



# Wild Instincts

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Primal instincts...

Jayden, one of the few surviving humans known to exist, grapples with the betrayal of her own clan, plunging her into a world of darkness and distrust. Determined to evade the clutches of the Others—shape shifters who now dominate the Earth—she finds herself entangled in an unexpected love triangle with two wolf shifters.

Van Timberwolf and Peterson Redfoot can't believe they have found their destined mate among the dwindling human population. It doesn't take long for them to discover that Jayden's elusive nature and fierce resolve pose challenges unlike any they've faced before. Despite the protection of the highest authority, the threesome finds themselves ensnared in a perilous game of cat-and-mouse where betrayal waits at every turn, and clandestine organizations lurk in the shadows.

None of them are safe when Jayden becomes a target. When poachers exploit the undeniable bond between herself and the two shifters who adore her, they set off a chain of events that imperils everything Van and Peterson hold dear.

With twists as unpredictable as Jayden herself, the poachers are about to realize they've underestimated the resilience of the human spirit. Can Jayden embrace her primal instincts to protect the ones she loves before it's too late for them all?

**Total Pages (Source):** 80

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:09 am*

## Prologue

Forest lands: Pacific Northwest

Seven years prior

\* \* \*

Muffled giggles filtered through the forests, catching the attention of a young barred owl weaving its way through the dense canopy of old growth conifers that covered the area. The owl swooped down and landed on the branch of a magnificent spruce, its eyes following the two young girls who raced along an animal trail cut through the tall, thick ferns.

The spring chill had passed, and the early days of summer gripped the lush green landscape. The girls, dressed in simple handwoven clothing, stood out against the forest floor. Their brown and blonde hair flowed behind them as they ran, as wild as they were.

“Wait up, Jayden!”

Jayden laughed as she ran along the trunk of a fallen tree. She hopped down on the other side and crawled under it to hide. A moment later, Ella jumped down. Jayden reached out from her hiding spot under the massive trunk and grabbed Ella’s slender ankle, making her jump.

Ella squealed with surprise, turning toward Jayden as she fell to the forest floor in a

heap of laughter. Jayden grinned back at her friend. Ella leaned forward and wiped a hand covered in dirt along Jayden's cheek.

"You look like one of those forest creatures that the elders warn us about," Ella teased.

"I am one of those forest creatures. We both are," Jayden replied, crawling over to sit next to Ella.

Ella laid back against the soft, moss-covered ground and stretched out, placing her dirty, bare feet on the trunk of the dead tree. She folded her arms under her head to cushion it and stared up at the swaying treetops and blue sky dotted with dense fluffy white clouds. It was a beautiful summer day. A welcome relief from the cold rains of spring.

Jayden flopped over onto her back and did the same. She reached into the pocket of her beige tunic and pulled out a piece of bread left over from their meager breakfast. She ripped it in half and held a piece out to Ella. Ella sat up and reached for the paltry offering as if she were being offered a piece of cake—something neither of them had ever tasted.

"I'm glad winter is done," Ella said as she picked a tidbit of the bread off.

"Me too."

Ella looked at Jayden with a look of regret. "I'm sorry, Jayden."

Jayden sat up and shrugged. "There's nothing to be sorry about. It's not your fault."

Jayden fingered the bread she was holding. She wasn't hungry anymore. It wasn't Ella's fault. According to her parents, it wasn't any of their faults.

No. If anyone is to blame it is the Others.

The Others had driven them out of their home in the middle of winter when they came too close. Jayden's little brother, Robert, had always been sickly. It hadn't mattered that she had added her best furs to cover him or tried to give him half of her meager meals, he had grown weaker and weaker. He hadn't survived the move. They had lost six more people because of the Others over the harsh winter months.

There hadn't been enough food, and there was never enough protection from the cold. Jayden lifted her face when the sun peeked through the canopy. The warmth felt good against her skin. She just needed it to reach her bones.

"Do you think we will have to move again soon?" Ella asked.

Jayden nodded. "Probably. I overheard the elders say that the Others are making it harder for us to hide from them. They are talking about moving to the mountains to the west."

"The mountains! We've never gone that far before. There is always snow on them," Ella groaned.

"Maybe the shifters won't like the snow," Jayden said.

Ella shook her head. "It didn't stop them from coming into the woods this past winter," she replied in a glum voice.

Jayden reached out and squeezed Ella's arm. She knew that Ella was terrified of what the Others would do to them. Jayden was scared too, but she was also determined to be ready. That was why she spent most of her time scouring the forests, learning the best ways to hide and fight.

When the day comes that we meet the shifters again, I will be ready to fight them.

“Maybe we will be safe in the mountains, but I hope it isn’t for a while. My mom can’t move far right now. My little brother or sister is making her sick,” Ella said.

“My brother did that to my mom. I’m never going to have children,” Jayden declared, tucking the piece of bread back into her pocket and rising.

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Ella gave her a startled look. “But... the elders say it’s necessary; otherwise there won’t be no more of us.”

Jayden pursed her lips and shook her head. Though her mom and dad said she often spoke before she thought, this time she didn’t say what she was really thinking—that humans were already a thing of the past. She and Ella might only be twelve winters old, but Jayden listened to the elders talk when they thought no one was listening. Late at night, she would eavesdrop on her parents’ conversations as they discussed the dire situation of their dwindling numbers and the slim chances of survival. After Robert’s untimely death last winter, the fleeting nature of life had sunk into Jayden’s bones. She understood. She accepted. But she was still going to fight to survive.

She was about to suggest they search for some wild blueberries when a thunderous crash caused them to drop to the ground. The ground trembled. When it happened again, she scrambled under the tree trunk, pulling Ella behind her.

Their intertwined fingers grew clammy and cold, each heartbeat a drumbeat against their ears as they huddled in fear. The air was thick with the buzz of insects as they remained frozen under the log, their bodies tensed in readiness to flee, before she finally released Ella’s hand and began to crawl out. With a trembling hand, Ella grabbed her arm, her eyes filled with terror as she silently shook her head.

“We have to know if it is the Others, so we can warn the clan,” Jayden said in a low voice.

“No! What if they see us?” Ella whispered.

“They won’t. We’ll be extra careful,” Jayden promised before she paused and bit her lip. “You can stay here. If I don’t come back, then you can go warn the others.”

“No. We go together,” Ella said, reaching for her hand.

Jayden helped Ella up. “We’ll be quiet as a mouse.”

Ella gave her a shaky smile and nodded. “Quiet as a mouse,” she repeated.

Jayden picked up a sharp stick that lay on the ground, its wood rough and dry under her fingers, and motioned for Ella to follow. They moved silently through the ferns, their footsteps muffled by the soft earth and the rustling leaves. A quarter mile from where they had been playing, they bent and crept closer to the edge of the woods. On the other side was a rocky section that led to a large river.

They squatted and peered through the branches of a spindly bush, and then jolted with intense alarm when the sound of wings flapping caught their attention. With a fearsome scowl, Jayden glared up at the juvenile owl perched on a branch, its soft hooting echoing through the air.

“Shh!” she mouthed, placing a dirty finger to her lips.

The owl tilted its head at her, its piercing eyes locked onto hers. With a quick hop along the branch, it propelled itself into the air, gracefully soaring across the river to the other side. Jayden’s eyes traced the owl’s graceful flight as it vanished into the dense woods where the mysterious noise had originated. Her eyes widened when a massive, leathery-skinned gray creature with a horn in the center of its snout appeared. A second later, two more creatures came into view. There was one similar to the first, only a shade darker, while the second was twice the size of the other two and had a long snout and large ears.

The creature with the long snout braced his shoulder against a young tree and pushed. The tree toppled with a loud crash, the top landing at the edge of the river. The other two creatures snickered and charged the toppled tree, lifting it as if it was no heavier than a pebble before they tossed it along the bank.

“Jayden, we have to go. We have to warn the clan,” Ella whispered in a frantic tone, pulling on Jayden’s arm.

Jayden nodded. The Others had once again come to their part of the woods. The elders were right. They would have to head for the mountains and into the great unknown forest to the west. It was their only hope of remaining undiscovered.

She stared at the three creatures for a second longer. They were tearing the young tree apart as if it were only a twig. Tears burned her eyes.

They care nothing for life.

With a heavy heart, she turned away and silently followed Ella. She stayed silent the whole trip back, grappling with the realization that her warrior skills would always fall short against the shape shifters who dominated the world.

## Chapter 1

Olympic National Park: Pacific Northwest

Eight-and-a-half-years later:

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Large flakes fell from fluffy dark gray clouds, coating the landscape in a blanket of white. The scenery would have been picturesque if not for the constant threat of the



Others. Jayden thought she had hardened her heart to everything they could do to her people—until now.

This is all my fault, she thought with growing sorrow.

Ella would have never met the grizzly shifter if Jayden hadn't talked her into going too close to a structure that belonged to the Others. She had only been looking for discarded items that would help their clan. Instead, her carelessness had led them into a trap—and discovery.

There was no one else to blame, and the weight of responsibility settled heavily on Jayden's shoulders. She had disregarded the first law of her people, which strictly forbade approaching the dwellings of the Others, which had led to the grizzly-shifter suddenly appearing in their village. Jayden had been shocked and dismayed by Ella's protective response.

While the other villagers, including herself, had recoiled with fear and hatred, Ella had thrown herself over the Other to protect him from harm. The clan had banished Ella. Jayden's best friend was an outcast now, cast adrift from her only family.

It's all because of me and my recklessness, Jayden thought with remorse.

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Jayden pulled the long white fur coat protecting her from the elements tighter around her slender form. She had been following Ella's tracks for the past half-hour. She was going to bring her supplies, even though such help was forbidden. If the elders wanted to banish Jayden too, they could. It was no less than what she deserved.

She glided effortlessly along the snow-covered ground, her movements as graceful as a dancer. In their quest for concealment, her dwindling clan had sought refuge in the remote mountains, venturing further into their secluded heights. It was the last place to hide.

Because of me...

She paused before the river Ella had crossed. The bark of one of the trees was rough beneath her fingertips and her heart raced with fear as she looked on, seeing her best friend wrap her arms tightly around the neck of a towering grizzly.

Instead of tearing Ella apart, the beast emitted a series of contented grunts and affectionately nuzzled its massive head against her, nearly knocking her off balance.

Ella's grizzly shifter had found her.

Pain and disillusionment coursed through Jayden. Her fingers tightened on the lance in her hand. She should have killed Ty Bearclaw when she had the chance, then none of this would be happening.

What did the beast do to enchant my friend?

Jayden shifted her attention to the two wolves maintaining a protective stance nearby. She had come across their tracks while on her reconnaissance missions earlier in the week, but this was the first time she actually saw them.

The wolf to the right was the color of midnight. The second wolf was the color of the burnt fall leaves. The black wolf released a sneeze, as if pleased with Ella's embrace of the grizzly. A low, rumbling growl pulled Jayden's attention back to the red wolf, who was staring in her direction.

Jayden remained still. She knew that any movement would draw the wolves' attention to her position. Her white coat, the thickly falling snow, and the massive tree trunk she was standing behind would conceal her—as long as she didn't bolt. Her breath caught when the black wolf suddenly shifted into his two-legged form.

The red wolf's body shimmered as well and then a second man stood next to the first. Neither wore clothes. The grizzly snarled at the men and blocked Ella's view of them with its massive body.

Oh mercy, but they are beautiful!

She recoiled internally from the surprising thought. Yet, even more disturbing, was the sudden desire to reveal herself. Had the creatures cast a spell on her? Did they have some strange pheromone that captivated human women?

A shudder of fear coursed through Jayden at the thought of losing control to a shifter, even as she drank in the sight before her. She was so absorbed in their beauty and strength that she didn't realize at first that Ella and the grizzly had moved further into the forest on the far side of the river. The two shifters conversed for another minute by the shore, scanning the forest in her direction, before they shifted again and followed her friend and the beast.

It wasn't until they too were hidden by the trees that she released a shuddering breath. Fear and the instinct for survival was so engrained in her that she lifted her hand without thinking to hide the fog of her breath. She waited for another five minutes before finally mustering the strength to move her heavy limbs.

"I will use your hide as my winter coat if you try to enchant me," she vowed in a low voice, staring at the empty shoreline across from her. "I will wrap it around my body and show you that you have no hold on me."

Bolstered by the threat, she turned and retraced the path through the forest back to her clan's encampment. She would have to tell the elders what she had seen. They would be forced to move deeper into the mountains.

Grief filled her. They were dying. Her clan, the last humans she was aware of, were a dying species. The Others were about to win the battle they had started centuries before.

One they thought they had already won, she bitterly thought.

Van grabbed the clothes out of his pack and pulled them on. Despite being unfazed by the weather as a wolf, it could be a little uncomfortable when he changed back. It wasn't the weather that was bothering him, though.

"You sensed something, too, didn't you?"

Van grunted in response to his friend's astute observation as he pulled on his pants. He had been wondering if Peterson had felt the same thing as well.

They hadn't been alone. Someone or something had been watching them. It could have been another shifter, which worried him, but his wolf hadn't reacted as though whoever had been there was a threat.

Peterson sat down on the log near the firepit in their camp. In the background, Tracy was fussing over Ella while Ty got dressed. Tracy Bearclaw was an anthropologist who happened to be the niece of Michaela Bearclaw-Kodiak, President of the United Species of North America. Van and Peterson often worked with Tracy when she needed exceptional trackers. Ty was her brother. He was the curator of the Washington State Animal Sanctuary, Research, and Observation Center. Ella was Ty's human mate. Van glanced over his shoulder. Through the gap in the tent, he could see the human woman.

"It's hard to believe that a human still exists. Do you think there are more?" Peterson continued.

Van scowled. He didn't really know if he was scowling at Peterson, at the cold, at his wolf, or just at everything. He felt... a nameless, urgent something. He pulled a forest green sweater over his head and tugged it down. He sat down next to Peterson, focusing on drying his feet so he could put his socks and boots on. What was it that Peterson had even asked him? Did he think there were more humans?

"Yeah, I think there are more. Ella had to come from somewhere and there is no way she could have survived this long on her own. The million-dollar question is: how many more humans are there, and where in the world have they been hiding?" he replied.

"That's two questions. And the 'where' is obvious. The question I have is how? I mean, how could they stay hidden? It's been centuries since the last one was seen."

"I know. I took the same classes as you in school, remember?" Van said with a wry grin, elbowing Peterson and almost knocking him off the log.

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“Classes? You mean the ones you talked me into skipping more than attending?” Peterson retorted with a chuckle.

“We attended the important ones.” He shook his head and pulled on his boots. “Yes, I think there are more humans, and?—”

His voice died and he stared into the flickering firelight. Yes, there are more. The certainty replayed in his mind like a broken record, accompanied by the realization that the remaining humans would be in peril once the news of their presence got out. He jerked back to the present when Peterson nudged him.

“And—?”

Van blinked as he tried to remember what he had been about to say. Releasing a long sigh, he shook his head. Peterson had sensed something, but was it the same thing as what he had experienced?

“And I think one of them was watching us,” he replied.

Peterson leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands together. Van studied the tense expression on Peterson’s face. He always knew when Peterson wanted to say something but wasn’t sure how to phrase it. It had been like that since they met when they were ten-years-old. Peterson’s parents had just perished in a car accident while on their way to a pack summit. Van’s parents, as leaders of the pack, had taken Peterson in, and there had been an instant connection between the two of them. Stronger than normal. Even stronger than Van’s bond with his brothers.

“My wolf—” Peterson shook his head before he clenched his fists and continued. “My wolf sensed it—our—mate.”

Van stiffened. Was that what the unusual feeling had been? His wolf had been confused, almost desperate. That was why he had shifted back into his two-legged form. At first, he wondered if it was because of Ella. After all, shifters and humans had fought. Wolves were guided by the instincts of their ancestors. He was afraid there may have been a latent instinct to attack and kill her held deep within his wolf DNA. Now he understood.

“I thought it was because of Ella,” he murmured.

Peterson gripped his arm. “You felt it, too. Your wolf... it wanted to hunt?”

He nodded. “I only caught the scent for a second and whoever was there knew to stay still. The scent was too faint for me to lock on because of the snow. But, yeah, I felt it, too.”

“Goddess, you don’t know how glad I am that you said that. I thought I was going crazy,” Peterson replied with a strained laugh.

Van glanced at the tent. Ty was inside with Ella. They were talking quietly. His focus shifted to Tracy. She was staring out at the forest with a thoughtful expression.

That usually means trouble.

“Van... Van...”

He returned his attention to Peterson, who had a dark scowl on his face. He frowned. What had he missed now?

“What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? I just told you that we found our mate and all you can say is ‘I felt it’? What are we going to do about it?” Peterson demanded.

Van stared out at the snow-covered forest with grim determination. Their mate was out there—somewhere. Their current priority was to make sure that Tracy, Ty, and Ella were safe, but after that, they would come back.

“We are going to find her,” he vowed.

## Chapter 2

Olympic National Park: Washington State

United Species of North America

\* \* \*

Six months later

\* \* \*

“Where ya going?”

Caught while sneaking out, Jayden grimaced and peered through the gloom toward the hushed voice. She huffed out a sigh when she saw small, thin, six-year-old Timmy near the central fire, sitting with a patchwork blanket wrapped around him. Her eyes softened, however, when she noticed the streak of dirt along his cheek that was still damp.



She walked over to the firepit and sat down next to him, pulling her bag around until it was resting in her lap.

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“Did you have another nightmare?” she asked.

Timmy nodded and looked down. “Yes. I didn’t want LaTrisha to hear me. She gets worried.”

She nodded and wiped a fresh tear from his face. “Yeah. I know how that feels. I used to get them after Robert died.”

Timmy looked up. “Does it get any better? I miss Momma so much. LaTrisha says that the hurt will get easier, but I’m scared she just means I’ll forget about her.”

“You won’t. It does get easier—in a way. You won’t forget your momma,” she promised.

Timmy looked at the fire. “Sometimes I hear LaTrisha cry. I think she misses Momma, too.”

“Are you hungry?” she asked, hoping to take the little boy’s thoughts off of his sorrow.

“A little. I’m eating the cookies that Tracy gave me. Would you like one?” he said, pulling a bowl out from under his blanket.

Jayden smiled ruefully. Sweet treats from the Others. Things had certainly changed. “No, thank you.” She pulled a palm-sized bundle out of her bag and held it out to him. “Would you like some dried fruit to go with your cookies? I have more than I can eat.”

Timmy's eyes lit up with delight. "I bet it would taste good with my cookies."

"Yeah. I bet it would. Listen, I need to go check my traps. Can you.... Well, I would appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone," she confided.

"Why don't you want anyone to know? You go out all the time."

Jayden stared at the embers in the firepit uncomfortably.

"I don't want anyone to worry about me. Mitchell and the elders have a lot going on now that the shifter is here," she said.

Timmy looked over toward Mitchell and Tracy's sleeping area. A shifter's tent was set up along the wall. It stood out among the more familiar, human arrangements in the cavern.

"I won't tell no one unless they ask. Momma said I wasn't supposed to fib," Timmy said.

Jayden ran her hand over his messy hair. "You don't have to fib. I'll probably be back before anyone notices I'm gone—well, except for you."

"Are you sure you don't want a cookie to take with you? They are really good."

"No, but thank you for asking," she said, rising.

Jayden did not want, and would never want, the shifters' cookies, or their cages, or their friend-stealing magic spells, or their sexy dreams?—

She waved goodbye and silently headed for the entrance to the cave. Timmy's offer of the shifter cookies had actually been sweet. A slight pang of guilt and shame made

her angry all over again, this time at herself. She had met two shifters in person in her life so far, and neither had resembled those of the stories the elders told about them.

She pulled her white fur cap further down over her ears when a shaft of freezing air swirled around her. The snow had finally stopped, leaving the world encased in a glittering white wonderland. She paused to slip on her snowshoes, tying the leather straps over the top of her boots and pulling the slip knots tight on each heel before stepping out.

The path down from the cave was covered in two more feet of snow than what was there a few days ago when they arrived. The wide brims of her snowshoes kept her from sinking into it. Scanning her surroundings, she thought about Tracy, Mitchell's shifter, the shifter Jayden had been studying for the last few days.

Tracy Bearclaw acted like she genuinely cared about humans, and as for how she was with Mitchell, she certainly seemed to be in love.

A pang of loneliness struck Jayden. First Ella and now Mitchell. How could life change so quickly?

The only thing that is constant is the mountains. That thought brought her some measure of comfort, and it was what she had been thinking about when she told her clan she would take her chances in the wild. Tracy had just offered the clan a compound designed for humans, explaining that the shifters' plan was to bring humans out of hiding in a safe way so humans could eventually live alongside the Others, fully integrated into their society. Mitchell and the elders had decided to accept.

It left Jayden reeling with resentment, anger, and fear. It also caused memories of the two wolf shifters to rise to the surface of her mind, along with a sense of panic.

Would I see them again?

That thought flustered her. She was still haunted by dreams of the men, dreams where they would hold her and do things to her that she knew happened between a man and a woman. Even though she couldn't remember the details, she remembered the feelings left behind when she woke.

"I won't let it happen. I won't give into whatever magic they think they can cast over me," she growled under her breath.

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She was still locked in a fierce battle with her emotions after two-and-a-half hours of walking in the mountainous forest. She had spent the time imagining various scenarios, playing out different strategies to outsmart the men in case she ever crossed paths with them again. Her imaginings ranged from amusing to breathtaking, leaving her alternating between laughter and catching her breath as she trekked across the snow-covered landscape. She stooped down to pick up an empty snare.

“There are probably tons of shifters out there. Just because I saw them once with Ty and Ella doesn’t mean that I’ll see them again. They could be anywhere by now,” she muttered.

Feeling comforted by that thought, she carried on with her duties. When she reached her last trap, the sun was high in the sky, painting the surrounding landscape with a comforting warmth. She had checked every trap, but they were all empty of any catch. Perplexed, she scanned the snowy landscape, searching for any signs of disturbance in the pristine powder. The forest was devoid of its usual sounds, as if nature itself was holding its breath in anticipation. It was an eerie atmosphere.

She straightened and carefully stowed the twine she had used as a snare inside her bag, her eyes scanning the dense forest. There was a strange stillness that she’d failed to notice earlier. Unease built inside her, and the overwhelming desire to return to the cave pulled at her.

There are others searching for you.

The memory of Tracy’s warning swept through her mind. Fear propelled her back along the path she had taken hours earlier, moving much faster than she had in the

early morning light, though she carefully studied the ground, searching for tracks other than her own. She kept her breathing even as she exited the forest and began the climb up the ridge. She didn't let her guard down as she searched the landscape for anything out of the ordinary.

When unfamiliar tracks leading toward the cave appeared from the southwest side of the ridge, her breath caught. She stopped and crouched by a set of the footprints, running her fingers along the unusual grooves in the snow. They differed from anything her people would wear. They were more like the boots Tracy wore, only larger. There was no fresh snow in the tracks, meaning they had arrived after she had left this morning.

The Others!

She rose and slowly advanced, keeping a wary eye open for any movement. Her heart pounded when she saw unmistakable droplets of blood in the snow. Swallowing down bile, she prayed that none of the specks were from someone inside the cave. She continued forward, moving with caution and holding her spear out in front of her.

As she approached the outcroppings of rocks that helped conceal the entrance to the cave, horror threatened to choke her when she saw a large pool of frozen blood covering a section of compacted snow. She frantically scanned the path, trying to discern how many footprints there were and whether any of them belonged to her people. Confusingly, she only saw tracks from one shifter.

