wojtek's hand found its way to the ancient stone column as he saw the crawler wobble. *What was taking Tedor so long?* He'd already said what he wanted; all the man had to do was name his price. Wojtek chanced a glance

over his shoulder and cursed under his breath. The cowfucker was playing with his phone.

*What was he waiting for?* It wasn't like there was much to discuss. Surely Tedor could see the waste of killing such a formidable fighter as his reptilian, and he wouldn't lose his fighter either. It was a win-win situation. They could even pit the fighters against each other again in a week or two.

He crammed his hand into the pocket of his jeans in an attempt to hide his frustration. This waiting was ridiculous, the crawler was dying, and the punters would be just as disappointed from having their debts collected over a death like this as they would be from having them returned because of a called-off fight. Not that they'd ever called off a match before; fight to the death was their thing. If the audience just wanted to see two creatures punch each other for a little while they could go to a human MMA fight or something equally tame. They offered the real thing, no rules, no interference... except.

"Sorry, just had to check up on my twitter feed. You want him to live?" Wojtek wanted to strangle Tedor; that was what he wanted. "Is he such a good fuck, the reptile, that you're willing to embarrass yourself in front of all these people?"

Wojtek snarled. He would never touch a fucking crawler, and Tedor knew it. Tedor just chuckled, though, obviously having a good time. Then all of a sudden he turned serious. "I'll tell you what, if you let him live I want a picture sent to me every day of you and him together. He'll be living in your quarters or not at all. Those are my terms."

"Never!" He pulled his hand out of his pocket just before his claws broke the skin on his fingertips. *Have a lizard in his home? Out of the fucking question.*

"Then kill him."

Wojtek stormed away through the arcade, throwing his clothes as he went. He let the change wash over him as he continued down the stone stairs, and onto the arena floor. His clawed feet scratched at the blood-stained sand, his tail swishing back and forth in an aggressive manner.

The entire stadium fell quiet.

The lizard tried to raise his head but couldn't. Wojtek was amazed that he was still as upright as he was. There couldn't be much blood left in him. He raised his hand, ready to dig the sharp points of his claws into the crawler's

larynx. A growl, born from the excitement he felt for the oncoming death, echoed through the spring night. His mouth watered. It would've been so much better if it'd been a creature that would taste good. The creepy-crawlies were too cold-blooded, the blood smelled about right and there probably wasn't anything wrong with the flavour if you could just get over the temperature. *Seemed like a waste to kill without having a taste.*

He leaned forward, just a little, his hand coming down in a powerful blow. But before he could make contact the reptilian angled his head—not away from the oncoming impact, no he angled himself to make the kill easier for Wojtek.

He snarled. *Hell no!*

The fucker would not have this his way. He ruled here. And he decided if and when he would kill someone. He knew Satul was watching from the entrance, probably cursing Wojtek for not having killed the crawler yet. *Well, he would just have to deal.*

He bent down and hefted the warrior up over his shoulders. Lukewarm blood trickled down his naked back and probably clotted in his Mohawk. *If the twat died on him now, when he'd humiliated himself in front of Tedor and his men, he might just have to kill him all over again.*

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## The Bet

“What the hell were you thinking?”

Wojtek didn't answer; he just stared at Aldo. Satul had been pacing and ranting for a good ten minutes already, and he did not want to hear the same shit from Aldo. “I don't need to justify my decisions to the two of you. If you don't like it, then feel free to leave.”

Aldo ground his teeth. His greying hair was always an utter mess, and the wrinkles around his eyes had deepened quite a lot these last three years. He sighed, and Wojtek couldn't help but feel a bit bad for the old man. “Have you thought this through? Don't you think it's better if we just kill him? We can send his head to Tedor in a nice little box with a pretty bow and then we'll be free of this whole situation.”

“No. He brings in great money, and he'll continue to do so once he's healed up a bit.”

“Okay, it's your call—”

“Damn right it is, and I don't like the two of you trying to tell me what to do.”

“Well”—Aldo held out his hands, palms up—“you know where to find me if you want me to take care of it.”

“I can kill my own slaves, Aldo.” He regretted being so hard on the old Beta and gave him a smile to smooth things over.

“Of course, I'm just saying...”

“Yeah, I know, and I appreciate it. You did a great job in the arena tonight, as always. I'd never make it without you.”

Aldo smiled the same fatherly smile he'd given Wojtek for as long as he could remember and left him with the pacing Satul. Aldo had always been like an uncle to him, and since his parents passed away, he'd become even more important.

“Don't you see that you've just given Tedor power over you, over us?” Satul stopped when he came close to the latte-coloured wall, turned around, and walked back toward the office door. *Again.*



“Are you a psychic, Satul?” Just to annoy Satul he leaned back in his leather chair and put his bare feet on the crescent desk. He almost laughed when Satul came to a sudden stop and whirled around to growl at him. Since he was in his human form, the growl was rather pathetic, but that only made it funnier.

“I don’t need to be a fucking psychic, and I can’t believe you’re so fucking dumb!” Wojtek’s growl wasn’t much more impressive than Satul’s had been, but he was pleased to see his Beta lower his gaze, even if it was only momentarily before he continued. “Don’t you see it? Having him live here will make you care about him.”

“I will not. Why would I ever care about one of our warriors? They’re pawns, merchandise. We fight them till they die, or we sell them, or trade them. Why would I ever get emotionally attached to something like that?”

“Because he’s in your home.” Satul slumped down into the armchair by the window, and Wojtek’s brows creased. He couldn’t see how it would matter if the reptilian was in his den—he would still be a reptilian. It wasn’t like he would start to care just because he saw him every now and then. It could even be good to have him here. He could do some housework and still fight once it was Friday again—maybe not next Friday, but the one after that. The pack healer had thrown him in the wine cellar to make him fall asleep. Not that he’d been conscious when they’d got home, but he guessed everyone felt safer if they kept him dazed. They’d stitched him up, but it still wasn’t certain he would live, so he couldn’t really see why Satul was so upset.

“You will smell him.” Satul held up a hand before letting it drop then shook his head.

Wojtek frowned. *Of course he would smell him.* No one could be in his home without him smelling them. “So?”

“So? So! What do you think will happen when you’ve smelled him for a couple of weeks and Tedor wants to pit his top puppet against *your* creepy-crawly?” Satul put a lot of emphasis on the *your*, and laughter bubbled in Wojtek’s chest. *Satul was such an idiot sometimes.*

“That’s what you’re afraid of? I’ll think of him as mine, as one of us?” He laughed even harder. It felt good to let some of the tension go. He looked at Satul and new waves of laughter spilled out of his mouth. It was just too insane. He would never include a fucking lizard in the pack, not even if he had to be close to one all the time.

He wondered what it would feel like to sleep next to a crawler. *Were they cold all the time?*

Satul sighed. “You think it’s that funny? If it wasn’t such a bad idea, I would love to prove you wrong. Come to think of it, I will. Let’s make a bet.”

“A bet? What are we betting on?” Wojtek loved a good bet, and it would be a great way to put Satul in his place, again.

“I’m betting that in three weeks Tedor will want a rematch with... the lizard—we need to name him.”

Wojtek shrugged. He didn’t know if Aldo had names for them, but he guessed he would have to call them something. Wojtek only ever looked at the rating scores, and he always recognised *this* reptilian because he was a more vivid green than any he’d ever seen before. Most of their reptilian fighters—which meant most of their fighters, since they didn’t keep stock in many other species—had either a brownish or a blueish hue to their scales, but this one was green.

“Anyway, I’m betting that it’ll take three weeks, at the most, before Tedor approaches you about a rematch, and by then you’ll be too attached to fight him.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to fight him? He’s our best warrior. He brings in the highest bets, and the crowd loves seeing him. It’s a good show every time we run him. He’s survived for so long that people are betting against him just because they think he can’t live much longer.”

“Exactly. Everyone will want him to fight. Everyone but you, because by then you’ll have smelled him enough to make that pea-brain of yours think of him as a werewolf—he’ll be as important to you as the rest of us.”

“He’ll never be a shifter like us, and I’ll never think of him as one.”

“Well, technically he is a shifter. He switches form just as easily as the rest of us”—Wojtek bared his teeth, but Satul didn’t take any notice—“but I know what you mean, and no he’ll never be a werewolf. I’m still betting that within a few weeks you’ll want to protect him. And to protect him you’ll refuse every suggested fight.”

“What are we betting?” He would not try to get the lizard out of fighting. He’d done that once and look where that had got him... He had a lizard in his wine cellar for fuck’s sake. *Satul would so lose this one.* He could hardly keep the grin off his face.

“If I’m right, which I will be—” Satul smirked. “—I want to live outside pack territory.”

“You can’t do that! I need you here.”

“It wouldn’t take any more time for me to rush through the woods than it would to zigzag between the houses.”

Wojtek hesitated. Werewolves did not seek solitude, not if they were well, so why would Satul even consider it? He looked healthy—a bit thin, but he’d always been that in his human form. He looked a little tired, dark circles under his eyes, and his dark hair more tousled than usual, but that could be due to changing back and forth several times during the evening.

“Please, Wojtek. I just want some peace and quiet. It wouldn’t change the way we work. I just... I need some space.”

*Space? Why?* It didn’t matter, though, because Wojtek wouldn’t lose, but... “I can’t protect you if you’re outside pack territory. You’d be free game for anyone wanting to capture themselves a werewolf.”

Satul snorted. “Oh, come on. Humans don’t believe we exist anymore, and every shifter knows there would be consequences if they took down the pack Beta.”

He had a point, but Wojtek still didn’t like the idea of having him living outside the hamlet. He could see every single one of the twenty-three houses from his home. Not being able to see Satul’s would be a constant source of worry.

“Yeah, okay. If I lose, you get to live outside pack territory, but if I win, which I of course will, then you’ll mate Ria. She’s been pining for you for years.”

Satul wrinkled his nose. “And if I don’t want to mate?”

“You want to mate. You want a bunch of cute little pups. But if you don’t want to mate Ria, I might be generous enough to let you pick one of the other females.”

Satul opened his mouth, then closed it again, before he started to wring his hands in that way Wojtek hated. *What werewolf wrung their hands?* And why the hell would he even want to live anyplace else? The peacefulness of watching the northern lights on a dark night, surrounded by the soft hills and untouched forest behind them, was all Wojtek ever wanted. There were no

roads leading up to the village, no traffic ever reached them, and he loved knowing that they owned all the land he could see when he stood on top of the nearest hill. This was their home. This was where their families had lived for generations, for so long, in fact, that they didn't know when their first ancestor had decided to settle down here. Why would he want to be away from it?

“Fair enough.” Satul rubbed his temples and got up from the armchair. “I think I'll head home if you don't need me any more today.”

Wojtek waved his goodbye. He probably should go talk to the healer, but he was tired. The creepy-crawly wouldn't die of lying in the wine cellar overnight. *Maybe he'd even develop a nice bouquet.*

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## Entombed

When Zoe woke, it was dark all around him. He flicked his tongue, taking in the musty smell and the cold. It didn't smell like the fridge. *He had to be somewhere below ground.* With a groan he banged his head against a stone floor, not the mouldy concrete he was used to from his cell. This felt smoother, but it had seams so he guessed it was tiled.

*Why wasn't he dead?* He'd done everything right. He'd broken the rules in a way that left the Alpha no choice but to kill him, there, on the spot, for everyone to see. Yet, here he was, in a cold dark room.

A lump formed in his throat. If he hadn't been in his warrior form, he might have cried. Not because he was locked up in a cold, dark place—he'd been in the fridge enough times to not freak out. No, he wanted to cry because it should've been over. He'd suffered enough. *They should've killed him. He should've been free.*

Would they approach him in human form? It was impossible for him to understand what the beasts were saying. Not that anyone was close by, but when they came for him he wouldn't be able to understand them unless they were human. Even if they were, he was too weak, too lethargic, to change. He sighed. He wouldn't be able to speak to them either way. Not that they'd ever wanted to talk before. The fighters were always treated like animals. Like they tried to ignore that they looked alike when they weren't in their shifter forms.

Zoe couldn't remember how many times Aldo had promised they would set him free. Before every fight they promised it would be his last. He'd believed them in the beginning, thought that he'd be free as soon as he'd won them enough money. Aldo had said that he and the Alpha had agreed on setting him free when his market value had been paid off. He couldn't believe he'd ever been that naïve. He didn't have a market value. His only value was what they collected in bets at the end of every Friday night. He was replaceable. If he died, they'd just bring in a new fighter the following week. If the stocks ran low, they'd send a group to raid the south and bring back new fighters. Zoe wondered if there were very many of his kind left.

If the fighting ring continued as it did, they'd soon be an endangered species. The werewolves wanted the males because they were generally more aggressive, and when engaged in a fight, they often fought to the death, even in

the wild. But sometimes they captured females. Zoe wasn't even sure they could tell the difference when a lizardian was in warrior form. He'd heard Aldo being displeased when a new arrival changed into human form, and he realised it was a woman. *They weren't very smart, these beasts.*

Zoe had fought for all he was worth in the beginning—and undoubtedly a lot more than that. So they probably thought he was an aggressive male. Maybe that had been his mistake. He scoffed. He should've let the reptilian he was fighting earlier win; then it would've been over by now.

*Why couldn't his brain become as slow as his muscles in the cold?* He couldn't feel his injuries, he was too numb, but he remembered being speared in the side. It had been pretty severe. Almost enough to kill him. *Maybe it wasn't too late yet; he couldn't tell in the cold.* A spark of hope shone in his chest. Maybe he was about to die. Lizards didn't heal very fast, contrary to what anyone might think. Just because he could regenerate a tail didn't mean he wouldn't bleed to death from a spear wound.

It took all of his strength to lift his arm and reach over his torso. *Bastards!* They'd stitched him up. He tried to scratch at the stitches, but he didn't have the strength to tear them. His clawed fingers didn't obey as they should, and before long, he had to give up. He flicked his tongue again—*couldn't even smell any new blood.* There was some on his tunic, but that was all. Why had they wiped off the rest of the blood? They never used to clean them up after a fight. Hygiene wasn't high on their list, at least not in the slave quarters.

Zoe shut his eyes, not that it made much difference; the dark was thick enough to make it hard to see anything. He knew he was in a rather small room. There was an arched ceiling above him, and there were shelves along the sides. Everything but the shelves was made of stone. He would bet his life he was in a cellar. He'd already bet his life, though—more times than he could count.

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## Taking a Nap

Zoe heard a gate, or maybe it was a door, squeak. The sound of human voices travelled through the room. *Human*. Didn't they think him more dangerous than that? If he could manage to hurt—or even slay—one of them, they would kill him for sure. That may be his best bet. He sighed. Did he really have the energy to try? Maybe it would be easier to just let them do what they were planning to do and then make sure he got killed in his next fight in the pit—screw honour, there was no honour in dying anyway.

But maybe he should try. If he succeeded, he wouldn't have to suffer through the week or two it would take before they deemed him fit to fight again. *He could do it; he just needed a few minutes in a warmer environment*. He wouldn't be fast enough to take them by surprise unless they came really close, but he might be able to hurt one of them enough to gain his freedom—his death.

A lock clicked and electric lights came on. You never knew with these animals. The arena was ancient, and the slave quarters even older, but they'd had electric lights installed everywhere. And they had a wine cellar, he realised now. He'd bet there would be a fancy living room with a TV up above. He hadn't seen a TV in over three years.

“Change,” came a harsh voice, and Zoe wanted to laugh. They really didn't know shit, these clowns. “I said change.” A growl followed the command, and Zoe thought that maybe he wouldn't have to do anything at all to get himself killed. He could just be his normal self and that would be infuriating enough for this creature to rip his head off.

“Erm... I don't think he can.” *Oh, so now they suddenly had an expert on reptilians; that was something they sorely needed down in the slave quarters*. They always kept the stalls too cold and the food was never what they needed. He didn't eat meat, something these monsters never seemed to get into their thick skulls even though Zoe had told them several times. He wasn't like the other fighters; they were carnivores. Crickets and other insects were what they preferred though, not the slabs of raw meat they usually got. Zoe couldn't digest that. He'd tried eating it and ended up puking his guts out. His usual luck made sure he was the only herbivore in the lot.

“What do you mean he can't?” The harsh voice was talking again. Zoe just closed his eyes. If they didn't get him out of here soon he would go into

hibernation. It would be a relief, but he'd rather they killed him so he'd never have to wake up again.

"I mean that he's too cold. We need to get him out of here and give him a chance to warm up before he'll be able to change."

"Huh."

A strong hand gripped his arm and pulled, the heat coming from it was almost burning. Zoe would've helped if he'd been able to, but he didn't have much control over his limbs. His movements were too slow. He spread his toes, trying to gain as much stability as possible as he was pulled to his feet. His forth toe was almost twice as long as the rest in this form, and the big toe was shorter than the little one, but it was the most important one for his balance.

The hand let go of him, and he took a stumbling step toward the entrance. The world tilted and he saw the floor coming closer. Sluggishly he tried to raise his hands to soften the impact, but they wouldn't cooperate. Just as he accepted that he'd be a heap of lizard-mash on the floor, two burning hands gripped his shoulder. He hissed as the movement pulled on his stitches, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was too slow to follow easily.

