

PACK OF DAWN AND DESTINY BOOK ONE



# HUNTED

MAGIFORD SUPERNATURAL CITY

K. M. SHEA

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HUNTED

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## Pack of Dawn and Destiny Book 1

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K. M. SHEA

HUNTED

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## Chapter 1

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### *Pip*

**A**s a hunter living with a Pack of werewolves, there were a lot of things I'd gotten used to. The hunts where I ran until my lungs ached with pain, the beautiful howls in the dead of night...but even after a decade, I still wasn't used to the aggressive snuggling.

My backpack thumped against my back as I hurried at that awkward too-fast-to-be-a-walk-but-too-slow-to-be-a-run pace.

I had the morning shift at the Timber Ridge Welcome Center, and if I didn't get there ten minutes early to open the place up at eight, Mayor Pearl would stop by to give me the evil eye.

I rubbed my cold nose and picked up my pace as I marched down the gravel road that would lead me into town.

Although it was nearly the middle of summer, this far north in Wisconsin our nights and early mornings were still pretty cool.

The trees and patchy lawn were drenched in dew. I'd gotten my shoes soaked all the way through to my socks when I'd walked across the lawn earlier, so I made a squelching noise every time I took a step.

But the moist noise wasn't loud enough to cover the wet slap of leaves that came from inside the forest. I suspiciously clutched the shoulder straps of my backpack and peered into the trees that hemmed the road in on either side.

I didn't hear anything else, but when I nudged my hunter senses I felt two bright spots in my mind, which meant there were two werewolves near —

A man threw himself out of the forest, landing so close to me that the gravel he kicked up hit my shins.

I dodged him and darted up the road, scuttling in a sideways motion so I could keep an eye on him.

A twig cracked, and on sheer instinct I threw myself to the side, narrowly avoiding a second man.

I heard the first man chase after me, closing in fast. I struggled to point my back toward something solid, but when you live in a forest filled with werewolves, *anything* can be a hiding spot.

The first man made a grab for me, but I shimmied away, barely avoiding him. He stopped long enough to laugh and brush a few leaves off his gray shirt and blue jeans. The casual clothes couldn't hide his corded arm muscles or the broad shoulders that most defensive linemen in the NFL would envy.

"Don't fight it, Pip." He adjusted his thinly framed glasses. "Just give in."

I made a shooing motion with my hand. "No, thank you. I'm not interested today. Or ever. Run along, now."

I felt the second man move farther up the path, putting me between the two of them.

I tried to back up toward the trees, but trapped as I was, I couldn't dodge as easily. The first man—the one with glasses—took advantage of this and pounced immediately.

"It's time for a Puppy Power-up!" He scooped me up as if I were a stuffed animal and squeezed me to his chest, deeply inhaling.

"Wyatt, stop it." I tried to elbow him in the gut, but he just squeezed me harder.

"Oh yeah, that's the good stuff," Wyatt said. "It's like hugging a basket of beagle puppies!"

"I thought we agreed she's a Pomeranian?" the second wolf asked. He cocked his head, his red hair glowing in the spot of sunshine that stabbed through the forest canopy. He was a little taller, but more wiry and lean. "She's got fluffy white hair like one."

I stopped wriggling in Wyatt's grasp—there was no point in trying to out-strength a werewolf, especially one as strong as Wyatt. Instead, I tried to push the tangled mess of my stark white hair out of my face and grimaced when I got some in my mouth. “Stop comparing me to small dogs.”

Wyatt patted my back as if I were a fretting baby. “But you yodel like a beagle when you're upset.” He planted his cheek on the top of my head, then sighed in obvious happiness. “You are also so soft and squishy, and the alliteration is catchier, so I guess you're a Pomeranian after all. Aeric, here.”

Wyatt passed me off to Aeric, who hugged me with enough force to make my spine crack.

“I feel better already,” Aeric announced. “These puppy pheromones are the best.”

“I'm so glad to hear that,” I said with no emotion. I tried to dig my phone out of the back pocket of my khakis and settled in for another hug session.

You'd think being embraced by two big, hulking guys would be every girl's dream, right?

Yeah, well, it's not when said guys don't think of you as a girl, but more as a cute puppy.

It was my pheromones—which were dead useful most of the time. Just not when I was trying to make an eight o'clock shift and the wolves were in a snuggly mood.

As a hunter, I was considered a subset of wizards, since I was a human with magic. But I couldn't use elemental magic like regular wizards; instead, I had hunter magic. Some forms of hunter magic are innate, and all werewolf hunters get them—like higher stamina and the ability to make trap spells. But my pheromones were examples of genetic magic that's only passed down through hunter family lines.

My pheromones—which were similar to the kind puppies give off—were the hunter magic hallmark of my mom's family tree. It was an awesome defense mechanism, as it inspired a wolf's protective instincts and made them way less likely to harm or kill me.

Werewolves, like their wild counterparts, *adore* puppies. The Pack would do anything to keep them safe. And since I smelled similar to a

puppy, it made me particularly appealing to hug to the already affectionate werewolves.

The downside was that they saw me more as a dog than a human, much less a female.

I'd made that particularly rude discovery multiple times in my years with the Northern Lakes Pack.

I held my phone high so I could see it over the muscles of Aeris's arm. "Could we speed this up a little? I don't want to be late for my shift."

"You are too much of a workaholic," Aeris told me. "You need to relax."

"Mayor Pearl will complain if I don't open the welcome center before eight," I reminded him.

"The welcome center doesn't fall under city management—it's a privately owned business." Wyatt smoothed his dark brown hair, which he'd gelled into a business-casual look for the day. "Mayor Pearl can't do more than complain—and even if you opened the center up half an hour early, she'd complain anyway. I think she'd shrivel up like a dead leaf if she didn't have something to be disagreeable about." Wyatt snapped his teeth, producing a loud, clicking sound that would have made the hair on the back of my neck stand up if I wasn't so used to the untamed power werewolves radiate.

"Yes, but I don't want her complaining to Greyson." I couldn't help the frown of distaste that pulled at my lips when I said his name.

Greyson was the Alpha of the Northern Lakes Pack—which had become the biggest Pack in the Midwest over the past few years. He was a decent Alpha, but I wasn't...fond of him.

I didn't appreciate the way he had become the Pack Alpha, and his personality was a real drawback in my opinion.

"Whatever. We'll walk you to the welcome center so the harpy doesn't bother you." Aeris finally released me from the bear hug, though he draped one arm over Wyatt and the other over me, pushing us farther down the gravel path.

I marched ahead, but Wyatt slightly tilted his head, his eyes going up as he listened to something my human ears couldn't hear.

A moment later, my hunter senses kicked in, and I felt a werewolf draw closer to us.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

Aeric hauled Wyatt and me along with him as he turned around to face the speaker.

Wyatt straightened his shoulders and bowed his head—Aeric mimicking him—to the mild-mannered werewolf who was watching us with a bemused smile.

As a hunter, I wasn’t bound to the same Pack dynamics that had Wyatt and Aeric bowing, so I just grinned. “Hey, Hector. Is Ember around?”

Hector smoothed his precisely trimmed goatee. “I believe she is speaking to Greyson at the moment. Why, did you need something?” He looked deceptively casual as he slipped his hands into the pockets of his suitcoat, which he wore despite knowing it was going to be beastly hot in the afternoon. His suit was a dark navy color, which set off his russet-colored skin perfectly—that was probably the work of Ember, his wife.

I used my left foot to scratch an itch on the calf of my right leg. “I was just wondering if she’d heard from Chase. She said she was going to call him when I saw her yesterday morning.”

“Ah.” Hector adjusted his dapper red bowtie. “In that case I will be certain to pass on your wish to speak to her. I imagine she’ll drop by the welcome center this morning.” Hector smiled, making him seem even more benevolent than usual.

Standing about as tall as Wyatt, but with the mild manners of a professor, Hector appeared to the untrained eye to be less physically impressive.

I, however, knew from my training sessions that Hector could rip the door off a car with ease—which was how I learned it was not safe to hide from werewolves in any vehicle other than a tank. (And maybe not even tanks.)

But even if I hadn’t seen his strength myself, as the Pack beta, Hector radiated a soft kind of strength that meant people listened to him when he spoke.

I peered at Hector, trying to get a better read on him. “Thanks for telling Ember. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, why can’t we go with Pip?” Aeric asked. “Did something happen?”

“Just political red tape, I’m afraid,” Hector said. “We’ve received more complaints that the Northern Lakes Pack should split into two given its size. It seems the Alphas of the area let their envy get the best of them as they stubbornly refuse to acknowledge our Pack cohesiveness means we’d never survive such a split.”

I grimaced in sympathy.

*Politics are the worst. I’m so glad I don’t have to deal with them!*

“Now that’s a pile of trash if I’ve ever smelled one,” Wyatt said. “You look stressed. Have a Pomeranian Puppy Power-up.”

Aeric gently pushed me across the gap between us and the beta.

Hector smiled ruefully and shook his head. “As delightful as Phillipa’s powers are, I’m afraid they will not fix the problem.” He slightly nodded his head to me, but it seemed like the call of my puppy pheromones were too much even for Hector to resist. He patted me on the head as if I were a dog, and the tension in his shoulders eased a fraction.

Magic puppy pheromones—they are useful.

I heard the purr of a golfcart puttering down the road and peered around Hector, trying to figure out if I needed to move.

The wolves could take getting hit by a golfcart. But even with my slightly increased healing capabilities, I couldn’t.

But Hector was still patting my head, and given the werewolves’ touchy-feely-ness with those they considered family, he’d feel a little hurt if I just walked off.

“Greyson oughta just go down to Magiford and set the Curia Cloisters straight so they’ll stop accepting complaints,” Wyatt declared.

“You’d think other Packs would be *happy* we’re actually growing,” Aeric grumbled.

The golfcart hummed its way along, emerging from a bend in the road.

Two of the humans that belonged to the Northern Lakes Pack were sitting in it—Olivia and Tucker. They were a little older than me, and I’d known them since I’d been adopted into the Pack.

I gave the pair an awkward wave.

Olivia gave me one of those equally awkward tight frowny-smiles you give people when you see them but don’t want to talk. Tucker didn’t seem to notice—his gaze was flickering between the three wolves, who absently waved to the pair without looking at them.

“Regardless, Greyson would like to speak with both of you.” Hector gave my head one last pet, then took a step back. Unlike most of the Pack, he respected the concept of space, even if he had a personality as warm as the spring sun. “And if Phillipa is to make her morning shift, I believe she must leave shortly.”

Tucker and Olivia puttered off in the golfcart, but they glanced back with a look I recognized unfortunately well: dislike.

Wyatt nodded decisively. “Got it. We’ll report in. See you later, Pip!”

“Shania is coming in at lunch time. We’ll come with her to say hi,” Aeric said, referring to his girlfriend and my closest friend.

“Okay.” I glanced at my phone—I had ten minutes to make the fifteen-minute walk. “Good luck with *that guy*,” I said, referring to the venerated Alpha.

“Aww, Pip, come on. It’s been years. You’re going to have to accept him eventually,” Aeric laughed.

I shrugged and hitched my backpack higher up my back. “Someone has to be a doubter, or his fanclub will get too crowded. See you guys later!” I jogged off before he or Wyatt could protest—Hector knew better.

Running in khakis and my short-sleeved polo shirt wasn’t too uncomfortable. I was wearing my orthopedic walking shoes with their special inserts for maximum cushion. (It made for a fabulous combination with my business casual clothes, but when you’re on your feet all day, granny shoes will save your feet. And your knees. And all your joints!)

Gravel crunched under my feet, and the sky was an inviting shade of blazing blue that cut through the trees above my head.

Running was something I’d gotten good at since I’d been adopted into the Northern Lakes Pack. The biggest irritation was that my khakis didn’t stretch very well at the knees, which kept my stride short. But I wasn’t even sweaty when the gravel trail merged with three other gravel paths and turned into a paved road that led directly into downtown Timber Ridge.

*I’m two minutes out from town, and about three from the welcome center. I should be able to make it in time!*

I trotted toward the last big curve in the road, my backpack smacking me with every step.

When I reached the curve, my hunter instincts slugged me in the gut.

I skidded to a stop and held my breath as I listened.

Werewolf hunters don't have as good of senses as a wolf. Yes, we have fairly good night vision, but we don't possess the amazing sense of smell the werewolves have. We do, however, have a kind of detection magic.

We can sense when werewolves are nearby, and how many of them there are. Typically, this was zero help for me. I lived with werewolves, there was no getting away from them. But there was something...off about this presence.

Werewolves were typically bright spots in my senses, and kind of minty feeling. This wolf was dim, and had a twisted feel to it.

I swung my backpack off my shoulders and clutched it so it didn't make any noises as I stalked down the road as quietly as possible.

I stopped altogether when I reached the natural boundary where the forest thinned out around Timber Ridge.

*Nothing. I don't see anyone unfamiliar...*

My eyes skated over the lumpy browns and vibrant greens of the forest boundary.

And then something moved.

I froze as a large wolf crept out of the tree line.

Although he was a little larger than a typical gray wolf, the werewolf looked rough. His brown and red mottled fur was patchy—as if he had mange—and he was so skinny he was almost skeletal.

*Whoever that is, he's not from the Northern Lakes Pack. All of them take pride in their wolf forms—they'd never let their fur get that greasy and dirty.*

I pushed a tree branch back, and my heart stuttered in my chest when I got a better look at the supernatural.

His lips were curled back in a snarl, and there was something glassy and unfocused about his eyes as he stalked toward downtown with the saunter of a predator. Something was wrong with him. It was like he was sick, or his instincts had taken over and his humanity was in the back seat.

He licked his chops as he narrowed in on two little girls who were playing on a swing set in a park at the very edge of town.

*He's going to attack. He's going to attack humans.*

My phone felt heavy in my hands—I needed to call someone.

Aeric and Wyatt could take him no problem. I couldn't. Hunters worked in families and focused on a single target. I was by myself, and I couldn't

even avoid werewolf hugs. Taking on a crazed wolf by myself wasn't possible.

He'd kill me.

*But can Aeris and Wyatt get here before this psycho hurts the girls?*

My heart hammered in my chest as I looked from the creeping wolf to the two little girls, who were still on the swings, oblivious to the danger they were in.

Although my throat was tight with fear, I knew what I had to do.

*I can't let him hurt them—even if I can't win against him.*

I took a deep breath, tucked my fingers in my mouth, and blew off the shrill, specific whistle I used in lieu of a howl: three sharp blasts.

I ripped my bag open and pulled out my silver tipped daggers. Mama Dulce and Papa Santos had gotten me for my eighteenth birthday.

I tossed my bag aside and stalked after the wolf, magic singing in my veins.

*Sorry, Mayor Pearl. Looks like the welcome center is opening late today.*

My hunter magic blew through my body, giving me a solid dose of adrenaline as it tried to prep me for this battle I was almost certainly going to lose.

Thankfully, the wolf hadn't noticed my whistles—or perhaps that was unthankfully, as it meant there was something *really* wrong with him to not notice.

But the little girls had. They looked up, saw the wolf, and ran off screaming.

That was the wrong thing to do.

Like their wild counterparts, werewolves work together to get their prey to run instead of standing their ground. A running animal that is scared out of its mind is more likely to stumble and fall, and that's when they strike.

The wolf tore after them with a throaty growl that had my heart leaping in my chest.

A bedraggled groan ripped from my throat as I ran after him, leaving the safety of the trees—wolves can't climb, which made trees the safest place.

He passed the girls and started to circle around them, cutting them off from the city.

I threw my first dagger, which bit into the large target of his flanks and stuck out of it like a glittering marker.

The wolf swung around, and curled its lips so high up its gums to display its teeth that it wrinkled the skin on the top of its muzzle. It worried me that he didn't show more of a reaction when the silver in the daggers should have been a burning sensation to him.

"No—not allowed. Get lost!" I shouted so hard my voice cracked as I barreled at the wolf, trying to crank up my intimidation factor as much as possible. "Go!"

The little girls hadn't stopped running—they'd arced away from the wolf, thank goodness.

The wolf flicked his eyes—which were an unnerving shade of pale blue—after them.

I leaped in front of him, breaking his focus, and stabbed my remaining dagger at him. "No! Get lost—this isn't your territory!"

I met the wolf's gaze and stared him down, refusing to look away.

A staring contest with a wolf was no joke, but as I stared into his blue eyes, my palms were soon coated with sweat. His eyes were still unfocused, but now I could see what made them appear so glassy was the lack of humanity.

Werewolves are not dual natured. They live in harmony with their human and wolf instincts, which shows in their eyes. Even in their werewolf forms, their eyes have that light of intelligence and humanity.

This werewolf's eyes were dim, as if he was entirely driven by his werewolf instinct and all shreds of his humanity were gone. He wasn't just sick, he was feral.

*Huh. The next few minutes are going to be a little exciting.*

The werewolf lunged at me—teeth out and ready to rip into my throat or belly.

I sidestepped him and stabbed my dagger into his shoulder with my left hand and yanked my other dagger free with my right hand.

The wolf growled and pivoted so fast, this time I wasn't entirely able to avoid him when he snapped at me.

His jaws clamped shut with an audible chomp on the sleeve of my shirt, and he nicked my arm with his teeth.

I didn't even feel the scratch. My hunter magic produced adrenaline, which deadened my senses of pain, so I was still in fighting condition.

I yanked my arm free, ripping the sleeve to shreds, then slammed the pommel of my dagger into the side of the wolf's head, all while screaming as loudly as I could.

The wolf staggered, and I followed up with another kick to his head, followed by a stab into the scruff of his neck.

I darted backward before he could bite at my open belly, breathing fast as I cautiously watched him.

Despite taking two knocks to the head and three dagger wounds—all of which were bleeding badly—the wolf lunged at me again.

*Don't fall—if I fall this is all over!*

I walked backward, mentally patting myself on the back for my devotion to comfortable footwear as I tried to get back to the tree line.

The next time the wolf lunged at me I struck at his chest, arcing my blow low so he wouldn't be able to avoid it.

My dagger bit into his chest, but he smashed into me with such force I hit the ground with a roll.

*Up, up! Get up—now!*

I got up on one knee before the wolf body slammed me, so I hit the ground again.

I kicked up, hitting it in the jaw, so it backed off a few steps, then threw my left dagger at its chest. My dagger hit the wolf, but it *still* didn't seem to notice as it snarled and snapped.

I tried to scramble to my feet, but the wolf jumped at me again.

I braced myself on my knees—hoping I would at least be able to keep it from throwing me to the ground—when an unearthly, eerie howl that seemed to make the air shake filled the park.

I knew that howl—it was as individualistic as a thumbprint.

*Greyson.*

The feral werewolf was on me—snapping at my face. I held my arms up and shoved it back, but it was stronger than me. It was going to bite my face.

I sucked air in and leaned backward, when something collided with the rabid wolf, knocking it head over tail.

Greyson had arrived.

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## Chapter 2

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### *Greyson*

I stood up from the crouch I'd landed in after knocking the intruding wolf over.

The brute was still rolling around on the ground, so I took the moment to roll up the cuffs of my sleeves—no sense ruining another shirt on the likes of this mutt—and glanced at Pip.

The hunter was stiff with adrenaline and an admirable amount of false bravado. I could hear the frantic beat of her heart, but her face showed none of her fear as she fixed her hold on her dagger.

"Did he get you?" I asked.

"Nah—but he tried to go after some kids. Two of them." She nodded at the still recovering wolf.

I slightly tilted my head up so I could smell better, and picked up on a familiar metallic tang. "Lying again, Lady Hunter?" I asked, using my nickname for Pip that I knew she hated. "I smell blood."

She puffed up, and her white hair—natural, not dyed—smacked her in the face. "It was just a nick!"

Pip was a practiced liar when it came to her wellbeing, so I inhaled the wind again.

*Not much blood, so it probably is just a scratch.*

Pip's personal scent—a sweet but dangerous scent I could only really describe as a silver dagger wrapped in wild roses—tickled my nose.

“Just go handle it.” Pip rolled her forest green eyes. “And watch out—I think he’s feral.”

I peered in the wolf’s direction with a little more interest. It was standing again, and already it was staggering its way toward town, seemingly uncaring of my presence. “Sounds like fun.”

I ran after the wolf in my human form. Even though fighting wolf against wolf would have been easier, the shift from human to wolf took about thirty seconds. Thirty *precious* seconds in which a lot of fighting could happen. With a city full of humans, I didn’t have that kind of time.

I jumped, landing on the wolf’s back and flattening it.

It writhed underneath me, trying to bite at my legs. I picked it up by the scruff of its neck, despite the fact that it weighed over two hundred pounds—werewolf strength at its finest—then slammed it down into the ground with enough force that its body made an imprint.

“Enough.” I let just enough of my power loose to make the wolf listen to my words.

The wolf ignored me and thrashed in my grasp, snapping as it rolled its sickly, clouded eyes.

*Pip’s right, he doesn’t have a scrap of humanity left.*

That meant he was either entirely feral, or there was a thin possibility he was under a spell.

I leaned in, trying to sniff out any magic on him as he struggled fruitlessly in my hold.

It wasn’t terribly hard to hold him; he was pretty scrawny compared to most of the wolves in my Pack. But his frantic strength didn’t seem to match his underdeveloped muscles.

*What is going on?*

I caught it after a moment—a faint whiff of magic. It wasn’t like anything I’d come across before. It smelled old—like ancient metal that hadn’t been cleaned—and oddly made my teeth ache.

*It’s not fae magic—that always smells like honey. Wizard magic is more earthy. Could it be the work of a dragon shifter? But I’ve come across dragon shifters before, and they smell more like smoke and sulfur...*

The wolf twisted out from underneath me, but I caught it before it could clamber to its paws again and slammed it back on the ground.

I took the opportunity to wrench one of Pip's daggers free from it, clenching my teeth as the silver in the blade made my fingers tingle. I tossed it over my shoulder at the hunter.

"Thanks!" Pip called in the friendliest tone she'd addressed me with in months.

"All I need to make you happy is daggers, is it? I'll stow that tip away." I studied the blood that matted the strange wolf's fur, trying to figure out how much was soaking his undercoat. "He's going to bleed out."

"Can't you make him submit to you with your Alpha powers?" Pip called out.

"Not quite," I said.

I could use my powers as Alpha to choke a wolf until he couldn't breathe with enough ease to be disturbing. But he wasn't my wolf, so I couldn't make him submit like I could my own Pack—forcing an outsider to heel required said outsider to be capable of thought, not a slobbering monster.

The wolf was panting now. Its gums were turning an unhealthy white, and I could tell it was getting weaker.

*I don't want him to die—I need to know what he was planning, and who bespelled him.*

I tried smashing its head with a careful amount of power—I wanted to addle it, not kill it—but the wolf didn't even pause in its thrashing.

I impatiently looked around the park.

Ember had been with me when I'd heard Pip's whistle. I'd thought she'd be right behind me, but I couldn't scent her—or hear her, but that would have been hard given the intruder's never ceasing snarls and growls.

Behind me, Pip squatted on the ground and cleaned her daggers.

The wolf's wriggling was starting to slow—not because it was giving in but because it was dying from blood loss.

*He's going to die before we figure out what's wrong with him.* The knowledge made a muscle in my cheek twitch with irritation.

"Is the wolf bad?"

Pip and I looked up in alarm as the two kids Pip had mentioned earlier—both girls who appeared to be under the age of ten—peered at us as they gripped the poles of the park swing set.

"What are they doing here? Didn't they run?" I snapped.

“They did!” Pip snarled right back at me—something no one else in the Pack would have done, or been able to do.

I caught scent of more humans, and to my surprise, I saw a crowd of them had gathered on the sidewalk and were watching rather than realizing this monster could easily kill them fleeing.

*Humans.*

The rabid wolf slid out from underneath me and snarled as he lunged in the girls’ direction.

Pip shouted and sprang after the wolf, but I was faster.

*It’s near death already, and if the humans watch out of curiosity there is a much higher probability of damage. I need to finish this.*

Resigned—because I wasn’t going to get the information I wanted—I grabbed the wolf by the neck.

A twitch, and its neck was snapped. The wolf was dead before it hit the ground.

Pip didn’t stop running. She reached the little girls just as the smaller one of the pair asked, “Is the wolf sleeping now?”

“Where are your parents? We should find them.” Pip ushered the girls toward the crowd standing on the sidewalk as I stared down at the dead wolf in disgust.

“Alpha Greyson.” Ember slowed from a sprint to a jog as she left the trees of the forest. Her hair—gathered in neat, tiny braids—swung with her steps, and the glow of the sun cresting through the town made the brown of her skin appear more golden.

When she was about halfway to me, she abruptly halted, and the muscles of her neck throbbed.

I immediately clamped down on the powers I’d loosened to try to make the wolf submit, tempering them to a more reasonable level for the rest of my Pack.

*I’d forgotten I’d used my powers.*

My powers didn’t work on Pip—one of the pros of her being a hunter. Since I had to keep my powers reeled up whenever I was around anyone else, Pip was the one person in the Pack I could truly unwind around, drop the stiff leader act, and play with.

Pip had never been shy of complaining about this, but at least she had the decency to playfight back.

*I need a hobby besides playing with our hunter. But there's nothing else that's nearly as entertaining.*

Regardless, letting my powers loose like that was sloppy work. I needed to keep absolute control, or I would accidentally nail half my Pack where they stood and not notice.

Without my powers holding her in place, Ember resumed picking her way toward me. "Hector should be here any moment with Wyatt and Aeric," she said.

"Good." I crouched down by the wolf, tilting my head as I sorted through the smells that wafted off him.

The reek of blood was pretty overwhelming, but it didn't entirely mask the scent of must and stagnant water.

"He's from the Low Marsh Pack," I said.

The Low Marsh Pack had been named after the geography of their small territory—the bulk of which was swamp. There was no escaping that smell when you lived in it and it festered in your hair—and fur—all day and all night.

Ember peered down at the mottled wolf. "I don't recognize him, but Hector might. He stays on top of all members of our neighboring Packs."

I leaned closer to the wolf, sniffing out the faint whiff of foreign magic—which was still there. He was pretty big. Pip—average sized at best, though she was lean with muscle—had done amazing well in holding him off.

"Looks like Pip got a few good hits in," Ember said. "He would have died of blood loss in a few minutes."

I glanced at Ember. "She was protecting the humans."

I still must not have fully clamped down on my powers, because Ember slightly bowed, dropping deeper than she normally would. "Of course, Alpha Greyson."

*I better smother even more of it.*

It was always hard for me to tell—I had to restrain them so much I barely felt it myself, which made it hard to judge the exact level. But I didn't tolerate excuses from myself. Not when my Pack paid for my mistakes.

I slowly stood up as I mentally pulled back my powers even more.

Right as I finished, Hector, Wyatt, and Aeris came striding out of the forest.

Wyatt and Aeris jogged up to Pip, crowding her with the ease of familiarity, but Hector joined Ember and me.

“Alpha Greyson.” He stopped when he was even with Ember and bowed to me before briefly brushing his shoulder against his wife’s.

I watched Pip—with Aeris and Wyatt—shoo the humans a few steps farther away. “Hector.”

Hector leaned over the wolf, inspecting the wounds. “My, my. This seems like a fine mess. I shall alert the Curia Cloisters shortly to this attack, but I’m sure they’ll want a detailed description.”

With the rush of the fight fading, the familiar pang in my chest started twisting, making its presence known again.

I didn’t acknowledge the pain—mentally or physically.

I’d gotten enough looks of sympathy from my Pack over the source of my pain to drive me off mentioning it for the rest of my life.

It was just an unfulfilled mate bond, but they acted as if I was missing half of myself—which was absolutely stupid. You can’t miss someone you’ve never met.

*And I hope I never do meet her. The last thing I need is someone chained to me so I have to control my powers every waking hour instead of just during work hours.*

I ignored the pain, even when it burrowed into my heart like a parasite. “Pip first saw the wolf,” I said. “She had it mostly handled when I arrived.”

“Ah, in that case, might I begin by speaking with Phillipa?” Hector asked.

“Sure, I’m right here.” Pip spun her daggers around her finger tips as she strolled up to us, an interested light making her green eyes even brighter than usual. “What’s up?”

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## Chapter 3

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### *Pip*

I ambled up to Greyson, Ember, and Hector, taking a moment to glance back over my shoulder at Aeris and Wyatt, who were reassuring the humans.

I smiled and wiggled my fingers at the two little girls, who were watching with big eyes.

“I was wondering if you might be willing to tell what you saw, so I can include it in my report to the Curia Cloisters.” Hector whipped out his phone, ready to take notes.

“I’m afraid there’s not much to say.” I tapped my daggers against my thigh and chewed on my lip. “I was on my way to work when I saw him. I whistled, then tried to stop him, but he kept going for the girls. I didn’t know right away he was feral, but it was pretty obvious once I got closer.”

Ember frowned. “Feral? But we haven’t had a case of that in Wisconsin in years.”

Feral was the term used to describe a werewolf who had entirely forfeited his humanity, and acted as pure animal.

“He was bespelled.” Greyson folded his arms across his chest and peered down at the dead wolf. “Though I’m not sure by who. The scent of the magic is different from anything I’ve smelled before.”

Greyson was tall for a werewolf—even taller than Aeris. While he had wide shoulders, it was the dangerous grace that he held himself with and the

sculpt of his muscles that reminded me more of a deadly soldier than the fierce athleticism of a typical wolf.

His hair was a light shade of brown—or maybe a dark shade of blond depending on the lighting—and his eyes were a deep amber color that could strike straight to your heart.

All of that combined with his chiseled facial features and strong jawline, and he was fit for a career as a model.

Since the unlucky day I'd met him, it seemed like it was unfair that he was so freakin' good looking in addition to being powerful.

Ember discreetly sniffed at the dead wolf, scenting it out for any remnants of the magic.

"Could you sense anything, Phillipa?" Hector asked.

I scratched my nose as I prodded my senses. I could sense other magic—like fae magic and wizard magic—though I couldn't track it to an individual, but it was harder than sensing werewolves.

I felt a wisp of magic drift off the wolf. It was hard to pin down, but it didn't have the usual glitter that fae magic produced in my senses, or the steady glow of wizard magic. There was so little of it, tracking it felt like trying to find fleas on a feral wolf.

"This close I can get *something* off him, but it's so faint I didn't sense it at all when I was fighting him." I frowned at the body, my eyebrows puckering.

Hector nodded and went back to sniffing at the wolf.

Ember leaned back on her heels and looked disgruntled. "If he really is from the Low Marsh Pack, this is going to turn into a mess."

I chewed my lip some more as doubt started to creep into me. "Maybe I shouldn't have used my daggers when fighting him..."

"No," Greyson said before I could even breathe. "You did the right thing."

I slightly pursed my lips as I studied the Alpha, on the rare occasion of being grateful for him.

It wasn't that I disliked Greyson—he was a good Alpha, even if he had swindled the Pack into thinking he was practically Prince Charming when he was actually more of a trickster. I just didn't like the way he'd been made Alpha of the Pack.

Typically Alphas come into their position through winning fights, or some method of proving they're capable of caring for the Pack. Not Greyson.

Hudson, the previous Alpha "left" the Pack, and Pre-Dominant Harka—the highest-ranking wolf in the Midwest—had installed Greyson as the new Alpha. I'm fairly certain Hudson was asked to step down—even though he was an amazing leader—as the switch happened in the span of a week.

Rumor had it that Greyson was a top contender for Pre-Dominant when Harka eventually left the position, and I can only imagine that being alpha of the strongest Pack in the Midwest would solidify his position.

I didn't doubt Greyson's strength or abilities—he was stronger than Hudson by far, and I didn't think there was another Alpha in the Midwest who was stronger than him except for Pre-Dominant Harka of course. But Hudson and his family's abrupt and obviously unplanned exit left a bad taste in my mouth when it came to Greyson becoming Northern Lakes' Alpha.

"I agree with Alpha Greyson," Hector said. "Keeping the humans safe is a priority—for supernaturals in general, but especially for us given that we have the honor of living among them."

"The wolf's death won't be a problem." Greyson nodded at the nearest building. "We should be able to pull security video footage off City Hall's cameras for the Curia Cloisters to see. I'm more concerned about what magic was used on him."

Hector grimaced. "Yes, that certainly could become a very large problem if the source isn't discovered."

Werewolves were already pretty susceptible to magic, but if there was a magic that could take away their humanity, it would be devastating and dangerous for the entire species.

"We'll have to call for an investigation," Greyson said.

Ember flicked one of her tiny braids over her shoulder. "They'll send hunters."

As one, Greyson, Ember, and Hector turned in my direction.

I'd been in the middle of scratching my elbow, and was very confused at the sudden attention. "What?"

"Can you handle the presence of other hunters?" Greyson asked.

“Of course! I’m not like you guys—I don’t get possessive of my home,” I said.

“That’s not exactly what Alpha Greyson was referring to,” Hector said.

*Ah. Yes.*

The conundrum was that a hunter living in a wolf Pack was not a natural phenomenon. While werewolf hunters and werewolves were polite to one another, they weren’t allies.

Hunters got called in to track down any feral werewolves, or to discipline any wayward Packs, which happened a lot more than you’d think. Werewolves liked the deal because given how Pack-oriented they were, it was pretty difficult to mete out on their own Pack the violent kind of justice most hunters performed. So instead of a relationship of animosity and fear—as it was back in the age of the renaissance era and before—hunters and wolves had a civil working relationship.

My position within the Pack—however sketchy it was—was a result of orphanhood.

My parents were both active-duty hunters. They died on a mission when I was twelve.

After exhausting all hunter families, who wanted nothing to do with me, an elderly wolf couple—Mama Dulce and Papa Santos—were approved to adopt me.

They were a part of the Northern Lakes Pack, and had been the best kind of grandparents I could have ever asked for, loving me unconditionally even as they made sure I received proper hunter training.

They’d died about three years ago, weeks apart, and I was once again an orphan.

I’d said a lot of goodbyes in my life. I would like to avoid more in the future.

“I don’t mind if hunters come to investigate,” I said. “My parents died years ago. I’m okay.”

Greyson stared flatly at me in obvious disbelief.

Hector and Ember were at least a little more discreet. They tilted their heads in a way that meant they were trying to listen to my heartbeat or smell any of the chemical changes in my body that happen when you lie. Yeah, that’s a fun thing no one expects about living with werewolves. Goodbye all forms of biological privacy!

You could still pull a lie over them—you just had to be good at it. But the wolves knew *everything* about my health. Nothing was secret in a Pack.

“Very well,” Hector said. “We shall respect your feelings.”

“Thanks.”

“Uh-oh.” Ember jerked her chin up. “Looks like we have trouble incoming.”

I cringed. “Mayor Pearl?”

“Right on,” Ember said.

I reluctantly turned around so I could brace myself for the impassioned Mayor Pearl.

Coming in at shoulder height to me with legs as thin as toothpicks, Mayor Pearl was a force to be reckoned with. Her snow-white hair, which was fashioned in something similar to a bowl cut, was frozen in curls. I was pretty sure she put them in rollers every night. The jowls of her cheeks hung lower, probably because of her perpetual scowl.

She carried an umbrella—rain or shine—supposedly because she thought it was nicer than a cane, but I’m pretty sure she knew umbrellas were more painful to be smacked with than a cane, which had greatly influenced her decision. As always, she wore a black and white pantsuit with the trousers hiked up almost to her chest, and stomped with authority down the sidewalk.

Privately, I thought she had to be a vampire. She’d looked like this since the day I’d moved in with Mama Dulce and Papa Santos, and had served as the mayor of Timber Ridge for longer than I’d been alive.

“Alpha Greyson!” Mayor Pearl barked, her voice surprisingly low and husky.

“Mayor Pearl,” Greyson said, keeping his voice neutral.

Mayor Pearl brandished her black umbrella in the air. “What fracas have you made now?”

“I’m afraid this isn’t our doing, Mayor Pearl,” Hector said.

“Of course it is—it’s a *wolf*!” Mayor Pearl’s scowl grew so pronounced her jowls almost swallowed up her chin. “A *dead* wolf.”

“A wolf from a neighboring Pack lost his mind,” Ember smoothly said. “Alpha Greyson—and Pip—protected the town.”

Mayor Pearl gave a great harumph, which moved the pointy shoulder pads of her suitcoat, as she looked Greyson up and down from head to toe.

“I suppose I should at least be thankful you managed to keep pants and a shirt on during the fight. For once.”

*Ahhh yes, Mayor Pearl continues her battle against public nudity.*

When werewolves switched from their human form to their wolf body, their clothes were usually sacrificed in the process, which made for an awkward transition back to their human form.

Mayor Pearl had built her political platform on making Timber Ridge “decent” and “Family Friendly.” Which basically meant she watched the whole town with binoculars and smacked the Northern Lakes Pack with huge fines whenever she saw a bare belly.

Greyson smiled dazzlingly at the old woman. “We will be informing the Curia Cloisters of all that has happened here. I assume you would like to remain updated on the situation.”

“Naturally.” Mayor Pearl sniffed, then turned her steely gaze on me. “And what are *you* still doing here? The Timber Ridge Welcome Center is set to open by now. If I’m not mistaken, this is your shift.”

“The welcome center will be opening late today,” Greyson said, his voice a deep rumble that made Ember and Hector shift in response to the power laced within it.

“That’s not very professional,” Mayor Pearl said.

“I am delighted you are so concerned about a werewolf business,” Greyson smiled, though it didn’t make it all the way to his golden eyes. “But we are secure enough in our finances that we can stand to have the center open late today.”

Mayor Pearl darkly eyed Greyson, but there wasn’t much she could say.

The werewolves owned most of the businesses in town. They staffed and ran the welcome center—with the adjoining souvenir shop—as a sort of public service effort to encourage humans to visit the tourist town to see the werewolves.

They also owned several hospitals in the area, the only plumbing service for miles, the Timber Ridge cellphone store, and a slew of other businesses.

Mayor Pearl had no control over the center—though that didn’t keep her from lecturing us employees for what she saw as failing our duties.

“Pip,” Greyson said.

I unflinchingly met his gaze and held it—something I did on purpose because none of the other werewolves *could* meet his eyes due to his sheer presence as an Alpha. “What?”

“Go with Ember and take a fae healing potion.”

I frowned. “Why? It was just a nick, see?” I held back the ruined fabric of my sleeve to reveal a tiny scratch. With my slightly increased healing abilities, it would scab over within the hour. “Since I’m a hunter, I’m immune to all contagious and communicable diseases werewolves carry.”

“Go,” Greyson said, more of his power creeping into his voice.

Normally Greyson would know better than to try to push me around—there was no use trying since I was immune to his impressive-alpha-ness. I folded my arms across my chest and was getting ready to remind him of this when Ember gently touched my elbow.

“Given that the wolf was seemingly under the influence of magic, it is best we dose you with fae potions, in case the spell is something that can affect you,” she said.

I flattened my lips. “Yeah, okay, that’s a good point. Most fae magic doesn’t affect me, but I can’t recognize the magic used, so I get it.” My shoulders briefly slumped in defeat before I straightened up and smiled at Ember. “Right. Then let’s go!”

Ember smiled encouragingly, and beckoned for me to follow her.

As we strode off in the direction of the paved road I’d taken to get to the edge of town, I heard Mayor Pearl speak.

“*Magic?* There is *magic* involved? That’s it—give me a detailed explanation now, or I’ll call the chief of police here!”

Given that her husband was the chief of police and there was a grand total of roughly a dozen officers, it wasn’t the biggest of threats. But Mayor Pearl had perfected the art of figuratively running the wolves down.

“Hector will explain it all,” Greyson promised—likely to the displeasure of his beta. “If you’ll excuse me...” He picked up the dead wolf with one hand—as if he was a sack of potatoes—then walked off, leaving Hector to deal with Mayor Pearl.

“Of course, Mayor Pearl. It was Phillipa Sabre who saw it first...”

That night I filled out the dozens of forms the Curia Cloisters sent me about the incident—all under Hector’s watchful eyes. But I went to work like normal the following day, and I was feeling pretty good when I left the welcome center at five.

*I’m glad I went to work today. It made life feel normal.*

I swung my backpack as I made my way through downtown. Rather than passing through the park and heading for the most direct route home, I ducked behind City Hall and took a paved trail that started there.

The sky was still a glorious blue, and while the shadows were starting to stretch out, the sun didn’t show even a hint of setting.

*I love long summer days. They’re the best!*

I was almost to the end of the public walking paths/trails, when I felt a spot tingle in my hunter senses.

Overly cautious from the previous day’s encounter, I yanked a dagger from my backpack with one hand and grabbed my phone with the other. I then whirled around, straining my ears for any sounds.

A wolf crashed through the underbrush, popping out on the path.

I was surprised—and increasingly more worried—when I saw who it was: Alpha Dolph of the Low Marsh Pack.

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## Chapter 4

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### *Pip*

**T**all but greasy looking with sweat slicked hair and an untrimmed beard, Dolph was a wilder breed of werewolf, and didn't strictly follow human rules of hygiene like the Northern Lakes wolves did.

The Low Marsh Pack lived in a rural patch of land with no small cities, and they kept to themselves—which was probably all around better for the health of the humans in the area.

“Phillipa Sabre,” he growled.

I raised my dagger as I flicked past the lock screen of my phone. “Alpha Dolph. What do you want?”

Dolph chuckled—which sounded almost like a rusty growl. “Easy, hunter.” He held his hands up. “I’m unarmed. Just like my wolf was that you killed.”

“I stopped him from harming kids,” I said. “He got himself killed when he wouldn’t stop.”

“As if a few kids are worth more than a werewolf.” Dolph narrowed his beady brown eyes. “Humans replicate like rabbits. They would hardly miss a child or two. Werewolves, however—each one is precious. But I suppose you wouldn’t understand that, *hunter*.”

“You’re not just insane, you’re wrong in so many ways.” I flipped the grasp on my dagger so it was positioned in a way that I could throw it and easily nail him. “Why are you here, Dolph?”

“To warn you.” Dolph strolled closer. “You’d best leave my wolves alone.”

“Sure. Make sure they don’t try to snack on children and stay out of Northern Lakes territory and we won’t have a problem.” I pulled my arm back into a clear throwing position as I raised my hand with my cellphone, my thumb hovering over Hector’s spot in my contacts.

Dolph shook his head. “It’s too late for that, *hunter*. You killed my wolf.”

“As you’ve previously stated.”

“There *will* be *payback* for his death,” Dolph said.

I narrowed my eyes. “Get lost, Dolph. Leave Timber Ridge. *Now*.”

Dolph, surprisingly, retreated a few steps. “Just remember, Phillipa Sabre. You can’t always hide behind that Alpha of yours.”

“He’s not *my* Alpha!”

Dolph was already halfway down the path. “Watch your back, hunter. You never know when you’ll become the hunted.”

He dove into the underbrush, and was louder than a pack of wild squirrels as he charged out of the area.

I sheathed my dagger only after I felt him fade from my hunter senses and couldn’t hear him anymore. “What an absolute loon.” I shook my head as I typed out a text to Hector—informing him of the conversation so he could make a public memo for the Pack.

I wasn’t too worried that Dolph was going to try something.

He wasn’t smart, but he wasn’t *that* stupid that he’d try to attack someone on Northern Lakes land. The Pack would eradicate *all* of his wolves.

He likely felt like he had to threaten someone to restore face with his Pack, and since Greyson was the only other one involved in the fight—and threatening him was a death wish—I was the obvious choice.

Still, Dolph was crazy enough that he might try something stupid, so I kept my senses extended when I finally started down the path again.

I had to get home to feed Princess and Prince—the overweight and choosey cats Mama Dulce and Papa Santos left behind that I took care of in their honor.

But I’d run out of popcorn the night before, and I knew the lodge snack room had several boxes of the microwavable stuff, so I was first heading

there as a pitstop to grab some, and maybe swipe a bottle of wine while I was at it. (I considered it my fee for getting smothered in werewolf hugs all the time, and after my chat with Dolph, I needed it.)

“After I get popcorn and wine, I have to clean the litter box and check the cat food—I think I’ll need to order more food from the vet by Friday...” I ticked my to do list off on my fingers as I rounded the bend in the paved path that popped me out in the meadow the giant Pack lodge was built in.

The Pack lodge looked like what I imagine you would get if you gave a ski lodge enthusiast an unlimited construction budget to work with.

Clocking in at three stories high—if you included the walkout finished basement—the lodge was built into a hill and constructed out of lumber, stone, and enough giant windows to outfit a greenhouse.

It was beautiful and functional, as it operated as a kind of home base for the Northern Lakes Pack with an immense kitchen and a few offices for the higher ups like Greyson and Hector. But even though the building was pretty new, none of the packmates lived in the place. Everyone had little cottages within a several mile radius of the lodge—including me.

“But for now, popcorn! To the snack room!” I pumped my arm in the air and spun in a circle like a drunken butterfly.

I was practically tap dancing my way down the paved path that led to the lodge—popcorn was an occasion worthy of a tap dance—and waved to Young Jack, Amelia, and Noah who were sitting on the front porch, playing on their phones.

“Hey, Pip,” Young Jack called, not even looking up from his phone.

“You can’t go inside,” Amelia told me. She was going to be a junior in high school when it started up in the fall, and both of her parents were werewolves—like Young Jack’s parents.

I paused, my hand on one of the door handles. “Why not?”

“Pack meeting,” Noah said. In his early thirties, Noah was a townie—that’s what the wolves called the humans who lived in Timber Ridge. He’d been dating a werewolf named River since I had been adopted. He leaned back in his chair and lifted an eyebrow at me. “They said it was important and private. Even you wouldn’t be allowed to frolic around in there during a time like that.”

“Huh.” I twisted my lips, trying to figure out how to say, ‘I don’t care, I want popcorn,’ without offending him.

As a hunter, I was in a weird position. I didn't quite fit in with the wolves—I wasn't nearly strong enough, and I couldn't keep up with their insane stamina. But I also didn't fit in with the humans who weren't considered Pack, but were treated as a sort of special, protected group of their own by the wolves, because I trained with the wolves a few times a week and was included on any business that had to do with supernaturals since I was one as well.

My lack of a place had been less obvious when Mama Dulce and Papa Santos were alive, but since their deaths I'd become more and more aware of the "between" spot that I inhabited.

"Well, I just want popcorn. And wine," I said. "I'm sure it's fine."

"I doubt that," Noah said. "I've been around just as long as you, and they said no to me."

"It's Pip." Young Jack shot Noah a look of irritation. "They'll be fine with her wandering in."

"Why? She's not a werewolf," Noah said.

Amelia rolled her eyes. "Yeah, but she's a supernatural. She's different from us. Go on in, Pip. Grab me a snack while you're in there?"

I winked and yanked the front door open. "You got it!"

I slipped into the lodge, glancing at the great room—by far the largest room of the lodge as it had been built to hold Pack meetings. Only wolves who lived in the area attended—there were about fifty or sixty wolves that made up the core of the Pack. There were also fringe members who lived on the borders of the Northern Lakes' vast territory, and a few wolves that had been sent out—like Chase—to live as representatives in different cities.

I didn't know the exact count, but I was pretty sure the Pack had a little over a hundred packmates total—though they rarely, if ever, all met in person. Usually meetings just involved the core members, like now.

I could see backs crowding the room entrance, so I turned in the opposite direction, intending to slink my way to the kitchen.

"Pip?"

*I wonder if I can pretend not to hear? I can be in and out and not hear anything.*

I tried to pick up my pace, but Ember called out to me. "It's no use running, Pip. We can smell you."

Almost to the huge granite island counter of the kitchen, I hurried with the hope of snacks. “I just want to grab a bag of microwavable popcorn and some wine,” I said. “I’ll be gone in a second.”

A few murmurs escaped the great room, and then a voice lined with power called out to me. “Pip, join the meeting.”

Greyson—like all Alphas—had a unique set of powers. He was intimidating and more physically advanced, obviously, but he also had a presence that made others pay attention to what he said, and he could even *order* wolves to do things that they would compulsively follow. Most Alphas had weak abilities at best, but Greyson could wield his like a weapon—if he wanted to.

I felt the thrum of Greyson’s power. But while I could feel it wash over me, and the compulsion to obey Greyson was a brush of silk at the back of my neck, I could easily shrug it off—unlike all other shifters and humans.

Another score for hunter powers!

“No thanks!” I made it to the cabinet above the microwave and got a whole box of popcorn—a full five satchels were inside! “Wouldn’t want to impose on you all. I’ll just—” I swung around and walked face first into Greyson’s rock-hard chest.

Greyson smiled at me—not the polite one he took pains to show the Pack, but one that was a little too concentrated in his eyes and showed a touch too much teeth.

*Time to abandon the wine—when he looks like this it’s never good for me.*

I shook my box at him. “Thanks, I’ll be leaving now.”

*Amelia will just have to live without snacks—or I’ll give her a bag and she can make it at her parents’ cottage.*

Greyson dropped an arm over my shoulder and spun me around with him. “There’s been a change in your plans, Lady Hunter,” he said. “You get to suffer with the rest of us.”

I tried to dig my heels in, but Greyson towed me along to the great room as if I weighed as much as a doll. “This is why I don’t like you,” I growled at him.

Greyson laughed—a low, throaty sound that was almost musical. “I’ve always known not everyone will recognize my genius.”

“I hope you get sprayed by a skunk at the next Pack run,” I grumbled.

Greyson's grin grew, and he tapped his fingers on my shoulder.

As soon as we hit the entrance, however, he removed his arm and his playful smirk morphed into a serious expression worthy of an Alpha.

Meanwhile, I tried to find some place I could sit where I could sink into the background—and maybe duck out early.

The great room was two stories high, with a fireplace big enough for me to stand in, and huge windows that I knew personally were a pain in the butt to clean as they stretched from the floor to the ceiling. The base floor was crowded with chairs, and there was a large balcony with wooden banisters that was thick with werewolves—all in their wolf form.

As I stepped into the room, all the werewolves sitting on the ground floor turned around to stare at me, making an intimidating sea of yellows, ambers, greens, and blues as their eyes glittered in the summer sunlight.

"Pip! Over here!" Wyatt called.

I scanned the crowd of werewolves sitting in the chairs, and it took a moment before I spotted Aeris wildly waving to me before he gestured to the empty chair next to him.

*No leaving early from that spot. But sitting with friends is a good substitute.*

I awkwardly waved my microwavable popcorn box at him, then started picking my way through the rows, making my way toward the duo.

"Why should *she* attend this meeting?"

I glanced up, not at all surprised to recognize my personal naysayer, Rio.

Rio was Hector's younger brother, but he and I had never gotten along well. He'd been wary of a hunter getting adopted into the Pack, and in his defense I hadn't made it any easier on him, as I'd ripped tufts of his fur out of his wolf coat when I was first told I had to practice fighting against wolves and he was my fighting partner. (The Northern Lakes Pack was big on training like Spartans, which could be semi traumatic to a twelve-year-old hunter and the unfortunate wolf she learned to fight on.)

Rio was also big on absolute loyalty to the Alpha, which also made us natural adversaries.

"I actually agree with him," I said. "Why am I here? Isn't this meeting for Pack business?"

Rio's nose twitched—likely he didn't know if he should be pleased or disgusted that we were on the same side for once. "If you agree, why did you come in here?" He bared his teeth at me as I scooted down the row, heading in his direction.

I stopped halfway down the aisle, awkwardly hovering over the knees of another wolf. "You're right. All I wanted was popcorn." I swung around, but Greyson was waiting at the entrance of the aisle.