She expanded her search and found a duplicate scene on the other side of the trail, near another line of boulders. Whoever, or whatever, had been there had also met a grisly demise. Following the splattered trail of blood as far as she safely could to the edge of the drop-off, she discovered that whatever had attacked the shifters must have deposited them over the cliff.

“But how?”

There were no tracks of the perpetrator nor of a dragged body—only blood. The closest she could safely get to the edge was twenty feet. It was impossible to tell how stable the snow was.

“None of this makes any sense!” she mused, turning back to look toward the cave.

Whatever had happened, she needed to find out if everyone was safe. Retracing her steps, she climbed the last two hundred feet to the mouth of the cave, silently praying she wouldn’t find the same evidence of death inside it that she had discovered outside.

A short time earlier:

\* \* \*

The team lead of Charley 1 crept forward, following the shallow impression of footprints in the snow. He held up his hand and motioned to the soldier across from him. The soldier nodded and crouched behind a snow-covered boulder.

A sneer curved his lips. “It looks like there’s a cave up ahead.”

The second soldier chuckled. “This is like herding lambs to the slaughter. We’ll be home before nightfall.”

Charley 1 nodded and spoke quietly into his mic. “Team 3 is moving up.”

He motioned for Charley 2 to follow him. He went first, detouring around the boulders, stopping several yards up the trail before taking cover behind another boulder two-hundred yards out from the entrance. Charley 2 fell into position across



from him again. They both lifted a pair of binoculars to their eyes.

“Target sighted,” Charley 1 murmured.

“Confirmed. Target sighted,” Charley 2 concurred.

Static on his com made him grimace. He kept his eyes glued on the entrance to the cave. From the markings on the woman standing just inside the opening, it was the shifter. According to their Intel, there should only be the one.

“Team 3 report.”

“Confirmed visual on a cave entrance. One target is visible,” Charley 1 responded into his mic.

“Charley 1, do not engage until we are in position,” Alpha 1 ordered.

He held up his fist to show they were ordered to hold their position. The neck gaiter he wore concealed the fog from his breath as he breathed out a sigh. Charley 2 must have felt the same frustration.

“Don’t know why we needed eight men. We could take the humans with one hand tied behind our backs,” Charley 2 muttered.

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“Don’t forget that grizzly shifter,” he replied.

Charley 2 lifted the gun in his hand and made an inaudible sound of gunfire. He shook his head and silently laughed before turning to look back at the mouth of the cave. Tracy Bearclaw was pacing just inside it, talking to someone. That could complicate the mission, if her people arrived before their team evacuated.

I always did love a challenge.

Just as he was about to lift the binoculars, Alpha 1’s voice came through the mic, causing him to pause. As soon as he heard the urgency in the team commander’s voice, a sense of impending danger washed over him. Lowering the binoculars, he pressed his hand against the mic to confirm the accuracy of what he was hearing.

“Charley 1, be advised there are hostiles in the area.”

He lifted his arm to alert Charley 2 that there was an issue. Intense pain, followed by a surreal sensation struck him. He watched in horror as the arm he had extended fell to the snow, detached from the rest of his body. His lips parted on a hoarse scream that remained frozen on his lips. He dropped the binoculars he was holding and lifted his hand to his throat. Warm blood pulsed like a spring fountain, coating his gloved hand and spilling onto his sleeve.

The world tilted as he fell onto his back in the snow. A shadow blocked the early morning light. The shadow grew larger as it came closer until all he could see was darkness. The brief thought that death had wings struck him as interesting, before his head lobbed to the side, his eyes already glazed in death.

“Charley 1, status report,” Alpha 1 requested again and again.

### Chapter 3

The noise of automatic gunfire caused Jayden to drop to her hands and knees less than a hundred feet from the entrance to the cave. She wildly looked around, turning and scrambling across the snow to a nearby boulder. The unusual sound had come from behind her... and sounded close.

She stiffened when the noise suddenly stopped. Visions of the blood-soaked area she had just left sent her heart racing. Had her people escaped only to be murdered in the woods?

“No. There aren’t any other tracks but mine,” she hissed under her breath, trying to quell her fears.

She pushed back to her feet, but crouched and kept a low profile as she focused on reaching the cave. Her eyes swept the ground, searching for more footprints. If there had been a mass exit, the snow would have been trampled.

It wasn’t until she rounded the large boulders partially blocking the entrance that she heard Mitchell and Tracy’s voices. She braced a gloved hand against the rock when relief made her knees weak. She breathed in calming breaths as she listened to make sure everything was alright before she entered.

“Is it possible it is your people?” Mitchell asked.

It was obvious they knew that something was going on, but not the full extent. She stopped just outside of the entrance and removed her snowshoes. She held them against her side; once more searching the terrain behind her before she entered the cave.

“I don’t know. Unless something bad happened, I can’t imagine them shooting. You don’t think Jayden—?” Tracy’s voice faltered on her question.

“I had nothing to do with what’s going on,” Jayden said, looking behind her again before scanning the interior of the cave.

Mitchell turned to face her with a scowl of disapproval on his face. “Where have you been? Did you see anything?”

Swallowing hard, she couldn’t help but replay the vivid images in her mind before finally giving him a quick nod. She shuddered as she related what she had discovered, unable to forget the sight of blood. Mitchell and Tracy’s concerned expressions mirrored each other as they kept exchanging apprehensive glances.

“My brother and the evac team should be here within the hour,” Tracy said.

Jayden pursed her lips and shook her head. As their conversation progressed, her anger simmered beneath the surface, steadily building. The thought of Tracy and Mitchell’s presence posing a threat to the clan filled her with terror. She and a few others probably stood a chance of escaping, but the young and old—her parents, grandparents... little Timmy—they would be defenseless. It was unlikely whoever was out there would be kind enough to wait until Tracy’s people arrived. A powerful sense of determination rose inside her. She would protect them, no matter what.

“We may not have an hour. If whoever is out there is this close, we need to stop them. Our priority is to protect the clan.”

She winced internally at the accusing edge in her tone. She didn’t miss the way Tracy looked down, shielding the hurt in her eyes at the animosity in her voice. Jayden sighed and tried to calm her desire to break something.

Now wasn't the time to rehash the foolishness of bringing a shifter into their home. After all, none of this would have happened if it hadn't been for her actions, she reminded herself for the hundredth time. Lost in her self-recrimination, she started when Mitchell reached out to touch her arm. She glanced at the entrance again. The longer they talked, the closer whoever was out there could get. They needed a distraction. She turned back to Mitchell when he spoke.

"Jayden, I want you and Tracy to stay here. I will go."

Jayden glanced back and forth as Tracy and Mitchell quietly argued about who should go and who should stay. After a minute, she released an impatient growl and threw her hands up in the air. They both fell silent and stared at her with a frown. She shot Mitchell a pointed look.

"I'm faster and quieter than you, Mitchell. I'm also already dressed for it. Tracy and I will go. The clan needs you here. You are a better fighter."

She could see the conflict in his eyes before he reluctantly answered. "Go, but... you both better watch each other's back and you better damn well come back in one piece."

They were almost a mile from the cave entrance when they stumbled upon another gruesome scene, reminiscent of what they had encountered on the path leading to the cave. Jayden ground her teeth together, the sound filling her ears as she tried to suppress the chattering caused by fear.

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They both recoiled when they saw the blood splattered across the pristine snow, staining it a light pink. Nausea rose in Jayden's stomach as she noted the bloodied areas where more than one shifter had been. There was a massive amount of blood... and again no bodies.

Tracy's grizzly snorted with distaste and horror. Jayden looked up and caught the expression dancing across Tracy's face. Fear... there was no other way to express what she was seeing in a better word. If there was anything that could convince her that a truce with their clan leader's shifter-girlfriend was her best chance at survival, it was the expression on Tracy's face at that moment.

Tracy violently shook her head back and forth as she backed away from a blood-soaked area. The fur along on Tracy's spine was raised. She had never dreamed that anything could terrify a grizzly. Not until she witnessed Tracy turning in a tight circle, as if afraid some ghostly army was about to attack.

Jayden was smart enough to know when a grizzly-shifter was scared, she should be too. She was currently questioning her sanity in volunteering to accompany the other woman on this crazy mission to find out who, or what, was behind their missing attackers.

Turning in a tight circle of her own, she warily peered about the forest. The crunch of snow under her feet made her wince. She kept Tracy in her peripheral view.

To hell with not liking or trusting shifters. If she keeps whoever did this from attacking, she'll be my best friend for life, she thought with unease.

She glanced over her shoulder. The grizzly was creeping backwards toward her. They both flinched when a heavy pile of snow fell from a nearby tree onto the ground. Jayden swiveled on her heels and lifted the lance she was holding.

“What’s wrong? What do you smell?” she asked, her voice not quite steady.

Tracy shuddered and scanned the trees. “These were all apex predators. From the amount of blood, I would be shocked if any of them survived. I don’t know anything that could kill this many... and take the bodies.”

The tremble in Tracy’s voice struck a chord of choking fear inside Jayden. This was a woman who ventured into the proverbial human’s den to save them and she was scared shitless? That thought alone made Jayden want to bolt. Instead, she took a deep breath and tried to think like a hunter.

“This is crazy! There aren’t any tracks. It’s as though whoever killed them was a ghost and the bodies just disappeared. What kind of shifter could do something like this?” she asked.

“None that I’ve ever met,” Tracy confessed.

None that I’ve ever met.

Tracy suddenly released a strident curse. She didn’t argue when Tracy ordered her to climb onto her back. Jayden could sense they were being watched, and it scared the hell out of her.

She had barely climbed onto the grizzly bear when Tracy bolted forward in a burst of speed that nearly unseated her human passenger. Visions of what they had discovered played in a loop over and over in her mind as they raced through the forest. For once, Jayden was thankful she was with a shifter as powerful as Tracy.

Adrenaline poured through her body and her heart pounded with fear as she gripped the fur on each side of Tracy's neck. Tracy raced across the thick ground cover of snow, leaving a trail of soft footprints behind. As they moved forward, the eerie silence was broken only by the faint snap of frozen branches and their heavy breathing.

The sounds of their retreat were a stark contrast to the looming specter of death that surrounded them. The magnitude of what she and Tracy had discovered left no room for any other interpretation. Something deadly was in the forest. Something that could frighten even a grizzly bear.

Jayden leaned forward as Tracy passed under a partially fallen tree wedged against another. The fur of Tracy's bear brushed against her cheek. It was surprisingly soft and warm.

Jayden ducked her chin and tried to look behind them. Snow flew out from Tracy's back feet as she dug her long claws into the fresh layer. She tilted her head back when a new sound filled the air. Twin dark shadows passed overhead. Jayden watched as two massive machines flew past them.

Jayden tightened her knees when Tracy cleared the forest and began their climb. One flying machine circled around and the side opened. Coils of rope unraveled, falling to the ground a short distance from the entrance to the cavern where her people had taken refuge.

She gripped the long spear she held in her left hand and counted. Six men dressed in black slid down the long ropes to the ground. She leaned closer to Tracy's ear.

"Who are they?" she yelled.

Tracy shook her massive brown head and grinned. "It's rainbows and unicorns as far



as I'm concerned."

Jayden didn't know what that meant, but she assumed from the relief in Tracy's voice, that it was a good thing. Personally, she wasn't so sure when she saw more men sliding down from the second flying machine. Surprise struck her when Tracy suddenly sped up.

The crunch of compacting snow was replaced by a low humph and a chorus of laughter when Tracy's bear rose and tackled a tall man who was turning in their direction. Jayden recognized the man as Ty Bearclaw. Tracy had him pinned to the ground and was giving his face a bath with her long, wide tongue much to Ty's disgust.

She released her grip on Tracy's fur and slid to the ground. It wasn't an easy feat considering that Tracy was still giving her brother enthusiastic bear kisses while he was trying to push her away. She stumbled when her foot caught in a low spot in the snow.

"Jeez, Tracy. Get ahold of your bear. You're embarrassing me in front of all the guys," Ty mumbled.

"Thank Goddess that isn't your blood. It isn't, is it?" another man questioned.

Tracy snorted and rubbed her head against her brother before she responded. Jayden frowned when she heard the shifter speak. His voice— She shook her head. It was crazy, but there was something in the low rumble that made her curious.

"No. There is more in the forest. I don't know who it belongs to," Tracy was saying as she rose and stepped back from her brother.

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Jayden desperately attempted to maneuver out of the way, but she found herself trapped in between Tracy and another shifter who had inched closer. She twisted and tried to slip away from between Tracy and the shifter, feeling their bodies brush against her. Tracy turned simultaneously, matching their movements perfectly. In the midst of taking a step, she was abruptly jolted forward by the bear's hairy hindquarters.

“Steady now.”

Her head jerked up at the low rumbling in the shifter's voice. Her eyes locked with a pair of intense blue eyes. Awareness struck her at the same time as she recognized the shifter who was holding her. She had seen him before—every delectable inch of him.

“Keep your paws off me, beast.”

Her voice came out in a strangled hiss. Panic hit her at her reactions to the two shifters. She had thought she was past the insane emotions that had haunted her days and nights for weeks after she had seen the two in the forest with Ty and Ella.

She swung her lance around, using it to create a barrier between herself and the group of shifters who were watching her with a combination of wry amusement and wary caution. The shifter with the auburn hair took a step toward her. Her gaze flickered to the shifter beside him who removed his helmet. Just as she suspected, it was the black-haired one. Visions of them in their wolf forms rose in her mind, filling her with the desire to flee.

“Jayden, I'll need my clothes.”

Jayden absently nodded when Tracy, oblivious to the emotions threatening to choke Jayden, called out. She followed Tracy, walking backwards with her spear still pointed at the men who watched in silence. The moment they were far enough inside, she thrust her soft leather bag at Tracy.

“Here’s your clothes. I’ll go let the others know we are here and it’s safe to come out,” she mumbled.

She cast a wary glance over her shoulder before she headed for the back of the cave. She knew where everyone was hiding. Cautionary tales and hiding places were drilled into all of them from a young age. If caught outside, become one with the Earth. In some of their shelters like this cavern, they had discovered narrow passageways cut by ice, water, and time. While not wide, they gave them a small measure of hope if they needed to hide.

Glancing over her shoulder once more, she slipped into the narrow tunnel at the back of the cave and wound along the increasingly narrow path. She passed the first two openings, one on each side. Those were used as a latrine. Several hundred feet in, the passage split again, this time in three different directions. The first one only went back a few feet. The other two were more extensive.

“Hey, Tracy’s people are here. It is safe to come out,” she called.

Her voice echoed, repeating itself. She winced as her voice bounced off the walls. The sound of scraping alerted her that she had been heard.

“Tracy?” Mitchell asked, appearing out of the darkness.

“She’s fine. There’s a bunch of shifters out there, including her brother,” she replied.

“What did you find?”

She shook her head. “Blood. Lots of blood, but no bodies. We don’t know what in the hell happened. All I do know is whatever happened was enough to scare a grizzly.”

“Son-of-a?—”

Mitchell’s muttered curse surprised her. He pushed past her as Connell appeared. Connell lifted an eyebrow at her. She shrugged and waved a hand toward the cave.

“It’s safe,” she said.

Connell nodded. “I’ll let the others know.”

“K.”

She retraced her steps. The passage was only large enough for one person at a time. It would take a while for everyone to exit. She stayed along the edge of the wall and worked her way back toward the entrance so she could see what was going on. Mitchell was holding Tracy as though he would never let her go.

Instinctively, she sought for sight of the two shifters she had seen earlier. The dark-haired one was engaged in a lively conversation with a group of people. He looked up and locked eyes with her, but continued nodding to the man next to him, not breaking his polite façade. She didn’t see the auburn-haired shifter.

“Jayden.”

Jayden pulled her attention away from the scene unfolding around them to look at Janna. Jace’s sister was staring back at her with an expression of concern. Unease rose inside her when Janna looked back over her shoulder toward the others who had spilled out from their hiding places. She continued watching the group, searching for her parents. They weren’t among the crowd.

“Where are my parents?”

Janna laid her hand on Jayden’s arm. “They are with your grandparents. Thomas is with them. I thought you would want to know.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s your grandfather. He’s-he’s not doing so good,” Janna replied.

“Thanks.”

The single word was all she could force out past the lump in her throat. She knew her grandfather had been feeling poorly lately. He wasn't that old, barely sixty-five winters, but life as a human was often cut short.

Memories of her little brother rose in her mind. Robert hadn't even lived to see his fourth celebration of life. It would take more than both of her hands to count the members of their clan who had perished because of accidents or illnesses.

She had tried to harden her heart. She was lucky. Both of her grandparents on her father's side, and her parents, were still alive. That was more than most of her clan could say.

She strode across the cavern to the spot where her grandparents slept. She and her father had set up the thin woven barrier to give them some privacy and to help keep the warmth in during the night when they filled the buckets with hot ashes from the fires. Slowing to a stop, she paused on the other side of the curtain and listened as Thomas, the clan's healer, spoke with her grandmother and parents.

“He has pneumonia. I'm afraid there isn't much I can do,” Thomas was saying.

“What about the shifters? Do you think they would have medicine that could heal him?” her grandmother asked.

“It's possible. I don't know what type of medicines they have. I imagine it's better than the few herbal ones we use,” Thomas said.

“Elaina, he’s not strong enough to hike out of here. Rand can ask if they can bring their doctor here,” her mother said.

Jayden pulled back the curtain. Her grandfather was lying on the pallet with his eyes closed. His breathing was labored and his coloring was pale. She swore she could see a tinge of blue around his lips.

“They have a flying machine. They could take him off the mountain in it,” she stated, looking at the group when they turned.

“What will they do with him? I don’t want them to take him away. What if I—?” her grandmother’s voice faltered before emotion overcame her and she looked away.

The fear in her grandmother’s eyes tore at Jayden. She walked forward, cupped her grandfather’s hand, and knelt next to the bed. He didn’t open his eyes.

“I won’t let you die,” she murmured, staring at his pale face.

Lifting his hand to her lips, she kissed the back of it. The sound of someone on the other side of the screen clearing their throat had her rising and turning. Thomas pulled back the curtain. A shifter stood on the other side with an apologetic expression on his face that changed when he saw Cyrus.

“Hello, my name is Conan. I’m a medic with the SBSI. I was told that someone might be having a medical emergency. I’d like to help... if you’ll allow me,” Conan said.

“Please, can you help him?” her grandmother begged.

Conan’s eyes softened with compassion at the tears glittering in her grandmother’s eyes. He smiled and nodded. Jayden reluctantly released her grandfather’s hand and stepped to the side when Conan stepped forward.

She watched as he examined her grandfather. Several minutes later, Conan murmured into a black box. Her mother and father held the curtain back as two other men in black came forward carrying a basket.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, watching as the men wrapped her grandfather up before placing him in the basket.

Conan smiled reassuringly at her. “Your grandfather needs to be transferred to a hospital. They can give him the care he needs that I can’t give him here. There are also doctors with more experience there.”

“I want to go. So does my grandmother. You will take us with him to this hospital,” she stated, lifting her chin.

Conan spoke into his mic. Jayden didn’t understand the words he was saying. It sounded like some type of coded language. Conan replied to whoever he was speaking to before he gave her and her grandmother another reassuring smile.

“Come on. The medic helicopter will be here any minute. They have room,” he said.

“Rand—” Elaina said, turning to her son.

“Go with him. Jayden will be there. Mallory and I will go with the others and help them settle in,” Rand said.

Elaina nodded. “I need my cloak. It will be cold if we are to fly like a bird through the sky,” she fretted.

Jayden helped her mother pack a light bag for her grandmother while her father helped Elaina with her cloak. She fingered the spear she was holding before she held it out to her father. Her father reached out and took the spear.



“I don’t think they will let me take this. Keep it safe for me,” she requested, fingering the woven rope near the end.

“Take care of your grandparents for your mom and me.”

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She nodded and didn't resist when he pulled her into his arms and gave her a brief hug. She stepped back so he could hug her grandmother. Taking the bag her mother held out, she stepped through the opening. Conan walked with them across the cavern to the entrance.

Jayden shielded her eyes from the wind and snow cast about by the flying machine. Her heart hammered in her chest when she saw the basket holding her grandfather being lifted into the air. A man in a bright red suit was leaning partially out of the flying machine and guiding the thin cable. Less than a minute later, the basket was being lowered again.

"We'll send your grandmother up first and then you," Conan said in a loud voice.

Her grandmother's eyes were wide with a mixture of fear and awe as Conan gently led her towards the basket. In a matter of seconds, her grandmother was effortlessly suspended in the air by a slender cable. Jayden hugged her grandmother's bag to her chest as she watched with growing anxiety.

"You're next," Conan shouted.

Jayden tore her gaze away from the flying machine. Her eyes locked on the two shifters standing a short distance away. Her lips parted as she struggled to pull in a breath as the intensity in their eyes washed over her. She felt like a rabbit who had just been discovered by wolves. If it wasn't for her grandparents, she would have given up on hiding and bolted.

"You ready?" Conan asked.

She nodded and moved forward when he guided her to the basket. It wasn't until she was lying back that she tore her eyes away from the two shifters and stared up at the twirling blades of the flying machine. She wound her fingers in the wire of the basket as it lifted off the ground.

Why do I feel that my feet will never touch the ground again? she wondered as the man in red pulled the basket into the flying machine.

## Chapter 4

Jayden lifted the blanket the nurse had brought in and gently covered her grandmother. Night had fallen outside and only the dim light over her grandfather's bed illuminated the room. She smiled down at her grandmother. A nurse had ordered a second bed be brought into the room so her grandmother could rest. The two beds were now pushed up against each other and her grandmother had fallen asleep with her hand wrapped around her grandfather's.

She didn't understand the equipment attached to her grandfather, only that whatever they had done over the last few days was working. Her grandfather's coloring already looked better and he was breathing easier. She wrapped her arms around her waist and walked over to the window to stare out.

The flight here had taken her breath away, giving her the impression they were birds as they soared over the forest. What shook her and her grandmother the most hadn't been the sensation of flying, it had been the knowledge of how closely they were surrounded by shifter settlements.

Small towns turned to cities with buildings that rose higher than the tallest trees and more massive than any forest. Tiny moving dots traveled along the long and winding roads, while ropes thicker than her arm held up magnificent bridges. Panic had set in that was hard for her to hide from her grandmother. Thankfully, her grandmother was

more focused on her grandfather than the landscape sweeping below them.

She hadn't been able to hide her fear completely, though. Conan and the shifter in the red suit kept looking at her. Conan had spoken to her in the black boxes they had placed on her head after she sat down.

“Are you alright?”

She had given Conan a silent, curt nod, realizing deep down she was screaming. Never in her wildest dreams had she thought the shifters had expanded the way they had. She always imagined them as the elders had described them from centuries before—living in small isolated villages. She now realized how naïve she was to believe that humans could ever survive, much less thrive in this world.

The sound of the door opening behind her made her turn. Doctor Ben Lyon stepped inside. His glance took in the sleeping couple, noting the tranquility of their intertwined fingers and the soft, steady rhythm of their breathing. She couldn't help but notice the way his eyes lingered on the couple's entwined hands, his compassionate smile reflected in his eyes before he shifted his focus to her. She bowed her head in silent greeting when he nodded and smiled.

He stepped closer to her grandfather. She watched as he scanned the monitor before gently lifting her grandfather's wrist and pressing his fingers against it. He tucked her grandfather's arm back under the covers before he looked up and motioned for her to follow him.

She took a step before she paused and bit her lip. Her eyes flickered from her grandparents, to him, to the door with uncertainty. She had not left this room since they had been escorted to it four days earlier.

