

Chapter 22 - Shopping

As they walk out of the house, Cal starts planning the route to accomplish all their tasks. Ember looks up at the grand house, marvelling at it while they make their way down the path to the drive.

“We’re going to go to the DIY shop first so I can give them Voigt’s specifications. I imagine they’ll have to cut the pipe which might take time. So while they’re doing that we’ll go and get you sorted with some new clothes. There are two shops we’ll try, one for a couple of sets of casual, and one for formal.” Cal pulls open the gate at the end they walk through onto the road. “Then we’ll pick up Hess’ veg and the pipe on the way back.”

Ember nods. “Sounds good.”

“Oh by the way, you’re going to start feeling the effects of the collar soon. It’ll be weak at first, but the longer we stay out the more homesick you’ll get. So we’ll try to be quick.”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks for the warning.”

As they amble down the street with sparse trees on either side, the black wolf thinks about how glad he is to be going with Cal. At the junction, the signage for the town centre stokes the smouldering pit of concern in his belly. He gulps and looks over at the other wolf who smiles back at him.

“Don’t worry, they’re all pretty used to us by now, but you may get a few startled or scared humans. Just be friendly and try not to interact too much.”

“Do I look frightening?” Ember forces a half-laugh.

“Oh yeah. The jeans alone make me quiver,” he smirks. “For real though, how do you feel? It was only two days ago you killed a human.”

Thinking about that night causes a rush of anxious energy to course through him like a cold draught. He doesn’t feel the effect of the bloodlust anymore, but he still remembers what it felt like to hunt, and the thrill that comes with it. He shivers.

“I’ll be fine,” he replies stiffly, nodding to himself. “I only ever hunted humans by circumstance. I never went looking for them specifically, doing so would remind me too much of my family.”

“Good. Use that to your advantage. Remember, I’m going to be right by your side the whole time, so if you feel like you’re ... getting hungry,” Cal grimaces at his poor phrasing, “signal to me and I’ll take you away.”

“Heh, ok. Thanks Cal.”

They get to the crossroad and turn towards a series of buildings in the distance. Before they get onto the main street, they get honked at by a couple of passing cars. A group of male youths even find the spare time to roll the windows down and howl at them. Cal flicks them the Vs.

“I should mention, just in case we come across any. There are some people that ... disagree with us more aggressively than others. I hope nothing bad will happen, but we’ve had to endure our fair share of abusive behaviour.”

“So I see. Nothing physically abusive I hope?”

“The occasional projectile. They don’t get close enough to attempt battery.”

“I remember people around the town where my tribe lived who would always talk shit about the ‘beasts in the woods’. I always held my tongue. Not to defend them of course, more to avoid being in any way associated.”

“Hardly surprising, considering what your family were doing. But I wanted to make you aware that there could always be trouble. I can spot the usual suspects a mile off so I can veer us away if necessary. I wouldn’t want you to have a experience here, it really is a lovely town.”

“Thanks. Again”

“Don’t mention it.”

They manage to get to the hardware store without incident and walk in. There is another patron looking at paint swatches who doesn’t seem particularly bothered by the two wolf men who just entered, but he does his best to avoid eye contact. Cal walks up to the store owner nervously gripping the counter top.

“Hello, I need a pipe cutting to these specifications, please.” Cal says politely and putting a slip of paper down on the surface.

The man, cautious about losing eye contact with the towering beast, retrieves the paper by touch and pulls it up into his vision. He checks it slowly and eventually nods up at the white wolf.

“A-alright. I’ll need to c-cut and thread it.” He murmurs.

“That’s fine, we have other errands to run. How long do you expect it to take?”

“Umm ... t-ten minutes ... maybe,” the man commits.

“Perfect, we’ll be back later.” Cal bows slightly, which makes the man quiver and shut an eye as the muzzle gets a little too close to his face and turns to exit.

“Wow I could smell the fear on him,” Ember says catching him back up at on the pavement. “Don’t worry,” he adds defensively upon seeing Cal raise a cautious eyebrow. “I’m not getting hungry, it was just an observation.”

“Hmm ... I could too. But I smell it all the time when I come here, just look around.”

Sure enough, as they walk up the street, people would cross the road to avoid getting into their way, and would steer children into shops they don’t need to go into. The fear is potent but the intrigue is higher. Interestingly to Ember, some would even stop to wave at them.

The further they get away from the house, the more he feels the persuasive tug from the collar that he should turn and go back. He was warned he would, but he didn’t expect to be feeling it so heavily so soon. Every step feels like it’s in the wrong direction, and he can’t shake a feeling not so dissimilar to thinking you’ve forgotten item before a trip. Thankfully his thoughts are interrupted by a gentleman in his late fifties sporting a trim beard and wearing smart casual attire with a tweed jacket.

“Cal, my boy!” The wolf he addresses instantly bends down to be aggressively petted, wagging his tail.

“Mmm, always a pleasure to see you Mr Hendricks.” Cal says, his voice wobbling from the rubbing against his neck.