"Not today," he said. His power filled the room in a warm blanket, and all the wolves on the main floor slumped a little deeper in their chairs.

*There goes that argument.*

I'd oppose Greyson, but when he was really set on something, even I knew enough to roll with it. The guy was ridiculously overpowered—I had no chance of winning if he felt strongly about something.

"Okay then." I resumed scooting down the aisle, smiling extra wide when I reached Rio. I made sure to pat him on the knee as I passed.

It would aggravate him later, but at the moment I could tell my puppy pheromones had him because he was trying—but failing—to scowl, and resorted to stiffly shaking his head to hide the instant relaxation my pheromones provided.

His girlfriend, Aspen, nodded to me as I scooted past her, a slight quirk of amusement in the tilt of her lips. "Hello, Pip."

"Hey, Aspen. Still with this jerk, huh?" I asked.

Rio glared at me, but Aspen chuckled, her voice low and pleasant. "I promise you he's actually quite charming."

I snorted. "Yeah, he seems like a dead ringer for the princely type. But as long as you're happy!" I winked, and Aspen gave me one last smile before shifting her attention back to Hector.

Aspen had been a member of the Pack for about two years. She was actually the niece of Harka, the Midwest Pre-Dominant, a.k.a. the top wolf in the region. She'd come to the Northern Lakes Pack to be turned into a wolf, however, because the Pack apparently had one of the best survival rates in the country.

It was fairly rare that a werewolf was born—most of them had to be changed, like vampires. Changing was a painful process that involved multiple werewolf bites, and supposedly only a fourth of the applicants who tried it survived, and only a fraction of them actually became wolves.

(I say supposedly because I'd never seen the Northern Lakes Pack lose someone in the process. They didn't always become werewolves, but they'd always survived. But, whatever. Maybe the water here was magical or something.)

Harka had asked the Pack to take Aspen on and change her because of this survival rate. She was supposed to stay with the Pack for a year or so while she learned how to control her werewolf strength and all the perks that came with her supernatural status, but then she and Rio started dating, and she'd decided to stay with the Pack.

I finally reached Wyatt and Aeric and thumped down in the thinly padded folding chair.

"It is fitting that you are here," Hector, standing at the front of the room, announced over the silence of the Pack. "We're discussing what's ahead for the Pack due to the aftermath of the feral wolf nearly entering town." He turned a paper in his packet and looked like he really wanted to make a PowerPoint presentation on the topic, but hadn't had the time. "Given your role in the incident—and that you are a supernatural as well—it's good you're attending." He glanced at Greyson, who sauntered up the narrow aisle the wolves had left, and came to a stop next to him.

Greyson flicked his golden eyes at Hector, who slightly inclined his head as he backed up a step or two.

When Greyson shifted from an amused stance with his hands tucked into the pockets of his pants, to a more formal stance with his hands clasped behind his back, the entire atmosphere of the room shifted.

The wolves leaned forward, their eyes set on their leader as they listened with their whole bodies.

"A group of hunters have been dispatched by the Midwest Regional Committee of Magic," Greyson said. "The feral wolf's death was ruled unavoidable given the circumstances, and Pip and I are mostly cleared. However, the Regional Committee of Magic decided an official investigation was necessary due to the unfamiliar magic we could sense on the wolf."

He paused, but no one moved. No one besides me, anyway. I juggled my box of microwavable popcorn from one hand to the other and shifted in my chair—which made a very loud, grating noise on the wooden floor.

Greyson flicked his eyes in my direction, a glitter of amusement briefly shining there.

*It's so aggravating that he seems to find whatever I do funny, while I find most everything he does annoying!*

"The hunters are all from the Fletching family, and they'll be led by Amos Fletching. He's the older brother of the family's leader, Carianne Fletching." Greyson peeled his eyes away from me to look out over the Pack. "They will arrive tomorrow. They will not interfere with Pack business—they're here to track magic. If asked, you should answer any questions they might have, but avoid them if possible."

From the way Hector was watching me, I was sure that last line went for me, too.

I could handle that. While the hunters would need to question me about what I'd observed, it was pretty unlikely their investigation would lead them to the Timber Ridge Welcome Center.

"Any questions?" Greyson asked. "Concerns or statements?"

No one moved a muscle—of course.

I wracked my brain for anything I could say—it'd be good for Greyson and the Pack as long as I didn't push them too far.

Since Mama Dulce and Papa Santos had died, my position in the Pack was...uncertain. Puppy pheromones or not, things wouldn't go well for me if I pushed too much.

*It's all about balance.*

"If the wolf's death was unavoidable, why is the committee sending hunters?" I asked. "Wizards or fae would be a better choice given that they are far better at sensing magic. Even a third-party werewolf would be a better choice."

Hector smiled benignly as he casually crossed his arms so his hands cradled the elbow patches of his suitcoat. "Hunters were chosen given the delicate nature of the events."

*There's something they're not saying...*

"Delicate?" I asked. "I'd think they'd want the best on hand, not passable magic trackers."

"The feral werewolf was from the Low Marsh Pack." Again, when Greyson spoke every eye in the room turned to him, but Greyson was studying me, his eyelids at half mast, which would normally make a person

look dopy, but he carried it off with his model looks. Figures. “Alpha Dolph is irate over his death. The hunters are to placate him, so he’ll let the matter drop.”

I frowned—concerned about this detail. Because Dolph didn’t seem anywhere near placated when I’d seen him just a bit ago. “And if he isn’t placated?”

Greyson leisurely tilted his head back in a relaxed look of absolute assurance. “Then we’ll teach him to be placated.”

I couldn’t really say anything to that. Werewolf Packs would frequently work together, but when a less powerful Pack did something stupid—like, for instance, try to pick fights with a much larger and stronger Pack—there was often some correction involved.

I swear, sometimes living among werewolves felt like being perpetually stuck in a clique-y high school.

“Sounds fun,” I said.

Greyson’s smile was more than a little dangerous, and Hector speedily took over the meeting.

“The hunters will be staying in town...” Hector continued.

I only half listened as I clutched my box of popcorn.

*Hunters, huh? Seems to me things are going to get a little spicy around here.*

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I leaned against the tree trunk as well as I could as I looked through the scope of my rifle. I mentally focused on the bullseye target I was aiming at while I tried to keep my balance so I didn’t fall out of the tree I was perched in.

I am inherently lazy. I didn’t like training, and I really didn’t like sweating. But the werewolves dragged me into combat training no matter how I felt on the issue. If I wanted a fighting chance at surviving their training methods—which could get pretty rough—I had to practice my hunter skills separately.

Typically hunters worked in teams—that’s why you had hunter family lines—and each hunter had a specialized role. But since I was a sole hunter,

I'd had to pick up skills that were focused on things that could boost my survivability, like climbing—since wolves can't climb—swimming—since they aren't the best swimmers though they'll do it in a pinch—and the use of silver blades and sniper rifles.

Give me a sniper rifle—or really, my fae-engineered sniper rifle that was a different creation entirely and could only loosely be called a rifle given that I needed to have special bullets for it, and not a real sniper rifle as it didn't have the range those did because I predominantly used it in a *forest*—and a tree, and that was the safest way for me to fight.

Of course, the wolves didn't let me bring my guns with too often when we were 'training'. (Or they would, but you cannot lug a sniper rifle on your shoulder when you've got wolves chasing you eight miles through the forest.)

I set my back against the tree trunk—precariously positioned as I was, I had to, or the recoil of my gun would send me toppling out of my tree.

Once I was sure I wasn't going to fall, I switched off the safety and took my shot.

My fae-engineered rifle recoiled, kicking into my shoulder, but I'd been braced properly for it. I dug out the tiny set of binoculars I carried with me when doing my training so I could see how my shot was on my target.

Silvery paint splattered the ring just outside the bullseye—that was another reason my fae-made rifle was odd; it could only shoot two kinds of bullets: silver ones, and capsules that were basically a cross of BB pellets and paintballs. (The fae had been pretty grumpy I'd asked for that modification, which would have been impossible outside the use of magic. But I needed rounds that were safe for me to shoot off for practice given that a werewolf could randomly wander through.)

*Not a bad shot. Not wonderful, but close enough to get the job done.*

Two wolves appeared in the green of the forest like shadows, silent and deadly.

I held my breath, until I recognized the pair.

The taller but leaner one with a reddish coat and a small black mask that covered his face and muzzle was Aeric, while the more muscled one with the dark brown fur and a hint of rust undercoat with a spray of gray on his chest was Wyatt.

They ghosted their way up to the small river that flowed through the forest and connected to one of the nearby lakes.

The river had carved its way through the ground, so it didn't have proper banks but rather steep cliffs that dumped into the wide stream.

Wyatt and Aeric didn't even pause. They jumped the river, the muscles of their front legs and hind quarters visibly bunching through their thick coats, and landed with a predatory grace that was almost ominous.

It was an impressive leap I never would have attempted, but hey, that's werewolf athleticism.

Now on the same side of the river as me and my target, Wyatt raised his nose as he sniffed, but I was downwind from them and up a tree, so he'd have a difficult time finding me.

Aeric slipped through the underbrush and found my target, investigating the silvery paint with his nose.

He made a noise of distaste, then pulled back, and started looking up in the trees.

I flicked the safety on my rifle, then nestled it across my lap. "Is something wrong?"

Wyatt saw me first and howled a hello before he triggered a shift, starting the transformation back to his human shape.

Shifting can be painful—they're literally changing the structure of their bones and muscles, after all—and it typically takes between forty seconds to a minute.

That might sound fast, but it's really dangerous considering it leaves the werewolf—or shifter—completely helpless, and gives an enemy plenty of time to kill them.

Greyson had the fastest shift I'd ever seen, and it still took him nearly thirty seconds to transform.

I secured my rifle to the harness I'd specially made for it and swung it over my back before I started shimmying my way down the tree.

Wyatt had almost finished shifting by the time I got down there, and Aeric had started the process, so I let them finish as I traipsed through the forest to more closely inspect my target.

"Ugh, I always feel like I need an ice bath after a shift." Wyatt groaned and popped something in his neck as he stood up, brushing dead leaves off his bare knees.

“It sounds painful enough to need one.” I turned in his direction, and was secretly grateful that Mayor Pearl had the temperament of a bulldog, as it meant I didn’t have to worry about mentally scarring myself.

Because Mayor Pearl had leveled huge fines against the Pack for indecent exposure every time they transformed in public—all shifters shifted back to their human forms in the buff; it made winter supremely unpopular with some of them—the Northern Lakes Pack had been forced to come up with a solution for the problem.

The fae engineer that had made my rifle also did some work for the wolves. She’d created thin, gold bracelets all the wolves wore that, when they shifted from wolf to human, triggered a cloth spell that covered the most important bits—at least the ones that would get them fined by Mayor Pearl.

For the female wolves that meant these sack-like shapes that could technically be defined as dresses, but were really baggy, and basically existed just so they could walk themselves to one of the clothes drop-off points without getting fined.

For male wolves, there was a pretty wide variety given that the fae had done a lot of experimenting when she first made the bracelets.

Wyatt puffed up his bare chest as his covering—a blue kilt—flapped a little in the breeze. “Nothing like a run through the woods to pump you up!”

“Yeah.” Aeric tried stretching out his hamstring, which yanked the hem of his kilt tight. “I guess.”

“If you’re not careful you’re going to bust your kilt again, and the fae engineer told you next time you did that she’d engineer it to have roses and kittens,” I reminded him.

Aeric propped his hands on his hips. “Excuse me, I am not wearing a *kilt*. This is clearly a *skort*, thank you!” He yanked up the front flap to show me the shorts the skirt-part hid.

“I didn’t really need the visual, thanks,” I said.

“That doesn’t matter,” Aeric said. “My skort cost me so much more than the basic kilt, I’m going to make sure I get my money’s worth out of every one of them! And I’ve decided I don’t care about that fae’s threat. Shania told me she thinks I’d look good in roses and kittens!”

Wyatt rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah.”

“She’s a good and supportive girlfriend,” Aeric continued.

“We know—you tell us that *every day*,” Wyatt said.

“You’re just jealous you don’t have a girlfriend,” Aeric said.

“True.” Wyatt leaned up against a young tree, which groaned ominously under the pressure of his strength. “I joined two dating apps, and I’m still not having any luck. I hope it’s just my profile, and not me?”

“It’s your profile,” Aeric said with confidence. “You are one cool wolf. Whoever you date will be lucky to have you!”

“Thanks, man.”

“Don’t mention it!”

While Aeric and Wyatt exchanged manly hugs, I peeled my target off the tree I’d attached it to, used to the ways of their bromance.

I’d been friends with them pretty much since I’d arrived in Timber Ridge when I was twelve, but it wasn’t until Greyson became Alpha and the previous Alpha’s daughter, my best friend Lynn, left the Pack with her parents that we became better friends.

“You know, if you’re desperate, you could date Pip,” Aeric offered.

“*Desperate?*” I spun around to glare at the pair.

Wyatt grimaced. “Yeah, sorry, no, I’m not that bad off.”

“Hey! That’s mean!” I folded my target up and prowled up to the pair.

*That’s it. Next time they make me go into Howl-In Café to get their coffee drinks, I’m getting them decaf!*

“Sorry, Pip. You’re great and all,” Wyatt said. “You just...have that dog vibe.”

“You do,” Aeric agreed. “I don’t know if it’s because your pheromones make you just so cute we want to ruffle your hair, or if it’s like a self-defense aura unique to hunters. But you just have that...*feel*. The same way Greyson has that Alpha vibe!”

“Yeah,” Wyatt said. “It’s a feeling that makes us want to hang out with you, play with you, and have fun. But, like...not at all romantically appealing.”

“Gee,” I wryly said. “Thanks.”

Their words might sound mean, but it didn’t affect me too much. I’d been told I had a dog-like vibe since around the time I turned sixteen. It put a real cramp on my dating life.

“Oh, that is a good way to frame it, Wyatt. You might not be able to get a girlfriend, but at least you haven’t been outright rejected like Pip a dozen

times because you have a dog vibe.” Aeric patted Wyatt on the shoulder.

“It wasn’t a dozen times!” I snapped. “It wasn’t even half a dozen!”

“It started with Chase, right?” Wyatt asked. “You never even told him that you liked him, he just told you that you had the same aura as a Pomeranian. That was the start of the Pomeranian Puppy Power-up.”

Chase was an extremely handsome werewolf who was about ten years older than me, was serious, respectful, and awesome. He currently lived outside of the Pack and worked for the fae Queen of the Night Court.

I’d had the biggest unrequited crush on him as a teenager, but when he told me I was like a Pomeranian, that had pretty much crushed any romantic feelings I had for him.

“There was also Cliff, Trev, and Weslan. They all said you had that dog vibe, too, so while they loved to hang with you, romance was off the table as the friend-feel is strong with you,” Wyatt recited.

*Ahh, yes. That hadn’t done much to help my confidence, either.*

My romantic life was in shambles. Or, really, I hadn’t ever *had* one.

I’d gone on a few dates with some human guys in college, but we never clicked because, as a hunter living in a supernatural community, I was just so different. I had very few shared experiences that would let me relate to a human.

“You know,” Aeric thoughtfully rubbed his chin, “I think it’s really admirable that you’re so happy being single. Really. I don’t know how you’d find anyone to date, anyway, so it’s great that you can find happiness by yourself. As a single person. With no one to love you.”

“I could go for another round of practice,” I cheerfully said. “Why don’t you two just stand there so I can aim at you?”

Wyatt cringed. “Too far?”

“More than a bit, yes,” I said.

“Sorry,” Aeric said. “We don’t mean it. I mean, you’re totally adored by the Pack, and you’re a blast to hang with. Maybe you should try dating a townie!”

“She confessed to one two years ago, remember? I think his name was Todd.” Wyatt nudged his friend. “He said he wasn’t interested in someone who was physically stronger than him.”

“Oh, I forgot *that* guy,” Aeric growled. “He’s just chauvinistic and obviously weak willed. Only insecure guys can’t handle that sort of thing.

Don't listen to him, Pip. We think it's awesome!"

Despite my irritation with the pair, I laughed. "Thanks? I think?" I said. "So was there a reason you guys came to find me, or did you just want to discuss Wyatt's love life?"

They'd done that before—find me just to talk about dating dramas.

Wyatt squinted at the forest canopy that stretched over our heads while I swatted at a mosquito. "Why *did* we come find you?" He swiveled to face Aeric. "Was it to tell her about the Pack run?"

"Nah, she can't come on the run," Aeric said. "Sorry, Pip."

"I'm used to it," I comfortably said.

I was allowed to see more of the werewolves than the humans attached to the Pack—including their own kids—but there were some hard boundaries they held, that kept me on the outside.

It was something I'd made my peace with ages ago, and it helped me with my own boundaries. A lot of my life was spent saying goodbye—first to my parents, then Mama Dulce and Papa Santos, then finally with Alpha Hudson and Lynn, who had been a second family to me. Alpha Hudson and Lynn were still alive. They'd just moved away thanks to Greyson and his future career in politics.

*The distance between the Pack and me makes it safer. There's so much less heartache for me.*

I was better off with relationships that were fun, but didn't go so painfully deep—like my friendship with Wyatt and Aeric.

Aeric straightened a pleat of his skort. "I remember! We came here because we're supposed to go get ice cream with Shania in an hour, and we wanted to invite her."

Wyatt snapped his fingers. "That was it! You want ice cream? I'll pay!"

"Yeah, sounds fun. I have to clean my gear first, though." I held my rifle up and scrutinized it, barely noticing when I felt another werewolf pop into range of my hunter senses—it happened all the time on Pack land.

"Sounds great," Aeric said. "We'll go find Shania and meet you—" Aeric froze, and Wyatt tensed up.

*That has to mean the werewolf is—*

A huge white wolf appeared—Greyson.

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## Chapter 5

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### *Pip*

**A**s a wolf, Greyson was the largest in the Pack, nearly reaching my chest when he was just standing. He was a pristine shade of white—yes, his name is Greyson, but he’s solid white, I think it’s hilarious—and he had giant paws, long legs, and golden eyes hooded with a rim of black to make them extra bright in the starkness of his white fur.

As he did in his human body, Greyson oozed power, and was able to influence his packmates whatever his shape. As he sauntered through the forest undergrowth, Aeric and Wyatt bowed to him.

“Alpha Greyson,” they said.

Greyson’s gold eyes lingered on them for a moment, before he shifted his attention to me.

“Hey,” I said. I have such a flair for drama!

Greyson sat down and stared at his two minions.

“Yes, Alpha,” Wyatt said after a moment. “We will.”

I licked my finger and tried to buff out a smudge on the barrel of my rifle, used to hearing the awkward half-conversations.

Packmates could talk to one another in wolf, without the use of spoken words. Papa Santos had tried explaining to me that it wasn’t mind speaking to one another—words weren’t exchanged. He described it as an understanding of each other’s spirits.

Sounded spooky.

I didn't know that I really wanted everyone "understanding" my spirit, so I was glad to chalk it up to another werewolf skill hunters didn't have.

"We'll meet you outside Howl-In Café, okay, Pip?" Wyatt said.

I tuned back into the conversation. "Yeah, okay, sounds great. It'll take me about half an hour."

"That's fine, we'll wait. See you then!" Wyatt waved before he and Aeris bowed to their Alpha, then trotted barefoot through the forest.

"You think we should transform back into our wolf forms?" Wyatt asked.

"Sure, but we have to stop by my house, then, to pick up clothes. Last time we stopped at the clothes drop off point, the only thing left there were those gaudy Hawaiian shirts Original Jack loves to wear, and I have a thing against flamingos."

"Got it."

I would have laughed at Aeris's comment, but I was too busy wrinkling my forehead at Greyson.

He stayed near me—though he was standing now—and made no move to leave me.

I awkwardly twitched my gun. "Have a good night, Greyson."

Greyson stared at me with his overwhelming, golden eyes, and I saw his tail twitch slightly from side to side.

It was just slightly back and forth, but for a werewolf of his status, it was the equivalent of a dog wildly wagging his tail.

*Oh. Oh no. I know what that means.*

"Nope!" I bolted, skittering a trail through the woods, heading for my cottage—where I could slam the door on his whiskered face.

I didn't hear Greyson behind me—but all that meant was that he was taking precious time to transform into a human body. I had about a thirty second head start if that was the case—thirty seconds, because of course Greyson had to be the fastest at shifting from human to wolf and back that I'd ever seen!

I went for speed rather than stealth or any attempt at covering my trail. With this little of a head start speed was all I had, and there was no point in trying to climb a tree because Greyson would be human—

Greyson stepped out in front of me in his human form, shirtless and wearing black pants courtesy of the extra expensive fae bracelet clasped

around his wrist.

“Running away? Careful, Pip. I’ll think you don’t like me much.” His voice was throaty with a slight rasp to it that made me twitch my shoulders back.

“You shouldn’t have to think I don’t like you, you should *know*,” I said.

Before I could say more, he hit me with the full brunt of his Alpha powers.

I gritted my teeth as the pressure to fall to my knees was overwhelming to the point where I could barely see anything but his gold eyes.

I swear I could feel teeth on my neck, before my hunter magic kicked in and I shrugged his powers off.

I could still sense them—and even feel them to a certain extent—but the compulsive desire to do whatever he said wasn’t there.

Most of the time Greyson kept his Alpha spirit tightly coiled up—he was powerful enough that if he let it go free all the time most of the Pack would have a hard time *moving* around him. But whenever it was just the two of us, he liked to let loose.

I didn’t know if he just liked to test me to see if one day he’d be able to get me, or if he just liked to use me as the wolf equivalent of a squeaky toy to relieve stress, but he’d been battering me with his powers since the month we met.

I held up my rifle. “I’m armed.”

“Maybe if you could load it faster than I could get you, I’d be more cautious.” Greyson sauntered around me, his shoulder brushing my shoulders until he was walking side by side with me. He delivered a slight hip bump that set me moving again, and he easily kept pace with his longer legs as I trundled through the forest. “But using a rifle to attack in close range is beside the point. I wanted to say that you did well against the Low Marsh wolf.”

I almost tripped on a tree root, when I suspiciously peered up at him.

The compliment could have been an example of his twisted personality, but when he glanced at me, his golden eyes weren’t hooded with mischief as they usually were when we were alone.

“Thanks. But as rare as your praise is, I don’t know that it’s true. I’m realistic enough to know I was in a pretty bad spot.”

Greyson yawned, casually flexing as his powers saturated the area enough to choke a wolf. “You would have survived. He was close to bleeding out before I killed him.”

We walked up to a tree that had split halfway up its trunk and fallen over. I ducked under it, but Greyson—without breaking his pace—grabbed the trunk and casually leaped over the top of it.

*This is why I can never win the Pack training sessions!*

“But I did swoop in and save you,” Greyson pointed out as we veered around a bush.

I snorted. “What do you want, a medal ceremony?”

“Ceremonies are boring,” Greyson said. “But I’d take a reward. I accept payments of obvious pandering and weapons.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re the Alpha of this region. Taking care of invaders is your responsibility.”

“And I could say taking care of feral wolves is *your* responsibility, Lady Hunter.” Greyson’s rough voice made me feel more claustrophobic than his actual nearness as his shoulder bumped mine again.

“I’m a certified hunter, but we’re supposed to get permits to eliminate feral wolves.” I chewed on my lip. “Which is why we may get in trouble that I cut him up so badly.”

“True,” Greyson agreed. “If supernaturals are good at anything, it’s focusing on useless politics like paperwork and permits instead of what’s important.”

“Making more money off Pack-owned business?” I wryly asked.

“Yes,” Greyson agreed. “And intervening when supernaturals are about to harm humans—like the Low Marsh wolf was going to harm those kids.”

“That excuse would work if I believed your knight-in-shining-armor-leader act,” I said.

Greyson leaned over so his breath tickled my ear. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He laughed when I veered away from him and raised my shoulder to wipe off my ear.

“You’re just upset that hunters are being sent to investigate the wolf’s death,” I said.

“Now why would I ever be rankled by a thing like investigators mucking around my Pack and stirring up trouble with our humans?”

Greyson's voice went lower with his irritation. "But you're wrong about one thing: I am furious with the Low Marsh wolves—that they let this happen."

The pressure of his power expanded, and I felt it nibble around my knees as the sensation of teeth on my neck grew. "It was bad," I said.

"It's unforgiveable," Greyson said. "The damage it could have caused to our relationship with humans—not to mention the loss of life—could have been irreparable."

He glanced at me, and the pressure lightened. "Lucky for us, our Lady Hunter was on hand. But you aren't skipping around without a care for anyone like you usually do, either. Do you expect trouble with the hunters?"

"Not exactly, but I doubt they're going to be thrilled to see me."

"But you're all hunters. Isn't there a sense of camaraderie?" Greyson asked.

"That I can easily exploit?" I asked, able to guess his reasoning. "No. Particularly since I'm a lone hunter. Typically the families take care of their own. But if things get bad I can contact the Quillons," I said.

The Quillons were a hunter family based in Minnesota. Several of their hunters had been with my parents on the mission they'd died in. They felt bad about it, so they helped me out by providing hunter training, sponsoring my hunter certification, and more. They'd helped me when the rest of the hunter families had abandoned me—no one wanted to take on a hunter kid who would be the successor of a different family and not secure any additional power for them. I guess guilt is a strong motivator.

"We'll try to avoid that kind of extreme situation," Greyson said.

I furrowed my forehead as we reached the edge of the forest. "How is it extreme?"

Greyson stopped at the edge of the forest—not surprising. I could see the lodge from this distance. If he got much closer, every wolf in the lodge was going to drop to their knees from his powers and not know why.

I walked a few more paces to get some space between us—maybe his voice wouldn't affect me as badly, then—and spun around to face him.

Greyson casually scratched his right bicep. "I don't like having to rely on others to take care of Pack issues."

I wagged my rifle at him. "This is a hunter issue, actually."

Greyson arched an eyebrow at me. “How could I forget the Lady Hunter has a fierce, independent streak?” He glanced beyond me, to the Pack lodge, and I felt it when he started to coil up his power. “If they bother you, I imagine you’ll make a pest of yourself.”

“It is a good strategy when you know every bylaw and rule they also have to follow,” I said cheerfully.

“Yeah, sure,” Greyson said. “Let me know if it becomes too much.”

“What could you do?” I took another step or two away to bolster my bravery. “If you mess with hunters, they’ll come down harder on you than they ever would on me.”

Greyson smiled, and his golden eyes almost glowed as the last flicker of his incredible powers brushed against me. “Only if they find out I’ve actually done something.”

He sauntered up to me as I scoffed.

“I hope the Pack one day realizes what a rogue you are.” It took all of my self-control to hold my ground as he swept past me.

His low chuckle snapped at my heels. “If you hope, why haven’t you told them, yet?”

I scowled at his back, switched my grasp on my rifle, and headed to the end of the meadow that had been marked off with two targets for my dagger practice.

*I haven’t told them because they’d never believe me.*

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The bell jingled when I walked through the front door of the welcome center, toting my empty cooler that had contained my lunch, and the frozen chocolate drink I’d bought down at the werewolf-owned Howl-In Café.

“Pip, is that you?” Shania—Aeric’s girlfriend, who also happened to be a townie, and had become a friend of mine, too—called from in the gift shop, which was partitioned off from the welcome center with glass windows.

“Yep!” I tossed my cooler into a nook on the ground, tucked into the giant hexagonal desk I manned for the center.

The desk was cluttered with pamphlets, maps of the area, a jar of wolf cookies—which were actually just sugar cookies we colored green with food dye, but what the humans didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them—and a landline telephone that was older than I was.

“Great! I’ll finish stocking the keychains, and then I’ll be right out,” Shania said.

“Gotcha.” I set my frozen chocolate on my counter, then shook the mouse of the ancient computer I used when I needed to research anything for tourists.

The Timber Ridge Welcome Center operated as part tourism center, part history museum, part gift shop.

There was plenty of information on the town and all the fun that was available via me and the many pamphlets. But the walls were covered with enormous, canvas prints of some of the werewolves in their werewolf forms, and there were metal plaques that described how the Northern Lakes Pack had been established and had partnered with the city by starting so many businesses.

The place smelled a little musty, but in a friendly way—like a library—and I was forever fighting off a fine layer of dust on all wooden surfaces. But there was something homey and warm about it—even though we had the air conditioning blasting because Moira, the werewolf manager, was a tundra wolf and required cold year-round.

Wolf art and knickknacks were everywhere, but the largest piece was a metal wolf statue positioned next to the little raised stage that had a camera stand in front of it.

A cloth banner proclaiming “Pictures with a real werewolf - \$25” hung over the stage, but we typically only ran that stand for a few hours during the weekends, much to the manager’s disappointment.

(Moira had told me numerous times the welcome center and gift shop would make more money than any of the other werewolf owned businesses in Timber Ridge if we just staffed the photo booth every day.)

“Keychains are stocked, so are the frames.” Shania emerged from the clutter of the gift shop, which was stuffed with racks and shelves of wolf-related pins, magnets, keychains, stuffed animals, paintings, postcards, shirts, hats, jackets, toys, candles, beauty products and more.

Shania leaned against one of the window frames and shook her head, making her thick, curly hair that was a lovely shade of brunette with just a hint of russet to it cascade over her shoulder.

Somewhere in the labyrinth of the souvenirs, a werewolf toy released a tinny howl, and Shania's eyebrows dropped low over her eyes. "Whoever thought motion sensing toys were a great idea should get thrown to the wolves."

"I usually take out the batteries whenever we get a new shipment of those," I said. "Or we'll get tourists who will circle the display just to set them off."

"Lowlifes." Shania strolled across the room and leaned against my hexagonal desk, propping her elbows on its worn surface. "Aeric is ditching me tonight—he and Wyatt are going to the track."

"For car races?" I clarified—Aeric was big into cars. When Shania nodded, I continued, "I thought you enjoyed watching him race."

"Yep. I was tempted to go with them, but then I realized, nah, they haven't had a night out with just the two of them in a week. They've gotta keep the spark to their bromance alive," Shania joked.

Shania was the best. She was hilarious to work with, but most importantly, she didn't feel threatened by Aeric's relationship with his packmates—which, usually, humans didn't understand because of how deep packmate relationships went.

Romantic relationships between humans and supernaturals were typically drama filled. It was hard for humans to understand how culturally and physically different supernaturals were, especially when we liked to encourage the fairy tale versions of our races as much as possible.

"I'm sure they'll be very happy together." I hitched my grin so it was a little lopsided as I rested my hands on my desk.

"For sure." Shania stretched her arms behind her back. "I'm starving. Time for my lunch break. Moira is snoozing in her office if you need her. Her snoring is getting louder—I thought we had a weasel in the stock room again for about half an hour until I figured out it was just Moira."

"I have a working theory that Moira is the reason why the werewolves only staff the welcome center with humans—because we can't hear Moira's snoring quite as well."

“I’d believe it.” Shania slapped the desk for emphasis, then leaned over the top. “Could you grab my inhaler for me? It’s in my drawer.”

“Sure. Is your asthma acting up again?” I eyed her for any sign of breathing issues as I flicked open the drawer that she stored all of her personal belongings in, and handed her an inhaler.

I was pretty sure Shania and Aeris were in it for the long haul and would end up together forever. It was beautiful, but in a way a little sad because Shania would never be able to take the risk of trying to change thanks to her asthma.

Any kind of health issue that left you in less-than-perfect health was a huge liability when attempting the change, and almost always ended up in death.

And that meant Aeris was likely to outlive her, and would have a huge part of his life—like Pack runs—that Shania would never be able to join in.

It was a testament to the strength of their relationship that this prospect never seemed to bother either of them, and Shania was beyond understanding and downright amazing when it came to the things she couldn’t do as a human.

“My lungs are fine right now,” Shania assured me. “It’s more for Aeris’s reassurance than mine. I swear, if my breath hitches for even one second he’s all over me thanks to his werewolf hearing. Okay, I’m out.” She angled herself away from me, but before she pushed off the desk the front door opened and the bell hanging above the door gave a very muted but cheerful jangle.

I fixed my smile so it was appropriately welcoming and immovable. “Welcome to Timber Ridge! How can I help you?”

Two gorgeous, long-legged women sauntered deeper into the welcome center. With their perfect complexions, lean builds, and perfectly braided hair—one was a brunette, the other a blond—they looked like a more perfect version of Camper Barbie. I wasn’t all that surprised when they met my gaze with intensely blue eyes.

*Ahhh, yes. Werewolves.*

“On second thought, I think I’ll stay around for this.” Shania cackled as the pair legged it up to my desk.

The brunette eyed me and pursed her lips, looking like a model for an outdoorsman clothes catalogue. “We were told by a friend that we had to

stop at the welcome center when visiting Timber Ridge as soon as we arrived.”

I had a hunch I knew exactly why they were here, but it was bad manners to assume. So I clasped my hands together and did my best imitation of a museum guide. “That’s wonderful to hear! Can I ask what brings you to Timber Ridge?”

The girls exchanged looks. “Alpha Greyson of the Northern Lakes Pack,” they said together.

*It’s always Greyson, always! Even though we have enough handsome male werewolves we could have our own supernatural version of The Bachelor, everyone is just interested in Greyson!*

“Ah.” My smile stayed professional, but I started pawing around in the cavernous underside of my desk. “And why are you here for Alpha Greyson?”

“To see if either of us are his mate,” the blond said.

“Of course, Alpha Greyson and his missing mate are a large draw to Timber Ridge,” I said.

Because Greyson needed *another* thing to make him into an even more desirable guy, he had a mate bond.

Mate bonds were half rooted in werewolf instinct and half rooted in wild magic itself. It was a soul deep connection forged between a werewolf and his/her mate—typically another werewolf, but occasionally mate bonds formed between werewolves and humans, shifters, or other supernaturals. All supernaturals except werewolf hunters, that was.

Mate bonds usually ended up romantic—although there were cases of platonic mate bonds—and emotionally and mentally connected the two mates in a profound way.

Typically, werewolf mate bonds only happened when a werewolf saw his/her mate for the first time, but they could kick in if a werewolf’s mate was put in danger, even if there was a continent between the pair.

It was the latter that had happened to Greyson. He’d arrived to take over the Northern Lakes Pack, and roughly the same time his mate must have been put into a great deal of danger because he felt the bond snap into place...but because he had no idea who she was, he’d been unable to locate her.

An incomplete mate bond could be physically painful, and I was sympathetic enough to say I was sure Greyson suffered as a result of his incomplete bond.

But it also brought in a huge number of female werewolves sniffing around Timber Ridge, desperate to find out if they were his mate. It wasn't surprising, considering he was pretty famous among werewolves due to the size of the Northern Lakes Pack, his power, and the persistent rumor that he was going to become the next Pre-Dominant in the far-off future when Harka chose to retire.

The whole thing struck me as stupid—wouldn't his mate *know* she had a mate, too, as she'd have the incomplete bond as well?

I'd asked that before and been ignored.

*It just makes me gladder I'm a hunter!*

My fingers touched what I'd been looking for—a worn binder filled with crinkled papers. I dragged it out from its shelf and slapped it on the desk.

"Before we discuss Alpha Greyson, there are a couple of things you should know about." I flipped the black binder open and spun it around so the werewolves could read it right-side-up. "These are the rules for visiting Timber Ridge. If you choose to break any of them, you will be escorted out of town, or possibly exiled from Northern Lakes Pack lands for life depending on the severity of the rule you break."

The brunette looked like she wanted to object, but I'd given this talk too many times to let her get a word in.

I jabbed my finger at the top line of the paper. "First rule: you must be kind and courteous to all beings in Timber Ridge but particularly to the humans. The Northern Lakes Pack has invested a lot in this town and their relationship with the humans here. Anything you do to jeopardize that relationship will be punished."

I waited a moment to make sure the pair was still listening before I tapped the next line on my plastic-covered guide. "Next rule: You *must* remain clothed at all times!"

Now it was the blond's turn to frown. "You can't mean we have to have clothes ready when we switch from werewolf to human form?"

"That is exactly what I mean," I said. "We have a mayor as mean as a honey badger. If she sees you streaking she is going to call the chief of

police—her *husband*—and smack you with a ticket and a hefty fine faster than you can blink. And then they’ll require a court appearance for public nudity, and possibly hit you with a second fine if they can find any witnesses in the area at the time of your transformation—believe me. It’s a mess. Save yourself a lot of time and money and stay clothed.”

I tugged two papers free from the back of the binder and slapped them down in front of the werewolves. “Here is a map marked with all the supply drops the Northern Lakes Pack has hidden around town. You are free to use them, but it’s asked that you use the Pack app to update when you take clothes from a location so they can be replaced.”

The brunette squinted. “You have a Pack app?”

“We have two super nerdy wolves who were bored last summer,” I dryly explained. “And here are the directions of how to download the app onto your cellphone.” I dug another sheet of paper out of my binder and placed it in front of them. “Next rule: no howling in Timber Ridge except in cases of emergency, or when the Pack is making a planned public relations event or demonstration. Mayor Pearl has informed the Pack—and fined them, shocking I’m sure based on what you have heard about our mayor—that wolf howling exceeds the number of decibels allowed within city limits...”

Shania listened with rapt attention and a sassy smile as I continued down the list—no catching and/or killing game within city limits, obey traffic laws even while in wolf form, and so on and so forth.

By the time I finished the werewolves were markedly less pouty and more in a state of amiable confusion.

“If you ever feel confused by any of these rules, please stop by the welcome center again, or call us—you’ll find the center’s number listed in the Pack app,” I said.

The women gathered up their papers, wrinkles creasing their foreheads.

*If they were in wolf form, their ears would be twitching,* I thought in amusement.

“Now, as for Greyson.” I shoved my binder aside and pulled out a much slimmer binder. “Let me check his schedule for the day.”

The werewolves perked up, and they leaned closer. “You’ll help us find him?”

“Oh, yes.” My grin unfurled with all the delight I could barely contain.  
“And it will be my pleasure. It’s one of the perks about this job!”

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## Chapter 6

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*Pip*

**D**espite everyone painting Greyson as some sort of tortured soul, the Alpha had little tolerance for everyone's sympathy regarding his missing mate, and nothing—not even I—exasperated him more than visiting werewolves testing to see if they were his lost love.

*It's good for him. It teaches him patience—surely all leaders are always in need of learning to have more patience! Besides, he can't fault me for making sure he's pursued in an orderly fashion that doesn't disrupt city or Pack business.*

It helped that it would usually be the visiting werewolves Greyson would be most irked with—though he was too good at his control to ever lose it in front of them.

“Let me find today's date...” I skimmed through his weekly calendar—I snuck into his office on Sunday evenings when he was always out for a Pack run to make sure I had the most up-to-date version of his schedule that I could get.

Hector had tried locking me out, but it is difficult to keep a determined hunter out of a locked room. Particularly when she's an excellent climber and there is a very handy tree just outside.

(Wolves are excellent at fighting. Subterfuge? Not so much.)

“It is 12:45, which means...” I smoothed out the paper that held the day's schedule. “He is either just wrapping up a meeting with his beta,

Hector, in the Pack lodge—it's the large star here." I pointed to the map that marked out all the clothing drops posted around town, tapping my finger on the giant star seemingly in the middle of the forest.

"Or, if that meeting wrapped up early, it means he's off on his 1:00 time slot, which is...oof. That's his personal training time. Well, that means he'd most likely be in these areas, which are sanctioned for fights." I pointed out a few bare spots among the trees. "I'd head over to the Pack lodge *fast*. He's never happy about his training time getting interrupted." I slapped the binder shut and shoved it into the depths of my desk.

"If you can't find him, come back here or give me a call and I'll help you track him down," I said. "Just remember: *be discreet*." I tapped my fingers on my desktop for emphasis. "If you charge in, he'll have someone escort you away."

*Which would then give them less time to potentially annoy him, and I can't have that!*

"We understand," the brunette said.

"Thank you!" The blond gave me a gorgeous smile before she and her friend hurried off, the doorbell jingling as they sauntered out of the building.

"Good luck!" I called after them just before the door swung shut—it didn't matter, they'd hear me with their superior wolf hearing.

Shania stretched like a cat. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"Of course," I said. "I *want* them to find Greyson. It will annoy him to the point of distraction, and he can't do anything about it."

"I swear you're more invested in Alpha Greyson's love life than he is," Shania said. "But Aeris and Wyatt are just as bad as you, if not worse."

"The Pack is justifiably concerned about it, because Greyson's missing mate means he's in pain—to a certain extent."

"Maybe." Shania dug her keys out of her pockets and jangled them. "I'm going for real, now. I'm supposed to meet Aeris, and I'm late now. Oh, but I have to say I admire how you handle Greyson's dating candidates. I'd never be able to lecture a werewolf about staying clothed, knowing they could just reach across the desk and throttle me."

"It's all in the firmness," I said. "They can smell it when you're scared—your sweat glands give it away. But if you act like you don't care and can keep your cool, you can pull them into your space, and they'll listen."

“I think it’s just because it’s you,” Shania said.

“Not hardly,” I snorted. “Though I will admit my puppy pheromones help. I know as long as I mind my manners, they won’t swat me.”

Shania started walking backward to the door. “See, it’s your can-do attitude like that, that got you stuck working the welcome center where they need someone to mind visiting werewolves when you could be doing so much more!”

My smile turned a little wooden, but I forced a laugh as Shania reached the door. “Yeah, maybe. Have a nice lunch with Aeric!”

I waited until Shania left before dropping my smile.

She couldn’t have known the emotional bomb she’d almost stepped on.

*What was I doing here?*

Given that I lived in that uncomfortable not-Pack-but-not-human state, there was nothing keeping me in Timber Ridge since Mama Dulce and Papa Santos had passed away.

I could go anywhere.

I *should* go anywhere but here. Then I’d maybe have a chance to get a life.

Most annoyingly, I’d tried.

I’d left Timber Ridge first for college, but I transferred to online classes and came back after one semester because I’d been absolutely miserable away from Timber Ridge. I didn’t regret coming back, it was a short time later that Mama Dulce and Papa Santos died, so those last few seasons we had together were that much sweeter since I was home with them.

But I’d tried twice since then to leave Timber Ridge.

Both times I’d been so homesick it *hurt* to breathe, and I’d come back within a week.

*It has to be that I hang out with wolves all the time. They’re such homebodies, they’re wearing off on me.*

I sighed and slipped out from behind my desk, heading to the gift shop.

I needed to buy some of the special bath products the wolves sold in the shop.

The Pack didn’t outright demand I use their products, but they were so sensitive to scents and would endlessly nip at me if I used something that upset their noses. It was just easier to buy the shampoo and conditioner two particularly enterprising packmates made.

(When my hair started going prematurely white—a genetic consolation gift from my dad since I apparently didn’t inherit any magic from his family line—I initially dyed it brown. I never made that mistake again as the entire Pack complained for a solid month about the stench of my hair every time I saw them. That was why I was rocking white hair at the tender age of twenty-three.)

I poked my head into the gift shop, trying to spy out the shelf we had dedicated to bath products, when the door jangled open.

“Pip!” Shania called.

I swung around with concern. “You’re back already? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” Aeric said. He crowded the doorway behind his girlfriend. “But the hunters just got here! You should come check it out!”

“The ones to investigate the Low Marsh wolf’s death?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Shania confirmed. “Don’t you want to see them?”

I hesitated. “We can’t leave the place unstaffed.”

“You can stand outside the door and see the hunters from the front stoop. They parked out on the street. Come on!” Shania darted back through the door, Aeric disappearing with her.

I glanced back at my desk before following after her, squinting when I stepped into the blinding sunlight and the hot, muggy air.

I had to wait for my eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness and shield my eyes before I could see the line of hunter cars—sufficiently cliché black SUVs, four of them.

The hunters, dressed in muted browns and grays with empty holsters strapped to their chests and thighs, piled out of the SUVs. It looked like there were thirteen or fourteen hunters, and they all were of varying age and size, though I was pretty sure they had to be from the same family, because there were similarities in the nuanced way they moved, and their expressions.

“Aeric said they’re led by Amos Fletching. Do you know him?” Shania asked.

My hand strayed to my thigh, reaching for my thigh bandolier of daggers I typically wore when practicing. Of course, it wasn’t there. “Nope. I haven’t been in touch with any hunter families besides the Quillons since I was adopted.”

“Not surprising.” Aeric frowned as he held Shania’s hand and swung it slightly.

I watched the hunters clump together, talking to each other in lowered tones as they looked around main street. The drivers of the SUVs all circled around one man who was about medium height with strong shoulders and deep-set eyes.

“But if I had to guess, I’d say he’s Amos.” I pointed to the guy with deeply set eyes. “It seems like everyone is checking in with him.”

He nodded at something one of the drivers said, then pointed to town hall. Two of the hunters peeled off and headed toward the stately brick building, confirming my guess.

“They’re different from you,” Shania said. “I thought they’d be more like you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Shania jangled her keys. “They have a very different air to them with their matching outfits and teamwork.”

“Hunters are supposed to work in teams,” I said. “It’s the only way you can hunt a wolf without getting yourself killed.”

Aeric raised his eyebrows at me. “You almost took out one. That’s why they’re here.”

“I was lucky help arrived in time, or I probably would have died if I hadn’t been able to lure the wolf back to the trees,” I said.

“I guess.” Shania watched the hunters for a few more seconds. “Or maybe it’s just that you’re different because you were taught by wolves.”

“Yup. That’s gotta be it. We are excellent teachers,” Aeric said.

I ignored his smug tone. “Believe me, I am *all* too aware of my hunter limitations. I am a lot more like other hunters than I am like a werewolf.”

The prickling of my calf where Rio had bitten me good the last time there’d been a Pack hunting session was a reminder of that.

The hunter I’d picked out as Amos Fletching looked up and down main street, his hands settled on his hips with an overconfident expression that made my figurative hackles rise.

He glanced in the direction of the welcome center and studied Shania, Aeric, and me.

“Do you think we should wave?” Shania asked. “It would be neighborly, but he looks almost as sour as Mayor Pearl.”

“I don’t think it’s necessary,” I said.

Amos Fletching slipped his phone out of his pocket and tapped its screen for a few moments, then looked back at me.

He strolled across the street without looking for traffic, adjusting the wide brim of his bush hat as he meandered toward us.

*Oh yeah. This guy definitely thinks he’s the leader, and that he’s here to take over. Good luck, buddy. Timber Ridge is ruled by Greyson. He’ll teach you that in a way you won’t soon forget.*

“Phillipa Sabre?” He studied me with hard eyes that were an unforgiving shade of brown that was so dark they looked like glassy black marbles, then glanced back at his phone.

I straightened, wishing I’d sent Shania and Aeris off on their lunch date. “Yes.”

“I’m Amos Fletching. I’m the leader of the investigation team sent here to look into the death of the wild wolf. I’m accompanied by several members of my hunter family.” He briefly held up his phone, showing the Curia Cloisters crest over what looked like a basic profile of my information, then offered his hand.

Reluctantly I shook his hand. “Welcome to Timber Ridge.”

Amos kept shaking my hand with a grip so firm it was starting to become painful. “You don’t seem that surprised to see me.”

“Alpha Greyson told his Pack you’d be coming.” I yanked my hand, trying to free it from Amos’s grasp.

Aeris must have caught on; he narrowed his eyes at the hunter, but he knew better than to start something in public like this.

Amos squeezed my hand one last time, but I’d almost wiggled free, so he only got my fingertips in his rock-cracking hold before I ripped my hand away entirely. “And that includes you?” he asked.

“Not really, but given that I’m the only other supernatural in Timber Ridge, he chose to inform me as well.”

“Ah.” Amos tilted his head back, so the brim of his hat cast a black shadow over his eyes. “The report said you and Alpha Greyson took down the wolf?”

“Yes.”

“Then you hang around with these wolves?”

Shania shifted uncomfortably as she looked back and forth between the two of us. She leaned into Aeris, who was managing to text on his cellphone with one hand as he held Shania secure with his other hand.

*Probably notifying the rest of the Pack.*

“I do,” I said. “I was adopted by two members of the Northern Lakes Pack.”

Amos rubbed his leathery chin, which was tanned from hours under the sun. “Adopted, huh. Seems unnatural.”

I tilted my head and tapped my cheek. “Really? I’m more interested in learning how this information plays into your investigation.”

“Just trying to get the lay of the land, Hunter Sabre.” His lopsided smile revealed yellowed teeth. “You sworn to a family?”

“I’m the last Sabre, and the last of my mother’s family, the Wards. I have fealty to both families, even though I’m the only one alive of either of them,” I said.

Hunters—active ones, anyway—didn’t have the greatest life expectancy given our line of work. It wasn’t shocking that my parents’ parents had died when I was little, though my lack of relatives was pretty depressing as it meant two hunter families would die out if something happened to me.

*Which can’t happen. I need to pass on these puppy pheromones so my offspring can needle werewolves for generations! Don’t want to let me live the lazy life I want? Fine, I’ll just make sure my offspring are a blight on you for centuries!*

Shania looked distinctly uncomfortable as she clutched her keys, learning more about my sob story childhood than she’d ever imagined, I’m sure. Aeris had heard it before—you couldn’t keep anything secret from the Pack—but I was pretty sure the only reason he hadn’t tugged Shania away was he was live texting the entire Pack whatever Amos was saying.

“Glad to hear you have *some* hunter loyalties,” Amos said. “I’ll be expecting your cooperation on this investigation.”

The oily way he said “cooperation” made my bones shiver, but I forced a smile. “Of course.”

I glanced at Shania and Aeris again, when I happened to see a very welcome force of nature barreling down the sidewalk: Mayor Pearl.

She marched with the pointy shoulder pads of her suitcoat stabbing the air as two hunters—who each had to be fifty years her junior—scrambled

behind her.

“Amos Fletching?” she shouted in her raspy voice.

Amos swiveled to face her, a smile slapped on his hardened face. “Indeed I am. You are—”

“Mayor Pearl. Your cars are parked in metered parking spots, and you haven’t put quarters in the machines. If you don’t add money, I’ll notify the police to have your cars towed.”

“Very well. We’ll get right on that,” Amos smoothly said. He nodded at the two hunters that had trailed Mayor Pearl.

They turned on their heels and ran back to the cars.

“Also, I will require proof of your Concealed Weapons License—from you and *all* of your little minions,” Mayor Pearl continued. “Weapons of any kind—including daggers, arrows, swords, spears, and the like—are not allowed in any public building, including town hall, the library, and the post office.”

“Huh. I see.” Amos turned and started walking away, but Mayor Pearl kept after him.

“There is a law that strictly prohibits loud and unnecessary noises during the hours of midnight to seven in the morning,” she said. “As outlined by chapter 15 orderly conduct...”

I swear Amos slightly hunched his shoulders as Mayor Pearl droned on, keeping up with him despite her toothpick legs.

“Wow,” Shania said.

“It’s good to see that Mayor Pearl hates all people, not just those of us who live in Timber Ridge,” I said.

Aeric laughed. “That’s the truth.”

“Are you going to be okay in the welcome center?” Shania asked. “That guy seemed kind of...intense.”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I said. “He was sent by the Regional Committee of Magic. He’s not going to try anything illegal. Besides, I can give him the brush off until work hours are over, and Moira is in her back office.”

“Okay.” Shania reluctantly started toward Howl-In Café. “Call me if he comes sniffing around. He gives me the creeps.”

“Got it—thanks, Shania. Bye, Aeric.” I waved to the pair, but as they made their way off to the café, I turned my gaze to the hunters—who were moving their cars.