“They will be fine. There is a guard outside the door. I can have a nurse sit with them

if you'd like," Ben murmured.

"Annie. Only Annie," she whispered back.

Ben nodded, turned, opened the door, and spoke to the guard. A minute later, Annie stepped inside with a smile to them both. Annie's eyes softened when she noticed the two beds pushed together.

"I'll watch over them," she promised.

Jayden swallowed and nodded. She walked over to the door and stepped out when Ben opened it for her. She dropped her arms to her sides, clenching her fists when she felt a sense of panic rising inside her again.

The hallway was brightly lit. Two shifters with broad shoulders and weapons stood on either side of the door. They both studied her with curious expressions but didn't say anything.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

Ben looked down at her with a compassionate expression. "I thought you might like a break and want to grab a bite to eat."

"No—thank you," she replied, adding the last two words as an afterthought.

"I would also like to talk to you about your grandfather's results. I didn't want to disturb your grandmother. She has been through enough and needs her rest. If you'd prefer I wait?—"

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“No! No, I want to know... about my grandfather. He-he will... live?” she asked, her voice huskier as emotion threatened to choke her.

“Yes. Why don’t we go get something to eat? It’s been a long day and I would really love a cup of tea,” he said, motioning toward the end of the hallway.

She glanced back at the door. “My grandparents?—?”

“Annie will protect them. She may look small, but she is a badger-shifter. No one would mess with her,” he replied.

“As long as we are not gone long. I don’t want my grandmother to be... afraid if she wakes up and I’m not there,” she said.

“We won’t be gone long,” he promised.

She nodded and stepped beside him when he turned and began walking. Glancing around the hallway, she noticed that while the rooms looked similar to her grandparents’, they were empty. They passed the nurses’ station. A young shifter with dark brown hair looked up and smiled at them before returning her attention to whatever she was working on.

“Do shifters not get sick?” she asked when they stopped outside the metal box that moved. “The rooms... they are all empty.”

Ben looked at her with a confused expression. She waved at the row of rooms behind them. His expression cleared and he grinned.

“Oh, that. Yes, shifters get hurt and sick just the same as humans. This is a military hospital. It’s run a little differently from the civilian ones. This floor has been cleared, so only your grandparents are here. It will be available should any of your clan require medical assistance.”

She thought about what he said. “Military? Like the men who tried to attack us? Tracy didn’t know what type of shifter could kill and carry away so many predators. Do you know?”

Ben cleared his throat. “Whoever those men were are not quite the same as the men and women here. They may have been ex-military. Until the DNA tests come back, I really can’t comment. As far as any shifters strong enough to lift another, unless the shifter was a small child or person being carried, I really can’t think of any capable of doing that.”

“Then what could?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Hopefully, there will be some additional evidence that will help us discover what happened. I’m just the doctor assigned to help your people. I’m not in the military myself.”

“Why did they bring you in? How do you know how to care for humans?”

The ping of the elevator distracted them. Ben stepped inside and waited for her. She didn’t like the box. It made her stomach feel funny when it went up and down. The flying bird had done the same thing.

She huffed out a breath, stepped forward, and turned. Ben pressed the button with a star on it and the doors closed. She clenched her fists and breathed through her nose when the box moved. Thankfully, it only took a few seconds before it reached the star floor and the doors opened.

She stepped out and looked around the lobby. There were more shifters here, even though it was in the middle of the night. She followed Ben, feeling out of place in her clothing compared to many of those walking around. She did like some of the clothing. The fabric had multiple colors that looked like the leaves and branches of the trees in the forest. If she wore something like what they had on during the summer, it would be difficult to see her.

Several shifters paused and did a double-take when they walked by her and Ben. She glared at them and they turned away. They entered a large room filled with tables. Most of the tables were empty. She noticed one shifter sitting in the corner with his head down on the table, obviously asleep. There were two other tables with shifters. Those shifters were quietly conversing, but fell silent when they noticed her.

“Ignore them. They’ll get bored soon enough,” Ben murmured.

“What are they?” she asked.

He looked back at the staff members on their break. “Mm, I’m not sure. If I had to guess, I’d say the one sleeping in the corner is a sloth. They can sleep just about anywhere. The two at the table over there to the right are a coyote and a water buffalo. The other two are a gazelle and a red panda.”

“Tracy said that one of the dead was a coyote shifter. They are mean?” she asked.

He frowned as he studied the shifter before he looked down at her. “Are all humans mean?”

She thought about what he said and shook her head. “No. Dennis was, but he is no longer with us.”

“What happened to him?”



She shrugged. “No one knows.”

“That isn’t good. Didn’t anyone from your clan try to find out what happened to him?” he asked.

“No. He was bad. He beat Janna. Why would we care what happened to him?” she said.

“Didn’t anyone try to stop him?” he asked in a shocked voice.

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She scowled at him. “Of course. The elders forbade him to talk to or approach any of the females in the village, especially Janna and her children. He disappeared shortly after that. We all slept better when he didn’t return. He was a bad person.”

“What would you like to eat?”

“Food,” she replied, not sure what he meant.

He chuckled and motioned for her to follow him. A plump shifter with curious eyes and a pleasant smile greeted them. Jayden’s mouth watered at all the food on display behind the transparent barrier. She had never seen so much food all in one place in her life.

“What is that?” she asked, pointing to a yellowish-orange food.

“That’s macaroni and cheese,” the woman replied.

“And that?” she asked, pointing to another dish.

The woman patiently explained each dish in the silver pans. Macaroni and cheese, green beans, turnip greens, potatoes, rice, fish, plant-based meatloaf... the list was overwhelming to choose from.

“I will take one of each,” she said. “And, that. I want to try your square yellow bread.”

“One super sampler coming up,” the woman replied with a wide grin. “Would you

like a super sampler of the desserts as well?”

“What is that?” she asked, looking up from the mouthwatering display.

“Cake, pie, cookies?—”

Jayden nodded. She tried not to show her excitement. This might be the only time she ever ate like this. If it was, she wanted to try everything.

Ben carried their laden trays to the table while she carried the dessert tray. Her mouth watered. She recognized some berries from the forest. The difference was they were mixed in a thick sauce and covered with a white fluff that looked like snow, but tasted better.

She licked the last of the white fluff off her finger off before she placed the tray on the table. Ben pulled out the chair for her and she sat down. Her lips parted to ask him a question when the words died on her lips.

Ben turned to see what she was staring at. His smile widened when he noticed the two men standing inside the doorway, scanning the room. She scowled and looked down at her plate of food when they started forward.

“Why are they here?” she grumbled, picking at the bread on her plate.

Ben gave her an amused look. “Probably to make sure you and your grandparents are safe.”

She grunted her disapproval at the idea and took a bite of her meal. An explosion of flavors burst in her mouth and she began devouring the food. She ignored, or at least tried to ignore, the two men who pulled out the chairs across from her and sat down.

“Van, Peterson. What brings you here?” Ben greeted.

“We were dropping off some more specimens that we collected for matching, and Tracy asked us to check in on Jayden and her grandparents while we were here,” Van said.

Jayden almost looked up when he said her name. She dropped her left hand to her lap and clenched her fist. Her name sounded more like a purr rolling off his tongue.

“Man, those look delicious,” Peterson said, reaching for the dessert tray.

Jayden reached out and slapped the back of his hand when he reached for a cookie. She glared at him when he looked back at her with an amused grin. She pulled the tray closer to her.

“You go talk to the lady. She will give you a sampler plate of your own,” she said.

Both men looked at the tray in front of her, the tray of desserts, then back at her with raised eyebrows. She wrapped her hand around the wooden butter knife, daring them to take any of her food again.

“Uh, I’ll go grab us some food,” Peterson said, pushing back his chair.

She glared at Peterson’s back until he disappeared into the next room where the food was being served. Her head whipped around when she saw a movement out of the corner of her eye. Van had snatched a cookie while she wasn’t looking. He grinned at her and took a bite.

“I’ll replace it once Peterson gets back. I’m starving,” he mumbled around a mouthful of the cookie.

“I want one with the brown dots,” she warned.

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“If Peterson doesn’t bring back a chocolate chip cookie, I’ll go get you more,” he promised.

“Okay.”

She bent her head and focused on her food. What was it about these two shifters that affected her so strongly? She didn’t react this way with the shifter doctor. She was acutely aware when Peterson returned. He placed a tray on the table and handed a plate of food to Van.

“Damn. I didn’t realize how hungry I was,” Peterson groaned as he began eating.

Jayden felt her face flush at his confession. She felt bad about slapping his hand now. The rule of her clan was never to deny another food if you had more than you could eat. She noticed he had no cookies.

“You did not get cookies?” she asked.

Peterson looked up from his plate and shook his head. “They were all out.”

She looked at the plate in front of her. There were three cookies on it. She swallowed. They looked very good, but guilt weighed heavily on her stomach.

“You may have one of my cookies. He already ate one. That will leave one for me and one for Doctor Ben,” she said.

“That’s okay. I have chocolate pie.”

She studied Peterson for a moment. He had blue eyes the color of the mountain lakes and auburn hair. His powerful, sculptured jaw was covered by a light, five o'clock shadow of matching auburn hair. He was built similar to Mitchell, probably six-one or two, lithe and muscular.

Her attention flickered to Van. He was the polar opposite with his black hair and dark brown eyes. He was about the same height as Peterson, but his shoulders were broader. Both men were staring at her as if she were the dessert and not the sweets on the small round plates.

Panic began to seep into her when she felt the familiar pull toward them. She pulled her eyes away to focus on Ben who was watching the three of them with a bemused expression on his face. She lifted her chin in defiance.

"You said you would tell me about my grandfather's health. He will be... alright?" she asked, her voice hesitating on the last word as her throat tightened in anticipation of bad news.

Ben smiled at her. "He'll be fine. His blood tests came back pretty good. His iron is a little low and his white-blood count is still a little high for my liking. I'm mostly concerned with his lungs, though the antibiotics have kicked in and are doing their job. He'll need plenty of rest. I've scheduled a respiratory therapist to come in tomorrow."

"How long will he be here?"

"I'd like to keep him for a couple more days just to make sure the antibiotics work. I don't want to take a chance on him having a relapse. The test results for your grandmother came in this afternoon. Elaina asked that I explain the results to you as she was concerned she wouldn't understand or remember everything. Her vitamin D is low. I'll prescribe a supplement to help boost it. I'll also start both of your

grandparents on a daily vitamin supplement once they are released. All the other tests came back looking good. The only one left to worry about is you. I'd like to run a few tests. A full workup on your blood, an MRI, CAT, and mammogram, and a routine exam," he added.

She scowled. "Why? I'm not sick."

Ben sighed and glanced at Van and Peterson. Both men quickly looked down at their plates when she looked in their directions. She rolled her eyes. She knew they were avidly listening.

"None of you've had any vaccinations or proper health care—ever. This would be a routine checkup. Think of it as preventive maintenance. At the very least, I'd just like to run some blood tests," Ben said.

"I cannot speak for the others, only myself. My answer is no."

She jumped when the table shook. Turning with a frown, she noticed that both Van and Peterson had a mutinous expression on their face. Van's fingers curled where he had slapped the table.

"Now wait just a damn minute. If Ben says you should be examined, then you should be examined," Van growled.

Peterson laid his hand on Van's arm, but kept his eyes focused on her. She didn't understand why they were so upset. It was none of their business what she did or didn't do with her body.

"What Van means is what could it hurt? Wouldn't you like to know that everything is okay? Hell, both of us go in for a routine exam once a year, don't we, Van? In the military, it is required. It's better to be safe than sorry. There's nothing to it, really.



They weigh you, take your blood pressure, take a little blood, and listen to your heart and lungs. Isn't that right, Ben?" Peterson said.

"Pretty much," Ben agreed.

She looked at the three men with a wry expression. "Pretty much, huh? I talked to my grandmother when she came back. I know what else you wish to do. My answer is the same—no."

"It isn't that bad! Why don't you ask Ella? Ben, you've seen Ella, haven't you?" Van asked.

"Yes—"

"I said no," she replied at the same time in a terse voice. Rising from her seat, she gathered her dessert tray. "I wish to return to my grandparents."

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All three men rose. Van opened and closed his mouth before he sighed and looked at Peterson with an expression of resignation. Peterson gave him a crooked smile and looked back at her.

“We’ll take you up,” Peterson offered.

She shook her head. “No, I would... I would like to talk to Doctor Ben... in private.”

Ben cleared his throat and nodded. “I’d be happy to escort you back upstairs. I’ll keep you two posted on what’s going on.”

Jayden gripped her tray and turned away. She could feel the eyes of Van and Peterson burning a hole through her back. She bit her lip and kept her eyes focused on the door.

“They only want to protect you,” Ben murmured.

With a mix of curiosity and apprehension, Jayden stole a glance over her shoulder, the feeling of being watched lingering in the air. Both men were sitting at the table, their eyes still glued on her. Van’s gesture made her blush, and Peterson’s charming smile only added to the complex feelings swirling inside her. Letting out a frustrated sigh, she averted her eyes.

“I don’t need their protection. I can take care of myself,” she retorted.

Port of Port Angeles

Cargo ship Nova Principia

\* \* \*

General Eric Singleton flipped through the report in front of him. Dozens of satellite images from Olympic National Park covering the past three months were spread out across his desk. The written reports held little useful information. The images were far more interesting.

He leaned forward and picked up two of the black and white images. The first was a line of individuals moving up the mountain along the ridge in a single line. There were at least twenty-five individuals that he could make out, possibly more.

These were the humans that Hyder Furman had told him about. He placed the satellite image down and studied the second photo. At first, he had disregarded it. The image had been taken outside of the zone and several days before the one he had just looked at.

Sitting back, he reached into the drawer of his desk and pulled out a round optical lens. He placed it over the satellite image, moving it slowly over each section as he studied the grainy details. He paused over the image of someone lying on the riverbank. There were four other distinctive figures standing over the person. Even without the outline of their weapons, he would recognize their stance as military. That wasn't what had sparked his curiosity. No, what had drawn his attention to this specific image was the shadow being cast behind them and the fact that he was seeing a reflection of the sky instead of the ground.

Frustration burned through him at not having a better image. He leaned back in his chair and stared out of the porthole. Tapping his fingers on his desk, he contemplated

his next move. His eyes flickered to the prone figure. Gathering the photos, he pushed back and stood.

Minutes later, he had descended into the bowels of the converted cargo ship. A water buffalo shifter and an ape shifter rose and stood at attention as he approached. He motioned with his hand for them to open the thick, steel door.

The ape shifter twirled the lock and pulled it open. Eric stepped through the opening and paused. The room smelled of piss and blood. The shifter on the bunk rolled over and blinked up at him with bloodshot eyes.

“Finally come to finish me off?” Hyder mumbled through cracked lips.

Eric studied Hyder as the shifter rolled into a sitting position with a pain-filled groan. It was obvious the man had mouthed off to his two guards. Thankfully, all they had done was beat the shit out of him. It would have been unfortunate for them if they had killed Hyder without his permission.

“Tell me more about the cougar shifter that disappeared,” he ordered.

Hyder frowned. “Lucien? Don’t know much about him except that he’s a mean son-of-a-bitch. Bishop brought him in.”

“That’s a shame. I guess you aren’t needed anymore,” he replied.

“Wait! Wait! I know he’s ex-military. He was following the Bearclaw woman and the two men that work with her... Redfoot, Peterson Redfoot, and Van Timberwolf. Isabella has something on Timberwolf’s younger brother. I assigned one man you sent to take out Lorne Timberwolf,” Hyder rapidly blurted.

Eric studied Hyder’s desperate expression. The hyena was telling him the truth. He

didn't inform Hyder that the man who went after Lorne Timberwolf was dead.

“What is Bishop's last name and where can I find him?” he demanded.

Hyder lifted a trembling hand to his bruised cheek. “Foxworthy. His name is Bishop Foxworthy. I don't have an address for him, just a number.”

Eric memorized the phone number when Hyder rattled it off.

“What does Isabella have on Timberwolf?” he asked.

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Hyder shrugged. “I don’t know. It must be pretty bad if he was willing to double-cross his own brother. Timberwolf gave us info on the security around the Bearclaws and a few details on where they are moving the humans.”

“What does Isabella want with humans?”

Hyder shrugged again. “She probably wants to breed them. She wanted a young male and female. Who the hell knows with that woman? She’s a crazy bitch. I know her brother wanted one, but for a different reason.”

“What reason?”

“Something about a legend and humans is all I know. You’d have to ask Theodore Badger or Isabella. I would imagine she would know what her brother wants with them,” Hyder replied.

“I guess I will,” he responded, turning back toward the door.

“Eric.”

He paused in the doorway and looked back at Hyder. Hyder was staring back at him with a desperate, pleading expression. Distaste filled him at the sight of the filthy, pathetic-looking shifter.

“Please. I can make this up to you. I’ll pay you back for all the equipment. I’ll come back and work for the company for as long as you want,” Hyder said.

The General studied Hyder's face before he turned away. Hyder continued pleading before his voice was cut off by the closing of the heavy steel door. Eric studied the photos in his hand before he looked at the two guards.

"Ensure that nobody discovers his body," he ordered before he headed back to his office.

First stage transfer camp: Olympic National Park

Two weeks later

\* \* \*

"Hey, Peterson, Van..." Tracy let them know Ty had called. "The permanent compound is finally ready enough that we can begin moving everyone out there by the end of the week," Tracy explained.

Peterson let out a long, deep sigh of relief. Each passing day of the past two weeks had been filled with nothing but torment. Because only a select few shifters were authorized to enter the compound, he and Van had been assigned to help with the twenty-four-hour security duty. That hadn't been the worst part of this assignment, though.

The torture stemmed from the constant sight of Jayden, a reminder of their unattainable connection. He and his wolf were literally going crazy. Whenever he tried to approach her, his attempts would be thwarted by interruptions or she would vanish before he could reach her.

"Security along the route is being tightened thanks to all the recent publicity. We don't want to take any chances after what happened up on the mountain. I can't believe the SBSI hasn't traced how those guys fell off the grid," Van said.

“I can’t believe that the bodies haven’t been found yet. It isn’t easy to make eight bodies just vanish,” Peterson added.

“More if you count the ones from the two empty helicopters that were found. The oil and gas company said they were stolen from a remote survey site in Canada. According to what Ty has found out, a couple of employees from the company confirmed the account. Auntie is pissed and threatening to boil the director of the SBSI in oil if he doesn’t come up with answers soon. All she keeps getting is that the situation is still under investigation and as soon as there is more information, it will be passed along. Until then, Nightsky is keeping things locked down because he doesn’t want anything leaking out. I can’t blame him for that, even if I can for a few other things. There’s something off about that guy. He gives me the creeps. By the way, thank you for the updated security plans. I’ve gone over them and shared them with Mitchell and the elders. We’ll take everyone out in two groups. The old and young will go first,” Tracy responded.

“The news crews are going nuts. Ever since it was revealed that humans weren’t extinct, every shifter around the world wants to see one,” he replied.

Tracy gave him a strained smile. “I know. Have you heard from your brother yet, Van?”

Van shook his head. “No. I don’t know what the hell he’s gotten himself into this time. I just hope he is alright. He’s gone off the grid before, but never after someone trashed his place and our offices.”

“I can’t believe there weren’t any prints. Whoever did it has to have connections with the shifters that were on the mountain,” she said.

Van pursed his lips and averted his eyes. Peterson rested his hand on Van’s shoulder. They both knew that Lorne had betrayed them. What they didn’t know was to whom



and why. That was an answer that they were still trying to figure out. There had been nothing on any of the computers, files, or papers that they could find.

“We’ll find him,” he murmured.

Van gave him a curt nod. “Have you made the changes we talked about to your place yet?”

Tracy nodded. “Yeah. Auntie ordered additional security. The place is a fortress. Hell, they almost shot an owl the other night that flew over the fence.”

“Was it a shifter?” Peterson asked with a frown.

Tracy rolled her eyes. “I’ve never heard of a shifter owl.”

“True.”

Tracy’s mate approached, and he turned to greet Mitchell with a warm smile. Mitchell’s furrowed brow and down-turned lips mirrored his deep concern. Peterson felt a deep sympathy for the human. Shifters hadn’t exactly been on their best behavior, and he knew Mitchell was worried about the move. They would be traveling a good distance to a new area, where the humans had never set foot before.

The near attack on the humans left them all feeling tense and on high alert. Considering what happened to Ella, he couldn’t fault the humans for their wariness. Thankfully, Ty and Tracy had their aunt’s unwavering support to rely on. Determined to weed out those responsible for the recent attacks on Tracy and Mitchell, Michaela convinced congress to loosen their tight purse strings.

Although he hadn’t visited the newly constructed settlement, he had familiarized himself with the blueprints. He almost felt sorry for any idiots who thought they could help themselves to a human. The presence of the military or full-time security at the compound ensured that unauthorized entry was virtually impossible. He suspected that Michaela wouldn’t hesitate about overseeing the consequences of any intruders who tried to slip through. She had done that once or twice, and it was the reason she became a fabulously successful president. She was extremely charming—until you riled the grizzly in her.

Once that happened, a shifter would be lucky to keep their head attached to the rest of their body, he mused.

“Tracy was telling us that the new compound is ready and that the transfers will start

at the end of the week,” he said.

Mitchell shot him a brief smile. “Yes. I’ve already informed the elders. They are spreading the word to the others.”

Tracy leaned back against Mitchell, feeling the warmth of his body as he wound his arm around her waist. Tilting her head back, she peered up at him with eyes filled with curiosity. Mitchell leaned down, his lips gently meeting hers in a tender kiss.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice soft with concern.

He shook his head. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

Tracy lifted an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. A grimace crossed Mitchell’s face as he shot a pointed glance over the two wolves’ shoulders. He was on the verge of asking if they needed some space when the air suddenly became filled with the clamor of angry voices.

Van’s body tensed up beside him. He followed Van’s gaze and saw what had caught his attention. Peterson drank in the sight of Jayden taking in every detail of their appearance. Whatever had upset her, she was fired up, her face was frozen into a mask of defiance that reminded him of the beautiful sculptures he had seen in the museums.

“She’s beautiful,” he breathed.

Mitchell’s gaze followed theirs, and he grimaced again. “Jayden? She’s a pain in my ass.”

Van’s brows furrowed in a frown, while Tracy let out a deep, weary sigh. Rand’s face contorted with anger as he vigorously waved his hands at Jayden. Beside him, tears

streamed down Jayden's mother's cheeks, her low sobs punctuating Rand's fury with his daughter. Despite her father's continuous shouting, Jayden maintained her composure and refrained from interrupting.

"I forbade it. Do you hear me? I forbade such talk," Rand snapped.

"Jayden, it would be madness. If you think about what you are saying," Mallory interjected.

"Mitchell, talk to her. Tell her she can't do this," Rand pleaded, turning in their direction.

Mitchell breathed out and released his hold on Tracy. Peterson shot Van a scowl and nodded toward Jayden. They silently followed behind Mitchell and Tracy.

"Rand. Mallory. We've already gone over this," Mitchell explained in a calm voice.

Rand vigorously shook his head while Mallory leaned into her husband and sobbed. Peterson didn't miss the way Jayden cast Van and him a panicked look, trying to step away as they came closer.

"What's the matter?" Van asked.

Rand glared at Jayden. She wasn't looking at her parents. Her wary eyes were locked on the two approaching wolf shifters. She retreated another step when he smiled at her.

You frightening her.

Shut up!

He didn't need his wolf telling him what he already knew. She had been like this ever since they had ridden back from the hospital. Her avoidance was getting old. She was like a skittish kitten or puppy, distrustful of any act of kindness. He forced his shoulders to relax and shoved his hands into his pockets to appear less threatening. She still backed away another step.