"See! It's already starting," the kinder of the two voices said, though it didn't sound very kind at the moment. Zoe looked up and saw a dark-haired man glare at him. He'd hardly ever seen any of them in their human form, but the ones he'd seen were huge. This one wasn't small, but he'd seen bigger.

"What?" The fingertips of the one holding him dug into his arm, making some of his scales loosen. Zoe couldn't find it in himself to care. It wasn't enough to break the white skin underneath, and beauty had never got him anywhere with these monsters. He'd once been considered a magnificent warrior, not only because of his fighting skill but for his looks as well. Before he was captured, his skin had been a vibrant green. The dull colour it held now was just another sign of poor nutrition and bad living standards. It didn't matter; he was done living.

"Yesterday you would've let him fall, and you'd probably have laughed when he failed to get up on his own."

"Yeah? This make you more comfortable?"

The hands pushed him away. Zoe closed his eyes; he didn't need to see the floor coming closer to know that was where he was heading. The sound was almost like a wet towel hitting a tiled floor when he made contact with the



ground. His head bounced, and he squeezed his eyes shut tighter to brace himself for the pain. Red fireworks exploded on the inside of his eyelids as he tried to breathe through it. Pain was the only sure way of knowing you were alive, but Zoe didn't want to be alive. He wanted it all to end.

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Wojtek wanted to wince, not because he cared about the lizard, but the sound as his head thudded against stone tiles was a bit sickening.

“Remarkably enough, it doesn't.” Satul's snide remark echoed in the cellar as Wojtek bent down and picked up the reptilian from the floor. He didn't try to help this time; he was out cold. The corner of Wojtek's mouth twitched. *Ha, out cold.* And he really was cold. His skin was the same temperature as the wine cellar, which meant about twelve degrees Celsius.

“Shouldn't he manage twelve degrees without going into hibernation?” He'd always thought they were tougher than that. He couldn't really remember how cold they kept the fridge, but they threw the lizardians in there every so often. They hated it, which made it the perfect punishment.

“I think they hibernate in temperatures between seven and fifteen degrees, but he's injured, so he probably didn't stand a chance.”

“Since when did you become such an expert in reptiles?” If he sounded grouchy, it was only because he was beginning to feel it. He should've come down here earlier, but he didn't really know what to do with the lizard, so he'd put it off.

“Well, we've been trying to breed them for a few years now so I've tried to understand a little about their natural habitat and such.”

Huh, he hadn't known Satul had taken an interest. He'd been opposed to the breeding program—not that it was much of a program. *The fucking crawlers wouldn't breed.* “Yeah, so when will he wake up?”

“If it's hibernation, and not just that the fall knocked him out or the blood loss made him faint, then it would take months. Just the waking up process takes about three weeks.”

“Three weeks! I'm not running a fucking spa here. He'd better wake up and make himself useful.” Claws prickled at Wojtek's fingertips as they dug into the cool skin once again. He couldn't remember ever touching one of them before, other than to deliver a punch. The skin was softer than he'd thought. Even though it looked wet, he knew it wouldn't be. He'd handled snakes—real

ones, not shifters—and he'd thought all creepy-crawlies would feel the same. This lizardman was softer, his skin consisting of small overlapping scales, making it feel almost like velvet, cold velvet. There were some coarse patches too, where some scales protruded like small horns, but mostly the skin was very soft.

“I don't think you have to worry. Going into hibernation usually takes weeks too, so he's probably just cold, weak, and... now he probably has a concussion too.”

If Satul didn't watch it Wojtek would show him what a concussion felt like.

Wojtek hauled the lizardian, whose tail was limp and useless, over his shoulder. He'd seen that tail swipe at the legs of his opponent in the pit more than once. It was a sad sight to see it flaccidly flopping about as Wojtek juggled him around. *God, he didn't weigh much.*

“So, I just put him to bed somewhere a bit warmer, let him rest for a while?”

“I guess.” Satul shrugged and started walking toward the stairs.

“Good. We'll put him in the guestroom, and you'll stand guard till he wakes up.” Wojtek smiled at the growl he heard coming from Satul.

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## A Pile of Bones

Zoe winced at the pain that started in his jaw and dug into his skull like evil tentacles. He could tell something was different even before he opened his eyes. He might be in pain, but he was lying on something soft, and it was warm. Not as warm as he preferred but warmer than he'd felt since they captured him three and a half years ago. He thought maybe it was a dream, so he didn't open his eyes just yet. Instead he let out a deep breath, flicked his tongue, and felt himself sink farther down into the mattress. There was life in the room, plants, and humidity.

"I know you're awake."

Zoe snapped his eyes open and shuddered when the light hit them. There was a dark-haired man with a five o'clock shadow standing in the doorway. Zoe had a fuzzy thought of having seen him before. *Maybe this was the head beast in his human form.* He seemed a bit small though—not that he'd seen the Alpha in human form, at least not while knowing it was the Alpha—but he'd always pictured him as a big bear of a man.

"If you're healthy enough to stare, then you're healthy enough to change."

Zoe hesitated. He didn't want to change. In his warrior form he had the pretence of being able to protect himself; his human form was pathetic. At least they hadn't taken off the tunic he was allowed to wear during fights, not that he had any modesty left, but it was a bit reassuring to know that he wouldn't be naked in front of the top dog.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus on centring himself. His tongue flicked out again, smelling the air. His scales sank into his body as the human skin overgrew them, the bones in his face repositioned themselves, his claws and toes retracted, and the tail regressed one little bit at a time until only a human tailbone remained. A heated wave flushed over him. His panting had nothing to do with discomfort, there was no pain in changing, but the extra strain it put on his body was more than he was able to endure. The room blurred before his eyes, and he closed them. He really was a sorry excuse for a warrior now.

He didn't want to feel shame, but as he heard the man at door gasp he knew that not even his tunic could hide the terrible state he was in. Well, they were the ones who'd made him like this, so they could gasp all they wanted.

"Are you ill?"

He didn't know what to make of the bewildered tone in the man's voice, because no one had seemed to care before. "No."

"But you're a skeleton."

"Heroin chic was considered pretty once."

"Uh-huh. I'll go get the Alpha now. Don't move."

*So, not the head beast then.* He really should move, but escaping was out of the question even with the heat helping him to move more easily. He flicked his tongue and then almost bit the tip off. He had to stop doing that in human form; he had a functioning nose for crying out loud. They would think he was insane if he went around licking the air—not that he planned to stick around for long.

He could die in this room. It wasn't ideal. He would've wanted it a little warmer and a little more humid, but for the first time in years he wasn't thirsty. His skin soaked up the moisture in the air. He wished he'd taken a look at his skin before changing; he bet it'd been looking healthier than it had in ages.

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Wojtek held up a pink *Cymbidium* orchid to examine the potting mix. *Argh, too dense again.* He'd have to repot it or the roots would starve for air. He put it back down and lifted the next pot, a *Cattleya*, from the bath where he'd been watering them. It looked okay.

"Wojtek."

He didn't turn around. He'd heard Satul coming up the stairs and guessed it meant their creepy-crawly was coming around. "Hm."

"He's in human form."

"Excellent. What is he able to do? Clean?" He turned around to look at Satul and frowned when he saw him wringing his hands.

"You should probably have a look at him first."

"I'm a bit busy, as I'm sure you can see." Wojtek gestured at the bath filled with orchids. Satul knew that he took care of his flowers every Saturday night. Surely he realised that was more important than having a look at a lizard—one he'd seen plenty of times.

Satul rolled his eyes. "I still think you should have a look at him. Your precious plants won't die if you stop coddling them for a few minutes."

“Fuck you,” Wojtek mumbled under his breath as he passed Satul and went down the stairs. He guessed he’d have to see what Satul wanted him to see so he could go back up and report his Cymbidium in peace and quiet. *Maybe he should use lava rocks this time.* On his recent trip south for the Spring Flower Fair, he’d had a chat with a human man who had said he had all his orchids in lava rocks. It could be worth a try. Sometimes Wojtek wondered why he bothered to go; the trip took longer than the time he spent there. But even though he could read up on orchid findings on the internet it wasn’t the same as talking to people about them. Spending time with the orchid society always brought him new enthusiasm, even though all the other members were humans.

He turned the corner at the bottom of the stairs and went into the room where he’d dumped the reptilian earlier. Maybe he should take on the orchids in here next. His eyes swept over the cream-coloured wall covered in pots. The humidifier seemed to be working fine; every plant was thriving. His gaze fell on the motionless human form on the bed. Thriving was not something you could accuse that man of.

Wojtek kept his face blank. He ran an underground fighting organisation for a living; death was not something that affected him. The skeleton on the bed, however, was not dead. *Had he been trying to starve himself to death? Was his desire to die so strong? Well, too bad.*

“You don’t think I’ll punish you for trying to destroy one of my warriors? You think I’d let you off the hook just because the one you’ve tried to finish is yourself?” He hadn’t planned on adding a growl at the end, but it pissed him off that this lowly creature had tried to rob him of his best fighter. And it pissed him off even more when the pile of bones gave a meek laugh. His brown lifeless hair fell into his eyes as he moved. Wojtek tried not to wrinkle his nose as the smell of unwashed man reached him. He guessed that was his doing; after all, they never allowed the lizardians to bathe. He had a nice mouth, though. Who would’ve thought such lush lips could transform into the hard mouth of a lizard.

“That’s precious,” the creature said between weak bouts of laughter, and Wojtek snarled. “You think I did this to myself.”

He didn’t answer. It hadn’t been a question, more something the man mumbled to himself. If he hadn’t done it to himself, then who had? Wojtek stroked his full beard and pulled a little on his moustache. *Was there someone trying to sabotage his establishment?*

Satul's footsteps echoed in the hallway outside the room, and with the sound, came the smell of eggs and bacon. *So, they were running a restaurant now too. A spa wasn't enough? Might as well let him feed the freak before he died on them.*

"Food's coming." He didn't know how well the lizard heard or smelled. The man stilled on the bed, the tip of his tongue sticking out of his mouth before he seemed to catch himself and clamped his lips together. The corner of Wojtek's mouth twitched. So that was how reptiles were in human form, still trying to lick the air. *So fucking daft.*

Satul came in carrying a tray with scrambled eggs and a healthy heap of bacon. Saliva flooded Wojtek's mouth. Food would be good now, even if it was breakfast in the middle of the night. The man on the bed, however, recoiled.

"Erm... I can't eat that."

"Can't or won't? Because I can force you if you're reluctant." Wojtek growled but stopped when the animated skeleton scowled at him. *He probably shouldn't growl in human form.*

"I'm an herbivore."

"You are?" Satul practically squealed. "Even in human form?"

"It's not like I haven't told you." The crawler had backbone; Wojtek had to give him that. You didn't argue with two werewolves—unless you had a death wish. *Which, he was still certain, this one did.*

He turned to leave. If Satul wanted to dote on the lizard then it'd be his choice. He'd never promised Tedor anything more than letting the lizard stay under his roof, and all the better for their bet if Satul was the one to take care of him.

*Fucking Tedor.* He dug out his phone from his pocket and turned toward the creature on the bed again. Better take a picture of the two of them now and get it over with for today. With some hesitation he reached for the man. He gave himself a mental shake. It wasn't a man; it was a filthy lizard who looked like a man. *Like a not-so-bad-looking man, at least if he got cleaned up a bit and fed properly.*

He snapped the picture with a muffled growl and hurried out of the room. On his way back to the bathroom, he searched his contacts for Tedor. They didn't talk often, but he knew he had his number stored there somewhere. He

would send the cow the fucking photo and then turn off his phone. It wasn't a good picture. It was all blurred, but you could easily see the surprised look on the crawler's face. Wojtek remembered feeling the soft scales under his hand, so unlike the skin of a werewolf, and yet so... He hit send and went back to his orchids, but not even the lava stones were enough to keep his mind from spinning.

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## Skin and Bones

Wojtek braced himself before turning the corner to his kitchen. Satul had obviously spent the night, and he could smell both him and the crawler in there. He was in no mood for having breakfast with either of them, but he'd be damned if he'd be forced out of his own home just because of a stupid deal with Tedor.

He took a deep breath, crossed the threshold, and stopped dead in his tracks. *What the fuck?* Laughter escaped his mouth before he even knew what he was doing. "What the hell, Satul! Were you afraid he'd outmanoeuvre you or something?"

The lizardian was trussed to one of the kitchen chairs with a thick rope Wojtek didn't even know he owned. Though his emaciated body looked harmless, his eyes were made of steel—dark and filled with hatred.

"No, he tried to behead himself with a kitchen knife."

Wojtek wanted to smack himself on the head. *How had he missed the scent of blood?* His gaze focused on the plaster on that slender neck. He really wasn't more than skin and bones. *How the hell had he been able to fight?* But no matter how fragile his small body looked, Wojtek knew it was the host of a great warrior.

The chair he pulled from the table screeched on the limestone flooring as he put it in front of the reptilian. "Let me make one thing clear..." He searched for a name. Had they named him? *He had to have a name right?*

"His name is Zoe," Satul provided.

Zoe? Could've been worse, could've been a series of hissing sounds. "Let me make one thing clear, Zoe. I'm running a lucrative business here, and I don't give a crap about your personal problems. If you do anything to interfere with the way I'm running it, I will care a great deal. And taking your life would be interfering with it, do you understand?"

The tip of Zoe's tongue peeked out between his lips before quickly disappearing into his mouth again. Wojtek growled. Just seeing the tip of that tongue angered him, somehow. This runt of a man was a fucking crawler; he should know his place.

"You think I might kill you myself, don't you?"



The claws prickled in his fingertips and his vision turned into that partial colour-blindness it had when he was in his shifted form. “Let me tell you one thing, if you so much as break a nail while you’re under my roof, I’ll force-feed you raw meat and keep you in the cellar, unless it’s Friday—then you’ll fight.”

The worthless piece of shit had the nerve to smile. “You think that scares me? It’s hardly any different from what you’ve done on a daily basis since I got here. Just put me in the ring. I’ll fight on Friday.”

Wojtek launched. He wasn’t aware of doing so until he heard the seams in his T-shirt rip. *Fuck, it was his favourite werewolf shirt. The print was completely wrong of course, but that was what made it funny. And now the crawler had ruined it.*

His clawed hand closed around Zoe’s neck, both of them hitting the floor as the chair Zoe was tied to toppled over. Hot blood coursed through Wojtek’s veins as the Mohawk-styled hair he wore as a human continued to grow down his back and ended in a furry tail. He snarled in Zoe’s face, close enough for his fangs to almost graze the skin on Zoe’s cheek.

A forked tongue flicked out between those plump lips. Next, Wojtek saw Zoe’s pupils turn into slits, followed by both eyes becoming a blueish colour with snaking blood vessels all over. *Fascinating.* Up close, the pale skin turned to the beautiful green of the warrior. Scales emerged all at once, and the face rearranged itself.

“Have we proven that the big bad wolf can best the malnourished, anaemic, tethered lizard now?”

Satul didn’t look pleased with Wojtek’s loss of control. And why should he? It wasn’t like he had planned on ripping the head off the reptilian he’d just threatened about harming himself. He snarled one more time just for the sake of it before he climbed off Zoe and walked out of the kitchen—claws tapping on stone tiles and clothes hanging in rags from his body.

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*So close!* Blood trickled down his throat for the second time this morning. It had been so close. If he’d only managed to anger the monster a little more, it would all have been over now. He shouldn’t have changed either, but it sort of just happened when it turned into a combat situation.

“Don’t worry about Wojtek. That won’t happen again.” Satul went back to the fruit plate he’d been preparing, obviously not wanting to acknowledge that

Zoe didn't worry, that he wanted to die. He placed the plate on the table and went to raise the chair with Zoe still tied to it. "You really don't weigh much." He pushed Zoe closer to the table and helped him get his arms free. He was still tied to the chair, though. "How much do you weigh when you're healthy?"

Zoe stared at him. Did he really think that he would answer while in warrior form? This guy seemed nice, but Zoe knew he was just as involved in running the arena as the rest of them. He would not be giving up information that wasn't necessary. To talk about food was one thing—he really was only one step away from starving to death—but if he told them about his need for heat and humidity it would only make things worse. Their little breeding project, as they called it, didn't work because no one could reproduce in the living conditions of the slave quarters. And all the lizardians wanted to keep it that way.

"Yeah, I guess it's stupid to ask questions right now."

Zoe ignored him, picked up a piece of apple, and popped it into his mouth. Sweet juice coated his tongue as he chewed. The aroma filled his senses, the taste of richness and freedom made his heart quicken. *Oh, what a foul trick to serve him delicious fruit.*

He ate it all, not caring if Satul stared at him. If he thought he'd have a change of heart over some fruit, he'd be deeply disappointed when Zoe's blood smeared all over the beautiful sand-coloured tiles of this floor the next time they let him close to a knife. Or maybe he'd wait until Friday and die in the pit—go out with an audience.