*They're hunters. They might not be best buddies with werewolves, but they'll be fair. Besides, Greyson and I didn't do anything wrong. It's that weird magic the wolf was dosed with that they'll need to work on, and that's important for the werewolves' sake.*

Even so...I couldn't quite shake the feeling that Amos Fletching was going to be a problem.

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A wolf howled, and I ran as silently as I could across the meadow, sprinting to safety.

My lungs burned, and there was a stitch in my side that felt like a dagger was stabbing me between the ribs, but I kept running.

The sky was painted red from the setting sun—which had long disappeared behind the tall trees. It gave the meadow—some of the most dangerous territory I'd crossed all night—an ominous red glow.

*Almost there. If I can just make it to the trees...*

Behind me, another wolf howled—this one's voice was clear and loud, projecting across the meadow.

They'd found me.

When I glanced back over my shoulder, I saw three wolves emerge from the shadows of the trees—their white fur swirled into their brown and gray coats was a stark marker in the evening light.

Larger than average wolves with the frightening intelligence of humans glittering in their eyes, the wolves blitzed across the meadow, running faster than I ever could.

A low growl closed in on me, but I laid out one last burst of speed, reaching the trees.

My hands scraped on rough bark as I shimmied up the closest tree.

The wolves snarled and snapped at my feet—which I yanked clear just in time. They circled the tree, their lips curled up to flash their white teeth at me.

"Yes, I regret to inform you that this evening, Hide of Hunter is no longer available on the menu." I tried to bow at them like a waiter in an expensive restaurant, but it almost knocked me off balance, so I hurriedly

fixed my grip and then scooted up higher so the maze of branches and leaves gave me better cover.

The largest of the trio—a yellow-ish gray colored wolf with black brushed over his back and tail and a narrower head—snapped at me.

“I made it fair and square, Rio!” I called down to the sore loser.

He growled as I climbed higher still.

“Throw a temper tantrum as much as you like, but I still made it.” I peered through the dark innards of the tree, waiting for my eyes to make the adjustment. (That was another standard hunter power—better night and low light vision.)

One of the wolves sneezed, and Rio snarled again.

I stayed silent—the game wasn’t over. I still had to make it to the lake.

Three times a week, I was “invited” to train with the wolves.

Wolves trained in a variety of ways—and it varied a lot from Pack to Pack.

Since the Northern Lakes Pack was so immense, Greyson most often held what he called “games.” Frequently they chased a target—me—other times they tracked a target—also me—as a Pack to promote comradery, but I knew it also served as a way to keep the wolves in shape and their senses sharp.

They’d also sometimes have “playfights,” which let me tell you there was *nothing* playful about. Wolves would draw blood in a playfight. They dragged me into those, which were probably my least favorite, even though the chase sessions were the most physically taxing.

(All of this and more was what the humans from the Pack were missing. Naturally, I could absolutely see how all of this *fun* would make them jealous and feel hurt that they were excluded.)

My back ached as I finally found a spot on the tree where I could wedge my feet between branches and almost stand up while holding myself secure. I really just wanted to sit down and sleep, but to finish tonight’s round of “chase,” I needed to make it to Lake Cleary.

Thankfully, it was just on the other side of the thatch of trees that I was nestled in.

*But how to make it over there when I’ve got three wolves sitting around the base of my tree?*

While I thought through the problem, I used my hunter magic to weave together a trap.

Hunter traps were another kind of magic all hunters shared. We used our raw powers to weave a literal trap. They could be set off in a variety of ways, and could do everything from stun an enemy to knock them out unconscious, or just tangle a wolf up and hold them still.

Typically trap magic was woven together by multiple hunters—it made the spells stronger so they could hold up longer to werewolf strength and teeth.

But I wasn't looking to actually hold any of the wolves, I just wanted to annoy them. So I wove a sticky trap between two thick branches, then dropped it over the side, hoping it would land on someone.

It bounced its way down—hitting other branches as it went—but I heard the familiar thump when it smacked into a wolf, eliciting a snarl as the unfortunate victim realized gobs of sticky, sap like material were dripping off the trap and matting their fur.

*Serves you right*, I thought as the wolves complained down below.

Finished with my moment of pettiness, I brushed my hands off on my thighs.

I'd have to jump—but I hated jumping from tree to tree. With my slight increase of strength I could make jumps a normal human couldn't, but for crying out loud, I wasn't a *squirrel*. Flinging myself at another tree could—and had in the past—go very wrong for me.

*I'd give up, but I can't let Rio claim this game!*

I found a thick, sturdy branch that stretched out long enough I'd be able to walk myself to the end and fling myself at the tree's next-door neighbor, which also happened to be downwind from the wolves if I placed myself right. If I rigged some of the branches on my tree to rustle—easy enough to accomplish by bending some back with a rope and releasing them when I jumped—I'd be able to misdirect the wolves on where I went.

I heard the wolves sniffing around the base of my tree as I rigged up my escape mechanism. I shimmied as far out onto the branch as I dared, tensing up so I remained still when the branch shook under me.

The trees in this area were huge and old, which made them nice for climbing. But I needed to do this fast, or the branch would break under me. I let go of my rope hand hold, which released the branches so they whisked

across the tree, creating a lot of noise as I jumped from my thick branch down to a thick V of the neighboring tree.

I smashed my face into the trunk, but thankfully I didn't scrap anything—the scent of my blood would have been a dead giveaway, even if I was still up in a tree.

I held my breath as I clutched my new tree and peered back over my shoulder just in time to see Rio's black colored tail disappear as he and the others circled around to the other side of the tree.

There were other wolves in the forest—too many for me to easily pinpoint. Eighteen wolves had joined today's practice session, and all of them were close enough to show up in the expanse of my senses, making my magic bright in my mind, and practically useless.

I shimmied around the trunk—putting it in between me and the wolves—then scurried down and did my best to pick my way through the forest, making sure I stayed downwind.

I had to be quiet, so I wasn't moving as fast as I would have liked. But stealth was the only way I'd make it to the lake when they were on my tail like this.

I made it about halfway through the thicket before tattletale Rio howled somewhere behind me.

Clenching my teeth, I gave up being stealthy and ran through the undergrowth as the other wolves howled, closing in on me.

I popped out of the trees, kicking up pebbles as I zipped across the lakeshore.

There was a wolf nearby, but with the Pack crowding my senses I couldn't tell which direction he was coming from.

*Probably Rio coming up behind me.*

I jumped a large rock, landed on wet sand, and kept sprinting toward the lake as I glanced over my shoulder to see if any of the wolves were behind when I rammed into something that was almost chest height.

Hitting it with as much force as I did, I flipped over the top of it, landing with a splash in the shallow waters of Lake Cleary and getting a face full of sand and cold water.

I sat up—spitting out lake water with a cough, and raised my hands to wipe grime off my eyes when I felt a very familiar but insistent grasp on the side of my neck.

Gentle but firm, I wasn't all that surprised to find Greyson's immense white body standing next to me, his jaws lightly clamped around my neck.

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## Chapter 7

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### *Pip*

I sagged in the water, disappointment dragging a muffled groan out of me. “I get it—I lost. You wolves won. Again.”

Greyson released my neck, but huffed his warm breath into my ear.

I rolled deeper into the lake rather than sit there and put up with his not-so-secret jabs, and scowled at him.

He tilted his head, watching me with an open amusement I could read in the forward position of his ears and the relaxed curl of his tail.

Although he was big, he was possibly the fastest of the Pack—and most certainly the quietest, which was why he got the flip on me and managed to trip me even though you’d think that as a hunter I’d be observant enough to notice the gigantic white wolf sitting on the lakeshore.

I stood up, water dripping from me as I waded through the shin high water. “I thought I had it—it’s all because Rio phoned ahead, isn’t it?” When I reached the pebbled shore I plopped down with a wet squish.

The lake had been cold—particularly after getting hot from sprinting and climbing—but the air was still warm enough that I wasn’t uncomfortable, though I knew I wasn’t going to dry very well with so little daylight left.

Greyson circled me with the stealth of a shadow, then stuck his black nose in my ear, ripping a squeal from me.

“We play this game all the time. I think it’s rigged. I should at least get an ally or two.” I wrung water out of my dark green t-shirt. “Hunters don’t go into missions alone, and pitting eighteen wolves against me like this means I’m never going to win a chase session.”

Greyson blinked, but this time I was ready for it, so when his nose veered toward my ear I leaned to the side, dodging him.

He must have been planning for that, because he hip checked me so I fell over, then placed one enormous paw on my chest to keep me pinned in place before he licked my cheek.

“*Cheating!*” I declared. “This is cheat—mm!” I scrunched my lips shut in self-defense when he licked my nose next.

I tried to express my displeasure by bulging my eyes at him.

My intimidation tactics failed, however, because Greyson just went in for another nose-jab to my ear.

He paused when a chorus of howls kicked up—this one was much closer.

Greyson huffed under his breath, then got off me so I could sit up. He regally sat down on the dry shore as I scrambled to my feet.

Wolves surged out of the forest, their tails wagging wildly. The air was filled with yips and howling barks as they sniffed me, brushed up against one another, and most likely congratulated themselves on another win.

Aeric and Wyatt burst out of the Pack and bounded up to me, their tails wildly wagging. Both whined happily once they reached me and pawed at my feet.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, reading their eager body language in the way they flattened their ears and “smiled” up at me.

Aeric flung himself down, completely ignoring the wet sand, and showed me his belly—his tail thumping the ground with a loud whoomph noise.

I crouched at his side and scratched his belly until Wyatt jabbed his nose under my arm and leaned in. All the wolves in the Pack were well over a hundred pounds, making them bigger, heavier, and stronger than the typical North American Gray Wolf, so when Wyatt sat on me it was the equivalent of a pony attempting to climb onto my legs.

“Wyatt—you are too big. Too! Big!” I laughed as other wolves crowded in around us, looking for scratches and pets.

Even in wolf form, werewolves were aggressively affectionate, but it was a lot more fun to stick your hands in their soft fur than to get a face full of rock-hard chest muscles.

Even Rio—in his wolf form, anyway—was unable to pass up a free shoulder scratch as he and Aspen pushed into me, insisting it was their turn.

Greyson was the only one who didn't join in. He looked up and down the shores with watchful gold eyes, forever the duty-bound leader. When he wasn't releasing his stress by torturing/playing with me, that was.

After about five or ten minutes, he decided the Pack had enough fun. He stood up, and blinked his golden eyes, and I abruptly felt the nearly physical pressure of...*him*.

The wolves stopped playing, barking, and wagging their tails. Bidden by Greyson's sheer force of presence, they trotted up to him, quiet and intense in their attention.

I could feel the pressure, but after the first few moments where it was hard to see—Greyson was *that* powerful—I was able to stand up straight without a problem and ignore the call of his presence.

Greyson turned and started trotting up the lakeshore, eventually transitioning into a smooth lope.

Rio, Aspen, Aeric, Wyatt, and all the others, streamed silently behind him, not even giving me a backward glance as they ran off.

Someone—Hector, I think—released a howl, and it set the whole Pack off. They raised their voices, creating one of the most beautiful songs known to the world as their unique calls blended and built.

They stopped so they could properly raise their heads, but I knew better than to stick around.

Greyson was taking them off on a hunting session—they'd ignore my presence now even if I tried to follow them.

I squelched my way up the shore and headed in the opposite direction.

*I need to go pick up my stuff at the lodge, but then I can head home.*

I'd gotten dumped in way too many lakes for me to risk taking my wallet and phone with me whenever I was subjected to a chase session.

I reached the trees and pushed my way into the forest, shaking my legs when a few leaves stuck to my pants.

A howl rose above all the others.

The call was low and filled with longing, then hitched high with a pain that brought tears to my eyes as all the other howls faded.

This was a song I recognized too well—the whole Pack recognized its soft, mournful tones.

It was Greyson, calling to his missing mate.

He howled it every few weeks—I don't think he ever meant to. He was far too aware of his role as leader, and he typically had no patience for his mate bond.

But as a wolf, sometimes even Greyson's instincts could get the best of him, and he'd sing for her in such mournful tones it made me tear up.

Mates were special, sacred things for wolves. Although Greyson and I got along like a wolf and a housecat, even I could sympathize with the pain he felt in having a part of him missing.

I paused and rested my hand against the smooth trunk of a birch tree and listened.

*He sounds so...lonely.*

Greyson's howls grew louder and more plaintive. When his tone shifted from high to low my throat pinched with emotion for the maddening Alpha.

I shook my head and made myself slog on.

*I'm willing to feel sympathy for Greyson, but only for a few moments, that jerk.*

I made my way back to the lodge and was shivering by the time I climbed its front steps. The sky was painted with blazes of orange and swirls of pink as the sun set—blocked by the trees.

Though it was summer, nights were cool this far north in Wisconsin, and slumping around in wet clothes only made it worse.

"Hey Pip."

The porch light flicked on as Young Jack, Original Jack, Rory, and Olivia stepped out of the lodge.

It was Young Jack who greeted me. He eyed me as he unscrewed the cap of a dubiously colored sports drink. "Played a round of chase with a part of the Pack, I'm guessing?"

I peeled a shirt sleeve up with a wet slurp. "Yep."

Rory—who was about five—peered at me as he held Original Jack's hand. "Did you win?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Nope. I lost. Again."

“Obviously,” Olivia snorted.

“You’ll win some day,” Rory promised me with the confidence of a five-year-old.

“Awww, thank you. But I’m not so sure about that.” I kicked off my shoes and contemplated stripping off my moist socks as well.

Original Jack chuckled, a sandpapery sound that was also soothing. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, Pip. To be chased by so many wolves and be a challenge for them says something about your abilities.”

“It was only eighteen of them tonight,” I said.

Young Jack took a swig of his drink. “More went to join the hunt. Mom and Dad ran outta here like crazy once the howling started.”

“That’s why we’re organizing a game night.” Original Jack rolled up the cuffs of his long-sleeved flannel shirt—he almost always wore flannel. I’d seen him walk around with flop flops, shorts, and a long-sleeved flannel shirt in temperatures so hot they had me jumping in a lake. “Would you like to join us?” He gave a kind but craggy smile—one that took me years back.

Original Jack was an adoptive father to all the humans connected to the Northern Lakes Pack.

Although his wife was a werewolf, he’d opted not to become one, and as a result he typically took charge of all the children and teenagers the wolves left behind when they went hunting—like Rory and Young Jack, who was named after Original Jack—or left for other Pack activities.

He also arranged housing for the humans connected to the Pack—whether they married a werewolf like he had, or they were adult children of the Pack who had opted not to become werewolves, like Young Jack had decided—and was the human contact to go to.

I didn’t quite fall under his wings like the rest of the humans—I was too much of a supernatural for that. But I’d always thought of him as an uncle, and I was grateful he extended invitations to join in with the rest of the humans. His never-ending patience and kindness made him a great favorite of everyone, Pack and human alike.

(Young Jack was not the only werewolf-born child named after him. Old Young Jack, who was off at college, was also named for him, as was Jackie, who had moved to Boston but still flew back to see her parents at holidays.)

“Monopoly has been banned for tonight’s game night,” Rory told me with great seriousness. “But we’re going to play Clue, Mousetrap, and Ticket to Ride. Unless there’s a game you wanna play?”

I smiled down at Rory and fought the impulse to pat his head like the wolves did to me—he was just too cute with his buzzed haircut and his green wolf shirt! “Aw, thank you for the invite, but I have to pass.”

“Going to join the Pack tonight?” Olivia asked with a hint of snideness to her tone.

Original Jack gave Olivia a side eye that promised he was going to talk to her later about this, but I didn’t let it bother me.

Some of the humans, whether it was the children of werewolves like Olivia, or the significant others like Noah—had a hard time accepting that I was included in a lot of Pack activities they were not.

I’d gotten mad about it as a teenager, but Papa Santos had sat me down and explained to me that it wasn’t really *me* they were mad at. Rather they were upset with themselves that they couldn’t connect with their loved ones, and as a supernatural I could.

*“It’s why the supernaturals have to take care with our human relationships,”* he’d said. *“It is hard on us, to watch them grow old and die before we do, but it is equally hard on them to watch us go places they cannot join us in.”*

His words held extra weight since I’d known all of Mama Dulce and Papa Santos’s kids had chosen to live as humans, and had died before they’d adopted me.

So I tried to be patient with the humans, for their sake.

I smiled and kept my tone light. “Nope—I never join the Pack for hunts. But I have to get back to feed the Bedevilments.”

I held Olivia’s gaze until she nodded in acceptance.

Original Jack relaxed slightly at the lowering tension. “Ahh, yes. How are your cats?”

I made a face. “As overweight as ever.”

Young Jack frowned. “Really? Didn’t you start feeding them diet food from the vet’s months ago?”

“Yeah. I don’t know how they’re doing it. I have them on a regimented schedule, and they stay inside most days, so it’s not like they’re finding

mice to snack on.” I pushed a strand of my white hair out of my face. Now that it had started drying, it was frizzing up so it resembled a cloud.

“We’d best let you go, then. If I recall, Prince and Princess can be destructive when hungry,” Original Jack said.

I winced. “Yeah. They shredded some curtains two weeks ago. You all have fun at game night!” I peeled off my socks, then darted inside, padding over to the laundry room where all the more active members of the Pack had lockers to store their weapons/gear.

I grabbed my backpack, but by the time I’d returned to the front door Young Jack, Original Jack, Rory, and Olivia were all gone.

I stuffed my feet back in my shoes and glanced at the rapidly darkening sky—it wasn’t totally black yet, but a smattering of stars were starting to appear—as I trundled down the stairs.

Three hunters walked the edge of the meadow. With my night vision kicked in, I was able to make out a bush hat and craggy nose—Amos Fletching—leading two hunters who had to be a year or two younger than I was.

The two younger hunters were watching me with interest as they obediently tramped behind Amos, who was rambling in his coarse voice at a tone too hushed for me to make out what he was saying.

I frowned as I watched them disappear into the forest.

*They shouldn’t be out here this late at night. I’m pretty sure Greyson told him the lodge area was off limits in the evening.*

I dug my cellphone out of my backpack and started sending out messages, starting with Ember as I hadn’t seen her among the wolves, which hopefully meant she hadn’t transformed and would be in a position to read her phone, and quickly adding Original Jack into the message so he’d know what was going on.

*“Hunters on the prowl, seen near the lodge.”*

My phone dinged as Original Jack and then—thankfully—Ember acknowledged my text.

But as I started off in the direction of my cottage, it was Ember’s follow up message that made me grimace.

*“Understood. Be careful—Amos has made it clear he considers your part in the Low Marsh wolf’s death a crime.”*

Great. Whatever happened to an easy, open-and-shut case?

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## Chapter 8

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### *Greyson*

I was ready to maim something, but I knew if I decked Amos Fletching like I wanted to, there'd be too much paperwork to make it worth the momentary satisfaction.

*Paperwork is the worst thing to happen to this world.*

“—we are sent by the Regional Committee of Magic, means we are freely able to travel where we choose for observation,” Amos rattled on.

I stared down at the paperwork the state needed me to fill out for the multiple businesses that operated under the Northern Lakes Pack LLC. I'd gotten remarkably fluent in paperwork-speak since I'd taken the position as Alpha, but having to fill out the same paperwork for the various businesses we owned was monotonous at best.

Match it with a windbag hunter who was on a power trip and smelled as if he'd been chewing on raw onions that morning, and it ratcheted the experience from tedious to physically provoking.

“Which is why we are not required to observe any of your *rules*, boy,” Amos sneered. He adjusted his bush hat as he peered down on me.

Though his manners would have stirred up any wolf—much less an Alpha—I kept my seething powers locked down.

That was the difference between a real Alpha worth his power, and one that was petty, greedy, and a terrible leader: the ability to control our instincts and the power that comes with being an Alpha.

Only a bad Alpha would fall for such manipulations—or give in to instinct and snap like a starving wolf over table scraps.

I wasn't, however, going to let Amos walk around Timber Ridge as puffed up as a turkey ripe for plucking.

Not at all. I'd control my powers and respond appropriately, but it didn't mean I wasn't going to react.

"Amos Fletching," I said in a low voice that was just shy of a growl.

A muscle on Amos's face jumped, and he tried to curl his lips back in a sneer, but when I rested my gaze on him and let my power as Alpha ooze off me, he didn't move.

"I don't care who sent you. The Northern Lakes Pack will cooperate with your investigation; however, you *will* observe the rules I gave you earlier, which includes staying off Pack land beginning at sunset."

Amos opened his mouth to argue.

"No," I said, speaking with the full authority of an Alpha.

He clenched his jaw and looked away.

A crooked smile escaped my control.

*It seems not all hunters have the grit of our Pip.*

It was hardly surprising. Pip was a law unto herself—I knew that better than anyone else in the Pack. But it was interesting that she was so easily able to flaunt an Alpha's power when Amos, it seemed, was having a much harder time.

"Do you understand?" I asked Amos after several long moments.

Amos kept his eyes down and scowled at the ground—a sign of his resistance.

That was fine. Intimidation worked when my authority wouldn't. "Amos Fletching," I deeply growled.

"Understood," the crusty hunter said.

I inhaled discreetly, sniffing out the sour smell of Amos's body odor. His heartbeat was steady, indicating he was scared but wasn't lying.

My message had been received.

I leaned back in my chair and returned to studying the state paperwork.

*After this I need to look over the new options for our 401(k) employee programs, and glance at the report the accountants made on the new hospital we're purchasing three cities over.*

A minute passed before Amos moved, his leather boots cracking as he paced from one side of my office to the other.

"I will be certain to make note of your *requirements* in the case file," he said.

I didn't bother to reply.

He seemed to think I cared what the Regional Committee of Magic thought about us. I didn't.

I just wanted to find out what had been put on the Low Marsh wolf to turn him wild. If this was how the committee investigated the issue, I'd bear with it, until one of my wolves or I uncovered the spell, that was.

"Have you learned anything related to the magic put upon the wolf?" I asked when it was apparent Amos wasn't going to leave.

"We found evidence of magic, but have not been able to uncover its origins," Amos said.

"In other words, you still only know as much as we told the committee when we lodged a report on this entire incident."

"We've done further investigations," Amos snapped. "We can say for certain it was not fae magic, though based on the contents of the wolf's stomach, it was likely a potion."

I carefully signed a piece of paperwork with a pen, holding it gently so I wouldn't crack it.

*A potion? But besides fae, who else makes potions?*

Potion making used to be a bigger industry—or so I'd heard—back when the elves were around. But they'd been gone for centuries.

"Further investigation of the wolf's body revealed it would have died from bleeding out if you hadn't killed it first," Amos said. "From the dagger wounds Hunter Sabre inflicted on it."

I paused and flicked my eyes up.

*He can't possibly mean to drag Pip into this? She's a hunter—she's cleared to fight wolves, particularly feral wolves. There's no way they can pin this death on her, no matter how the Low Marsh Pack wants it.*

I wasn't an idiot—as important as the magic on the wolf was, there was some politics behind this investigating thanks to the yipping of the Low Marsh's Alpha.

The Low Marsh Pack was getting to be too big of an irritation to let it run around howling any longer.

As a Pack, they were small and posed no threat to us. But while I believed that as the strongest Pack in the region we should be careful not to overstep our boundaries, I was not going to have my packmates bow and scrape to an Alpha so incompetent he couldn't keep track of his own wolves despite having fewer than fifteen members under his command.

"Phillipa Sabre is an accredited hunter and is cleared to take on feral wolves," I said. "She's excellent at what she's trained to do."

Amos rubbed the tip of his hooked nose. "If she's so well trained, what's she doing in a *wolf* Pack?"

The temptation to put Amos in his place grew stronger so it was a tightness in my chest.

I was used to people questioning Pip's presence in the Pack, though Hudson—the wolf I'd taken over from—said it had been worse when she was a teenager.

But I'd never had another hunter question it. The Quillons had helped Pip and gotten her accredited all without batting an eyelash at her homelife.

It wasn't good that Amos was so interested in her.

"Pip does whatever she wants in our Pack," I said, unwilling to give this creep more information on her personal life.

"Interesting." Amos folded his arms across his chest. "So she's *not* specially trained to take out your enemies?"

I stared blankly at Amos.

*How did the committee put such an important investigation in the hands of someone so unbelievably stupid?*

"The Northern Lakes Pack doesn't need anyone to fight for it," I said. "Because there isn't a Pack in the region that could harm us."

Disgusted with the conversation, I glanced back down at the unwanted paperwork.

*I hope Amos has to do binders of paperwork for this investigation. That would be justice at its finest.*

"Then you won't mind if I question her," Amos said. "I heard she's trained with you werewolves. I'd be interested in seeing what she's capable of." His smile was leering, and his shaded eyes were that of a low-level predator—one assured of its abilities even though it was weak.

My powers smacked so hard I couldn't see for a moment. Rather than try to subdue it or push it down, I channeled it. My feet were silent as I

stalked around my desk, invading the hunter's space so he backed up until he hit a wall.

"You will leave our hunter alone." It came out as a low growl, one that was heavy with every inch of my authority. "Don't mess with her, don't bother her, don't even *look* at her."

I loomed over Amos, who shook slightly. "The committee will hear—"

"Go ahead. *Tell* the committee," I said. "As the Alpha of the Northern Lakes Pack, it's within my rights to protect my packmates—including the hunter."

I stayed in Amos's space as I listened to his heart beat violently in his chest, and the sour smell of his sweat increased, making my cedar scented room almost muggy.

I lifted an eyebrow at him and smirked. Only then did I back off, shut my powers down, and walk back to my desk.

Amos stayed on the wall, glaring at me with hatred.

He was scared of me, and he hated that I knew he was.

He left, throwing the door open so hard it cracked against the plaster wall, then stomped through it, disappearing into the lodge.

I stared at my paperwork, but listened with a careful ear as I heard his boots thud across the wooden floor. I didn't relax until I heard the front door open, and he stomped outside.

High pitched murmurs from outside my office tugged on my attention as I attempted to immerse myself back into paperwork.

Someone had burned something in the kitchen—bacon, it smelled like, because burnt bacon was a very sad and easily recognizable smell. Judging by the thick stench, it was soon going to set off the lodge's fire alarms. The clang of pans being thrown on the counter as someone frantically flapped what sounded like a towel through the air, trying to clear the smell before the fire alarms could turn on, jarred my skull as I reread a line in my paperwork.

My stronger senses—stronger than even a regular werewolf's due to my abundance of power—were sometimes a blessing and a curse.

My cellphone—lying innocently on top of my desk—erupted in a high-pitched ringtone that grated my nerves so badly I reacted—flinging the phone across the room—before I realized what I'd done.

I peered at the phone, hoping it might have survived the encounter.

It hit the floor with an ominous crunch and skidded a foot or two.

Even from my chair I could see the phone was cracked through the casing and had shattered the screen as well.

I leaned back in my chair, defeated by my own senses and tech that was all too breakable.

*Another cellphone down. I'll have to ask Aeric for yet another replacement.*

I frowned, certain I'd turned the volume down on my phone—the ringtones always grated my ears as both a human and wolf, so I'd made it a habit to carry my phones on vibrate mode after I'd gone through my third one. But if I wasn't careful with how I carried it in my pants pockets, they'd turn the volume up by themselves all while taking fascinating pictures of lint.

*I hate phones.*

I rubbed the back of my neck and glanced sideways across my desk.

I wanted to go for a run, or maybe rip a tree apart with my bare hands. I needed to get *out*.

I stood up, and the murmurs I heard outside turned into a squeal.

I stared at a crossbow that hung on my wall as I listened and discreetly scented the air.

The two female werewolves—the ones that had showed up earlier in the week the same day as the hunters—stood outside my office, giggling.

They'd been quiet when the door was shut, but apparently an open door was an invitation to gawk at me.

*They've been hanging around for days. Why haven't they left?*

I didn't like it when werewolves sniffed around Pack land, trying to prove to me that they were my mate. It was annoying—especially when they didn't leave after first seeing me and knowing they obviously weren't my missing mate.

I briefly rubbed the spot over my heart where the pain of my incomplete bond knifed deep before I caught myself.

*So many wolves treat this infuriating situation like it's something fun, and should be celebrated...I wish I could have rejected this ridiculous bond.* Unfortunately, I could only do that if I actually *found* whoever had set it off.

The whole idea rankled me.

I didn't want to be stuck with another wolf that I'd have to be on guard against *all the time* because of the level of my powers. I'd rather keep my moments of peace, bond with the Pack, and maybe schedule in a few extra sessions of teasing Pip for fun.

*If she were like Pip, maybe it wouldn't be so bad.*

I considered the idea for a moment. With Pip, I could be myself—a seductive idea. But Pip was a hunter, and hunters were never, ever fated mates for a wolf. The same kind of magic they had that shielded them from an Alpha's powers meant they'd never be able to form the close bond of a mate as well. It required a lowering of mental barriers that hunters couldn't do.

*Ahh, well. It was a fun idea.*

I flexed my fingers and buried the desire to head out on a run or to shift and go for a hunt. If I left, the women would follow me.

*But they've been here long enough. It's time to get them to move on.*

I could ask them to leave, but that would incite more giggles and a lot of rounds of talking. No, the fastest way to get rid of them was Pip.

Which would work in my favor. I could use a moment of relaxation. But if I wanted to hang around her longer than five minutes before she booted me out of her door, I'd have to take...*measures*.

I left my office door open, but slipped into the attached bathroom which was roomy enough to allow space for a shift.

Thirty seconds of white hot, bone crunching pain, and I was out of my human body and its many cares, free in my four-pawed, white wolf form.

While Pip detested my human presence—ironic, considering I had been brought to Timber Ridge because of her, even if she didn't know it—she was much more tolerant of my wolf form.

I was pretty sure it was because of my eye-catching white pelt, but I'd used any advantage I had when it came to the obstinate hunter.

Getting out of the bathroom without opposable thumbs was a little difficult, but I'd perfected the art of smashing my nose down on the handle and pushing. Once I was freed, I trotted out of my office.

The visiting females abruptly went silent as I stalked through the lodge, slunk down the stairs to the main floor, and headed to the front of the lodge where I shouldered my way through an open window and hopped outside.

I was to the edge of the meadow when they scrambled outside, also in their wolf bodies, and ran after me.

I scoffed at them and ducked into the trees as they—acting like young puppies—howled their excitement and raced after me with the subtlety of a charging stag.

My ears flattened against my skull as I picked up my pace, making my way to Pip—and the break I sorely needed.

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## Chapter 9

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### *Pip*

I loved my cottage home. Quaint in size and built out of logs, it was a little like a cabin since it was surrounded by trees. A flower garden that was the result of decades of work done by my adopted parents added a splash of color to the outside, while the inside was cozy and bright.

It was also the home of the Bedevilments.

I stuck a ceramic food bowl that was decorated with pinecones and deer down in front of a plump cat. “Princess, this is your food. This. No, *this*.”

I tapped the ceramic bowl, but she was more interested in the ceramic platter I held in my other hand, which was shaped like a fish.

“Prince, this is for you.” I set the fish platter down in front of a similarly colored cat that sat about two feet away before I stood up and waited.

The nearly identical cats stared back at me. Mirror images of each other with gray fur and white chins and paws, Prince and Princess made a striking pair. Particularly because both were at least three or four pounds overweight—which for a cat is *a lot*.

Princess’s gray fur was just the tiniest bit lighter, and she was one pound smaller than her brother. Otherwise they looked so similar it was hard to know which one was which unless they were sitting side by side.

However, they were equally fussy and full of spite.

The cats looked away from me, stood, then stalked across the two-foot gap between them, Prince making for Princess’s bowl, while Princess

closed in on Prince's fish platter.

"No! You can't swap food!" I picked up Princess, who sagged from my grasp, and grabbed her ceramic bowl. I carried her across the sitting room, to the edge of the kitchen—which was about five steps away. She meowed angrily as I set her down.

I ignored it and slid the ceramic bowl in front of her. "You have the fancy allergy food. Prince has the prescription level diet food. You *cannot* switch, or you'll get sick and he'll get fatter!"

Princess gave me a look of disgust, then bolted—moving as fast as lightning despite her portly heft.

I grabbed Prince as he made a beeline for Princess's ceramic bowl and hauled him back to his fish dish where Princess was eating so fast her breathing was wheezy.

"No—you can't eat that!" I set Prince down and picked up Princess. Her extra rolls of skin draped over my arm as I walked her back to the kitchen and desperately, because I didn't want to clean up cat puke in the middle of the night, stuck Princess on top of the table, then grabbed her bowl and put it in front of her.

Princess looked from me to the bowl.

I scratched my nose as I watched for any sign that she might bolt. "Does it displease Your Highness?"

Princess strutted across the table and leaned over the side so she could rub her face against my arm. She purred, then wandered back to her food dish, pausing at my plastic cup of water I'd poured for myself when I got home.

She poked her tail high and peered back at me.

"Don't—"

Using a white mittened paw, Princess pushed the glass off the table, spilling water everywhere.

She purred, then immediately settled down to eat her food.

I sighed. "Of course. That'll teach me." I suspiciously turned around, but Prince was innocently crunching on his diet kibble.

Shaking my head, I grabbed a dish towel and started cleaning up the mess—at least it was just water, and given the size of my place the cats could only do so much damage.

My cottage was small, but wolves spent so much time at the lodge, larger homes were unnecessary—particularly for a pair of retired wolves, given that Mama Dulce and Papa Santos had built this place long before I was around.

A tiny loft bedroom—where I slept—with a beautiful view of the forest occupied the small second floor of the cottage, while the main floor held a small sitting area, the compact kitchen, the only bathroom, and a slightly larger bedroom that had belonged to my adopted parents.

My loft bedroom had wooden slat walls and smelled faintly of wood, while the main floor had cherry wood floors that mysteriously never got scratched—even though I’d roller bladed through the house on more than one occasion—and a cute little stone fireplace topped with my only TV. The wallpaper in the sitting area was faded, and the tiny, three-seater table Princess had taken up residence on was so old a lot of the varnish covering it had been rubbed off, but I’d never buy a replacement table—I had too many memories of making cookies with Papa Santos and watching Mama Dulce make tamales wrapped in corn leaves there.

I’d inherited the cottage from them—though it technically belonged to the Pack, I’d be able to stay there rent free for as long as I wanted.

Once I finished cleaning up the water I got dinner ready for myself—a frozen pizza, because I am a fancy person—and watched the cats eat the last of their food as the pizza baked in the oven.

When the Bedevilments were almost finished with their food, I snuck over to the cupboard that had their ridiculously expensive food, treats, and various medications. It was strapped shut with a bungee cord because they’d gotten inside before and ripped open bags of treats.

After prying the cupboard open, I got out a cream I had to smear on lucky Princess’s rear, then got my disposable gloves—because there was no way I was doing this bare handed.

Gloves on and with the cream hidden behind my back, I casually strolled back to the table where Princess was licking out her dish.

I made a grab for her, but she skittered off so fast I only brushed the tip of her tail.

Considering her size, she was able to scuttle across the floor at a physics-defying pace, and evaded me as she ran into the bedroom my adopted parents used to occupy, scurrying under their empty bed.

“Princess, come on.” I dropped to my belly and peered under the bed frame at the cat crouched there. “You need this cream, or your rear is going to hurt and you’ll try to pluck out all your hair again. Come here, kitty, kitty,” I called in a singsong voice.

Princess didn’t appreciate the vocals. She shuffled so her massive rear was pointed in my direction.

I had to wriggle under the bed and grab her by the scruff. When I hauled her out I tried to adjust my grip on her and she slipped free, streaking back under the bed.

It took me two more tries before I caught her, got her pinned between my legs and the cap off the prescription cream before I swung her around and discovered it was not *Princess*, but *Prince*.

I sat back on my heels and groaned as Prince ran off.

“Why me?” I asked my ceiling. “What did I ever do to deserve the Bedevilments?”

Prince and Princess were a pair of cats that Mama Dulce and Papa Santos had adopted when I was a senior in high school. The pair were a brother and sister from the same litter, and had been spoiled horribly since they came to live among wolves.

Unfortunately, the despotic twins had been the pride and joy of Papa Santos. I would never give them up—even if they dripped my bank account dry with their expensive food and costly vet bills. (And yes, even if I had to apply creams to their rears.)

I found Princess—sitting in the doorway and watching my struggle with Prince with glee, apparently—and wiped the cream on her. I’d thrown out the gloves and was washing my hands when the doorbell rang.

“Coming!” I wiped my hands off on my shirt since I’d used my towels drying up the cup-mess Princess had made, and walked toward the door, nearly tripping on Prince when he decided to dart across my path—probably an attempt to do me in so he and Princess could have the cottage to themselves.

I was a bit of a sweaty mess when I swung the door open, blinking when I realized it wasn’t a human that had rung my doorbell, but a wolf.

A large, white wolf.

“Greyson,” I said. “What do you want?”

I maneuvered my hand so I could slam the door shut on him if needed. A couple times a year the wolves would yank me from my cottage to chase/hunt/“play” with me without any preparation on my end.

Hector insisted it was to teach me to be prepared for a fight at any moment.

Ember admitted it was because it was convenient to have a supernatural on two legs with opposable thumbs around to do things when everyone else was a wolf on four paws.

I’d never had Greyson come get me for those delightful “sessions,” but I wouldn’t put it past the wolves to try to catch me off guard.

Greyson stared at me for a moment, then tried to bump past me to get into the cottage. I wasn’t going to stop him—there wasn’t much you could stop an Alpha from doing—until I caught sight of the two wolves standing in the forest, wagging their tails as they watched him.

“Wait—no, no, no!” I linked my arms around his neck and tried to pull him back out. “I’m not getting involved in your romantic entanglements!”

Greyson’s ears twisted to the side, and he gave me an unimpressed look.

While I couldn’t communicate with him like a werewolf could, I’d spent enough time around werewolves to be able to decipher his body language, so I had a pretty good idea what he was thinking.

“Me telling others where you are doesn’t count as getting involved. It’s practically a public service so they don’t bother the whole Pack and all the residents of Timber Ridge,” I said. “I’m just giving them a sporting chance, then I’m hands off—may the best woman win!”

Greyson sat down—which was a little intimidating because he was so *big* compared to a regular dog but built so leanly. As he stared me down with golden eyes I was keenly aware that he was an apex predator.

Out in the rapidly dimming woods, one of the visiting female werewolves gave an inviting little yip. Her friend broke into a howl, then bowed her front end down in the universal wolf sign for “let’s play!”

Greyson sat with a regality that was a sharp contrast to their over-eager enthusiasm, and kept staring at me.

I sighed. “Fine. But this shouldn’t be my job—can’t you get Ember to do it? She’s way scarier than I am.”

I stepped outside and closed my door—no sense letting the bugs in—and marched up to the forest, leaving Greyson on the little wooden deck.

“Hey there.” I waved to the visiting werewolves as I stomped my way closer. “Sorry to tell you, but it’s a no-go. He’s not interested.”

The pretty wolves cocked their heads at me and looked from me to Greyson.

“His mate isn’t either of you. I’m sorry, I imagine you feel disappointed, but please let me assure you it’s a good thing because he’s pretty mean-spirited and likes to taunt people, and his white fur is high maintenance I imagine and—”

Behind me, Greyson growled.

“Right. So, thanks for visiting Timber Ridge. I’d recommend you visit the Sweets Shoppe candy store tomorrow for a souvenir or two—it has excellent freshly made fudge—and tell all your friends. I hope you had a nice time!”

I held my breath as I studied the two females.

Werewolves can be tricky.

If either of them were feeling territorial about Greyson, things could go south for me real quick. Of course, Greyson would reach us before they could hurt me too badly, but just the *idea* that I would get attacked because Greyson was so popular with females was enough to make me grind my teeth.

Sure enough, one of the wolves flattened her ears and curled up her lips, showing me her teeth.

“Stop that,” I said sharply, keeping my voice firm. “You’re better than this.” I shifted a little closer and used every trick I had to keep my heartbeat even and unafraid, selling my bluff.

Thankfully, it worked. She lowered her gaze and licked her chops, all apologies.

The two wolves turned on their paws and slunk into the darkening shadows of the forest, blending in with their grey swirled coats. I watched until they ducked around some trees and disappeared, then headed back to my cottage.

“You’re free.” I wrinkled my nose at Greyson. “Now goodnight.”

I opened my door, intending to leave Greyson outside, but he slipped past me, getting inside my home before me.

“Hey, I took care of the wolves,” I complained.

Greyson didn't look back as he barged in. He slunk over to my one couch, climbed on it, then splayed out.

"Greyson," I said, attempting to regain control of the situation. "What are you doing?"

Greyson ignored me and got comfortable.

He looked really out of place in my cozy home with his pointed muzzle, long legs, and thick white fur that was clearly meant for the wilderness.

But he rested his head on the blanket Mama Dulce had crocheted forever ago and settled in, tucking his tail over his legs as he closed his golden eyes.

With his eyes closed, it was safe to scowl at him and make a face—which I did.

"I swear," I grumbled under my breath as I shut the front door. "It's because of this Pack that I have entirely failed at romance. Packmates tell me I'm like their pet pooch, and then you use me as a romantic dispute settler—it's not surprising the townies think I'm some weird handmaiden or something."

I sat down at the table and dug into my nearly cooled pizza. "I'm never going to get a date, much less a relationship, as long as I live here."

Greyson opened one gold eye to watch me for a moment, then shut it again as I ate.

When I finished and put away my dishes, Greyson wandered off to the bedroom—I assumed to sleep on the uncovered mattress.

*Why is he here instead of hanging out at the lodge if he's just going to sleep?*

I shrugged it off as I did dishes, made some popcorn, then perused the single bookcase in the house, which was packed with Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie—those were Papa Santos's favorites—and all the regency romances Mama Santos loved.

The regencies were secretly my favorite—which might account for my bitterness at being compared to a *dog* by any of the guys I was interested in—but tonight I plucked a battered copy of Sherlock Holmes and settled down on the sofa with my bowl of popcorn, switching on a lamp for extra light.

I was only about a page into the book when Greyson emerged from the spare bedroom, padded his way across the tiny cottage, and started to ease

himself onto the sofa.

“Hey—what are you doing?” I peered at him over the top of my book. “Seriously, Greyson. There’s not room for both of us on here—you’re too big.”

Greyson gave me a disgusted look as he hefted his body all the way onto the sofa.

I was scrunched up, pressed into the arm of the couch while Greyson took up two of the three cushions, and was still pretty cramped.

“I’m not moving,” I said. “This is my home, and this is my spot.”

Greyson’s eyes glowed alarmingly with mischief, and he abruptly stretched out, then plopped down, his head and part of his chest resting on top of my legs.

His fur was soft and warm, and I could feel his breath on my knees as he got comfy.

“Hey—what is this?” I demanded.

Greyson shifted until he was on his side, then yawned, showing his massive teeth.

“I’m not a couch,” I declared.

He ignored me and sighed, closing his eyes as he stretched out his back legs.

For a moment, I debated what to do.

*Is this a new method of teasing me—invading my cottage to show that nowhere is safe? But he’s not really doing anything.*

Slowly I lowered my arms so my hands and my book rested on his neck. Greyson didn’t even move.

*I have no idea what any of this means, I concluded. And that’s really irritating. Possibly dangerous, but mostly irritating.*

I stared at him for a moment or two, but no matter how I tried to remember, there was nothing about werewolves that said curling up with a person reading a book was a thing.

*But werewolves will pile together when in their wolf form as a sort of bonding experience. Maybe that’s what he’s attempting to do?*

I glanced down at Greyson, who appeared to be snoozing.

*No. No way. Greyson likes to torture me, and he’s not a cuddler. Maybe it has something to do with the visiting hunters. That seems more likely.*

Disgruntled, I returned to my book—where I could at least count on Sherlock to reveal the mystery to Watson and myself, rather than just act mysterious and annoying.

About thirty minutes passed before I realized I'd been absentmindedly petting Greyson's shoulder, sinking my fingers into his soft undercoat.

I froze.

*All the other wolves like getting their bellies scratched or a good pet. But Greyson isn't really affectionate with anyone...*

I guiltily glanced at Prince and Princess, who were sitting in their cat bed on the armchair, watching me with judgy eyes.

I started to raise my hand up when Greyson opened his gold eyes and peeled his head off my lap to stare up at me.

"Sorry?" I tried.

He kept staring, the quirk of his ears communicating a slight irritation.

Hesitantly, I lowered my hand back into his fur.

Greyson set his head back down and once again closed his eyes.

I looked at Prince and Princess. They had their eyes closed and were purring up a storm together, leaving all furry bodies in the house content.

I frowned down at my book, slightly disturbed by the realization I'd just had.

*I am such a sucker when Greyson is in his gorgeous wolf form, I concluded. And I think he might have figured that out.*

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## Chapter 10

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### *Pip*

A week after the hunters rolled into town, I had a rare weekday off. I was enjoying myself, sitting on the wicker furniture outside Howl-In Café, tapping away on my laptop as I researched job opportunities away from Timber Ridge.

I'd finished my degree online after I realized the college scene wasn't my thing and had gotten a liberal arts degree about a year ago. I'd taken a lot of courses on technical writing, business statistics, economics, legal research and writing—stuff that hopefully meant I could easily get hired as some kind of online editor/content creation job.

I was contemplating a content writer position in Minnesota—hours away from Northern Lakes territory, when Teresa—Hector and Ember's eldest child—zipped up to my table so fast she nearly skidded out and slammed into a wicker chair.

"We need your help." Her corkscrew curls bounced as she finally rocked to a stop, and her dark eyes were dangerously serious.

I froze mid keystroke. "What is it? Is there something wrong with the hunters?"

"No." Teresa, looking like she was eighty instead of her young ten, puffed her cheeks out. "Young Jack and Forrest are arguing."

I shut my laptop screen—I didn't really want anyone to know I was thinking of attempting to leave Timber Ridge. "How can they be fighting?"

Don't they have to work?"

"Young Jack has a part time job here, but he mostly works weekends." Teresa jerked her thumb, pointing to the Howl-In café that most of the humans belonging to the Pack worked at. (The second store they mostly staffed was the Sweets Shoppe. The Pack couldn't staff either store with wolves. Each location had failed health inspections twice due to wolf fur being found in kitchen areas—that stuff sticks to everything. After that, Greyson declared that the wolves weren't even allowed to enter the building, and had to text orders to be delivered to them outside.) "Forrest is working at Timber Wolves Landscaping, but I think he's on his lunch break," Teresa concluded.

"How wonderful. I take it I'm the closest adult?" I asked.

"No," Teresa said. "Amelia sent me to find you—she said it had to be you, because if the older wolves got involved it would make it more serious, and you're impartial since you're not human or wolf."

*In other words it's because I'm an outsider that straddles both groups, accepted by neither but involved in both.*

Teresa scooted over to my side of the table and tugged on the sleeve of my t-shirt. "Can you hurry? Things were getting really loud when I left."

"I bet." I slid my laptop into my backpack and zipped it up. "Young Jack has zero respect for werewolves, and since Forrest was just changed six months ago he's still pretty touchy. Where are they?"

"In the park." Teresa backed up as I stood and slipped my backpack over my shoulders. "What are you gonna make them do to settle it?"

"I'll think of something." I offered her a flash of a reassuring smile, and together we hurried down the sidewalk.

As with most families, there were clashes between the humans and the wolves of the Northern Lakes Pack. It got dangerous, however, as wolves traditionally settle arguments through physical fights—something any human would be severely disadvantaged in.

When I was a teenager I'd shot my mouth off more times than was good for my health—mainly at Rio, but occasionally at some of the other werewolves who called me a dog behind my back—and to seek revenge I'd come up with the idea of settling scores in other ways.

It started with mini golf. I'd practiced for a full year before I challenged Rio to a match and trashed him thoroughly—with his werewolf strength it

was nearly impossible for him to do such a delicate sport.

After about three years the wolves had gotten remarkably good at mini golf—they used Chase as their representative whenever possible as he almost always got a perfect score after all that practice—and I was forced to switch to croquet, then pickleball, followed by volleyball, and most recently bowling.

Unfortunately the wolves were learning faster and faster how to control their strength with each new sport I introduced. (We did darts for a grand total of one week before the wolves figured out how to throw so they didn't knock the target down.) Thankfully, most of the wolves had grown up and weren't so hot tempered.

Actually, I hadn't challenged Aeric or Wyatt to a match since before my adopted parents died.

Instead, it was only the younger members of the Pack who had been werewolves for less than three years or so who hadn't perfected their reflexes and ability to hold back. Which worked well given that they were also the most likely to lose their tempers.

When we arrived at the park there was a cluster of Pack members, snarling at one another.

As expected, it was only the two youngest werewolves—Forrest, who was changed about ten months ago when he turned nineteen, and Remy, who was twenty but still should have known better since she was one of the few who had been born a werewolf—who were present and fighting. Judging by the way she looked at him, however, she was probably backing him up because they'd been dating for about three months now.

Young Jack and Amelia were shouting at the snapping werewolves, creating a confusing cloud of sound, though thankfully it didn't look like they'd gotten physical yet.

*Greyson is going to rip them a new one if he finds out they were fighting in front of humans.*

"Stop it, *now!*" I marched up to Young Jack and Forrest, getting in their space. "I have too few days off for me to be wasting it like this."

Forrest—easily cowed as a young werewolf if he was presented with enough force—lowered his eyes and listened carefully.

Young Jack, having known me since he was just out of kindergarten, was less impressed. He stood next to Forrest and hip checked him,

knocking him off balance.

“*Jack.*” Death was in my voice as I slammed my hands on his shoulders and gripped them. “Do you want this match to be against *me*?”

Young Jack tucked his chin and guiltily looked away.

I narrowed my eyes, then stepped back. “All of you are being silly,” I snarled.

“They started it,” Amelia began.

“Ah!” I held up a finger. “I don’t care. All of you know better than to fight this close to Timber Ridge.”

I waited for several seconds to make sure none of them were going to argue.

When no one met my eyes except for Teresa, who gave me a cherubic smile she’d inherited from Ember, I started walking to the paved road that led the way to the Pack land. “Come on,” I called when no one but Teresa moved to follow me. “We’re going to settle this back at the lodge.”

They trailed behind me, dragging their feet. But that was fine—I knew how to best motivate opinionated packmates.

“What happened?” I asked Teresa, making my voice loud enough so Young Jack and Amelia could hear, too.

“I think Forrest said that because Jack doesn’t want to try changing and becoming a werewolf, he’s a wimp.”

“I didn’t say that!” Forrest objected. He kicked his snail pace into a lope so he could catch up with me.

Naturally, Young Jack, Amelia, and Remy hurried along behind him.

“Yes, you did,” Young Jack snarled. “Because you’re so muscle-bound in the head you can’t imagine anyone wanting something besides what *you’ve* chosen—did you ever stop to think it’s idiots like you that make me not want to be a werewolf?”

“What did you say?” Forrest growled.

“*Enough,*” I said in my firm, retribution-promising voice.

They fell blessedly silent as we trudged along, barely noticing when I took a turn off of the paved road that would take us to the lodge.

“You two are going to settle this with pickleball,” I announced when we finally entered the meadow that contained the lodge.

“But pickleball is the worst!” Young Jack groaned.

Forrest was silent, but when I glanced back at him his forehead had a worried pinch to it.

*Good.*

I led the way to the lone pickleball court I'd personally fundraised to build—money aside, it hadn't taken much pleading with Hudson, the Alpha at the time, to make it happen as Lynn—his daughter and my best friend—had been very keen on the game as well.

Studying the court brought a stabbing sensation to my heart as it reminded me of all the time Lynn and I had spent playing on it, before she'd left with Hudson when Pre-Dominant Harka made Greyson the new Alpha.