"Jayden refuses to go to the compound," Mitchell replied.

"I thought everything was settled. The compound is a thousand times better than this place," Van exclaimed with surprise.

"It will be safer. Mitchell has told us about it," Rand agreed.

Jayden lifted her chin and gave both Peterson and Van a haughty expression. "It was never settled. I told both of you that I didn't want to live in a cage. Do you expect me to believe that this new place is any better than here?"

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“What’s wrong with here? We have everything we need,” her mother defended.

Jayden shook her head. “We aren’t free. You see the fence. They keep us locked up here.”

He huffed out a breath. “This is only temporary. The new place is wide open with enough land so you won’t feel confined.”

Jayden shook her head. “My decision has been made. There will be no more discussion about it.” Her expression softened when she looked back at her parents. “I hope you find peace. You know I love you both, but I can’t go. I don’t want to.”

“Jayden, please. We need you,” Mallory pleaded in a trembling voice.

Jayden glanced at Peterson and Van. There was an expression in her eyes that perplexed him. He barely glimpsed it before she lowered her eyelids and averted her eyes. He started forward, only to stop when Van gripped his arm and shook his head.

“I love you both,” she murmured, touching her mother’s damp cheek before she turned and walked away.

Peterson watched in silence as Jayden walked away from them—again. He took a step forward only to stop when Van squeezed his arm before he released him. Rand wrapped his arm around Mallory’s waist, murmuring reassuring words that Jayden would change her mind as he led her away.

Mitchell sighed. “Jayden is determined to resist all help—” He stopped short and

looked down at Tracy.

“You can say it. She doesn’t trust the Others,” Tracy commented in a dry voice.

Mitchell shook his head. “It’s more than that. She blames herself for what is happening.”

“Blaming herself for what?” Van demanded.

Mitchell looked around the compound. “All of this. She blames herself for Ella being found. For our clan being discovered.”

“Oh, Mitchell. She has no idea how happy that has made so many people,” Tracy murmured, staring after Jayden.

“She doesn’t see it as that. She sees us as being uprooted from our way of life and cast into the unknown,” Mitchell replied. “I’ve tried to talk to her about it, but she refuses.”

“Why would she think that she is to blame?” he asked.

“It was Jayden who insisted on going past the boundaries we had set. She was the one who broke into the shifter’s shed. Ella was with her when they fell into the trap. She believes if she hadn’t gone, that shifters would still believe we were extinct,” Mitchell explained.

“So, she is going to punish herself for the rest of her life? What the hell is she going to do once everyone is gone? Stay here by herself? Every dick of a shifter will be hunting for her if they find out she is alone out here,” he retorted.

“That is exactly what she plans to do. It is her choice,” Mitchell replied.

“Well, it is the wrong choice,” he snapped in response.

“Come on, Peterson,” Van muttered, pulling on his arm.

“She was so damn close! We could grab her and take her back to our place before she knew what happened.”

“And what do you think she would do the second we took our eyes off her?” Van asked in a quiet voice.

Peterson pursed his lips when he realized he had spoken his thoughts aloud. Van stopped and waited for Peterson to look at him. He reluctantly pulled his gaze away from Jayden.

“You know she can’t stay here alone. Hell, I don’t think I could survive in the forest alone and I’m a Goddamn wolf shifter!” he muttered.

Van chuckled. “Yeah, I know I couldn’t. Shitting in the woods isn’t much fun.”

“I hate raw food,” Peterson grumbled.

Van slapped his shoulder. “You and me both, brother. I guess now isn’t the time to mention to her that we bought a ranch that borders the new compound so she could be close to her family.”

He chuckled. “Probably not. So... what are we going to do?” he asked.

Van looked in the direction Jayden had disappeared. “We corner her and ask her why she feels the way she does, convince her that what happened was a frigging miracle, and charm the shit out of her.”



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His lips curved into a slow smile, revealing a hint of mischief. That was something he was capable of. It was said that wolf shifters possessed an innate charm that made it impossible to resist their magnetic personalities. They would put her at ease, ask questions to uncover her fears, and then soothe her worries with their charm. It was time to stop being patient and go on the offensive.

She won't stand a chance.

The first thing Jayden noticed was the sudden quiet. LaTrisha, Hope, Connell, and Jace had been chatting about what their new homes would look like before they all fell silent. She stiffened when Hope whispered a warning under her breath to Connell.

Her back was to the group, but she still picked up on the faint footsteps. She had been training herself for years to open all her senses. The hair on the back of her neck rose, as if aware that predators were close.

Too close.

She stood, gripping the lance she always carried in her right hand while holding her backpack in her left. In a situation of fight or flight, she could sacrifice her bag. The one thing she would never give up without a fight were her weapons... and she had plenty of those hidden on her body.

She swallowed nervously and turned around, her heart pounding in her chest. Suddenly, a peculiar warmth washed over her, slowly radiating from her toes to her head. She tightly controlled her facial expression, molding it into a neutral mask. At least, she hoped it was. She noticed a subtle change in the men's expressions when

their nostrils flared and wondered if they could sense her nervousness.

“Jayden,” Van greeted.

She remained silent, her lips sealed shut. She had been trying to avoid this moment, but now it had arrived, and there was no escaping it. She breathed through her mouth.

“What the hell are you thinking? Or should we say not thinking?” Peterson growled.

She wasn’t having this conversation with them. They had no right to pry into her actions, or lack thereof. Resentment flared inside her, a searing heat that threatened to consume her, and she started to turn away.

Gentle but firm, strong fingers snapped out and firmly grasped her arm. Her response was immediate and impulsive, with no thought. Her bag fell to the ground as she swiftly pivoted in the opposite direction. Peterson’s head snapped back when she pressed the tip of her sharp lance under his chin.

“You do not have permission to touch me—ever!” she hissed in a low voice.

Peterson slowly pulled his fingers back, releasing her arm. Jayden pressed the tip a little harder, enough to break the skin under his chin. A tiny droplet of blood oozed from the spot.

So, they do bleed.

The thought didn’t give her any satisfaction. She leaned down and picked up her bag, feeling the weight of it in her hand as she kept a vigilant eye on Peterson and Van.

“Before you kill Peterson for being an ass, please understand he is only saying that because he—we—care about what happens to you,” Van explained in a calm,

soothing tone.

Jayden flashed Van a heated glare. “Save it for someone who cares. I’ll tell you this once, and one time only. Stay the hell away from me.”

She pulled her lance away and backed up several feet before she turned and strode away. Her heart was pounding and her hands were trembling, but she refused to look back. Deep down, she hoped they believed her bravado.

“Hey, just so you know he wasn’t lying! We do care about you,” Peterson called.

Jayden shook her head and kept walking. Her lips twitched with reluctant amusement at the pouting, defensive tone in his voice. She didn’t know who she surprised more with her little antic, herself or them! One thing that had surprised her was the amusement in Van’s eyes and the strange gleam in Peterson’s that looked almost like—pride.

“Crazy wolf shifters,” she muttered.

## Chapter 6

Lucien Katmoore sat on the bunk in his cell and stared at the door. He rolled his shoulders and straightened his leg, wincing at the twinge of pain. The wound had healed better than his pride. The familiar sound of boots against the polished stone made him smile.

He sat up and waited as the guard outside his cell unlocked the door and opened it. He rose from the bunk, grimacing when the chain around his ankle clunked against the floor. He stared at his captor with a raised eyebrow.

“Have you been demoted, General?” he asked.

Commander Chawni Reed walked over to the table and placed the tray on it before she motioned for him to sit on the narrow bench bolted to the floor. Irritation flared inside Lucien, and a low growl rumbled from him before he could smother it. His irritation grew when she shot him an amused look.

“Calm your cat, Lucien,” she ordered.

His lip pulled back into a slight, mocking sneer. “Let me loose and I will.”

She tsked, stepped around the table, and slid onto the second narrow bench. She sat straight, with her hands folded together, and waited, watching him with stunning dark brown eyes that seemed to notice everything. He knew she would continue studying him until he complied with her command. Resentment built inside him at her control over him.

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He walked over to the table and sat down. His stomach growled when he caught the aroma of his dinner. He unfolded the flimsy spork they gave him from the paper napkin and began eating. He was about a third of the way through his meal before Chawni spoke.

“Are you ready to cooperate?” she asked.

He glanced up from his meal, shrugged, and looked back down. It was the same question she had asked since he had awoken in this hellhole. He had no idea where he was or who his captors were, only that the Commander had asked him the same questions over and over. Some questions he could answer and refused to do so. As for the others, he had no clue what in the hell they were talking about, so he had no answers.

“Will you release me if I do?” he asked.

“No.”

He lowered his utensil and stared at her. She spoke the truth. He could hear it in her voice. A shiver of apprehension ran through him. He looked around the ten-by-ten-foot cell before he stared back at her.

“You might as well kill me now if you think you can keep me in this cage,” he snarled, partially rising from his seat.

She lifted her hand when a guard started to step into the cell. The guard shot him a warning glare but stepped back. He started when she laid her hand over the back of

his.

“Lucien, who sent you to find the humans? Do they have any?” she asked.

“Release me and I’ll tell you what I know,” he countered.

She pulled her hand back, stood, and shook her head. “Perhaps we can have this conversation again tomorrow.”

Lucien rose and tried to follow her. He growled in frustration when the chain caught on the table and jerked him to a stop. She stepped out of the cell and closed the door behind her. He glared at her through the thick bars.

“I meant what I said. You might as well kill me, human,” he snarled.

Chawni gave him a steely-eyed stare. “Be careful what you wish for, Lucien Katmoore. It may come true if you are no longer of any use.”

He watched as she walked down the dim corridor. His fingers curled around the wooden spork in his hand and it snapped in half under the pressure. In frustration, he threw the broken pieces at the cell door and watched as they slid through the bars.

His eyes glittered with determination before he released a low chuckle. The human was playing with fire and didn’t realize it. He was a master at escaping. Time and patience would work to his advantage. If she wanted to play games, he would play—but by his rules, not hers.

“One day, my little human soldier, you’ll make a mistake and when you do, I’ll be ready,” he vowed.

It wasn’t until he sat down that he realized that Chawni must have expected his

reaction. Lying on the table was another set of utensils. He pulled it over, unwrapped the spork, and finished eating.

One day soon, my beautiful, intriguing human.

Nightsky estate:

\* \* \*

“Come in, my boy. Come in. What did you discover?”

The quiver in Thaddeus’s voice came not from age but from excitement. Talon Nightsky chuckled when his grandfather patted the space next to him on the bed. He walked across the bedroom to the enormous canopy bed where his grandfather lay against silky, navy-blue sheets. The old shifter’s brilliant white hair stood out against the dark fabric.

“What did Sofia tell you?” he asked, sitting beside his grandfather.

“That you took out some bad shifters who were after the humans,” Thaddeus said.

He waited as his grandfather scooted and sat up against his pillows. Talon was glad to see the healthy color in his grandfather’s face. He had been on his way to bed when he noticed the light still on under his grandfather’s door. Now, he wished he had continued to his bedroom. It would take ages for Thaddeus to calm down and sleep. Robert and Olive weren’t going to be happy with him when they found out.

“Yes. They were ex-military, well-funded, and trained. I need to find out who they were working for,” he replied.

“Do you think it was someone other than the Wyland witch? She’s got the money to

afford to hire a bunch of mercenaries. There's more, though, isn't there? You found something else."

He sighed. He should have known his grandfather would sense something was off. The old shifter's mind was still as sharp as ever even if his body was slowly succumbing to the effects of time.

"Yes, Isabella Wyland has the funds. One man escaped. We expected him to head for the helicopters, but he eluded us," he said.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Thaddeus waved his hand. “Sofia said as much. You’ll find him and take him out. Best to let him lead you back to Isabella. That way, you can kill two bad shifters at once. But, there’s something else bothering you. Tell me, Talon. Perhaps I can help.”

Talon could feel his grandfather staring at him with a shrewd expression. He rose from the bed and walked over to the window to stare out. The moon cast a glow across the vast lawn. Unease rose inside him when the sense of being watched flickered through him. He reached out and closed the heavy fabric drapes.

“Talon?”

He turned and studied his grandfather’s time-worn face. The animated excitement had changed to concern. He shoved his hands in his front pockets, carefully weighing what he was about to say. He finally decided to refrain from mentioning his suspicions until he had proof.

“It’s nothing to concern yourself about. Once we know who the men were working for, it will give us a better idea of what we are up against,” he said.

“The humans—?” Thaddeus asked.

Talon smiled. “Are safe for now. Michaela has ordered additional security and asked the SBSI to oversee it. We’ve collected samples from the mercenaries and are running their DNA through the database. It’s only a matter of time before we find a thread that leads back to the source.”

Thaddeus nodded and yawned. “You won’t stop searching, will you? For more

humans. You'll keep looking, won't you, my boy?"

"Yes. We'll continue searching."

Thaddeus sighed and slid down under the covers. "The Guardians live, Talon. I told you we would. Mark my words, King Or'Ang's kingdom is out there somewhere, too. The humans will know. They will help you find it. They will help you find it."

Thaddeus's voice was barely audible by the end of his declaration. He had misjudged just how exhausting all the excitement had been for the old shifter. He gently lifted the covers and tucked them around his grandfather before he turned off the bedside lamp.

"If there are more humans, if they know where King Or'Ang's kingdom is, we'll find it. I promise," he murmured, resting his hand over his grandfather's wrinkled one for a moment before he quietly exited the bedroom.

He stood outside the closed door for a moment and breathed deep, calming breaths. He hadn't spoken to the others about what he thought he had seen in the forest. A part of him hoped one of them would have mentioned seeing or experiencing something unusual, but no one had.

Was it just my imagination?

The image of eerie, ghostly shadows flitting through the forest canopy played in his mind. None of the other Guardians had said anything. If they had witnessed something, he was certain they wouldn't have kept quiet about it.

Had it been nothing more than a play of the light on the snow?

He pushed away from the door and walked across to his suite of rooms. Entering his

bedroom, he closed and locked the door. He undressed, placed his dirty clothes in the hamper, and stepped into the shower. Under the soothing warmth of the massaging jets, he closed his eyes and focused on remembering the details of their earlier mission.

The air had been cold and still. Light, fluffy flakes still occasionally fell as he soared on silent wings above the canopy of the forest. The group had divided into four teams. He had taken out the two shifters nearest the cave while Sofia and Juliette focused on the men in the helicopters. Mateo and Miles were to neutralize the second team while Xavier and Danielle had taken care of the last group of mercenaries.

He braced his arms against the side of the shower as he remembered how he had veered off from the group. His focus had been on the two shifters moving up the narrow ridge when a slight movement below him caught his attention. He had almost missed the figure covered in white fur. She was swiftly moving across the fresh snow, appearing and disappearing from view among the thick branches.

He remembered looking back toward the two shifters. They were a few hundred yards from the entrance. He had been torn between ensuring the safety of all the humans, and that of the woman. He assumed the petite figure was a human woman from her size, the way she dressed, and the primitive weapon she was carrying.

The decision was made for him when he saw a lone figure dressed in white, military camo following her. The human would be trapped between the merc behind her and the two in front. It was imperative to the mission that he prevented the two mercs closest to the humans from taking them as hostage. The collateral damage would have been horrific if he hadn't stopped the men, especially once they knew they were compromised.

He had circled back around, weaving between the branches. He was less than three hundred feet from the shifter when the merc had disappeared. It had been as if the

ground had opened up and swallowed him. He had flown over the spot, but the snow was pristine, as if no one had been there. The only evidence that he wasn't hallucinating was the line of footprints leading to the spot where the shifter had disappeared.

When he looked up again, he swore he saw ghostly shadows moving through the woods. They had been moving in the opposite direction of the cave. Worried about the other two mercenaries, he had resumed his mission, intending to return to the spot to investigate once he had eliminated the urgent threat to the humans.

He clenched his fist and banged it against the shower wall. There had been no time. At least, not to do it safely without fear of discovery. He barely had time to eliminate and dispose of the two mercenaries before the human had appeared. Shortly after, she and Tracy Bearclaw had ventured out of the cave.

He had followed them, watching over them as they discovered the evidence left in the snow of their would-be attackers. He had sensed they were being watched. Hell, they weren't the only ones. There had been someone or something else in those woods—something not natural.

“But what? Ghosts? I don't believe in ghosts. More mercenaries? Then why didn't they help the others?”

He ruled out more humans. It was inconceivable that they could have vanished without a trace. At least not under the watchful and intense scrutiny of himself and the other Guardians. That still didn't answer what had taken the one mercenary, leaving behind an eerie silence in the air.

He ran his hands over his wet hair and face, feeling the droplets slide down his skin. He finished drying off and changed into a pair of loose-fitting pajama pants before leaving the bathroom. As he entered his bedroom, he didn't bother to switch on a

light, preferring to rely on the faint glow of the moon spilling through the window. He was drawn to the arched frame, haunted by the memory of being watched when he had been in his grandfather's bedroom. He cautiously pulled the sheer curtain aside, revealing the view of the dark, meticulously maintained lawn and gardens.

“Is there another threat that we aren't aware of? Someone other than Isabelle Wyland?”

His murmurs filled the room, leaving behind a ghostly echo of his innermost thoughts. The thought of another threat, one that he couldn't identify, filled him with worry. He had a strong aversion for loose ends, always seeking closure and resolution. His agenda for tomorrow included a thorough examination of the reports and a meticulous analysis of the satellite images. He would find out if he was seeing things or if ghosts were more than just legends.

Military Hospital: Seattle, Washington

\* \* \*

Three days later, Jayden swallowed as she, her grandmother, and her grandfather were guided back to the roof of the hospital. It was strange to see the world at night from so high up. Lights dotted the horizon for as far as she could see. They didn't flicker as would a flame, but remained steady.

"We came in that?" her grandfather asked in an awed voice.

"Yes. It flew above the trees like a bird," her grandmother replied.

"Incredible," her grandfather breathed.

"Yes, love. It is."

Jayden knew her grandmother was talking about more than their flight to this place. She was talking about how quickly her grandfather had healed from what would have been certain death if the shifters had not cared for him. She clutched her grandmother's bag to her chest, waiting as Ben talked to Van and Peterson who had disembarked from the helicopter.

It had been three days since she had last laid eyes on either man. In reality, it was far from the truth. Every time she had a moment of quiet, she couldn't help but see them, in her dreams. Her emotional state swung back and forth, shifting from frustration and irritation to a burning, pent-up sexual frustration. Everything about the last was

connected to her vivid dreams.

“Cyrus, Van and Peterson are going to escort all of you to the new complex that has been built. For security and to be less draining for you, they are going to fly you in. Are you okay with that?” Ben asked.

“Yes. It will be interesting to fly like a bird,” Cyrus replied with barely controlled excitement.

Jayden tried not to react to her grandfather’s excitement, but it was impossible. Seeing him feeling better was a relief. Her grandmother gave a nervous laugh and looked at the helicopter with a touch of apprehension.

“If humans were meant to fly—” Elaina murmured before shaking her head.

Jayden rubbed her grandmother’s shoulder. “At least we don’t have to ride in the basket. I found that scarier than flying.”

Her grandmother nodded and followed Ben as he pushed her grandfather’s wheelchair towards the flying machine. She swallowed and stiffened her shoulders. She was steeling herself, not for the ride, but for being around Van and Peterson again. Every time she thought she had control of her wayward emotions, the two men would appear and send them spiraling like a whirlpool in an endless pit that threatened to drag her to a place she wasn’t prepared to go.

She forced her eyes to remain focused on the back of her grandfather’s head. Breathing deeply, she waited as the two men helped her grandfather, then her grandmother into the flying machine. Ben spoke to her grandparents after they were seated. She wouldn’t look at Van... or Peterson. Her vow to remain aloof lasted all of thirty seconds.

“It’s good to see you again,” Peterson said.

She frowned. “Why?”

Van snorted a laugh. “Maybe because we missed your charming personality.”

She lifted a skeptical eyebrow and stared back at him. “I’m not trying to be charming.”

“Yeah, we got the memo,” Peterson muttered.

“You two are very strange,” she retorted.

She climbed into the flying machine, mumbling she didn’t need any help when she saw both men reach out to give her a hand. She took the center seat facing her grandparents. It wasn’t until she had settled in her seat that she realized her mistake. Van squeezed in front of her to sit on her right while Peterson took the seat to her left. The move conveniently boxed her between them.

“Just the way we like it,” Peterson teased.

“In your dreams,” she retorted.

She muttered a curse under her breath when both men chuckled. It didn’t help that the vision had been played more than once in her own mind of just such a scenario. The only saving grace was that her grandparents were oblivious to what was going on. Her grandfather was touching the headphone the pilot had given him. She grabbed the headphones the pilot held out and pulled it on over her ears.

“What does this do?”



She winced again when her grandfather's voice boomed loudly in her ears. Her grandfather chuckled when her grandmother chided him and told him to be quiet. A gentle smile curved her lips when her grandfather pulled the headphones off, looked at them, before he placed them over his ears again.

He had always loved discovering new things and tinkering with ways to make their life easier. He was the one who had come up with the counter-balance system to act as an elevator when he was younger than she now was. Her grandmother and father often shared tales of his inventions.

She curled her fingers into fists when the flying machine lifted off. Her stomach fell as if it was floating at the sudden feeling of weightlessness. Below them, the building grew smaller.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

“This is amazing,” her grandfather breathed in her ear.

“Below you can see Seattle. Beyond that is the Pacific Ocean,” Van explained.

She listened as Van and Peterson took turns pointing out different landmarks to them. Her breath caught at the vast network of roads and buildings. A part of her was curious about all the development and how it worked while another part of her yearned for the serenity of the forests.

Her grandfather asked a hundred questions and both men patiently answered each one. She appreciated that they didn't seem to think the questions were too stupid or naïve. She swallowed when Peterson reached over, cupped her clenched fist, and threaded his fingers through hers. Any thought of pulling free evaporated when the helicopter bounced a little. Her grandmother's startled squeal caused her grandfather to chuckle and he cupped her hand in his.

“A little excitement is good for the soul,” he said.

She blinked with surprise when her grandfather winked at her and looked down at her hands. It was only then that she realized that she was clutching not only Peterson's hand in a death grip but also Van's. She blushed and tried to pull her hands free, but neither man would loosen his grasp.

“The complex is coming along nicely. The other members of your clan are settling in,” Van said.

“What will happen next?” Cyrus asked.

“Once the permanent compound is completed, we’ll move everyone there. It will have all the modern conveniences without all the traffic,” Peterson said.

“What do you mean by ‘modern’ conveniences?” Elaina asked.

“Homes, schools, hospital, markets, along with plenty of room for you to expand. The area is near the Canadian Shifters of North America border. It’s a mixture of forest, mountains, and prairie land. Centuries ago, it was designated a wildlife refuge. Except for some scientists studying the fauna and flora and ranger training, it has been left to exist as it has been for thousands of years,” Van said.

“Where is this place? Is it far from our home?” she asked.

Van gently brushed his thumb along the back of her hand. “It’s a few hundred miles to the east. Tracy and her father recommended it. I guess there is a historical human site near where they are building the permanent village.”

“It also doesn’t hurt that there is a military base close by so the area is off-limits,” Peterson added.

Fear threatened to choke her. She studied her grandparents’ expressions. They were busy staring out of the windows of the flying machine. The first complex would be close to their home, but the other one?—

She tugged her hands free and clasped them together. As she processed what the two men had shared, her mind became a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. The realization that she may never lay eyes on her family again if she didn’t go with her clan hit her hard. Ella would be close if she were to stay here, yet somehow still untouchable. Every aspect of her life would be in the hands of the shifters as she found herself thrust into an unfamiliar territory, surrounded by these ‘modern’ buildings.