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## Nice and Cold

Wojtek had repotted all of his orchids in seven days—all 727 of them. He'd rearranged them, made sure the ones that didn't fit on the walls around the house were standing in the windowsills on trays with damp gravel to increase the humidity level around the plant. He only allowed himself to fill his bedroom from floor to ceiling; the other rooms were more tastefully decorated. But, no matter how much he tended to his flowers, he couldn't ignore Zoe being in the house.

His scent was everywhere, and it got under his skin. He didn't smell bad once Satul had cleaned him up a bit—Wojtek had thought he would, but he didn't. No, Zoe smelled humid and a little musty, but not bad. He was used to the warm musky smell of werewolves, not this... It wasn't cold. He often told himself that it was a cold smell, but how could a smell be cold?

*Argh!* He threw the plastic ewer against the only wall in his bedroom that was free from pots; water splashed and ran down the grey wallpaper. *He needed some space.*

He stomped down the stairs to the bottom floor. Zoe and Satul were in the kitchen, as always. If he didn't know better he'd have thought they were best buddies by now, but they weren't. Zoe didn't say shit, much to Satul's admitted frustration. Wojtek didn't care. If Zoe wanted to be quiet, that was just fine with him. They weren't here to socialise—something Satul failed to see. *He would so win their bet!*

The soles of his bare feet padded on the floor as he walked; there was no way they wouldn't hear him coming. He liked announcing his presence, liked how Zoe's eyes filled with blazing anger whenever he entered the room.

He didn't give them any time to greet him, just grabbed Zoe's arm and started dragging him toward the cellar door, looking back over his shoulder at Satul. "You and I are going to the arena early today, leaving now." He didn't wait for Satul's answer, just continued toward the cellar.

Zoe didn't resist, much to Wojtek's chagrin. *Couldn't he at least struggle?* He would've loved to be able to tussle with him a little, feel that skin under his hands again. Not that anything stopped him from putting his hands on the man, but... *Why didn't the little fucker fight? Surely he couldn't be that indifferent to what was happening to him?*

He had seen him slay many a man, and even though Wojtek probably was twice as strong, the little crawler had some neat tricks up his scales. He didn't even lose balance as Wojtek hauled him down the cellar stairs. Maybe he could've been fighting today. Wojtek knew how thin he was—his fingers could easily encircle his upper arms—but maybe Satul was exaggerating his poor health. Maybe he wasn't as bad off as it looked; some people were simply thin. Probably best to wait another week. He didn't want him to get himself killed just yet. There would still be plenty of money to be made off this warrior if he only could prevent him from offing himself in the ring.

“Don't go into hibernation,” he growled as he pushed Zoe into the wine cellar.

“Oh, haven't we learned some fancy words since we last talked.”

Wojtek ignored him and locked the gate, some expensive iron shit his father had installed right before he went and got himself killed—leaving Wojtek in charge of the entire pack and the fighting arena.

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Zoe's body was at war with itself. A human would shiver, and some part of him wanted to, but that wasn't how he worked. He couldn't do anything but wait until his body was the same temperature as the rest of the room. He wasn't afraid of the cold, but that didn't mean he enjoyed being locked up in a wine cellar. This time Wojtek had been nice enough to leave the lights on. His face scrunched as that thought flitted through his head. *There was nothing nice about Wojtek; he lived off slavery and illicit fighting for crying out loud.*

He was a formidable creature, though—strong and fast... and probably evil to the bone. He wasn't as big as Zoe had imagined, easily a head taller than himself but that didn't say much, and while fit, he didn't look like he was hopped up on steroids. Still, he cared more about his orchids than he did about the reptilians living in his slave quarters.

Zoe couldn't deny feeling some sort of satisfaction in getting a reaction out of him every time they were in the same room. He didn't think Wojtek was aware of it, but as soon as he met Satul and Zoe together, he inhaled and his eyes zeroed in on Zoe. More often than not they shone yellow for a second or two as if he was about to shift. *Too bad he was a dick.* When his eyes weren't burning yellow they were blue, dark blue. And the beard, the ring in his ear, and that ridiculous nose piercing—just a little stud that you hardly even saw unless the light fell on it. Zoe wanted to mess up the Mohawk he kept even in

human form. Not that you could do much to mess it up, he was completely shaved on the sides of his head leaving only the hair on the top, he still wanted to run his fingers through that hair. *Ridiculous!* He'd always pictured the Alpha as a feeble-minded monster with overgrown muscles, and he was still rather certain that he was pretty dim-witted, but he sure was nice to look at in his human form. *So, there was something nice about Wojtek after all, even if it only was physical appearance.*

The cold seeped in through his skin, gradually equalising his body temperature to that of the wine cellar. He wouldn't freeze to death, not in here, but if he was left for long he would hibernate. He would fall asleep and lie there as still as the neatly shelved wine bottles.

Well, if he was about to nap for a few months maybe he should try to have a drink. He'd never had wine—could be interesting to see what would happen. It wasn't like it would matter if he died, so why not? Broaden his horizons and maybe piss Wojtek off a little... or a lot.

He selected one of the dusty bottles and went over to the little counter by the far wall. The grime coating it was so thick he couldn't tell the colour of the label, let alone whether the wine was white or red, but that didn't matter. If it was old it was good, right? He hoped it cost a fortune.

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## Sharpen Your Claws

Wojtek sharpened his claws on the white stone pillar of his box in the arena and looked across the pit. There was a wolverine in the audience. He'd seen him earlier and had kept his eyes on him. His skin was crawling and not because of the sound his claws were causing. Wolverines were uncommon, and he found it a bit strange that one had come to watch the show on the very same night they had a wolverine fighting.

And there was something up with Tedor. He and his men were gloating. He didn't need to understand their mooing and bellowing to figure out that they were laughing at him. What he couldn't figure out was why. His tail swished back and forth. When Satul came too close, he bared his teeth. *Was he being set up?* He had the feeling he was, but how could he be? And would they be this open about it if they were trying to cause problems? *Nah, he was probably imagining things.*

He hadn't made any mistakes in setting up the fights. They had a good schedule this evening, and all the combatants were present and subdued according to regulation. There hadn't been any problems. None of their slaves had tried to run; no one had tried to kill themselves. That was the beauty of reptilians, they didn't kill themselves and they didn't fold—no matter how much pain they were in, they fought until one of them was dead. *Well, everyone but Zoe did.*

Tonight's fights consisted of a good mix of lizardians, a few lower shifters like foxes and cats—and of course his opponent's wolverine. Tedor had either got very lucky or very unlucky in managing to trade himself to that one. If he'd got unlucky, Wojtek hoped it wouldn't spill over on his business. Wolverines didn't live in packs but it made Wojtek uneasy to know that there was one in the audience.

He grimaced. Maybe it was stupid to let the fight run. It could turn out to be more of a problem than he could afford. He could practically taste the blood in the air, hot and gushing. His lizardmen wouldn't stand a chance against the wolverine even if they let them fight him in pairs, but it would be a good fighting night anyway. He loved Fridays, the pulsating excitement, the growls, the snarls, and the yelps. Swords and spears clashing, the smell of all the different animals present, and then how the air would be overtaken by the scent of blood as the first combatants got hurt. Taunts would fly all over the stadium,

and there would be some brawls in the audience; there always were. He got his cut on all the bets whether his fighters won or not, and with a wolverine there would be a lot of bets. He just had to crush the feeling of something being wrong.

Deep growls vibrated in the air around him. More and more of his wolves joined in, almost drowning out the sound of approaching hoofs. Tedor knew better than to walk, unannounced, into their area of the stands with his entourage, especially in changed form. If Wojtek hadn't been busy showing off his pearly whites, he'd have taken some time to be proud of the way his pack formed a circle around him, their jaws snapping, tails straight out from their bodies, and their eyes never leaving the minotaurs that were intruding.

*What the fuck did Tedor want?*

His broad raspy tongue came out to lick at his bared upper teeth, and Wojtek almost shuddered. Tedor sure looked nasty. When Zoe flicked his tongue it was much more refined, a delicate movement almost—*how would it feel to have that split tongue dancing over his skin?* Tedor's broad slab of a tongue was just crude.

With a nod Tedor indicated that he wanted to talk and pointed at the imperial box where they usually met if they needed to exchange words. He held up two fingers meaning that they'd each bring two guards. Wojtek wanted to frown; they usually only brought their Betas, or whatever you called your second in command when you were cattle.

He nodded, turned to Satul, and sent a thought asking, "Do we bring Koray?" as the hoof tramps from the departing herd echoed down the arcade.

"Yes," came the response in his head. Satul's ears laid back flat on his head, telling Wojtek all he needed to know about what his Beta thought of the meeting.

"Do we have any reason not to go?" He had no idea why they shouldn't, but then he'd never been accused of being smart either. Satul was the one who usually knew what was going on around them; he was the one with the brains. Koray had somehow become Wojtek's bodyguard. It wasn't a post that had been assigned to him; it sort of just turned out that way when he'd become Alpha and Satul, Beta.

"Not that I can think of. Can't think of any reason to go either. We don't have any unfinished business with them."

The metallic sound of a swordfight had Wojtek glancing down at the ring. His fighter was already bleeding abundantly. *Fucking good-for-nothing crawlers.* Tedor's lizardman, an orange sort, chose that very moment to thrust the blade of his sword straight through Wojtek's reptilian's throat. As he pulled back, blood sprayed him from the open wound and the gurgling sounds were drowned out by the audience's roar. Wojtek rolled his eyes. *Worthless piece of shit.*

He guessed they'd better go see what it was Tedor wanted. He growled as he turned around to see where he'd put his clothes. It was one thing to show off your goods when you were in wolf form, but they did not meet nude. He had no interest whatsoever in knowing if Tedor was as hung in human form as he was in minotaur—probably was, the bastard.

He shifted, dressed, and went with Satul and Koray to the balcony where Tedor and his two men were already waiting.

“So that's what the red one looks like. I've always wondered.” Tedor was laughing as he let his gaze wander over Koray, not in an appreciative way, simply cataloguing what he saw. Wojtek bristled, but he tried not to let it show. His men were not here to fucking model; they had a purpose no matter what they looked like.

“What do you want?” He had no patience for pleasantries, and he did nothing to gloss over his harsh tone even though he saw Satul stiffen out of the corner of his eye. “Do you have something you want to discuss or did you just want to slobber over my men?”

Koray sent a wicked grin his way. Sometimes Wojtek wished he'd made the Beta position instead of Satul. Not that Satul did a bad job, quite the opposite, but Koray always understood him.

“No, I simply wanted to know a little about the man you've been slobbering over.” There was a challenge in Tedor's eyes, but Wojtek didn't follow. His brows creased as he thought through his past weeks. *Who had he been with? He couldn't remember fucking anyone in ages.*

“When will your green lizard be back in the ring?” Wojtek snarled. “Where is he now, if you don't mind me asking?”

“He's in the fridge.”

When Tedor simply sat back on his chair and raised one eyebrow—one—Wojtek wanted to launch himself at him. “I thought we'd agreed on him living in your home. Have you been Photoshopping the pictures you've sent?”



“He is at home, in my wine cellar.”

Tedor’s mouth twisted, the other two minotaurs did little to hide their amusement. “At home, huh? Does he smell good, Wojtek? Do you know where he is at any given moment of the day? Maybe you like holding him at night knowing that he has no ability to keep himself warm unless you provide him with some body heat.”

Satul’s hand closed around his arm, which was already on its way to smash in some minotaur teeth. “He’s in no condition to fight yet, Mr. Tedor. If you’d like to set up a match with one of our other reptilians please follow the ordinary routines. We do not need to meet to schedule fights.” *Yeah, Satul was a good Beta, cool, calm, and collected in any situation.*

“Most kind of you to clear that up, Satul, but I want a fight with... what’s his name?” He tilted his head a little as he directed the question to Wojtek.

“Names aren’t important,” Satul answered, some of the politeness replaced by a harder tone, and Tedor started to laugh.

“How naïve of me to think you’d babysit on your own, Wojtek. Maybe you should change the schedule around a bit, though. I hear werewolves can get quite fond of the scent of someone. We wouldn’t want Satul here to interfere with the lizards’ timetable in the ring, would we now?” He stood and walked away followed by his two dairy queens without so much as a glance back.

Wojtek had a niggling feeling that something was about to go horribly wrong. Satul had obviously been right about Tedor having an ulterior motive for having Zoe in his home, and Wojtek wanted to smack himself on the head—of course there’d been an ulterior motive. It was just that he couldn’t understand what Tedor would gain from him starting to care about the lizard, not that he did. But maybe it would be smart to try to prevent Satul from getting too attached. Or was it dumb to subject the whole pack to the odour of the crawler?

“Would it be wise or unwise to have others in the pack smell him?”

Satul wrung his hands. “Depends. It could make ordering him to fight a bit awkward if everybody wants to protect him.”

Wojtek turned to Koray and waited for him to speak. “I don’t know, dude. Can’t see how anyone would get attached to a crawler. It isn’t like they’re like us. Just because you have him under your roof—which I don’t get why you have, by the way—doesn’t mean he can’t fight.”

“He’s not strong enough. He’s malnourished and he needs the extra heating of living in a normal house instead of down in the slave quarters.” Satul’s eyes blazed blue as he spoke.

Both Wojtek and Koray frowned. This could become a problem.

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## Skinny-dipping

Zoe heard a growl but he was too tired to care. Everything hurt, even the soft light from the ceiling lamp felt like icicles to his eyes. *Why couldn't Wojtek just have turned them off?* There was some more growling followed by the screeching sound of the iron gate. Zoe managed to get up into a sitting position and leaned against the brick wall, cradling his head in his hands. He tried to get away from the sound, but moving would joggle the thorny cotton in his head, so that was out of the question. His skull had grown too tight, and he needed a bath in the worst way. Needed to let his skin soak for a day or two, nothing less than that would cure the desert that had overtaken his mouth.

“Get up.” There was a kind of anger in Satul’s voice he hadn’t heard before. He couldn’t quite remember what he’d done, but he remembered that his goal had been to annoy the top dog—he hoped it had worked. “Zoe, get the fuck up off the floor.”

“I think he’s drunk.”

*Huh, that was someone he hadn't heard before.* He squinted in the direction of the sound.

“Or maybe not. Here is an open bottle, but I can’t tell if he drank from it, seems like maybe a mouthful or two is missing.”

Zoe blinked a few times to clear his vision and almost choked, right there in front of his eyes was a nicely shaped cock nestled in a shock of fiery red pubic hair. With a wince, he turned his head away. *Couldn't these monsters at least put on some clothes before they came down here?*

“Shit. He could’ve killed himself with that corkscrew; take it away.” The urgency in Satul’s voice made him groan. He hadn’t even thought of that. *God, he was bad at committing suicide.* “Half a glass would probably be enough to knock him out.” At least Satul had the decency of covering up his bits by wrapping a towel around his waist.

“How could he become this drunk on a mouthful of wine?”

“Lizards don’t drink.”

“No one drinks until they’ve tried it and they see the benefits of being mellow.”

“You’re so fucking daft, Koray. They don’t drink anything, not even water, unless they’re ill.”

“How can anyone survive without water?”

Zoe tried to tune them out but their voices were like glass shards in his brain.

“They live off the humidity in the air,” Satul muttered. He seemed to know a lot more about lizardians than anyone else around here, and yet they failed so miserably at taking care of their... Zoe had always considered himself a warrior, a fighter, but *slave* probably was the correct word for what he’d become.

Satul bent down and pulled Zoe up on his feet. The room shifted, queasiness hit, and Zoe gagged. He managed not to puke all over the place, but it was a close call. Cold sweat came in waves, timed with each unstable step he took—as if he wouldn’t have been sluggish enough from the cold, he’d just had to swallow that tannic shit.

“Stop the jibber-jabbing and get moving.” Rough hands grabbed and hauled him up into a fireman’s carry. Zoe’s stomach lurched but he clamped his lips together and swallowed down the bile. *He would not vomit all over that gorgeous bum.* Koray was still as naked as the day he’d been born. *Werewolves were born naked, right? Or did they come out hairy?*

Zoe presumed Satul went before them up the stairs, but he really couldn’t tell—it took all his attention to keep from puking.

“Take him to the bathroom. He needs to bathe.”

“Shouldn’t we search the house first? The boss will be home any minute and he’ll hand us our arses if we haven’t figured this out.”

“I’ll bathe him. You search the house.” Satul’s tone was clipped, and Zoe started to realise that something must have happened, something other than him having a sip of Wojtek’s wine. He could feel how tense they both were, and though he didn’t know Koray he guessed that something had to have happened to make him come down to the cellar without Wojtek present.

“You search the house, dude. I think Tedor’s right. You’re getting too attached.”

“Fuck you!” There was a snarl that couldn’t have come from a human. Zoe tried to see over Koray’s shoulder, but a strong hand held him in place. He was

carried into the bathroom, where Koray turned on the faucet. Hot steam billowed from the water as Zoe tried to find his balance.

“I’ll go into shock if it’s too hot.”

“And how hot is too hot?”

“I’d say that about thirty degrees would be great on a normal day, but I’m figuring I’m about twelve degrees now.” Koray’s eyes widened. “Maybe a little more since you so graciously lent me some body heat on the way up here.” He winked—he just had to when Koray wrinkled his nose in a repulsed manner. “So maybe fifteen to begin with, not over twenty.”