*Don't dwell on it. Lynn is gone, and I learned my lesson about getting close to wolves—and wolf politics.*

I shook my head and swiveled to face Forrest and Young Jack. "Get the gear."

Young Jack grumbled as he slumped his way over to the garden shed that held most of the sports equipment the wolves kept and dug out the necessary paddles and whiffle ball while Forrest wrestled the net into place.

When they finished, they stood across from each other and peered at me.

"You know the rules—have at it. But if either of you cheat I'll use you as an obstacle in my target practice session tonight." I looked meaningfully at the part of the forest I put my paper targets up in for shooting practice. I purposely avoided practicing in public because I didn't want the werewolves figuring out what level my skills were at.

While the wolves only made me train with them about three times a week, I voluntarily practiced hunter skills on at least two other days per week—it was the only way I'd have a hope of surviving the sessions, much less ever *win* anything.

When I'd been young the Quillons had sent trainers to train with me so I could pass the accreditation test. My old teachers still showed up every now and then to make sure I was progressing—hunters are supposed to be the sharp shooters of the supernatural world. I was okay—no slouch, but I was no genius either.

The back-and-forth tap of the whiffle ball sped up, then cracked when Forrest hit it too hard. Young Jack dove to avoid it, and when the whiffle ball smacked the ground it careened past him, hitting the non-regulation

walls the werewolves had built directly behind each player space so they wouldn't have to run all the way out to the forest to find their wayward balls.

Unfortunately for Forrest, he'd hit the ball so hard that when it hit the wall, it bounced off and shot across the court, smacking him in the forehead with enough force to propel him several feet backward.

I clapped for him. "Shake it off, Forrest, and try not to die, Jack."

Teresa, Amelia, and Remy stood with me as we watched Forrest and Young Jack scramble back and forth across the court, their shoes squeaking. Young Jack missed the ball about half as much as he hit it, and Forrest nearly beamed himself in the face with his own paddle.

"They are both terrible at this," Amelia said.

"Yeah, that's why I chose it." I slipped my backpack off my back—it was making my t-shirt moist with sweat in the afternoon sunshine. "They'll exhaust themselves with all the extra running and diving they'll have to do because they're bad at it, and then they'll apologize to each other just to get out of playing longer. Both sides had legitimate complaints, but they also both hit each other in their emotional hot spots. There's no winning in a situation like that."

"Mom says you're a mad genius," Teresa announced. "I think she's right."

"You'd have to be cunning to survive living among wolves as a sole hunter." Remy froze when she realized what she'd said. "I didn't mean that, Pip—I said that wrong!"

I chuckled at her panicked expression. "It's fine—and you're not wrong."

"Is our wise hunter solving another wrong?"

Wyatt and Aeric—both wearing athletic clothes that were damp with sweat—jogged out of the forest, probably having finished the run they frequently took together during their lunch breaks.

It was Aeric who had called out to me, and he and Wyatt slowed to a walk as they ambled across the meadow.

"Just a little spat," I said. "They're both hot tempered."

"Ahh yes, the fire of youth." Wyatt adjusted his glasses with the mannerisms of a ninety-year-old grandpa as he fondly watched Jack and Forrest.

Amelia frowned at him. “Aren’t you in your twenties? That’s still pretty young.”

“Nope.” Aeric shook his head as he stretched his legs out. “Once you start creaking when you wake up, it’s all over. You’re old.”

“Don’t be confused by our youthful appearances, which are brought on by the magic of werewolves that flows through our veins,” Wyatt declared. “It helps us retain our girlish figures.” He grinned as he folded his arms across his chest, and his biceps—usually hidden by his baggy dress shirts—bulged with muscles.

Amelia rolled her eyes, but despite their casual smiles and overly dramatic comments, Remy made sure she ducked her head at the pair, and Forrest risked getting smacked in the head with a whiffle ball to wave to them.

*They might wear the façade of nerdy bros, but they are strong.*

I’d wondered before if they even had some Alpha capabilities—like Chase.

The thought made my mouth dry.

I’d noticed a pattern. It was the strongest members of the Pack—like Chase—who were sent out in the name of “promoting relationships with other races.”

If it was decided that Wyatt and Aeric were truly strong, they’d leave too.

A part of me knew I was being ridiculous. Aeric was also another rare case of being born as a werewolf. He wouldn’t suddenly develop Alpha powers...right?

*This is why it’s so dangerous to befriend wolves. Somehow, despite being Pack-focused, they leave all the time.*

Aeric rubbed his chin as he watched the game. “I hope they finish soon,” he said. “Five more minutes of this and I think Young Jack will pass out from lack of oxygen.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “Around then Forrest would probably fall over from repeated head trauma.”

“From a whiffle ball?” Remy asked.

“From a whiffle ball hit with werewolf strength,” Wyatt corrected her. He winced in sympathy when Forrest hit the ball too hard again, and Young

Jack dodged it, so it bounced off the wall again and shot across the court, smacking Forrest in the chin.

“Do you two have to go back to work soon?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m on my lunch break right now,” Wyatt said. “But I don’t have any meetings for another half an hour, so I have a little time.”

Wyatt served as the official writer/journalist for the Pack. Everything that appeared on the Pack’s website, phone app, the business websites, and all the press releases were written by him. He interacted with humans a lot in his position—which worked well for the Pack since he was so likeable.

“I’ve got plenty of time.” Aeric grinned and wriggled his eyebrows. “No one has any IT problems in the Pack right now except for Rio. He says the internet at his house is out or something. But he can wait!”

Aeric served as the Pack’s official IT guy for all businesses and homes, so he worked all hours of the day—including the middle of the night on occasion.

Aeric’s grin turned into a smirk. “I think I’ll go visit my ladyfriend before I drop by his house.”

“Your *what*?” Teresa asked.

Wyatt and I simultaneously grimaced.

“Bro,” Wyatt said. “Not cool.”

“We’ve told you that you have to stop calling Shania that,” I said. “It makes you sound like you’re both in your nineties.”

“Why?” Aeric asked. “People use that phrase in Canada all the time.”

“You should honor your home country of course, but when it comes to this issue my answer remains: no,” Wyatt said.

“For Shania’s sake,” I added.

“Hey...guys?” Teresa scooted closer to me and peered back at the forest behind us.

I turned around, frowning when I saw Amos Fletching and sixteen hunters emerge from the shadows.

*I could have sworn there were only fourteen of them at the start...*

Amos led the group, swaggering into the meadow with a smirk as he adjusted his bush hat so sinister shadows fell across his face.

Two hunters trailed directly behind him—two younger hunters I’d seen with him before. They shared the dark eyes and hair features of their hunter

family, but they were in their early twenties and about ten years younger than everyone else.

The rest of the hunters stayed a little farther back, but were easily within hearing distance.

Amos had his eyes set on us, and all hopes that he was merely passing through evaporated as he strolled straight up to us.

“Wolves. Humans. Hunter,” he greeted.

“Amos.” I jutted my chin at his entourage. “Called up more of your family, I see?”

“The investigation is a bigger issue than I was prepared for.” Amos’s laugh was gritty like rust. “I decided more backup was necessary.”

“I see.” I flicked my eyes to his two shadows. “And you two are?”

“Ahh, yes. These are my nephew and niece, Radcliff and Scarlett.”

Radcliff slightly inclined his head while Scarlett gave me a small but genuine smile.

“You two are cousins?” I guessed.

“Siblings,” Scarlett said.

“Ahh, yes. I suppose you’re keeping it all in the family.” I glanced again at the hunters standing farther back.

“What brings you to the lodge today?” Aeric asked. His goofy smile that typically made people drop their guard around him was slapped on his face.

“We’ve just made a report to the Regional Committee of Magic and were told to inform Alpha Greyson.” Amos pushed his hands deep into the pockets of his pants.

He smirked at us, expecting some kind of reaction.

*What, does he want us to congratulate him for doing his job?*

Wyatt casually watched Young Jack and Forrest—who had slowed down their playing considerably, and I was certain it was only partially because they were running out of anger to fuel them—then glanced at me, raising his eyebrows.

I sucked in a deep breath of air, then put on the polite smile I used at the welcome center. “We are so glad to hear you’ve gotten traction on this very important and vital case. I’m sure Alpha Greyson will be happy to hear your report.” I gestured to the lodge, but in truth I didn’t know if he was

there at the moment or not—I didn't have my binder with his schedule on me.

*But what Amos doesn't know, won't hurt him!*

"Aren't you at all curious what we've uncovered?" Amos asked.

Aeric scratched the back of his neck. "Alpha Greyson will tell us," he said with a confidence that was hard to refute. "We'll wait for him."

Amos rolled his eyes. "Typical power-cowering werewolf." He glanced at Amelia and Teresa with a scornful eye—most likely unimpressed with their humanity—then his eyes landed on me. "What about you, Hunter Sabre? Are you curious?"

"No," I lied with my welcome center smile. "Sorry, you seem to think we'd be more interested in this issue than we are."

Amos smirked. "You *should* be more interested. What we found is going to have grave repercussions for you wolves. But first, a little history lesson." He took a few swaggering steps away, ignoring the nervous looks Radcliff and Scarlett swapped.

"Uncle Amos." Radcliff awkwardly cleared his throat. "Maybe we should let their Alpha tell them?"

"And miss out on the fun? Nonsense. Besides." He turned around and studied me. "Their reactions may prove useful for the investigation."

I kept my welcome center smile in place. "I understand what's going on!" I set my hand over my heart. "You need our help! Technically we're not supposed to get involved in the investigation, but if it's giving you so much trouble I'm sure someone from the Pack could offer assistance," I chirped.

Amos gave me a disgusted look. "You're a sellout."

I gave him my best mournful look. "Don't worry, everyone needs help. It doesn't make you completely incompetent."

I thought I'd successfully irritated him into leaving, but he circled back around to smirk at Aeric and Wyatt, his eyes flicking to Forrest and Young Jack who'd given up on their game entirely and were watching him instead.

"Before they were exterminated in war, the elves were the terrors of the world," Amos said. "They were merciless—but their intelligence and abilities are simply unmatched in today's age." He sighed and shook his head as if he was sad for the loss of the race that literally all supernaturals had banded up against to defeat.

Elves had been the apex predator of supernaturals. But they weren't content with that—they intended to wage war on humanity, and were convinced they'd win and could enslave them.

All other supernaturals banded together for the first—and only—time in history to defeat them. Since then we'd perpetuated the beautiful myth to the humans that the elves had “died out” centuries ago when we went public, rather than reveal to them that the supernaturals were a great deal more deadly than they could imagine.

“We all know the truth of the elves,” Wyatt said. “If that's your big reveal, I question your ability to lead this investigation.”

Amos ignored him and clasped his hands behind his back, looking more gleeful by the moment—which was starting to stir my gut in apprehension.

“Masters of magic, the elves had a great number of special magics that we still can't recreate—spells and artifacts that were lost to time. Among them is a long forgotten potion...wolfsbane.”

Aeric and Wyatt froze, but Remy and Forrest—younger and less experienced, squinted in their ignorance.

Remy frowned. “Isn't that just a plant?”

Amos opened his mouth, but I rushed to answer before him—because he'd explain it in the cruelest way possible.

“It's a potion only the elves could ever brew. It takes away a shifter's humanity—not just werewolves, *any* shifter—leaving them with animal instincts and trapped in their animal shapes,” I said.

“Ding, ding, ding!” Amos brandished a finger at me. “What your little pet hunter *didn't* say, is that they used it on shifters to destroy Packs and ruin their leadership...and to keep shifters as tame animals around their homes.”

I gritted my teeth and glanced at the werewolves, trying to judge their reactions.

“They *what?*” Forrest left the pickleball court and strode over to our circle.

Amos chuckled. “That's right, they used to make you into over-glorified pets!”

Amelia gasped and covered her mouth while Young Jack lunged forward to grab Teresa—who was shaking her head in denial.

Forrest shivered with anger. He took a step toward Amos, but Wyatt grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him back.

It was a truth, one that showed just how twisted the elves had been near the end. But for the werewolves—who value the open air and running through the woods with absolute freedom—it was devastating.

Remy turned to Wyatt—who was still gripping Forrest’s shoulder—and Aeric. “That can’t be real,” she argued. “Magic like that couldn’t exist!”

Wyatt and Aeric stared straight at Amos, their expressions unflinching.

Desperate, Remy, Young Jack, and Amelia turned to me.

“He’s lying, isn’t he, Pip?” Amelia asked.

I stared Amos down. “Wolfsbane is real. We hunters are trained to recognize it—in case it ever popped up again. But it won’t. Wolfsbane died with the elves,” I said. “They never shared the recipe with the fae, and even if they had, it can only be made with elf magic.”

“Perhaps.” Amos scuffed his boots in the grass. “But occasionally someone unearths a vial or two, and wolves start turning up feral. That’s what happened to the poor Low Marsh wolf.”

“That’s impossible,” Aeric said. “No one in Northern Wisconsin has those kinds of resources to *find* that kind of a potion, much less afford to buy it on the black market.”

“Oh, but they did. We have tests that confirm the Low Marsh wolf was dosed with wolfsbane.” Amos said. “We confirmed that elf magic had been used on the wolf as soon as we arrived—that was the supposedly *unknown* magic found in its blood. But the Regional Committee of Magic itself confirmed the presence of wolfsbane when we sent in a blood sample with our tests.”

Amos prowled up to Remy, getting in the young werewolf’s face. “And we’re going to uncover exactly how your precious Alpha got it.”

Remy snarled, her lovely face twisting in her anger. “There’s no way our Alpha had anything to do with something like that!”

Radcliff and Scarlett both shifted their stances, and their hands crept toward the waistbands of their pants—where they likely had hidden weapons. But Aeric casually grabbed Remy by the back of her neck and dragged her backward with no sign of difficulty.

Radcliff and Scarlett didn’t settle back into place. Instead they looked to their uncle, who spread his arms wide. “Who else would have done it?”

Amos asked. “You pointed out no one has the resources to afford such a thing...except, perhaps, for the *Northern Lakes Pack* which annually grows in members and monetary value.”

There was something in the way he snarled the Pack name that worried me. *He doesn't like the Pack. But why? They're thriving, cause no trouble, and have improved werewolf relationships with humans.*

I paid zero attention to his accusations.

Greyson wasn't my favorite werewolf, but he was undeniably a near perfect leader. He'd never do such a thing to another wolf.

*He'd never need to. If he had a problem with someone, he could simply end them.*

Everyone else was not nearly so untouched.

Forrest growled—until Wyatt shook him so he had to shut up or risk biting his tongue.

Young Jack looked just as angry as Forrest. He and Amelia together burst past the werewolves. “Shut up,” he snarled, almost wolf-like. “Alpha Greyson would *never* do anything like that! You as—”

“Jack,” I called.

He snapped his mouth shut, but curled his hands into fists and lowered his head—not like a wolf acknowledging status, but a ram getting ready to charge.

“If it's not your Alpha, then perhaps it's the *hunter* that lives among you.” Amos smirked at me and raised his eyebrows. “She is, as she said, taught about the uses of wolfsbane.”

“How much wolfsbane did he have in him?” I asked, ignoring the accusation.

No one seemed to mind the allegation anyway. Amos Fletching had missed the notice that I was protected, but not precisely included. Remy and Forrest both relaxed though Teresa gave me a wide-eyed look of concern that I appreciated.

Amos squinted at me—I think he might have been a little disappointed at my reaction. “What?”

“How big a dose was he on?” I repeated.

Amos looked away, but when Scarlett cleared her throat, he nodded at her.

“Testing has been inconclusive on that matter,” she said. “The Regional Committee of Magic is having us run additional tests on the wolf’s fur and tissue samples, so we can judge if the amount present in his system was a result of a single dose, or multiple.”

“Multiple?” I frowned. “I think it’d be pretty difficult to miss wolves getting juiced with wolfsbane *multiple* times.”

“We are set to interview the Low Marsh Pack starting tomorrow,” Radcliff said. “We hope to get additional information through personal testimonies.”

*So Amos really did have a legit reason for bringing in more hunters. That’ll teach me for jumping to a conclusion like an impatient puppy.*

I’d been staring at the forest as I mulled over what this meant, which was how I realized the hunters were slowly closing in.

“Time will reveal who the real culprit is,” Amos said. “But I have my suspicions.” He glanced at the lodge, which made Forrest lift his upper lip in a sneer.

*Werewolves. So overly loyal—to their Alpha, anyway.*

I squinted in the bright afternoon sun and wished we were inside with the air conditioning blasting down on us. “What you mean is you don’t have any proof of anything. You just know wolfsbane was used.”

“Not entirely.” Amos wagged a finger at me. “The eyes of the hunters’ association has been on the Northern Lakes Pack for some years. As expected, given its oddly *high* percentage of successfully turned wolves, and that for over ten years it’s had a nearly 100% survival rate, even among those who don’t successfully change and remain human. That is an *impossibility*—one that isn’t natural.”

Amos narrowed his eyes at Aeris and Wyatt, who were stoic and silent.

“We’ve concluded,” he continued, “that there must be a kind of illegal magic at work here. We will find it, and uncover how your Alpha has been going against nature itself.”

I opened my mouth to point out Greyson had only been Alpha for about two years, so if something magical was at work it obviously had nothing to do with him, but Remy growled and tried to wrestle herself free from Aeris’s grasp.

Aeris pulled the young wolf’s arms behind her back and held her straight, but no one stopped Amelia when she jabbed her finger in Amos’s

direction.

“Take that back,” she yelled.

“Why would I when it’s obviously true?” Amos gloated.

“Guys, he’s just trying to rile you up,” I said.

I was ignored.

Young Jack jostled past Amelia. “Apologize to Alpha Greyson!”

“Greyson isn’t even here to be offended,” I pointed out.

Again, no one listened to me.

Forrest was trying to break free from Wyatt’s hold, but Wyatt held him pinned in a choke hold as he tried to snag Young Jack—who evaded him. What worried me, however, was that the other hunters who had been sticking to the edge of the meadow were starting to approach.

*Is this a setup for something?*

“If Alpha Greyson is not the culprit, then the only other option is that he is incompetent—how else could a wolf dosed with wolfsbane wander so close to a human city without being sensed?” Amos asked.

“Our failings as packmates to watch our lands and borders are hardly our Alpha’s fault,” Wyatt said in a voice hard enough to crunch rocks.

I stepped away from my backpack, just in case I needed to move in a hurry—it was not a good sign that Wyatt was starting to respond to him.

It meant the wolves weren’t going to put up with this much longer.

Amos shrugged. “Isn’t it? He’s your *leader*, after all. For all that he was appointed to the position and didn’t earn it. You’re just his training wheels, you know.”

*Oooh, that’s going to hit them.*

I was skeptical about the way Greyson had been made Alpha of the Pack and his obvious future career as the Pre-Dominant, but to the Pack, Greyson was their leader. They’d defend him with their last breath.

Remy strained in Aeric’s grasp, snarling as the musky whiff of werewolf magic shimmered around her—she was going to shift if she didn’t get herself under control, soon.

I glanced at Aeric to see if he could help her, but his gaze was deadly as he stared at Amos.

*This is bad, I realized. Amos went too far. Even Aeric and Wyatt won’t hold back much longer. If one of them attacks Amos...no committee would*

*find what he said a just reason for attacking him. They'll bill it as a wolf attacking a hunter—or a human attacking a supernatural if Jack jumps in.*

The political ramifications would be disastrous.

But I didn't have werewolf strength. I couldn't hold back Jack *and* Amelia.

How, then, was I supposed to get everyone out of this?

Amelia shouted, and as Jack made a grab for Amos, Radcliff and Scarlett flicked out daggers.

*That's it.*

Faster than a human, I zipped past Jack, closing in on Amos before he even realized I was there.

"Amos," I said.

He blinked in surprise at my abrupt appearance. "What? Aren't you going to try to stop your little friends?"

"No," I said. "I wanted to know, have you ever had your nose broken before?"

Amos stared at me in his disbelief, looking down his very obviously crooked nose as he did so. "Yes."

"Good. That'll make this easier." Arranging my fingers so I wouldn't break my thumb, I pulled back, then punched Amos in the face, hearing the satisfying crunch as his nose broke.

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## Chapter 11

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### *Pip*

**A**mos toppled, falling to a heap on the ground as blood trickled from his nose while his niece and nephew stared at me in shock.

My fist throbbed like crazy, but I smirked down at Amos, who groaned as he held his hands to his nose, fighting the tears that clogged his eyes.

Young Jack and Amelia gawked at me with wide eyes—Teresa cheered—and Remy and Forrest stopped fighting Aeric and Wyatt so they could gawk at Amos in shock.

Even Amos's hunter family didn't quite know how to react. The ones that had been on the fringe and fast approaching us when it looked like a wolf or human was going to attack Amos were frozen with visible confusion.

Amos called me a few things that Mama Dulce would have grounded me for repeating as he rolled around. I picked my way around him, ignoring Radcliff and Scarlett, who went back and forth between raising their daggers at me and starting to put them away.

"You're going to regret that," Amos growled as I squatted down next to him.

"Oh come off it, Fletching." I rolled my eyes. "We both know you were trying to wind us up."

Amos tried to smile at me, but it looked pretty gruesome since his nose was still bleeding and blood was smeared on his teeth. "Maybe so, but you

hit me. Do you have any idea of the laws that are going to get thrown at you?"

"Oh, I have a rough idea." I casually rested my arms on my legs and smiled down at him. "But I also know that there are very, very few penalties for hunter on hunter violence. Just a few fines, in fact."

Amos's smile faded, and he swore at me again as he unsuccessfully tried to rock to his feet.

"I can live with a fine," I continued, "knowing you were hoping for a *much* bigger target." I gave Amos my most perfect Timber Ridge Welcome Center Smile. "So go ahead. File a complaint. Try to go after Greyson. Just remember, I'm here...*and I'm just like you.*"

I patted Amos on the hand, stood up, walked back to my waiting backpack and scooped it up.

"You'll be hearing from the Curia Cloisters," Amos snarled.

I winked. "Wouldn't have it any other way. It was nice to meet you, Radcliff, Scarlett!" I waved to the younger hunters, shouldered my bag, and tried to beat a hasty retreat.

Not because I thought the hunters were going to react poorly—I'd effectively de-escalated the situation. The wolves and humans wouldn't react no matter what Amos said, now, since I'd broken his nose.

But I had to get outta there because—

"Why do I smell blood?"

*Too slow—again!*

I hastily slapped a smile on and hid my hand behind my back. "Greyson. Hello. There might have been a small accident. You should check with Aeris and Wyatt for the details."

I tried to side shuffle away, but Greyson draped an arm over my shoulders and towed me with him.

He walked more slowly than usual so I could keep up with him without having to jog. "And would this accident involve your fists and Amos Fletcher's face?"

"Maybe," I said. "It depends what the Curia Cloisters find."

We stopped a short distance away from everyone to enjoy the show.

Young Jack had recovered enough that he was laughing so hard he had sat down on the lawn. Amelia was still watching me with surprise as Teresa tugged on her arm.

The wolves were in a huddle as Aeris and Wyatt lectured Forrest and Remy, who were looking properly shamed.

The hunters were crowded around Amos, trying to help him stand and offering tissues to staunch the flow of his nose.

Amos growled at his family and waved them off as he staggered.

"This seems like a good time to tell you the Fletching hunters discovered wolfsbane in the Low Marsh wolf's system," I said.

Greyson watched the hunters with an emotionless mask. "I know."

Surprised, I turned away from the hunters. "What? How could you know? He told us he was coming to tell you!"

"Pre-Dominant Harka sent me the report as soon as she received it," Greyson said.

*Ahhh yes, that's hardly surprising considering she practically hand picked him as her replacement.*

"So, what do you think?" I asked.

Greyson's expression was unreadable as he looked out at the chaos I had caused. "I think someone is playing a dangerous game, and gravely underestimates the power of the Northern Lakes Pack."

His golden eyes seemed to glow as he spoke, and the werewolves—sensitive to the influence of his power—immediately swung around to face him.

He let his arm slide off my shoulders and took a few steps closer to his wolves, making them stand straighter with their chests puffed and their eyes fixed on him.

"Showoff," I mouthed at Greyson's back.

He must have sensed my mutinous spirit somehow—even though I didn't actually say anything—because he abruptly swung around to face me again.

"I'll take you to the Curia Cloisters when you are called there," he said. "I can tell them to hold the inquiry over the weekend so you won't need another day off when you report in."

I relaxed, gratified that was all he wanted. "I'd appreciate the weekend thing, but you don't need to drive me. I have a car. I can drive myself. It's a few hours away, but maybe I'll spend the weekend there and see if I can visit Chase at the Night Court."

"You live with my Pack," Greyson said. "My rules."

*Your rules? Your. Rules? That settles it. I'm asking Aeris to start putting GPS tracking on Greyson's phones so I can give his exact location to all visiting werewolf females. Maybe I'll even start advertising it as a travel package—"Are you the Alpha-bachelor's mate? Find out over a long weekend trip to picturesque northern Wisconsin!" We could merchandise it and make a killing!*

Soothed by my plan of action, I was able to keep a pleasant expression on. "So glad to hear that even though you're a busy Alpha with a lot of responsibilities, you can take time off to drive me—who is perfectly capable of driving myself."

"You'll need the backup," Greyson said. "I won't pit you against the entire Curia Cloisters on your own."

Softened by the explanation, I relaxed. "Don't worry about it. I'll call the Quillons while I walk home. They'll have one of their fancy lawyers waiting at the Cloisters for me. They're supposedly hunters, but I'm pretty sure the lawyers are part fae—or at least get coaching from fae—because they have a way with words that is terrifying."

Greyson rubbed the five o'clock shadow that stubbled his jawline. "That's not good enough. I'll reach out to my contacts. They'll keep me updated with the process." He meaningfully looked at Amos, who was holding a tissue to his nose as he shouted over his cellphone.

"Besides," Greyson said. "I know why you hit him." His eyes flicked to the werewolves and humans. "The Pack owes you."

"Oh. Thanks." I awkwardly cleared my throat.

Greyson watched me for a moment longer, the intensity of his golden eyes making me want to fidget even though I couldn't feel his compulsive power behind it.

When he turned away to address the wolves, I sagged a little, grateful the moment was over.

*It is not fair at all that I'm told I have dog vibes when Greyson—who can actually turn into a wolf—has enough charisma to choke a person.*

I slid my thumbs under the canvas straps of my backpack and hiked them farther up, then turned in the direction of my cottage to make my escape.

Behind me, Amos Fletching railed on his phone. "Yes, a report! I was attacked, by a hunter, and I want full charges to be brought against her!"

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The car ride down to Magiford—which was placed halfway between Milwaukee and Chicago, straddling the state lines of Wisconsin and Illinois—took roughly four and a half hours.

The solo car time with Greyson wasn't too bad. We got started at about four in the morning, and he let me doze in the back seat as he phoned in to some werewolf Alpha conference call with some of the top Alphas in North America.

It wasn't until we stopped to pick up coffee for Greyson and hot cocoa for me around seven that he alternated jostling and swerving the car. I got the hint and woke up.

"You know who your arbiter is?" Greyson asked me.

I juggled my mostly drunk hot cocoa as I wiped sleep from my eyes, then unlocked my phone so I could blearily peer at my screen. "Yep. The paperwork just came through. Arbiter Tanaka. My lawyer from the Quillons—Gigi—will meet us at the Arbiter's office. She's checking into something." I wiped dried drool from the corner of my mouth and batted at the heavy presence of Greyson's powers that hung in the car.

My hunter powers had already kicked in, so it didn't physically affect me. I could talk, speak, and move just fine. But I still didn't like it—it was like *he* was everywhere, even though I'd dragged myself into the back seat, as far away from him as I could get.

"Just as well," Greyson said. "Pre-Dominant Harka will be waiting at the Cloisters with some of her people."

"You have a meeting with her, I take it?" I tipped back the last of my hot cocoa, shaking the empty paper cup.

"Not for me, for you."

I almost spat out my lukewarm mouthful of cocoa. "*What?*" I squeezed my empty cup into the cupholder. "Why on earth would the Pre-Dominant be waiting for *me*?"

"I don't know, Lady Hunter." Greyson's voice was way too smug for my personal wellbeing. "First, we went to the Night Queen's crowning banquet together, and now I'm going to court for you. Maybe she thinks you and I—"

I thrust my arm up between the front seats of the car and smacked Greyson on the chest. “You! You have a mate! *Don’t* joke about that sort of thing!”

“Yeah, the mate who’s been so present and helpful in my life.” Greyson glanced back at me and cocked an eyebrow. “You don’t see her around, do you?”

I sank back in my seat and mutely pinched my lips shut.

*There’s no way I’m touching that potential bomb. I don’t know what a mate bond is like, but I do know he suffers for it. It’s the one thing I actually feel bad for him about.*

“If she had any decency she could have at least wandered in by now and bitten the Low Marsh Alpha for being an idiot—or at least stabbed him,” he continued. “But I’ve got no use for some elusive day-dream that may never come true, and only causes trouble.”

“But it’s a mate bond.” The words popped out before I could stop them. “Once you find her, it’ll be different.”

I cringed a little once I realized what I’d said.

I’ll fess up, as a teenager I’d been pretty sad when I found out hunters could never be a part of a mate bond—our magic made mental connections like that impossible.

Yes, I’d been attracted to the romance of the bond, but it was really the depth of the relationship that I was jealous of. To have someone who really knew you—from your very *soul*—with you for the rest of your life?

I didn’t even like Greyson all that much, and I was a tad jealous of whoever was out there waiting for him. I knew he’d treat his mate right—he’d tear down the world for her. There was no hiding that kind of loyalty in the heart-breaking song he uttered as a wolf on the late nights the Pack went for runs.

“As if I’ll get a choice to reject her,” Greyson said, his low voice lined with a bitterness I hadn’t heard before, snapping me out of my daydream.

I frowned. “But can’t you reject the bond?”

“In theory.” Greyson glanced at the GPS system on the dashboard. “But that doesn’t account for all the fussy politicians in the Curia Cloisters. They’d tan my hide if I rejected a mate—they want too badly to tie me down.”

Before I could fully ponder what that meant, Greyson pointed down the road.

“We’re on a bypass right now, but that’s Magiford straight ahead.”

Magiford was no urban superstar, but it was a large city and served as the center of supernaturals for the Midwest.

It was fenced in by several lakes that were a beautiful shade of blue that sparkled brightly enough to make my eyes hurt as Greyson took the bypass exit.

The lakes made the city more meandering and spread out with a quaint downtown, a defined industrial section on the edge of the city, neighborhoods of huge, stately wizard Houses, and several blocks with high-rise apartment buildings, hotels, and more to house all of the out-of-towners.

I knew from the supernatural general studies I had to take to get my hunter certification that Magiford was also home to the six most powerful fae courts in the Midwest, as well as the stronghold of vampire power in the Midwest thanks to the infamous Drake family, and had recently become a revival point in wizard power given the actions of the much-admired Hazel Medeis, who was rallying the wizards into a fighting force like they used to be back during the elf wars.

I was pretty sure the werewolves were putting pressure on Pre-Dominant Harka to strengthen werewolf power as a result of the growing powers of the other supernaturals, and based on the amount of attention the Northern Lakes Pack got, I was fairly certain she thought Greyson was going to be it.

*That’s why I know she’s there for him, even if he’s pretending it’s about me. Maybe that’s also why he feels like he can’t reject a mate bond? Because there’s a lot of pressure on him, as well.*

As little as I liked the way he took over the Northern Lakes Pack—and yeah, okay, as much as I might complain about the way he acted when it was just the two of us—Greyson was a nearly perfect Alpha.

It made me grind my teeth just thinking about it, but he didn’t misstep.

*And to repay him for that perfectness, he must keep on being perfect. Or else.*

I frowned and tucked my chin into my neck, disturbed by my own thoughts.

I almost sounded empathetic. To Greyson!

*Woah.*

In his defense, it didn't sound like fun. Not that it affected me. Greyson and the Pack weren't my monkeys or my circus to worry about. Not since I wasn't really part of the Pack.

I pressed my forehead against the window and watched as Greyson drove through Magiford, taking us around the lakes, through downtown, and to the Curia Cloisters.

The Curia Cloisters were a haven for supernaturals, that also acted as the regional seat of our governments. The Regional Committee of Magic—which contained the representatives from the various races—and the subcommittees—like the Fae Ring, Wizard Council, and Shifter Board—all met in the Cloisters.

The Cloisters was also where all legal complaints and supernatural notices were filed—which included cases that had to be handled by arbiters—which was basically a judge for supernaturals.

As a building, it reminded me of a werewolf in his wolf form trying to pass himself off as a friendly husky.

The designers had tried to make it reminiscent of human city halls. The front part of the building had four Greek columns and was about two stories tall with a large overhang for drop offs and deliveries and was constructed in a combination of yellow limestone and white granite, that made it almost appear striped from certain angles.

The proverbial wolf, however, was the rest of the building that crowded up behind it, looming over its shoulder with several domed ceilings, a main building that was several stories high, fancy archways set over huge arched windows, gargoyles jutting out of the walls, and enough seals, spells, and wards to knock anyone with the tiniest amount of magical senses on their rear.

I was convinced they had more than a few illegal spells on the place—the outside seemed to take up distinctly less space than you found on the inside of the building.

Greyson got a good spot in the visitor parking lot—it wasn't nine yet, so the place was pretty empty—and sauntered toward/under the large overhang where two stone dragon statues guarded the front doors.

I started to follow after him, until I saw two people—werewolves for certain based on their upright and almost assertive posture—standing under the overhang, waiting.

I turned on my heels and headed for a side door—I had nothing against Pre-Dominant Harka, but I didn't want to get dragged into talks about the Northern Lakes Pack that I had no business hearing as an outsider.

Greyson countered my plan and slung his arm over my shoulders, rerouting me. "Nope," he said. "There's no way you're throwing me to the Pre-Dominant like a sacrificial offering when she's here for *you*."

"I wasn't throwing," I objected. "I was being discreet. I don't care what you say, she's not here for me!"

"Don't be so sure about that." There was a grim scratch to Greyson's usually smooth voice that made me jerk my head and peer up at him.

The set of his mouth was tugged down—a rare show of grimness from him—and he watched Harka with the same wariness in his golden eyes as he used when watching a potential threat.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He shook his head. "You're not as unnoticed as you think," he said in a tone so low I wasn't sure the other wolves could hear him.

"Alpha Greyson, Hunter Phillipa Sabre. Welcome to Magiford!" The female wolf with an unusually slender build for a werewolf—though she had the pronounced muscles of a gymnast—smiled, lowering the intensity of her deep blue eyes.

Greyson snapped off a nod that barely counted as lowering his head. "Pre-Dominant Harka."

I saw Harka's eyes lingering on his arm that was still casually slung over my shoulder, so I grabbed him by the wrist and flicked his arm off. "Good morning, Pre-Dominant Harka, and..." I trailed off as I squinted at the other wolf.

"Oh, yes. Alpha Greyson, Hunter Phillipa, this is my nephew, Rafe. He's likely going to be the next Alpha of my Pack once I retire, so he's begun working with me now to get used to the responsibilities." Harka beckoned at the other wolf, and he stepped up with a smile.

*The Pack Alpha, but not the Pre-Dominant. How obvious is it that she's doing this so she can introduce Rafe to Greyson, who will probably be the*

*next Pre-Dominant, so she can get the two of them to buddy up before they both move into their positions?*

This was why I was happy I was a hunter. The hunter families fought and disagreed, but there were too few of us to play any dumb political ploys.

“Hello, Hunter Sabre and Alpha Greyson. I’ve heard a lot about you.” Rafe inclined his head to Greyson, then smiled at me.

Rafe bore a decent resemblance to his aunt. His hair was dark—though more of a chocolate-y color than black like hers—and he had the same deep blue eyes. He was just a touch taller than her, and more of a wiry build, but age wise I’d put him in his late twenties with Greyson, or possibly in his early thirties with Chase.

Wolves were hard to pinpoint an age for as they were slower to show their age. They weren’t anything like the fae, but it was pretty rare for them to appear old—like Mama Dulce and Papa Santos had. (Usually, they died before they got to that point. For all of their strength and abilities, wolves did not have a high self-preservation drive.)

I thought Greyson would keep his powers locked up tight like he did with the Pack, but as he flicked his eyes from Pre-Dominant Harka to Rafe, I felt the unmistakable pressure of his spirit nipping at my legs.

“Pip punched a hunter, but I didn’t think she did anything so serious that would bring wolf royalty out to greet us,” he drawled.

Harka laughed, deepening the smile lines around her mouth as she casually pushed her hands into the pockets of her pantsuit. “I don’t think it’s a serious matter. If it got to be a big issue, the Regional Committee would have to hear the case, and while I would perhaps be forced to abstain given that I know Hunter Sabre, the vampire Eminence would put a stop to the matter quickly. He doesn’t like to waste his time unless it’s his idea, and he isn’t particularly forgiving to those who attempt it.”

“It shouldn’t be a big issue, regardless,” Rafe offered. “Arbiter Tanaka is fair, and I was told you will have legal representation; is that right, Hunter Sabre?”

“Yes. And I should get going. Into there. Pre-Dominant Harka, Rafe.” I scuttled sideways, attempting to walk into the building—you never ran from a wolf; that invited them to pounce.

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## Chapter 12

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### *Pip*

Greyson didn't even say anything to them. He just sauntered after me without saying farewell.

"What, you don't pretend to be a nice guy for them?" I muttered once we passed through the doors.

"Not anymore." Greyson eyed a shifter standing guard. "Do you know where you're going?"

"Yep. I pulled up the Curia Cloisters map this morning when you were driving like a screaming banshee." I smiled at the secretary sitting behind the front desk—she had gorgeous black hair without even a strand of frizz, and a smile that brought extra light to her dark eyes—as we walked past, turning off to a different section of the Cloisters.

We climbed a set of granite stairs, my heels tapping with precise clicks. I didn't wobble too badly, even though I almost never wore heels. As Wyatt and Aeris loved to remind me, I'd rarely had an occasion to, given my failed romantic life.

I veered away from the stairwell and click-clacked my way down the hallway.

I looked pretty sharp, if I say so myself, in my dark gray skirt and suitcoat with my black heels and my white hair pulled back in a bun so neat it could maybe pass as blond if no one looked long enough.

I'd made an effort today to dress sufficiently business-y so Fletching wouldn't be able to try to make me out as some kind of low-life—if Amos dared to show his face here.

He still had the dark bruises under his eyes and the tape on his nose since the Pack refused to give him a fae healing potion and his hunters hadn't been able to ship him one yet, and he'd look pretty ridiculous standing next to me, particularly since I'd be shorter than him even in my heels, and I'd worn a suitcoat to highlight the leanness of my build and hide the light definition of my arm muscles.

Use every resource available to you in a fight, including a wardrobe. Another tip brought to you by experiencing years of Pack training.

“Pip!”

I looked up and smiled when I saw Gigi Quillon.

Although she was petite and looked almost pixie-like with her short blond-brown hair, button nose, and pink dress, when Gigi smiled, she looked shark-like.

She was a full-fledged member of the Quillon family, but she didn't do much field work, as she was a lawyer and did a lot of accounting for supernaturals in Minnesota—the state the Quillons were based out of.

“Hello, Gigi. How are the kids?” I asked.

“Oh, nearly grown up!” Gigi swept me up in a motherly hug and patted my back. “My youngest is learning to drive—and she's going to drive me straight into an early grave. I'm saying it now in case I turn up dead later this summer!” Gigi pulled back and looked me over. “You are looking prettier every time I see you! How are you—happy in Timber Ridge?”

I laughed awkwardly—keenly aware of Greyson's golden eyes drilling into the spot between my shoulder blades. “It's as adorable as ever! Though I do miss Mama Dulce and Papa Santos.”

Gigi made a tsking noise. “Naturally,” she said. “Are you ready for our appointment?”

“As ready as I can be,” I said. “I'm prepared that I'm probably going to get fined—but do you think they'll stick me with some kind of ‘community building service’ that I'll have to do? Because that's going to be a pain in the butt to pull off in Timber Ridge. We're too far north to see many other supernaturals.”

Gigi made a noise in the back of her throat. “We'll see.”

Her response made me gulp.

*Does that mean this is a bigger issue than I thought?*

Gigi peered around me. “And who is this handsome wolf you brought with you?”

I could *feel* Greyson turn on his Alpha persona as he drew closer.

“I’m Greyson, the Alpha of the Northern Lakes Pack.” He made his voice extra deep and velvety, somehow perfectly managing to cloak his snarky personality.

“Ahh, yes, I should have recognized you, my apologies,” Gigi said. “I’ve seen your picture a thousand times on werewolf reports. Somehow, though, you seem...different.” She tilted her head as she stared up at him, narrowing her eyes.

Over her shoulder, I smirked at Greyson.

*See! We hunters don’t fall for your little act!*

Greyson didn’t acknowledge my smugness as he reached out and shook Gigi’s hand. “I see,” he said. “And you are Gigi Quillon, of the Quillon hunters?”

“Oh, yes, where are my manners? I’m Gigi, and I will be officially representing Pip before the arbiter.”

“I hope things can come to an amicable understanding,” Greyson said in a very politically polite way.

*There’s no way he actually believes what he’s saying. I’m pretty sure he’d love to toss Amos across the lodge meadow.*

“We’ll see,” Gigi said. “The law is the law.”

“Sorry, Gigi,” I said. “I was backed into a corner.”

Gigi patted my hand and made a soothing noise. “Come on, I already scoped out the room. They have subpar coffee sludge if you need to choke something down, and some tea packets that I’m pretty sure were left behind after a few fae raided the initial beverage offerings.”

Gigi led the way, holding her leather briefcase at her side.

Greyson was watching me, so I made myself hurry after Gigi as I didn’t want to get caught with him alone. Greyson meandered after us.

When we reached the room I was supposed to report to, a uniformed guard stood with us outside while Arbiter Tanaka finished prepping.

Supernaturals solved disagreements in vastly different ways from regular humans with their judges and juries.

For the most part, judgment fell on the race of supernatural that was wronged. A vampire killer would be handed over to vampires—and most likely immediately killed. Wizard issues were taken before the local Wizard Council, fae Courts ruled over their own subjects, and so on.

For smaller races of supernaturals—like werewolf hunters, vampire slayers, oracles, and more—where there were a lot fewer members of that particular race, we typically saw arbiters for small issues. Arbiters listened to the complaints, studied the laws and rules in place, and then made a judgment.

Typically hunter complaints never went to an arbiter. We settled things between families, as I had previously experienced.

But Fletching had wanted to make a big stink of the issue, so he'd reported it to the Curia Cloisters and it had gotten handed off to an arbiter.

The door swung open and a man—a wizard, based on the coat of arms pin he sported on the lapel of his suit jacket—stuck his head out. “Phillipa Sabre?”

“That’s me.” I gave him my welcome center smile and clasped my hands in front of me.

He glanced at his tablet, nodded, then opened the door. “We’re ready for you and your representation and...” he trailed off and gulped when he saw Greyson.

Greyson turned up the corners of his lips so he only looked a little predatory when he smiled. “Alpha Greyson of the Northern Lakes Pack.”

“Yes, I’m aware, Alpha Greyson,” the man said. “May I ask what your involvement in the case is?”

Greyson’s expression turned flinty. “Interesting you ask that when the incident took place on *my* Pack lands.”

“Did it?” the most likely regretful wizard asked. “I’m afraid I didn’t notice the setting as it was classified as a hunter-on-hunter incident.” He fumbled with his tablet.

I glanced at Gigi—her face had gone suspiciously blank.

“Is this okay?” I whispered to her.

“It’s perfect,” she said.

Her expression didn’t say it was, but Gigi had gotten me out of trouble before, so I’d have to believe her.

“You are correct, the stage of the fight doesn’t matter much,” Greyson said. “But Phillipa is important to the Pack.” He somehow managed to lean toward me even though I was standing in the middle of the doorway and gawking. He got close enough to brush my shoulder and he slightly lowered his head toward mine before abruptly jerking it back.

He’d probably automatically started a standard werewolf sign of affection—rubbing your cheek against another—before he remembered the setting or picked up on the scent of my hairspray and disapproved.

*I’d bet on the latter.*

My guess was proven when he narrowed his eyes at the bun my hair was pulled into, then turned his gaze back on the regretful wizard. “Either way, the public is allowed to listen to arbiter cases. Unless the rules have changed?”

“Nope.” The wizard gulped. “Go on in, Alpha Greyson!”

The wizard flattened himself against the wall and held the door open.

I shrugged at Greyson, then hurried after Gigi, who charged up the aisle that led to the arbiter’s desk.

Arbiter Tanaka was already seated. His salt and pepper hair was tidy and smooth, and his build was slight, but as he adjusted the two computer screens set up in front of him and then adjusted his gold framed glasses, there was an innate sense of power in his movements. He must have been using a magic, because I felt it—it was a buzzing hum that prodded my senses.

Arbiter Tanaka was an alchemist—a wizard who used his elemental magic combined with years of study to produce magical items, like the artifacts fae needed in order to use their own magic.

There weren’t many alchemists around these days. Wild magic was dying out, and with it so was the potency of the supernatural races, and it took a fair amount of power for a wizard to become an alchemist—an amount of power that was rarely seen in recent generations.

Arbiter Tanaka straightened in his seat when he saw Gigi and me approach and flicked a notch on his glasses, which slightly magnified the size of his eyes.

“Hunter Phillipa Sabre,” he said. “Be seated. Hunter Amos Fletching has already arrived.” He gestured to Amos, who was sprawled in a wooden

seat in the second row of the sea of chairs and was wearing a surprisingly tidy suit, though he hadn't taken off his net covered hat.

His nose was still taped up, but the swelling and bruising had subsided considerably—he must have finally found a fae potion.

I mirrored Gigi and sat down in the front row of seats positioned in front of Arbiter Tanaka.

Greyson prowled past us, finding a chair on the wall that was positioned so he could see the whole room and had his back protected.

Arbiter Tanaka only glanced at him before he motioned at the wizard Greyson had frightened to close the door. He rubbed the joints of his left hand, massaging his golden skin, and peered at his computer screens.

“Shall we begin?” He didn't wait before launching into his speech. “Hunter Phillipa Sabre, you've been called to the Curia Cloisters due to your violent attack of Hunter Amos Fletching on the date of...” he read the official claim off his computer screen, including details of the incident that were relatively accurate.

(The Curia Cloisters had compiled testimonies from the Fletching hunters as well as the humans and wolves from the Northern Lakes Pack, so it was pretty balanced.)

He droned through the incident report—which I'd read ahead of time—plunging into the case with no hesitation.

Supernaturals handled their crimes in what most humans considered a frightfully casual method, given we didn't have things like courts and juries.

In reality, arbiters were remarkably genteel considering we used to settle all arguments by duels, fights to the death, and lots of other “fun” and violent methods.

“...breaking Hunter Amos Fletching's nose. Do you agree to these accounts, Hunter Amos Fletching and Hunter Phillipa Sabre?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Yes.” Amos smirked—not at me, but Greyson, weirdly.

*Does he think he's somehow getting at Greyson through me? Wow. He is a really bad investigator. Like, he isn't barking up the wrong tree; he's in the wrong forest! And this is who the Regional Committee of Magic sent as their A team?*

Arbiter Tanaka removed his glasses as he focused on me. “Although Amos Fletching requested this be tried as a larger crime, the Curia Cloisters has found it to be appropriate as a small claims,” he dryly said. “And if Hunter Sabre had anyone to her family besides herself, it wouldn’t have even come this far and wasted valuable Cloister resources.” He gave Amos a narrowed look as he drummed his fingers on his desk. “But while the testimonies make it obvious Hunter Fletching was acting in an insulting manner, he has a legitimate complaint, given his injury,” he concluded. “Hunter Sabre, do you have anything to say in your defense?”

I glanced at Gigi, who folded her hands on her lap and smiled beautifully. “Speaking on behalf of Hunter Sabre, I do.”

I knew Gigi well enough to know her calm façade usually was good for me, but I didn’t see any way she could possibly spin this to get me off.

*There are over a dozen witnesses. What can she do?*

Gigi sat straight and perfect in her chair as she flipped through the official testimony. “All parties can agree that Hunter Fletching verbally attacked the Northern Lakes Pack, and spoke in a provoking manner?”

“The testimony says as much,” Arbiter Tanaka said. “But that does not excuse Hunter Sabre’s response.”

“But it does.” Gigi dropped the packet of papers, her shark smile in place. “Due to Hunter Fletching’s conduct, I request a total exemption for Hunter Phillipa, using the citation of Hunter Code Section F, subsection 4a, in which it states it is allowed for hunters to defend their family’s honor and reputation from other hunters, including cases of minor physical assault, without consequence as long as both hunters acknowledge the provocation.”

I barely kept a straight face as I listened to Gigi’s gutsy defense. *I have no idea where she’s going with this...*

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one.

“What are you saying?” Amos squinted at Gigi.

She didn’t acknowledge him, and kept her face pointed to Arbiter Tanaka.

Greyson was as still as a statue, but I thought a tiny bit of his stiffness was gone.

“Get on with your point, Hunter Quillon,” Arbiter Tanaka ordered.

Gigi flicked her eyes at Amos, every sign of the kind and bubbly person she usually was snuffed out as she looked at him with an expression a lot closer to a wolf's. "Hunter Fletching verbally attacked the Northern Lakes Pack in front of Hunter Sabre—who was adopted into the Pack as a child. They're her family. She was raised by two members of the Pack, but continues to live among the Pack, trains with them, and is employed by them. It was her *right* to defend them from Hunter Fletching's insults."

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## Chapter 13

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*Pip*

**A**mos rocketed out of his chair. “That’s insane,” he said. “There’s no way a bunch of wolves could be *family* to a hunter!”

Arbiter Tanaka leaned back in his chair and flicked a finger at Amos, silencing him.

Gigi’s smile grew as she closed in on her argument. “Hunter Sabre has no living hunter relatives, and is the last of her father’s and her mother’s lines. After the tragedy of her parents’ deaths, she was an orphan. None of the hunter families took her in, but the wolves did, and they continue to care for her.” Gigi motioned to Greyson—a convenient prop for her case.

*No wonder she looked gleeful when she saw him.*

“You can also witness this connection in the verbiage of the testimonies.” Gigi danced her fingers across her paper packet. “The Northern Lakes Pack refers to Hunter Sabre as ‘our hunter’. The werewolves believe she is a part of their Pack—why else would Alpha Greyson be here?”

That was stretching things a little.

The wolves thought I was important. And I wasn’t an idiot—they did a lot for me. But I was a hunter. While they might call me Pack, they didn’t treat me like a wolf.

*I’m not going to volunteer that little factoid, though.*

“The Northern Lakes Pack are all Hunter Sabre has in terms of family,” Gigi said. “And to hunters—like werewolves—family matters. It is natural she’d seek to defend them from Hunter Fletching’s vile accusations, and according to the law, in attacking him she meted out *hunter* justice on a fight between two hunters.”

*Woah. Maybe she really did apprentice with a fae—because that was some stunning word manipulation.*

Amos stood up and ripped his hat off. “This is ridiculous! Arbiter Tanaka, you can’t possibly believe her! Hunter Sabre can’t consider a Pack of werewolves family—she’s a *hunter*!”