This would be nothing but an elaborate cage camouflaged with fancy bars.

As she imagined what her life would become, a wave of nausea washed over her, leaving a bitter taste in her mouth. The thought of losing her autonomy haunted her as she contemplated being at the mercy of their shifter overlords' every whim. Mitchell had made a mistake in agreeing to this.

No. Not Mitchell. I made the first mistake.

Her conscience weighed heavily on her, and she instinctively squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the overwhelming guilt. She bore the weight of this responsibility on her shoulders alone. Ella and Mitchell were not the ones who should be held responsible for what had happened. Regretfully, no amount of wishing to reverse time or alter her past could prevent the haunting consequences of her reckless behavior from resurfacing.

"There's the temporary compound," Peterson announced.

Jayden opened her eyes and peered down at her clan's temporary home. Through the front glass of the flying machine, she could see the familiar landmarks that helped her orient the location. It was south of the mountains and forests they had called home for as long as she could remember.

Nestled to the northwest of the compound, a sprawling lake provided a picturesque backdrop, its shimmering waters mirroring the clear blue sky. From this vantage point, she could see the intricate web of rivers that flowed into it. The compound loomed before them, many times larger than their humble village, enclosed by a towering fence. Inside the compound, the center was devoid of any buildings.

Her eyes were immediately drawn to the distant roofs of nearly three dozen buildings, standing out against the tree line. The structures varied in material, with some

constructed from wooden slats and others appearing to be made of cloth. Inside the compound, a diverse range of shifter vehicles occupied the space.

When the flying machine changed directions, she twisted her body to keep seeing the view of the landscape below. The only way to reach the compound was via a solitary road. It stretched for miles, hugging the edge of the lake and offering a continuous display of picturesque scenery. In the distance, she could see additional shifter buildings, their silhouettes barely visible against the horizon. The additional barrier of thick forests added a false sense of isolation.

Her eyes were drawn back to the majestic snowcapped mountain in the distance. They were so far from it that it was likely a hundred miles or more away. It was challenging to measure the distance. She could almost taste the crisp mountain air and hear the gentle rustling of leaves in the forest.

“Welcome to your temporary home,” Van murmured.

In that moment, their gazes locked, and time seemed to stand still. The longing she was feeling grew, aching deep within her, but this time it was for something she couldn’t quite put into words. When she looked into his dark brown eyes, it felt as if she was being pulled into an endless abyss.

The sensation of tiny silver threads reaching out to wrap around her caused her lips to part in surprise. As she blinked, the threads vanished, leaving her feeling disoriented and unsure of her surroundings. She turned her head in surprise when Peterson unexpectedly slid his hand into hers.

The sensation of drowning engulfed her once more, but now it was in the captivating embrace of a crystal-clear, blue lagoon. Her heart quickened its pace, her chest heaving as she struggled to steady her breathing. The allure of the two men was like a bewitching charm, awakening a fervent longing within her young body.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Her senses snapped back to reality when she felt the gentle thump of the skids when they touched the compact ground. With a quick tug, she released her hand and looked away. She glanced over at her grandparents. Her grandfather's eyes lit up with excitement as he bombarded Van and Peterson with questions. When she noticed the speculative expression in her grandmother's eyes, a flush of embarrassment crept up her cheeks.

"I will see you settled," she said.

The corners of her grandmother's mouth turned up into a comforting smile. "Thank you for being here," she said.

She bowed her head in acknowledgement. She had a sinking feeling deep down, knowing that the most challenging part was yet to come. She waited as Van opened the door and exited the flying machine. After assisting her grandfather and grandmother, he extended his hand towards her. She hesitated before placing her hand in his.

One last time can't hurt, then I will avoid them until I leave.

### Chapter 7

First stage transfer camp: Olympic National Park

A month later

\* \* \*

Jayden stood in the shadows. Her body felt stiff and unnatural, as if her soul had been ripped from her physical form. She listened to the drone of voices. Some were as familiar to her as her own. Her mother and father, were chatting with several shifters. Her focus turned to Mitchell. Who she had always looked up to and believed in—until today.

Today it felt that the world was dissolving around her. It was the day she had thought she would be prepared for—the day the world ended.

No... not the world. Just me. It's going to be the end for me.

She had argued and fought for the past month against moving the clan, but she had been overruled... again. The realization made her nauseated. She breathed deeply through her nose and gripped the spear in her hand until her knuckles turned white from the pressure and her fingers grew as numb as the rest of her body. Rage fought with disbelief.

How could Mitchell support moving the rest of their clan to this faraway place? He didn't even stay with them here! He traveled with Tracy.

Why had her parents and the other elders been so accepting of all of this? If they stayed here, they would at least be close to the mountains and forest that they knew.

I would be close to them, she thought as grief filled her.

How could they forget what the shifters had done to humans? Even in the past month, they had been forced to stay within the confines of the compound. Regardless of what Mitchell and the others said, they were caged like animals.

The overwhelming need to run, to be free from the wired fence, from the curious eyes burned through her until she thought she would scream. She felt like she was slowly

suffocating.

“Jayden.”

She stiffened at the soft voice calling her name. It was one she hadn't heard in over eight months. She tightened her jaw, refusing to show her conflicted emotions to the one person who knew her better than anyone else. Turning slowly, she faced the one person she had been purposely avoiding.

“Ella.”

When she spoke, her voice carried a cool, curt edge. A pained expression flickered across Ella's face, and she winced at the sharp tone in Jayden's voice. Ella's hand gravitated towards her extended stomach, a silent testament to the life growing inside her, and Jayden couldn't help but be aware of it. Her stomach churned with a sour, burning acid sensation.

“Please... don't be mad,” Ella quietly pleaded.

As Ella advanced closer, Jayden instinctively took a step back, maintaining the distance between them. In warning, she shook her head vigorously. In that moment, she could feel her emotions teetering on the edge of control, unsure if she could rein them in completely. She couldn't bear the idea of causing harm to Ella, or to the innocent creature growing inside her. While she knew she would never hurt Ella physically, she knew that sometimes words could cut sharper than any blade.

“You should return to the... group,” she replied.

Ella's eyes followed the movement of her hand when she waved toward the large group of people sitting around the fire. Ty Bearclaw was watching Ella with an intense, protective scrutiny.



“I wanted to say hi... to talk to you,” Ella said.

She could feel her head shaking. “There’s nothing to talk about,” she stated through clenched teeth. “You made your choice.”

Ella winced at her blunt tone. “It doesn’t have to be a choice. You know that. Things are already better. Look at your grandfather. He would have died if not for Ben. If Mitchell and the elders didn’t accept what Ty, Tracy, and Michaela were offering, there won’t be anyone left. Those other shifters would have wiped everyone out.”

“What’s the difference? At least, that would have been quicker,” she retorted.

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Jayden knew she was being unreasonable. It wasn't Ella's fault and she shouldn't take it out on her friend, but she felt out of control and just wanted to be left alone. The problem with being stuck in the compound was there was no place to disappear.

She knew part of the reason she was feeling on edge was because of the two men standing in the shadows on the other side of the firepit. The last month had been a wild dance of avoidance. From the time she woke until she retreated to the cabin that she shared with her parents, she felt that she was walking along the edge of a crumbling cliff.

It was impossible to ignore the challenge in the two men's eyes whenever they came within spitting distance anywhere inside the compound. That was another reason she wanted to escape. It was getting harder and harder not to throw herself into their paths.

"You don't mean that," Ella chided.

Jayden averted her eyes. She hadn't missed the healthy flush or the love shining in Ella's eyes when she looked at her shifter. Everything about her friend screamed that she was happy—including the very obvious roundness of her stomach. She looked back at the group, desperate to turn the topic to something else.

"Is that the leader of the shifters?" she asked.

Ella partially turned and nodded. "Yes, that's Michaela. She's really very nice. She is the President of the United Species of North America and Ty's aunt. She is a powerful person," Ella explained.

“She looks pretty pleased with herself. I guess she got what the Others always wanted, a cage full of humans,” Jayden muttered, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“It has been a lot of work convincing the other shifters to create a home for us. There were some who—well, not everyone feels the same,” Ella acknowledged before she looked down at her clasped hands. “Ty and his family are doing everything they can to make it easier for us.”

Jayden shook her head. “What power does he have over you? What power does Tracy have over Mitchell that he would turn his back and agree to this? How can I?—?”

She bit off her last desperate question. She didn’t want Ella—or anyone else—to know that she felt a strange attraction to the two wolf-shifters. She knew she was acting crazy. There was a small part of her that wanted to push Ella—and everyone else—away. If they hated her, it would be easier to be alone.

That realization hit her hard, and her gaze flickered over Ella’s shoulder to the men. They were still staring in the two women’s direction. Panic coursed through her.

Can they smell my desire? Do they know that I want them?

The thought sent a wave of dismay through her even as a shiver of awareness ran down her spine. The choking feeling of being hunted swept through her. What horrified her the most was the sense of excitement at what it would be like to be caught and held by the men.

“Love.”

She blinked, frowning at Ella. “What?”

“You asked what power Ty has over me. It’s love. I love him so much and I know he loves me just as much in return,” Ella said.

Jayden studied Ella’s expression. Her friend believed what she was saying. Was it possible to love a shifter and not just desire them? She looked over at Mitchell. He was talking to Michaela. Tracy was sitting next to him and they were holding hands.

Mitchell smiled at the woman and nodded. A chorus of agreement rose among the two dozen human members of her clan. They had voted—again. They would allow the shifters to take them away to the place far from here.

The piercing pain of betrayal hit her again. She bowed her head and breathed deeply. Her worst fear had become a reality. Once again, she knew she had no one else to blame for what was happening but herself.

Acceptance flowed through her along with a sense of serenity with her clan’s final decision to accept what the shifters were offering. She could not change the past. The only thing she could do was accept the present. The future would always be filled with uncertainty, but she was used to that.

She reached out and touched Ella’s cheek. A sad smile curved her lips as memories of them running wild and free through the forest flashed through her mind. Time had moved on... and so had they.

“I wish you... happiness, Ella,” she murmured.

“Jayden?” Ella’s voice held a hint of confusion. “Everything will be alright. You’ll see. Ty won’t let anything happen to the clan. He’ll protect them.”

She dipped her head in agreement and lowered her eyelids to shield the emotion in them. She gave Ella a strained smile and nodded toward the group. Ella’s shifter

husband had risen and was heading towards them.

“Your... husband is looking for you,” she said.

Ella turned when she mentioned Ty. Jayden took advantage of Ella’s distraction to slip further into the darkness. The wolf-shifters were walking toward them along with Ella’s husband. The last thing Jayden wanted was to give the two shifters a chance to work any more of their magic on her.

She slipped into the shadows between two of the cabins. Striding toward the back, she turned near the tall fence and followed it around until she came to the back of the cabin that she shared with her parents.

She paused along the back, worried that the two wolf-shifters would follow her. A wry smile curved her lips. If they did, they were in for a surprise. She walked around to the edge of the small, covered porch. Hopping up on the railing, she used the notches in the natural wood pillar to climb up onto the roof.

Once she was on the roof, she twisted and sat down. Drawing her knees up, she wound her arms around her legs and rested her chin between her knees... and waited. The moon hadn’t risen yet, so the sky was dark. The lights around the compound were shielded, limiting the amount of ambient light. Between the artificial lights, the campfires, and the stars, there was more than enough light to navigate. Lucky for her, it was all aimed downward or low to the ground and her grandparents’ cabin was on the outer rim.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

She straightened when she heard the low crunch of leaves. From her perch, she watched as the two wolf-shifters emerged out of the shadows between the cabins and paused. They sniffed the air before they looked around with a frown.

“How the hell did she disappear so quickly?” Van muttered.

“She probably went into her cabin. She looked pretty upset earlier. I don’t know what she and Ella were talking about, but it didn’t look good,” Peterson said.

“I’ll be glad when we can get her out of here,” Van replied.

Peterson snorted out a sharp laugh. “Hell, I’d be happy if she just wasn’t so skittish. It’s driving me crazy the way she’s avoiding us. Why won’t she give us a chance? That’s all we are asking for. Talk to us. Get to know us.”

“I know. I thought for sure once we got here that it would be easier,” Van grumbled before emitting a loud sigh.

“Van, Peterson, Michaela would like to speak to you both,” Ty called out.

“Coming,” they responded together.

The tenor of their voices rolled over her. She bit her lip and watched as they glanced once more between the cabins before they walked away. The quiet murmur of voices carried on the gentle breeze. From the rooftop, she could see the firepit where everyone had been sitting. The scene was bittersweet. It reminded her of all the nights when her clan had gathered to listen to the elders tell their stories. Now, she couldn’t

help but wonder if any of the stories the elders had told them were true.

“Was everything a lie?” she whispered.

## Chapter 8

“Damn, what a woman!” Peterson muttered.

Van chuckled and held out a folded paper towel from his pocket. “You’re bleeding.”

Peterson took the paper towel and pressed it under his chin where Jayden’s lance had pierced his skin. He looked at the red spot against the white and grinned.

“She drew first blood.”

“Something tells me it won’t be the last. If there was any doubt, which there wasn’t, that she is perfect for us, it has disappeared. We should have pushed things sooner,” Van murmured.

Peterson shot him a look of disbelief. “You had doubts? Is your wolf not going as crazy as mine?”

Van scowled at him. “Yes, my wolf is going nuts, and no, I didn’t really have doubts. This encounter just reenforced that she is perfect. She’ll keep us on our toes and in our place if we get too arrogant.”

“Arrogant? I’m never arrogant,” Peterson scoffed.

Van raised his eyebrow. “Says the wolf-shifter who insulted his mate, wants to kidnap her, and is bleeding for it.”

“She didn’t hear the kidnapping part,” he defended.

“Doesn’t matter. We need to be smart about this.”

Peterson stared in the direction Jayden had disappeared. A perplexed frown creased his brow as he tried to figure out what they were going to do next. He probably shouldn’t have come on so strong. When he had caught her scent, it was as if his brain had stopped functioning.

So much for being charming.

He winced when his wolf snorted at his thoughts. Sometimes it really sucked having a sarcastic other half that knew what he was thinking. It was almost as bad as dealing with Van when he was on a roll.

“What now?” he asked with a sigh.

“We hope she sees common sense and changes her mind by the end of the week.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

Van shook his head. “I don’t know. We’ll figure it out.”

“Did you hear the news?”



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Bishop Foxworthy didn't turn around. He continued working on unloading the boxes of food from the delivery truck. His partner, Carter Stout, a warthog-shifter, paused beside him and leaned against the back of the box truck.

"Yes, I heard. They are moving all of them at the end of the week to the permanent compound," he replied.

"You gonna let the boss know?" Carter asked.

Bishop grunted as he tossed a heavy box onto the trolley. Carter should be the one unloading the damn boxes. Warthogs were short, stout, and could lift a pallet of the damn crates. As a fox-shifter, Bishop was tall, lean, and used to using his brain.

"What do you think?" he snapped.

He didn't add 'if you could' to the end of his sentence. There was no sense in pissing off a warthog if you didn't have to. They also tended to have very thin skin when it came to insults in regard to their intelligence.

"I was just asking in case you wanted me to put the call in. No reason to get bent out of shape," Carter grumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Bishop gritted his teeth. "It's possible that I'm upset because both of us are expected to unload the truck to maintain the illusion that we belong here."

Carter gave him a confused look before his expression cleared and he grinned. "Oh, yeah. Right, delivery guys. I forgot."

Bishop shook his head in irritation at Carter. “You finish unloading this stuff and take it to the kitchen.”

“Where are you going?” Carter demanded.

“We need to find out where this compound is, remember? That is one reason we were sent here,” he answered.

“Oh, yeah. Right. I forgot about that, too.”

Bishop mouthed a silent expletive about dumbass warthogs and turned away. He moved between the box truck and the wooden and canvas structure that served as a temporary kitchen for the humans. Pulling his t-shirt over his head, he stripped out of his clothing and tossed them through the open driver’s window.

He shifted and disappeared behind the kitchen. A temporary fence had been erected around this compound and bordered the woods. He kept to the shadows, using the undergrowth and canvas tents to hide his movements.

He was making a wide arc around the camp when he caught the scent of two wolf shifters. Ducking under a military truck, he peered out from behind the broad, off-road back tire. The men were talking to a human female.

He crouched and crawled to the front tire. From this angle, he had a better view of what was going on—and it surprised him! The female was holding a long, wooden pole that had been sharpened on one end under the jaw of the red-haired wolf. He recognized the man as Peterson Redfoot. Amusement pulsed through him at the sight.

She has good taste, and a lot of balls, to be sticking a wolf.

His ears twitched, listening to their conversation. A minute later, the human stepped

back and walked away. A sly grin curved Bishop's mouth when Peterson shouted after her.

So, she doesn't want to go to the new compound.

He had taken over the mission of discovering where the humans were and what was to happen to them after Hyder pulled out. If possible, Isabella Wyland had instructed him to pluck one or two from the group. Isabella hadn't told him what happened to Hyder, only that the hyena was lying low for a while. Bishop wondered if it had anything to do with Lucien disappearing. He hadn't been able to contact the cougar-shifter in weeks. His job was to pass the information along to Isabella. There had been no talk of retrieving one—at least not with him. Still, if the opportunity presented itself with a minimal amount of danger, he wasn't opposed to taking it. After all, a human female would bring a lot of money on the black market.

What Wyland doesn't know won't hurt.

He waited until the two wolf-shifters turned and walked away before he darted out and followed the female. Scurrying between buildings, he slipped under the one to the left. It was the one the human female had entered.

Each building was raised off the ground. The newer canvas units were attached to a raised platform that stood close to two feet off the ground. In his fox form, he had no issues moving under the structures. He paused and sniffed the flooring, trying to gauge which building it was. The faint antiseptic odor told him this was the medical unit.

He angled so he could peer through the cracks between two of the boards. He glimpsed the female. She was rummaging 'round in the medical supply cabinet. He twisted around, tracking her movements, when she walked over the boards he was looking through.

“Can I help you?”

The deep vibration from a man’s voice caused the hair on Bishop’s neck to rise. His lip curled to reveal sharp white teeth. His fox scurried back several feet to the edge of the structure.

Lion-shifter!

Foxes held a strong animosity towards lion-shifters. The beast in the shifters was as sly as any fox-shifter, and deadly. They were also deceptive. Just when you thought you were safe, they could explode and slice through you with sharp claws as if they were batting a fly.

Bishop had seen his fair share of lion-shifters enraged. The females were worse than the males. They traveled in packs whereas the males were also solitary creatures.

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“I’ve got what I needed,” the human female replied.

“Are you hurt? I don’t remember seeing you before when I was doing the routine exams of the other humans. I’m Brennan Shortclaw, by the way. I’m the new PA. I work with Doctor Lyon. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yeah. I was just grabbing a band aid. I’ve got what I needed, so I’ll be leaving.”

“Why don’t you let me take a look at your wound? If it will make you more comfortable, I can ask Tracy to come in. She’s Ty’s?—”

“I know who Tracy is. I don’t need her or you,” the female interrupted in an impatient tone.

Bishop caught Brennan Shortclaw’s startled expression. It was apparent that the female’s animosity had taken the new PA by surprise. He waited with bated breath to see what happened next when Brennan’s easygoing expression changed to one of clinical determination.

“It’s regulation that all humans be evaluated for any medical issues and be given vaccines to prevent the spread of any communicable diseases before being moved to new the compound. I’ll need to make sure that you have all your shots.”

The female scoffed. “Lucky for you, I’m not going to any compound. You can keep your medical evaluation and vaccines for someone else.”

Brennan stepped in front of the female when she tried to move past him. Bishop

didn't have a clear view of what happened next, but the low moan of pain and the heavy thud of knees hitting the wood made him wince.

He fought against a sneeze when fine dust rained down. Another thud, this one a little more controlled, blocked his view. He realized he was staring at the thick, coarse hair of the new PA.

“Son-of-a—Damn, but that hurts. No one told me that humans were dangerous,” Brennan moaned.

Bishop backed out from under the building in time to see the human female running across the complex. A thoughtful expression darkened his eyes as he studied her gazelle-like flight. He would be running like hell too if he had just put a damn lion-shifter on the floor.

The sound of muttered curses and heavy feet on the wooden platform warned him that Brennan had pulled himself off the floor. He darted behind a crate when the door of the tent slammed back against the canvas. Brennan was holding onto the frame with one hand and his balls with the other. Amusement swept through Bishop when Brennan drew in a long, painful breath before he shuddered and released it.

“Damn humans,” Brennan muttered before he looked in Tracy's direction with a determined glare.

A sardonic amusement swept through him when the PA staggered down the steps. The fox slipped behind the buildings, retracing his earlier path. He would let Wyland know about the upcoming move, but not about the woman. No, this one had captured his curiosity. He still needed to find out where the location of the new compound was, but he could do that when he took the woman. She would know.

He silently wove his way back to the delivery truck. Carter was sitting on a stack of

crates, drinking a soda instead of unloading the boxes. He shifted back into his two-legged form, retrieved his clothes, and dressed before joining the warthog again.

Carter belched and wiped his dirty hand across his mouth before he spoke. "Find out anything?"

"No. I see you did what you were supposed to do," he replied in a sarcastic voice, noticing the box truck was still half-full.

Carter shrugged. "It's hot. Nobody cares what I'm doing."

Bishop shook his head. "I do. I want to get back to town."

Carter muttered a smothered expletive and rose. A half-hour later, they were stopped at the gate where security agents for the complex scanned their truck before allowing them to leave. A movement in the side mirror caught his attention. The human female from earlier was glancing furtively around before she disappeared into the kitchen storage unit they had just left. He studied her with a thoughtful expression before she disappeared from sight as they pulled away.

"So, whatcha gonna tell the boss?" Carter asked as they drove down the long, winding dirt road.

"That next time I would like to pick my partner," he retorted.

Carter, completely unaware of the underlying insult, responded with a simple, "That's good."

Jayden's heart thundered in her chest. She had reacted on instinct when the Shifter PA had reached for her. Her fear came two-fold. She had been afraid he would find out that she had taken a lot more than just band aids from the cabinet. Her second fear

came at the idea of him injecting her with stuff she didn't understand.

Yes, her parents and the others had received these so-called vaccines. They were supposed to help keep them from catching some disease from the shifters... or giving some to them. She had overheard a few of the shifter guards saying something about tracking devices just in case a human was kidnapped or took off.

The humorous laughter between the men had fueled the flames of her distrust and anger. When the big guy with the brownish-black hair had reached for her, she had kicked him between the legs as hard as she could.

The shock in his eyes told her that he had not been expecting her to react the way she did. His lips had parted on a low hiss before his eyes had watered and he fell to his knees hard enough to shake the structure. She barely had time to jump out of the way before he fell over onto his side and curled into a ball.

She hadn't stuck around to find out how long it would take him to recover. Clutching her bag, she had grabbed her lance that she had left by the door and bolted as if the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels.

The little breath she had whooshed out of her when she rounded the corner of the kitchen area and ran smack into a hard chest. She would have fallen if not for the muscular arms that caught her around the waist and steadied her. She dropped her bag and lance and splayed her hands across a broad chest.



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Dread filled her when she recognized the shirt the man was wearing. She slowly raised her chin. Her eyes locked with a pair of startled brown eyes. They were dark with a hint of red in them the same as the bark of a redwood tree. He immediately dropped his hands and stepped back.