“The pleasure is mine, you wonderful wolf,” he adds, stroking the fur back into place and shifts his focus. “You’ve brought a friend with you! Who is this handsome fellow? A boyfriend I hope.” Ember immediately gulps and takes a step back as the hands disconnect from Cal and extend towards him.

“Phew.” Cal shakes his head and rights himself. “No, no, this is a new servant at the manor, his name is Ember.”

“What a pretty name! He’s terribly shy isn’t he? Come here my boy, let me pet you.”

Ember nervously looks at Cal who’s smiling sweetly, and nods. He looks back at the human and eventually bends down. The hands clasp his head and the fingers work their wily way through the dense fur and start scratching at all the right places. He struggles to resist a verbal exhale and his tail goes just as Cal’s did.

“What a sweet thing. Colleague or not, I think you should snatch this one before someone else does.” The man says, continuing to ruffle and tousele.

“Perhaps I will. Don’t want you grabbing him before I get chance,” Cal titters causing Ember to look up at him and blush heavily. The man laughs and ceases his assault to scratch his beard.

“I hardly think the wife would approve.”

Ember feels the haze of the attention start to fade and he stands himself up to stop himself from falling over. He pants, letting his tongue roll out a little and hears a throat be cleared.

“Then again ...” the man adds and suddenly a carrier bag is thrust against’s the black wolf’s belly.

“Be a dear and carry this for me,” Cal says, chuckling to himself.

Ember quickly realises the tightness in his jeans and grabs the bag, holding it with both hands so it covers his crotch completely. He shifts his eyes around, glad that no one seems to be looking at him directly, apart from Mr Hendricks.

“Yes, wouldn’t want you to get into trouble. But ...” The man subtly looks around also and adds “If you ever find yourself in my shop ... I’ll be happy to give you an extended rub”

“Gosh, you’re in mood today” Cal nudges a closed fist to the man’s shoulder friendly, who responds with a very dirty grin.

“What can I say, I like what I like. And your master has a cruel knack for finding the best of your kind.”

“You’re too kind. Come on Ember, we really should get you some proper clothes,” Cal urges, gesturing to the embarrassed wolf with a head jerk.

“Yes, something more revealing I hope.”

“Goodbye Mr Hendricks.” The white wolf laughs, hugging him.

Ember makes a timid farewell and the two head off back up the main street. He turns his head to see that the man is watching them walk away, not really caring about how obvious he’s being. His head snaps back around and he looks at Cal.

“He’s harmless, just a bit ... keen.”

“He had the opposite effect I was ever expecting to get out of another human today.”

“In a bad way?” Cal smirks, gesturing to the bag Ember is still having to strategically hold.

“It was just so sudden; and he has a wife too?”

“Yeah, uhh ...” the wolf scratches his chin for a moment. “Clarice, I think. Or, Clara I think she prefers. Only met her once.”

“Does she know?”

"I don't think you could have a husband be as openly flirtatious to a male werewolf in the middle of the high street without her finding out. Yeah she doesn't really care."

"That's ... progressive of her," Ember says, surprised.

"I guess so. Maybe she knows it's pretty unlikely he's going to leave her for one, so she allows him to have his fancies."

"It sounded like more than just fancies. Didn't he invite me back for sex?"

"Sort of." Cal grins and opens the glass door of a clothing shop. "He said rubs and it's what he meant. He does really enjoy petting, but it could lead to more if you wanted."

"Oh yeah? Spoken from experience?"

Cal flushes a little and stops to turn and face the other wolf. "Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. That's for me to know." He sticks his tongue out, still smiling and points at a wall with a large label above saying 'MENS'.

"Sorry it's just ... kinda interesting in a way."

They walk over to the wall, ignoring the young couple cowering behind island racks and trying to stealth their way out of the shop. By this point Ember has really started to miss being back at the mansion. He misses seeing the master and being near him and the longer he is away, the more he feels like he wants to just run back and dive at his feet. He embarrasses himself at the thought and tries to focus on picking out some clothes he likes.

"I've never picked out clothes for myself while I've been in wolf mode. How do you know what size you are?"

"It's hard to judge. I usually start with my human size plus two."

Cal reads the labels on the shirt and trousers he lent to Ember and they work from there, looking through the designs for something he likes.

"Before I came here," Ember says conversationally as a shirt is held against his body for size. "I didn't know human-werewolf relationships were a thing."

"They are, rare as they may be. The master is aware, before you get the wrong idea by the way. He knows that we can't -" he looks around and lowers his tone. "- finish. So there's no 'product' wasted."

"I'm kinda surprised by that, but I suppose as long as you're safe it's not really a problem. Plus there probably aren't that many humans out there that would want to have a sex with a werewolf right?" Ember laughs quietly.

"Right ..." Cal smiles secretively, flicking through shirts on the rack. "By the way, safety isn't too much of an issue." He leans in to whisper. "Another perk of the collar."

"You're kidding." Ember turns to the other wolf who just shrugs dismissively.

"It was one of the first things the master put on them. Strangely enough he said it was one of the easier spells to code."