Arbiter Tanaka carefully placed his glasses back on, tapping his frames so the lenses grew slightly tinted—alchemist work, likely. “It seems not everyone shares your views, Hunter Fletching. Given the support the Pack gives her, and her status as adoptee, I agree with Hunter Quillon’s defense. According to the Hunter Code, Hunter Sabre has done nothing wrong. This incident is dismissed from Curia Cloisters attention as it was handled according to hunter law.”

“But—that!” Amos growled and briefly crushed his hat in his hands.

He turned, and I thought he’d bring his anger out on me—surprisingly, it was Greyson he turned to. “One day Sabre will leave your Pack, and then it’ll be open season on you lot!”

Greyson narrowed his eyes. “Careful, Hunter Fletching.” His voice was so low I swear I could feel it vibrate in my chest. “One might think you don’t actually care about the investigation you were charged with, and are only looking to undermine my Pack.”

Amos swaggered up to him, a sneer curling his upper lip. “You’d be wrong about that. My hunters have been researching wolfsbane—do you know what we discovered? Used in small doses, it increases a werewolf’s strength and stamina, as well as their predator drive, without entirely making them wild so they retain a shred of their selves.”

Greyson shifted his weight so he appeared relaxed. “Congratulations. How does this evidence relate to the case?”

“It relates because we know from hair samples that the Low Marsh wolf had been taking these low doses for months, before the buildup became too much and he went wild. We interviewed the Low Marsh Alpha, who admitted the wolf had recently moved up in the Pack due to his increased

strength. And isn't it remarkable that all of this just so happens to be on the edges of the Northern Lakes Pack territory—which has the greatest ratio of wolves with Alpha-like strength in the entire Midwest!" Amos squashed his hat back on his head as he glared up at Greyson.

Greyson twitched his eyebrows. "So you're using the excuse of a case in an attempt to investigate my Pack? Your theatrics are unnecessary. Anyone from my Pack would submit a sample to prove we don't resort to dirty potions created by a race that is hated even after being eradicated." He turned away from Amos. "They'd be especially glad to, considering it would keep you from wasting time on your crackpot theories instead of actually attempting to solve the case you were sent to investigate."

Gigi cleared her throat, getting my attention, then tipped her head at the doorway before she charged off.

I reluctantly followed her.

"Oh, my investigations are linked to this case!" Amos snarled. "We'll prove the Low Marsh wolf's supplier was your Pack, Alpha Greyson. Mark my words!"

"Hunter Fletching," Arbiter Tanaka interrupted in biting tones. "I would appreciate if you uttered your theatrics *elsewhere*. I have more incidents to review—leave!"

"Yes, Arbiter Tanaka," Amos sneered. He stalked down the aisle, elbowing past Gigi and me.

His face was carved with anger, but he didn't even glance at me as he stormed out of the room.

*Amos didn't turn me punching him into a big deal because he was trying to punish me. He thought he could use me to get to Greyson. I was still just bait—more proof he's a terrible investigator, given that Greyson didn't do a thing except drive me here. Though he was a convenient prop for Gigi, too.*

I shook my head as Gigi and I slipped out of the room.

*Why is Amos out to get the Northern Lakes Pack? He seems pretty upset by the power they've amassed. But why? It doesn't affect us hunters.*

Gigi didn't stop outside the door, she led me all the way down the stairs and outside the Curia Cloisters building before she let it rip.

"We won!" Gigi brandished her briefcase in the air. "You didn't even get a warning—everything went perfectly! And did you see Fletching's

face? It shriveled up like a mushy potato! Oh, that was gorgeous—and so much fun!”

Gigi slapped her thigh as she leaned against what I hoped was her car—a shiny silver Audi.

“Thanks for the help, Gigi,” I said. “I know I was just facing a fine, but I really appreciate that you came all the way here from Minnesota to help me.”

Gigi sobered up immediately. “Of course,” she said. “We Quillons owe it to you. Fletching obviously had a plan. I’m glad we could thwart him.” She narrowed her eyes, and that sharp edge she’d had reappeared. “If he bothers you at all, let me know. We’ll throw the Hunter Code at him until he’s so strung up in red tape he can’t move.”

“I don’t think he’s really targeting me.” I tugged on my suitcoat—which felt stuffy and hot now that we were outside under the summer sun. It was still just morning, but Magiford got humid fast in the summer.

“He’s not,” Greyson said.

I carefully turned on my heels to face him—I’d thought for sure he’d turned off when Gigi led me outside. “Yeah, it seems like he’s after the Pack. Do you know why?”

Greyson shook his head. “He’s known for being generally disagreeable to work with among us werewolves. But I haven’t ever heard of him specifically targeting a Pack like this.”

“Yeah, he was pushing your wolves pretty hardcore according to the testimony.” Gigi opened the back seat of the Audi and tossed her briefcase inside. “It’s strange. You’d better be careful.”

“But the Northern Lakes Pack isn’t involved in anything to do with wolfsbane,” I said. “None of the wolves would ever take something so horrible—particularly given what it stands for.”

“Maybe they wouldn’t in the Northern Lakes Pack,” Gigi said. “But there’s no way the Low Marsh wolf was the only one taking it. Northern, rural Wisconsin is not a hotbed for producing magical drugs, and he couldn’t have stumbled on it if Amos is right and he took it over a long period of time.”

“You’re saying he had to have a supplier,” Greyson said.

“And that there is a very good chance he wasn’t the only one taking it,” Gigi grimly added. “With that, I need to head out. I’m calling on a friend of

mine—a fae lawyer who helped me put your defense together. He'll want to know how it went, and he has offices here in Magiford." Gigi slipped into her car and yanked the door shut, then immediately kicked it open again. "Thank you, Alpha Greyson, for coming. It made my argument airtight. I hope you both have an uneventful trip back to Timber Ridge."

"Thank you for helping Pip," Greyson said.

Gigi smiled—this one with a touch of sadness. "Of course," she said. "The Quillons always will. Call me when you need me, Pip."

"Will do. Thanks again, Gigi." I waved as she started her car up, but once she pulled out of her parking spot I turned to Greyson.

"I'm assuming you've got some Alpha business to take care of?"

"There are a few notices that need to be posted in the Curia Cloisters—the Night Queen has offered us an official alliance. I need to sign it, and a few other similar things." He glanced warily at the Curia Cloisters building, then me. "It might take an hour or two."

"That's fine, I'll head to downtown Magiford," I said. "I want to tour the place and see if they have a welcome center. I think ours needs an update, so I'm looking for ideas—oh! And I want to visit the Queen's Court! Chase told me it was the best café in Magiford."

"You talked to Chase?" Greyson stared me down with his golden eyes, but he didn't loosen his powers or anything so I was going to take that as a win.

"Yeah, I asked him if we could drop in for a quick visit. He's on duty today, but he said he could take a break when we stop by...if that's okay? I figured you'd be busy so I could use Uber or something to drive me out there."

Greyson tilted his head. "It'd be good to check on him," he finally said. "I assume he is the reason why the Night Queen has offered an alliance to us. I'll drive us out there after I finish my work, but first I'll take you downtown."

"It's not that far," I said. "I think it's only a few miles away. I can walk it."

Thanks to the wolves and their obsessive training—or "playing"—anything less than five miles was just a stroll for me, especially if I got to walk it.

“I’ll drive you.” Greyson sauntered off in the direction of the car. “You can call me when you’re done at the café.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I asked. “We don’t own the cellphone store here. If you break yours, you’ll be without a phone until at least tonight—and that’s only if I call Aeris on my phone so he has one waiting for you.”

“That won’t happen,” he said.

“Why not?”

Greyson scoffed, a piece of his true personality breaking through. “Because if I break mine, I’ll take yours and break it, too.”

“Why would you do that? Then we’d be stranded without phones!”

Greyson unlocked the car. “It would make me feel a lot better. Get in.”

“I said I could walk.”

“Get in.”

“Oohhh, there’s the Alpha voice! You bust it out a lot more easily here. I assume that means you don’t care what people think about you in Magiford? But it would be bad PR for your future.” Despite my verbal prods, I hopped in the car.

Greyson slid in and turned the car on, which blasted hot air on us as the car had heated up during our brief time inside. “I don’t need to care for my future when you care enough for the both of us, *Packmate*.”

“Of course, *Alpha*,” I said in my chirpiest tour guide voice. “Do you need me to tell you where to drive, *Alpha*, or do you know where the Queen’s Court Café is?”

“Stop talking like that—and I know where I’m going.”

“Yes, *Alpha*!”

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The wolves in the Curia Cloisters must have hopped to it under Greyson’s command like the Northern Lakes Pack, because I only had about two hours to explore downtown before Greyson showed up and chauffeured me off to the mansion that served as the Night Queen’s base on human lands.

We parked in a huge garage, that could have held dozens of vehicles but oddly only held one slightly beat-up looking truck that wouldn’t have been

out of place in Timber Ridge, one Lexus SUV, and a Bentley car.

“Why do you think the garage is so big?” I asked Greyson, my voice echoing in the vast emptiness.

I felt a wolf somewhere behind me and was already turning around when Chase spoke. “Because the Night Queen sold the dozens of cars previous rulers owned in an effort to pay off some of the Night Court’s debt.”

Chase stood with his arms clasped behind his back, wearing a black, military-esque uniform with accents of dark purple and silver that emphasized the warmth of his sepia-brown skin and the broadness of his build. His eyes—a bright shade of yellow—held a gleam of humor that hadn’t changed since he’d joined the Night Court over a year ago. His hair was the same style it had always been in since I’d been adopted: short on the sides and slightly longer on top so it showed the tiniest hint of curling.

But there was something...*looser* about him.

Chase was diligent—almost to the point of ridiculous. Even when I’d been younger and had a crush on him, I thought if he lightened up just a touch, he’d have so much more fun. Studying him now, I could see that had changed. For the better.

“Chase!” I paused, not sure if I should hug him like most wolves would, or stay back if he was working. (It was Chase, after all.)

Chase decided for me by sweeping me up and hugging me, petting me on the top of the head like a puppy.

“If you say Pomeranian Power-up, I’m going to bite you,” I muttered into his chest.

“I would never say such a thing out loud.” Chase gave me a brotherly pat on the back, then stepped back.

“Ah-hah! That means you’ve thought it.” I scrunched my mouth up and narrowed my eyes at him.

“I don’t know that there is a packmate who *hasn’t* thought it.” Chase ruffled my hair one last time, then turned to Greyson and bowed his head. “Alpha Greyson.”

“Chase.” Greyson nodded at him. “Have we come at a bad time?”

“Not at all,” Chase said. “This is the start of my lunch break. I’ll show you two to my office.”

“You have an office? Sweet!” I shielded my eyes from the hot afternoon sun as we left the garage and headed for the mansion.

The landscape was swept with a lush green lawn, and I could see a hedge maze peeking out from behind the mansion, and even farther back a stable that was so luxurious—I could see the glass skylights from the driveway—it could have been a really nice house.

I whistled. “Wow, this is a really nice place.”

Chase lifted an eyebrow at me. “You’ve seen it before.”

“Yeah, after *dark*,” I said. “These gardens are gorgeous—you can’t possibly do them justice at night!”

Flowering bushes were everywhere, making the grounds colorful and the air sweet. I was tempted to stick my nose in a wild rosebush or two, but the buzzing of fat bumble bees kept me following Chase up to the house.

“Is Queen Leila at home?” Greyson asked.

“My Sovereign is currently receiving visitors.” Chase adjusted the earpiece that was tucked around his ear. “Or at least she *should* be. But it seems she is attempting to avoid them.”

“Avoiding them?” I asked. “Are they ambassadors from the Curia Cloisters with paperwork or something?”

“Not quite, but close.” Chase opened a magnificent wooden door and stepped aside, motioning for me to enter the huge mansion. “They are fae royalty.”

The inside of the mansion was as beautiful and luxurious as the outside with dark wooden floors and floorboards, elaborate blue and purple damask wallpaper, and tea sets settled on nearly every surface to the point that I made sure to keep my arms tight against my body so I didn’t knock any over.

Tea—it’s a fae thing.

“Why would she avoid other fae royalty?” Greyson asked. “Queen Leila is powerful. I was under the impression that she bowed to no one.”

“My Sovereign *is* powerful.” The slant of Chase’s eyebrows said he didn’t appreciate Greyson’s doubts. “She is also...eccentric.”

“When we met Queen Leila for her inauguration ball she seemed very kind,” I said as I trailed behind Chase as he led us up a fancy set of stairs.

“She is kind—in some ways, too kind,” Chase said. “She also has the good sense of a turkey that has fallen out of too many trees.”

“Hey, turkeys are wily creatures.” I peered up and down the hallway when Chase led us out of the staircase and into a similarly decorated second floor. “Don’t underestimate them.”

Greyson glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “Let me guess, you feel a kinship to prey animals?” he muttered to me.

“We can’t all be high and mighty wolves,” I said.

“Maybe, but you should at least try to learn from them and *hide* rather than attack others.”

“If you’re referring to Amos, that hardly counts. I broke his nose in one hit. If I’m a prey animal, he’s a plant or something,” I said.

Chase opened a door. “My office.”

Unlike the rest of the mansion, Chase’s office was slightly less lavish... because there was no room for it.

One wall consisted entirely of screens that showed live video feed of various parts of the mansion grounds—the fancy stable, several angles of the vast gardens, the front driveway, the garage, and more.

There was a long row of computers—two of which were occupied by fae wearing headsets who took them off, bowed, and scurried out of the room before Chase said anything.

(It had to be the slight Alpha edge he had—and that they obviously respected him based on the quick smiles the fae flashed me before they ducked out.)

Windows occupied the far side of the room, and positioned in front of them was a desk that was so tidy and bare it could only be Chase’s. There were a few metal folding chairs placed around the room in the scant space that wasn’t taken by the sword racks and locked gun and ammo cabinet.

“Pip is here to visit me.” Chase shut the door, then shifted his yellow gaze to Greyson. “But why are you here, Alpha?”

“Huh?” I blinked and looked between the two.

Greyson seated himself in one of the metal chairs, his long legs stretched in front of him. “When you were dealing with the attempts on Queen Leila’s life, elf magic was used against her, correct?”

Chase stood straight—even if he was now a part of the Night Court, he’d still always have ties to the Pack, and his Alpha edge was no match for Greyson’s overwhelming power. “Yes.”

“Were they spells only? Or have you seen or heard of any elf potions being circulated?” Greyson asked.

Standing safely behind him, I rolled my eyes.

*Of course, I should have guessed there was a reason he wanted to visit Chase. Always the Alpha! Though it’s not a bad idea. Although the elves have been dead for a long time, it seems odd that isolated uses of their magic are suddenly popping up.*

“Spells only,” Chase reported. “And I believe they were recreations. You think there is an elf potion that survived the purging the supernaturals held of all elven magic and artifacts?”

Greyson nodded. “I don’t believe, I know. The Low Marsh wolf was dosed with wolfsbane. The original point of the potion was to create domesticated werewolf and shifter pets for the elves—so we lost our humanity and acted like dumb animals. The Low Marsh wolf was apparently taking low doses of it to avoid the loss of his human mind, but to gain strength and stamina.”

“Similar to performance enhancing drugs humans occasionally take?” Chase asked.

Greyson nodded. “During Pip’s appearance before Arbiter Tanaka—”

That got me a narrowed glance from Chase since I had “happened” to leave that tiny detail out when I’d asked if we could visit him.

I smiled and yanked my white hair out of its orderly bun, trying to look like the Pomeranian puppy the wolves were forever telling me I was.

Chase narrowed his eyes, but obediently shifted his attention back to Greyson, who hadn’t stopped talking.

“—Hunter Fletching reported that the Low Marsh wolf had been taking small doses of wolfsbane for the past few months, and that the Low Marsh Alpha reported that wolf had recently moved up in the rankings.”

“I assume because the potion gave him the necessary strength?” Chase asked.

“That would be my guess.” Greyson abruptly stood, pacing back and forth in the narrow space by the computers. “But I want to know if the use of this potion is restricted to northern Wisconsin, or if it has infiltrated the Midwest in general.”

Chase nodded. “I’ll see what I can do. Have you told the Pre-Dominant?”

“Fletching will submit her a report if he hasn’t already, but I don’t want her to know I’m looking into it,” Greyson said.

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## Chapter 14

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*Pip*

I frowned. “Why not? Don’t you trust her?”

“I trust her with a lot of things,” Greyson said. “My life and my loyalty. But I don’t want her making a big deal about this. If I’m lucky, she’ll never have to find out we’re investigating the issue, and won’t have a chance to parade me around.”

“Understood,” Chase said.

I pushed my eyebrows together, not half as understanding.

*But if he means to be the Pre-Dominant...wouldn't he want the opportunity to show off? Unless he doesn't intend to become the Pre-Dominant? No—he has to. Why else would he agree to take over the Northern Lakes Pack when he had no connection to us, and Alpha Hudson was nowhere close to retiring?*

“Do I have permission to explain the situation to Queen Leila?” Chase continued. “I’ll get farther if I can use the power of the Night Court’s reputation to request documents.”

“Would she mention it before the Regional Committee?” Greyson asked.

“Not likely,” Chase blandly said. “She already dislikes how long committee meetings take, and frequently brings additional work.”

“I don’t believe you that she lacks sense,” I said. “She sounds practical. I had to sit in on a few committee meetings as part of my hunter

certification, and they are *dead boring*.” I shivered at the memory.

*Politics—they’re the worst! Give me the forest any day.*

I itched to pull out my twin daggers, but Greyson had made me put them in the glove compartment of his car when we first headed out this morning—when I was too groggy to argue.

Chase shook his head at me, then pivoted back to Greyson. “I’ll report in if I find anything.”

“Thanks. Look for reports of wolves inexplicably going feral, too, please. Ember is looking over the statistics of the past few years in North America to see if there’s an increase, but you might learn something different coming at it from a fae base of power,” Greyson said.

“Yes, Alpha.” Chase’s gaze strayed to the door, and after a few moments, I thought I heard the muffled tap of footsteps.

The door abruptly swung open. A beautiful woman scrambled through it, shut the door, then leaned her back against it and exhaled sharply.

Her dark hair was tousled—which didn’t quite match the beautiful silken gown she wore that gleamed thanks to the opals sewn into the skirt—and she was model tall with the pronounced, glamorous features of a fae, though her eyes—a magical shade of purple-ish blue—were bright with a kindness fae didn’t usually have.

But that was the cornerstone of the easily recognizable Queen Leila, the monarch of the Night Court: her kindness.

Queen Leila flicked her hair from her face, then straightened when she noticed our presence. “Good afternoon!” She strolled across the room with a grace that was at odds with the way she’d practically thrown herself inside. “Alpha Greyson and Pip! I’m so glad to see you in Magiford again.”

It was hard not to chortle with glee that a genuine *fae queen* recognized me, but that’s the kind of person Queen Leila was.

“Queen Leila.” I hovered between a bow and a very awkward curtsy—I didn’t meet many royals.

“Queen Leila,” Greyson murmured as well.

“It’s just Leila, please. You two are practically family, anyway, since you’re Chase’s Pack.” Leila reached the giant windows and peered outside, looking beautiful as she stared into the gardens, which was how I almost missed her checking the latches on the window to see if it would swing open. “Are you staying in town for long?”

“Unfortunately we must leave this afternoon. The drive back to Timber Ridge is several hours long, and we’d like to be home before midnight.” Greyson bowed to her as she moved down one window and tested the locks on that one as well.

“An hours long drive?” That distracted Queen Leila long enough from her lock-testing that she frowned and peered in our direction. “Chase, why don’t you just take them back with the night mares?”

“I’m on duty,” Chase said.

Queen Leila rolled her eyes as she yanked on another window latch that also didn’t budge. “Yeah, I forgot you have a thing about work. You could take a fifteen-minute coffee break and that would be more than enough time for the night mares to take them home. All you need to do is show the night mares a map and they’ll figure it out.”

“I would be unreachable for those fifteen minutes,” Chase said.

“I’ll be fine,” Queen Leila said. “It’s fifteen minutes—what could happen?”

Chase flattened his lips. “With you? *A lot.*”

Queen Leila circled around back to the last window she hadn’t tried. “Fine. I could find Rigel and sit on him—would that make you feel better?”

“*Sit on me? Is that a human euphemism for something?*”

Leila jumped—and I was caught off guard, too—when the window she’d been heading toward was suddenly open and filled with a crouched fae.

With his silver hair, nearly black eyes, and carrying enough hidden blades to outfit one of Chase’s guard squads, it would have been impossible to mistake Consort Rigel—Leila’s husband—as anyone else.

They were a love match—now. But they’d thrown the supernatural world into a tizzy when they’d first married, as Rigel had previously been the best fae assassin in North America.

“Fae-bae, hello.” Queen Leila leaned out of the window to kiss Consort Rigel’s cheek as he remained crouched on the window sill. “I just meant then I’d be so close to you nothing could hurt me.” She stuck her head out past her husband’s crouched body and peered down at the ground. “We’re on the second floor, but I could theoretically survive a fall from this height—right?”

Consort Rigel narrowed his eyes. “The Mid-Atlantic Winter King wants to swear fealty to you, not stab you in the heart.”

“With a *polar bear*. He wants to swear fealty to me *with his polar bear*.” Queen Leila shook her head as she looked up and down the line of windows.

“It’s the animal that represents his court,” Consort Rigel said. “Besides, you have magic that makes you likable to animals.”

Leila sucked her head back into the room. “Yeah, well *likable* isn’t on the same level as ‘let me put my face near your mouth full of *teeth*’! Even my survival instincts are too strong for that.”

“That’s good to know,” Chase said. “I’d lost all hope such instincts existed in you—because you’ve done plenty that should have made them kick in before.”

Queen Leila scrunched her nose. “Have you guys seen this polar bear? He’s like the size of an SUV!”

“It is unavoidable,” Consort Rigel said. “Queen Rime is quite insistent that her siblings swear fealty to you.”

“Yeah, and you can bet I’m going to give her a special attention for this wonderful idea,” Queen Leila grumbled.

“You liked to call animals like your night mares—*before* their transformation—cute,” Chase added. “You can’t backtrack now when it’s inconvenient.”

“It’s fine,” Queen Leila said. “So that’s a no to a window escape, then?”

“Correct.” Consort Rigel eased his way inside and stood up to his full height—which also gave me a good look at the daggers sheathed directly into his arm guards. Talk about nifty!

Queen Leila folded her arms across her chest. “Returning back to what’s important. Chase, if you can’t escort Alpha Greyson and Pip back home with the night mares, then send someone else in your place.”

Chase frowned at her. “Who? My people are all on a carefully scheduled rotation.”

“Chrysanthe would,” Queen Leila said.

“I would never ask Chrysanthe to look after such a personal matter for me,” Chase said.

“She’d cry if she heard you say that, you know.” Queen Leila approached the door and pressed her right ear against it—listening for the

polar bear, I assumed. “If you won’t ask Chrysanthé then...I don’t know... someone with a lot of time on their hands? Oh! You can ask Lord Linus!”

Chase furrowed his brow so deeply it looked like it was sculpted out of stone. “*Your father?*”

“Yeah, he’s got tons of time,” Queen Leila said. “You’d practically be doing me a favor by occupying him for even fifteen minutes.”

Chase rested his thumbs on his belt. “Lord Linus would be a suitable candidate, I suppose.”

“Being compared negatively to Linus would *really* make Chrysanthé cry,” Queen Leila said.

“Doubtful,” Rigel said. “Most everyone else respects your father.”

“I respect him too, but I could do without all the babies-sitting-in-flowers-photographs he keeps texting me to hint that he wants us to start popping out grandkids.” Queen Leila tapped her chin. “I should make *him* go greet the polar bear!”

“You are going to have to greet the polar bear,” Rigel said. “It’s unavoidable.”

“Psh, you underestimate me,” Leila said.

“Not at all,” Rigel said. “It’s merely that it’s outside the door.”

“*What?*” Queen Leila was back at the open window. “Something came up, so I—uhh—have to make an emergency departure.”

“My Sovereign,” Chase said in a warning tone as he started to skirt around his desk and approach the fae queen.

“Greyson, Pip, have a fast trip back home! Portal traveling can be trippy, but make sure you stop by the kitchens before you leave for lunch!” Queen Leila boosted herself onto the edge of the sill—which I was pretty sure turned two of Chase’s hair follicles instantly white.

“Can’t you be an adult about this?” Consort Rigel grumbled as he edged past Chase and slithered onto the sill after Leila.

“I have a thing about giant bears,” Queen Leila said. “Mainly that they could eat me.”

“That’s an unconvincing argument considering some of the animals you’ve played with in the past.” Consort Rigel held on to the edge of the building with one hand and scooped his wife up with the other.

“Playing doesn’t mean I let their teeth anywhere near my head.” Queen Leila threw her arms around Consort Rigel’s neck and clung to him.

She waved to us before Rigel stalked off, easily carrying her as he confidently strode down the thin stone sill, disappearing from the line of windows.

Just after they slipped out of sight, the door buckled, then popped open.

My heart pounded in my chest as a wall of white fur filled the doorway. An enormous polar bear pushed his head in—which was practically the size of my upper body.

It blinked shiny black eyes, and its large black nose twitched as it sniffed the air, but when it opened its mouth to huff/growl its disappointment I deeply understood Queen Leila's desire to avoid the creature.

Its teeth were bigger than my fingers!

Chase bowed to the creature. "I apologize—she just left."

The bear huffed again, sucked its head into the hallway, then ambled off.

I plopped down in the metal chair Greyson had previously abandoned. "Wow. It must be a constant shot of adrenaline to work here."

"It is an interesting workplace," Chase mildly said.

"I'm glad it has worked so well," Greyson said.

Chase ducked his head. "Queen Leila is an honorable leader, and the Night Court has become another Pack to me, but it works only because I still retain my link with the Northern Lakes Pack." He offered a slight smile—which was the biggest positive reaction you could ever hope to get from him—and ruffled my hair.

"Cut that out." I gave up trying to restore order to my hair—the bun had given it a weird kink, but it was extra big and staticky now.

The door banged open again—I was starting to get the feeling that this was a normal occurrence for Chase—and in marched a handsome fae lord with a pair of sunglasses settled low on the bridge of his nose and his dark hair pulled back in a high ponytail.

"Greetings, puppies!" He smiled mischievously and flicked his sunglasses off with a flourish.

I'd met him once before, but between his dark hair and purple-ish-blue eyes that I'd only ever seen in Leila, as well as his good-humored grin, Lord Linus's parental relationship to Queen Leila would have been obvious. (Though I'll admit it had thrown me the first time I met him, given that he

looked barely a decade older than his daughter. Fae aged more slowly than werewolves, so it wasn't surprising, but as someone who hadn't been around many fae it was still a little jarring.)

"My darling daughter sent me a text and said you needed my help, Chase? Which, might I say, is *such* a rare occasion I think we should take a selfie for posterity!" He winked at me, gave Greyson a little salute, and generally seemed like a charming idiot, but I could see the faint outline of a hidden dagger strapped to his back, tucked under his long-sleeved shirt, in a way that would have been unnoticeable to anyone who didn't have to frequently hide weapons on their body.

*Tricky fae—I'm glad I live with uncomplicated wolves.*

"My Sovereign is correct," Chase said. "She granted me permission to ask the night mares to take Alpha Greyson and Pip back to Timber Ridge—our Pack home in northern Wisconsin."

Lord Linus held a hand up. "Say no more—I want to guess. You're too diligent to go since it would require going out of touch for ten minutes, so I'm getting sent in your place?"

Chase only had the opportunity to blink before Lord Linus slapped him on the back in a friendly way.

"Of *course* I'll take them," he said. "It's my honor since you take such great care of Leila—though I'm not ashamed to admit I'll also go because I'm curious what kind of place spawned you."

"There will be some complications," Chase said. "They drove a car here, which will need to be transported as well."

"Don't worry about it," Lord Linus said. "I'm pretty certain help is coming, so we'll just drive it through the portals with the night mares."

"Help?" I asked.

I heard someone run down the hallway, and seconds later a blur of blond careened past and crashed into something just outside the door.

"That'll be my help!" Lord Linus brightly declared. "Chrysanthe—come introduce yourself!"

A beautiful fae with blond hair, olive skin, and an emerald green shirt tucked into black slacks planted her hands in the doorway to balance herself as she flipped her hair out of her face. She smiled—a dazzlingly white grin that, I won't lie, made my thoughts stop for a moment or two. She was *that* pretty!

“Hello,” she said, her voice breathy from her run. “Hi,” she repeated. “I’m Chrysanthe. It’s so nice to meet a member of Ch-ch—Chase’s Pack.” Her eyes widened when she noticed Greyson, and she blurted out, “And his Alpha!”

“I’m impressed you recognize Greyson,” I said.

“It’s not difficult,” Chrysanthe said. “The Curia Cloisters has an online profile for him. Might I inquire what your name is?”

“I’m Pip,” I said. “I live with the Northern Lakes Pack—though I’m a human.”

It was always easier to introduce myself as a human than a hunter—particularly since I didn’t actually do hunter work, and it always raised *a lot* of questions.

“Pip,” Chrysanthe said. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

“Chrysanthe is a dear friend of my daughter’s,” Lord Linus said to me and Greyson. “She’ll be glad to help me—won’t you, Chrysanthe?”

“Yes, of course.” Chrysanthe pulled off a beautiful curtsy I wouldn’t have been able to imitate if my life depended on it. “I would love to help.” She smiled, but this time it was aimed at Chase.

Chase bowed his head to her. “Thank you, Chrysanthe. I appreciate it. I will have to thank Queen Leila for informing you.”

“Oh.” Some of Chrysanthe’s fae poise left her. “Um. She didn’t. I heard that you had guests...from your Pack. Good manners would say they must be greeted.” She straightened her shoulders and smiled again.

“Mmmhmm,” Lord Linus said. “Good manners. Yes. That is certainly one of your main concerns.” He winked at Chrysanthe, who blushed bright red, but ignored him as she kept smiling at Chase.

*Woah—a fae, batting her eyes after a werewolf?*

Supernaturals romancing outside of their own race wasn’t taboo...but it just wasn’t *done*. Everyone was too focused on trying to slow the death of wild magic to be concerned with other supernaturals, much less find them attractive.

*Maybe that’s my problem. I need to mingle with other supernaturals and look outside my regular social circle. I think I remember watching a dating coach say that on YouTube once when I was despairing over human guys disliking my strength.*

I didn't normally care about romance too much. I mean, I was young. I wanted to figure out if I could leave Timber Ridge before I really gave a relationship a thought.

But if Chase was making even an inch of progress in the field of romance, that drastically changed things. Chase had the emotional awareness of a fungus growing in the woods. If *he* was moving faster than I was, things were way more dire than I thought.

"Do you need us to leave now?" Greyson asked. He stopped pacing directly in front of my chair, blocking my vision of everyone like the annoyance he was.

I leaned out of my chair in time to see Chase check his phone. "I still have ten minutes left of my lunch break," he said.

"Yeah, but you need to eat!" I tapped the back of Greyson's knees, getting him to move a step forward before I stood up and slithered out from behind him. "We can head out now, and you can eat."

"Excellent! A jolly plan," Lord Linus said.

Chase furrowed his forehead at Lord Linus. "You know how to drive?"

"Of course!" Lord Linus said. "Mind you, I've only driven in Europe, but as long as the night mares keep us off roads, the source of my experience won't matter."

"I see. Then I guess this is goodbye." Chase tilted his head at me. "I know better than to ask you to listen to Greyson."

"Good," I said.

Chase frowned. "Could I at least ask that you increase your running speed or physical strength?"

"Heck no," I said. "I'm fast enough to survive. That's good enough."

It was an odd request, but I knew it was just Chase's way of saying he wanted me to be safe.

Chase's frown grew more pronounced. "I see."

I laughed and threw my arms around his broad shoulders in a hug. "It was good to see you, Chase. Come visit soon!"

"If work allows," Greyson added.

Chase slightly tipped his head. "Of course. It was a pleasure to see you both."

Greyson nodded, then gave Chase one of those painful sounding hug/backslaps the wolves commonly exchanged that I was pretty sure

would crack the spine of a normal human.

Lord Linus elbowed Chrysanthe. “See that? Wolves hug a lot and are affectionate.”

“I see that,” Chrysanthe said.

“Mmhm.” Lord Linus stuck his hand out to Greyson. “Might I have your keys while the lovely Chrysanthe guides you out to the lawn? I shall inquire of the night mares if they’re available, and we’ll be off!”

Greyson mutely fished the keys out of his pockets and tossed them to Lord Linus, who caught them in one hand.

“Let’s begin, then, shall we?” He put his sunglasses back on with a flourish, then waltzed from the room.

“This way, please.” Chrysanthe motioned for Greyson and me to leave the room ahead of her. She grabbed the doorknob and started to swing it closed, but just before it clicked shut she added, “I hope you have a pleasant lunch, Chase!”

She closed the door, released a high-pitched squeal I’m pretty sure she didn’t think Greyson or I would hear—I pretended not to, but Greyson couldn’t entirely mask his wince at the pitch—then cleared her throat, and slipped in front of us. “This way, please!”

She led us through the maze of the mansion and popped us out at the circle/turn-around portion of the driveway at the front of the house.

“So.” I clapped my hands together as we awkwardly waited for Lord Linus. “Chase seems to be thriving here.”

I’d chosen the right topic. Chrysanthe visibly brightened. “The Night Court is a lovely place to live—and be a part of,” she said. “And Director Washington—Chase—is vital to My Sovereign’s safety.”

Greyson eyed me—attempting to nonverbally communicate with me. Luckily, I wasn’t a wolf, so it didn’t work.

I ignored him with glee. “I can imagine it must be fun to live in the mansion. It’s beautiful.”

“It is, but the Night Court is even better,” Chrysanthe said. “You’ll see when the night mares cross us. They have to take us to the Night Court before they can open up a portal close to your home. When we travel by portal, you’ll need to closely picture where you want us to drop you off.”

“So it should have easily recognizable landmarks to make it easier, I’m guessing?” I asked. “Greyson, where do you think we should go for? I’d say

downtown, but I'm pretty sure that'll bring Mayor Pearl running, and we'll get a fine for sure."

"A fine?" Chrysanthe asked, bewildered. "Whatever for?"

"She'll come up with something—disturbing the peace, probably," I said. "I'm pretty sure most of the police budget is propped up by all the fines the Pack keeps getting."

"How interesting," Chrysanthe said.

An engine revved, and Lord Linus coasted up the driveway in our car, the front window rolled down. "We're all set! Eclipse and Solstice have agreed to guide our travels today!" He leaned out of the window and peered back behind the car, to the two unicorns—yes, straight up unicorns—following him.

They didn't look like the pretty, white, mild tempered unicorns humans show in their historic texts, tapestries and the like. Nope, these night mares looked too deadly-gorgeous for that.

Their coats were more of a silvery color than white, and both of them had black manes and tails—though the larger one's mane had been cut short so it looked like a mohawk—and black hooves and socks. Their horns were ebony and a lot bigger than what you'd expect on a regular unicorn, too. *All of them* was bigger than what you'd picture for a unicorn in general.

But I wasn't fooled by all the beauty. The night mares were dual natured, and I'd seen the skeletal, blood-curdling form they'd had before. They were capable of killing—as testified by the predator feeling they inspired in my gut compared to the prey feeling horses usually gave me.

Chrysanthe gravely bowed to the horses—the night mares. "Eclipse, Solstice. Thank you for your help today in transporting Chase's Alpha and packmate."

The smaller one nickered—which sounded scarily like a gleeful chortle—and circled around Greyson and me, sniffing us.

The larger one pressed his muzzle against Chrysanthe's forehead, then meandered over to us as well.

"You'll need to get on Solstice," Chrysanthe explained as she shimmied her way onto the smaller night mare. "It'll make the crossing easier. Lord Linus will drive your car."

I squinted up at the giant night mare. "No saddle?" I asked.

“We could get one if you needed it,” Chrysanthe said. “But it’ll be a short ride. If you’re concerned about horse hair I could get a blanket for you...”

“Nah. It’s fine. I’ll manage!” I set my hands on Solstice’s warm shoulder. “Sorry,” I said. “I might accidentally knee you on the way up.”

Solstice twisted his head so he could sniff me, and snorted his warm breath into my face—which was weirdly calming.

I patted him, then set my hands on his back and pushed up, wriggling my way up.

I had pretty decent upper body strength and core strength from all the tree climbing—everything was easier with core strength, as much as it pained me to say because ab exercises were so *painful* and time consuming—but the problem was trying to kick my legs up and over his rump so I could haul myself up.

“Allow me,” Greyson said in a voice that sounded way too helpful to actually be good for me.

“Wait—woah!” I squealed a little when Greyson wrapped his arms around my waist and pushed me up onto Solstice’s back.

I almost lurched over his other side, but I grabbed fistfuls of his short mane and stabilized myself. “*Thanks.*” I peered over Solstice’s side and glared down at Greyson. “That was really helpful,” I said through gritted teeth.

Greyson wore his stoic Alpha look. “I’m sure.”

I rolled my eyes as he casually jumped and boosted himself onto Solstice’s back. It would have been a show of his werewolf strength if he hadn’t half landed on me—almost flattening me into the crest of Solstice’s neck.

I elbowed him in the gut, but I’m pretty sure it hurt me more than him since he had abs of steel—freakin’ werewolf.

Greyson retaliated by pulling me with him when he scooted back so I wasn’t perched on top of Solstice’s shoulders and patting my stomach—an area usually targeted by wolves when they attacked—before letting go.

Chrysanthe wove her hands through her night mare’s—Eclipse’s—mane. “Are all packmates close like the two of you?”

“Yes,” Greyson said before I could respond. “Werewolves are very affectionate. Physical closeness is important to us.” He scooped his arms

around me and physically rammed me against his chest in what looked like a back hug, but I knew from experience could very easily be switched into a choke hold.

*Overbearing canine!*

“I see...” Chrysanthe bit her lip and glanced nervously at the mansion—obviously pondering Chase and his conduct.

“Chase is unusually...controlled for a werewolf.” I tried to struggle my way out of Greyson’s grasp, but his arms didn’t budge, even when I pinched his underarm where Chrysanthe couldn’t see. “He’s not as demonstrative—particularly when he’s working.”

Chrysanthe’s expression smoothed over and her shoulders relaxed. “That seems accurate.”

“Yes, yes. Now that your fears have been soothed, shall we be off?” Lord Linus poked his head out the car window and peered up at us.

“My apologies, of course.” Chrysanthe set her hand on Eclipse’s shoulder.

The night mare trotted over to our car and circled around it so she stood on the driveway in front of it.

Magic hummed in the air—it was an alien kind of magic that was cool like the night and soft like moonlight, but I could tell it came from the night mares.

With the grinding of stone on stone, an archway made of rock grew out of the ground, forming a perfect arch before a twisted metal gate grew in front of it.

The gate soundlessly swung open, revealing a foggy black swirl of nothingness.

Despite myself, I grabbed Greyson’s hands—which were still secured around my waist—and squeezed.

I thought he’d say something mocking as Chrysanthe and Eclipse disappeared through the misty door—which widened to allow Lord Linus to start inching our car through.

Surprisingly, Greyson glossed over my moment of weakness. “I was thinking we should try to picture the park outside Timber Ridge,” he said. “It has enough landmarks that it should be easier for the night mares to locate.”

“We could try the Pack lodge.” I gulped as the car disappeared entirely through the portal.

“I suspect the landmarks of Timber Ridge and the playground equipment are more easily traceable than the forest. The trees around the lodge are unique to us wolves, but I don’t think the night mares use scent like we do,” Greyson said.

“Good point.” I leaned back into Greyson’s chest as Solstice placidly trudged his way up to the portal. “The park it is, then.”

I stiffened when we passed through the portal.

The world turned into shades of blues and purples, and I saw a faint glitter that made me think of stars. It was a dizzying shift, but it wasn’t too far off from how I felt when I climbed a touch too high in a tree and happened to look down when I was contemplating jumping.

It made my stomach do a funny flip in my gut, but that was all.

Within a moment we were stepping out of the swirl.

It was night—the beautiful velveteen blue of midnight. A full moon hung in the sky, and the stars glittered more brightly than they did in the human realm and somehow seemed more...*full*.

The Night Realm itself was lush with greenery. There was a hedge shaped like a teapot, bushes full of flowers that bloomed in the moonlight, and all of this pressed against the beautiful castle of the Night Court.

Impossibly huge windows that were multiple stories tall made up one side of the palace, overlooking the gardens and huge horse statues with stars and moons positioned on their backs and fountains that gushed with crystalline water, and glass lanterns that had to be the size of a human hung from the peaks of the castle, marking immense archways and gorgeous fae architecture.

It glittered with fae magic and was simultaneously so beautiful it made my soul hurt, and so different that my mind reeled with the change.

“Woah.” I grabbed at Solstice’s neck as I tried to mentally adjust to the abrupt transition of day to night. Behind me, Greyson shifted, but he said nothing—apparently he was unmoved by the glory of the Night Court.

Eclipse picked her way around Greyson’s car, Chrysanthe still perched on her back. “Was the trip through the gate upsetting?” Chrysanthe asked.

“No—it wasn’t bad at all. It’s just...I wasn’t prepared mentally for it to be nighttime.”

“Oh, yes.” Chrysanthe peered up at the beautiful sky. “Time behaves differently here in the Night Realm. It doesn’t always match up with the human world.”

“It’s lovely, though. You two really should come stay in the Night Realm for an extended visit.” Lord Linus rested his forearms on the frame of the car window as he peered back at us. “Bring the whole Pack—you wolves love the moon, don’t you? You’ll have a blast here!”

“Thank you for the invitation,” Greyson said.

“Of course! Now, did Chrysanthe tell you that to get to your home, you’ll both need to clearly picture a location? Solstice will take you through first and anchor the gate, and then Lady Chrysanthe and I will follow behind.”

“We have a location in mind.” I tried to twist to look back at Greyson, but it was a little too awkward given how close he was to me. “We’ll have to do the road by the park? Because you can’t drive your car around on the park’s lawn. Then Mayor Pearl will fine us for destruction of public property.”

“This Mayor Pearl of yours sounds tyrannical,” Chrysanthe said.

I laughed. “She is. But she’s such a huge part of Timber Ridge, we need to bother her as little as possible.”

“I think she sounds sensible,” Lord Linus said. “Fines would be an excellent way to generate revenue—just don’t tell Leila, or she’ll start getting ideas.” He slapped the car door. “Well then, let’s get moving! Alpha Greyson, Pip, please lead the way!”

Solstice must have understood him, because he started walking, jolting us into motion as he meandered around the car so he stood in front of it.

Another brush of the night mares’ magic, and another stone archway with a metal gate grew in front of us.

I scrunched up my face as I pictured the little road and parking lot just off the park—it gave you a perfect view of the playground, and most of downtown. “Got it,” I said. “I’m thinking of our location.”

“As am I,” Greyson said.

Solstice clip-clopped into the gate—surrounding us with another gorgeous swirl of night—and then we popped out in the harsh afternoon sunlight, stepping onto the smooth pavement of the little parking lot.

A pack of children were playing on the playground equipment—one nearly toppled off the slide when he spun around to look at us—and their parents sitting on the park benches nearby stood up as Lord Linus started to edge Greyson's car through the portal.

"Hey there!" I waved to them and used my very recognizable Timber Ridge Welcome Center voice—most of the kids had trooped through the center at one point or another out of sheer curiosity about the werewolves or on a school fieldtrip. "Sorry for the disruption, we'll be out of here in a minute!"

Solstice flicked his tail as Linus revved the car's engine and pulled all the way out of the portal, parking it in an empty spot.

Eclipse pranced through, and Chrysanthé curiously peered down main street as she clung to the unicorn's back.

"It's a unicorn!"

"Unicorns!" the kids shouted.

Greyson slipped off Solstice's back, and I scrambled down after him, glancing back at the parents who had corralled their kids to keep them from running at us.

Linus slipped out of the car and nudged the door shut. "It sounds like we should head out before we cause any more of a ruckus," Linus said. "Next time we visit we shall attempt to make a more discreet entrance." He waved to the kids, then hopped up on Solstice's back with ease given his fae height advantage.

"Yes," Chrysanthé agreed, though I wasn't sure she'd actually heard a word Lord Linus said—she was too busy gawking at City Hall. "A ruckus."

"Thanks for the ride," I said. "It's really, really nice to not have to drive all the way back here." I glanced at the city as the smell of hot blacktop mingled with the pungent scent of pine.

Linus tossed Greyson the car keys, then waved off my comment. "Of course! Next time you come to Magiford, text Chase and one of us shall come fetch you," he said.

"We couldn't possibly impose on the Night Queen in such a way," Greyson started.

"Nonsense! She offered you an alliance, and as her official fae advisor I'm well aware you signed it this morning," Linus said with a gleam in his eye. "Besides, Chase is now part of the Night Court, and for all practical

purposes you are his family. His family is naturally important to the Night Court, then, as well. So, until next time!” He gave Greyson a jaunty salute, then nudged Solstice in the direction of the still active gate. “Come along, Lady Chrysanthe. We must be going.”

“Already?” Lady Chrysanthe asked.

“Fret not, I have a plan,” Lord Linus said before he and Solstice disappeared through the gate.

“Farewell, Alpha Greyson, Pip.” Lady Chrysanthe waved to us as Eclipse headed into the portal, and moments later she, too, was gone.

The portal collapsed, then faded as the magic propping it up dissipated.

As soon as it was gone, Greyson let his arm drop over my shoulders, and he surprised me by resting a little of his weight on me.

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## Chapter 15

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### *Pip*

I thought he was playing a trick on me, so I scowled up at him, but my frown faded when I saw he had his eyes closed.

“Are you okay?” I slid my arm behind his back in a feeble attempt to offer more support.

“I’m fine.” Greyson opened his golden eyes and stared at the ground. “The rapid changes are...difficult to handle.”

“Ahhh, I bet.”

Here’s the thing about wolves: their senses made them pretty sensitive—and the stronger their senses, the worse it was. Going from day to night in a totally different biosphere to day but several hundred miles north would be rough on any wolf given the different smells, sensations, and weather patterns. For a werewolf as strong as Greyson, it probably was enough to make his head swirl.

The kids returned to the playground—they were used to seeing wolves snuggle in public so they didn’t care. But I’m pretty sure one or two of the adults recognized Greyson because they were giving me some squinty-eyed looks that said gossip was spawning as we stood there.

“Do you need to sit down?” I asked.

“Just give me a second,” Greyson said. He plunked his chin down on the top of my head, effectively anchoring me in place.

I stretched my arm a little farther and tried not to be salty about all his muscles—seriously, wolves win the genetic lottery when it comes to physical fitness with the least amount of work.

“I can drive you and the car back to the lodge,” I offered.

“I’ve seen you drive. That’s not necessary.” Greyson leaned in, and a little more of his weight blanketed me.

I tried to look up at him, but between his chin on my head and his arm on my shoulders I couldn’t move much.

“Feeling better?” I sourly asked.

“I’m not sure. I have a ringing headache. You could try kissing me to see if it makes it better.”

“You are such an *animal*.” I tried to struggle my way out of his grasp.

“Yeah, it’s almost like I’m a wolf or something.” Greyson let me scramble for another moment or two, then collected himself, freeing me from his weight. “Congratulations on winning your case, Lady Hunter. Be sure to wave at Fletching when he arrives so he knows you got back first.”

“I never pegged you as being petty.”

“It’s not seemly in an Alpha,” Greyson acknowledged. “It’s why I encourage it in my Pack instead.”

I rolled my eyes and strode toward his car—I needed to grab my daggers from the glove compartment before I left. Because I certainly wasn’t driving home with him like this when it was just a short walk. “I’d say thank you for coming with me to Magiford, but you didn’t have to, and it seems like you had your own agenda.”

“So that’s a no to a thank you kiss, too?”

I glared at him as I yanked the passenger door open.

Greyson’s smile was too wolfish as he leaned against the car. “What? You’re the one that’s stingy.”

“Bad wolf.” I fished my daggers out of the glove compartment—they were cool to the touch since the car had been parked in the shadows of the garage instead of cooking in the sunlight. “Go find your mate and bother her.”

Greyson snorted as he pushed off the car and wandered up to the driver’s side. “Yeah, because *that’s* possible.”

I headed for the path that led into the woods and would take me back to my house. “A mate bond is absolutely *wasted* on you.”

“I agree,” Greyson called. His voice was too serious to be his usual snark, so I turned around in surprise, but he was already in the car, his forehead slightly furrowed as he started it up.

*Don't get involved. He might have my sympathy, but he's a wolf—and an Alpha. He can take care of his own issues.*

I nodded at the wisdom in my own advice and headed for the trees, waiting until I reached the forest before stopping to take off my heels so I could walk barefoot the rest of the way.

*Wolves are wolves. I'm just a hunter. I may live with them, but I'm not Pack. Greyson isn't my Alpha.*

Somehow the thought made my heart twist a little. Not that I cared about Greyson—he could go romance some she-wolf. But that I wasn't really Pack—and I had a sneaking suspicion, after seeing the Fletching hunters, that I wasn't really a hunter either.

*I'm stuck halfway between the two. That's a nonexistent place to be.*

I'd have to do something different, eventually. Or I was going to be alone, not quite fitting in, for the rest of my life.

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Four nights later, I played out the downside of being a crazy cat lady—the litter box.

“You two are disgusting.” I tested to make sure my face mask and goggles were secure—I'd once made the mistake of cleaning their litter box and not covering my face, and Prince kicked a clump of dirty kitty litter at my face. I had never before gagged so much or used that much face soap in a single day.

Princess sat on the tile floor next to me and peered into the litter box while Prince stared at me.

“Don't give me that look.” I scooped dirty litter from the box and dumped it into a trash bag. “I just cleaned this yesterday, and you two pigged it up already—hey, what are you doing?”

Princess ignored me as she crawled into the litter box.

“Get out,” I said. “If you have to go that badly, go outside.”

She waited until I cleared one end of the box, then immediately started digging a spot.

“Stop that—out, get out!” I dropped the poop scoop and picked her up, carrying her through the house and out to the front porch. “Go out here if you *must* go while I’m cleaning!”

I shut the door, then turned around to find Prince doing the same thing.

I repeated the exercise of kicking his fat, fluffy gray butt outside as well, then finished cleaning the litter box—aware of the two sets of judge-y eyes that drilled into my back as Prince and Princess smashed their faces against the glass of one of the front windows.

I tied off the dirty trash bag and stripped off my gloves. “I’ll be right back. I mean it!” I waltzed out to the garage—which just held my scooter, and all the tools Papa Santos had left behind, as well as my trash can and recycling.

I tossed the bag of dirty kitty litter in the trash, then pushed the button to open the garage door before I thoroughly washed my hands in the garage sink.

“Prince, Princess. Come on back here,” I called out into the foggy night. “I’ll let you in through the garage door.”

I removed my mouth mask and goggles and set them on the shelf next to the bags of kitty litter I’d bought in advance.

Something rustled in the bushes outside. “Prince? Princess?” I edged around my scooter and stuck my head outside. “Come on. I know you can hear me. Let’s go—I’ll give you treaties!” I offered.

Usually the word “treatie” made them meow like crazy, but this time they were silent.

I strained my ears to listen, and I heard some leaves rustle in the encroaching forest.

Narrowing my eyes, I extended my hunter senses, searching for the disturbance.

*Is that...? Wolves!*

I spun around, intending to sprint for the door, but a wolf rammed me from the side, knocking me over.

My heart raced for a second, but I recognized the mottled black pattern of Rio’s coat almost immediately.