“Sorry.”

She gave him a wary stare. “I was the one who ran into you. Why are you sorry?”

Van nodded his head in the direction she had just come. “Well, if the way Brennan is holding his balls and his expression is anything to go on, I figure I’ll ask for forgiveness just in case you might think of doing the same thing to me.”

Her lips twitched at the teasing amusement in his voice. She glanced over her shoulder and grimaced at where he was staring. It looked like the PA was searching for her. The shifter didn’t look like he was in a too forgiving mood. She didn’t relish the idea of running into him again—especially so soon after what had just happened.

She turned back and bent to pick up the stuff she dropped. Her head collided with Van’s when he leaned down at the same time. Stars danced in front of her eyes for a second before she scowled at him.

“Ouch!”

She rubbed her head where they connected before she reached out and pulled her bag out of his hands. Another quick glance showed a large box truck with a produce sign on the side had blocked the PA’s view of them.

“Here you go. Uh, were you going to the kitchen?”

“Yes.”

She tried to ignore the way his voice washed over her. The warm timbre was doing all kinds of weird things to her body that she didn't like, or understand. Cradling her bag against her chest, she tried to hide the way her nipples had hardened into twin peaks. He held her lance in his hand, away from her.

“Listen, I was about to get a snack and a drink. Would you like something?”

Behind them, Jayden heard the truck changing gears. If she didn't move soon, the shifter from the medical tent would see her. Her stomach growled at that moment, and she rubbed it under the bag.

“Okay. Yeah, I'd like something. Where's Peterson? You two always seem to be together,” she replied, casting a wary eye around.

He chuckled. “That's what brothers do—hang out together. Or at least we do. He's intercepting a rather bent-out-of-shape lion shifter at the moment,” he answered.

“Oh. Well, that's nice of him,” she mumbled, stepping around him when he moved to the side and motioned for her to precede.

## Chapter 9

Van didn't know how he had gotten such a lucky break, but he wasn't about to throw it away. He smothered the goofy grin on his face when Jayden glanced suspiciously over her shoulder. He followed her to the back door of the kitchen. Reaching out, he opened the door for her, giving her a charming smile when her eyes narrowed.

“After you.”

She shook her head and stepped into the kitchen area. There was a mixture of humans and shifters inside. Van was relieved to see Jayden’s tense shoulders relax as she surveyed the room.

He crossed to an empty table in the corner. She followed at a slower pace. He observed her attention lingering on the lavish spread of appetizing food at the buffet.

“I’ll put your stuff down if you’d like to grab a plate and dish up,” he offered.

She thrust her bag at him and turned away. He didn’t know whether to laugh or curse when she grabbed a plate and held it to her chest. Her eyes were flashing from one tray to another. She reached out and gripped the spoon on a portion of beans as if afraid the feast would disappear.

She scooped a serving on her plate. She licked her lips and studied the assortment of dishes before she replaced the spoon and eagerly lifted another. He placed her bag on the back of the chair and leaned her lance against the wall.

He turned in time to see her walking in a fast clip to the table. She was balancing a plate that was overflowing in one hand and a large cup in the other. He grinned at her when he noticed the roll hanging out of her mouth and the purposeful gleam in her eye.

He chuckled when she wrapped her foot around the leg of the chair and pulled it out before placing her plate. His low whistle of appreciation earned him a disdainful glare. She pulled the roll from her mouth. A large chunk was missing from it. He was fixated on her lips, unable to look away as she chewed and swallowed.

“I thought you said you were hungry.”

He swallowed and nodded. “Yeah, I-I’ll be right back.”

Turning, he headed to the buffet. He needed to keep his thoughts clean and focused. A part of him was still in shock that she had agreed to a meal with him.

She like us.

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He bowed his head and grinned as he filled his plate. Yeah. I smelled her reaction earlier. We just need to take it slow and easy. We don't want to scare her.

His wolf snorted in amusement. The image of Brennan's pale, outraged face flashed through his mind. Peterson would have his hands full soothing that lion-shifter's ruffled mane.

He returned to the table after filling his plate and grabbing an unsweet ice tea. Sliding into the seat across from her, he contemplated eating or just enjoying watching her. He picked up a bowl from his tray and placed it next to her plate. She wiggled her nose and eyed the pudding with a wary expression.

"What is that?" she asked.

He gave her an offended look. "Chocolate pudding. Haven't you tried the pudding before?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "No. I saw it, but it looked—strange. It's not like we humans just pop into your kitchen and decided we want to eat—" She eyed the chocolate pudding again before picking up the bowl and tilting it from side-to-side before finishing what she was saying, "liquid poop."

He scowled and tried to take the bowl back from her, but she held it out of his reach. "It's not poop. It's very delicious. If you don't want to try it, I'll eat it. I love chocolate pudding."

She sat back in her chair and studied his mutinous face. Van tried to keep the outrage

on his face, but it was difficult with her staring at him as if trying to decide if he was telling her the truth or not. She released a snort and shot him a disgusted glare.

His eyes followed the movement of her hand when she stuck her finger in the creamy dessert before opening her mouth and sliding her finger over her tongue. He choked back the low, primal groan when she wrapped her tongue around her finger and sucked on it. All kinds of wicked thoughts flashed through his head, especially when she moaned with delight and continued scooping the delicious treat out onto her finger and sucking the chocolate delight clean.

“I agree. This choc-o-late pud-ding is very good. Almost as good as the cookies and the pie,” she said.

He swallowed when she stuck her tongue out and licked the last bit from the bowl. Her focus froze on his face, transfixed by the intensity in his eyes. She lowered the bowl to the table, picked up her half-eaten roll, and tore a piece off. He blinked in surprise when the bite-size tidbit struck him between the eyes.

“What did you do that for?” his voice was low and rough with desire.

She lifted her eyebrow at him. “You don’t hide your thoughts very well.”

A wicked gleam glittered in his eyes. He was learning a lot about their defiant mate. She wasn’t afraid to speak her mind. Nor was she afraid to taunt the wolf inside him. Both characteristics heated his blood.

“And what do you think I’m thinking?” he asked in a low voice.

She scoffed and shook her head. “I’m not falling for whatever charm shifters use to enchant us humans. I’ll slit both of your throats and wear your hides as a coat before that happens.”

He sat back at her vehement threat. Her eyes glittered with defiance and a hint of fear before she looked down at her plate. Her fingers curled on the table on each side of the nearly empty dish before she pushed back her chair and rose.

“I shouldn’t have come here,” she mumbled.

He rose when she did. “Why?”

She looked at him again. This time, the look in her eyes was sad... almost defeated. She picked up her bag off the back of the chair and reached for her lance before she answered him.

“It makes me realize how much you shifters have taken away from us. You are not our friends. You never have been and you never will be,” she said.

She turned away. Anger and frustration waged a battle inside him. Anger at what the shifters had done to the humans centuries ago and frustration at not knowing how to break through the barrier she was determined to erect between them.

“You’re wrong, you know. You just need to give us a chance,” he called after her.

She didn’t turn around. She pushed past Peterson when he entered the kitchen. Peterson looked at him with an inquiring expression. All he could do was shake his head in response.

She like chocolate pudding.

He ignored his wolf. It wasn’t the chocolate pudding that he needed her to like. He sank back down into his chair when Peterson approached. This was going to be a lot harder than either of them imagined.

Darkness was descending and one-by-one each of her clan members made their way to the central firepit. Old habits die hard, and the need to gather as a group was just as strong here as it had been out in the forest. Jayden waited between her own and her grandparents' cabin. She had been avoiding her parents since their earlier argument. The creak of the screen door warned her that her parents were heading to the fire ring.

"You go ahead, love. I'll be there in a minute," her grandfather said.

"Is everything alright, Cyrus?" her mother asked.

"Yes. I'll be there shortly," Cyrus called.



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Jayden watched with a deep sense of sadness as her grandmother joined her mother and father. She was about to turn away when her grandfather cleared his throat. She glanced upward, surprised when she noticed him standing near the railing.

“Care to spend a few minutes with an old man?” Cyrus asked.

A reluctant smile curved her lips. “You may be old, but you are still one sly fox. How did you know I was here?” she retorted.

Cyrus chuckled and motioned for her to climb up onto the porch. He was sitting in one of the two rockers by the time she climbed the steps. She walked over and sat down beside him.

“Your father tells me that you are refusing to go to the new compound,” he said.

Her throat tightened and she gently rocked the chair. Tears burned the back of her eyes. She would miss this. Time was a precious thing and never a guarantee.

“Yes,” she finally answered.

“I have a favor to ask of you.”

She glanced at her grandfather in surprise. She had expected him to try to talk her out of not going. The last thing she expected was for him to ask her for a favor—unless he was trying to use that reverse psychology stuff on her that he used when she was little.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Do you remember my box?” he asked.

She frowned and nodded. “The one with pretty carvings on it? Yes.”

“I need you to retrieve it for me,” he said.

She gave him a startled look. “You don’t have it with you? You never go anywhere without it.”

He shook his head. “I was afraid back at the cave that we were going to be captured. I wanted to keep it safe. I took it with us when we hid. If you remember, I wasn’t well and it was left behind.”

“What’s in it that is so important? You always promised you’d tell me one day.”

“Today is that day. It is time for you to take over protecting our secret. For centuries, our family has been tasked with a very important mission,” he said.

“You make it sound serious. Shouldn’t that task go to Dad if it is so important?” she asked.

“Your father has too gentle a soul.”

“What does that say about mine?” she demanded with wry amusement.

Her grandfather chuckled. “You have the heart and soul of a warrior. Believe it or not, your ancestors were the protectors of a kingdom. They were part of the King’s Guard.”

“King? King of what, farmers and herders?” she scoffed.

“No, protectors to an Orangutan shifter named King Or’Ang and his queen, a beautiful human named Elizabeth,” he said.

Jayden pressed her feet against the wooden boards and stared at her grandfather wide, shocked eyes. He was serious. Her expression gradually eased from disbelief to curiosity.

“Are you saying there was a human... and a shifter? Before the wars?”

Cyrus padded his pocket for his pipe, pulled it out, and lit it. The fragrant tobacco teased her nostrils. She inhaled the familiar aroma of kinnikinnick, manzanita, and willow bark. She waited impatiently for him to exhale.

“Yes. I’ve only told one other person about this—long ago. I— He paused, rocked, and puffed on his pipe. Jayden waited again. He appeared lost in thought. With a sigh, he continued, “I was going to pass the responsibility on to Mitchell. I shared a bit of the story with him when he was a boy.”

She shot him a startled glance before she stared across to the fire to where Mitchell and Tracy were sitting. An unexpected hurt rose inside her at her grandfather’s confession.

“Why?” she asked, her throat tight with emotion.

“I worried about putting you in danger,” he admitted.

“Danger? From whom?” she asked, surprised.

Cyrus took another puff on his pipe and blew the smoke out in small rings. When she was a child, she used to chase the puffy, delicate clouds of smoke. There were no rocking chairs or porches back then. No cabins with soft beds or artificial lights to guide their way. There had definitely been no shifters sitting side-by-side with members of her clan, telling stories and laughing.

“It’s said that King Or’Ang sent a few select members of his private guard on a quest. The quest was to find any humans that survived and guide them back to the safety of the hidden kingdom he and his queen had built. The danger lay in keeping the kingdom hidden from those that wanted to finish what the war had started... the final annihilation of the human species. Because of that, the shifters and humans who were chosen were sworn to secrecy. Until we know for sure that shifters won’t kill us, we must protect the box and the secret it contains,” he explained.

“What is in the box?” she asked.

“The box, and the contents inside it, hold clues to the location of King Or’Ang and Queen Elizabeth’s hidden kingdom. The only place on Earth where humans and shifters co-exist.”

She stopped rocking and sat forward. “Are you saying... that there are more humans? That we aren’t the only ones?”

“It’s possible,” he admitted.

Cyrus sighed and lifted his hand. Smoke from his pipe danced on a light breeze. She absorbed what he was saying.

More humans! There may be a place where more humans exist.

“Why didn’t our clan ever try to find them? Why didn’t we? We were dying. There aren’t enough of us to carry on. How do you know if the story is even real? Our ancestors could have made it up to keep our hope alive,” she growled.

She pushed out of the rocker and walked to the railing of the porch. Gripping it, she stared at the group across from them. She had more questions than answers.

“It’s true. I know in my heart that it is true. The story that my father told me was that the knight, our ancestor, found a group of humans living in hiding. He had been badly injured and was barely alive. A young human woman found him and nursed him back to health, but his leg never healed right. Unable to continue his quest, he settled into the village. His orders were to guide the group back to the kingdom. The villagers refused. They didn’t believe his stories. Even if they did, he could no longer guide them and it was too risky to entrust the quest to anyone else. He made the decision that only when humans and shifters live in harmony would the location be revealed. He carved the box, hiding clues within the images. Inside the box, he placed a cryptex containing the map to the kingdom inside it,” he said.

“What’s a cryptex?”

Cyrus chuckled. “I asked my father that same question. A cryptex is a cylindrical, hand-held vault with five concentric, rotating dials labeled with letters. My father warned me that if anyone ever tried to open the cryptex without deciphering the key, that the map would be destroyed,” he added.

She turned and studied his face. “Did you open it?”

He shook his head. “No. Alas, knowledge of the key was lost and I never could figure out the code on the box. It is one reason I’ve kept it hidden. I was afraid someone would find the cryptex, try to unlock it, and destroy the map. It was better to wait until someone far smarter than I am would figure out the code. Besides, by the time I came along, the shifters had built up their cities around us. Going on a quest to find a mythical kingdom was no longer possible.”

She looked across to the firepit where several shifters had joined her clan members. Her eyes flickered over Tracy and Mitchell, and she thought of Ella and Ty before she instinctively searched for Van and Peterson.

“Until now,” she murmured.

“Perhaps now is the time when humans and shifters can live in harmony.”

“Will you—will you tell me the story?”

“Have a seat.”

She returned to the rocking chair and sat down. Tucking her hands under her thighs, she listened to the creak of her grandfather’s rocker against the wood boards and the warm tenor of his voice as he began.

“Long, long ago, there was a kingdom where a very proud and powerful shifter king named Or’Ang fell in love with a beautiful human woman named Elizabeth. Even though it was forbidden by both the humans and shifters, their love was too great to be denied. The people of the Kingdom of Or’Ang loved their king and queen and vowed to stand beside them. Even as tension between our species spread throughout other kingdoms, the shifters and humans in this kingdom lived and worked side-by-side in harmony.”

Wonder filled Jayden as her grandfather shared the story passed down to him. Vivid images of gallant knights, both human and shifter, standing to defend their king and queen filled her mind. Despair for what she had done by crossing paths with the shifters slowly turned to unanswered questions. Her attention drifted toward the group sitting around the fire, sharing stories, songs, and food together and she couldn't help but wonder if perhaps her mistake hadn't been a mistake at all, but foreordained history righting itself.

"I'll go. I'll find the box," she softly promised as her grandfather's voice faded.

## Chapter 10

It was a little past midnight when Jayden tiptoed back into the kitchen, the darkness wrapping around her like a comforting blanket. This time she was searching for food. The canned foods were out. They would be too heavy and make too much noise. She meticulously packed her bag with packages of dried soup, crackers, dried milk, cereal, and as many freeze-dried meals as she could fit into her bag.

Her bag would be bulky and would slow her down. She had brought everything she deemed necessary, pushing the limits of what she could carry. Her wardrobe consisted of three brand new shirts, two pairs of dark gray hiking pants, one of which she was wearing, a forest green puffy jacket, a light-weight forest green hat with a brim that she could fold if she needed to and that would protect her when it rained, a pair of black insulated gloves, and an emerald green hand-knit wool scarf her mother had made. She had the assortment of medicine and bandages she had scrounged earlier wrapped in the clothing. The bundle was placed inside a waterproof bag she had taken from the supply tent where she had gotten the hat, coat, and clothing. She had also taken a lighter, matches, and a new hunting knife that had a fine edge on one side and a serrated side for cutting through wood. Her lance was a necessity which would also serve as a hiking pole.

Jayden's desire to put as much distance between herself and the compound made it necessary to take more food than she wanted. She wouldn't have the time or the luxury to hunt or even forage much. The cave was a good hundred miles or more from her current location, as well as across difficult and dangerous terrain.

Testing the weight of her pack, she decided she couldn't afford to add any more. She glanced around the storeroom with regret. There was so much food here, more than she had seen in a lifetime. Tears burned her eyes at the memories of her stomach twisting with pain from hunger.



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She closed her eyes. “I hope my people never have to feel hunger again. Please, be kind to them.”

Breathing deeply, she released her regret at the pain her parents would feel in the morning when they realized that she had left. Her grandfather would explain why she was doing this. It might help if they knew she was doing this for a far more noble reason than her original one.

Pulling her pack on over her shoulders, she picked up her lance and retraced her steps. She paused by the door, listening. Over the past month, she had mapped out the complex, the guards, and their schedules. She had also planned how she would escape. There was a drainage tunnel that allowed excess rainwater to flow downhill a short distance from the complex to a lake.

The shifters had a canoe at the bottom. She would slip through the drainage pipe, down the hill to the lake, and take the canoe. This would help conceal her scent. Once she reached where she wanted to go, she would scuttle the canoe. She would then head for the mountain.

Her one prize possession was a map she had found in the supply tent. The detail had taken her breath away. The large green area was called Olympic National Park and was undeveloped. She had overheard Tracy telling Mitchell that the lands were protected and no shifter could live there.

Her people had only explored a quarter of the area. She had studied the map, committing as much as she could to memory and pinpointed the different areas where she could hide. She would need to stay on the move and be unpredictable.

It wasn't likely that the shifters would care about one stray human, but she wasn't going to risk it. The image of Van and Peterson rose in her mind, vivid and haunting. Van's face today, filled with a profound sense of longing, had served as the final push for her to leave tonight. She had felt an irresistible temptation to surrender to the intensity of her emotions for him. She was terrified by the overwhelming surge of emotions.

Would I have been strong enough to resist if Peterson had been there?

She felt a shudder run through her, sending a chill down her spine. The uncertainty of the answer fueled her running, each step driven by the need to escape her own doubts. As she listened, the soft, rhythmic sound of footsteps coming closer were signaling the guard's approach. With each passing second, the sound of her own heartbeat seemed to pound louder in her ears as she waited. She watched him pass by, and then she began to count. In twenty-five steps, the guard would be far enough upwind that he wouldn't smell her nor hear her footsteps. In another hundred and fifty, a second guard would follow.

Jayden stepped out of the kitchen, careful to keep the door from making any noise. As she wove her way between the tents and cabins, she continued to count, her footsteps creating a steady rhythm. As she listened, she could hear the low snores of her clan mates blending with the soft whimper of a child.

As the moon rose higher in the sky, its shimmering light created a playful dance along the ground. The full moon shone down on the complex. Only sporadic spotlights crisscrossed through the trees, creating a mesmerizing play of light and shadow. While she didn't like the idea of escaping in the bright moonlight, it did make things easier for her.

She stopped next to one of the canvas tents to survey the surroundings, absorbing the details of the area. The second guard was approaching, his heavy footsteps muted by

the mulch and gravel path. With each passing moment, her heart pounded harder, as if trying to escape her chest. She needed to find a hiding spot where he wouldn't be able to detect her presence through sight or scent.

“Excuse me.”

Jayden started when a soft voice unexpectedly called out, breaking the silence. Janna stepped out from shadows of the canvas tent. She was cradling a fussy Macon in her arms. The guard paused on the path a yard from where she was standing.

“How can I help?” the guard requested.

“I—Would it be possible to get a snack for my son? He's hungry and thirsty,” Janna asked.

“Of course. There is something suitable in the kitchen. Would you like for me to bring it to you or would you like to get it?” the guard asked.

“I'd like to go, if you don't mind. I don't want him waking the others up,” Janna replied.

As Janna and the guard retreated, their footsteps faded into the distance, and Jayden quietly breathed a thank you. The fortuitous distraction would give her precious extra minutes to complete her task. She searched for the guard she had been following. He was halfway to the other side of the complex.

If he followed his usual routine, he would pause and engage in conversation with the guards at the gate before resuming his activities. She patiently waited until he came to a complete halt before shifting her focus towards the spot she needed to reach. There was a transport truck parked over the grate that led to the drainage tunnel.

She made sure the pack on her back was secure, rolled her shoulders to relieve tension. Resisting the urge to break into a run, she headed towards the truck. If anyone were to glance her way, she wanted to exude an air of confidence and familiarity, as if she belonged there. She struggled to control the urge to run as her heart raced.

When she reached the truck, she twisted, shrugged her pack off her shoulders, ducked, and rolled under the huge military green truck. Tires half the size of her body helped conceal her as she pushed her pack toward the grate.

By the time she pulled the heavy metal lattice cover from the hole in the ground, her breathing was labored. Her pack slipped from her grasp and tumbled into the hole, disappearing into the darkness below. She mouthed a silent curse. It was a short drop, no more than ten feet, and there was nothing breakable in the pack. Grasping her lance, she twisted onto her stomach and felt for the ladder with her foot.

As soon as she was inside the hole, she let go of her lance and extended her hand towards the grate cover, her fingers brushing against the cold metal. The cover proved to be a challenge to pull back over the hole as she descended. By the time she was done, her body was drenched in sweat and her skin was coated in a fine layer of sand.

With her head ducked and body crouched, she skillfully maneuvered through the concrete and metal tube until it led her to another iron gate. She pulled out the keys she had taken from the supply tent, feeling the weight of them in her hand. There had been a board in the supply tent that had caught her attention during her earlier reconnaissance of the complex.

The keys had been sorted according to their purpose. Some were for the vehicles, others for the medical cabinets, food storage lockers, and community buildings. When she visited earlier to gather supplies, she took only the keys she needed.

She struggled to maneuver the heavy lock, finally positioning it so she could see the small opening at the bottom. She inserted the thick, burnt gold key into the lock, the sound of the tumblers clicking audibly in the silence. As she turned the key, she heard a satisfying pop, and the lock sprung open. She sent a quick prayer of gratitude, realizing how fortunate she was that the lock hadn't been replaced since her last reconnoitering. That's when she had made the unexpected discovery of the canoe.

Stepping out of the damp drain, she could feel the chill of the air on her skin as she straightened up and prepared for the journey ahead. She hoisted her pack onto her back and secured her lance. She turned around, closing and locking the gate to the drain, before tossing the keys into the nearby bushes. The poured concrete forms not only provided stability to the bank where the drain came out, but they also served as a means for her to climb up to the path leading down to the lake. Within minutes, she found herself along the bank, taking in the calming sights of the shimmering water and the gentle rustling of the nearby trees.

It didn't take her long to locate the canoe, turn it over, and drag it down to the water's edge. She shrugged her pack off and tossed it in the front to help stabilize the weight and placed her lance within easy reach. Pushing the canoe out into the water, she waded a short distance in the frigid waters before twisting and slipping onto the seat of the canoe. She picked up the paddle and turned the canoe in the direction she wanted to go.

North-by-northwest.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

In the distance, the snowcapped mountains glowed like a beacon to her in the moonlight. Digging the paddle deep into the water, she created a rhythm to keep herself focused. Jayden concentrated on her counting and not the heavy weight that seemed to be an anchor wanting to drag her down.

She looked over her shoulder at the shore. Through the trees, she could see the glow of lights from the complex. She didn't know if her heart felt heavy because she was leaving her parents and grandparents, or?—

Or because?—

Her mind shied away from the vision of Van and Peterson. Her new quest was of greater importance than her personal desires. A shuddering sigh slipped from her at the thought of their intense stares and the fire they created within her. She turned her focus to the mountains. She was too wild to be held captive. If there was a hidden kingdom, she would find it. That would be her destiny.