“You can’t regulate your body temperature? Like at all?”

Zoe rolled his eyes, for someone *owning* lizardmen this lot really didn’t know shit about them. “How can you know so little about us? I’ve been here for more than three years, and you already had fighters in the pens then.”

“I’m not involved in that part of the business. I just follow Wojtek around like a glorified groupie. So, as long as no one tries to rip him to shreds and the money comes in every Friday, I’m good.”

Zoe slumped down on the rim of the bath. “You can leave. I promise not to drown myself.” *He’d probably fail anyway.*

Koray studied him for a while, almost as if he was seeing something he hadn’t before. “Give me your clothes.” He looked down at his dirty, blood-stained, tunic. He’d been wearing it for a week now, and it didn’t smell too good. But to be naked in front of the werewolves—

“What the hell are you waiting for?”

With a deep breath, he untied the leather armour, pulled it over his head, and then did the same with the thin linen tunic. He didn’t try to shield himself. If Koray wanted to see what their kind of treatment did to their slaves, then let him look.

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## A Smiling Corpse

Wojtek rushed into his house, phone clutched in one hand and a few remnants of his clothes hanging in rags from his body. “Satul!”

“Here.” Satul was leaning against the wall in the hallway with a towel wrapped around his waist.

“What the hell are you doing dressed in a towel?”

“I’m... erm... Zoe’s in the bath and I figured maybe... since he doesn’t seem to be used to... I didn’t want to be naked.”

Wojtek stared at him. *Didn’t want to be naked? They were shifters for fuck’s sake, naked was their thing.* “What’s he doing in the bath?” They *didn’t* run a fucking spa. When was Satul going to get that into his thick skull?

“He was dehydrated.”

“And you ran him a bath? What’s wrong with giving him a glass of water?” Satul shook his head, making Wojtek even angrier than before. “I’ll deal with the crawler after you’ve told me what’s going on.”

“Someone’s been in the house.” Koray came walking from the bathroom and down the stairs—without a towel. *Why did it bother Wojtek that the redhead had been naked in the bath with Zoe?* “Satul and I came back from the arena, ran through the forest. That’s where we came across an unfamiliar scent. We followed it, thinking someone had left there and ventured into the hamlet.”

“They had,” Satul interrupted. “Someone, one person as far as we can tell, walked from the stadium, through the wildwood and into the village. Seemed like he or she knew where they were going, too.”

“Yeah, no detours or anything. He went straight for this house,” Koray added.

Wojtek growled, he couldn’t help it, someone had come into pack territory and walked about without being invited, and they had broken into his home. His vision shifted, claws ripped through the skin on his fingers.

“Nothing’s taken,” Koray continued, without so much as a pause when Wojtek turned into a partially shifted monster before his eyes. He was used to it of course, but Satul would at least have faltered a little. “As far as we can tell, he was in the cellar but didn’t come up into the house. Still, the lizard was down there.”

“He had nothing to do with this!”

Wojtek didn't listen to Satul's shouts of defence. He rushed up the stairs, shifting a little more while he took the stairs three at a time. The claws on his feet dug into the wooden treads, not that he cared about the damage, but it was good to set foot on stone-tiled floor again. He reached the white panelled door and barged right through it. It bounced on its hinges after banging into the wall.

Zoe bounced almost as hard until he saw that it was Wojtek bursting in, then he smiled—fucking smiled. He stood there in all his glory, teeth bared, eyes glowing, and the fucking crawler smiled. In one swift moment, he leaned over the bath and had his claws around the lizardman's voice box.

He had to change back a bit to be able to talk, but stayed as much wolf as he could. “Who was in the cellar with you?” It was hard to talk with fangs growing out of his mouth, and his tongue did not obey properly.

Zoe's brows creased as if he was trying to make sense of what Wojtek was saying. “I... eh...” He let up a little on the pressure since it seemed the twat couldn't talk, watched as his claws slipped into his fingers again. “There wasn't anyone in the cellar. You left me, I had a glass of wine, and then the redhead came growling.”

If it hadn't been for the fact that he wanted to rip the reptilian's head off, he might have smiled. *Koray sure knew how to growl.* He heard footsteps on the stairs and went to lock the door. He did not need Satul in here at the moment. The man was weak, or maybe not weak, but he let his human side get too emotionally invested in things he should keep at arm's length. *And to think he'd thought Wojtek would lose the bet. And why the hell had he covered up with that towel earlier? And why hadn't Koray?*

“He didn't have anything to do with it, Wojtek!” Satul was pounding on the door. Wojtek could hear Koray mumbling something to him, but he couldn't hear what he was saying.

“What's up with him?” That tongue flicked out again as if he could smell Satul through the door. Wojtek growled. *Why would he try to scent Satul?*

“He thinks I'm gonna kill you, which I am, unless you tell me the truth.”

“Finally.” A forked tongue came out, but the change stopped there, and Wojtek realised that he meant it. *Finally.* He tried not to stare down into the water—you didn't stare when you were a shifter. People were nude all the time, or at least werewolves were since they were quite a lot bigger in their were

form than they were in their human one, so no clothes survived the constant shape shifting. The lizard was smaller in his human form but not by much—or it wouldn't have been much if he'd had some meat on his bones. The parched, paper-thin skin was covered in scars, and every bone in his body was visible. Wojtek thought that maybe he looked a bit better now than he had when he'd first come here a week ago, but he was still just a pile of bones. *Shit, what had they done?*

“Erm... don't fall asleep.” He turned his gaze away, tried to hold on to his indifference, but he couldn't stop his fingertips from lightly caressing the abused throat as he straightened from the bath. He tried to crush the stupid feeling of wanting to lift Zoe out of the bath, towel him dry, and put him in some soft clothes that wouldn't scratch his delicate skin but would shield him from Satul and Koray's prying eyes. He growled at his own silliness and walked out of the bathroom. He would remember that scar-covered body when he closed his eyes tonight. “I'll be back in a few minutes to ask you some questions, okay?”

He didn't wait for Zoe's answer, just walked out, and turned to face Koray and Satul as soon as he exited the room. “Okay, so one person, you say?”

“Yeah, one.” Koray didn't miss a beat. “One scent, and I don't recognise it. Definitely here in human form, though, otherwise it would've been headier.”

There were only a few scents Wojtek would recognise in human form, only the ones he'd talked to, since the majority of people he met stayed shifted. The arena was a place you went to bet money and watch creatures tear each other to pieces; you came for the blood and the thrill of death, not to socialise outside your race.

“We tracked it from the arena, into the hamlet, and then back to the arena where it got mixed up with all the other scents. He probably changed somewhere in the crowd, because there isn't a trail anywhere after that.” Koray clenched his jaws. “If a human walked through the crowd, someone should've noticed it.”

*Yeah*, Wojtek thought. You didn't go into the arena in your human form; it was too dangerous. But on the other hand, you didn't go around talking about what you'd seen either. *What the fuck should they do now?*

Satul cleared his throat. “You didn't hurt him, did you?”

Wojtek glared. He wanted to punch Satul for trying to look past him and into the bathroom. He wouldn't hurt Zoe. He might have thought that he



wanted to, but he didn't. The mere thought of harming him while he was in the bath, looking so small and defenceless, made Wojtek's skin crawl. But if Satul didn't stop looking soon, he would most definitely get hurt. He exchanged a frown with Koray, again. Satul's interest in Zoe was definitely becoming a problem.

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## A Good Day to Die

It was hard to deny the uneasy feeling that curled in the pit of Zoe's stomach. He should've felt good, well, apart from the persistent queasiness—he would never drink wine again, especially not since Wojtek didn't seem to care that he'd opened one of his fancy bottles. But it didn't matter that he'd been allowed to eat his fill for a week and just had a bath, something he'd dreamed of for more than three years, because there was something going on. He didn't know what it was, but he had a sneaking suspicion it somehow revolved around him. He hadn't seen any intruder, but his gut told him it was somehow connected to him being there.

Wojtek paced the kitchen, his eyes glowing and claws clicking on the floor as he walked. Zoe had never seen anyone stay in partial change for as long as Wojtek did. His muscles were bulging, much bigger in this form than in his human one. His skin was not quite the brownish colour it held when he was completely shifted, but darker. The fangs were there, but no canine ears, and no tail. It was impressive to see. Zoe could do a partial shift, but only for a little while. Then he'd either turn reptilian or force it down and go back to human.

The others weren't shifted at all. Satul sat on one of the chairs, his head resting in his hands. Koray leaned against the doorpost, and Zoe sat on the floor rolling up the sleeves of the shirt he'd got from Wojtek. *Did he have to be so big? Stupid monster!*

"You're sure?" Wojtek glared at him again.

"Yes."

"You didn't see or hear anything?"

"No, I didn't, but that doesn't mean no one was there."

Wojtek sneered, a grisly sight. "We know someone was there, and it would help if you could tell us who it was."

"Yeah, I get that. Contrary to what you may think, I'm not stupid."

"He can't help, Wojtek. He was out cold in the cellar." Satul didn't lift his head from his hands as he spoke, and for the first time in the entire week, Zoe felt a bit sorry for him. The man looked exhausted.

"I'm just asking him to try to remember if there was something out of the ordinary, a scent, movements, something."

Zoe found himself flicking his tongue as Wojtek mentioned scent, and of course, he was caught in the act. Heat spread on his cheeks. *Why the fuck was he blushing? It wasn't like he cared what they thought of him.* Wojtek grinned and the heat on Zoe's face increased. "No, sorry. I didn't hear, see, or smell anyone, and I don't really see how any of this has anything to do with me." *No, he couldn't see it, but it sure felt as if it had something to do with him.*

"Me neither. But I've lived here my entire life, and not once have we had a break-in. You've been here for seven days and all of a sudden this place is crawling with intruders."

Zoe could see how Wojtek would come to blame him, but he really didn't have anything to do with it, at least not in any way he could figure out.

"Don't exaggerate, Wojtek. It was one intruder." Satul really did have a death wish today, not that Zoe couldn't sympathise—it was a good day to die.

The snarl coming from Wojtek had him shivering; there was power where that came from. "Maybe you should go home, Satul. You look a bit tired."

Satul looked up as if in a daze. "Yeah, I feel a headache coming on. But if you're going somewhere, I'm coming with you."

Both Wojtek and Koray nodded. "I think we'll visit minotaur-land tomorrow," Wojtek said in a softer voice than Zoe'd ever heard him use. Both Satul and Koray nodded, and Zoe felt like he was missing something crucial.

"Creepy-crawly is sleeping in my bedroom tonight. Koray, you'll stand guard."

"Hey!" Zoe just had to interrupt. Sleeping in Wojtek's bedroom? He might be a slave, but he was not *that* kind of slave. Though if they hadn't been slave and master... *Nah, that's just crazy thinking.*

"Don't kid yourself" was all Wojtek had to say, and Zoe watched as Satul and Koray went outside.

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"Well, get going. The clock is ticking and I'd like to get some shut-eye." Not that Wojtek thought he'd be able to sleep with a crawler in his bed, but it was definitely time for bed. It wasn't that he was worried someone would come back and try to snatch his warrior, and he didn't really think Zoe had anything to do with the break-in. Even if he had, he couldn't have done anything as he'd been locked up in the cellar. But Wojtek wanted to keep an eye on things.

Maybe Zoe had done something to communicate with someone on the outside. Maybe he had family out there.

That was a thought that hadn't crossed his mind before—maybe this didn't have anything to do with the minotaurs; maybe Tedor and his men were completely unaware of what was going on. It could be someone else trying to free Zoe.

He let himself slip into his human form even though it was difficult. He wanted to shift completely, to growl and snarl, and maybe rip a few scales from the little fucker's body. Or maybe he just wanted to touch those scales again. He wasn't entirely sure.

With a human hand, he gestured for Zoe to walk up the stairs. *Was the little crawler planning to escape?* Somehow he didn't think so. It could be naïve, but this man had tried to force Wojtek into killing him. It was like he didn't dream about freedom anymore. But if it wasn't Zoe, or anyone related to Zoe, then it had to be Tedor. *But why would Tedor order somebody to break into his home?* It wasn't Tedor himself; he'd been at the arena and made sure Wojtek was caught up in the meeting. *It had to be the minotaurs. Something had been up with them today. Maybe they worked together with someone else, but they had to be involved.* "Have you ever spoken with Tedor?"

"I've heard that name several times tonight, but I have no idea who it is." Zoe glanced at him over his shoulder. Standing two steps above him on the stairs only made him a few centimetres taller than Wojtek. He didn't even have to raise his chin to be able to look him in the eyes. *The crawler sure was a little thing; you never would've guessed when you saw him fight.*

"No one ever spoke to you at the stadium, a minotaur?"

"No one ever speaks to us. You know that. It's against the rules, and we're always in warrior form."

*Yeah, they always were, but Aldo sometimes changed just to be able to talk to them, so maybe someone else had too.*

"Aldo never introduced anyone?"

"Aldo?" Zoe laughed. It wasn't a happy laugh, but it made his heart skip a beat anyway—which was *fucking stupid*. The crawler was dead meat, a fighter, nothing to get attached to or even think of as a living being. "You know, to be able to introduce someone he'd have to acknowledge that we exist, and he only does that when he can't avoid it. He only stops ignoring us when he's

informing us of what and how we're going to fight, or when he's been talking to you and has something to tell us."

"Talking to me?" Wojtek and Aldo never spoke about the fighters, not about any one of them in particular at least. He left Aldo in charge of them, and he didn't care how he managed things as long as good fighters showed up every Friday. And they did. Aldo did a good job and Wojtek trusted him completely in his work with the crawlers.

"Yeah... You never talked about me did you?"

*Talked about him?* The only thing Wojtek knew about Zoe was that he was green in his warrior form. They'd never talked about him other than to set up the fights. Aldo told him which ones were fit to fight, and Wojtek paired them up with opponents based on their rating scores or how many punters had requested a certain kind of fight. The ones who didn't have any scores got a rookie match in the beginning of the evening. Either they died, or he had a new fighter. "No, we've never talked about you."

Zoe exhaled and sort of crumpled. "I figured that. It's just... I'm just being silly. Which way is the bedroom?"

Wojtek pointed toward a closed door at the end of the hallway. He didn't care what Zoe was being silly about—*he didn't*—but had Aldo been saying something in Wojtek's name? It didn't matter. Aldo did his job, and Wojtek did his. He only interfered with Aldo's if things went awry, and so far their fighters did pretty well.

Zoe hesitated by the door. "You know—"

"Just get in, lay down on the bed, and go to sleep."

Zoe sighed, turned the knob, and looked around. Wojtek knew what it looked like and glowered at Zoe, daring him to say anything. "My God," came out in a breathy whisper full of reverence. Then he closed his eyes, held out his hands and breathed in deep.

When Wojtek saw the look of euphoria on Zoe's face, his cock twitched, which was completely inappropriate. Suddenly aware of being naked, he looked around for something to put on. Not that Zoe was watching him. He kept his eyes closed as he breathed in the warm humid air. Wojtek slipped on a pair of sweats and a T-shirt—good clothes if he needed to make a quick shift. Sweats usually survived a change.

Zoe whirled around and looked at him before throwing himself on the bed, spreadeagled. “How many are there?” His eyes travelled the walls.

“In this room?”

“Yeah.”

“Four-hundred.”

“Four-hundred orchids better cared for than your slaves.”

“Shut up.” Wojtek growled as he turned off the light. He saw well in the dark so he didn’t need it. The reminder of slaves made Wojtek uneasy, not that he didn’t know he owned slaves—it was how he made a living—but for a moment he’d sort of forgotten why Zoe was there, and that wasn’t good.

Wojtek watched Zoe curl up on the bed. He looked quite comical in Wojtek’s clothes with rolled up legs and sleeves. With a deep breath he climbed into bed. *This must be the most ridiculous idea he’d ever had.* Why would anyone want to free Zoe, and if there was anyone, they surely wouldn’t come during the night when Wojtek was at home. *Maybe he should kick the fucker out of bed.*

He lay quiet, staring at the ceiling, not touching Zoe. He’d been right; the orchids were better cared for than the crawlers in the slave quarters. They had the right temperature, the right humidity, and he fed them what they needed. He didn’t know much about lizardians, had never had the interest to know anything about them, but he’d heard Satul talk about humidity and shit. “Do you have a family?”

Zoe turned toward him. It was obvious that he didn’t see very well, his eyes searched in the dark. “No, depending on what you mean by family, of course. Before I was caught, I hung out with a group but...” He fell silent making Wojtek wonder what he was thinking about.

“Where are your parents?”

“Huh?”

“Your parents. Where’s your mother?”

“My mother?” Zoe laughed again, and this time Wojtek felt his lips stretch into a smile. “You should try picking up a book every now and then, you imbecile.” Wojtek reached over, about to tussle him, but then he remembered that this was a creepy-crawly teasing him, not a lover, and he froze. The

laughter died as Zoe realised what had happened. Wojtek felt stupid, and then he felt stupid for feeling stupid.