*Okay, so no immediate death, but this could still hurt. Rio is rough, and this is probably for a “training” session.*

I tried to roll to my feet, but Rio latched on to my wrist. He didn’t bite down hard enough to puncture, but he yanked me hard enough that I face planted.

I grabbed pebbles and grit from my gravel driveway with my free hand and flung them at Rio’s face.

He released me and backed up, bumping into a second wolf—a pretty wolf with a sandy brown coat with streaks of gray and black—Aspen.

Aspen leaped over Rio, on trajectory to collide with me.

I rolled to the side so she sailed over me, then scrambled to my feet.

I felt another wolf angling behind me, but Rio had gotten between me and the garage, so I had to step away from it—the *last* thing you want to do when trying to defend yourself against wolves. House structures are always the safest—after trees, anyway.

When I glanced back I saw a wisp of reddish black in my cottage’s floodlights—which meant it had to be Aeric—and heard the snap of teeth when I barely moved my legs in time.

Cursing every wolf-themed fairy tale that I could think of, I gave up on getting back into the garage and made a break for the trees.

*Weapon check—I have my pocket knife in my shorts pocket, and one of my silver daggers strapped under my shirt. No firearm though—who would clean a litter box with a firearm?*

I had one fully functioning trap spell that had taken me a week to build with my hunter magic, but it was attached to a rust covered dagger I kept in a flowerpot by the door leading into the house. I was already too far away to grab it.

So I made it to a tree and jumped at it, reaching for the lowest branch, when a creamy golden colored wolf—Ember, she was pretty recognizable with her tawny coat and her cream colored chin and cheeks—charged out of the shadows of the forest and latched on to my calf.

She yanked me down before I could get a good grip on the tree branch.

I fell with a thump, landing on an exposed root.

*That’s going to bruise.*

Clenching my teeth, I kicked her in the face. She let go—even when training none of the wolves would bite me hard enough to draw blood,

which meant they had to have a fairly loose hold—and scurried backward.

I could feel another wolf incoming, so I rolled to the side, avoiding them—I didn't even have enough time to see who it was before two wolves grabbed me by the ankles and dragged me off.

I clenched my teeth as the gritty ground ripped at my exposed arms, leaving me with a friction burn.

My hunter powers started to pulse in my chest as my anger built.

*I get the training—kind of, not really. But what's the point of ambushing me with...five or six wolves? I don't even stand a chance!*

"Guys, stop it," I shouted, but the wolves dragged me through the underbrush. Bushes snagged on my clothes and cut through my skin, and I still couldn't shake free.

I saw two new wolves, and I felt my hunter powers crack—that was it.

"*Enough!*" I shouted, my voice hot with anger and lined with my useless hunter magic.

Immediately the wolves dragging me dropped my legs—apparently they realized they'd gone too far.

I spat out a leaf and brushed drool off my legs before I stood up and whirled around to face the wolves. There were ten of them gathered in the tiny clearing they'd dragged me to. All of them were down on their bellies, their ears flattened against their skulls and their tails tucked.

I was far from satisfied.

"No." I was firm, but I couldn't entirely keep the anger out of my voice. "You're not getting out of this by acting cute. That was over the top. My entire side is going to be one massive bruise—it was all of you against me. *Just* me. With those kinds of odds, I'm not a challenge, I'm a chew toy."

Aeric wiggled forward and whined, looking absolutely pitiful.

But that was the thing about werewolves. They had 100% of their human intelligence while in their wolf form, so he knew *exactly* what he was doing.

"No!" I repeated. "I'm done with this—and you all *will* be done with this. You're not just going to grovel and get forgiven. Do. Not. Do. This. Again!" I stabbed my finger at each one of them.

Rio started to stand.

"Don't even think about it," I growled.

He slammed back down to the ground and meekly settled his head on a patch of dirt.

I placed my hand on my uninjured hip as I made myself stand tall, even though my side was on fire. “This isn’t training. I can’t possibly get stronger or learn anything when you ambush attack me. What’s the take away? That numbers matter? Newsflash—you *push that lesson home every training session!*”

I was pretty close to crying—I was an angry crier, because it was just so frustrating when they did something like this—but I could still feel my hunter powers in me, hot and restless.

*I’ve got to get out of this place. This is never going to change because they’re wolves. They only respond to force, and I’m never going to be able to get them out of this.*

I impatiently rubbed my eyes. “Ember—you especially know better. Why would you condone this?”

Ember gave me a high-pitched whine of sorrow.

I sighed, but heard a distant rustle of leaves and felt another bright spot flare in my hunter senses.

*That’s a wolf...closing in fast.*

I swung around and started to reach for my dagger, but Greyson was too fast.

He emerged from the trees—glowing white in the starlight—at a full run and skidded to a stop next to me.

I was gearing up to have to kick him or defend myself in some way—he hadn’t ever played ambush with the other wolves, but there was always time for a first—but to my surprise, he gently pushed his muzzle into my burning hip and sniffed.

He sniffed his way up and down my thigh and hip, his entire body tense.

“Stop that. Yeah, I landed on my side and got dragged.” I tried to wave him off, but he shoved his cold, wet nose under the hem of my shirt and sniffed my skin.

I squawked, but before I could flick his nose, Greyson stiffened, removed his nose, then snarled at his packmates with a growl that had *me* flinching.

The wolves couldn’t get any lower than they already were, but they did release a chorus of sad little whines and peered up at me.

Greyson moved so he stood in front of me and snarled again—clearly communicating with the Pack. I was pretty certain he was yelling at them based on his body language, but I wasn't entirely sure.

A couple of the wolves flipped over onto their backs, showing their bellies.

Greyson had his lips peeled back, showing his teeth, but when he turned around and peered up at me, he perked his ears and his tail gave the tiniest of twitches as he wagged it back and forth once.

"I don't speak wolf," I reminded him.

Greyson huffed, then briefly pushed his head against my stomach and rubbed his face, getting white hairs all over my already dirty shirt.

It was a soothing gesture, one that took the hot, stinging sensation out of my eyes.

I smoothed the fur on the top of his head, then dug my fingers into the neck of his thick white coat, past his coarse outer layer and to the downy soft fur of his undercoat.

I debated for a moment or two—because it was *Greyson*. On principal, I didn't like the guy. But my desire for comfort outweighed my slight grudge—particularly when he was in his wolf form—so I crouched down and leaned into the giant wolf, taking comfort in the softness of his undercoat and his faint, musky wolf scent that was heavily spiked with the smell of pine needles from his run through the forest.

Wyatt whined, and Greyson turned his head away from me so he could snarl in a tone that sounded like he was prepared to eat the other wolf. He then huffed, licked his chops, and pushed his nose into the messy tangle of my hair.

"Thanks, Greyson," I said. I briefly considered resting my head on his shoulder, but I wasn't *that* hurt, so I ran my fingers down his back instead. "But I'm serious. I'm done with this stupid ambush stuff."

Greyson huffed into my hair, then smeared his wet nose against my ear.

I squealed and pulled back, but I was pretty sure he was telling me that he agreed.

He pulled away and backed up, and the other wolves were halfway between standing and sitting, their ears still down and their tails tucked.

"Never again," I told them. "I mean it. Do you understand?"

Off to the side, Greyson growled at them.

The wolves gave me soft little awoo's and sadly peered up at me.

"Fine." I kneeled so I'd be stabilized. "If you understand, then group hug—oof."

The wolves were on me before I could get all my words out.

Ember rubbed her furry cheek against mine, giving me a nose full of wolf fur, while Aeris pushed his face into my shoulder.

Wyatt nudged my hand until I rubbed that itchy spot just in front of his right ear, and even Rio crowded in, leaning into my back.

I grinned as another wolf presented her belly for me to rub, and when I scratched her belly she happily wriggled on the ground, wagging her tail despite the uncomfortable angle.

The wolves panted happily, and a few of them romped around the clearing, playing with each other now that the shouting from their Alpha was over.

Aeris left me when Ember body slammed him out of the way, and he and Wyatt cracked skulls and then play bit each other for "fun". But Rio and Ember both practically wormed their way under me so my arms were thrown around Ember's shoulders for balance while Rio tipped me over and inspected one of my bare legs.

"They won't do this again." Greyson stepped out of the trees, wearing his silver fae-bracelet and the magic designed, fitted black pants. He shrugged on a black t-shirt—he must have disappeared to go find one of the clothing drops—as he approached me.

"Because you told them not to?" I wryly guessed.

*It doesn't matter that I was upset and angry, the Pack only listens to their precious Alpha.*

"No." Greyson stopped just short of my jumbled pile with the wolves and stared down Rio. "Out."

Rio flattened his ears to his skull and rapidly backed up, then slunk off to join the other wolves in their impromptu snuggle session, wagging his tail when Aspen licked his ear.

Greyson stepped into the space Rio had left and crouched down next to me. "They won't do it because you told them you were done."

I flung my arms around Ember's neck and clung to her—I didn't want the wolves running off and leaving me with Greyson. She panted in my face

and nosed my cheek, but seemed to understand what I wanted because she settled in and watched her packmates play.

"I don't believe that," I said. "They only listen to you like that."

Greyson shrugged and watched as Aeris hopped at Wyatt and wagged his tail before the two tore their way around the clearing, knocking into Aspen who snarled at the pair. "You underestimate your power."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "You guys constantly trash me in training."

Greyson glanced at me, and there was a gleam in his gold eyes that said if we'd been alone there would have been a lot of scoffing on his end. But since we were in front of the Pack, he was polite and stoic. "I wasn't referring to your physical strength."

He shifted his attention back to his Pack. "Hunters move as a family and fight as a unit, so they *can* fight using pure strength and sheer force. They have the numbers for it. You don't. But as a result, your *hunter* powers—your base magic—seems to be much more active." He paused. "It's stronger than you think."

"You mean with my special pheromones and being close to tears they realized they hurt the puppy and they shouldn't do that?" I adjusted my hold on Ember's neck. "I guess I hadn't thought of weaponizing my pheromones like that."

"Pheromones can only do so much," Greyson said. His words were careful and measured, and his eyes seemed to glow in the darkness of the night as he stared at me. "Perhaps you inherited more magic from your parents than you thought."

I was caught halfway between a frown and eyes scrunched in confusion.

*That wasn't a random comment. He purposefully said that. But why? And what's he getting at?*

"You are able to settle arguments involving werewolves with ease," he continued.

I relaxed. "That's just practice. You just need a firm voice and enough false bravado to keep your own fear under control so they can't smell it on you. Isn't that right, Ember?"

Ember leaned into my shoulder but wouldn't look at me—meaning she was receptive to affection, but she did *not* want to get dragged into this conversation.

“You’ve said before most of your hunter magic seems to come from your mother’s family. Do you know anything about the strains of magic from your father’s family?” Greyson asked.

“Not really? I haven’t looked into it. A hunter usually comes into her magic when she’s ten or twelve. Mom was able to recognize some of her powers in me and taught me about them, and I haven’t really had anything new pop up since then. Dad told me his family had some pretty wild stuff, but besides his gene for getting white hair in your twenties, he didn’t have any special magic. They were hoping I’d get my mom’s magic.”

Greyson was silent for a moment as Ember pushed her face against mine and thumped her tail on the ground. “No one besides an Alpha should be able to give wolves orders and have the expectation that they will be listened to in an argument. You do. Perhaps you should look into why that is.”

He reached for me, but just before his fingers brushed my cheek he abruptly stood up. “Regardless, the Pack will no longer ambush you in this way. You need to go sanitize your wound.”

“Wound? It’s just a bad case of friction burn,” I said.

“They made you bleed.” Greyson glanced at his wolves, who felt his gaze and instantly stopped playing and instead stood gravely, waiting for his command. “It needs to be cleaned.”

“Ah. Is that what you were sniffing when you first showed up?” I let go of Ember and boosted myself to my feet, groaning as my bruised side dully ached.

“Something like that,” Greyson said. “Have a pleasant evening, Pip.”

“Thanks.”

I watched him slip into the shadows of the trees, visible for only a few moments before I couldn’t see him through the underbrush despite my better-than-average night vision.

Wyatt and Aeric pressed against my thighs, then followed after the rest of the Pack that trailed behind the Alpha.

I waved them off, then turned around and found the very obvious path the wolves had left when they dragged me. I followed it back to my cottage, to a very belligerent Prince and Princess, who—in retaliation for kicking them out—had brought a live snake into my garage. It was one of their favorite things to do when I made them mad, so I was used to it.

As I swept the snake out with a broom, I pondered Greyson's words.

*Could I have inherited more magic than I thought? But I don't feel anything magical about the stuff he mentioned. It's all about the way you carry yourself. And I'm not convinced the wolves won't end up pouncing on me in a few months after their memory of tonight isn't quite so sharp.*

I was certain I didn't have any extra magic because between all of the "training" the wolves put me through, and with the extracurricular fun I encountered—like the feral Low Marsh wolf—any extra magic I had would have appeared by now.

*I bet it's just Timber Ridge. The place is overflowing with successfully changed werewolves, way more packmates with Alpha-like powers than they should normally have, and wolves with higher strength and drive than normal. I thought it was the water, but maybe it's the lakes. Maybe they have magic in their muck?*

I laughed as I put the broom away, until I turned around and realized Princess had caught the snake again and dragged it back inside.

"Princess—no! Stop that!"

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## Chapter 16

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### *Greyson*

I inhaled deeply, sifting through the scents of the forest.

It was late summer, so everything was ripe and green, creating a full scent that made it harder to pick up any undertones.

*I could shift. As a wolf, my nose is stronger. But then the Low Marsh wolves would realize we're investigating the potion issue ourselves, and right now secrecy is more important.*

I impatiently looked up and down the border we shared with the Low Marsh Pack. They had a small territory, which meant we had just one shared border. But it also meant it was fairly easy to scent out anything on their lands if the wind blew just right.

"Anything, Alpha?" Hector looked up from his phone, and the wind tousled his dark hair, adding Hector's faint scent of paper and laundry soap into the mix of smells.

"Not here." I glanced at the top of the rocky cliff—we stood at the base, where a small stream divided the Pack lands. "We might have better luck up top."

"Excellent, shall we?" Hector waited until I nodded before he ducked into the underbrush.

I glanced at the cliff before following, taking a more direct route to the top.

Hector had stamina for days, so he'd sprint around to the lowest incline and run up. I opted to hike up portions, jumping from sections of flattened rock to steep incline.

Wolves weren't big climbers, but I enjoyed hiking. There was something freeing in using your strength, balance, and speed in tandem. It helped that the more active I was, the less I felt the constant ache from my incomplete mate bond, so as I made a particularly long jump, the pain was so distant it was only a faint needling in my heart.

The gnawing pain was worst when I was sitting in my office or standing around—which, admittedly, was not high on a typical wolf's priority list anyway, and made for a great excuse to slip out for a run or quick hunt.

When I reached the top of the cliff I inhaled again, picking through the individual scents as I ignored the reigniting pain from my ridiculous bond.

*That's a maple tree...rabbit...a white pine...owl pellets...wolf...*

A faint, sour smell intertwined with something sweet tickled my nose. "There it is."

"You smell *it*, Alpha?" Hector trotted up the last of the incline, pushing his dark eyebrows together in a line as he referred to wolfsbane.

I narrowed my eyes as I pinpointed the scent. "Yes. Can you pick it up?"

Hector breathed deeply a few times. "I can, faintly. I'll mark it down." He slipped his cellphone out and made notes.

We'd been attempting to track the scent of wolfsbane all morning. I'd smelled it on two other occasions, but Hector could only smell it one of those times.

"Do you think we're smelling the potion itself, or a wolf that has taken it?" Hector asked.

I gazed across the miniature chasm. "A wolf that has taken it. It's similar to what the original Low Marsh wolf smelled like. Which means more than one was taking it."

"Logical," Hector said. "It seems unlikely he would have stumbled upon it in Northern Wisconsin, and the Low Marsh Pack is not known for being bookish so I doubt he would have searched it out. I imagine someone introduced it to him."

"It can't be more than one or two wolves taking it," I said. "Or their territory would reek of it."

“Indeed,” Hector said. “What do we do with this information?”

“Submit it to the Regional Committee of Magic,” I said. “If we only tell Pre-Dominant Harka, it’s likely Fletching will try to accuse us of manipulating the case. But the Regional Committee can send out additional investigators, or tell Fletching to search Low Marsh territory.”

“Fletching is a problem,” Hector agreed. “Do you wish for me to do something about him?”

For Hector “do something” was a pretty broad category. Going by the twitch in his cheek, I was guessing he was thinking on the more extreme end this time.

I narrowed my eyes, considering the matter. “Not yet. It’d be a bigger pain to deal with the aftermath. If we can scent out the Low Marsh Pack’s supplier, Fletching will have to leave and the case will close.”

“Understood.” He finished tapping away on his phone and slipped it back into the pocket of his tweed coat that he wore even though it was possibly the hottest part of summer.

*Pip walked to work in the heat this morning, even though she was hurt last night. She should have taken her scooter.*

Hector paused in the middle of adjusting his coat and glanced at me. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” I responded automatically, then paused. “But...do you know how Pip is doing?”

“You are referring to the scrape she got after the Pack’s antics last night?” Hector asked.

“Yes.”

“Ember checked on her this morning and gave her a fae potion—which Pip informed her was unnecessary,” Hector said. “She seemed in fine health and threw one of her overweight cats at Wyatt when he attempted to hug her for one of the so called ‘Pomeranian Puppy Power-ups’.”

“They went too far last night,” I said. “She’s right, it’s unfair to pit her against enough wolves to make up a small Pack.”

“I agree. However, I don’t believe you ever need to worry about the Pack ambushing her in such a manner again.” Hector stood straight, and his dark eyes seemed to glow for a moment. “I made certain to *explain* the situation to all Pack members who weren’t present at the incident.”

“Good.” I rubbed the back of my neck as I tried to nail down the unease that rolled in my gut.

It wasn’t that I thought she’d be ambushed again. Because it was Pip, the moment she barked at the Pack the way she had, she’d guaranteed they wouldn’t come after her again like that.

Even if Pip was clueless about her powers, I was more in tune to them—I *had* to be.

*But it wasn’t her powers that made me bolt through the forest last night.*

I’d scented her blood, and had been flooded with an urgency that bucked logic and made me tear through the forest like a newly changed wolf.

*But she’s bled before. Has something changed?*

I didn’t have an answer for that—which was unacceptable.

The toll of being the Alpha of the Northern Lakes Pack was that I needed absolute control. It wasn’t Pip’s fault that she broke that control, but I had to figure out the source of it and fix whatever it was in me that allowed it.

A sharp, piercing ring that seemed to shoot through my skull ripped through the quiet forest.

Without thinking, I slapped my hand against the pocket of my jeans, and heard a crunch as my cellphone ringtone abruptly cut off.

I sighed, and Hector very carefully said nothing as I pulled my newly broken phone from my pocket.

Hector just nodded and reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a new phone. “I’ll call Aeris and let him know the spare is your new main.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” I didn’t bother looking at the phone—I knew from experience it had all the numbers and applications I used.

Instead, I looked at the Low Marsh Pack territory. “This is the last strip of border we share with them,” I said. “I don’t think we’ll find anything more. Let’s head back.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

I shook my head as I started to jog through the forest.

*I need to get rid of Fletching first. I can figure out what’s wrong with me after that. It’s nothing too dangerous, or I would have reacted before now. Maybe it’s not even me; maybe Pip’s powers are growing.*

Though it was an excuse for me, the thought brought a frown to my lips.

I hadn't been happy about transferring to the Northern Lakes Pack from my home in Colorado, but things had changed. With Pip, especially. I'd never hated her, but strangely, she'd become some kind of friend. It was more than I ever thought I'd feel for her, because she was the reason why I'd been forced to become Alpha of the Northern Lakes Pack.

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## Chapter 17

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### *Pip*

I locked the welcome center's double doors and pulled on them, testing to make sure they wouldn't open. They rattled, but stayed shut.

"Excellent! Time to head home for a late dinner." I put the keys away in my backpack, slung the backpack over my shoulder, and waltzed out onto the sidewalk.

It was late. The streetlights were already on though the sun hadn't set quite yet, and everything was that beautiful dusty blue shade of twilight when the sounds of the day start to settle and seem muffled.

I'd stayed after usual work hours to modify one of the center's displays—the signs had gotten so faded you could barely read the print, so I'd printed off new copies and then struggled for an hour with figuring out how to laminate them, then had to clean up the mess I'd made, and time had gotten away from me.

I salivated as I passed the Goats On The Roof Pub. The delicious aroma of their Friday fish fry tickled my nose as I passed by the restaurant, dodging a car that was attempting to parallel park in a spot on the street just in front of the building.

With the exceptions of the restaurants and pubs, all other stores and buildings had closed on main street, but the hum of conversation dripped from the eateries, and the windows glowed with a pleasant light as I passed them, making my way to the empty park.

One of the swings swung, creaking in a totally not creepy way even though no one was on the equipment, but I ignored it as I marched across the park lawn, joining up with the paved path I took home.

I followed the paved path out of Timber Ridge and into the tree line, diving into the forest.

*What do I have to eat? I think there's some leftover pizza in the fridge, or some chili in the freezer, but I'd have to thaw that.*

I'd also have to feed the cats, but the question was, did I need to feed them before I got a chance to eat?

*If I don't, there's a big possibility they'll do something bratty...*

I paused when I picked up on my hunter senses spiking. I lifted my head up and strained my ears as I listened.

Then I felt it, the cold blast of a wolf closing in.

It was moving fast, but erratically.

*That's not a Northern Lakes wolf.*

I flung my backpack off and got my daggers out. I tucked my fingers to my mouth and made the shrill, specific whistle that I used in lieu of a wolf howl, and still had just enough time to turn around and face the incoming wolf head on.

Dolph, the Alpha of the Low Marsh Pack, stepped out of the trees. His beard was longer than the last time I'd seen him, and based on the greasiness of his hair, I didn't know that he'd showered since I'd last seen him, either.

"Phillipa Sabre," he said.

His brown eyes seemed a little glassy, and the smile on his lips was creepy enough to make my spine shiver as he strolled toward me.

"What do you want?" I put my back to a tree, preparing myself to climb.

"Retribution," he said. "I told you I'd come for it."

I snorted. "So you attack me instead of Greyson—who actually killed your guy? Yeah, that's retribution, for sure."

Dolph wiped his hands off on his grease-stained jeans and licked his lips. "Nah, you see, if we get you, it'll hit your *Alpha* hard, so I get my revenge on you both."

"And you think no one is going to suspect you? Dream on." I adjusted my hold on my daggers as I watched his legs, studying the way he

crouched. “The Northern Lakes Pack will raze you to the ground.”

He lunged, but I was prepared for it, and shot up the tree, yanking my feet out of reach as I juggled my daggers—I had plenty of practice holding them while climbing.

Once I was safely situated, I whistled again—though it was a pretty bad sign no one had come yet.

That meant either no one heard me, or maybe Dolph had brought extra wolves...

I clung to the trunk, honing in on my senses, then cursed when I felt two more cold blasts.

*Fantastic. He has backup.*

“Nope, we can’t have you cheating like that.” Dolph set a hand on my tree and peered up at me, his eyes glowing. “Come down, hunter.”

“Do you seriously think I’m that stupid?” I called down to him. “Or is it just that *you* are so stupid you think that’ll work?”

Dolph laughed. “No, I know exactly how your mind works. So come down, or else my friend here will go pay a visit to downtown Timber Ridge.”

Another wolf stepped out of the shadows—this one was a woman with rusty brown hair and a mean look in her green eyes. She seemed already half feral as she snarled at me, and my heart fell.

*She could tear through an entire restaurant or pub before the Pack realizes what’s going on. And I left my cellphone in my backpack, so I can’t call Aeris or Wyatt.*

I seriously needed to get a Bluetooth headset. Or maybe one of those fancy phone watches. Hands free devices were underrated.

“Come down, Phillipa,” Dolph repeated in a harder voice. “Unless you want human blood on your hands.”

*He has to be bluffing. Greyson would legally be allowed to kill him if he did something like that, and the supernatural community in general would stamp the Pack out for doing such a thing.*

But...his eyes had the same glassy look as the wolf I’d fought.

If he was taking wolfsbane, there was a good chance he was half feral and wouldn’t think the consequences through.

*I can’t risk it.*

I bit my lip, then started to pick my way down out of the tree, going as slowly as I could to buy time.

When I reached the lowest branch, Dolph meandered up to my tree, like an idiot, and peered up at me. “If you don’t hurry—”

I boosted myself off my branch and landed on top of Dolph, grinding the heel of my right foot into his face. I pushed off him and landed in a crouch as he staggered backward, shaking off the force I’d hit him with.

His lips curled up and he growled. “You—”

I rammed the pommel of my dagger into his throat, striking as hard as I could and cutting off his words to a pained gurgle. When he staggered I tried to hook my leg behind his knees and topple him, but he was too heavy for me to push over, and wasn’t quite unsteady enough to fall on his own.

Apparently, I needed to hit him even harder.

I tapped my hunter magic—which made my senses pulse to life as I narrowed in on Dolph with a predator’s intensity.

Dolph tried to peer at his backup. “Kash, don’t just—”

*Did the throat, eyes next.*

Flipping my daggers so I secured them in my fingers and freed up my thumbs, I rammed my thumbs into his eyeballs.

He reared back and batted at me, hitting me in the shoulder with enough force to send me staggering backward, but I’d pressed hard enough that his eyes were watering and he couldn’t see well.

As a werewolf, Dolph could take a lot more damage than a human, so if I didn’t stab him and make him bleed out, I could be as brutal as necessary to get him down. But it was risky for me to fight him, which was why I needed to use every advantage I could—including forgoing the usual back and forth dialog and insults fighters like to exchange. I needed to put all my focus into fighting and strike whenever he was unguarded—and talking.

“You!” he snarled.

*Sight down for now, I need to hinder his hearing next.*

Still holding my daggers wedged between my fingers so they pointed away from my palms, I pulled my hands back and swung at both of Dolph’s ears with the bones of my wrist.

If I was incredibly lucky and hit him at the right angle, I’d be able to rupture his eardrums. Even if I didn’t succeed it’d make his ears ring—

which was enough to dull the senses of a wolf like Dolph and open him up to another attack.

I smashed his ears with my wrists, using all the force I could put into my swings.

He released a high-pitched yelp, but when I shifted my weight so I could knee him in the gut—hopefully *finally* toppling him, I felt his minion—Kash, apparently—finally move.

She tried to grab me, but she burned bright in my hunter senses, so I lunged out of the way in the nick of time.

I kept my eyes on Dolph, but when I felt two more wolves draw in at a rambling pace, I knew I was outnumbered. (There was no way any Northern Lakes wolf would *lollygag* at the pace they were moving, so they had to be from the Low Marsh Pack.)

I switched so I held both of my daggers in one hand, then grabbed a sturdy branch and flung it in the direction of the incoming wolves.

One of them was stupid enough to walk directly into it. It smacked him in the skull, snapping his head backward, but although he cursed, he stayed standing.

The other wolf gaped stupidly at me—he didn't have the glassy eyed look of his Alpha, but that didn't matter much. He'd do whatever Dolph ordered.

I felt Kash move behind me, so I spun around and stabbed my silver daggers at her.

She wasn't quite so far gone that her instincts had dulled to the sense of silver, and she threw herself to the side, dodging me.

"Get her!" Dolph roared, still struggling to see through his tears.

*Why do wolves always have to fight in Packs when they're already so difficult to fight one-on-one?*

Lumberer #1 and #2 finally stirred behind me, coming at me from an angle.

I tried to flee forward, but Kash managed to grab a lock of my white hair—I knew I should have braided it—and yanked me backward.

She swung me straight into the arms of Lumberer #2, and while I was able to get my elbow up high enough to drive it into his face, Kash switched her grip from my hair to my wrists and was easily able to jerk my arms

down while Lumberer #1 kneed me in the side with enough force to make my legs give out.

I collapsed to my knees, my arms raised over my head, and one of the wolves plucked my daggers from my grasp as if I had the strength of a child.

I coughed, trying to breathe through the pain that radiated up and down my side. *It's always me against a Pack of wolves. I'm always alone.*

Dolph had apparently recovered enough to see. He marched toward me with murder in his eyes.

I struggled—trying to stand or wriggle out of the wolves' grasp, but they were too strong.

*This'll hurt.*

I started to brace myself, when a flash of my hunter senses nearly blinded me, and something came barreling out of the forest and slammed into Dolph. He went flying and smacked into a tree—making it audibly creak.

Greyson stood where Dolph had moments before—his usually swept back blond-brown hair was ruffled, his jeans were ripped at the knees, and his dark t-shirt was dirty.

His gold eyes landed on me for a moment, before he took in the wolves holding me. “You’re all going to die.”

Kash inhaled, but Greyson reached her before she could say anything. He grabbed her by the shoulder and *flung* her on top of Dolph as if she was a pillow.

He grabbed Lumberer #1 by the throat and slammed him into the ground with so much force I felt it in the bones of my legs.

Lumberer #2 dropped me and turned to run, but Greyson caught him by the back of the shirt, yanked him hard so he started to fall backward, then kneed him in the left side, just below his bottom rib, right where his liver was.

The Lumberer dropped with a gurgle, totally incapacitated by the pain.

Greyson released his shirt, then turned his blistering gaze onto Dolph.

The Alpha was shaking, unable to get any of his muscles to respond as he felt the full force of Greyson's powers.

Greyson's anger was so fierce, so intense, it was biting cold. Even I felt the strength of his powers rasp in my lungs when I breathed.

*He's serious—he's going to kill them.*

"Wait, Greyson!" I leaped in front of him, grabbing his right wrist—though I knew I'd never physically be able to stop him. "You can't kill them."

Greyson stared at me, his gold eyes glowing. "Why not?"

"For a lot of reasons," I panted. "Because you'd regret it later most obviously, but *mostly* because Dolph is dosed with wolfsbane."

Greyson glanced past me and peered at Dolph's crumpled form.

"We can give him to the Regional Committee, and once they worm out who the supplier is, the case will be closed. The hunters will leave, and everything will be over."

He tilted his head from side to side as he scented the other Alpha. "You're right."

The sharp edge left his stance, and he twisted his wrist so I wasn't grabbing him, instead he was holding one of my hands. "Fine. I'll leave it."

He moved a step closer to me so there wasn't much room between us as he inspected me. He glided the fingers of his free hand across my cheekbone—probably checking for damage. "How badly did they get you?"

"Not too bad," I said. "It wasn't until they dogpiled on me that they got any hits in."

Greyson glanced at Lumberer #1—the one I'd hit in the face with the branch. "It seems you doled out a few injuries of your own."

"Yeah, but I couldn't stop them," I said wryly. "Not like you did."

Greyson squeezed my hand that he was still holding and gently slid his fingers down my quickly bruising side. "I'm an Alpha. It'd be a sad thing if I was easily overpowered by *Dolph*."

"Good for you," I grumbled. "I'm sure your parents are very proud."

"Did you ever wonder if maybe you're supposed to fight differently?" Greyson asked.

"Like in a family and not alone?" I snidely said.

"No. As in, perhaps your magic could be channeled in different ways from how you already use it." Greyson licked the pad of his thumb, then moved it toward my cheek.

"Do *not* touch my face with that," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want your *spit* on my face!"

“You don’t know, maybe my spit will give you wolf healing powers,” Greyson said.

I rolled my eyes as I retrieved my daggers from where Kash had thrown them. “That’s not a thing.”

My hunter instincts stirred, and in the distance I heard the howl of the Northern Lakes Pack as they slowly closed in on us.

I turned in the direction of their howls. “They’re a lot farther than I thought they’d be,” I said. “You arrived way before them.”

Greyson shrugged. “I sensed you were in trouble first.”

I wrinkled my forehead as I sheathed my daggers. *He sensed I was in trouble? Didn’t he hear my whistle?*

Greyson stalked over to Dolph—who had recovered enough that at least his mouth was working.

“Y-you!” Dolph growled as Greyson crouched next to him.

“Me,” Greyson agreed. “You gave the wolfsbane to the wolf who died, didn’t you?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dolph ground out in pained huffs.

“You reek of it,” Greyson said. “You won’t be able to hide it.”

“S-so? Why should I get in trouble for using a potion?” Dolph huffed.

I strolled up to Greyson’s back. “Um, maybe because it’s *illegal!*”

“It’s illegal because the other supernaturals know if we take it, we’ll be stronger, harder to fight, and they won’t be able to stop us,” Dolph said.

“Wow.” I slapped my hands to my cheeks. “This is my first time seeing a real, live nutcase.”

“It’s true! I’m unbeatable with it,” Dolph snarled.

I shook my finger at him. “Uh-ah. Not so unbeatable. Greyson took you down with *one hit*. Even I can sometimes survive more than a hit from him.”

“He’s lost some of his sense.” Greyson forced one of Dolph’s eyes wide open and peered at his pupils. “It’s hard to say if that’s the potion, or a pre-existing condition.”

“I see the truth,” Dolph said. “The other supernaturals want us weaker! Wolfsbane will fix everything.”

“Wolfsbane will make you lose your mind. That was the whole *point* of it. Given how straight up evil the elves could be, why would you think it

would do anything besides make you easy to subjugate?”

“Don’t waste your breath,” Greyson said. “You’re not going to get through to him. Who is your supplier?”

Dolph ignored Greyson and bared his teeth at me. “I should have eaten you when I had the chance.”

Greyson put his hand on Dolph’s sternum and pushed, grinding the wolf into the ground. “It was stupid of you to mess with the hunter, Alpha Dolph.”

Dolph attempted to laugh, but it came out as more of a choking noise. “Losing the hunter would show how incompetent you are.”

Greyson yawned in boredom. “Is that so? You’re lucky I’m not more incompetent, or I’d just kill you.”

“You’re stone c-cold.” Dolph tried to move his body, but I think he was still aching too badly because his feet kept twitching. “No wonder you can’t find your mate.”

Greyson lazily blinked. “Am I supposed to be upset by that?”

“Unnatural.” Dolph sucked air in through his mouth as he very obviously tried to control his spasming body.

“Maybe. Stay down.” Greyson grabbed Dolph’s throat and squeezed, making the other Alpha wheeze for a moment, then stood up.

He joined me as I took a few steps away, massaging the still tingling patch of my scalp that ached from when Kash yanked my hair.

“Is poking at your mate bond seriously the best insult he can come up with?” I asked.

“Most wolves would see my still missing mate as a failing,” Greyson said.

I squinted up at him. It was starting to get dark, but I could still read his expression well enough. “You have no control over finding your mate or not.”

“Yes.”

“But they would still blame you for that?”

“Yes.”

I dropped my gaze to his shirt as I puzzled through this revelation. “Wow. You wolves have some screwed up ways of thinking.”

“Something none of the hunters struggle with, as exemplified by Hunter Fletching.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

The Pack howled again. This time they were much closer—I could feel them entering the range of my senses.

“The Pack will be here soon.” I turned in the direction of their howls and glanced at the other Low Marsh wolves Greyson had laid low—they were still recovering and were nowhere near being able to stand based on the way one was curled up in the fetal position, and the other was emitting a high-pitched whine.

*Jeez. He’s still just as over-powered as ever.*

“Pip.”

“Hmm?” He was still radiating some of his Alpha intensity, so I was prepared for it when I turned around and was nearly nose to nose with him. Or nose to neck, I guess, since he was taller than me.

“You fought well, and I’m glad you’re not hurt.”

I stared up into his glowing eyes for a moment, relaxing when I realized he meant it.

*He wouldn’t tell me I did well just to spare my feelings—he’d be more likely to rub it in.*

“Thanks.” I chewed on my lower lip, then added, “And thanks for coming.”

Remembering his odd comment from when he’d first arrived, I awkwardly swung my arms forward and backward. “Hey, Greyson. When you said you sensed me—”

“Alpha!” Hector emerged from the trees, Ember right behind him—both of them in their human forms. They stopped abruptly when they saw Dolph and the other werewolves on the ground, and Rio, Aeric, and Wyatt—all in their wolf bodies—nearly slammed into the backs of their legs.

Hector glanced at Greyson and apparently had refined the ability to read minds. “Secure them,” he instructed. “I’ll phone the Curia Cloisters, and then contact the Fletchings and have them take these intruders into custody.”

The other wolves got to work, nabbing the recovering Low Marsh wolves.

Greyson remained at my side, any hint of his Alpha powers gone. “You were asking me something?”

“Nah, it’s not important,” I said.

Hector approached us, holding his cellphone. “Pip...”

“Let me guess, I get to make another incident report?” I asked. “And testify that these bozos were high on wolfsbane?”

Hector gave me a sympathetic smile. “The Curia Cloisters is requesting it.”

“Great,” I grumbled. “This better make the case watertight—because I’m getting sick of all of this paperwork.”

“Take her home,” Greyson instructed Hector. “She can make her statement on the phone there.”

“Hey, thanks for asking my opinion!” I sarcastically grinned at Greyson and gave him a thumbs up.

“You must not be injured.” Hector held my backpack—which looked ridiculous with his suave, professor-y get up.

“You can’t smell it?”

“No. You’ve retained your refreshing sense of humor.”

“Oohh, nice one! See, Greyson? You should be taking notes—this is what fun looks like!” I took my backpack from Hector.

Greyson flatly stared at me, then switched his attention to Ember.

Hector beckoned for me to follow him down the path. “I do wish you hadn’t said that.”

“Why?”

“He is fond of you.”

“Fond of me the way dogs are fond of chew toys, you mean.”

“That I cannot deny.”

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## Chapter 18

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*Pip*

“I can’t believe you’re here.”

I looked up from the computer where I was working on ordering another shipment of the little wolf keychains that howled. “What do you mean?”

Shania leaned over my hexagonal desk to peer at me. “You were *attacked* yesterday. And now here you are, at work—as if nothing happened!” She waved her hand around the welcome center for emphasis. “You should have taken off the rest of the week—or at least today!”

“Why?” I glanced at the visitors—three elderly ladies—who were checking out one of the displays. “Ember nearly force fed me a potion last night, so I’m not even hurt.”

“But it had to be traumatizing—to be attacked out of nowhere!”

“Oh. No, I’m pretty used to that, actually. And since the Fletchings are driving the entire Low Marsh Pack down to the Curia Cloisters, it’s not like I can do anything about the case. The Curia Cloisters will let us know when they finish questioning them.”

“Unbelievable.” Shania shook her head, then plopped her chin on her fist. “You complain about the wolves’ lack of sense, but you’re nearly as bad as them.”

I patted her hand. “It’s okay, Shania.”

“Why are *you* trying to placate *me*?” she demanded.

The bell on the door jingled, and together we turned toward it with bright smiles. “Hello! Welcome to Timber Ridge.”

Two new visitors entered, both possessing a beauty and sense of elegance that instantly marked them as fae.

My smile slid off in surprise when I realized I knew them. “Lord Linus? Lady Chrysanthe?”

“Ah, you *do* work here!” Lord Linus beamed at me as Chrysanthe took a picture on her phone with the flash on. “Chase told us you did, but he wasn’t sure if you’d be on duty today or not.”

Lord Linus had his perfect hair pulled back in a ponytail and was wearing slacks and a dress shirt rolled up to his elbows that—matched with his crooked grin—gave him a more casual appearance.

Lady Chrysanthe was a little more...*intense*. Even though she was just in jeans and what appeared to be a flannel shirt—a second glance made me realize it was actually a knit cardigan with a flannel pattern, and she had it belted fashionably at the waist—her innate elegance made her look more like a celebrity trying to blend in. But she was taking pictures of *everything*, and didn’t stop moving her head as she went from display to display.

“What brought you all the way up to Timber Ridge?” I asked.

“Officially, I’m delivering a report to your Alpha on some of the things he asked Chase to look into.” Lord Linus stuffed his hands in the pockets of his slacks and casually meandered up to my desk. “Unofficially, Lady Chrysanthe and I are here to see what kind of place shaped our dear Director of Security. Isn’t that right, Lady Chrysanthe?”

Lady Chrysanthe twisted to look back at us, holding her cellphone pointed at a wolf statue. “Yes.” Her testimony given, she immediately went back to her picture taking, oblivious to the three old ladies who were gawking at her.

“And there you have it.” Lord Linus slapped his hand on my desk, then delivered a devastating grin to Shania. “Hello.”

“Hi.” Shania blinked. “Director of Security?”

“He’s talking about Chase Washington, Ember’s younger brother,” I said. “Lord Linus and Lady Chrysanthe are members of the fae Night Court, where Chase works. Lord Linus, Lady Chrysanthe, this is Shania—a friend and coworker of mine.”

Lord Linus turned all his attention to Shania, his purple-ish, blue-ish eyes shining with curiosity. “It’s lovely to meet you, Shania. Tell me, what is it like living side by side with werewolves?”

I squinted at him. “Don’t you and Chase both live in the mansion? That means you live with a werewolf.”

Lord Linus rolled his eyes. “That doesn’t count. Chase is just one werewolf. I will admit I’m curious what life with a Pack of them is like. Are they all as regimented as Chase? Do they near constantly train and condition themselves? Or are wolves more casual than one would believe based on the same sample size I’ve encountered?”

Lady Chrysanthe paused her picture taking. “Lord Linus—they have a gift shop!”

“Really?” Lord Linus swiveled around so he could peer at it, and he watched as Lady Chrysanthe disappeared past the outer racks of keychains and other Timber Ridge memorabilia. “We should get some souvenirs.”

He pushed his elbows off the desk and looked ready to float away, but he had information I wanted.

“Lord Linus? Can you tell me what Chase found?” I asked.

“Hm?” Lord Linus yanked his gaze back to me. “I suppose so. Chase said Greyson asked for the information in front of you.” He glanced at the three old ladies.

The trio—bearing canes and a walker—clacked their way into the gift shop, undoubtedly following Lady Chrysanthe.

Shania bustled after them. “I can ring you up if you find anything,” she said. “And we might have more merchandise in the back if you want more than one of something.”

Somehow, Lord Linus managed to casually stand by my computer and appear relaxed, but lowered his voice so softly I think even a wolf would have had a hard time hearing him from the gift shop. “A cache of wolfsbane was discovered in Europe about two years ago. The Committee of Magic for that region thought they’d recovered all vials, and a few bottles were sent to the Dominant here in the USA for testing. He actually sent one to Pre-Dominant Harka initially for a few specific supernaturals in Magiford to look into, though she sent it back to him months ago.”

“Lord Linus, they have coffee mugs!” Lady Chrysanthe shouted from the innards of the gift shop.

“Any with wolves?” Lord Linus hollered back to her.

“They *all* do. There’s one that says, ‘I growl before coffee’.”

“Oh, get that one!”

“Got it!”

Though Lord Linus’s voice was bright when he called to Lady Chrysanthe, the pinch of concern hadn’t left the corners of his eyes.

I heard the older ladies chortle to themselves when they found the baby onesies.

“Oh, look at this one—it’s a wolf print!”

“I prefer this deer print—it’s so darling.”

I waited long enough to make sure they were occupied before I started up the conversation again. “Do you think someone could have stolen the samples the Dominant was given?”

“Unlikely.” Lord Linus ran his thumb along the edge of my desk, which was smoothed and faded from age. “The Dominant received too few for any kind of dealer to be interested, and it seems like the Low Marsh Pack would have guzzled several bottles of the stuff by themselves. Moreover, all bottles are accounted for. It seems more likely that vials were either taken before the cache was discovered, or that there are more, additional caches across the world that less benevolent supernaturals have found.”

I chewed on my lip. “Someone could be manufacturing it.”

“It’s been deemed unlikely,” Lord Linus said. “As there doesn’t seem to be any widespread use of wolfsbane. There have been a few *very* isolated incidents across the USA of wolves inexplicably going feral. Pre-Dominant Harka will be speaking to the Dominant about the Low Marsh Pack, so I think it would be safe to expect that there will be a new investigation into those isolated incidents. But if this was turning into a drug epidemic, we would see a lot more wolves—or shifters—going feral by now.”

“If that’s the case it seems particularly odd that multiple members of the Low Marsh Pack were taking it as a group,” I said.

“Yes. That’s why it’s been deemed a priority to uncover the Low Marsh Pack’s supplier—though rumor has it they haven’t gotten anything useful out of Alpha Dolph.”

“They have spray scents!” Lady Chrysanthe’s bright voice poked through the direness of our conversation again.

Again, Lord Linus shouted back to her. “What do they smell like?”

“Wolf musk?”

“Don’t get that one,” I told Linus before shouting, “*Don’t* get that one! That’s a joke—it smells like wet dog! Shania, can you show her the hair care products?”

“Oop, yeah, you don’t want that,” Shania said. “Come on, the hair care products are over here—they smell really good, because the wolves use them, too.”

“What do you mean?” Lady Chrysanthe asked.

“Werewolves have stronger noses than we do, and they find some scents and chemicals overwhelming,” Shania explained.

“Really?” Lady Chrysanthe sounded near tears.

“Don’t worry. These shampoos, conditioners, and soaps are more soothing to their senses. I use them, and my boyfriend—who is a werewolf—loves it,” Shania said.

“Better get a box of them, Lady Chrysanthe,” Lord Linus shouted. “It might help your attempt to seduce Chase!”

*“Thank you. Lord. Linus.”*

Lord Linus chuckled. “Ahhh, young love.”

I was not nearly as invested in Chase’s possible romance—or rather I had way bigger things to worry about, even though it was an intriguing thought.

“You said no one at the Curia Cloisters has been able to get Dolph to talk *at all*? Why haven’t they called in a fae to use a truth potion or something?” I asked.

Lord Linus shook his head. “I ‘happened’ to get word just before we left. Alpha Dolph and Kash, the two members of the Low Marsh Pack who were using wolfsbane—both went feral sometime in the middle of the night, before any specialists were called. Now they’re too far gone for either of them to make sense.”

“How is that possible?” I asked. “Wouldn’t they’ve had to get more wolfsbane to push them over?”

“I don’t know enough about it to make an educated guess.” Lord Linus’s expression darkened. “But it seems possible that it was their supplier, covering their tracks.”

“Which means the supplier has some highly specialized magic, or has enough political clout to give them access without it being suspicious,” I

said.

“Exactly.” Lord Linus nodded in approval. “I like your wits, Hunter Sabre. Regarding the issue, the first option seems the most likely given some of the unrest that has plagued us supernaturals recently.”

I grimaced. “Great. But that still leaves some pretty big questions out in the open.”

“Like?” Lord Linus asked.

“Why give wolfsbane to the Low Marsh Pack? They aren’t politically important, so was it an experiment or something? It has to have been—there’s no logical reason to target this specific area.”

Lord Linus drummed his fingers on my desk. “Perhaps it’s not so much the location as who is up here?”

“You mean Greyson? Or even the Northern Lakes Pack in general?” I asked. “That might make a little more sense. Greyson is going places.”

“And the Northern Lakes Pack is the strongest in the region. I’d bet it’s even stronger than Pre-Dominant Harka’s Pack,” Lord Linus said.

I made a noise in the back of my throat. “Maybe. But Dolph hated Greyson. He’s not super popular with some of the smaller Packs in the region. But I don’t think they’d have the clout or power necessary to get wolfsbane.”

“True,” Lord Linus agreed. “And unfortunately, it seems that theories are all we will have for some time. But I’m going to recommend to your Alpha that you prepare for some investigators from the Dominant to arrive in the next few months.”

“Great,” I said. “That’ll be fun.”

Lord Linus chuckled. “Think of all the excitement! It could bring new industry to your city. Though I will admit, I find Timber Ridge to be adorably quaint.” He turned in a circle, glancing at the displays, then paused when he saw the sign and backdrop advertising the picture-with-a-wolf. He pointed at it. “Is that real?”

“Yeah, we don’t do it too often mostly because the Pack is busy,” I said. “But it’s a big draw when we do open it up.”

“Fascinating,” Lord Linus said.

Lady Chrysanthe emerged from the gift shop, carrying two little handcarts. “Shania said I can pay for these here?”

“Yep!” Shania emerged, carrying another filled handcart. “Just put your stuff on the counter.”

I scooted down my desk, making room for Shania to unearth the tablet we used as our cash register.

“What kind of payment system do you use?” Lady Chrysanthe asked as she began unloading her finds—it looked like she’d gotten almost one of everything. In her first cart alone she had six different kinds of keychains, all twelve of the types of magnets we carried, two wolf bobbleheads, a handbag with wolves embroidered on it, and several t-shirts with Timber Ridge and wolf slogans printed on them.

Shania started scanning the merchandise, bagging it like a pro. “We take cash or credit.”

Lady Chrysanthe paused, her lips pressed together in concern. “Do you take fae gold? My Sovereign has told me multiple times humans do not consider it legal tender...”

There was a scuffle in the door that led to the back room where Moira’s office and the breakroom were, and the door was opened so abruptly it sagged on the hinges.

“We take fae gold!” Moira declared.

Old—especially for a werewolf—but feisty, Moira sported a slight belly paunch, a skip in her step, and hair almost as white as mine that was perpetually flat on one side, as if she was always waking up from a nap.

She smiled as she shuffled toward the desk where Shania was still scanning Lady Chrysanthe’s purchases. “Welcome to the Timber Ridge Welcome Center. Did you find everything you wanted?”

Lady Chrysanthe beamed, making her breathtakingly pretty. “Yes! You have a lovely shop.”

“Thank you.” Moira humbly bowed her head.

Lord Linus leaned closer. “Say, are you a werewolf?” he asked, likely able to sense the flavor of magic werewolves came in.

Moira straightened up and nodded, puffing up her chest just a little. “I am indeed! My name is Moira—my appearance is that of a tundra-wolf when I shift.”

Given the heat outside and that Moira always ran hot as a tundra wolf, she was wearing a bright green workout shirt and shorts, a visor, and Velcro sandals. The ensemble did little to convey the fierceness younger wolves

like Chase, Greyson, and Wyatt or Aeric did, but I was almost certain this was by design.

“Really? That’s fantastic!” Lord Linus turned, his gaze going in the direction of our photo stand. “Say, Lady Chrysanthe, how would you like a pictorial souvenir?”

Lady Chrysanthe turned away from the desk. “What?”

Shania finished bagging the last of Lady Chrysanthe’s many purchases. “Is fae gold real gold? Or is it some kind of fool’s gold, thing?” Shania whispered while the fae was occupied.

“It’s real,” Moira assured her. “It’s gold that comes from the fae realms, but it has the same properties as our gold here.”

Chrysanthe dropped a handful of fae gold coins on the counter. One of them spun, shooting off green colored sparks.

“Maybe they’re a little magical, but we can melt them down and no one will know,” Moira said.

“Moira, would you agree to taking a picture with us?” Lord Linus motioned to our photo stand. “We understand if you are too busy or don’t wish to be bothered, but we would treasure it as a reminder of our time here.”

Moira tilted her head, and I thought she was going to say no, until Lady Chrysanthe tossed a little pouch on the counter that jingled with coins—probably more fae coins.

That was how—five minutes later—I found myself taking a photograph of Lady Chrysanthe and Lord Linus standing on either side of a transformed Moira.

The little old ladies had paid for their purchases—yes, they’d each gotten a baby onesie, and the one with the walker had also bought a bottle of wine from a werewolf run vineyard in New York we were affiliated with, New Moon Wines—and then shuffled off with the intention to visit the Sweet Shoppe after learning there were wolf shaped chocolates and candies sold there. That meant we had the shop to ourselves, giving us plenty of time to snap some pictures.