“This is for the best,” she murmured to reassure herself.

The lapping of the waves against the canoe and the wind pushing her out into the deeper waters of the lake toward the mountains seemed to agree with her. She took solace in the beauty surrounding her. A shadow passed over her and she looked up. Twenty feet above her, a barred owl soared past her, as if curious to see who else was awake in the middle of the night. Jayden smiled.

“Hello, friend. Are you here to help guide me?” she said, her voice laced with a wry amusement.

Turning in a tight circle, the owl gracefully landed on the bow of the canoe, surprising her. Jayden couldn't help but stifle a delighted laugh as it rotated its head, fixing its focus on her before ruffling its feathers and resuming its forward-facing position. As she breathed deeply, she felt a weight being lifted from her heart, bringing her a glimmer of hope. Despite the uncertainty facing her, she found solace in the gentle breeze that whispered across the water and the comforting presence of her new feathery friend.

## Chapter 11

“What do you mean she's gone? What do we pay you for? You are supposed to keep the humans safe! How the hell did this happen?” Van growled.

“We did a count this morning. We kept coming up short. That's when Beau noticed an older woman crying. When he asked her and the male what was wrong, they told him their daughter had taken off during the night,” Grayson explained.

Peterson walked in a tight circle, muttering curses under his breath and running his hands through his thick auburn hair. He dropped his hands and glared at Grayson and Beau, two of their best security team members. The men grimaced at the fierce, pointed expression on Peterson's face.

“What the hell good is it having the best security if it doesn't work?” Peterson snapped.

Beau lifted his hands. “Hey, man, we were focusing on keeping shifters out. We were never told that any of the humans might try to escape. I mean, this place is for their protection. It wasn't meant to be a prison. We weren't expecting any of them to want to go back to the wild. It's fucking dangerous out there!”

Peterson took a menacing step forward, his eyes locked onto Beau's. Van stepped

between Beau and Peterson, feeling the tension thicken the air, while Grayson lounged back against the metal desk in the security office. Van knew there was no point in needlessly provoking a bison shifter. Beau, with his strong, silent, but imposing presence, was an integral part of their formidable security team. Those who dared to provoke the normally placid man did so at their own risk. The last thing he wanted was Peterson pissing the man off. He knew his friend would regret it later.

“You’re right, this isn’t a prison. The fault lies with Peterson and me. We knew Jayden was planning on leaving. We should have warned the team,” he said.

Grayson raised an eyebrow at the unexpected admission. Peterson shoved his hands into his pockets. Grayson’s eyes narrowed with suspicion before his eyes widened in disbelief.

“Holy Goddesses, you’ve imprinted on her,” Grayson hissed.

“Wow. Both of you? That’s... uh, pretty cool,” Beau quickly corrected when Peterson rounded on him again.

Van nodded while Peterson cursed again under his breath before he nodded as well. Grayson’s eyes widened even more. Van pursed his lips when Beau looked back and forth between himself and Peterson with an astonished expression before he released a low whistle.

Grayson straightened and released a low whistle as well. “Both of you? On a human? Wow! I totally didn’t see that coming,” Grayson confessed in a voice edged with wonder.

“Me neither,” Beau seconded.

Peterson growled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”



Grayson lifted his hands in surrender and chuckled. “Hell, if I know. I’m still shocked at Ty and Tracy’s relationships with humans. They seem... fragile. I’d be afraid of breaking one. I can’t imagine one being able to handle one, much less two, shifters. Damn. How does that even work? I mean, I know how it... but with a human?” He stopped and shook his head in wonderment.

“They’re stronger than you realize,” he responded.

Peterson released a strained laugh and nodded. “Yeah, just ask Brennan about that. She laid him out on the floor where he cried like a baby. Well, he wanted to cry. When I saw him, he was holding his bruised balls and contemplating murder.”

Van looked at Peterson and waved his hand. “Don’t forget that she drew a little blood from you, too.”

“How the hell did we miss all that? Damn. So, what’s the plan? Would you like me to ask Rigo if he can locate her? He can cover a lot of ground in a short time,” Grayson asked.

“Yes. She can’t have gotten that far. We know when she was last seen. In the meantime, Peterson and I will try to figure out how she escaped. If she could get out, then that means someone could get in,” he said.

Grayson grimaced. “Good point. I didn’t think of that. I’ll let the others on the team know what’s happened. Right now, it is just you two, Beau, and me. We thought it best to keep it quiet. The second word gets out that one has escaped, every damn shifter in the world will be hunting her.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Washington State Animal Sanctuary, Research and Observation Center: Seattle, Washington

\* \* \*

Talon Nightsky slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone when it vibrated. He swiped the screen and lifted the phone to his ear. A scan of the ornate arched corridor leading to the WSASROC's Observatory was deserted.

"Yes."

"A situation has developed at the complex," Juliette said.

"What's happened?"

"A human is missing. She took off during the night," Juliette replied.

Muttering a silent curse, he scanned the corridor. He stepped back into the shadows. Juliette had volunteered to go undercover as a worker at the complex in the hopes they could find out more information about them.

"There is another issue," she continued.

Talon frowned. He did not like surprises. They made the wound he had received from the last time there was another 'issue' ache. He resisted the urge to rub his shoulder.

"What?" he asked in a brisk tone.

“Van and Peterson have imprinted on a human,” she responded.

Talon’s breath hissed in at this unexpected development. His mind swirled with the complications that this would cause. He walked to the edge of the corridor and stared out across the pristine grounds of the Observatory.

“Can you find her? She needs to be protected at all cost,” he said.

“Isabella—”

“—should not be underestimated. My sources say she has been making inquiries. Unfortunately, she isn’t the only one we need to be concerned about,” he replied.

There was another brief pause before Juliette spoke, “What have you found out?”

“Tonight, nine o’clock,” he replied in a terse tone. “Double-check the security measures for transferring the humans. If you need additional resources, let me know—tonight. I don’t want to say anything over the phone. I need to go.”

“I’ll be there,” Juliette replied.

Talon disconnected the call and turned in anticipation. The noise of footsteps against gravel warned him that someone was approaching. His mouth tightened when he caught sight of the entourage that rounded the curve onto the path leading into the passageway. A small army of black clad security surrounded an elegant woman who could rip out his throat and not spill a drop of her tea.

“Madame President, what a surprise,” he greeted.

Michaela Bearclaw-Kodiak lifted an elegant eyebrow and slapped her gloves against her palm. “Still playing games, Talon? We need to talk.”

## Temporary Human Complex

Two hours later:

\* \* \*

“How the hell did she figure this out?” Peterson asked.

He and Van were standing on the outside of the drainage tube. They had finally tracked Jayden’s scent, which hadn’t been easy. She didn’t wear any type of distinguishing fragrance. All her stuff, from soap to clothes, came from local sources. Any tracks were mixed with other members from the complex.

Van had finally picked up on a hint of chocolate. When it led them to one of the transport trucks, they had been excited. It would have made sense for Jayden to think she could hide in the truck, wait for it to leave the complex, and jump out. Their hopes had been dashed after a thorough vehicle search proved fruitless.

Hell, it had been less than fruitless! Her scent disappeared.

It wasn’t until they walked around the truck, looking for additional clues that he noticed the marks from where something had slid under the truck. That was when they noticed the grate. Ten minutes later and two trips back to the surface to retrieve a spare set of keys to unlock the iron grate, they had their answer as to how Jayden had slipped out.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

He turned when he heard the rattle of metal. Van straightened and held up a set of keys that had been missing. He waited as Van untangled himself from the brush.

“Well, that answers what happened to the keys. Note to self: do not store spare keys in the supply room,” Van dryly commented, tossing the keys to him.

He caught the keys in one hand. “Yeah,” he muttered, grimacing at the consequences of his ill-advised decision.

Van shook his head before he climbed up the concrete barrier. Peterson sighed and pocketed the keys before he followed. Van pointed to a shallow imprint of a heel in the soft, moist soil. He nodded and they descended the steep path that wound down to the lake. A quick search along the bank revealed the telltale mark where the missing canoe had been dragged across the sandy soil. He shoved his hands in his pocket and stared out across the vast expanse of water.

“She was smart. She knew we wouldn’t be able to track her scent on the water,” Van commented.

“Yeah. There is no telling where she would go ashore,” he muttered.

They both looked up when a shadow passed over them. The screech of the Golden Eagle made them both lift their hands to shield their eyes from the brilliant sunlight. Rigo swooped down over their heads before soaring upward again.

“Show off,” Van said.

“It’s a shame wolves can’t fly,” he mused, following Rigo as he headed outward over the water.

“I wish there were fish-shifters. I’d love to know where in the hell she went,” Van said.

The low rumble of an outboard motor alerted them that additional help had arrived. Beau slowed the nineteen-foot center console watercraft to an idle and raised the outboard engine. The boat glided toward the shore.

Van and Peterson both stepped into the icy water and caught the bow. With a quick flick of his wrist, Beau shifted the gearshift into neutral, signaling to him and Van to join him. Seconds later, they were aboard. With an affable grin, Beau put the engine into reverse. The low rumble of the boat reverberated under their feet as he propelled them back into deeper water.

“Grayson is keeping an eye on the complex with Tracy and a few others. We decided that it would be smart to have a way to bring your lady-friend home once we found her,” Beau said, turning the steering wheel and aiming them out toward the wide expanse of the lake.

“Thanks,” he said.

He stood next to Beau at the console while Van sat on the bench in front of it.

Clouds were rolling in from the west and a brisk wind created whitecaps on the lake. He could smell rain in the air. He looked back toward the shore. If Grayson and Beau hadn’t realized Jayden was missing for a few more hours, any evidence of her escape would have been erased.

He focused on the darkening skies, a sense of foreboding creeping over him. If Rigo

didn't spot her, they still might not find her before the storm hit. Van must have sensed the same thing because he abruptly looked up from his cell phone, his expression filled with foreboding.

"Weather service just posted a flash flood warning for the area west of us," he said.

"I hope you two don't mind getting a little wet," Beau said as the boat hit a wave and water sprayed over the bow.

Torrents of rain fell, creating miniature rivers along the animal trail Jayden was following. She shivered and cringed when lightning created a spiderweb effect across the sky. She counted, waiting for the crack of thunder.

Three seconds.

Desperate for shelter, she scanned her surroundings. The last bolt of lightning was less than a mile away, and the storm seemed to intensify. Her heart sank as she felt the pelts of hail assaulting her, confirming her fears.

Another flash of lightning illuminated a fallen tree, prompting her to abandon the narrow trail and ascend the rocky outcrop. The tree, a massive spruce, had toppled onto a steep incline of jagged rocks. The natural lean-to offered her protection from the rain, hail, and lightning.

Carefully navigating through the dense foliage, she finally discovered a narrow opening beneath the protective bark. Sinking down to her knees, she crawled under the trunk of the tree, feeling the rough rock mixed with dried needles and soil under her hands. As she pressed back against the rock, a wave of uncontrollable shivers ran through her body. She struggled to control her shaking limbs, her breath visible in the chilly air.

Shrugging the backpack off, she cradled it against her chest and drew her knees up as far as she could. She needed to gather her strength. The first thing she needed to do was build a fire. Once she had one, she would change into dry clothes, eat, and try to get some rest. Exhaustion plagued her. It had been almost forty-eight hours since she had last slept.

Two days before, she had paddled until dawn. Once she reached a section of the lake where a tributary ran into it, she had scuttled the canoe, piercing the bottom with her knife to create a series of holes before pushing it back into the lake. She had wasted precious time making sure it sank before she began her trek along the river.

She had made good progress until the storm hit yesterday afternoon, filling the air with the sound of thunder and rain. Once the sky opened up, the rain fell in torrents, giving the impression that it would never end. The sky was illuminated once again by a sudden flash of lightning, prompting her to bury her face against her bag, seeking refuge from the blinding light and the relentless, uncontrollable shivers that shook her body. Her fatigue was overwhelming, but she pushed through, determined not to succumb to sleep. She understood that changing out of her soaked garments was crucial for her chances of surviving the night.

With a sigh of exhaustion, she pushed her backpack off her lap and began the arduous task of shedding her wet attire. As a cold draft of wind cut through her meager shelter, goosebumps formed over her skin. She reached into the dry bag she had taken from the supply tent and retrieved a fresh set of clothes.

Relief swept through her almost immediately at donning the dry clothing. She pulled the tie from her wet hair and combed it out before braiding it again. More refreshed, she studied her shelter. There was enough dry wood underneath from the bark that had fallen off for her to build a small fire. If she pulled the surrounding branches across the opening. They would help block the wind and rain that was beginning to dampen her dry clothes.



Thirty minutes later, she had a fire going. Holding her frozen fingers out, she closed her eyes, savoring the heat beginning to defrost the bone-numbing chill. Once her hands were warm, she collected rainwater in a metal cup and placed it as close as she could to the flames to heat it. She felt in a second dry pouch for the bag containing a variety of herbal teas.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Eating a packet of crackers. She leaned back and peered through the branches she had piled in front of the opening. The crackers helped to calm the ache in her stomach, but she feared nothing would help the pain in her heart.

“Why do I miss them?”

What was it about Van and Peterson that drew her to them? Yes, she missed her people already, especially her parents and grandparents. Despite her resistance, she was beginning to understand why Mitchell had made the decision that he had. Life as they had been living it was harsh. It had only grown more so since the shifters knew about their existence.

A single tear escaped down her cheek as she reflected on those who hadn't made it through the winter, a poignant symbol of her sorrow. Memories of her little brother, gone for what felt like an eternity, flickered through her mind as she stared out at the rain. Born early and always sickly, he never had a fighting chance.

The past year had brought unique hardships for everyone. The frequent need to move had taken its toll on their entire clan, leaving them feeling stressed and drained. Hunger had been a constant companion, as there was never enough food.

“Why couldn't they have left us alone?” she murmured, lifting a hand to wipe away her tear.

She lifted another cracker into her mouth and slowly chewed it. Mourning the past wouldn't change the present. She leaned forward and picked up her damp shirt off the rock beside her and used it to lift the hot metal cup. She placed the tea bag into the

cup and tossed the wrapper and several more pieces of bark and some sticks into the fire.

The hot tea created a soothing path down to her stomach when she sipped it. She held the cup to her lips, breathing in the steam. The aroma of the herbal tea teased her senses and calmed her.

Once again, she leaned back against the rock, feeling its rough surface against her back. Her mind couldn't help but wander to Van and Peterson, wondering what they were doing at that moment. What was it about the two shifters that intrigued her, drawing her closer with every passing moment? Her mind was flooded with memories of the first time she laid eyes on them in the forest. Even then, she had sensed a mysterious connection between them, something inexplicable. The undeniable strength of the connection made it impossible to brush it aside or overlook.

They were not only good-looking, but they also had an undeniable charm. She would be lying if she said they weren't. There was a sense of danger that surrounded them, but... she wasn't afraid.

"Think, Jayden. What is it about them? Did they say or do anything unusual that would make me feel this way?"

The answer she kept coming back to was... no. Visions of the amusement and longing in Van's eyes, the hunger in Peterson's, the warmth of their touch against her body, the smile on their lips, their gentle manner when dealing with other members of her clan—the visions popped into her head, one after another, like the flashes of lightning streaking across the sky.

She had noticed every move they made from the first time she saw them in the woods to the complex. They had never acted with malice. When the children followed the

two around at the complex, they had stopped to play games and chat with them. When Macon had fallen and scraped his knee, Peterson had scooped the three-year-old boy into his arms and taken him to the medical tent.

She sipped more of the tea and looked out at the forest. Her mind wasn't on the falling rain or the slight fog rising from the ground, but on what it had been like to see them shift from one form to the other. She thought it would have been repulsive, but it hadn't been.

The change happened in a blink of the eye. She had been expecting their bodies to twist and snap as the bones reformed. The drawings on the walls of the caves where they camped when she was little had shown images of grotesque creatures with their human-like skin peeling back to reveal muscle and bones. Their faces contorted into masks of rage.

The transformation she had witnessed had been seamless. One second there had been a shimmer, and Van's body had flowed from his wolf form to his human form. She closed her eyes as she remembered the expanse of firm muscle. His skin wasn't as dark as Mitchell's, but it was a contrast next to Peterson's. The two men were what she imagined night and day would look like in human form.

With her eyes still closed, she placed her empty cup on the ground next to her. She kept the image of the two men in her mind and slid her hand up over her stomach. Her body felt feverish and heavy again; just as it did whenever she was near them.

Sliding her hand under her clothing, she ran her fingers along the soft curls protecting her womanhood. A low moan slipped from her when she fingered the hidden nub. She scooted down far enough so she could spread her legs. The stretchy fabric of the trousers she was wearing were no match for her desperate need for release.

Living in a small clan, it was impossible to not know about sex. Soft moans of need

were guaranteed to ignite the curiosity of the young. She had learned how to satisfy any need herself after her mother explained that coupling with a male could lead to a child. She swore that would never happen and had avoided encouraging interest with any of the males in her clan.

Her lips parted on a gasp as the heat inside her built. She imagined it was caused by the two men. One between her legs while the other suckled on her aching breasts. She shoved her hand up her blouse, grasping her swollen nipple and pinched it.

She bit down on her lower lip to keep from crying out. Her body trembled, this time from arousal. The explosive force of her release bowed her back. Her fingers stilled, even as her vaginal channel pulsed. A shudder ran through her body and she opened her eyes.

The vision of Van and Peterson was replaced with decay. An aching denial froze on her lips as a tear slipped down from the corner of her eye as reality raised its ugly head.

She was not locked in the warm embrace of two men. That fantasy would never—could never—become a reality. She and Ella had sworn they would never bring a child into this world. Ella had broken her vow, but she wouldn't. Besides, she now had a greater mission to fulfill.

"I had to escape," she whispered, pulling her hand free and laying it out far enough that the rain could wash the evidence of her weakness away. "They aren't the ones casting a spell. It is my own desires—my body—that is betraying me."

She lifted her hand, watching dispassionately as a droplet of cold water clung to the tip of her finger before falling to her cheek. It was icy cold, unlike her tear. The cold was a shock to her still heated skin.

“I must never let them catch me. I must never go back.”

She rolled onto her side and sat up, feeling the hard stone beneath her. Reaching out, she cupped the rainwater in her hand and wiped her face, feeling refreshed. She twisted up onto her knees and scrubbed her hands with the icy water until she could no longer smell her release on them.

The chill on her skin sank deeper until she felt like a wall of ice had formed around her heart. Knowledge was power. Armed with the realization that her attraction to them may be a part of the catalyst for them being drawn to her made it easier for her to accept. After all, she had witnessed the same laws of attraction in nature. Ty and Ella, as well as Mitchell and Tracy’s joining proved that just because she was a human and they were shifters—it could happen.

“I will not fall in love with them. I will not fall in love with them,” she whispered.

With the determined chant on her lips, she hung her damp jacket and clothes to dry near the fire. There wasn’t much she could do to create a cushioned bed. She scraped as many of the dried needles that were left into a pile and fashioned a makeshift pallet using one of the ultra-thin silver blankets she had taken from the storage room and the few pieces of dry clothing that she had. Pulling her knife out, she cut away more bark and sticks from the belly of the trunk and added them to the fire.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Once her small space was as comfortable and dry as she could make it, she unfolded a second silver sheet, laid down next to the fire, and draped it over herself. She held little hope that the thin sheet would actually provide warmth and protection from the elements. The blankets had been an unexpected discovery, tucked away in the corner. According to the pictures, they were supposed to be warm and had a light-weight design. Something that would keep her alive until she could find a place to stay long enough to hunt and gather the items she would need to survive. It didn't seem possible that something so thin and flimsy could work the way the pictures said it would.

She curled her arm under her head to act as a pillow. Her backpack was too wet to use. Thankfully, the dry bags worked just as they said they would, keeping her food and clothing dry.

To her surprise, a few minutes later she was beginning to feel warm. Her fingers curled around the edge of the blanket, keeping it close to her head. She pulled the wool scarf her mother made her closer and tucked her hands into it.

“Six months. I have maybe six months to prepare for winter and decide where I will stay,” she calculated in a sleepy voice.

Her mind wandering from one thought to another at random. The ambience of the rain, the low roll of thunder, and the combined warmth of dry clothes, the fire, her exhaustion, and the blanket soon lured her into a trance-like state where she was caught between two worlds.

Just as I am with them, she mused before sleep finally claimed her.

## Chapter 12

Victoria, Canada:

Pineminister Castle

\* \* \*

The sharp tap of a cane against tile echoed in the great hallway of Pineminister Castle. The castle had been built by an Orangutan-shifter nearly two hundred years before in the isolated wilds of Canada. Isabella and Theodore's paternal grandmother, three-times removed, had been the trusted assistant of Lord Pine, managing his vast estate.

Her grandmother, Isabella, whom she had been named after, would eventually marry Lord Pine. Upon his death, the castle was passed down through her lineage. Now, she was the castle's mistress.

She entered the library, pausing in the doorway. A fire burned in the massive hearth framed by the heritage of its original master. Thick vines, heavy with fruit, rose to the top mantle where ancient ruins of the fabled Orangutan king, Or'Ang the Great, were carved into the ancient red oak.

Dr. Theodore Badger sat at the heavy mahogany desk. Isabella studied her younger half-brother with a dispassionate expression. He looked like a crazed lunatic. Only she knew better. He was brilliant, although reckless when he became fixated on something he wanted.

"When was the last time you had a shower or a meal?" she inquired.

Theodore started at the unexpected intrusion. He blinked at her behind thick glasses.



His eyes were unfocused behind the smudged lenses. He owlshly stared back at her with an expression of disorientation and irritation. His hand swept out to adjust his glasses. Instead, he caught a stack of books piled near his right arm. The books slid in different directions, knocking against a pile of papers before sending them to the floor.

Theodore released an annoyed growl and slipped from the plush leather chair onto his hands and knees on the floor. He grabbed wildly at the papers, peering at them and muttering under his breath before he placed them into separate piles.

Isabella crossed to a chair placed before the fireplace. She lowered herself onto the eighteenth century, handstitched fabric with a grace that belied her advanced age of seventy years. She waited for her brother to finish retrieving his research papers.

“You shouldn’t startle me like that,” Theodore snapped.

She waved an irate hand. “Sit down. You were the one who called me. What was so important that I needed to return?”

“I heard on the news that more humans have been found,” he said.

Isabella pursed her lips and tightened her grip on the handle of her cane. Her orangutan wanted to use it to beat her half-brother. She had inherited her mother’s genetic shifter qualities while her brother had inherited her step-father’s badger genomes.

“I’m aware there are more humans,” she replied.

Theodore stared at her, opening and closing his mouth like a drunken fish. He mumbled inaudibly again while he shuffled through the papers spread out across the floor in front of him. His expression changed to one of triumph, and he held out a

wrinkled sheet.

“But... did you know about this? Did you? It’s real, Issy. I knew it was real.”

Isabella scowled at her brother. “You know I hate when you call me that.”

Theodore shook the paper at her. “Take it. Look at it, Is—Isabella. All my research has led me to this moment. I knew I wasn’t crazy. It is real,” he insisted.

Isabella leaned forward and snatched the sheet out of her brother’s quivering hand. She sat back and read the paper; or rather, she studied the drawing. She turned the paper over before studying the front again. The paper felt... old. She looked at her brother with a frown.

“Where did you get this?”