“My parents took care of the eggs. As soon as we hatched, they went into hibernation. It’s the way of our species. We find groups to live in. Contrary to what you may think, we’re social beings. We have almost pack-like structures, with an Alpha and all that, though we’re not as close-knit as you are. We’re more like humans, but without their family ties.”

“You’re an Alpha?” It wouldn’t really surprise Wojtek if he was. Zoe was strong and fierce. Seeing him fight was like watching art... *or porn*.

“No, I’m too young, or was, at least. I guess if I’d been free, my life would’ve been different.”

*Yeah, it would’ve been different.* Wojtek didn’t know what to say. He didn’t feel bad for the way he made his living—the strong oppressed the weak; it had always been like that. Zoe might not be weak, but he was physically weaker than werewolves were, and he was far away from his home environment, without any allies. He didn’t stand a chance in this part of the world. He’d probably freeze to death just from being outside in the wintertime. Just the thought of Zoe outside in the snow felt wrong.

“It doesn’t matter.” Zoe turned toward the wall, clearly showing Wojtek that he didn’t want to talk anymore. *The hell it didn’t*, he thought, but he wasn’t about to make any excuses for what had been done, and he couldn’t just change things. If he let one of his fighters go, he’d need to let the others go as well, and then he’d have no income, no way to support his pack. *It mattered, but there was nothing to be done about it.*

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## Scrambled Eggs

Zoe was sure he was dreaming. He was warm and cosy, the humidity was almost perfect, and he could smell plants, living plants. If he'd felt the warmth of the sun he'd have believed he was at home, but he wasn't. He was in the cold north. Being in this sanctum was only temporary, as was the feeling of strong arms holding him close. He knew that once Wojtek woke up there'd be air between them again. It almost made him feel bad that he enjoyed the closeness, the body heat, the powerful arms shielding him from the evil of the outside world.

The respite was short-lived, though. Satul barged in through the door, and in the same moment, Wojtek flew up. He changed instantly as he positioned himself on all fours over Zoe, probably unaware of the protective stance he'd taken. His eyes never left Satul as he bared his teeth and growled. It took a few seconds before he woke up properly, long enough for Zoe to fear for Satul's life. It took a few very long seconds before he changed back.

"What the fuck, Satul?" Wojtek's voice was growly enough to make Zoe shiver, and not out of fear.

"I... erm... I just wanted... to make sure he was okay." Satul stared at the floor in front of him, looking like a kicked puppy.

"And you couldn't have done that by knocking on the door?"

"Erm..."

"You know the bet is off, right?"

"No, please, Alpha. I need to get away for a while. I just want some peace and quiet at the end of the day. I'll still do everything I do now. Please."

Zoe didn't understand what they were talking about, but he felt the need to interrupt, which was pretty darned stupid. Why would he want to protect Satul? "Hey, what do you two say about some breakfast? I make a mean orange juice."

Both Wojtek and Satul frowned. "I didn't think lizards drank," Satul added after a little while.

"Well, no. I still know how to make juice, though."

The corners of Wojtek's mouth twisted, but he didn't let it turn into a smile. It didn't matter, Zoe was happy he'd managed to break the tension.



“What are you waiting for? Make yourself useful.” Wojtek turned to look at him as he spoke, and there was a sparkle in his eyes Zoe hadn’t seen before. “I’d like some scrambled eggs too.”

“Ew, eggs. I came from one of those.” He added some hand-flapping to his wrinkled nose.

“You did?” Satul stared at him as if he’d just arrived in a spaceship. *Fuck! Yet another thing he’d let slip.*

“Yeah.”

“Oh, I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, you’re real science freaks around here.” He flicked back the cover, glad he’d slept in his clothes—Wojtek’s clothes—and went out of the bedroom. It really had been a good way to wake up, even if Satul had ruined everything.

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Wojtek watched him go, shoulders stiff and chin stubborn. He wanted to smile. His little warrior didn’t like Satul asking questions—questions to which he’d been given the answers freely the night before. It shouldn’t please him, but it did. Satul should back off. Zoe didn’t want him knowing things.

“So... what’s the plan?” *Oh, his Beta knew he’d stepped over some boundaries by barging into his bedroom.*

“We go talk to Tedor. I’m not sure he has anything to do with it. Yesterday’s meeting could’ve been a coincidence—”

“Do you really think so?” Satul didn’t look too convinced.

“No, I don’t think the meeting was a coincidence. He’s definitely up to something, but I’m not sure it has anything to do with the break-in.”

Satul seemed to consider it. “You think we have two unconnected parties trying to harm us or our business?”

Saying it like that, it sounded hard to believe. *Did he really think that?* “I think Tedor wants us to care about the lizardian—”

“Zoe.”

“Yes, Zoe. I think he wants us to care, and maybe to start questioning what we are doing. If we realise Zoe is an individual with needs and feelings, what does that tell us about the rest of our business?”

“You think he wants us to close shop?”

“I have no idea. Either that, or he’s counting on our pride to hurt us. Like you said in your stupid bet, he’ll wait a couple of weeks then give us an offer we can’t refuse. We’ll put Zoe in the pit and then suffer the tortures of the damned while he’s in there. Worst-case scenario for us would be to watch him kill himself, because if there’s one thing we know, it’s that our boy is a tad suicidal.”

“Tedor wouldn’t put himself through the trouble if he didn’t gain anything, so what does he gain from us being heartbroken?”

*See, he knew Satul was Beta for a reason.* “No idea.”

“Me neither.” *Oh, he’d thought he’d had a point.* “Unless it’s a pride thing.”

“How do you mean?” Wojtek needed his coffee. He really couldn’t think while he still was sitting on his bed, especially not when he smelled of Zoe—only way he’d smell this strongly of him was if he’d held him. *He probably had.*

“Simply that he’s bested you. It could be as simple as that. They were having a good laugh when they saw that Zoe wasn’t there to fight.” His voice turned a little growly. “They were probably joking about you fucking him and therefore not wanting to put him in the ring.”

Wojtek pursed his lips. *Could it be that simple?* He shrugged, but stopped the movement when he saw the black look Satul was giving him. He wondered if his Beta was aware of how protective he’d become of Zoe. “You know he’s not yours, right?”

“What?” Satul snarled.

“He doesn’t want you, and I’m not just saying that,” he hurried to add when he saw Satul was about to protest.

“It’s not like that. I don’t want to mate with him—”

“I should hope not! I don’t think Ria would be happy to know you’re considered fucking a man, and he’s not even a man, he’s a lizard. I sure as hell wouldn’t want to be the one telling her.”

Satul opened his mouth, then closed it again before saying, “It’s just... they’re just like us.”

*Hardly.* “How do you mean?”

“That he has feelings, that we took him from his home, his family. That we’ve mistreated him, and forced him to fight for us, risking his life every fucking Friday.”

“We didn’t take him. He was here before I became Alpha, and he doesn’t have a family.”

“All the worse. He’s without protection, and we profit from it.”

“Yeah, well, let’s have some breakfast, find Koray, and pay Tedor a visit.” He didn’t want to think about what Satul was saying. He knew Zoe had suffered, and he knew he wasn’t the only one, but the pack needed their income. How would they survive if they gave up the fighting? A few already had jobs, human jobs. But the more they socialised with the humans the more they put themselves at risk. It wouldn’t take much for their existence to be revealed and what would happen then? They had to keep the fights going.

Satul sighed. “Yeah, that’ll be pleasant.”

Wojtek couldn’t help but grin. Pleasant was not the word he would’ve used.

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## Behind Bars

Zoe was getting very tired of the wine cellar. He'd walked the six steps that took him to the far wall, only to walk the six steps back to the iron gate more times than he cared to know. It was cold, and even though he didn't mind the dampness, it wasn't his favourite pastime to look at Wojtek's wine bottles. He reckoned there were about 1,500 of the dusty vessels, perhaps a little fewer. Maybe he should try to organise them... although they were probably already organised.

Why couldn't Wojtek have locked him up in the bedroom instead? *His bedroom.* Zoe sighed. That room was fabulous. It was almost impossible to see the walls behind all the orchids, and the humidity was almost right, as was the temperature. He wouldn't have minded a few degrees warmer, but he hadn't felt an environment that welcoming since he'd been taken from his home in the south.

With a frustrated groan, he went back and shook the wrought iron gate. Couldn't they have forgotten to lock it or something? His legs wanted to pace, but it wouldn't do any good. The cold had already started to make him slow, and even though he was pretty sure nothing would happen to him here, he hated the helplessness that came with being drowsy.

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Wojtek didn't feel bad for leaving Zoe in the cellar. *He didn't!* As they made their way through the woods to the outskirts of pack territory, and right up to the barbwire-decorated chain link fence that surrounded the slave quarters, he noticed Satul getting more and more tense.

"I'll take a walk around the perimeter; see if I can find something."

"You don't want to come inside with us?" Wojtek frowned. They'd decided to stop by on their way to Tedor, just to have a smell around. If someone was planning an attempt to spring the fighters, they'd want to investigate the barracks—or at least that was what Wojtek would've done.

"Nah, I've seen it enough times." Satul had never made any effort to hide what he felt about keeping stock, but the disgust so clearly written on his face was something new.

"He just wants to avoid Aldo." Koray was clearly amused by Satul's reluctance to be there, his eyes were twinkling, his face split into a wide smile.

“Why?”

The way Koray scoffed was almost comical, or it probably would have been comical if it wasn't for the fact that Wojtek clearly was missing something. “The man's an arse, dude. How can you not see that?”

He looked at Satul to see if he agreed and got a short nod in return. *Aldo was an arse?* Wojtek had never noticed. He'd been his father's Beta. Wojtek had grown up with him and had seen him in his home more often than not. Aldo couldn't be an arse. He was good at his job. He trained the lizardmen well and ran this operation without a hitch. He'd stepped down from his Beta position when Wojtek's father died, but he'd always been there for Wojtek when he needed him. *He couldn't be an arse.*

“Fine, circle the fence while Koray and I take a look inside.”

As soon as they stepped into the lodgings, Wojtek wrinkled his nose. The smell of sewage was so thick in the air he almost gagged. And even though he moved with stealth, it was like his footsteps echoed against the thick concrete wall on one side and into the barred cells on the other. No one was present, apart from the fighters in their cages, but he had a nagging feeling of being watched, which, of course, was ridiculous. They were still on pack ground, no foreign smells were present, and he was surrounded by his men, well one of them. There was no threat here, no danger.

Zoe was securely locked up in the cellar, not that he thought he had anything to do with this—at least not directly. He might be the reason behind the break-in, but Wojtek didn't think he'd initiated the action.

Each cell had a number to make it easier to keep track of the reptiles. He wondered what number Zoe'd been in and glanced into one of the chambers. A naked man, not as emaciated as Zoe but still not healthy-looking, glared back at him. The iron bars keeping him in had once been white but were now covered in dirt and rust. Wojtek looked away and shuddered. This cold would have him shivering through the night. Zoe's expression from when he saw Wojtek's bedroom flashed through his mind. It didn't fit with the mouldy corners, the stink, and the chill.

They walked through the building without finding anything suspicious. He avoided looking into the cages; he didn't want to see the fighters. He guessed there was a chance he'd miss it if something was unusual. He never went into the slave quarters if he didn't have to, so he really couldn't tell if something

was off. But he could tell by the smell that no one outside of the pack had been in there.

“Don’t we keep them because they’re unproblematic?” Koray pursed his lips as he thought. “I mean, isn’t that why it works: they don’t unite, they don’t fuss, and they don’t sacrifice themselves for each other. Imagine us being locked up like this.”

Wojtek glanced at the barred doors. Most of the cells were single ones, there were a few that had room for two, and that was where Aldo kept the ones he hoped would mate and give them new fighters without having to go south and capture them. It was a long-term project, one Wojtek wasn’t particularly invested in, but he could see the benefits of having a constantly renewed stock of warriors to pick from.

“It would never happen to us. We’re not like them. We would never fight for someone else.” Wojtek didn’t want to think about what it would be like to be held like this—it wasn’t his job to think about that.

“You don’t know that.” Koray forehead creased as he looked around. “If it was your only way to survive, wouldn’t you let Aldo put you in the pit?”

“But there’s no way out of a situation like this.” Wojtek didn’t want to talk about it, and he didn’t want to think about it.

“Sure there is, you’ll either die, or you’ll be set free.”

“We’ve never set anyone free.” He thought about how Zoe had tried to make him deliver a deadly blow in the ring. He wanted out, and that was his only way. Wojtek swallowed and tried to ignore the feelings that were clawing at his chest. Once again the unguarded happiness on Zoe’s face when he’d closed his eyes and stretched out his arms in Wojtek’s bedroom flashed before his eyes—because of some fucking plants and a little humidity.

“They don’t know that. Aldo tells them that you’ll set them free once they’ve won enough fights.” Koray grimaced. “Did you think they fought for you out of loyalty?”

Wojtek felt a bit dizzy. Of course he hadn’t thought they fought out of loyalty for him, but lizards never folded, it was in their nature not to give up. That was why they fought, wasn’t it? He’d had no idea Aldo was talking to them. He knew he gave them orders, how else would they know what was expected of them, but to sit down and chat with them. He couldn’t believe that, yet hadn’t Zoe said something along those lines?

“No, of course not. I’m not stupid.” Though he started to suspect that he was a bit more stupid than he wanted to admit. “Let’s go talk to Aldo before we head out.” Koray didn’t answer, just followed him out of the stinking hovel and toward the adjoining building.

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## Trespassing

Aldo and Osmond were waiting for them, and that fact had Wojtek frowning. They hadn't said they were coming, yet there they were, looking as if they were expecting to sit down for a meeting. He hadn't known Osmond helped out down here. The man was as dumb as he was tall. It grated on Wojtek's nerves that he had to tilt his head up to look the man in the eyes, but he was loyal. Wojtek could see the benefits of having someone like that helping out down here.

"Alpha." Aldo bowed.

"Get real, old man, you've never bowed to me before." Aldo started laughing and Wojtek relaxed. Satul and Koray were full of shit; there was nothing wrong with Aldo. He liked yanking people's chains, that was all. "I had a visitor last night."

"Yeah, I heard." Aldo ran a hand through his greying hair. He might be getting old, but Wojtek was damn glad to have him around. "What are you gonna do about it?"

"We're on our way to have a chat with Tedor. He was acting funny at the arena. They were having a laugh, and I have no idea why."

"You want me to come with you?"

"Nah, it's cool. Stay here and take care of our income. We're just gonna ask some questions anyway."

"Be careful, son. Don't step on any toes. Accusing someone of trespassing is a serious offence."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I'm bringing my golden boy. Satul knows how to talk to the cows."

Aldo chuckled, looking like Wojtek had cracked a joke. He hadn't. He'd been serious; Satul was damn good at talking to people.

As they left the slave quarters, Wojtek felt a prickling at the back of his neck. If he hadn't been sure Aldo and Osmond were the only ones present, he'd have thought they were being watched. His gaze swept around, but there was no one there, only Satul who was standing right outside the fence. Still, there was an itch between his shoulder blades as they left pack territory.

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Wojtek realised they probably should've called first. Four minotaurs met up with them as soon as they crossed the border. There were twisted horns and ugly snouts everywhere as they were escorted, not too gently, toward the main building on their land. *Fucking cows!* Wojtek had to trample down the need to change when Tedor's second in command gripped his arm with rough hands. He knew it was Tedor's second because of the massive nose ring he wore and refrained from yanking his arm out of the grip. He needed to stay calm. They hadn't come here as a provocation; he just wanted to talk to Tedor.

The minotaurs' land wasn't as impressive as the werewolves', or at least Wojtek didn't think so. His pack had lush forests and soft hills. Their hamlet lay out of sight with a buffer of trees between it and the arena. The distance made sure they didn't get intruders snooping around their homes. Here it was flat, grass as far as the eye could see, and in the middle of it some temple-like buildings scattered, completely exposed to the elements.

Satul looked around with a worried expression while Koray grinned in expectation. *Yeah, he could see why Satul was better suited for being a Beta, but that didn't mean he didn't appreciate Koray's view on life.*

The cattle took them to meet Tedor, and as Wojtek had expected, he didn't look pleased to see them.

"Trespassing, Wojtek? Don't we have laws against that?"

"We do. That's kind of why we're here." Tedor lifted an eyebrow, just the gesture to make Wojtek's blood boil. "I wonder if we could have a word. Sitting down," he added when all Tedor did was cross his arms across his chest.

With a short nod, Tedor and his men led them into one of the stone-pillared buildings. The inside did nothing to lessen the impression of its being an ancient temple. Their footsteps echoed against the white marble as they followed Tedor through a great hall that looked like something out of a museum, with huge ceiling medallions made of Greek key reliefs above even more stone pillars.

"So, what brings you here... uninvited?" Tedor swept his hand toward a group of daybeds that looked like they belonged on the set for the next Cleopatra movie.

Wojtek sat down, a bit unsure of how to sit properly on one of these things. "Erm... yesterday, while you had me caught up in your little meeting, someone broke into my home."

One of the beasts standing behind Tedor gave a low bellowing in warning which Koray, of course, answered with a quite human growl.

