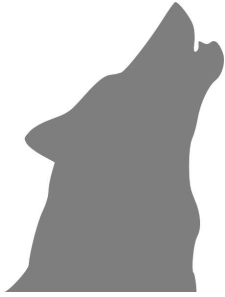


***The Boys Need a Time-Out* by Dawn M Turner**

Published in newsletter for April 2020

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This short provides a glimpse at a light moment in the lives of those in the Campbell pack. This event occurs after the short story ***Tough Love*** (#13 in the **Campbell Wildlife Preserve** series). It can be read as a stand-alone, but it doesn't introduce the characters, so readers who know the characters will get the most out of the story.

Sophia leaned against the door frame and watched her alpha mate spar with his best friend in the grass several yards off the back deck. They'd been at it for nearly half an hour. Though Ian had the advantage in weight, strength, and efficiency of movement that gave him incredible endurance, his second, Brett, had speed, sheer grit, and a tendency toward brutal, quick-witted strategy. As they battled, their strengths kept them even, and neither was willing to quit.

A human watching them right then would probably conclude they were after blood, but in reality, by werewolf standards, they were going easy on each other. She'd seen the damage both of them could do in a real fight.

Ian managed to slip past Brett's nearly flawless defenses and land a punch that clearly hadn't been pulled.

*Okay, maybe **easy** is the wrong word.* She chuckled.

Brett growled and wiped blood from his face, even as it continued to pour from an obviously broken nose. He did little more than smear it across his pale skin.

A half grin quirked Ian's lips, revealing the double canine in the right side of his mouth. "Ready to admit defeat yet?"

"You wish," Brett snarled and circled his opponent. "I'll heal. A stinking bloody nose isn't taking me out." He suddenly grinned. "My mate might come after your head for damaging my pretty face though."

Ian snorted. "Are you kidding? She might find bruises to be an improvement."

Sophia slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh. As a fellow wolf, Brett's mate Kelly would know just how quickly his injuries would heal.

Giggles came from one side of the deck.

Sophia glanced at the two children who'd taken up residence in the Adirondack chairs to one side of the doorway she stood in. 14-year-old Tommy was the younger brother of a packmate. 12-year-old Chelsea was new to the pack, having joined along with her human mother only weeks prior.

The kids hunched close together, their gazes on the men, snickering softly.

She'd almost forgotten they were there. "Um... Ian, aren't you two supposed to be giving the pups instruction in defensive techniques for this week's lesson, or do I have my days mixed up?"

Both men froze, and their gazes shot to Tommy and Chelsea.

Apparently I'm not the only one who forgot about them.

Her mate's grin grew. "Just illustrating what happens when you fail to defend yourself properly."

"I was doing just fine," Brett grumbled, "until you took that cheap shot."

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“Ah, but”—Ian raised a brow—“if you’d been defending yourself effectively, you would’ve seen it coming and stopped it.”

Brett narrowed his eyes and glared at his friend then turned to face the children.

“Remember this. When it comes to a fight, Ian doesn’t fight fair or honestly.”

Ian laughed. “You’re one to talk.” He shook his head. “Like I haven’t seen you cheat to win.”

Nose rising, Brett cocked a brow in smug superiority. “I’m the pack’s enforcer. It’s my job to win every fight. By fair means or foul. As our alpha, you’re supposed to be the honorable one and above such things.”

“Tell you what.” Ian crossed his arms loosely over his chest. “You fight fair, and I’ll fight fair. Deal?”

Sophia watched the byplay. Would Brett truly agree to set aside his ruthless tendencies?

After a long moment, a slow smile curved the man’s lips. “Sure.” He winked at the kids, who smothered giggles behind raised hands.

“You do realize I know you’re lying, right?” Ian shook his head. “Besides, we both know you’ve fought dirty for so long, you couldn’t do otherwise even if your life depended on it.”

Brett scowled, though his eyes remained bright with laughter. “I’m not *that* bad.”

Ian shook his head again and gave the children a mournful look. “Don’t let his tendency to lie get you down. Love him anyway, and pray for him. Hard.”

With a growl, Brett lunged at him, and off they went again. Only, this time, they didn’t look like the pair of lethal predators they truly were. Instead, it was two boys horsing around.

Sophia glanced at Tommy and Chelsea. “I think the boys need a time-out. Don’t you?”

“Yes!” the children hollered in unison then dissolved into giggles.