"That's incredible. He should sell that, it'd surely fetch a higher price than ... the other thing."

"I said the same thing, and was involved in process of trying for a while. The problem is that it would require the spell to be permanently attached to the person. You can't inject it or cast it on the person, it doesn't really work that way, it has to be a constant source, like a kind of radiation." Cal pulls out some more shirts and holds them up against Ember's body, tilting his head with each

one. "Research went into translating it into a vaccine, but it went nowhere. Magic and biology aren't really compatible like that. There was also an attempt at a tattoo, but it got horribly infected and the experiment was shut down."

"Well, what about just having the person wear the thing that cures them then? Or putting it on condoms or something?"

"They did. There are actually some products you can buy, but unfortunately they aren't cheap and you have to know a guy who knows a guy who knows a guy. You see, as sad as it is, the medical corporations don't actually want the population to just ... get better. Because then they can't sell drugs and afford medical staff and equipment. It's all kinda fucked honestly."

"Wow ... yeah that ... that's actually disgraceful."

"Master fought for it, nothing happened. See as it turns out, companies like having money; and when someone threatens their profits, the threats come back tenfold. Magic isn't even a talked-about thing, because only like a few thousand people in the world even know it exists and a tiny fraction of that can even practice it."

"It's still being developed isn't it? My mum used to tell me stories about people using it more in her childhood, which is how our mage learned some simple things."

"I assume so, based on what the master does, but I don't know anything about it really. It's always been hidden pretty tightly and people eventually forget about it. What do you think to this?" He holds up a flannel button shirt.

"Quite nice. I like the design, but I prefer autumnal colours. So is that why the products that protect you are so expensive? To keep how they work quiet?"

"I assume so, in part. I don't like to stick my nose in too deep, it's all rather depressing."

"You're telling me," Ember puffs, putting another shirt on a small pile on the rack.

He picks up the selection of shirts and is directed to the back of the shop by Cal. An attendant by the fitting room in her early twenties quivers as the lumbering beasts approach her. She jumps when she's told how many items and gingerly holds out a token for him to take. He thanks her and goes into the fitting room.

"Remember, put the biggest one on first and work down, and be careful of your claws," Cal says and smiles at the clerk. She does not smile back for fear that baring her teeth might be a sign of aggression.

"This is so much harder like this."

"You get used to it. Let me see any that you're unsure on, I'll be having a look for some jeans for you."

Ember steps out a minute later, wearing a tartan, short-sleeve button shirt and gets Cal's attention. He turns around and nearly drops the jeans he's holding.

"Oh ... uhh ... yep, I insist you keep that one." He says, admiring how the neck fluff keeps the top two buttons apart, showing a decent chunk of chest.

"I feel like a lumberjack."

"I will gladly facilitate that aesthetic," Cal muses aloud. He quickly clears his throat when he sees the clerk covering her mouth to hide the snickering and turn away. "Add it to the yes pile and try the next one."

Ember smiles and starts unbuttoning the shirt well before he turns back towards the fitting room. The other wolf shakes his head and goes back to the jeans, pulling out a few with the same or higher size as the pair he's loaning.

Ember comes out again soon after, carrying three shirts he likes, including the lumberjack one, and hands the woman the token with the discarded items. Cal then trades the shirts with the jeans and the process restarts. But Ember doesn't come out again until he's selected two pairs and then again for some gardening clothes and a few pairs of shorts. Cal puts it all on the till counter, along with several packs of socks, some underwear, stockings and a belt.

"So, does this come out of expenses or something?" The black wolf asks, trying on some sunglasses.

"No, the master covers these things sorts of purchases himself, unless they become too frivolous."

"Oh." He turns away to look at himself in the little mirror and notices Cal pay across two cards. He puts the glasses back and helps carry the bags outside, thankful he no longer needs to hold one in front of his groin.

"So was something a little too frivolous?" He asks as they continue their walk up the road.

"Oh ... you saw that." Cal says sheepishly and stops walking. "No ..." He leans down and rummages through one of the bags. "I wanted to buy this one for you."

Ember feels himself warm up inside when Cal pulls out a scarf and wraps it around his neck. It's thinly woven and patterned in vivid stripes of reds, oranges and yellows on a dark grey backing.

"I thought you'd look cute in this. It's autumnal too," he adds.

"Aw, Cal." Ember whimpers, looking down at it, grinning goofily. "I love it."

"I know it's not the weather for it, so feel free to take it off. I just wanted to see if I was right." He smiles, admiring the look and nods. "Which, of course, I am; you're cuter than ever."

Ember whines softly as he exhales and reluctantly takes off the scarf. "I know it doesn't mean much, considering it's the only one I have, but this is my favourite scarf. I wish we weren't in public so I could just smooch you," he giggles sheepishly and looks down at the soft fabric, stroking it with his thumb. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. But for future reference, I like chocolates, merlot, Turkish delights ..." he grins, reeling them off with exaggerated finger counting.

"Noted." Ember laughs back and carefully returns the scarf to one of the bags.