Wojtek held up his hands. “I’m not accusing anyone, simply wondering why you decided to call a meeting when you didn’t have anything to discuss.”

Tedor watched him for a couple of seconds. “We were just having some fun. I know we’re not the best of friends, and never will be, but we have a good business arrangement. Why would I want to fuck that up?”

Wojtek glanced at Satul hoping to see something in his expression that would tell him how to proceed with this little chat. “I don’t know,” he said carefully. “What do you mean having some fun?”

“With the green lizard.”

Wojtek’s chest began to vibrate. *Fuck! He couldn’t growl at Tedor in his own home.* He bit his tongue and pretended nothing had happened, but he didn’t miss the amused glint in the bovine’s eyes.

Tedor continued, “It’s commonly known that you get protective of the people in your pack, more so than other shifters. I saw a chance to fuck with you, and I took it. Satul understood what was going on right from the start, but you’re too damn pig-headed to think that you’re being ruled by your instincts.”

He didn’t say more, and Wojtek didn’t really get what them having a little fun had to do with Tedor’s speech but... “So you called a meeting to see if I would fight the lizard?” He would not say Zoe’s name in their presence.

Tedor looked at Satul and rolled his eyes. “No. We called the meeting to see you make a fool of yourself for not wanting to fight the lizard. We never assumed you’d put him in the pit. God, Wojtek, you really are stupid, aren’t you? By making sure the lizard was in your home I made you think you’d got away with not killing your best fighter. Seeing how thick you are, you probably still think you’re gonna fight him.”

This time he did nothing to hide his growl. Things began to shift in his body and he wanted nothing more than to claw the smug look off of Tedor’s face. And it didn’t get better when the fat fucking cow proceeded.

“I made you the laughingstock of the shifter world—the underground fighting lord who’s living with one of his slaves. I did it all with minimal effort and still managed to get your best warrior out of the ring. I have the highest-ranked combatant now. My wolverine is making mincemeat out of your lizardians, but people want to see him compete so you have to set up the fights.

Soon you'll run out of slaves and will either have to search for new ways to find recruits or go raid the south... Now wasn't that how you lost your last Alpha, he was injured while capturing new fighters?"

The room tilted, but it wasn't until he felt Koray's heavily muscled arms and clawed hands that he realised that he'd been about to attack Tedor. Koray gave him a fangy grin as he let go.

"I think we'd better leave." Wojtek's voice was growly, and his tongue not entirely cooperative, but he thought he got the words out clearly enough for the cows to understand him.

"It's been a pleasure, Wojtek. Call ahead next time."

Wojtek nodded and started walking through the massive hall, crept out by the way every sound from their steps seemed to be amplified by the open space.

"About the intruder, I'll keep my ears open, okay?"

"Thanks," Wojtek called back.

"Say hi to scaly for me!" The moo-mixed laughter bounced around in the building as they closed the door behind them. He would make sure Tedor never saw Zoe. Wojtek would keep him in the house—in his bedroom where he was happy. Zoe would never set foot in the arena again.

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## Smell a Rat

Zoe heard a scratching sound, but his eyelids were too heavy to lift. *Were they back?* Maybe he'd dozed off for longer than he'd thought. It definitely sounded like claws against the stone-tiled floor. He really, really detested himself for not being able to fight the cold. He wanted to get up, but his limbs hardly moved on the first try. With a shake of his head, he tried to rid it of the fog in there. Lizards weren't made for northern climates, that was for sure; at least not his kind of lizard.

He forced his eyes open, now quite sure he heard one set of booted footsteps and one set of clawed. His heart rate picked up. Unless Wojtek was partially shifted, he and Satul stayed in the same shape—either they changed or stayed human. Zoe guessed it was a communication thing—hard to understand a monster when you yourself were in human form.

His legs wouldn't obey. With a painstaking effort, he managed to get himself up on all fours and then up on his knees. He couldn't see clearly, but there were definitely movements on the other side of the wine cellar's barred gate. His heart quickened; they were usually talking by now. Satul never stayed quiet for long.

It was impossible to see any details, but he thought it was one upright, human person, and one animal. He swayed and cursed under his breath. *That wasn't a werewolf.* It was smaller than that, but not by much. It looked like a bear, a stocky thing on short legs. *Did they have bears living here?* He really hoped this was someone Wojtek knew, someone that should be here.

They still didn't talk, well obviously the bear didn't talk, but the man didn't either. Zoe's uneasiness increased with every step they took in his direction. He became more and more convinced that they really shouldn't be here. If only Wojtek would come back. *Any second now would be excellent.*

There was some jingling, and Zoe realised to his horror that they had keys. *Where the hell had strangers got keys?* His heart pounded in his chest. He couldn't fight a bear, not even under normal circumstances. He forced himself to get his feet under him. His legs shook, but he braced himself for the next push. In one slow, unsteady motion he managed to get up into a standing position and leaned against the wall, panting. *He needed to wake up. He really needed to wake up!* Still gasping from the exertion, he tried to change.

It didn't work.

The key turned in the lock and Zoe's rib cage shrank. He tried to breathe properly, tried to back away from the door, but he couldn't move. The screeching sound of the iron gate once again filled the room. *How could he have thought that he would be safe locked up in here? He would kill Wojtek for making him this weak.* He tried again to change, but it still didn't work. There wasn't even a spark of change.

"There," the human-looking person said and pointed at Zoe. Zoe flicked his tongue even though he knew it wouldn't make any difference. He couldn't smell with his tongue when he was in human form. *He really wanted Wojtek to come home now.*

The animal came nearer. It had an oily brown fur and looked like a giant weasel, or something. The growl coming from it made Zoe jump. There were some serious teeth on that thing, that's for sure. *Shit, did they have monsters like that living up here? Where were his monsters? He wouldn't mind seeing all three of them right about now.*

"Just go with him. It'll be easier that way." Zoe stared at the man as if he was out of his mind—which he probably was, considering he hung out with giant weasels fit for a freaking nightmare.

He held out a bunch of keys. "Could you take these? I was supposed to bring them back, but I'm not going to. I'm not going back there."

Zoe's fingers closed around the keys, why he didn't know. His brain wasn't awake enough to grasp what was happening, but standing this close to the man, he realised he knew who it was. Not by name—you didn't get friendly with people you might end up having to kill—but he was one of the lizardmen from the slave quarters. Zoe tried to remember, but all he could come up with was that he turned into a blue-hued one.

"What's going on?"

"Sorry, man. I need to get going. The rat is going to take you somewhere." There was another growl behind him, and Zoe felt the hair on his neck stand straight up. The man shrugged. "I don't know anything. Not saying I would've helped you if I did—each to their own and all of that."

"Yeah." Zoe clenched the keys. "He's going to let you go?"

"Said so on the way over here when I said I wasn't going back to return the keys. If not, you'll see me turned into rat food right here. I'm not going back, no matter what."

Zoe recognised the determination in his voice—it was the same he'd felt a week ago, sitting on his knees in the pit waiting for Wojtek to kill him. "Okay, good luck." And he meant it. He didn't plan on going anywhere with the rat either—Zoe knew it wasn't a rat, but the name fit. He just needed the lizardian out of here so he could figure out what to do.

"Stay warm," the man said before turning tail and leaving Zoe alone with the giant weasel.

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## Jailbreak

Zoe edged back from the weasel. He clasped the keys, wishing he had a better weapon, but it would have to do. He took another step, positioned one key between his thumb and forefinger, the metal from the others cutting into his palm. A growl told him that the rat wasn't pleased to see him move, if he had seen him—his small eyes seemed quite vacant in the soft light. The more Zoe studied him, the more he realised that he probably relied on his hearing far more than he did on his sight. It wouldn't help Zoe much; he was far too slow to be able to get out of hearing distance, not to mention that he didn't know shit about this creature's sense of smell. The nose sure resembled a dog's snout, not something he considered to be in his favour.

He moved his feet a little, drew in a deep breath, tried to balance himself, and searched for the warm rush that came with changing. He tried to find it somewhere within, but it wasn't there. Nothing happened. He took another wobbly step backwards.

The weasel snarled.

Zoe didn't know where he should go. To fight in the wine cellar would be damn near impossible, not to mention that he was too weak to stand up properly. *Should he move toward the door or the counter?* He couldn't run, couldn't hide.

He took another step. His breaths came quickly. The animal hunched down as if ready to leap. Zoe knew he didn't stand a chance, but he wasn't going down without a fight. He didn't want to die down here—not at the hands of this creature.

Without much thought of what to do, he threw himself toward the counter. Powerful jaws closed around his calf even before he landed. Instinct took over. He used the momentum of the fall to get down closer to the animal and delivered an elbow to the side of his head. Teeth sliced through his skin. He stabbed at the ribcage. Thick, soft fur touched his fingers. The animal yelped and let up on his grip momentarily. Zoe tried to get his leg out of its jaws. His naked foot connected with a wet muzzle. Warm spit hit him as jaws snapped shut mere millimetres from his skin. He wanted to cheer for getting loose from the teeth. But the triumph was short-lived. Just as he thought he would be able to crawl away, sharp teeth buried into his arm, punctured his flesh. Blood

trickled down his hand, which still clutched the keys, and dripped onto the pale stone tiles.

Zoe stretched out on the floor, and reached for the bottom shelf with his free hand. His fingers closed around the cold neck of the closest wine bottle. He swung around, smashing it down as hard as he could. The angle was bad, but the bottle shattered. The animal dropped to the ground but didn't let go of his hold. Zoe tried to yank out of the grip.

It didn't work.

Desperation welled up inside of him. *He was stuck.* His pulse pounded in his ears. Blood and wine pooled around them, and the animal was up in no time at all, a bit unsteady but otherwise unaffected by the blow to his head.

With new determination, his strong legs started pushing against the ground, dragging Zoe across the floor. He tried to find his bearings, but each painful tug on his arm made him realise how defenceless he was. He was too cold. The keys fell to the floor with a clatter. *Why wasn't Wojtek here?*

If the bear, weasel, rat, whatever he was, had wanted him dead, he'd have been that by now. One swipe with those long, sharp claws could have killed him, not to mention that the teeth would have shredded his calf with the first bite if that had been the animal's intention. He bled, both from his arm and his leg, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it could've been. He was too dazed to feel any real pain, though he knew it was there somewhere. It burned, but he couldn't really pinpoint it.

As he was being dragged toward the door, Zoe glanced back toward the wine cellar. They were leaving a trail of smeared blood and wine behind them, and there was a steady drip coming from the animal's side.

Zoe didn't struggle. He hissed every now and then as the fangs sank deeper into his wrist, but overall the weasel was gentle. He was taking him somewhere. Last time he'd been taken somewhere he'd ended up being a gladiator for three and a half years. He would not make the mistake of being taken alive again.

When they reached the cellar door, the animal pushed it open with his backside and continued to pull at Zoe's arm until they were out on the walk that led up to the door. Grass tickled the bare skin on his arms, the spring sun stung his eyes, and it smelled of life—freedom.

*What if Wojtek was close by?* He thought about screaming. Maybe someone would come running? But on the other hand, where would that get him? Back



to the slave quarters? The air around him was cold, but his skin warmed under the sun's rays, not quickly enough for him to be able to shift yet, but he spread himself out as wide as he could to absorb as much heat as possible.

The animal started pulling at his arm again. To spare his wrist, he began crawling behind it. The ground was damp against his hand and knees, and he wanted to enjoy it. He hadn't felt anything other than sand and concrete floors since he'd been captured, but it was hard to find any joy in creeping around on the ground in a situation like this.

It was the first time he'd seen the outside of Wojtek's house, and he was surprised to see so many other houses surrounding it. He hadn't known the pack was this big. In the pit, he'd always been more focused on his opponent than on the audience, and there seemed to be so many different species there. Now he realised there probably were more than twenty households here.

During the week he'd been there, Zoe had never heard or seen anyone except Satul and Koray. He'd somehow painted a picture of the pack being a rather small group of men living together, but this was a village, a real village. Not with shops and stuff, but apart from the houses there was a little park with benches, and he could even see a football goal and well-kept flowerbeds.

But what shocked him even more than seeing the neat houses built in circles around Wojtek's was the eerie silence. The little village was completely deserted. It wasn't a ghost town. Toys lay scattered on the grounds, and he could see that the houses were well cared for, with nice little gardens and fancy curtains in the windows, but there was no one there. The sun was still high in the sky, so there should've been children playing, or at least little Mohawk-wearing cubs wrestling. Zoe could hear the wind rustle in the fresh spring leaves but not the sound of a single person.

The weasel tugged at his arm again, apparently unconcerned with what was happening around them. Zoe turned his head and flicked his tongue, the forked tip tickled his nose, and he smiled. There was no way he could beat this beast in a fight, but he could end it right here. *No more prisons.*

He let the calm flood him. The animal dragged him to the tree line. Beyond was thick wildwood, giant trees with crowns full of bright green spring leaves. The moss-covered trunks and mouldering stumps created a heady, earthy smell. Zoe let his scales surface and struggled to get out of his sweats before his tail got caught in them. His toes lengthened, the claws on his feet digging into the soil.

The weasel growled, and Zoe threw himself to the side. The razor-sharp teeth sliced his wrist, leaving a burning pain in their wake, but he got loose. He whipped his tail straight over the muzzle of the beast, but wasted no time on seeing what effect it had.

He hadn't run like a free lizard in over three years. Even if he could only go a few meters before the beast was on him again, it was worth it. The vegetation tickled his belly as he kept close to the ground. Happiness flared in his chest. His clawed feet moved fast over the terrain, his body in a constant wave. Dirt flew as he pushed against the ground.

He jumped up on the closest trunk, not even slowing down. His claws quickly found their way up the tree. It would soon be over. He got caught on a twig, and the tearing sound of his shirt ripping almost drowned out the thundering footsteps that closed in on him. *Maybe the rat was a bad climber.* He'd seen the claws, though—like a bear's.

It didn't take long before the rat was right behind him, and he scurried up the tree like a born climber. Zoe looked around. He had nowhere to go. The branches were too thin, and it was too far to jump to the next tree. *Maybe if he could go farther out on the branch, just a little bit, then maybe he'd be able to leap and grab hold of something on his way down.*

He was yanked back, almost falling before he could regain his balance. The weasel bit around his tail and tugged. Zoe held on. But when the next pull came he let his tail drop. Skin, muscles, and bone separated as he let go of most of his tail. The weasel slid down a bit as he wrestled Zoe's wiggling tail.

Zoe plummeted to the ground. The jarring pain from the landing made him unsteady. Blood dripped from the wound where his tail had been. He chanced a look and winced as he saw the exposed muscle and bone. *He'd have to keep the wound clean; an infection would be life-threatening.* Not that he had any hopes of surviving the day, but dying from an infection would be such a bummer.

Without the tail, his balance was off. He continued in an unsteady sprint farther into the forest. Twigs hit his face as he now ran upright; it was easier, more like when he was human. He didn't know where he was, didn't know where to go. There was no time to think.

He could hear the weasel coming after him again, and he knew he didn't stand a chance. He had nowhere to hide. With the constant dripping from where his tail had been, a scent trailed after him wherever he went. *There was no way out.*

Zoe stopped. *It was over.* Why he felt sad he didn't know. A few minutes in the forest and he suddenly wanted to live again? Could a week of good food and warmth erase everything that had been done to him by Wojtek and his men? No, he had decided to die, so why not now?

He turned around and saw the giant weasel, teeth bared much like he would imagine Wojtek's would be if he'd hunted down prey in the woods. But where Wojtek would have been a wolf-like creature, naked apart from the brownish Mohawk, this bear-like being was covered in thick fur. The sunlight enhanced the lighter areas on its sides, which Zoe hadn't seen in the dim light of the wine cellar.

Fatigue hit. Not only was he still too cold, he was losing blood. Zoe had never imagined how it would feel to be prey, and it made his skin crawl to think of himself that way. His eyes zeroed in on his opponent. He couldn't just stand there. If he should die, he would die. But he had 120 razor-sharp teeth. They weren't as long as the weasel's, but he could do some serious injury.

Zoe went down on all fours, digging his claws into the dirt. When he had a weapon, he fought upright. They gave them human weapons in the ring, and he, unlike many other shifters, had just as much control on two legs as he did on four. He braced himself for the collision, prepared to roll with it and hopefully manage to get in a good bite and some scratching.

What he hadn't prepared for was the weasel seamlessly changing into a man, without so much as a hitch, and kicking him square in the face before he even could react. A sickening crunch echoed through the dark that swallowed him.

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## Blood and Wine

Rage. That was what Wojtek felt. Hot boiling rage. Someone had been in his house. *Again*. And this time they had taken something of his. No one was around. *Why wasn't there anyone around?*

Someone should've noticed that an outsider had crossed the border into pack territory. They should've sounded an alarm when a stranger walked into the hamlet. Someone should've seen the open cellar door. Wojtek kicked off his shoes as claws tore through the skin on his fingers and toes.

Blood was smeared all over the cellar floor and out on the walk. A metallic tang hung thick in the air. *Some fucker had been in his home!*

Satul stared at the floor. "He fought back."