As a wolf, Moira was a bright white color with a brush of gray on the top of her back, as if an artist had dry-brushed it there. She was stately, and wasn’t quite hip height next to the taller-than-average-fae, but her frame

was still solid with muscle, and while her coat wasn't as plush as say Greyson's, you could feel the power of her wolf form.

Lady Chrysanthe and Lord Linus smiled, and were very respectful—setting only their hands on Moira's back, as Moira had suggested before she'd shuffled off to change.

Next to me, Shania took pictures with Lord Linus's phone, and Lady Chrysanthe's. "Say cheese!"

"Parmesan," Lady Chrysanthe said.

"Aged cheddar," Lord Linus said. "Though I don't believe that's what she meant."

"One, two, three." I counted off before I snapped the picture.

I sent the picture to my computer, then darted over to my desk and printed the photo on our photo printer.

While the printer got to work, I opened a drawer of my desk and plucked out the little folder—which was, of course, covered with photos of wolves—that we slipped the souvenir photograph in, and got a plastic sleeve for safekeeping.

When the printer spat out the photo into the photo tray I glanced down at it to confirm it hadn't printed out weird, then finished writing out Lady Chrysanthe's, Lord Linus's, and Moira's names under the little placard spot printed on the photo folder so they could remember what wolf they had their picture taken with. "It just needs to dry for a few seconds, but it's done!"

"Thank you! This is very exciting," Lord Linus said. "I got my picture taken with an actual werewolf!"

Shania handed the phones back. "Didn't Pip say you live with Chase? Can't you get a photo taken with him whenever you want?"

"I don't imagine Mr. Workaholic would ever stop working long enough to *take* a photo," Lord Linus said.

"Chase's sense of duty is one of his many admirable qualities," Lady Chrysanthe said.

"Besides," Lord Linus continued, ignoring Lady Chrysanthe's defense of the werewolf. "It's not the same. It's like taking a picture of your roommate."

Lady Chrysanthe opened her mouth to argue, but the photo finished drying, so I slid it into the folder and passed it over. "Here you go!"

“How charming!” Lady Chrysanthé clapped her hands in delight.

“Quite so,” Lord Linus agreed. “We’ll have to put it on display. Everyone will be positively jealous.”

“But...you’re all supernaturals,” I said. “You see werewolves all the time.”

Our photo booth attracted a lot of attention...from humans. But for supernaturals, it wasn’t a rare thing to see werewolves—or shifters in general.

“Seeing a werewolf and having your picture taken with one are two very different things,” Lord Linus informed me.

“Okay. Glad you’re so happy,” I said.

Shania and Moira joined me in the center area of my hexagonal desk, crowding the place as Lady Chrysanthé started picking up her bags.

Lord Linus took one of them from her. “We still have an hour or two before we’re due to drop in on your Alpha—”

“He’s not my Alpha,” I said.

“Are there any places you’d recommend we visit?” Lord Linus finished without acknowledging my comment—he seemed to be very good at ignoring things he didn’t want to hear.

Moira grunted and jumped up, resting her front paws on my desk as she nosed a display that had pamphlets of all the werewolf owned businesses in Timber Ridge.

“Excellent!” Lord Linus plucked one of each, then flapped them—and their commemorative photo folder—at us. “Thank you for a delightful time. Come along, Lady Chrysanthé.”

Lady Chrysanthé grabbed her last bag. “Thank you,” she said. “It was very enjoyable. We will be sure to tell the rest of the Court about our excursion.”

They were out the door—the little bell jingling—before I could say anything in response.

Shania, Moira—with her paws still on my desk—and I all stared at the shut door.

“That was weird, right?” Shania asked. “We’ve never gotten supernatural tourists before.”

“Yes,” I said. “It was...something.”

Moirra made a rumbling noise in the back of her throat, then excitedly sniffed the fae gold Lady Chrysanthe had paid with.

*Too bad, I doubt this is going to become a new business model.*

I shook my head, then got to work, cleaning up the photo booth, while some of what Lord Linus had shared circled through my brain.

*Sounds like the Northern Lakes Pack is going to be entirely cleared. I wonder how Amos Fletching will take that...*

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## Chapter 19

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### *Pip*

**L**ord Linus's suspicions were correct. Two days later Greyson and I—as well as a few other representatives from the Northern Lakes Pack—were called to appear before Pre-Dominant Harka to hear the results of the investigation.

The case was held in a natural preserve owned and run by the Curia Cloisters. Thankfully everyone had gathered in the shade of the trees, out of the beastly hot morning sun.

All of the Fletchings involved in the investigation were present, as were a number of Pre-Dominant Harka's Pack Members, Rafe—her nephew—two record keepers who would publicly post the findings of our meetings and report back to the Regional Committee of Magic, several representatives from some of the larger shifter clans, a vampire from the Drake Family—I had no idea what they were doing attending this meeting—and two wizards who worked as secretaries for the Dominant.

Since it was quite a crowd we stood in an oval shape, with Pre-Dominant Harka and all of her people at the top of the oval.

Everyone was standing, which you would assume would be awkward, but it gave the wolves a chance to move and fidget with their nervous energy, and they were much more comfortable than they would have been in one of the Curia Cloisters' meeting rooms.

“We’ve heard the findings of the initial investigation made by the Fletching Hunters after Alpha Greyson and Hunter Sabre were involved with the fight and killing of a feral Low Marsh wolf,” Pre-Dominant Harka announced from her seat. “And we’ve reviewed all information we have on wolfsbane.”

I glanced back at Wyatt and Aeric, who stood behind me and smiled reassuringly.

Greyson and I were positioned in front of Harka with ten wolves from the Pack flanking us.

Lady Chrysanthe lingered behind the Northern Lakes wolves—she’d come with the night mares to pick us up from Timber Ridge, so our commute had been minutes instead of hours. Judging by the way she was tapping away on her phone, I was pretty sure she was texting someone—though I didn’t know if it was Chase, or the Night Queen herself.

“While it has been confirmed that two additional members of the Low Marsh Pack have imbibed the potion, that is the only additional information that has been uncovered. Is that correct, Hunter Amos Fletching?”

Amos stood with his hands clasped behind his back, the two younger members of his family standing behind him. “That is correct.”

*Hmm, he didn’t call her Pre-Dominant Harka. That’s pretty rude—even I wouldn’t be that gutsy.*

Harka must have noticed. She stared him down for several long, painful moments, but then returned her attention to the papers she held. “What did you find when investigating the Low Marsh territory?”

“One unused bottle of wolfsbane was hidden in a false bottom of a kitchen drawer,” Amos said. “No other vials or bottles were found.”

“Did you uncover anything to reveal the source of the bottle?”

“No,” Amos said. “We combed through all phone records, and what small paper trails Dolph had in his home, but we were unable to find anything.”

*How is that possible? At bare minimum Dolph would need a way to contact his source. Unless the source always did the contacting? Perhaps it was someone who lived nearby—but why would they be in Northern Wisconsin?*

It seemed more likely that the source had an easy way to travel, but that was groundless gut instinct.

One of the secretaries who worked for the Dominant poked her pen in the air. “And neither Alpha Dolph nor Kash have revealed the source of the potion?”

“Unfortunately, they’re not able to. Bring them in.” Harka nodded to her nephew.

Rafe nodded and disappeared through the trees, coming back a few moments later with two hunters and four wolves who herded Dolph and Kash—who were in their wolf forms—to the front of our gathering.

Kash didn’t resist—she was so out of it the wolves practically carried her in. She sagged in the werewolves’ grasp, and her eyes were unfocused as her nails scraped the ground.

Dolph, however, fought every step, snarling and snapping. His eyes were shot through with blood, and they had a sickly glassiness to them. His fur was matted, and it looked like he’d chipped one of his front fang teeth.

“*Stop,*” Harka barked.

For a moment, I felt Harka’s power swell. It flashed in the thicket of trees like a lightning strike, making all the wolves stiffen.

Kash didn’t react—I don’t think she was really conscious—but Dolph slammed to the mossy ground. He didn’t really seem to be aware of it, though, because he tried to chew his own paw and his drool was flecked with froth.

*Woah, that’s pretty intense. Even feral he still reacts to Harka’s power.*

The secretary grimaced. “Will they remain feral forever? Or will it wear off and let them become human again?”

“It is believed it will wear off.” Pre-Dominant Harka slipped her hands into the pockets of her pantsuit. “Centuries ago, when the elves used it, they administered wolfsbane on a monthly basis to keep pet shifters pliant. Given that we haven’t seen this potion used in modern times, we don’t know. All wolves who have taken it—at this point—have been put down because they were threatening or harming humans.”

“If they return to their human form, they should have the mental capacity to tell us who sold them the potion,” Rafe added. “But there are no guarantees.”

“Regardless, Alpha Dolph is officially removed from his position as Alpha of the Low Marsh Pack, whether he regains his senses or not.” Pre-Dominant Harka’s stark black hair seemed extra dark in the shadows of the

trees. “Being Alpha is a position of honor *and* responsibility—you are to take care of those within your Pack and look after their wellbeing. Something Dolph failed at, given that he chose to imbibe wolfsbane, and likely encouraged its use.”

“Vant, step forward,” Rafe instructed.

Vant—the beta of the Low Marsh Pack—meandered out of the crowd.

He was a big guy, with lots of muscle and a look in his eye I didn’t quite like.

I shifted uneasily as he stalked up to where Harka stood.

“Vant is now Alpha over the Low Marsh Pack,” Harka announced. “Unless he is unseated in a challenge. Are there any challengers?”

The Low Marsh wolves who attended the meeting sat a little deeper in their chairs, avoiding Vant’s eyes.

“Congratulations, Alpha Vant,” Pre-Dominant Harka said. She held his gaze, her eyes hard. “Learn from the mistake of your predecessor. Keep your Pack safe.”

Mere wisps of her power were enough to make Vant lower his gaze and get down on one knee in front of her. “I will guard them,” he said.

“See that you do,” Pre-Dominant Harka warned. She then looked out at the crowd, releasing Vant.

The wolves clapped politely—and a few howled—as Vant returned to his spot near the back of the crowd.

I uneasily watched his Pack’s reaction when he returned to them, noting the way none of them seemed to smile or be happy.

*Dolph was terrible, but I’m not sure Vant is going to be that much better for them. Though I suppose, as long as he doesn’t make them take wolfsbane, that’d be a huge upgrade for them.*

I glanced over at Greyson—who had his usual unreadable and stone-like expression slapped on since we were in public.

*But I don’t think he’s going to be any better a neighbor than Dolph was. Although I think he’s smart enough not to wander into Northern Lakes territory and pick a fight.*

“Given what has been uncovered about the Low Marsh Pack,” Harka continued once the wolves settled down, “I’ve decided to completely absolve Alpha Greyson and Hunter Sabre from the death of the Low Marsh Pack wolf. The Northern Lakes Pack responded to a threat to the humans

they live with. It was appropriate—and to be applauded. They are no longer under any investigation of any kind.”

“*What!*” Amos Fletching fought his way forward, an angry sneer branded into his face. “How can you say that?”

Pre-Dominant Harka peered down her long nose at him. “The Northern Lakes Pack had nothing to do with the wolfsbane.”

“The Northern Lakes Pack has had a near perfect survival rate of those who have attempted the change for the past decade, and more wolves make the change successfully. Moreover, the number of wolves in the Pack with the competency and capacity to be an Alpha is so high it should be statistically impossible,” Amos snarled.

“Such things are not side effects of the potion—no matter what dosage it is taken in. The elves would never stand for positive side effects when they wanted to use the potion to enslave shifters,” Pre-Dominant Harka wryly said. “And even if it was, you have been unable to find any trace of wolfsbane anywhere besides Low Marsh Pack territory.”

“But their statistics are impossible,” Amos argued. “They’re using something to achieve those kinds of numbers!”

“Be that as it may, the Fletchings were sent to investigate the death of the Low Marsh wolf, and the wolfsbane.” Pre-Dominant Harka glanced down at Amos as if he were a bug. “At this time, the Northern Lakes Pack is *not* under investigation.”

“You can’t do that,” Amos argued. “They aren’t natural!”

“*What* can I not do?” Pre-Dominant Harka’s voice was dangerously sharp. “Choose your next words carefully, Amos Fletching.”

Even though we hunters weren’t affected by an Alpha’s presence, Harka’s raw strength was pretty hard to miss—or oppose.

Amos snapped his jaw shut and retreated to where his family was clustered, but his expression was murderous.

*This isn’t over.* I frowned as I watched him whisper something to one of his hunters. *He’s not going to give up that easily. He’s too obsessed with the Northern Lakes Pack.*

“A new investigation into wolfsbane is opening, but it will be headed by the Dominant.” Harka nodded down at the Dominant’s secretaries. “Due to the nature of the case, details will not be available until the Dominant publicly posts the findings, but the Low Marsh Pack has already agreed to

cooperate with further investigation. The Northern Lakes Pack is entirely cleared. That's all." Harka turned her back to the wolves and moved to stand with Rafe and the wolves from her Pack.

Behind me, Aeric released a deep breath. "So we're free," he said. "Awesome! I can't wait for those hunters to get out of Timber Ridge—no offense, Pip."

"No, I get it." I shifted my weight, trying to balance so my heels wouldn't punch through the grass into the dirt. "But at least they're gone."

"They have a ton of stuff up north that I'm sure they'll come get." Wyatt tucked his hands into the pockets of his dress pants and jingled his keys. "But after a day or two they'll be gone." He glanced at Amos—who was stalking off through the trees, his face dark with anger as his family raced after him. "I hope."

"If they don't leave, we'll be able to kick them out," Aeric said. "Right? Alpha Greyson?"

Greyson watched Amos, his golden eyes cold. "They'll leave."

*Why does that feel like more of a promise than a prediction?*

Aspen, who'd wandered closer to us as the meeting let out, frowned. "I think it's shameful the wolfsbane supplier wasn't uncovered." She glanced at Greyson in a way that made me think she was implying he needed to step up and handle it.

The Pack shifted uncomfortably around us at this valid but problematic point.

"We'll watch for the dealer," Greyson said. "And join the Dominant's investigation. Though it's likely the dealer already moved on, rather than risk detection."

"I suppose so," Aspen said, a smile budding on her lips at the thought.

"Aspen," Rio called.

Aspen slightly bowed her head to Greyson, then slipped off to join her boyfriend where he was talking with some of Harka's people.

Some of the other Pack members began talking, leaving Aeric, Wyatt, and me to our own devices.

"This whole thing got me wondering, though." Aeric thoughtfully peered up at the sky and watched a squirrel jump in the trees overhead. "Why *do* we have such a great survival rate, and have so many potential Alphas in our Pack?"

“I didn’t think it was that big a difference,” I said. “I just figured everyone else exaggerated the difference.”

“No,” Wyatt said. “We’ve been crazy successful. That’s why Pre-Dominant Harka asked for Aspen to join our Pack—her chance of surviving the change was way higher.”

Together, all three of us turned to Greyson, curious if he’d give a reason.

Greyson stood up. “The Northern Lakes Pack is what it is.” He walked off, heading for Pre-Dominant Harka.

“And that is that,” Aeric said.

“Unsurprisingly,” I grumbled. “Of course he wouldn’t share anything.”

“Really?” Wyatt leaned back in his chair. “I think it was pretty telling.”

I eyed him. “Telling of what?”

“That there is a reason for it,” Wyatt said. “Because if there wasn’t, he would have just told us we were idiots.”

Aeric and Wyatt exchanged nods, then moved on.

“We should eat somewhere in Magiford for lunch before we head home,” Aeric said.

“Yeah, agreed. Oh, there are a few specialized weapon forgers in Magiford. I’d like to check them out before we leave, too.” Wyatt took off his glasses to peer at the dirty lenses. “And I want to stop at the board game store downtown. Is there a car shop you want to visit?”

“You know me too well!”

I was not nearly so satisfied with Greyson’s answer—and Wyatt’s valid point.

*If there is a reason...why isn't the Pack telling other wolves? What is Greyson so deeply protecting?*

---

An hour later, I sat at a plastic table, safely hidden from the hot summer sun under an umbrella, finishing up my french fries from our lunch.

All the Pack that had come with us to Magiford had swamped the place—a little diner-style restaurant set against one of the lakes, with a bunch of cute outdoor seating.

Since they finished eating their food—about twice as much as what I had ordered—they were exploring Magiford.

At a glance I could see Aerik and Wyatt standing outside the board game store Wyatt had wanted to see. I was pretty sure at least a handful of humans had figured out they were wolves, because a clutch of teenagers were standing on the sidewalk, gawking at them.

*Apparently wolves don't come to town very often, even in a place like Magiford.*

Further down—on the lake side of the street—Rio and Aspen went into a gelato store, while another few Pack members were trying to track down a famous blacksmith with little luck as the blacksmith didn't own a physical shop.

Hector and Greyson were talking with Lady Chrysanthe and a brownie with russet red hair who was apparently from the Night Court, leaving me to my own devices.

I was perfectly content to sit on my rear and eat—it was pretty rare for me to have any down time given all the practice the wolves wanted, and if I could have a hobby, it would be doing nothing.

But my good sense/desire not to be run down during said practice sessions was stronger than my desire to be lazy.

*Maybe I should see if the fae who modified my gun has store hours right now. I could get some more ammo.*

“Pip!”

*I know that voice.*

I stood up from my table so fast I almost knocked my water glass over and peered around.

Sure enough, coming up the opposite end of the street was Hudson.

Built like a bear with an infectious smile and a laugh that matched, Hudson meandered toward me, wearing his familiar blue jean overalls as he rubbed his bald head.

“Hudson!” I laughed, tears making my throat sting as I flung myself at the older wolf.

He laughed as he lifted me off my feet and swung me around. “Little Hunter! It's good to see you again!”

A few of the Pack members—the ones standing at a crosswalk, attempting to track down the blacksmith—looked up when they heard me

shout and turned in our direction.

Two of them took a few steps toward us, then stopped and looked at Greyson, checking with him.

My smile slipped off my face.

*Ahh, yes. Pack politics.*

Hudson was the previous Alpha of the Northern Lakes Pack and had abruptly stepped down and was immediately replaced with Greyson.

Hudson was still a decade or two away from retiring at the time, and when I'd relentlessly pushed for an explanation all I was told was that Hudson hadn't done anything wrong, but he'd wanted to step down, and that it was all of his own volition.

Yeah. Right.

He'd left the Pack. His wife and Lynn—his daughter—left with him.

"How are you?" I studied his face for any sign of unhappiness, but his smile was just as warm as it always was, and the lines at the crease of his eyes and the depth of his smile lines made me think he actually was happy.

"Loving retirement." Hudson took my hand and patted it. "The family and I joined a local Pack here in Magiford! It's smaller than Northern Lakes, of course—no Pack in the Midwest is as big as Northern Lakes. But Lynn married the Alpha's son and is expecting her first child—a little girl!"

I coughed, trying to get rid of the tight feeling at the back of my throat. "She's pregnant?"

Hudson's smile was bright and proud. "Yep! I'm going to be a grandpa!"

"Wow, I didn't know," I said.

The thought stung.

Lynn used to be my best friend. She had attended a ton of my hunter classes with me so I wouldn't feel isolated from the others, and we'd been constant companions since I'd arrived in Timber Ridge.

But when Hudson left, she'd gone with him and dropped all contact with me. She never texted me back, much less responded to any emails or direct messages I'd sent her. Apparently our friendship hadn't been as deep as I'd thought.

I shook myself from the selfish thought—Hudson and his family had been through so much. I was just a hunter their Pack had taken in, not actual Pack. Lynn didn't owe me anything.

“She’s about ready to pop,” Hudson continued. “But the last time she heard me say that, I got a kick in the head, so let’s pretend I didn’t mention it. How are you doing, Little Hunter?”

“Fine.” I glanced at the Pack again.

Aeric and Wyatt had abandoned their game store and come a block closer. They stood across the street, waiting for a crosswalk to change.

The rest of the wolves looked back and forth between Hudson and Greyson.

Surprisingly, Greyson didn’t look like he was paying attention to his conversation with Hector, Lady Chrysanthe, and the brownie.

When I glanced at him he locked eyes with me. He was relaxed—his posture was too loose and uncaring. But there was an intensity in his eyes—he was listening to our conversation, even though he was almost a block up.

I tore my eyes away from Greyson and smiled at Hudson. “I assume you heard about everything that happened to the Low Marsh Pack?”

Hudson nodded and squinted in the bright sunlight. “I have. Sounds like you and Alpha Greyson handled it well. I also heard about you socking Hunter Fletching in the face. I was surprised; I thought Dulce and Santos taught you better.” He kept a disappointed look for about one second before a deep, roaring laughter ripped from him. “Dulce would have taken a rolling pin to that hunter’s noggin if she were still around!”

He wiped his eyes and straightened up. “Greyson told me the whole story. I gave him a jingle when I heard about it. I’m proud you used your position.”

“Yeah, hunter on hunter violence is totally something to brag about,” I joked.

Hudson gave me a funny look. “You might have gotten off because you’re a hunter and you attacked another hunter, but the others didn’t step down because of that.”

“Yeah, it’s because I hit him so they didn’t have to,” I said.

Hudson shook his head. “Not quite. It’s because you were the one who stepped in. You owned the situation, so they could fall in line.”

Now it was my turn to be confused. “I’m a hunter, not an Alpha, Hudson.”

“You’re not,” Hudson agreed. “But it seems like you still don’t quite understand your position in the Pack.”

*Because there is no position. They've made that abundantly clear.*

"I'm not really Pack, though," I pointed out.

For a moment, Hudson looked older, and there was a hint of sadness in his eyes. "Pip..."

I felt a familiar presence approach from behind, and Hudson immediately clamped up.

"Alpha Greyson, hello." Hudson smiled—it looked genuine, but also a little wary.

"Hello, Hudson." Greyson moved in until his chest brushed my right shoulder. "It's good to see you again so soon."

"So soon?" I peered up at Greyson.

"He stopped by the Curia Cloisters when I was finishing up some paperwork while you were exploring downtown the day you saw Arbiter Tanaka," Greyson said.

"Oh." More of my joy leaked out of me. "So you knew I was in town."

*And you didn't try to see me? Yep. I'm definitely not a packmate. But I already knew that.*

"Hudson!"

"Hudson, my man!"

Aeric and Wyatt finally crossed the street and jogged up to us.

"Aeric, Wyatt!" Hudson laughed as he gave Wyatt a backslap, then elbowed Aeric. "Did you finally ask Shania out?"

"Yeah!" Aeric laughed and sheepishly ruffled his hair. "We've been dating for a while."

I smiled and figured this was a good time to leave, because yeah, okay, I was feeling a little hurt, even though I should have known better.

Greyson watched me as I backed away. I nodded to him, then went around the group—which was growing as more Northern Lakes wolves approached to greet Hudson—and headed up the street.

*Maybe I should copy Rio and Aspen and get some gelato.*

I grabbed my now cold remaining few french fries from the table I'd been sitting at and tossed them in the garbage, then headed up the street, wiping my hands off on my dress pants as I went.

When I got to the gelato store I saw Rio and Aspen were still inside. I didn't really feel like dealing with Rio's sucky attitude, so I kept walking. I

found a clean alleyway with colored stones that led to the boardwalk behind main street and wound snug against the lakes.

“Hunter Sabre.”

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## Chapter 20

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*Pip*

I rolled my eyes to the side and watched Amos slouch his way down the boardwalk, his netted hat cocked on his head, much like his smile.

Radcliff and Scarlett trailed behind him, but I was pretty sure I saw another hunter or two from their family farther down the boardwalk.

*What are they doing in downtown?*

It wasn't like they weren't allowed, but I would have thought they'd be starting the drive back north to Timber Ridge to get their stuff since they hadn't traveled via night mare like the rest of us.

"Hunter Fletching," I said. "Congratulations on a closed case."

Amos laughed lowly and shook his head. "You're a bit too premature."

I turned my back to the water and propped up my elbows on the banister of the boardwalk railing so I'd look casual, but I'd be able to see all possible directions Amos and his family cronies could pop out of. "Am I? Even though the Pre-Dominant herself said the investigation is over?"

Amos narrowed his eyes. "Just because a politician says an investigation is closed doesn't mean we're done looking into it."

*He's lucky the Pre-Dominant isn't around to hear him call her a politician. Pretty sure she'd kick him through the floor of the boardwalk.*

I tucked a loose strand of my white hair behind my ear. "Really? Because I think that's *exactly* what it means."

A vein in Amos's neck pulsed with anger despite the hard looking smile he wore. "You're planning on staying with the wolves?"

"Yeah." I furrowed my brow, confused by the question. "Timber Ridge is my home."

"Why?" Amos asked. "Why do you stay with them?"

Thinking of everyone I'd said goodbye to in my life, I somehow managed to keep my voice even. "Because they're all I have."

Amos shook his head. "Nonsense. You belong with a hunter family."

*Ugh. This again.*

I rolled my eyes. "None of the hunter families except the Quillons wanted me when I was orphaned—and I wasn't going to go with them for obvious reasons. I have no loyalty to hunters as a supernatural besides that of coworkers."

Amos held up a finger. "You see that? That there's unnatural. You're living with the things you should be tracking down and eliminating."

I stood up straighter. "*Things?* You dare to call werewolves *things*?"

"They're nearly beasts," Amos flatly said. "They look human, and they can mimic human behavior, but they are the only supernaturals whose humanity can be stripped away like clothing. They're a step up from animals."

*He's a bigger nut than I realized. He's absolutely insane.*

"What are you talking about? If wizards lose control they're just as dangerous, if not more so!" I kept my voice low and hopefully inaudible to anyone around. "You're out of your mind and so wrong in your thinking I can't believe you're a certified hunter."

"You think you can deny it when feral wolves almost ripped you apart?" Amos scoffed. "Given how your parents died, I can't believe you don't know it."

I was so shocked by his arrogant stupidity, I found I couldn't make my mouth move.

*He...what?*

Behind him, Radcliff shifted and exchanged glances with Scarlett. The two looked almost ill at the hatred their uncle spewed.

*At least the whole family isn't tainted.*

"I don't know what your problem is, but you need to get your head screwed on straight," I said. "Despite what you think, the investigation is

over. You have nothing more to do with the Northern Lakes Pack.”

Amos rocked back on his heels and shook his head. “Can’t do that.”

“Why is that?” I asked, my voice sword-edge sharp.

“Because they’re unnatural.”

“This again.” I rolled my eyes to the heavens. “If you’re so stuck on the natural order of things, you need to go watch a nature documentary.”

“Werewolves are dying out,” Amos announced. “As they should be.”

“Werewolves and every other supernatural,” I muttered under my breath.

“It’s the natural order of things that will allow magic to slowly leave this world.”

“You are aware that we are magic, right?” I asked. I peered at Scarlett and Radcliff. “Which means we’re gonna die out, too.”

Radcliff shifted his weight. “Uncle—”

Amos held his hand up, cutting him off.

“The success rate of werewolf changes has drastically decreased,” Amos continued. “It’s rare for a person attempting the change to survive, much less actually become a werewolf, which means the population is radically decreasing. *Except* for the Northern Lakes Pack.”

“*That’s* why you don’t like the Pack?” I asked. “You’re mad because they successfully change people?”

“Their change rate is better than werewolves have had in the past century,” Amos said.

“Well, hospitals are now a thing, you know,” I said. “Although maybe you don’t, given your other ways of thinking.”

“There is obviously something to the Pack—a potion or method they haven’t revealed,” Amos growled.

“There’s not,” I said. “The rate stayed the same with Hudson and then Greyson taking over. Yeah, they’re strong, but they’re not doing anything different or illegal.”

“They are,” Amos flatly said. “It’s impossible for them to thrive as they are and for magic to *not* be involved. The danger in that is that they could eventually reveal their method to the other Packs.”

I massaged the sides of my head. “I’m sorry. I’m struggling to think like a crackpot. What does that have to do with anything?”

“It means the werewolf population will stop decreasing,” Amos hissed. “And they won’t die out.”

“Ohh, yeah, that’s right. I’d forgotten already that you’re clinically insane,” I said.

“You crack jokes, but when the rest of supernatural society has died out and only the wolves are left—”

“And the vampires,” I interrupted. “Because they’re, like, immortal.”

“With only the most savage of supernaturals left, they prey upon the humans,” Amos said.

I pressed my hands to my mouth. “I don’t know how to tell you this,” I said. “But there are way more humans than there are supernaturals. If we’re all extinct, I think they’ll be fine anyway.”

Amos leaned closer so he invaded my space. “You may think this is a *joke*, Hunter Sabre, but it’s a dangerous problem. One I will take care of, even if the proper authorities don’t see it.”

I’m pretty sure my blood thickened in my veins—there was something threatening about the way he said it, and his yellow-toothed smile made my throat squeeze uncomfortably.

“Leave the Northern Lakes Pack alone, Amos,” I said.

Amos leaned closer still, near enough I could smell his terrible, hot breath. “We’ll see.”

“Uncle Amos, we should leave,” Scarlett said, her voice loud.

“You definitely should.” I gritted my teeth to keep from snarling as he backed up.

Amos slid his hands into his pockets. “Fine, but know this, Hunter Sabre. You need to pick a side: hunters, or wolves.”

I would have taken his words as gibberish, but given what he’d just said, my gut twisted in me, and something like dread clawed at my throat. “There are no sides, Fletching.”

Amos smirked. “There will be.” He turned around and strolled back up the boardwalk, the wooden walkway creaking under him. “Think about it!”

“There’s nothing to think about!” I shouted.

“Sorry,” Scarlett said. “Our mom leads the family. We’ve told her everything that’s happening. We’ll be leaving Timber Ridge immediately after we get our stuff.”

“She’ll keep him under control,” Radcliff added. “He’ll leave you alone.”

“Okay,” I said—though I honestly wasn’t sure that I believed them.

*He’s got the backing of some of the other hunters for certain, or they wouldn’t let him spout off all his stupid speeches.*

Scarlett and Radcliff hurried after their uncle, their boots clomping on the boardwalk.

“I should tell Hector what he said,” I decided. “Just in case.”

---

I adjusted the straps of my holster, then wiped the sweat from my face. “Have a good run,” I said.

Ember wagged her tail at me—her golden fur had more of a russet appearance in the late evening sun—then led them off through the woods.

About twenty of them were heading out. The other twenty or so members of the Pack who were around tonight were probably still in their human form.

*They probably won’t join them until the sun sets.*

As the last of the wolves disappeared into the underbrush of the woods, something squeezed my heart.

It couldn’t be regret—I was smarter than that. As I was forever reminding everyone, I wasn’t Pack. Obviously, as shown by the way I was excluded from Pack bonding—like Pack hunts and runs. I was liked by the wolves, but not loved.

*Ugh, maybe it is regret. I thought I was past that.*

Rather than revisit old hurts, I triple checked to make sure the safety of my gun was on—it didn’t matter too much, though, as I only had one magazine clip and it was fixed to my belt—as I made my way back through the forest.

It took me a moment or two to orient myself before I figured out what direction I needed to go in, then I hiked off.

*Aeric and Wyatt weren’t in the group. Maybe they’re at the lodge? I could stop and eat there—I don’t think anyone would mind.*

I felt the burst of energy that was a werewolf following close behind me.

When I glanced back I saw Greyson—in his beautiful white wolf form. “Do you need something?” I stared at Greyson’s tail, warily watching for it to start wagging.

He just stared at me.

“What?” I asked. “Do you want me to send Hector or something?”

Hector had stayed human—in case anyone needed contact with the wolves.

Greyson circled around me as I tried to dissect his body language. He brushed against my legs, shedding white hair all over them.

“What?” I repeated. “You’re not giving me any hints here.”

Greyson pushed his large head under my hand, his wet nose nudging the palm of my hand before he pushed so my fingers glided over the top of his head.

I knelt down so I could better rub the sides of his cheeks—just in front of his ears—where I knew most wolves got itchy. “You are unbelievable.” There was more laughter to my voice than I would have liked, but there was something about Greyson in his wolf body—he was so breathtaking with his golden eyes, snow white fur, and lean build—and here he was, leaning into me, exhaling loudly in satisfaction.

As Greyson pushed his side into mine, there was something about the moment that just made me relax.

I’d missed this: just being with someone.

I hung out with Wyatt and Aeric, and yeah I was forcibly given hugs, but I hadn’t really just *sat* with someone and breathed for a minute in a long while.

Greyson was warm, and he’d rip the throat out of anything that bothered us. So I let my eyes slide shut as I just enjoyed the moment and loosely threw one of my arms around his shoulders.

In the distance, a wolf howled.

*Ahh yes. The Pack. Always the Pack.*

Greyson’s body shifted as he moved his head, and I opened my eyes and stood up. “Have fun!” I tried to brush some of the white hair off my pants—which were a muted dark brown for camouflage—checked to make sure I

had both of my daggers, then jogged past Greyson, once again aimed in the direction of my cottage.

Greyson was still for a while, but I felt it when he ghosted away, the bright spot of his powers fading from my senses.

I tried wiping off more sweat as I picked my way through the forest—going slowly so I could hide my trail and misdirect it with different scent paths in case anyone got any *ideas*. (I aspire to one day be lazy. That day will probably come when all wolves I know are old and geriatric. So I'll probably die first.)

It was a pretty muggy day, and my shirt was sticking to me like a second skin when I left a thicket of the forest as it opened up by a lake.

I grabbed my stuff—my cellphone and the keys to my cottage—from one of my hidey-holes by a picnic bench, and was more than a little disappointed I hadn't left myself a second shirt or something.

I followed the shore—it was privately owned by the Pack, so no one was at the dock—and was just about to plunge back into the forest when I smelled gasoline.

*Did a golfcart go through here?*

Intrigued, I changed my path so I had to scramble up a steep hill that overlooked the gravel parking lot that the humans typically parked their golfcarts in when they were going to use this particular lake.

There were no golfcarts, but instead there were two black SUVs that looked like the ones the Fletching Hunters drove.

They still hadn't left.

Pre-Dominant Harka had announced her decision three days ago, but apparently they were still “packing up.” Actually, more of the hunters had arrived.

Scarlett and Radcliff's mom wasn't among them, so I wasn't thrilled that Amos was still running amok, but it was at least a little understandable.

The Dominant's team of investigators had arrived, so the Fletchings spent a day or two turning over all the information they had and walking them through what they'd learned about wolfsbane.

*But enough time has passed by now; they should be leaving Timber Ridge.*

I skidded my way down the hill—Northern Wisconsin had lots of squat but steep hills that made hiking extra exciting for injuries—and tripped my

way up to the cars.

I peered inside, but I couldn't see through anything but the windshield—all the other windows were tinted.

*Is that...cases of ammo?*

"What are they doing cruising around with cases of bullets?" I leaned against the car to see if the alarm would go off. When it didn't, I half climbed onto the front so I could get a better look, cupping my hands around my eyes.

It was in the back seat, so I couldn't get much of a look, but I saw boxes of ammo, and several gun cases...which were unzipped and empty.

*They've got weapons, and the car is parked...while half of the Pack is out on a run.*

I pushed off the car and hurtled to the trees, yanking my phone from my pants pocket. As soon as I hit the trees I dove low, army crawling through underbrush and trying to disturb as little vegetation as possible, in case they were in the area.

*First, I need to call Hector. There's a possibility I'm blowing this all out of proportion, but given all of Amos's threats the other day...*

I pressed my lips together as I tapped my phone—my unfortunately sweaty fingers smearing across it without getting traction.

*I'll take the whole Pack laughing at my paranoia and looking like an idiot over this being real. In fact, please, please let this all just be insane suspicion.*

I finally got my phone to make the call when I heard a gunshot, and felt the ripple of hunter magic.

It was trap magic—but a *big* trap. It had to have several hunters anchoring it together.

I tried to swallow, but my mouth was dry as I tried to expand my senses, feeling for the Pack.

I couldn't sense anything out that far—I could only feel the magic because it plucked at my hunter instinct for family.

I was pretty sure I could feel a second version of the spell, but it was so faint and far off I wasn't sure.

I held my phone to my ear—dimly aware that it was endlessly ringing—as I boosted myself to my feet.

I jogged—trying to hit a pace that was halfway between a loud sprint that would be impossible to miss and a walk that would be quiet but horrifically slow.

When I got Hector's voicemail I hung up and tried calling again.

*The rest of the Pack is probably frantically calling him, just like I am. That's why he hasn't picked up.*

My spit had a metallic flavor to it, and I could feel my heart galloping in my chest as I closed in on the area where the spell flickered with power—it was still going strong.

My phone was still ringing when I heard shouts.

I reluctantly hung up and stopped running long enough to type out a quick text to Hector, then silenced my phone and put it back in my pocket.

Ready for stealth, I started slinking through the woods, watching for signs of other hunters. I had a huge advantage over them—I knew the surrounding woods like the back of my hand. Even if I couldn't smell them like a wolf, I could see signs of their presence a heck of a lot easier than they'd ever be able to see me.

There were a few boot prints in the soft dirt that were fresh, so I carefully moved away from those as I pushed closer to the spell. Just before I reached the meadow that engulfed the Pack lodge, I dropped to the ground, slinking behind thick bushes so I had cover.

Once I felt I was hidden well enough, I pushed back a bush branch and had to bite down on a scream.

The other half of the Pack that hadn't yet joined the wolves I'd been training with—about twenty of them—were surrounded by a golden colored trap spell. As it was shaped like a dome, it completely sealed them, but instead of the traditional fae shield or a dragon shifter seal, the surface was made of a series of crosshatches and had a net-like surface with holes.

It would dissipate under wizard or fae magic, but would stay strong against physical weapons and force. In other words, it was perfectly suited to trap werewolves or shifters.

Nine hunters were stationed in the area. *Nine.*

*Those are odds I can't hope to beat.*

All of them were carrying either a gun or an unsheathed dagger. Four of them seemed to be responsible for the trap, now that it was up and

activated. They were spaced out around the trap, focused on the silver daggers slammed into the ground that were anchoring the spell.

*Those will have to be taken out to destroy the trap. But I can't go against nine hunters.*

Amos was pacing in the middle of the group, talking on his phone with a despicable smile of satisfaction.

Scarlett and Radcliff were watching him with frowns, but I didn't recognize any of the other hunters present.

I could see Wyatt and Aeric through the trap's net-like surface. Aeric had transformed into a wolf, but Wyatt was still a human. His clothes were ripped and dirtied, and one of the lenses of his glasses was broken, but he looked uninjured. About a dozen of the captive werewolves had switched to their wolf form—they had the time, trapped as they were.

My throat squeezed shut when Aeric slunk off, momentarily revealing why some of the wolves had stayed human.

Hector was limply laid across the ground. It looked like they were trying to elevate his head.

The trap was pretty far away, so I couldn't see how badly he was hurt, but he didn't seem to be gushing blood—a legitimate worry after hearing that gunshot.

*Did they catch everyone? Were Greyson and the Pack caught?*

I chewed on my lip as I considered my options.

Greyson and the wolves wouldn't have cellphones on them, and I didn't want to whistle and give away my position until I had a plan.

*But what can I do against nine hunters? Maybe I should backtrack and try to find Greyson?*

Something moved at the back of the meadow, and I saw Amelia and Teresa hurtling across it, running from the lodge, toward the trees.

The hunters saw them, too. One whistled then used hand gestures and pointed at the two.

Amos peeled his attention from his phone long enough to give an order. "Leave them," he shouted to his hunter. "We do this to guard humans. They'll be grateful, eventually."

*At least his hate-filled logic means the humans will all be safe.*

Even so, my frantically beating heart kicked up again.

Because if Amos knew they were humans, it meant he'd been watching the Pack members, habits, and families. He'd been planning for this kind of thing for a long time.

*Stop it. I need to be calm. Getting frantic isn't going to help anyone.*

I forced myself to take a deep breath, then released the branch slowly—so no one would notice the movement—and prowled deeper into the forest as I tried to figure out what to do—or who to call.

*First, I should try to meet up with Amelia and Teresa—maybe they can tell me what happened.*

I picked my way around the meadow, heading in the general direction they'd disappeared in.

They were easy to find—I just had to follow the sound of Teresa's crying, and the blatant trail they'd left—and they weren't alone.

They were huddled at the base of an enormous tree, whispering with Young Jack and Original Jack.

"Teresa." I spoke before I emerged from the trees, hoping I wouldn't startle them too badly.

"Pip!" Teresa—her face red and smeared with tears—latched on to me, ringing her arms around my waist. "Pip!" she repeated, her voice turning into a wail.

Amelia was shaking, her hand grasping the hem of Young Jack's grass-stained T-shirt, while Young Jack was practically vibrating with anger.

Original Jack was attempting to make a call on his cellphone, his face creased with worry. When he turned to me, some of the strain eased around his eyes and he lowered his phone. "Pip."

I rubbed Teresa's back, trying to soothe her. "What happened?"

Young Jack shook his head. "The hunters called Hector out—Amos said they were leaving. Remy and Forrest came out with Hector, and the hunters started purposely insulting them and trying to rile them up."

"They held out admirably—I believe they learned from watching you, Pip." Original Jack glanced down at his phone. "But the rest of the Pack came out, and the hunters sprang a trap."

"On the front lawn," Young Jack spat. "How could we not have seen them set it?"

"Hunter traps are portable," I said. "I'm sure they made it somewhere else and then transported it in. What happened to Hector?"

“He was starting to rally everyone.” Amelia wiped tears from her eyes, smudging her eyeliner, and glanced at Teresa. “And, um...”

“They shot him!” Teresa sobbed. “They shot Dad!”

My hands tightened convulsively around Teresa’s shoulders, and the hot fire of anger burst to life in my chest, eating away at some of my fear. “How bad is it?”

“They used silver bullets,” Original Jack said. “They didn’t hit him in the heart or skull. Given enough time he’ll heal up. But...” He glanced at Teresa and didn’t finish.

*It’s unlikely Amos will give him enough time to heal. There’s no way they’re rounding up all the wolves for something innocent.*

“They’re searching the lodge,” Young Jack said. “I don’t know for what. When Jack and I resisted, they threw us out.”

“Teresa and I didn’t fight, so they left us alone—until we decided to run for it,” Amelia said. “They ripped apart Greyson’s office, but didn’t seem to find what they were looking for, so they moved on to all parts of the lodge when we left.”

“Wait, you said they? How many hunters were inside, searching?” I asked.

Amelia nervously chewed on the nail of her thumb. “Maybe ten of them?”

“What?” I shook my head. “This is impossible—the Fletching Hunter family can’t be that big to afford sending nineteen hunters.”

“I don’t think all the hunters are Fletchings,” Teresa said into my shoulder. “Some of them had different colored clothes and little symbols.”

*He got help?! How? Why? Hunters aren’t besties with wolves, yeah, but they don’t hate them!*

“Why on earth would they stake everything—their reputation, the honor of the family, the family itself—on the dim hope that the Northern Lakes Pack *might* have some special ace in the hole?” I was mostly pondering the idea out loud and didn’t expect a response, but I did get one.

“Yeah, I don’t get it either,” Amelia said. “The Regional Committee of Magic will come down *hard* on them for all of this!”

“It might not be as unexpected as you think.” Original Jack scratched the back of his head. “Pack survival is pretty dark right now. Because Greyson is so strong, we haven’t had any problems, but when Hudson was

Alpha, trouble was brewing with the nearby Packs. No one likes how great the Northern Lakes Pack is doing.”

“Stupid,” I muttered. “This whole thing is stupid.”

“What do we do?” Young Jack asked.

Silence stretched between us, and it took me a few moments to realize he was asking *me*.

“Uh...” I glanced at Original Jack—the adult of the group.

“Rio sent a text when all of this started,” Original Jack said. “He said he saw a second group of hunters—twenty-three of them.”

*Twenty-three hunters on top of the nineteen in the meadow and lodge... forty-two hunters total? Just how on earth was Crackpot Amos able to find so many allies?*

“I imagine they were sent after the rest of the Pack,” Original Jack continued. “I don’t know if they caught them, but given that they haven’t showed up, I’m afraid to hope.” He closed his eyes and squeezed his phone. When he opened his eyes, he turned to me. “So, what do we do, Pip?”

*Oh...no.*

I tried not to visibly gulp as Amelia, Young Jack, and Original Jack stared at me—fear and hope battling in their expressions.

I wasn’t a leader. I was a loner—and not even by choice. I couldn’t lead!

*But I’m the only one trained in fighting, and as a hunter I’m better suited for this than they are. So I better get it together. What do we do?*

“We need to free some of the werewolves, or we won’t stand a chance.” I licked my dried lips. “I’d prefer not to go directly against Amos, but there are only nineteen hunters by the lodge, and twenty-three if Rio’s text is accurate. We’d be better off facing the smaller group.”

Teresa finally stepped back from me and wiped her face off on her arm. “They probably needed more hunters to fight Greyson.”

I traced the sheaths of my daggers on my thigh holster. “Greyson is insanely strong. It will take a lot to get him down. I think we’d be better off taking on this group.”

“Then we fight?” Young Jack asked.

I glanced at Teresa. “Not all of us. Teresa, I need you to run to Timber Ridge.”

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## Chapter 21

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### *Greyson*

I growled at a hunter, peeling my lips back from my teeth as I slunk up to him, crouched so I could jump if necessary.

The hunter stumbled over his feet, but didn't shoot at me—which was what I was trying to avoid.

*They have mostly ranged guns, not pistols. If I stay close to them, their guns are too cumbersome to quickly reposition.*

That was the only reason why I wasn't slumped over with Ember and the others, artificially unconscious.

Four of them stood in front of me, reeking of sweat and fear.

I howled, then chased after them, growling and snapping.

They ran like scared sheep, bolting and tripping over one another as they tried to flee.

We ran past the trap they'd set up for the Pack. I recognized it as something hunter made. Hunter trap spells are unique in that they have a net-like appearance to them, and while they didn't operate as shields—they couldn't stop anything magical from getting through—they were excellent physical barriers. Even the strongest of wolves wouldn't be able to bust out of one that was properly prepared by several hunters and anchored—as these unfortunately were.

The hunters had then released a fae sleeping spell inside the trap, which had knocked out every wolf they'd caught.

I hadn't been with the Pack when they were first captured—I was just slightly behind them as I'd stopped to sniff Pip before heading out.

I'd been able to attack the hunters from behind, but there were twenty-three of them.

I wasn't going to beat those numbers.

Instead I'd done my best to split the group around the trap—making it harder for the hunters to get off a shot at me and not hit one of their own.

Not that they didn't try.

A bullet narrowly missed my flank, and the hunter—who wielded a rifle—swore as he tried to track me.

I rammed into him—knocking him over—then grabbed his throat and crunched down. I didn't savage his throat, but I used enough force to deal damage to his windpipe.

He flopped, uselessly trying to get air, and I jumped at the next hunter.

She tried to stab me with a silver edged dagger, but it was easy to dodge and ram her over with my wolf strength.

For wolves, a downed enemy was a defeated enemy. It made it much harder for them to fight back.

I grabbed her wrist with my mouth and bit down.

She cried and dropped her dagger.

I grabbed her hand next and crunched down again, likely breaking a few of her fingers.

She screamed in pain, and I knew she wouldn't be picking up her weapon again.

I dropped her limb and leaped over her as she cried, curling up in a ball.

I locked eyes on the next hunter I needed to target, but most of my concentration switched to my ears for a moment.

I didn't hear any wolves coming for us—or any shouts.

*I don't think help is coming. Pip would have felt the trap snap into place, and Amos isn't here when these are very obviously his hunters. Which means there's trouble back home as well.*

If I wanted to free the Pack, I'd need to get to wherever the other fight was and find Pip—she'd know how to disassemble the traps.

*But how do I best tackle this so they don't hurt any of the knocked out Pack members? I already know the likelihood that I survive this isn't good, but the Pack needs to make it.*

I howled, and tried leading the hunters away from the trap. If I was going down, I was going to try to take out as many as possible, and keep them away from the rest of the Pack as long as possible.

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## Chapter 22

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*Pip*

**R**eady? I texted the message to Original Jack and waited, holding my breath.

The reply flickered across my lock screen. *Ready.*

I put my phone away in my deep pockets, exhaled, and rolled my shoulders back.

*This will be a cinch. I fool wolves all the time, and they can smell fear in me. Distracting a bunch of hunters is totally doable.*

I checked my weapons—my gun was still in its holster, and both my daggers were sheathed—then strode out into the open meadow, doing my best to look irritated, but not hostile.

“Amos!” I hollered as I stomped across the lawn. “What do you think you’re doing?”

I blew past a hunter, who couldn’t seem to figure out if he was supposed to stop me or not.

“Hunter Sabre,” Radcliff called. I’m certain he did it on purpose, because as soon as he named me the hunters eyeing me relaxed and went back to watching the wolves.

*It’s nice that they’re not going to shoot at me, but I wish they’d pay less attention to their trap so Amelia and the Jacks can move.*

Amos laughed as I strode up to him, reigniting my anger so it ate up most of my fear. “Good evening to you, Hunter Sabre.”

“Stop screwing around, and tell me what you’re doing. I won’t hesitate to clock you again.” I made my voice extra loud for the threat, and succeeded in drawing attention back to me.

It worked *marvelously*. Too well, in fact. All but two of the hunters strode in our direction—the remaining two stayed by the trap, but they were watching us, and didn’t see when Amelia and Young Jack crawled out of the forest, making a beeline for the trap.

“You seem to enjoy confrontation, Hunter Sabre,” Amos said.

“Not at all,” I said. “I just can’t stand idiots and injustice. *What* are you doing?”

“Pip—just go! Get help!” Wyatt shouted—he was one of the only wolves who hadn’t shifted by this point.

“Thanks for the advice, but I’ll pass,” I said without removing my eyes from Amos. “Spill it.”

Amos spread his arms wide. “We’re doing what has to be done since the Regional Committee of Magic won’t act.”

“That’s a vague enough statement to mean anything. I already know you’re searching the lodge, and you’ve got the Pack pinned. Is this because you’re still upset the Pre-Dominant closed the case when you wanted to keep playing detective?”

Amos slipped a dagger off his belt and brandished it in my direction. “Careful, Sabre. I’m in a good mood, but not so good that I won’t stop to teach you a lesson.”

*So he’s less tolerant of me than he is of the humans. Good to know. But if I back down too much, his people are going to lose interest.*

I propped my hands on my hips. “Just tell me what you’re doing, Amos.”

“Why, I’m doing exactly what I told you I’d do. I’m finding out what the Northern Lakes Pack is hiding!” Amos announced.

“They’re not hiding anything!”

“Oh, they are,” Amos assured me. “They *must* be—to be going against nature as they do!”

I lifted my chin up, practically daring him to start a fight with my mulish expression. “Fine. Then tell me what illicit things you’ve found since you started your search.” I waited for a moment, and was about to

launch into a snarky take down of their useless search, when Amos surprised me.

“Oh, we’ve found plenty, Hunter Sabre.” He put his dagger back into place on his belt. “I thought the Northern Lakes Pack was dealing in wolfsbane, but I was thinking too small. They’ve got encrypted files—from the Pre-Dominant herself.”

“So?” I asked. “Greyson is the obvious choice for her heir apparent. She —”

“These files were first sent to Alpha Hudson,” Amos interrupted.

I hesitated.

He wagged what appeared to be a USB flash drive at me. “Yep. There’s months’ worth of encrypted reports from the Pre-Dominant. We haven’t busted the code on the files yet, but I’ve got a guy. And when we figure out what the Pre-Dominant is hiding, we’re going to let the world know.”