"Of course he did!" He wanted to howl. Zoe was a warrior, of course he fought back. The question was who he fought against. He was gonna kill that arse, and he was going to take his sweet time doing it.

"There's no *of course* about it. He would've been in a daze when they got here. It's too cold for him to function properly. Just to get to his feet without help..." Satul shook his head, and Wojtek wanted to snarl at him. Zoe was his concern. His, not Satul's.

How could he have known that Zoe would need to defend himself—he couldn't have known that. He wouldn't have been much of a challenge for a group of men. Or two, Wojtek thought he smelled two creatures besides Zoe. "Well, there's more than one type of blood, so I guess he landed a blow or two." He tried to sound more confident than he felt.

Satul moved around in the wine cellar, dipped his finger into one of the blood drops, and licked it off. "He wouldn't have been able to change. The fight was between him in human form and someone, something, changed. Taste it." Wojtek did, it had a round, thick flavour, definitely a warm-blooded animal.

The thought of Zoe, slow and sluggish, trying to fight something bigger and stronger than himself made Wojtek want to destroy something.

"He wouldn't have stood a chance."

Satul needed to shut the fuck up. He knew he'd made the fight uneven by using Zoe's nature against him; he didn't need Satul's comments to remind him

of it. He'd thought he'd been smart locking up a lizard in the cold. *Why did he always have to be such a fucking idiot?*

“Argh, that’s tough, dude. Not being able to defend yourself.” Koray didn’t seem half as affected as Satul and Wojtek, and maybe that was the right attitude. Sure, he should be angry over the break-in and his stolen property, but he needn’t feel bad for rendering Zoe defenceless. Anyone could have thrown their slave in the cellar when they were leaving the house. *But this was Zoe.*

“What’s that smell?” Koray sniffed the air. “I feel like I should know what it is.”

“Is that...” Wojtek scented the air. *How could he have missed it? A snarl erupted from his chest. That lying fucking cow!*

“Wait!”

Wojtek didn’t listen. He heard the fabric of his shirt ripping as he changed. Muscles bulged, hair growing out along his spine and continuing over his tail. His vision shifted as he started to move. He was gonna kill that fucking ruminant and eat his flesh for breakfast. He was gonna tear every piece of meat from his bones, one muscle at a time, and feast on his warm blood. He could almost feel it splatter on his face as his teeth cut into cow throat.

He heard Satul’s voice in his head, but shut it out. His clawed feet slid on the floor as he made his way out of the wine cellar. *He was gonna kill fucking every hooped freak he came across.*

A furry cannonball hit him straight in the side, making him lose his balance, and end up in a very undignified position on the floor with Satul sitting on top of him. Koray trotted over, obviously also having shifted since a flaming red tail whipped over his muzzle before the clawed foot right in front of his eyes turned into a human one with red downy toes.

“Change.”

Wojtek took a few calming breaths before he did, not pleased about being ordered to do so. The neck of his T-shirt still hung around his throat, and the rest of his clothes were nothing more than shredded pieces of fabric. Neither Satul’s nor Koray’s were in any better condition.

“Are you out of your mind?” Satul growled, his voice not completely back to human yet—a clear sign of how upset he was. “We need to think this through.”

“A wolverine has been in here. Do you know many wolverines? How many times have you even seen one? It can’t be a coincidence. Tedor owns one, and one has been in my house. He fooled us.”

“We need to think!” Satul’s icy blue hadn’t changed back to his human eye colour. His claws were out and he was fucking mad. Wojtek had a sinking feeling much of that anger was directed at him. “What would Tedor achieve? How would he gain enough control over a wolverine to make it run errands? They’re fucking fierce. The one he has will rip him to shreds sooner rather than later; he’s just too dumb to realise it.”

“Yeah, can’t see a cow standing a chance against one of those.” Koray was having a laugh. *Of course he was.*

“So, before you run over there to start a war, we need to think.”

Wojtek couldn’t think. He wanted to kill, but Satul didn’t take that into consideration.

“Apart from one shifted wolverine, another person has been here.”

Wojtek nodded. He could smell that too.

Satul continued in his know-it-all way. “I feel like I know that scent, but I can’t... I can’t place it.”

Wojtek couldn’t find anything familiar in the scent. He looked at Koray, but he only shrugged and went to look at the cellar door. “Yo, boss! Did you leave it unlocked?”

“Of course not.” The members of the pack knew not to enter his house without permission, but he always locked it anyway. He wasn’t one to pursue paperwork, but there were still some things that needed to be written down, and not everyone needed to know what was written on those papers.

“There’s a ring of keys in a puddle of blood on the floor.” Satul nodded toward them.

Wojtek blinked. *Keys?* No one had keys for his house, not even Satul.

“Erm, before we go after Tedor, if we still are?” Koray looked back and forth between Satul and him. “I’d like to know what anyone would gain from pet-napping your lizard.” Wojtek bared his teeth to Koray who quickly raised his hands. “I’m just saying, if we’re gonna get laughed at again I’d like to know why.”

Wojtek didn't have an answer. "Satul?"

"I don't think we should go after Tedor. He can't be the one with the keys."

They couldn't know that. The keys could be anybody's. They could've dropped them when they fought. Just because there were keys on the floor didn't mean someone had used them to unlock his house. The intruder could've picked the locks. *Maybe*. It could still be Tedor.

"I still think it's Tedor." *Who else could it be?*

"Okay. Now I know that you're gonna growl, both of you, but are we gonna embarrass ourselves in front of every fucking shifter we know because of a wayward slave?"

They did growl, both of them. No one in their right mind would go to war over a lowly crawler, but right now Wojtek didn't care. He just wanted to hunt down the fucker that had hurt Zoe. "It has to be Tedor."

"What makes you think that?" Satul sounded like he was talking to a child, and Wojtek visualised grabbing Satul's head and ramming it into the stone floor.

"Because he knew Zoe would be in the house. He knew I put him in the cellar the last time I left him alone. He owns a wolverine. He wants us to be laughed at." Wojtek thought for a moment. "He wants me to lose credibility."

Satul sighed. "Say all that is true, I still find it a bit unlikely he'd go to all this effort. He didn't know we were coming today. He couldn't have planned it. Does he have spies here? How else would he know you weren't home?"

Wojtek really didn't have any patience for all these fucking questions. They needed to get going. He needed to find Zoe. They could think of the hows and the whys later. "I don't care. Let's get going."

"Are we going tracking? Is that our next course of action?" Koray looked at Satul to see if he might add something.

"I want him home." Wojtek didn't know why he was mumbling, or why he felt embarrassed about it, but he wanted Zoe home. Satul nodded, and they all stood and went for the cellar door. Right outside, they came to a sudden stop. "Where is everyone?"

The hamlet was deserted, not one sound came from the surrounding houses. Wojtek looked around. *What the hell was going on here?*

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## Sand, Blood, and Darkness

Zoe woke with a splitting headache. He squeezed his eyes shut even though it was completely dark. *What the hell had happened?* He tried to lift his hand only to realise he couldn't move. Thick ropes held him immobilised. His lungs felt as if they were shrinking. *If he was bound, he couldn't fight.* The more he struggled, the tighter the ropes wrapped around him. Thrashing and turning only resulted in sharp stabbings in his head. His wrists chafed, scales fell onto his clawed fingers and down to the ground.

He gasped in exhaustion. It was cold, cold and dark. Why was it always cold and dark when he woke up? He rested his forehead against the ground—sand-covered stones. He knew where there were sand-covered stones.

It was impossible to see anything. All he could smell was the sand and his own blood. There were probably plenty of places that could smell of sand and blood, but there was only one ingrained in his thoughts. He wished he had a sense of smell like Wojtek's; then he'd probably have been able to tell for sure if he was back at the arena.

His calf throbbed from the bite, as did his wrist. The open wound from where his tail had been hurt too, but not as much as he'd feared it would. The cold took away some of the pain. Maybe he should be grateful for it. *He wasn't.* He wondered how much time had passed and if Wojtek had come back home. He'd be so angry that someone had broken into his house again.

*Would he come searching?* If he did, would it be because he was worried about Zoe, or because someone had stolen his slave? It was silly of him to think about it, wouldn't help the situation in the least, but a part of him wanted Wojtek to worry about him. *Him*, not the missing fighter. *He wanted Wojtek to miss him.*

His sigh was as loud as a gunshot in the darkness. There was nothing he could do but wait.

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Wojtek stared. He'd seen tails get lost before, but this was Zoe's tail. It lay there on a bed of moss and old leaves. *Discarded.* It didn't move, so it had happened some time ago. He gazed upon the bright green scales again. At least they knew that Zoe had been conscious and strong enough to change.



Koray came to stand next to him. “I don’t get it.”

“What?”

“Why they’d go through all this trouble.”

Wojtek didn’t get it either. He wished Satul had been there, he usually could figure out shit like this, but they’d split up outside his house. The scent trails had gone in different directions and Satul had followed the unknown one.

Dusk was falling, not that he cared. Wojtek would finish this no matter how long it took, but it told him that most of the day had passed and he was still short half a lizard. When he found Zoe, he would set him free. He didn’t care if everyone laughed at him. Tedor could laugh all he wanted; he didn’t care. *As long as Zoe was alright, he didn’t care.*

“Well,” Koray continued. “Are we gonna follow them?”

“Maybe we should call Satul over and go together.”

Koray picked up his phone and dialled Satul. While they waited for him to come, Wojtek tried to see what he was missing. The pieces didn’t fit. *Where was everyone? Had a band of wolverines taken the whole pack?*

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Zoe’s breath came in shaky pants. His skin crawled, and the dark was thick enough to choke on. There was no end to it, a never ending darkness that closed him off from everything he knew. There were no sounds, only the rasp of his inhalation. He flicked his tongue. *Sand and blood.*

His mouth was dry, thirst clawed at his throat. Needles danced over his bound limbs, yet they felt numb. He tried to swallow. *Sand and blood.*

His eyes strained to see something, anything... everything. But all he saw was the black cloak surrounding him. The beating of his heart pounded in his throat, making it hard to breathe. He would die in here. No one but the animal who’d put him here knew where he was. No one would come looking for him. He would die swallowed by sand, blood, and darkness. *He didn’t want to die.*

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## A Smell of Death

As they followed the trail, Wojtek felt a burning anger mixed with apprehension. Nothing had been done to try to cover up the tracks. Not that it would've helped, but they could've done something to muddle up the traces. But they'd left Zoe's tail behind, and then the wolverine had gone to the footpath many of the pack members used to and from the arena. It was a bit harder to follow the scent along the path, because every fucker he knew had walked there recently, so recently, in fact, that Wojtek was pretty sure they all were at the arena.

No one said anything. He was sure both Satul and Koray's thoughts were racing as fast as his own, but no one uttered a word. Wojtek stopped by the tree line, looking at the ancient amphitheatre that had provided for the pack through generations. Times would change; humans would come visit. An amphitheatre this size wouldn't remain hidden forever, not when every fucker could see all they wanted to see on Google Maps. *Maybe it was time to give up on fighting.*

He could clearly hear the hum coming from inside the stadium. Lights shone through the stone arches, just like on a fighting night. There were not as many people, though, and there were no excited cheers, but it still sounded similar to a fighting night.

"Why are they here?" Koray stared wide-eyed at the ancient arena that felt like a second home to them all.

Satul wrung his hands. "I don't think this has anything to do with Zoe."

"But he is here." Or had been. Wojtek couldn't know if he still was, but the scent trail led here.

"Maybe, but if he's still... here—" He had a feeling Satul's first word hadn't been *here*. *If he's still alive*. "I think it's because someone wants to lure you here."

"Say someone does, why do you think?"

Satul grimaced and dug his fingers into his forearms. "I don't know, but I don't have a good feeling about it."

No, Wojtek didn't either. But there was only one way of finding out what was going on, and it was not standing there gazing upon the white stone walls.

Zoe thought he heard something.

*Was someone talking?* No, it couldn't be. He stuck his tongue out. Still only sand and blood, no one had come close enough for him to smell them. *Was something moving in the dark? What if someone was watching him?*

He turned his head, tried to see if anyone was there even though he was completely blinded by the darkness. His heart must've transformed itself into a hummingbird's, it beat so fast. He tried to slow it down, but his shallow breaths kept coming more rapidly. *What if he was running out of oxygen?* He tried to move, tried to crawl, but the ropes dug in harder, tightened over his chest, made it even harder to breath. *He was dying. He would never be anything but blood on sand.*

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The smell of death still hung in the air from the previous night. For the first time, Wojtek realised how terrifying it must be for the fighters to set foot in the arena. The blinding beams of the spotlights hurt his eyes as he walked toward the middle. Satul and Koray flanked his sides, looking in every direction to see if there was any threat.

The entire pack sat side by side on the first seating row. Everyone was there, every man, woman, and child under his protection stared down at him as his feet touched the sand-covered ground. In that moment, you could've heard a pin drop, but the silence didn't last. Before Wojtek had made it to the middle, people were throwing accusations around, the drone so loud he couldn't separate one complaint from the other.

Koray snarled, the fiery mohawk was already beginning to develop. Pointy fangs grew out of his partly human mouth. One quick glance at Satul told Wojtek that, though he hadn't started to change yet, it wasn't far away. Piercing blue eyes met his, and he could read trepidation there.

They were alone on the sand and blood covered floor, three men, standing before the entire pack. Wojtek held up his hands, waiting for the crowd to fall silent.

"What is the meaning of this?" He let his eyes travel over every single one of them, meeting hard eyes, scared eyes, angry eyes, and even a few pairs filled with hatred. *What had happened?* He'd been a good leader; he'd had their trust. So why had they acted without his consent? Why had they left the hamlet unguarded?

No one seemed inclined to answer, but then Aldo cleared his throat and stood up from his seat. “There seem to be concerns about whether or not you’re fit to lead.”

Wojtek felt a punch to his stomach. *What the fuck?* “Fit to lead? This isn’t a fucking democracy. I inherited this position, it’s how it’s done, how it always has been done.”

“Maybe it’s time for a change?”

Koray growled, Satul stood stoic by his side, and Wojtek tried not to gape. *What the fuck was Aldo doing?* Aldo, the man who had been like a father to him when he’d first stepped into the role of Alpha. “And why would that time be today?”

More than one person started mumbling, and judging by the tone, it wasn’t in his defence.

“How will we survive when you start freeing our fighters?” a man, he couldn’t see who, shouted.

“Fucking crawler lover!”

“You’re weak!”

The spotlights burned, and sweat trickled down between his shoulder blades. Koray stood on four feet, completely changed, and for once Satul didn’t wring his hands even though he had to be petrified. The darker spots on the sand showed where life had bled out and money had been brought in the night before. *Blood on sand, that was all it came down to.*

Aldo held up a hand to quiet the audience. Fire surged through Wojtek’s veins as he watched them obey. This had gone further than he believed. “There’s a simple solution to this problem, Wojtek.”

“There is?” He did nothing to hide the anger in his voice.

“Of course.” Aldo waved his hand, and Wojtek didn’t need to look to know what was happening. The heavy iron door screeched on its hinges and he knew, just knew, that the fuckers had Zoe in there. He didn’t look. He could’ve glanced over his right shoulder to make sure that this was what he thought it was, but he would not give them the satisfaction.

“All you need to do is kill him and prove to everyone that you aren’t letting yourself get side-lined by some... tail.”

The audience hollered, but he never took his eyes off Aldo, who started walking down the stairs to meet him. *Brave.*

Koray growled as Aldo came close, but didn't do anything apart from that. Night had fallen during the time it had taken them to get to the arena, and Wojtek could feel the audience's anticipation—they'd come here for a show, but he feared killing Aldo wouldn't solve the problem they had here.

“Why?”

“It should have been me from the beginning.” Aldo gave him a look so full of disdain that Wojtek had to force himself not to step back.

“You? Last I checked you weren't part of the family. You can never be Alpha, so what's all this shit about?” Wojtek was shaking, his hands curled in an attempt not to rip Aldo's throat out.

“Your father and I made all decisions together. I knew everything that went on. He made me a spare key to every lock in the house. After your mother died, he relied on me, and me alone. We ran this pack! Then he got hurt, killed, because of some fucking lizards, and you got to lead the pack. You, a self-centred, snotty-nosed cub.”

Wojtek was stunned by the bitterness. “So, what is this? I kill the lizard, everyone gets to see some blood, and we lose our best source of income. How will that help the pack?”

Aldo clenched his fists as his eyes turned burning yellow. “You won't kill him,” he spat. “You're too attached now.”

“You seem pretty sure of that.” He tried not to smile as Aldo lost some of his control. There was a subtle change of the bones in his face. He managed to restrain the change, but the teeth didn't quite fit in his mouth and the nose looked more like a wolf muzzle than a human one. “You sure you aren't being a little hasty? You think I care that much about a crawler? A fucking reptile you had to fetch from my wine cellar. How did you get the wolverine to do your bidding, anyway?” *If Tedor had anything to do with this he would run over there and turn the whole herd into mincemeat.*

Aldo shrugged again. “Are you gonna kill him or not?” This was said loud enough for the audience to hear.

“As soon as you've answered my question.”

Aldo growled, a sign that he wasn't as sure of this as he tried to make it look, but Wojtek held his gaze until he was forced to answer. “The wolverine came to me for help. Tedor fucked up bringing one of them into the ring.”

“Came to you for help with what?”

“He thought I was in charge of the schedule. He wanted me to stop the wolverine from fighting. But as I told him, it’s up to the Alpha to decide who’s allowed to fight or not, so with a new Alpha, we could have some new rules.” There was a palpable sneer in his voice.

“Why doesn’t he just go free his buddy from the cows? This seems like an awful lot of work.”

“Fighting is a lucrative business and more parties want in on the market. The wolverines are building up a stable, but enough talk.” He raised his voice. “We came here to get some entertainment, did we not?”

The cheers were deafening. Wojtek considered killing Aldo, right there on the spot. These theatrics were unnecessary, one strike and this whole ordeal would be over. Aldo wasn’t strong enough to be Alpha, he still flinched under Wojtek’s gaze, and it was just a matter of time before the pack realised that. *Right now though, he had them eating out of his hand. Twat.*

“You’d better get your playmates out of the ring, and just so you know, deciding that the Alpha role should be inherited didn’t undo the right to challenge the Alpha for the title.”

A short nod from Satul told him that Aldo probably had his facts right. “Are you gonna fight me, old man?” He pictured Aldo lying lifeless in the sand, the unforgiving light shining upon him as his blood turned the ground an even darker shade. He shuddered. He didn’t want to kill Aldo, not really.

“Not until you’ve gone a few rounds.” He nodded at Osmond who stood leaning against the inner wall of the arena floor.

Wojtek started laughing. “You want Osmond as Alpha?”

Aldo sighed. “No, he’ll fight you, stupid.” He turned to the audience. “Now are you gonna chat the night away, or are we finally getting some entertainment?”

The cheering started up again. *Idiots.*

“You’re not going to, are you?” Satul’s handwringing had started up again.

“Take Koray and get out of the arena.”

“No.”

“I’ll take care of this. It’ll be for the best.”

“No.”

“Koray?” He felt a wet nose against the back of his hand before the werewolf grabbed hold of Satul’s arm with his strong jaws.

“No.” He started to pull free before his shoulders slumped, and he looked down at the blood-covered sand. Wojtek met Koray’s glowing eyes and nodded.

“Seems like the show is finally ready to start,” Aldo shouted, now back at a safe distance from the scene.

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## The Show Must Go On

It was like the sand he was lying in had crept into his mouth; his tongue had turned into superglued sawdust. He tried to smell the air again and again, but nothing had changed—still just his blood on sand. Zoe had been there for hours, maybe for a whole day... or two. *Maybe he was dead?*

If this was death, then he really wanted life. Even when life was shitty, it was better than the darkness. His lungs didn't work as they should. The darkness had pushed inside. It was taking up too much room for his lungs to function. He hadn't thought they could get any smaller, but they kept on shrinking. It felt like someone was sitting on his chest, but no one was. He was all alone. *Or was he alone?*

He heard footsteps. *No, it wasn't footsteps.* Or was it? He thought it was, but he'd already heard footsteps a thousand times since waking up. Maybe he was dreaming.

There was a sound.

*No, it wasn't a sound.*

It was a sound, a metallic clunk followed by a terrible screeching that seemed to force itself into his head where it sunk its claws into his brain. Harsh light stabbed his eyes; he had to squeeze them shut to protect himself from the painful onslaught. *So this was it. The waiting was over.* Zoe had thought he would be glad, but he wasn't.

As rough hands grabbed hold of his upper arms, he knew that nothing good would come of being dragged out of the darkness and into the arena. He didn't want to die, but he was too weak to fight. *Why didn't he want to die anymore?* An image of Wojtek danced before his eyes, just for a split second, but it was enough.

Everything would've been so much easier if he hadn't cared.

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Osmond hauled Zoe out of one of the side chambers on the ground level of the theatre. Wojtek tried not to look at the tracks Zoe's feet left in the sand. *Why the fuck did they have to take Zoe?* He didn't move a muscle. The entire pack was watching. Rushing to Zoe's side would only be seen as a weakness so he remained in the same spot and glared at them.



This was something that had to happen. Wojtek might not like it, he might actually hate it, but he couldn't stop it. Zoe looked scared. The last time they'd been in this situation there'd been nothing but determination in his eyes. Now they were wide and filled with dread. His forked tongue came out for a second before disappearing again. His gaze bounced between Osmond and the audience, no one could miss the tension in his body.

With a grin, Osmond let go of his hold, and Zoe fell to his knees in the middle of the arena, a cloud of sand puffing up around his legs. He faltered, and for a moment, Wojtek thought he'd tip over. Anger burned through his body; he guessed Osmond would've wanted Zoe to crawl on the sand before his feet. *Fucker.*

Time seemed to stand still.

Zoe didn't move and neither did Wojtek. The crowd was quiet, and the harsh spotlights shone on them. Wojtek almost felt like a spectator even though he knew he was the main attraction.

He watched Zoe, saw the severed tail, and winced at the sight of the exposed muscles and the protruding bone resting on the sand. At least he'd stopped bleeding, that was good. He'd seen a lizard once who didn't stop bleeding—they'd lost him the day after. It couldn't be good to get sand in the wound, though. *He needed to end this.*

In that moment Zoe's gaze fell on him, and Wojtek couldn't help but smile. Zoe stilled. His gaze stopped bouncing, his shoulders slumped, and with a short nod he tilted his head and bared his throat. Wojtek took a few steps closer, feeling Zoe's gaze upon him the entire time. He was covered in sand, dust, and dried blood, but his scales were still vivid green. The ropes cutting into his skin made Wojtek want to roar. *Did they have to bind him so fucking tight?* He saw the raw flesh where they'd chafed his body, and feared there was worse he couldn't see. He filled his lungs with air, smelled the fear, the anticipation, sweat, blood, and sand. It was time to get the show on the road.

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Zoe's eyes never left Wojtek's. It felt fitting that it was Wojtek who would kill him. A week ago Zoe had tried to force him, but he hadn't wanted to. Now Zoe didn't want him to, but Wojtek would do it. Strange how things can change in just a few days and still be as they always had been. Zoe bleeding out on the sand, and Wojtek giving the audience a show. If he'd been able to, he might have laughed.

He wished he could've had more time, wished he could've slept more nights in Wojtek's shrine of orchids, wished he could've seen home one more time. He wished he'd done more in life, loved more, laughed more... killed less. He'd hoped there would be a time when he could've been with someone like Wojtek without being owned by him. He simply wished he'd been given a little more.

It didn't matter now. He would die at Wojtek's hand, and that would have to be okay.

"You want me to kill him?" Zoe startled at Wojtek's voice.

The crowd's cheer boomed. The sounds so different from every other time Zoe'd been there. The growls, snarls, and bellows were now human. It made it all the more barbaric to Zoe. Wojtek was going to kill him in human form—execute him, and what for? He didn't think there were any bets tonight.

"Is that what you came here to see?"

More deafening sounds travelled through the spring night. "Kill him. Kill him. Kill him," they chanted.

"Isn't he allowed to defend himself? Isn't the thrill of a fight what brought you here tonight? Isn't it a show you want?" Wojtek's growl only egged the audience on. Zoe wished he'd just get on with it. He wouldn't fight. He was too weak even if he'd wanted to, and without his tail he'd have a hard time keeping his balance. It didn't matter, though. He didn't want to hurt Wojtek. *He wouldn't fight.* He would give Wojtek his last breath, his last heartbeat, his last drop of blood as it ran out onto the sand.

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## Blood, Gore, and Ancient Walls

Wojtek circled Zoe, noticing the way he'd closed his eyes and slumped even further while he'd talked to the audience. He knew Zoe wasn't in any condition to fight. The tongue flicked out again, and he wondered what Zoe was thinking. He wanted to shake him, to scream at him for accepting his death in this shitty stadium on a night like this. *For nothing.*

He wanted to hold him, to carry him out of there, to clean his wounds, and spend the rest of his life trying to make up for everything he'd done to him. But these fucking idiots didn't want him to do that, would never accept an Alpha doing that.

"Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!" The chant had become a manic mantra. *Idiots.*

"I will not." The boos were instant. "You're all fools. You want me to kill our best source of income, and for what?"

The taunts were hailing. Wojtek watched every single person sitting on the first row. Most of them were leaning out over the stone railing separating the stands from the arena floor. This was his pack, his home, his safety, the only place on earth where he belonged. Killing Zoe in this moment was a complete waste, yet that was what they wanted to see.

He sauntered. Took in the atmosphere, the menacing hooting, the heat from the spots, the stained grains under his feet, and the smell of sweat and death—new and old. He walked past Zoe, tipped his head to scan the tiered seating all the way up to where the night sky took over. This was his home—blood, gore, and ancient stone walls. He drew in a deep breath, smelling the expectation in the air.

With newfound determination, he went back to Zoe, took his chin in his hand. The arena fell silent.

"Do you want me to kill him?" Cheers erupted again. *Imbeciles!* Had they always been this easily led? He caressed the scaly cheek beneath his fingers, so soft, so green. "You're such fools." He said it without looking away from Zoe's closed eyes. Wojtek wished he would open them; he longed to see those scary vertical pupils and vein-filled irises.

How long he stood there he didn't know. The sounds ceased to exist, the audience fell away. In his mind it was only Zoe and him. One cowardly werewolf and one very brave reptilian. *What had he done?*

The bubble was burst by Aldo's scornful voice. "Well, are you gonna kill him or not? We don't have all night."

He bent down until he was nose to nose with Zoe. "I'm so sorry."

Zoe's eyes opened, shocking blue with the slit pupils—just like he remembered them. All tension left his body and for a moment Wojtek thought Zoe was smiling, not that lizards could smile, but he could almost feel the smile there. A sad, accepting smile.

"You can have as many nights as you want, Aldo. I'm leaving." He grabbed Zoe's arms, pulled him up onto his feet, and lifted him onto his shoulders. He still weighed too little. One week of being force-fed fruits and vegetables by Satul apparently didn't fix all the damage they'd done. *He would make sure he ate properly from now on.*

"Sorry, if that hurts," he said in a hushed tone as he turned and started walking toward the exit.

"You have one hour to clear out of the hamlet. If you're not gone by then—" Wojtek didn't turn to look at Aldo, didn't stop to hear what he had to say, he just kept on walking, leaving the sand, the blood, and the spotlights behind.

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## At the End of the Tail

Wojtek almost didn't notice the two shadows that flanked him as soon as he stepped out of the ring—Koray on one side, Satul on the other. They walked with him through the forest, through the hamlet Wojtek had never imagined leaving. There were no werewolves anywhere else, at least not any packs. He had nowhere to go, nowhere to seek shelter. He'd been born here, he'd learned to hunt in these woods, and he'd buried his parents in this ground. This was where he belonged, and this was what he had to leave behind.

"I'll just grab some clothes, and some food, and then we'll be on our way." If Wojtek's voice cracked no one gave any indication of noticing. "Take care of my orchids, Satul."

"Fool." The sharp tone in Satul's voice hurt, but Wojtek could understand him being angry so he let it go. "I'm not staying. How could you even think I would stay behind? I swear to God, Wojtek, sometimes you're so dumb I want to fucking strangle you."

"We're coming too, boss. I'm just gonna let Mum know. There'll probably be some tears, but I'll be back in a few. Pack some clothes for me... and some other stuff. I want my laptop." He gave Satul a sharp look before running back through the woods.

Wojtek tried to find his voice. He couldn't let them leave. They belonged here; they had families. Satul's sister would shatter into tiny pieces if he left her. He had a female who wanted to mate with him.

"Don't even think about saying what you're planning on saying." Satul didn't look at him. He was looking at Zoe's tail-stump. Wojtek was pretty sure Zoe had lost consciousness; he lay limp in his arms. "We need to clean that before we go."

Wojtek only nodded, the lump in his throat too big to talk around.

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Tears sprung to his eyes as a screaming pain surged through his arms. He wished he could go back to being bound; his arms had at least been numb then. Satul's concerned eyes catalogued every little hiss and flinch, and Wojtek's growl from when he'd seen the shredded skin hanging from his wrists still seemed to ricochet through the bathroom. The two men doused every scrape in

Betadine while an entire conversation took place between them without so much as a word being said.

He wanted to ask what was going on, but they wouldn't understand his hissing, and he couldn't change to try to talk to them. Changing now would mean never regenerating his tail. A wound anywhere else would remain through the change and continue to heal where it was on the human body, but since his human form didn't have a tail, it had nowhere to go and would be lost forever. And so would his chance of growing a new one.

As soon as he'd realised that he would live, all energy had left him. He felt safe enough in Wojtek's arms to let the exhaustion win. Apart from being carried out of the arena, he didn't remember anything about getting back to the house, just like last time. He could sense something going on now, though. They were in a hurry. Wojtek was tense, and Satul determined.

They left Zoe slumping on the toilet seat for a few minutes, his carefully bandaged tail-stump not even dangling over the edge of the lid. He huffed a hiss as he remembered Wojtek barging in while he was having a bath. It seemed so long ago. Zoe felt old, old, but glad to be alive. He would be given a chance at a life he hadn't dared dream about in a long while. They would leave this place, and he was happy about leaving with Wojtek. Where they'd go, he didn't know, and it didn't matter. Together they would find a way, a place, where they could live.

When Wojtek came for him, he got one of those rare smiles. "You ready?"

Zoe nodded. He wondered what Wojtek would think about him not changing back to human for a few weeks. It would sure make conversation hard, but he could still nod or shake his head.

"I know trousers won't work, but we need to get you into a jumper at least. The nights are still pretty cold and we can't stop to make shelter until we've left pack land behind us." Zoe nodded. He didn't know if he'd be able to walk all the way, but he'd do his best. He tried to stand only to lose his balance and almost crash into the wall.

Wojtek caught him. "You're not up for travelling." Zoe wanted to protest but froze as Wojtek caressed his cheek. He'd done it before, but not quite like now. Now his eyes were sparkling—there was no regret, no pain, only warmth, and it was directed at him.

Zoe didn't dare breathe as Wojtek held him closer. His big hands caressed Zoe's naked skin, lightly touched the spines on his back, making him shiver.

The spines were very sensitive, and Wojtek's soft exploring was driving him a little crazy. He rested his clawed hands on Wojtek's shoulders, wishing he could explore a little on his own. *What would Wojtek's skin feel like?*

Wojtek bent down a little until his mouth was by Zoe's ear. "How long will you stay in this shape?" Zoe shrugged. How to tell that he'd have to stay like this for weeks? If he'd been in human form, he'd have had goose pimples all over. Wojtek's breath was so hot against his skin that he shivered. "I want you in your human form. I want to hold you, to kiss you." Zoe wanted to groan. He wanted Wojtek to kiss him. Now. Instead he rested his head against Wojtek's chest and soaked up as much body heat as he could. He smelled nice, warm and safe. Soft lips landed on his forehead and Zoe closed his eyes. "I think I'll have to carry you. You're just a scrawny little lizard anyway."

Despite his hissing protests Wojtek picked him up bridal style, and carried him out of the house.

"I see the happy couple is good to go."

Zoe would've blushed if he'd been in human form, at least until he noticed that Koray was carrying a huge backpack and seemed ready to go. *Was he coming too?*

"We need to go." Satul, too, exited the house. "The time's almost up, not that I think Aldo will do anything, but we need to get going." He put down another enormous backpack by Wojtek's feet and held up a hoodie for Zoe. Wojtek put him down, and Satul dressed him as if he was a child while Wojtek put on his bag. Zoe felt bewildered; were they all leaving their home because of him, even Koray?

Before he knew it, he was up in Wojtek's arms again and was carried away from the little village he'd never got to know. A few steps into the dark wood and the houses were out of sight. Wojtek didn't so much as break a sweat as they went. The forest was quiet, apart from the occasional twig that snapped as they passed through. When they reached the top of the first hill, the men stopped. They turned and looked down at the small houses built in circles around Wojtek's.

"I guess you won the bet," Wojtek said to Satul in a hushed tone. Zoe had no idea what he was talking about, but it didn't matter. Satul nodded without taking his eyes off their home. Silence fell. The chill of the spring night made Zoe slow and tired. A light breeze ruffled Wojtek's hair, but no one moved. No one said a word.

Everyone they cared for, everything they'd ever known was left behind tonight, and Zoe knew what that felt like. They would never again see the village that had been their home, their safety. And they left because of a slave. Zoe should feel guilty, but his heart sang. He was finally free.

**The End**



## **Author Bio**

*Ofelia Gränd is Swedish through and through. She lives in a small west coast town with her husband and their three children. She has absolutely no time to write, so, naturally, that's what she wants to do.*

*Ofelia could give up her glamorous life as a stay-at-home mum, and go back to her work as a teacher. But why not take advantage of the situation when she's living in a parental leave utopia? Enough about her being a parent, you think, and you're quite right. Ofelia is a no-poo follower, a pescatarian who bakes her own bread and makes her own soap—now, you wish that we'd stuck to the children, don't you?*

*If you want to keep an eye on her you should subscribe to her [newsletter list](#).*

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