“Now you’re just being dramatic,” I said. “Just because there are encrypted files, it doesn’t mean the Northern Lakes Pack has been doing anything illegal.” I believed what I was saying—barely.

*Hudson wouldn’t do anything like that. Neither would Greyson—as sketchy as his personality is.*

“Did you know they submitted reports about you to the Pre-Dominant every month?” Amos asked. “Both Hudson and Greyson.”

I felt the fangs of hurt squeeze my throat.

*No. No—I was adopted. They didn’t think I was a danger, or they wouldn’t have let Dulce and Santos adopt me. Or maybe Amos is lying—that’s a very real possibility.*

But the sense of betrayal haunted me, pushing down on my shoulders like a massive wolf. Weirdly, I felt especially betrayed by Greyson’s reports.

I’d been a kid when I was adopted, so Hudson’s reports maybe made sense—it wasn’t a bad idea to keep an eye on a kid hunter in a Pack. But Greyson...

Even so, I’d die before I let Amos know he was getting to me, and I’d never let him use me—like he was obviously hoping to.

“Is this where I’m supposed to gasp and start crying from the betrayal and emotional trauma?” I asked. “Because I’d like to skip that. I’m not a pretty crier.”

I made a show of looking boredly away from Amos, which gave me the opportunity to check on the humans.

Original Jack had followed them out. I couldn't see them—they were crouched behind the trap and hopefully screened from the hunters' notice—but I could see a flash of Original Jack's red flannel shirt between the mesh that made up the spell. Hopefully the trio was digging out the two daggers near the back of the trap that anchored the spell.

*If they can get two out, the wolves might have a chance at busting through. But they need both out—one won't be enough.*

"If you wish to be stupid and ignore the obvious signs in front of your face—that the Pack is not as good and moral as you believe—that's your wish. But you won't be interrupting our investigation. Take her away." Amos pointed at two of his minions.

"Um," I stalled, not sure what to do.

*It's not like I can start a fist fight. There are what...nine of them out here? I won't survive those kinds of odds.*

Amos's minions stepped forward, each of them taking one of my arms so they could manhandle me however they wished.

"Uncle, are you sure about this?" Scarlett glanced at me as she sidled closer to Amos. "What we're doing isn't legal—there are rules for this."

"Nonsense," Amos said. "This is in the pursuit of safety. The Pack's lies must be uncovered."

"Except they haven't done anything bad to any of the humans around them," Radcliff said. "Even if they're using something to help their change rate, they work more with humans than the majority of werewolf—or shifter—Packs."

Scarlett nodded. "Mom said if Hunter Sabre didn't think there were any problems—"

"That's enough." Amos's voice was hot and painful, like the crack of a whip. "I don't want to hear any more out of either of you."

Radcliff fidgeted and looked rebelliously at Scarlett, but Scarlett worriedly glanced at the rest of the hunters—who did nothing to stop Amos.

Amos started to turn and stride in the direction of the trap, while the two hunters holding my arms started to escort me toward the forest.

*The trap is still too bright—I don't know that they've even gotten one dagger pried up—I need to stall!*

“Wait!” I shouted, making him and the hunters nudging me stop.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “What?”

Stretching my leg out as far as I could, I scraped the toe of my boot against the cuff of his pants. “I’ve changed my mind. I’m totally going to join your little...rebellion thing.”

Amos shook his head. “It’s too late for you, Sabre. You’re loyal to the wolves.”

“Mmm nah, I’ve reformed. I swear.” I wasn’t trying to be convincing—even Amos wasn’t that stupid—as much as I was trying to reel him into an argument. “Wolves? Pft! They’re the worst. All that fur gets everywhere.”

Amos narrowed his eyes. “She’s stalling! Check in with the other team!”

“Yessir.” Another minion pulled out a phone and tapped away on it.

“And check the trap!” Amos added. “I want these wolves secured before we eliminate them.”

“WHAT?!” This time I didn’t have to fake my shout—or my horror.

Amos smirked back at me. “Did you think we’d let them survive and share whatever magic it is they’re hoarding?”

“You can’t be serious—they’re werewolves. They’re *people*!”

“I told you before, Sabre. They’re going against the way things should be. Therefore, it is up to us to correct it.”

“You’re talking about a massacre! The supernatural community will hunt you down for this!” I shouted.

“I don’t care what the community thinks of us,” Amos coldly said. “They’ve made it abundantly clear that toadying up to those with power—even if they’re little more than *beasts*—is more important than seeing to the way things should be.”

“You can’t do this!” My voice pitched into a scream with my fear. “Amos!”

Amos ignored me as he strode up toward the trap, several of his hunters flanking him.

They’d be on Amelia and the Jacks.

“Uncle, we’re not doing this,” Scarlett announced.

“This is way beyond the code of hunters,” Radcliff added.

“Then stand aside—or go hide behind your mother,” Amos said indifferently. “The Fletchings are *mine* now.”

My heart throbbed painfully in my chest, and I swear time slowed down as I considered my options.

*Nine hunters—maybe seven if Scarlett and Radcliff don't fight me. But there are ten more inside. I can't do anything against those odds—they'll beat me for sure.*

And by beat, I meant it literally. Amos wasn't going to react without violence if I tried to mess up his plans. I'd *maybe* survive, but maybe I wouldn't.

My gaze flickered to the wolves.

*Would I be willing to be throttled within an inch of my life, for a Pack that treats me as an outsider—for a Pack that makes reports on me?*

Wyatt was as close to the weave of the trap as he could come without touching it when he met my gaze and shook his head.

Yes.

The answer throbbed in my chest.

*Because Mama Dulce's hugs, and Papa Santos's laughter was real. Because Wyatt's jokes and Aeris's grins, and the stupid Pomeranian Puppy Power-ups are real. If Greyson is reporting on me to Harka, it's for a reason. I might not be Pack, but at least I know that I'm valued.*

Wyatt must have seen something in my face. "Pip, no! Don't do it!"

I ignored him as I shifted my weight to my heels as the hunters realized maybe they should drag me off like Amos had ordered.

"PIP! *Don't!*" Wyatt shouted, his voice deep with anguish.

I ignored him as I casually shifted my right arm. The hunter holding my right arm had a very loose grasp on my wrist—he wasn't even watching me, he was gawking at Scarlett and Radcliff.

*Perfect.*

I lined up my fist so it was under his chin.

"Pip!" Wyatt yelled.

I glanced at the hunters, confirming their locations, then punched upward, nailing the one hunter in the chin.

He toppled, unable to shout as he curled up in a ball.

Using my free hand, I grabbed the other hunter's throat, digging my fingers in so I triggered her gag reflex.

She let go of me and dropped to her knees in a combination of gagging and coughing. I helped her to the ground by slamming my knee into her

side.

Finally, some of the other hunters were starting to take notice. They turned around and gaped at me, looking from the two hunters I'd downed to me with confused expressions.

They were still staring as I sprinted to the next one. He was wide open—didn't even have a hand on a weapon. I formed a V with the fingers and thumb of my right hand, stiffened my arm, then slammed my hand into the upper part of his neck.

He gagged and coughed, and I was able to push him over after applying a knee strike to the groin.

The thing about fighting is if you know where to hit, you don't actually need a lot of force. And the throat? Super fragile.

*That's three...*

I needed to get to Amos and take him down—before they called for backup. I locked eyes on him, and felt my hunter magic bubble as it kicked into high gear, giving me a hefty surge of adrenaline and intensifying my senses so I was more aware of all the hunters and their movements.

"Don't just stand there, stop her!" Amos scoffed. He lost that attitude fast, however, as I closed in on him.

He back up so fast his netted hat fell off, but he couldn't shuffle backward faster than I could run.

I grabbed the collar of his shirt and yanked him forward. Using my free fist like a hammer, I slammed it into the side of his head.

One of the hunters standing near the trap fitted a metal whistle to his lips and blew—which was almost certainly a signal for reinforcements.

I could sense another hunter coming up behind me, so I swung around—dragging Amos with me—and pushed him into the incoming hunter.

She stumbled as she tried to stabilize her groaning, swearing, staggering leader, occupying both of her hands.

I jabbed my fingers into her eyes.

She cried out as she tried to stagger away, blinded and half tripping on Amos.

I dug two of my fingers into her jugular notch—the dip between the collarbones—which made her throat tighten, and she started coughing and gagging as she hobbled away from me.

*So far, this is a lot easier than I expected. These guys are wide open—and so slow!*

I heard the trill of a blade sliding out of its scabbard.

*I just had to think it, didn't I?*

I'd been avoiding using my own daggers and gun in hopes that it would keep them from resorting to weapons. Apparently, they felt my throat grabs were lethal enough to warrant it.

The hunters were finally starting to move, leaving the trap—and Amelia and the Jacks—as they closed in on me.

“Let go!” a hunter growled somewhere behind my back.

“No,” Radcliff grunted. “We shouldn't be doing this!”

I turned just enough to see Scarlett and Radcliff were fighting two of the incoming hunters, keeping them off my back.

I also saw the reinforcements. All ten of the hunters that Amelia had counted in the lodge came swarming out the front doors and sprinting across the lawn.

A hunter jumped at me, brandishing a dagger with his arm extended and wide.

I smacked the inside of his forearm, redirecting the dagger away from me, then planted my palm just under his chin and pushed up, snapping his head upward.

A part of me couldn't believe just how *bad* they were at this, until it dawned on me.

*They're hunters. They're used to attacking from a distance as a group. They've never been pulverized in close range combat where they can only count on themselves. The Quillons got me a combat instructor just because I asked for one—it's not typically taught.*

Unfortunately, my luck was about to run out.

The hunter wildly windmilled his arms as he tried to catch his balance, and his blade bit into the side of my upper arm.

The Pack went wild in the trap.

Aeric threw himself at the netted, hissing surface, growling as the hackles of his fur stood up. Wyatt slammed his fists on its insubstantial surface, making it bulge, but it didn't give.

Hissing in pain, I shoved the hunter to the ground and glanced at my arm.

The slice was about as long as my pinky finger, and was deep enough that it created a burning ache. The bigger problem was I was now bleeding, and I knew from experience that meant I had a limited amount of time before I got woozy.

*Do I have time to try to wrap it?*

The reinforcements reached me, swarming past Radcliff and Scarlett. One grabbed for me, and while I was able to dodge him, I nearly slammed into another hunter who was circling around to the front.

He tried to stab me in the eye with a hunting knife. I bent backward just in time—barely avoiding it—but the tiny blade nicked me on the cheekbone, opening a small cut that burned fiercely.

*That's a no.*

“Take her down!” Amos yelled, having recovered enough to breathe.

I ripped my sheathed daggers off my belt and used one to block another knife jab, and rammed the pommel of the other dagger into the side of the hunter's head.

He almost fell on top of me, and I backed up into another hunter, who tried to force me into a choke hold.

Scarlett ripped him off with a snarl, and Radcliff grabbed the wrist of another hunter who was raising a gun, chopped down on his elbow, and yanked the pistol from his grasp.

“You know.” I grabbed the now weaponless hunter by the collar of his shirt and kneed him in the groin, waiting until he bent over before I hit him in the back of the head with one of my sheathed daggers. “It's pretty cool fighting *with* people,” I said.

“That isn't normal for you?” Scarlett asked through gritted teeth. She was wrestling with a male hunter twice her size, and just as I took a step toward her to help, she slammed her head into his nose, making him stagger.

I planted my legs, then delivered a roundhouse kick to an incoming hunter, hitting her in the neck. “Not usually, no.”

Radcliff pistol whipped another hunter. “No wonder you're so frightening.”

“I'll take that as a compliment.” I spun around, looking for Amos.

The wolves' angry howls turned frantic, and I instinctively turned toward the trap.

Amos was tottering in its direction, ignoring the wolves—who frantically smashed against the trap, filling the air with the scent of singed fur.

*He's going to see the humans!*

I secured one of my daggers to my belt, then sprinted after him, my fingers closing in on the collar of his shirt just as he rounded the bend of the hunter spell.

The trap briefly sputtered, then dimmed as Amelia and the Jacks finally dug out one of the trap's anchors.

He tried to shout, but I yanked him backward, then smashed my elbow into the spot between his shoulder blades.

Amos cursed, then spun around and grabbed at my wrists as Amelia and the Jacks scrambled to the next anchor point. "Capture the humans!"

The hunters shifted their attention to Amelia and the guys, and I knew if I didn't get their attention back, they'd be on them.

*I hope I don't regret this.*

I yanked the scabbard off my dagger, and instantly all the hunters were focused on me and the grip I had on their leader.

Amos was so angry, he whistled when he inhaled. "Don't just stand there! Get—" I slammed the pommel of my dagger into his nose, breaking it—again.

Three hunters charged at me.

Scarlett and Radcliff each grabbed one. I pulled Amos backward and pushed down on his forehead until he collapsed, then turned to face the incoming hunter.

Before I could strike, hot, intense pain bloomed on my back right shoulder.

All air left me as I struggled to process the pain. I dropped to my knees and awkwardly turned, looking over my shoulder.

A crossbow bolt stuck out of my right shoulder, the arrow digging into the muscle there.

*Okay, this isn't too bad. It didn't pierce deep enough to get my lungs or anything important. Arrows are most dangerous because they can make a person bleed out. As long as I don't yank this out—*

Someone behind me viciously yanked the bolt out—which hurt worse coming out than it had actually getting shot. I screamed, the pain so

overwhelming my throat burned.

As I tried to breathe through the hot, all-consuming pain, I felt my shirt grow sticky with blood.

*If help doesn't come soon...I'm going to die.*

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## Chapter 23

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*Greyson*

I stopped mid-step when I smelled blood.  
Not just any blood—Pip’s.

I was deep in the heart of the forest, with hunters hot on my trail. By leading them deeper and then circling back behind them I’d taken out at least six of the hunters.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts despite the overwhelming scent of blood.

*She’s hurt—I need to help her.*

The instinct dug deep in my chest.

I ignored it and jumped a hunter from behind, snagging him by the knee and ripping his leg out from under him. I crunched down on his throat before he could scream and warn the others.

The scent of Pip’s blood was overwhelming now.

Everything in me screamed that I needed to find her. *Now*. I wasn’t too surprised by the impulse—I’d been openly approaching her. Of course if she was in danger it was going to affect me. But I needed to take care of these hunters. Pip was smart. She wasn’t going to risk her neck if she couldn’t win.

I exhaled sharply and slipped through the underbrush, smelling out my next target.

I spotted a hunter shining a flashlight into the shadows of some trees. Thankfully these idiots were so unfamiliar with one-on-one combat that they hadn't thought to climb a tree like Pip would have.

I lined myself up so I could jump on his back and hopefully slam his head into a tree trunk if I was just right.

Pain slammed through my chest. It was a hot, knifing sensation that was so intense it was hard to see.

It was like the gnawing pain of my missing mate, multiplied tenfold.

*FIND HER!*

Every instinct screamed at me, and I took a few steps away.

*No—I should stay and fight.*

A scream rippled through the forest, coming from the direction of the lodge.

*Pip!*

I snarled at the hunters, scaring the one in front of me and drawing the attention of the others.

“There he is!”

“Shoot him!”

Bullets ricocheted off trees as the hunters shot at me, then thrashed through the forest, attempting to follow.

I kicked it up to the fastest pace I could manage, my paws ripping up the forest turf as I ran.

As I drew closer and closer to the meadow, dread filled me as the scent of Pip's blood saturated the air.

She'd been hurt, badly.

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## Chapter 24

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### *Pip*

“Pip!” Wyatt shouted. His yells were eclipsed by howling—I was pretty sure that was Aeric.

I tried to stand—I probably had five minutes before the blood loss would totally take me out—but the pain was too much to contend with. It felt like my whole back was on fire.

*I have to keep going—I have to give Amelia and the Jacks enough time to get that second anchor point out!*

Amos snarled as he regained his balance. His face was smeared with blood from his broken nose. “You!” He stomped closer to me.

I yanked my gun from my holster. I fumbled with flicking off the safety, but I was able to rack the gun and load a bullet in the chamber. My hand shook from the pain, but I was still kneeling, and his foot wasn’t even two feet away. I aimed and shot.

Amos shouted so loudly his voice turned hoarse as he staggered, trying not to put any weight on his foot.

The handgun slipped from my fingers—it was too heavy to hold up anymore.

A hunter kicked me in the chest, but I was about to collapse anyway, so it didn’t hurt too badly when I fell—though the dirt mashing into my open shoulder wound probably wasn’t going to do wonders for it.

There was a lot of shouting, and a hunter with a satchel sprinted over, uncorking a fae potion.

They must have dumped at least two potions on Amos's foot, because he was standing over me before I had time to try to formulate another plan.

"What are you?" Amos snarled down at me. "How can you keep going?"

"Easy. I'm a hunter—trained by wolves." The wooziness was starting to affect me. It felt like everything in my skull was tilting. But I had enough strength to scissor kick Amos in the ankle.

He cried out, and a hunter rushed to stabilize him while another planted his boot on my chest—as if I was going to sprint off.

"Hope I broke it," I muttered as nausea churned away in my gut—the blood loss was setting in, fast.

"Why do you fight for them?" Amos demanded. "Wolves killed your parents! By all rights, you should be joining us! Did the beasts brainwash you?"

"We got them!"

Beyond Amos, one of the Fletching hunters dragged Amelia, Young Jack, and Original Jack out from behind the trap.

The hope that they'd get the second anchor point out sputtered and died in my chest.

"Let me go!" Amelia scratched the face of the hunter who was struggling with her, and it took another two hunters to control Young Jack and Original Jack.

Amos laughed and wiped blood off his face. "So that's what you were so valiantly fighting for, was it? Too bad—you failed." He smirked at me, then hummed as he strode toward the Pack.

"Don't hurt them!" Young Jack shouted. "Mom! Dad!"

"Stop it!" Amelia screamed.

Scarlett and Radcliff jumped at Amos, but several hunters caught them and dragged them off.

The pain and nausea was too much to take, but no matter how I tried to move, I could barely twitch my neck.

*Get up! Stand!*

Still whistling, Amos unholstered a weapon as he strode up to the trap. He flicked off the safety and pointed at the nearest wolf—Aeric, who was

snarling and still slamming his body into the trap, trying to break through it.

The sound of my heart beating filled my ears, and fear and terror rippled through me like a bullet.

*It's happening again. Someone I care about is going to die.*

My hunter magic pulsed in my chest—hot, furious, and *desperate* to get out.

No.

“No.” My lips felt numb as the sensation of my magic flooded my entire body, numbing me to the pain.

Maybe it was the blood loss, but my magic beat in my chest—screaming to be used. But I didn’t know how! What could I do? I wasn’t Pack—I was a hunter!

My magic surged, and it felt...different—though I couldn’t say how, because I was barely holding on to consciousness, my eyes drooping shut—and it surged through my body.

Before I entirely lost it, several things happened at once.

Greyson’s Alpha powers hit the area with enough force to fry my nerves, and the hunter who’d been standing over me *flew* over my head, tossed aside like a doll when Greyson slammed into him in his massive wolf body.

The wolves inside the trap glowed before they grew *larger*. They were nearly horse sized now. Their eyes glittered with magic I’d never seen before, and energy hummed around them.

Aeric slammed into the trap, and the net-like weaving frayed.

Several other wolves threw themselves at it, and the trap bulged—hissing and spitting sparks. Aeric and Wyatt—still in his human form—slammed into it together, and the trap snapped.

The wolves burst out of the trap, howls tearing from their throats as they pounced on the hunters.

*Is this the power of a Pack under the direction of their Alpha? It's beautiful.*

Even in my addled state I could recognize the one-sided fight.

Aeric leaped onto a hunter’s chest, flattening him with enough force that he wasn’t going to be getting up anytime soon.

Wyatt jumped over Aeric—pushing off his back—and kicked another hunter in the side, downing her with one hit.

Another wolf grabbed a hunter by the shoulder—which was easy to reach now that they were all so *huge*—and flung the man into another hunter.

A shadow fell over me, and I realized somewhere in the battle, Greyson had turned into a human. (Which must have been a record for him; I swear only twenty seconds had passed since I saw him arrive.) He scooped me up, cradling me against his bare chest.

I groaned in pain, but as soon as my forehead smacked the side of his bicep potent, powerful magic zapped me like a lightning strike, waking me up and chasing off the wooziness of the blood loss.

My shoulder was hot, but I felt *great*. I could feel my muscles knit together—it was like chugging three of the best fae potions, one after another.

“Wow.” I weakly clung to Greyson as I exhaled pure magic. “Is this what being part of the Pack feels like? Because this...this is pretty awesome.”

“This isn’t the Pack’s magic.” Greyson adjusted his arms under my legs so he was carrying me princess style and my entire body was practically plastered against him.

“Really? Then what the heck is this?”

Around us, the wolves snapped at hunters, smacking them down with pure strength.

I blinked as I felt something tickle my hunter senses. “Incoming!” I shouted. “From the woods.”

More hunters stepped out of the trees—carrying sparkling magic that I was fairly certain was another trap spell—but three of the wolves had already streaked toward the forest at my shouted warning. They were on the hunters before they could even get a shot off.

“How are you feeling?” Greyson asked.

“*Great*,” I said. “Really *great*. Seriously. If the Pack could bottle this feeling, you would be so rich. How are you doing this?”

“It’s not the Pack,” Greyson repeated. “Can you stand?”

“Yep.” I shook my head, trying to adjust. All the sickness from blood loss was gone. Instead it felt like every part of me was singing with power.

Greyson set me down as if I was fragile glass, but I was steady on my feet despite being close to passing out minutes ago.

I laughed and stretched my arms over my head—I'd never felt so *alive*!

Greyson grabbed one of the biggest hunters and cuffed him upside the head. The hunter sagged in his grasp, and Greyson proceeded to rob him of his jacket.

I felt for my dagger on my belt—the other one was somewhere in the mess of the fight. “What are you doing?”

“Getting ready to fight.” Greyson shrugged the jacket on—which struck me as a weird thing to do as part of battle preparation. He then yanked the hunter's daggers from him and passed them off to me—which did make sense.

“Perfect, thanks! I call Amos!” I declared. “He's gotten something wrong that's been bothering me for a long time. I want to correct him.”

Greyson narrowed his gold eyes at me. “You're not fighting, Lady Hunter.”

“Why not?”

“Because you were *shot* with a crossbow?”

“Pft, that was, like, five minutes ago. This magic is fiiiine, so I'm all good now.” I winked at him and twirled my stolen daggers, trying to adjust to their unfamiliar balance and weight.

Greyson leaned in and sniffed me—probably listening for my heartbeat too, or something. He spun me around to check my back, then slowly righted me so I faced him. “Fine,” he said. “But stay behind me—and don't engage with any enemy until after I get Amos.”

“Sure,” I agreed.

*It's not like there's anyone for me to fight.*

Even though the Pack was outnumbered, the wolves were flattening the hunters.

Greyson gave me one last look over. He should have looked ridiculous with his fitted black pants and the borrowed hunter jacket that was too tight in the shoulders and couldn't be zipped, but he just looked deadly with his glowing golden eyes instead. Go figure.

*Some people just have all the good genetics.*

He watched me for another moment, then pivoted, and punched a hunter on the jaw, taking him down with one shot.

I lingered near his broad back—making sure I gave him plenty of room to maneuver if needed—and peered around the chaos, looking for Amos as

magic thrummed so deep in me it felt like my bones were vibrating.

“I see him!” I waited until Greyson tossed a hunter before I draped myself over his back so I could point over his shoulder. “There!”

Amos was at the fringe of the fight. It looked like he was going to head across the meadow to the trees beyond the lodge that were far away from the fighting. He wasn’t running—his limping, rolling gait looked too painful for that.

“Got it.” Greyson pivoted in his direction, grabbed a fleeing hunter, then pushed him in front and used him like a battering ram to mow down any of the hunters in front of us.

A female hunter tried to stab his back, but I was there and helpfully slammed my heel into her lower back, then popped her in the base of the neck with the pommel of my borrowed dagger so she wouldn’t be too tempted to get up again.

A hunter tried to grab me from behind, so I hung on to the back of Greyson’s jacket and heaved myself over his shoulder.

Without pausing, Greyson swung around with me and kicked the hunter square in the chest, knocking him on his rear.

“This is fun!” I declared. “You’re still the worst, but fighting like this is fun.”

Greyson faced Amos—we’d almost caught up to the rat. “Get used to it.”

“Really? Why?”

Greyson picked up a small rock off the lawn and threw it, nailing Amos in the back of his left knee. He fell with a pained shout. “Got him. Are you ready?”

“Oh yeah.” I jogged out in front of Greyson, reaching Amos just as he struggled to stand. “It’s over, Amos. You’ve lost—and now you’ll have to pay the consequences of all your insane theories.”

Amos growled and swung around, lunging at me.

Greyson caught him by the wrists and shook him like a rag doll so he flopped to the ground and had his arms stretched over his head. “Resign yourself, hunter.”

“Never.” Amos peered up at us, his beady eyes angry. “I know I’m right about all of this. You’re using something—something dark and illegal,” he

snarled. “You can’t hide from the likes of me. The Fletchings are the best investigative hunters there are in the Midwest!”

“No, actually,” I said. “You’re quite possibly the worst investigator I’ve ever met.”

Amos growled, but stilled when I grabbed him by the collar and hauled him to his feet with a strength I didn’t normally have.

“And I know that, because you are so fundamentally wrong about *me* it’s laughable.” My voice rapidly dropped in pitch as my anger returned. “All those times when you asked me how I could side with werewolves—who killed my parents—you proved how ignorant you really were.”

Amos tried to spit in my face, but I moved my head fast enough to avoid it. “You traitor—” he started.

“My parents weren’t killed by wolves, Fletching.” I yanked him closer, barely holding back from decking him again. “They were killed by hunters.” I let him go and shoved him down.

Greyson released his arms and stepped back, letting me take over.

I planted a foot on Amos’s chest and leaned in when he tried to stand. “Friendly fire,” I spat. “It was an accident. There was a miscommunication about the location of a feral wolf, and the Quillons killed them both. It’s why they’ve helped me all these years.”

Amos flapped his mouth open and shut, looking for words.

The years of sorrow still crackled in me, and I ground my heel into his chest. “It was a famous case, and somehow you—Mr. Mighty Investigator—didn’t hear of it, or bother to look into my history before coming here?”

I laughed. “The wolves have my loyalty, Amos, because they took me in when the hunter community did their *worst* to me. Only the Quillons tried to help, which is why I still respect them despite what happened. And now, your whole family is going to pay...because you didn’t bother to check why a hunter was living with wolves.”

I kicked him in the side of his head, carefully aiming for a knock out hit. It was a dirty move, but I didn’t feel it was necessary to play nice with the creep who intended to kill my friends.

Amos slumped to the ground, so addled from the kick he couldn’t even groan.

I stood up straight and surveyed the rest of the fight—the wolves had subdued most of the hunters by now.

I could feel Greyson's eyes on my back, so I slapped on a smile as I turned to face him. "I feel a lot better now!"

Greyson flicked his eyes from Amos to me. "We need to talk."

"About what?"

"Your hunter magic."

Before he could say anything else, six police cars—which I was pretty sure was *all* the police cars the Timber Ridge police force had—zoomed into the meadow from the gravel road, scattering pebbles and rock as they slammed to a stop.

I wiped sweat from my forehead and exhaled. "Ah, good. Teresa made it to City Hall! Woah." My legs abruptly gave out underneath me, and I would have fallen down if Greyson hadn't caught me.

"Careful. I don't think the magic can completely replace all the blood you lost," he said.

"It feels weird—you being all caring and thoughtful, I mean," I said. "Not even a snarky comment to accompany that. Hey!" I went through the motions of protesting when Greyson picked me up bridal style again.

"Relax, Lady Hunter," Greyson said. "It's this, or you can crawl."

I screwed my mouth up tight and frowned at him, but hooked my arms around his neck and enjoyed the ride.

The police climbed out of the cars, the nearest officer—a tall guy with a mop of blond hair—crouched by Original Jack and young Jack, checking in to see if they were hurt.

A crackle spat out over the loudspeaker attached to one of the cars. "Hunters, you are under arrest," Mayor Pearl declared through the radio. "For attacking the Northern Lakes Pack, and for your unpaid parking tickets! Easton, help Henry—get the one who's crawling away!"

I laughed as I listened to the ornery woman. "I told Teresa to tell Mayor Pearl about this. I knew Mayor Pearl would be the scariest thing in Timber Ridge that we could possibly sic on them. I'm glad I was right!"

"And check to make sure they all have permits for their firearms—if they don't, double the fine!" Mayor Pearl shouted, making the speaker blare.

Several of the police officers saluted her. "Yes Ma'am!"

I smiled, but when I let my head thump Greyson's chest, I saw him glance down at me in concern.

*This worked out perfectly. My back is patched well enough by whatever awesome magic this is that I won't die of bleeding out, Amos got caught, the Pack made it out okay. Everything is fantastic!*

Except it wasn't.

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## Chapter 25

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### *Pip*

The first hint that things weren't as beautiful as I believed was that Pre-Dominant Harka and Rafe drove up to Timber Ridge. Harka stayed so she could help sort out the mess with the Fletchings and the allies they'd called in—because they had, as I'd suspected, captured all the wolves who were going out on a run. Even worse, they'd hit them with a fae sleep spell. The only reason they hadn't been slaughtered was that all the hunters assigned to them had abandoned their posts to follow Greyson because Amos had emphasized that Greyson needed to be captured.

But three days had passed since the Fletchings were taken into custody in the Curia Cloisters...and Harka was still around.

*Why? This whole thing was about the Fletchings, not the Northern Lakes Pack.*

I adjusted my hold on two sacks of veterinary prescription cat food as I toddled back to my house.

*I still haven't had the courage to ask Greyson about the reports he makes to her. I'm afraid what he'll say.*

Greyson wouldn't pull any punches with me—even if he had carried me princess style after the fight. He'd straight out tell me why Harka was getting reports, and I wasn't sure I really wanted to know. I had a feeling it might destroy my fragile illusion of feeling like I was welcomed here.

I fixed my grip on the sacks of cat food and looked up, pausing when I saw Scarlett and Radcliff walking up the gravel pathway, coming toward me.

They were the only two Fletching hunters who'd come to Timber Ridge to get off completely free.

Mayor Pearl had searched hard for *some* reason to fine them—she'd wanted to hit them with a ticket for disturbing the peace—but even she hadn't been able to find fault with them.

*I don't know why they're still here, in Timber Ridge, though, instead of leaving for home.*

"Hello," I called out to the siblings. "How are you two?"

"Hunter Sabre, hello." Scarlett nervously dipped her head while Radcliff anxiously swung his arms forward then backward. "We were hoping to find you."

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No, um. No," Radcliff said. "We wanted to ask if we could stay," he blurted out.

I stared at them, confused. "Sorry?"

"We want to stay in Timber Ridge," Scarlett translated.

My forehead wrinkled as I tried to make sense of them. "But *why*?"

"This...incident with Uncle Amos has made it clear that we don't understand..." Scarlett trailed off and looked at Radcliff for help.

"Much of anything," Radcliff said. "We know what we were taught for hunter certification, but you obviously know a lot more about werewolves—about their lives and what it means to be a werewolf. We'd like to learn."

"Oh." I blinked. "Well...that's...cool. Did you clear it with Greyson?"

"Yes—we did that first," Scarlett said. "Alpha Greyson gave us permission to live in Timber Ridge. He offered to let us rent the flat over the Timber Ridge Welcome Center."

"Our mother gave us permission, too," Radcliff added. "But we wanted to ask you, because traditionally when hunters infringe on another hunter family's territory, you have to ask for permission to enter."

"Ah, well, I don't consider this my territory," I said. "It's the Northern Lakes' territory. So if Greyson said yes, then go for it—wait." I suspiciously eyed them. "I'm not going to get stuck holding remedial classes, like 'how to correctly tell the wolves apart 101,' am I?"

“No.” Scarlett linked her hands behind her back and stood in a position of attention. “We will do our best not to impede upon Pack life.”

“And I’m included in that?” I guessed.

Radcliff slightly frowned at me, as if he were offended on behalf of the wolves. “Obviously,” he said. “You are part of their Pack, Hunter Sabre.”

*Debatable.*

“Sounds excellent. If you’re going to be staying here, why don’t you two start with calling me Pip?” I suggested. “I don’t really use the hunter title around here.”

“Just Pip?” Scarlett asked.

“Yep!”

They gave me tiny, precise nods at the same time, mirroring each other.

“Very well, Pip!” Radcliff said. His gruff tone was somewhat ruined by his shy smile.

“Thank you for giving us permission, Pip,” Scarlett added.

*Glad they got over that—it’s weird to be treated so formally when they’re only a few years younger than me.*

Plus I’d always gone out of my way to eschew formalities since the wolves so closely observed Greyson’s leadership role.

“I’m glad you guys are staying. It sounds like you’ve been thinking about it a lot. That’s really neat.” I hugged Prince and Princess’s food closer.

“Yeah, we’re pretty stoked,” Radcliff said.

“We won’t keep you any longer.” Scarlett’s eyes strayed to my bags of cat food. “Have a great evening.”

“Thanks, you too!” I couldn’t really wave since I was holding the cat food, so I settled for shrugging my shoulders at them, then ducked past and continued down the path, heading for my house.

I was making plans for what I was going to do that night—I needed to apply the cream to Princess’s rear again, unfortunately, but I was hoping I’d be able to sit on the front porch at sunset and maybe sip wine and eat popcorn until the fireflies came out. We were almost into late summer, so they weren’t going to be around too much longer.

I was feeling pretty good about the idea until I made the turn off for my cottage and found Hector, Ember, Greyson, Rafe, and Pre-Dominant Harka sitting on the wicker furniture I’d arranged on my front porch.

*Something's up.*

I slowed down the closer I got to my home, and crinkled the bags of cat food as I adjusted my grip on them. "Hey. Is something going on?"

"I thought we should talk, Hunter Sabre, about the incident with the Fletching Hunters," Pre-Dominant Harka said.

I relaxed a little.

*She probably just needs my testimony or something.*

"Okay. What about it?" I stepped onto my porch and set the bags of cat food down by the door, then dusted my hands off on my jean shorts.

Pre-Dominant Harka folded her hands behind her head so she cradled her own skull. "Jack told us that Amos Fletching—his hunter certification has been officially pulled, so he is no longer a hunter—informed you that I've been receiving monthly reports about you for years. Alpha Greyson has been petitioning to tell you about this for about a year now. Given what happened in the fight, I believe he was correct, and an explanation is long overdue."

"Huh. Okay." I was going to need something to do with my hands if this conversation was as serious as it seemed like it might be. I retreated to my porch railing so I could lean back against it and prop my arms on it. "He mentioned it, but I figured it was just because I'm a hunter living among wolves."

"No..." Pre-Dominant Harka glanced at Greyson, then back at me. "The reports weren't necessary when you were first adopted. It wasn't until you were a teenager that we started seeing the consequences of your... influence."

"What do you mean?" I glanced at the other wolves.

Hector and Ember were watching the Pre-Dominant expectantly—they knew what was coming. Rafe looked just as confused as I felt—which made me feel a little better. At least I wasn't the only one left out of the loop! But Greyson wasn't even looking at Harka. He was staring at me, his eyes locked on me in a way I knew meant all of his senses were focused on me—sight, hearing, and smell. If I started sweating, he'd know before my deodorant could kick in.

Pre-Dominant Harka itched her chin. "Amos was right. There is a reason why the Northern Lakes Pack has a higher change rate, and a near perfect survival rate for the past decade."

*What?*

My shoulders dropped, and I glanced at Hector and Ember in alarm. Ember's reassuring smile helped a little, but I still felt blindsided. "What's the reason?"

"You."

I stared at the Pre-Dominant, but she didn't go any further.

*Is this a joke?*

I tried chuckling, but when Hector and Ember stayed silent, my attempt at humor died. "You're serious?"

Pre-Dominant Harka watched me with a critical eye. If Greyson was watching *me* intensely, she was trying to deduct my reaction and what it meant.

"I am," she said. "It took Hudson several years to figure it out. It wasn't until it became apparent that every wolf you interacted with before they made the change not only always survived, they also retained a stronger sense of responsibility to humans—something that is typically only attributed to Alphas."

"What, so I'm like an informative textbook?" I asked. "Stay on the right path, lads, or you'll be lost—that kind of thing?"

"No," the Pre-Dominant said. "You make everything in the Pack *more*."

"I make things *more*?" I blankly repeated.

*What the heck is that supposed to mean? It sounds like a stupid riddle from the renaissance era!*

"You have a very rare kind of magic that hasn't been seen for decades," Pre-Dominant Harka continued. "It allows its wielder to influence a Pack, almost to the point where their presence is as strong as a second Alpha. They can command all Pack members, make it easier for humans to make the change and become wolves, raise up wolves so they aren't quite so subservient, and you can make the Pack mesh better, fight better, and make them stronger."

She hesitated, then added, "That's the magic you felt during the fight against the Fletchings. It was your magic, propping up the Pack so they could fight as one. It's why those in wolf form grew larger and more lethal."

I shook my head as I tried to take it in. "I get what you mean, but there's no way. I'm twenty-four. Any magic I had should have appeared a long

time ago. It wouldn't just suddenly break free now. Besides, I should have felt it."

"You didn't feel any of your magic at all?" Ember asked.

"Well, I was in a fight. Yes, my magic was active, so I did feel it," I admitted. "But I didn't do anything with it!"

"It's very possible you didn't recognize the way in which you used it," Hector said. "You've never been involved in a Pack fight. Most often you are pitted against wolves in a battle—something that had been done on purpose so your magic was never tempted to break through before."

"It almost reacted the day you saved those kids in the park from the Low Marsh wolf," Ember added.

I pushed my white hair out of my face. "You two *knew*?"

Hector slightly bowed his head. "Hudson told me when he first began to suspect you had additional magic. Ember was told after Chase made the change."

"I love my little brother," Ember said, "but he shouldn't have the edge of Alpha abilities that he has. He is loyal to his leaders, and will follow them to the end—which makes his extra power and ability to survive so far away from the Pack particularly unusual."

"Which proves just how long your magic really has been active," Pre-Dominant Harka said. "You might not feel it, but it's been oozing out of you since you arrived. Your magic is always active, it just took the fight with the Fletchings for the fighting-based side of your abilities to emerge."

I dropped my head back on my neck and stared up at the cloudy sky.

*Looks like rain*, I thought, feeling weirdly removed from the situation.

This couldn't be real. It wasn't possible! There was no way I would have special magic and not know. They were mistaken—they had to be!

When I lowered my head again, I found myself staring at Greyson. He was wearing a long-sleeved shirt, which seemed weird for a wolf in the heat of summer.

"The way you speak of her magic...I assume there are historical examples?" Rafe asked.

"There are." Pre-Dominant Harka slapped her knees. "I had some people research Phillipa's family as soon as Hudson asked me about the possibility. I found this particular strain of magic in her father's side, going back a few generations."

My heart squeezed—I'd known the Sabres had some weird variations of magic, but no one had seen it in so long, it was assumed the unnamed ability had died out.

"This kind of magic is only found in hunters—and only in a few family lines. It's surfaced so infrequently, it's theorized that it only happens when there is a hunter with a particularly wolf-like soul, but there are several hunter families across the globe that have records of this magic in their ancestry," Pre-Dominant Harka explained. "It has numerous names—tamer and trainer are the most popular translations from most languages, but the elves used to call it 'Wolf's Kiss'."

I furrowed my brow as I tried to puzzle through that one. "Wolf's Kiss? Why would they name it that?"

"Because if a hunter who has this magic becomes attached to a Pack, the whole Pack thrives—their survival rate increases, the ability to change humans into wolves increases, and the Pack in general has an increased capacity of competency," Pre-Dominant Harka said. "In return, the Pack that bonds with the hunter reveres them, and treats them as they would no other. It's said the hunters with this magic can bring out a soft side of wolves never seen otherwise—hence the title."

"Revered?" I couldn't help the snort that escaped me. "Now I know this is a mistake. I'm not revered. I'm squeezed tightly for Pomeranian Puppy Power-ups, and chased through the forest in the middle of the night for fun."

"Our version of revered isn't quite the human definition," Ember said.

"Quite right," Hector agreed. "To us wolves, the Pack's respect for you is obvious. You're the only one—besides Alpha Greyson—who is able to settle a Pack dispute. The others listen to what you say and go with it."

"Because I'm a hunter and exist outside the Pack," I argued.

"No. Because you are a Wolf's Kiss." Hector steadily met my gaze. "That's why Remy and Forrest backed down after you broke Amos Fletching's nose. Because to them, you're an existence that's next to an Alpha. They'll stand back when you take action and accept what you decide—just as the humans do."

"The humans don't even like me!"

"And yet they listen to what you say." Ember's voice was soft, but lined with power. "Teresa told us everything, Pip. Jack, Young Jack, and Amelia

all looked to you when the Fletchings attacked.”

“Because I was the only one with combat experience,” I said.

“Because although they aren’t wolves, they can recognize the power you hold,” Hector gently said. “That’s why they are so conflicted over your presence. You command respect, when most of them are just simply adored.”

I pushed off my porch railing, not quite sure what to think.

*It’s not that I hate the idea of being...whatever this is. It’s just...this will complicate life so much. And I can’t help but think they’re looking to me when I’m not the right answer, and they’re going to be disappointed.*

Pre-Dominant Harka watched me for a few moments. “A Wolf’s Kiss exists in an odd space—not Pack, but so important and crucial to the wolves, it’s said that the hunter is physically incapable of leaving the Pack once the bond is cemented.”

I jerked my head up, my heartbeat increasing.

*That’s happened to me. College was when I first experienced it. But... how?*

“It’s also why we’ve been so careful to guard the existence of your magic,” she continued. “Because if other Packs knew of your existence, it could spark a war. Regions would *fight* to possess someone capable of increasing their Pack size.”

Pre-Dominant Harka glanced at Rafe. “Which is why we will continue to keep your abilities a secret outside the Northern Lakes Pack—though the rest of the Pack will be informed—for now.”

Rafe ducked his head in a sign of submission.

“How can you know I have this magic?” I asked. “Is there some kind of test?”

Greyson stiffened—the first movement he’d made since I settled down into place. (I wasn’t sure if this meant he didn’t like the fact that I could be a Wolf’s Kiss, or something else.)

Pre-Dominant Harka nodded. “A fair question. In reality, we’ve known since approximately your last year in high school and first year in college.”

I scratched my cheek as I tried to remember those years. Nothing special stood out. “Really? How?”

“Pre-Dominant Harka,” Greyson said. “There has to be another example.”

She waved her hand at him. "It's the best one."

"It's not," Greyson said, his voice taking on the sharpness he didn't ever use in front of the Pack.

"We know, Phillipa, that you are a Wolf's Kiss," Pre-Dominant Harka continued, "because of your effect on the Pack. That was why Hudson had to re—"

"*Enough!*" Greyson snapped. "She doesn't have to know this part!"

His power so thickly flooded the air, it was like breathing electricity.

Pre-Dominant Harka snapped her jaw shut, falling silent, while Ember and Hector stared at Greyson with wide eyes.

*Wow. I also gaped at Greyson, shocked. Double wow. He just told off the Pre-Dominant, and she listened? That means he's got to be stronger than her already? How is that possible?*

I gawked at Harka, but she still was silent, pressed deep into her seat by Greyson's oppressive presence.

*This is real. He's really keeping her silent. He's more powerful than I ever thought—how can he do this? Wait...*

Harka's words finally caught up with me.

*That was why Hudson had to re...? Why he had to what?*

"Retire?" It wasn't until I said the word out loud that the full force hit me. "Wait...Hudson retired...because of *me*?"

I turned my whole body in Pre-Dominant Harka's direction, but she was silent.

"I have to be wrong," I said. "There's no way. Hudson left because Greyson needed a high position so he could be promoted to leadership within the community earlier. Everyone was talking about it."

Greyson started pacing, and the death grip he had on the other wolves must have lessened a little.

Rafe was still choking, and Hector and Ember were a mixture of shock and awe—over Greyson, not me.

Pre-Dominant Harka actually had to move her lips *twice* before she could speak despite Greyson's powers. "You were eighteen," she said. "And your hold on the Pack was rivaling Hudson's. Another few years...and the Pack would be entirely under your influence, and you wouldn't know what to do with them, nor would they operate as well without proper wolf leadership."

She glanced at Greyson, who was still stalking like a caged wolf. “Greyson was brought in...because we believed he was the only wolf with enough power to match yours. Anyone lesser, and you would have taken away leadership from them.”

*Hudson had to leave...because of me? Lynn was ripped from the Pack she grew up with, all because of me?*

“No,” I whispered. “No. That’s not possible. I didn’t mean to do anything like that!”

“You might not have meant for it to happen,” Pre-Dominant Harka said. “The majority of the effects of your rare magic are often unconscious. But...”

I didn’t want to hear any more. I *couldn’t*.

My throat closed, and I felt sick. I launched myself over the railing of my porch and ran.

Tears clogged my eyes, and I couldn’t see as I ran back up the path, hiccupping as I tried to hold my sobs in.

*Everyone loved Hudson—I loved him! And because of me...*

Greyson had to be brought in because of me. He’d left Colorado to take over a Pack he knew nothing about because of me.

Hudson—the one wolf who felt like family to me after Papa Santos and Mama Dulce—had left the Pack he’d grown up in and run...because of me.

My side burned, and a sob finally escaped from me, making my shoulders heave.

I tripped and fell, scraping my knees on the gravel path. I sat in the dust, and cried.

*How could I? What was wrong with me?*

I’d had my family ripped twice from me now.

That I was responsible for ripping apart an entire Pack?

Greyson appeared in my hunter senses, blazing like a white star.

I didn’t realize until he was standing in front of me that he was in his wolf form. I could barely make out his stark white body in the smear of the forest because my eyes were already swelling from my tears.

I wiped my face off with the hem of my shirt. “W-what?” I asked. “What is it?” I expected him to nudge me to my feet, or maybe growl in my face to get me up.

Instead, he leaned into me, pushing his furry head against mine.

There was something about the gesture. Even though I couldn't communicate with him like other wolves could, I knew what he was saying.

*I'm with you. You're not alone.*

Considering the lifetime of goodbyes I'd said, knowing that he was standing here—when he could very easily blame me for ruining his life—and was supporting me in my grief...it meant more to me than he could possibly know.

Greyson—who I had blamed for the loss of Hudson and Lynn when they'd actually left because of *me*—was here with me.

I felt like I'd learned a part of my life was a lie—that *I* wasn't who I thought I was. In fact, I'd caused so much pain to the wolves I had loved dearly. And Greyson was still here with me, even though he was one of the ones I'd unknowingly wronged.

The last tiny remnant of the grudge I'd nursed against him evaporated, leaving me to acknowledge that trickster Greyson had somehow wormed his way into meaning more to me than I'd understood.

That he was here, with me—that he'd tried to protect me—meant a lot to me.

I started sobbing again and threw my arms over his muscled shoulders.

He didn't pull away. Instead, Greyson whined and jabbed his wet nose in my ear, then scooted closer, curling protectively around me.

I rested my head on his chest and cried—for everything I had lost, for all the heartbreak I'd caused myself and those around me, for the unfairness of everything.

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## Epilogue

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### *Greyson*

I checked for the third time that Pip was really sleeping on the couch before I headed into the bathroom.

By the time she'd stopped crying and we'd come back to her home, Harka, her nephew, Hector, and Ember had left.

Someone—Hector, going by scent—had brought the cat food inside, and Ember had turned on the lights, so Pip didn't have to fumble around in darkness as the sun started to set.

I'd waited until she'd made it to the couch and mashed her head into a couch cushion before I slipped outside to grab my clothes and change back into my human form.

When I came back inside and she didn't say anything snarky to me, I knew she was still feeling pretty awful about it.

I fed her cats and hung around the cottage—trying to offer the comfort of nearness as well as I could without risking upsetting her more.

She'd passed out, though, giving me a chance to check on my arm.

I yanked up the sleeve of my shirt, clenching my jaw to hold in a growl when I brushed the new, black, tattoo-like brand on my bicep—a wolf paw.

Brushing it jolted a deep awareness of my mate through my body, filling my mind with her location, breathing, heartbeat, and more information than my brain could process.

Yes, I had figured out who my mate was, in the middle of the fight with the hunters. I'd been out of my mind with concern for her as the overwhelming sensation of the bond twisted around my heart. Then I'd felt it, the cord of connection between my mate and me. Immediately, every intention I had to reject the bond disappeared.

I grimaced as I mentally reached for the bond, and felt nothing.

There was a black, gaping hole where the connection formed by the bond usually settled in a wolf's mind—the spot where you could *feel* the person, to the point where you almost existed in two bodies.

The hole hurt worse than the dull ache the missing mate bond had been in my chest. That I had been able to ignore if I focused. But this...there was no way to ignore what felt like a chunk of my *soul* missing.

Every breath I took I was painfully aware that while I had solidified the bond, my mate had done no such thing, creating an unbalanced, uneven bond.

*I'll get used to it.*

I had no choice.

The pain was never going to lessen.

Hunters were physically incapable of accepting mate bonds. It came with the territory of being immune to Alpha powers, and was also probably the reason why my bond had never settled—it never had a chance to make the connection after I'd set eyes on her.

I had no intention of telling my mate. She already had enough she was dealing with. Adding in a mate bond would only make things worse for her.

Yes, the last thing Pip needed to know was that she was my mate, and that I'd inescapably tied myself to her. Forever.

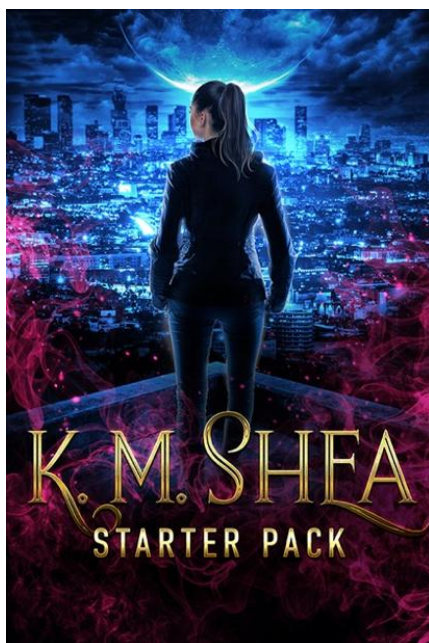
THE END

*To be continued in United,  
Pack of Dawn and Destiny Book 2*

*For free short stories and more information about the Pack of Dawn and  
Destiny Series, visit [kmshea.com](http://kmshea.com)!*

## Afterword

Thank you for reading *Hunted*, I hope you enjoyed Pip's story! If you want to read more of my work, [sign up for my newsletter](#) to receive my **free** *K. M. Shea Starter Pack* ebook.



It contains:

- A Hall of Blood and Mercy short story
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My newsletter is released every month, and contains information about the books I'm working on, new freebies, and exclusive content just for newsletter subscribers!

Thank you for your support and encouragement. I am proud to say I have the best readers. Therefore, it is my dearest wish that Pip and her friends made you laugh and warmed your heart. Thank you.

Pip's adventure continues in...



**United**

Pack of Dawn and Destiny Book Two

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## About the Author

K. M. Shea is a fantasy-romance author who never quite grew out of adventure books or fairy tales, and still searches closets in hopes of stumbling into Narnia. She is addicted to sweet romances, witty characters, and happy endings. She also writes LitRPG and GameLit under the pen name, A. M. Sohma.