“Tomes. The tomes stored in the archives at the Observatory. The directors didn’t even know what they had, but I did the moment I found it hidden in an ancient tome from the Great War, the Shifter-Human War. The minute I saw this, I knew what it was,” Theodore muttered in a rushed tone.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Isabella studied the map. In the center was a temple. This was the moment her family had been waiting for—the discovery of the ancient temple they had been seeking for centuries.

“The fabled kingdom of King Or’Ang the Great,” she murmured.

She ran her finger over the ancient ruin before sliding it down along the page. Turning it over, she studied the illustration on the back. King Or’Ang sat on his throne. Next to him were humans.

“Where is it?” she demanded.

Theodore motioned to the paper in her hand. “There’s an inscription above the throne. I had just deciphered it when you entered. The legend states King Or’Ang had grown disillusioned during the war between humans and shifters. He was partial to humans and wanted to protect them. When the war broke out, it is said he took those in his kingdom through a veil to another world where they would be safe. He ordered a dozen members of his elite knights to search for the few humans who might have survived. The legend says his knights were to guide the humans through the veil to the new kingdom where they would be safe.”

Isabella slammed the end of her cane against the rich, cultured marble and glared at her brother. Theodore blanched at his sister’s anger. She lifted the paper and shook it at him.

“I know the legend. I want to know what the inscription said. I want to know where King Or’Ang’s lost city is!” she hissed.

“The humans hold the key,” Theodore mumbled. “The inscription says that the humans hold the key.” He paused to look at her with unfocused eyes. “Isabella, you must find me a human. They may know the location of the kingdom.”

The rains continued for the next four days. Van and Peterson had given up trying to navigate the forest in their two-legged forms and had shifted into their wolves. Van shook his body as his wet fur weighed on him.

They had taken to the ground in what they hoped was the right direction. All they had to go by was the limited information Rigo shared before having to retreat because of the storm. Rigo’s eagle-eye spotted a sunken canoe in the shallow clear waters of the lake.

They had come ashore directly out from it. Realizing the weather was only going to get worse, they had instructed Beau to return to the boat dock. They had discovered Jayden’s scent just as the rains began. In minutes, their hopes—along with any scent or tracks that Jayden may have left—faded. They would be going in blind and have to hope Jayden left behind obvious clues of where she was heading.

Three hours later, drenched to the skin, and warily watching the impressive light show illuminating the skies, Van reached out and gripped Peterson’s arm.

“We’re never going to find her in this. At least, not in this form,” he shouted above the booming thunder.

“I’m all for shifting,” Peterson responded.

They both shucked their clothing before shifting into their wolves. Their clothing would have to be left behind since there was no way to carry them. Now, four days later, they were no closer to finding Jayden than they had been on the first. Van’s black wolf jerked to the side, crouching when a brilliant flash danced across the sky

above them, a loud rumble of thunder following almost immediately.

They had split up to cover more ground. And they had covered it—to no avail. Van had covered a fifty-plus mile range with nothing to show but muddy, matted fur and sore paws. It was as if Jayden had vanished off the face of the damn planet!

Van trotted to the spot where he and Peterson had left their clothes. His wolf sniffed the air before sneezing. The rain had stopped an hour ago, but the wind hadn't. The scent of burning wood was his first clue that either Peterson had already returned or?—

“You owe me fifty,” Beau said as he rose.

“Peterson isn't back. The bet was one or the other would find her,” Grayson replied, tossing a piece of damp wood onto the glowing bed of coals before he rose.

Van trotted over to the two men. Grayson waved a hand toward one of two tents that had been erected nearby. Van headed for the family-size tent and slipped through the unzipped door. Two cots were set up. Neatly folded warm, dry clothes were piled at the foot of each one along with a towel.

He shifted into his two-legged form. A glance through the opening showed that Grayson and Beau had returned to the camp chairs under an anchored canopy where they had been waiting for the two searchers to return. He grabbed the towel and dried off. Goosebumps rose along his flesh as he briskly rubbed the dampness from his skin and hair.

The grumble of his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten in days. He pulled on the boxers and a pair of thick wool socks before he pulled on a pair of insulated hiking pants, a t-shirt, followed by a thick sweater, and a black puffy jacket. Shoving his foot into his boot, he bent and tied it before doing the same to his other foot.

Each movement held restrained anger born from fear. If he was this hungry, this cold, this tired, how must Jayden be feeling? It had been a long time, if ever, that he could remember being so miserable.

He was just finishing up when Grayson and Beau called out a second greeting. He finished tying his boot, straightened, and stepped to the opening. The familiar red-coat of Peterson's wolf limped past the two men.

He stepped out as Peterson shifted. Peterson grimaced with pain. He stood to the side as the red wolf stepped into the tent.

"You alright?" he asked.

Peterson grabbed the towel off the end of the cot with his clothes piled on it and began drying before he nodded. Van motioned to the bruising along Peterson's ribcage.

"What happened?"

Peterson started to wrap the towel around his waist before he winced and tossed it onto the cot. Instead, he grabbed the pair of boxers on the top of the pile and pulled them on.

"I hit a tree. I was climbing when the soil gave out. I slid about a hundred feet into a tree. Thankfully, it was there or I wouldn't be here now. I take it you didn't have any luck either?" Peterson asked in a quiet voice.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

He placed his hand on Peterson's shoulder. "No. We'll find her."

Peterson closed his eyes and hung his head. "Four days. It's been four days of pure hell, Van. I didn't eat. I didn't sleep. Hell, my wolf wouldn't stop. It was only the knowledge that he would kill us both and be of no use to Jayden if I didn't come back that finally allowed me to take control of him. We're going to need more help."

"I agree. That is the reason I came back."

Peterson lifted his head and looked at him with a haunted stare. "If it was this hard on us, what must she be going through—all alone out there?"

"We'll find her. We won't stop searching until we do," he vowed.

"Hey, Beau and I thought you two might need some fuel. We have dinner ready if you're hungry," Grayson called out.

"Let's get some food and make a plan. It will help you heal faster," he encouraged.

Peterson rose and finished getting dressed. The sense of anguish radiating from his friend reflected his own. He couldn't stop thinking of how miserable Jayden must be—or how frightened and alone she must be feeling at that moment.

## Chapter 13

"It's nice to have someone to talk to. It's also nice to have someone who can fish and hunt as good as you do."

The barred owl rotated its head to look at her and hooted in response. A wide grin spread across Jayden's face. Three days ago, she woke up feeling surprisingly refreshed, only to be greeted by the sight of a dead rabbit staring back at her. She had barely silenced the scream that threatened to escape her lips. Only after she sat up did she notice the owl perched on a dead tree trunk; its eyes fixed on her from several yards away.

After she had skinned and cleaned the rabbit, she tossed the remnants out for the owl, who eagerly devoured the remains of the poor creature. She cleaned the meat of the rabbit in the rain before building a spit over her small firepit. While the rabbit sizzled over the fire, she diligently worked on cleaning the pelt and gathering a selection of tiny bones to repurpose as needles and hooks. Every part of the animal would be used, leaving nothing to waste.

As she savored the moist, perfectly roasted meat, a comforting warmth spread through her stomach, lifting her spirits after days of feeling down. The heavy showers persisted for the following three days, leaving everything drenched and muddy. Jayden took the time to inventory her supplies, dry her wet clothing over the fire, and study the map she had taken.

Nature's call was the only thing that could compel her to venture from her small, makeshift abode. Luckily, amidst the silver blankets, she stumbled upon a poncho that had been haphazardly thrown in. Once or twice a day, the owl would return, bringing gifts of food. This morning it was a trout.

"The rains have slowed. I need to continue on my journey today," she explained, looking at the owl who pecked at the remains of the fish she had laid out on a large leaf.

The owl looked up and blinked at her before returning its attention to its meal. Jayden studied the creature. She wasn't concerned that the owl was a shifter. She had seen



them all her life in the forest. Her people thought of them as guardians. The elders often told stories at night about how the owls would warn them if shifters were close.

She remembered asking them how they knew the owls were not shifters. Why would owls want to protect humans? Could shifters not change into birds?

Shifters can take many forms. There are said to be shifters who can change into the forms of the great eagle. The owl is wise. He knows there needs to be balance. The eagle is a predator who thinks only with its stomach. It can be greedy like the shifters. Seeking only to destroy for pleasure. The owl is our brother.

She studied the owl. “You aren’t a shifter—are you?”

The owl continued to peck at the fish, swallowing some of the gut. She shook her head at her wayward thoughts. The owl simply wanted a dry, safe place during the storm. It wasn’t that unusual. She had witnessed other creatures doing the same.

But they didn’t bring you food.

Perhaps it was just dropping it to eat later and I took it as a gift. Once it realized that I wouldn’t eat it all, it was happy to share.

She argued back and forth with herself as she packed her meager supplies. Dousing the fire, she did what she could to conceal her presence. Once she was satisfied, she climbed out from under the tree and stretched.

After four days of mostly sitting or lying down, she was stiff. She worked her muscles while she scanned the surrounding area. The owl hopped out before lifting off and landing in a nearby tree.

“Keep watch,” she requested.

The owl's head turned as if following her request. Jayden smiled and rearranged the brush to help hide where she had sheltered. Hopefully, the rain would do a good job of concealing her scent and the dirt she had piled over the firepit would hide the aroma of smoke.

The strange, heavy feeling was threatening to build again inside her. She shoved it down. Time was her enemy and distance was her friend. She needed to get moving. She had already lost enough time because of the weather.

She looked over at the owl. Its head was twisted around until it looked like it was stuck on backwards. A rueful smile curved her lips when it swiveled back around.

"I won't even tell you how weird that is. I'm heading that way, just in case you were interested in going the same way. If not, that's okay. I understand. Thank you for all your help the last few days."

She pressed her lips together. She was beginning to sound needy. Bending, she picked up her backpack, slung it over her shoulders and strapped it on before she grabbed her lance, which was leaning against the branches she had artfully arranged. She released a deep sigh, scanning her temporary home once more before setting off.

Nightsky Estate

\* \* \*

Talon glanced up at the clock. He had postponed his meeting with Juliette four days earlier after his confrontation with Michaela. The grizzly shifter was more than a figure-head politician. She was shrewd and was as brilliant about human-shifter history as her brother.

He had underestimated her. That thought still burned. He tapped his fingers on the list of names in front of him. There was a mole at the SBSI and he was still no closer to discovering who it was than he was at finding out who employed the resurrected mercenaries he and the other Guardians had killed outside the human encampment.

The soft tap on the door alerted him that Juliette had arrived. He rose at the same time as the door opened and Olive peered in. He gave the housekeeper a reassuring smile and nod. Olive returned his smile and opened the door further.

“Miss Juliette for you, sir,” Olive said.

“Thank you, Olive. Can you bring a refreshment tray in,” he requested.

“Of course.”

“Thank you for coming. Would you care for a drink?” he asked.

“Of course,” she replied, walking over to the couch and sitting down. “Have you

talked to the others?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. There have been some... unexpected developments that I’ve been working on. I thought it was best to have more answers than questions,” he replied.

She lifted a delicate eyebrow at his rueful tone. He poured her a glass of whiskey, walked over, and handed it to her before he sank down in the chair across from her. They sipped on their drinks.

Olive’s knock alerted them that she had returned with a tray of refreshments. As soon as Olive set the tray on the table, the aroma of freshly baked bread and savory dishes filled the air, making him acutely aware of his hunger. As she pulled back the cover, the aroma of succulent lemon-glazed trout, rice pilaf, and roasted vegetables wafted through the air.

“You need something a little more substantial than finger foods,” Olive said.

“Thank you, Olive. This looks magnificent,” Juliette praised.

“I’ll return later with a nice dessert and coffee,” Olive replied before she exited the room, closing the door behind her.

“I swear if Thaddeus ever fires Robert again, I’m kidnapping both him and Olive and taking them home with me,” Juliette threatened.

He chuckled when she took a bite of the delicious meal and moaned. He had to agree with her. The meal melted in his mouth and warmed his empty stomach.

“I may have to smother the old owl if he does. Has there been any word on the missing female?” he asked.

Juliette shook her head. “No. Van and Peterson have been searching for her. It hasn’t been easy with the weather, but I would have been shocked if they had quit. With the break in the weather, Grayson and Beau have gone to meet up with them. They will also have Rigo.”

He nodded. That was a good team, especially with Rigo. If Juliette was correct and Jayden was the two wolf shifters’ mate, they would never give up on finding and protecting her. The weather had hindered the use of any satellite imagery. Searching for the woman was like searching for a specific pine needle in a forest.

“What have you found out?” she asked.

He sighed, touched his serviette to the corners of his mouth, and sat back in his chair. Reaching for his glass of bourbon, he was surprised to notice that he had cleaned his plate. He sipped his drink before he answered her.

“I’ve narrowed the list of suspects who could be the mole in the SBSI.”

She studied his face with a shrewd look. “But?—?”

He shook his head and twirled the amber liquid in his glass, studying the way the liquid formed a whirlpool. The corner of his mouth twitched as the imagery mirrored his current thoughts.

“My gut says I’m being manipulated.”

“Ah.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “And that means?”

“Ah.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

She chuckled and sat back against the couch cushion. He scowled back at her. She hid her grin by lifting her glass of whiskey to her lips and taking a sip. She tilted her head to the side and waited.

“Tell me why your gut feels you are being manipulated,” she said.

He rose and stepped over to the fireplace mantle. Staring into the flames, he thought about the report. He sighed again, walked over to his desk, and retrieved the report he had pulled. Walking back to the couch, he held it out to Juliette. She took the report and read through it.

“There are only four others besides myself that have access to the satellite that took the picture that you found in the helicopter.”

She studied the list and the description next to each one. “Do any of them have any personal financial problems? Gambling? Medical? New relationships?”

He shook his head. “That was the first thing I checked.”

She frowned and flicked through additional pages, running her finger along the report as she scanned it. Her lips parted and she turned back to the satellite image, before turning back to another page. She leaned forward and placed her glass on the side table before spreading the pages out across the coffee table.

He straightened, watching as her eyes darted from one page to another. She worried her bottom lip, sliding her finger over several pages. Finally, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone.

“What is it?” he demanded, his eyes narrowing on her face.

She held up her index finger. The sound of the phone ringing, then a sleepy voice answering sent a wave of impatience through him. She glanced up at him.

“Hey, Kev. This is Juliette Natnel. I need to pick your brain,” she said.

“Juliette? Hey. What’s going on? Is everything alright?” Kev mumbled.

“Yes, everything is fine. I’m sorry to wake you. Where are you?”

Kev grunted. “What? No, it’s okay. I’m in England for a few days for some meetings. What do you need?”

“Oh, sorry. I wouldn’t have bothered you if I had known. I just had a question that I thought you might know the answer to off the top of your head considering it’s your field of specialty,” she said.

“It’s all good. I needed to get up, anyway. I like to go for a run before the streets get too crowded. What’s your question?” Kev responded.

“I heard through the grapevine Dutchcorp was in trouble, then suddenly they aren’t. Is that true?” she asked.

Kev muttered an oath, and she could hear him sitting up. He must have covered the speaker because his voice was muffled as he spoke to someone. A second later, he spoke.

“Hold on a sec.”

She waited while it sounded like he shuffled into another room. It was obvious he had

found some distraction to help relieve the boredom of his meeting. The click of a door came through the phone before what sounded like the lid of the loo being lowered.

“What do you want to know?” he asked, his voice hushed.

“Who’s backing them?” she asked.

“Jeez, Juliette. How do you find this shit out? I don’t know what is worse, that you know or the fact that you want information on it. No one is supposed to know,” Kev muttered.

“Never mind how I know or why, Kev. Who is financing them?”

Kev signed. “This shit could get me killed if it gets out,” he warned.

“I know. I hate to put you in this spot, but it’s a matter of life or death,” she replied.

“I don’t want to know any more. The less you tell me, the safer it is for both of us—I hope. Fortunately for you, I haven’t been given orders—yet—not to disclose what I’m about to tell you. About a year ago, Aaron Ball, the founder and CEO of Dutchcorp, was caught doing some illegal shit to support his spaceflight hobby. It didn’t help having a couple of major rocket explosions and getting caught with his pants down with someone other than his wife. It looked like he was about to go under when suddenly, Dutchcorp gets this new influx of money and some sweet contracts from multiple governments to send some satellites up into space.”

She sighed in frustration. “I know about all that. I want to know who is funding him.”

Kev released a sardonic chuckle and huffed out a breath. “You and a few governments around the world. You see, the governments who signed the sweet



contracts aren't ones that normally send up satellites, especially advanced military and surveillance grade ones that came with technology from top secret USNA technology sites."

"I need a name, Kev," she said.

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There was a pause before he answered, “I came across one today. I’m not sure who he is or if he’s involved. I’m still investigating, but if anyone can find out more information it is you. Take a look at a shifter named Eric Singleton. He was a General—ex. It could be a dead end, but it might be worth doing a little digging.”

“Thank you.”

“Listen, Juliette, I’m just scratching the surface of this shit, but this guy is scary as hell. I don’t know what you are looking for, but be careful.”

“I will. I’ll share what I can. Be careful, bro,” she murmured.

“Love you, sis,” Kev said.

Juliette hung up and looked up at him. Talon lifted an eyebrow. He had caught a little of the conversation.

“Does the name General Eric Singleton mean anything to you?” she asked.

Talon frowned and nodded. “Yes. What makes you think that he is involved?”

She tapped three pages. “The specs for the satellite are almost identical to the SBSI one. The differences are in the report code here.” She pointed to a series of numbers below the satellite image. “The middle digits identify it as a Dutchcorp satellite, and this—” She pointed to two other pages. There was a series of code on them. “Find a coder named BMC82 and we’ll know where they got their source code.”

He walked over and sat down beside her, then picked up the paper. The answer had been staring him in the face the entire time. BMC82... Byron Michael Crayman, best shifter in the national football league. His jersey number was 82. His eyes flickered to his list.

“You’re brilliant, Juliette,” he murmured.

## Chapter 14

### Deep in the Mountains of Olympic National Park

\* \* \*

Two weeks and nearly a hundred miles later, Jayden pressed her body back as far as she could into the crevice where a section of soil had eroded away. The only thing holding the tree—and her—in place was where the tree had grown into the rock.

“I could’ve sworn I saw something,” a grumpy voice muttered.

“You’ve been saying that for the last two days,” the second man snapped.

“Aw, come on, Bishop. It’s not my fault the boss is mad.”

“Shut up, Carter.”

“What’re we going to do about those wolf shifters looking for her?” Carter asked.

“I said shut up. I’m trying to think.”

Carter snorted and spat a wad of slimy spit out. Jayden turned her face into her arm when the wad struck inches from her head. The smell made her want to vomit.

“I think we should kill them,” Carter muttered.

Small rocks rained down when someone twisted above her. Jayden bit her lip. Her arms and legs were trembling with fatigue. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could hold herself in the tight spot.

“We can’t kill them—yet,” Bishop responded after a brief pause.

“Why not?”

“Think, you idiot! If we kill them before we find the missing human, what do you think will happen?” Bishop demanded.

“Duh, they’ll be dead?”

“Jeez, why do I even try to explain things to you? If we kill them now, then there will be a huge investigation with swarms of Observatory and SBSI agents out here. If we can find her before they do, we take her and they can look all they want—they won’t find anything,” Bishop explained.

“But... what if they find her first?” Carter asked.

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Bishop released a long sigh. “Then, I’ll let you kill them.”

Carter grunted with approval. “I like that idea better. I think we should just let ‘em find her. I don’t like all this living in the wild stuff. I think I’ve got a rash from shitting in the woods,” he complained.

“I don’t care about your?—”

Jayden strained to hear as their voices faded into the distance. Breathing a sigh of relief, she let go of her foothold. Slowly, her body eased out of its hiding spot, blending seamlessly with the shadows. With every ounce of strength, she held onto the roots, desperately trying to maintain her balance on the steep incline. As she forced her feet into the rocky section, the sharp edges dug into her skin, but she refused to let her protesting limbs deter her.

Gripping the root tightly, she descended the edge of the rock face with slow and deliberate movements. By the time she reached the bottom, her clothes clung to her body, drenched in sweat. Looking back up, she assessed that she had descended about two hundred feet, giving her a sense of relief that she had put some much-needed space between herself and the two shifters who were hunting her.

Not wanting to cross paths with the two shifters, she decided to descend the cliff rather than going back up. Luck had favored her when she spotted them. If she hadn’t positioned herself downwind and at a lower elevation, the chances of them discovering her would have been much higher.

Her eyes darted around the area, filled with hesitation, as the man’s haunting words

reverberated in her mind. I think we should kill them. I think we should kill them. I think we should kill them.

A sinking feeling settled in her stomach as she realized they were discussing Van and Peterson. She turned to the north, her eyes scanning the vast expanse of towering mountains. The cave was only a few days' hike away, as long as she stayed on track and didn't take any detours. Her fingers clenched tightly around the straps of her backpack, feeling the rough texture against her skin.

I can't go there—not as long as those two men are hunting me.

Turning slightly, she looked down the wooded slope to the southwest. The direction that the men were coming from indicated that Van and Peterson were there. She urgently needed to warn them about the imminent danger they were facing.

Frustration and the fear of being cornered waged a fierce battle within her. How did she warn the guys and stay one step ahead of the shifters hunting her? The distinct sound of wings flapping caught her attention, causing her to glance upwards. Above her, the barred owl, which had been following her like a ghostly shadow, sat quietly on a rock, twenty feet away.

“You wouldn't be interested in delivering a message for me, would you?” she asked.

The idea was completely absurd and outlandish. She realized the futility of her attempts to convey her needs to the owl, as it remained completely oblivious to her words. With a shake of her head, her frustration was growing along with her feelings of indecision. The realization hit her that relying on an owl as her sole friend in solitude may not have been the best choice.

Biting her lip, she considered the possibility that Van and Peterson might stumble upon the path she left behind. Balancing the need to avoid leaving any clues for the

bad guys and the urgency to warn Van and Peterson, she pondered how to accomplish both without jeopardizing her mission.

If she backtracked, she could leave something without jeopardizing her mission. She just needed to get between Van and Peterson and the bad guys. Except ... that still left that she didn't know where they were. The forest comprised hundreds of square miles and she didn't have the super sniffers that Van and Peterson did.

“Maybe they will smell the bad guys!”

That thought made the most sense. While she had been super careful, traveling along the rocky ridges or using the streams and river as much as possible, she highly doubted that the two shifters from above had done the same. The daily rains would have helped to conceal her tracks and scent, as well.

Sending a silent prayer that Van and Peterson already were onto the two men, she decided the best plan for her was to reach the cave, find her grandfather's box, and head to one of the clan's old camping spots along the Elwah River. She could rest, fish, and see if she could decipher that code her ancestor had left.

Her attention flickered to the owl, and she gave the creature a rueful smile. “Warn me if you see anything suspicious, okay? I could use all the help I can get,” she requested before reluctantly setting off.

Four hours earlier:

\* \* \*

Van clenched his fist and looked up from where he was crouching as Peterson approached. Rising to his feet, he studied the remains of the campsite. It was obvious from both the amount of evidence and the smell that the campsite hadn't belonged to

Jayden.

They had been about to give up and call for re-enforcements six days ago when they had their first break in their search for Jayden. Their first clue had been a hairband with fine strands of silver-blond hair tangled in it. It was the strangest thing. They had stopped to take a brief rest and the hairband had been hanging from a branch.

A brief search had revealed an opening beneath a fallen log. They had discovered evidence of a fire, moss piled to form a bed, and the remains of a rabbit and fish. He had been both impressed and relieved. Jayden had spent some time there, most likely through the storm.

Over the last five days, there had been other unexpected clues. It was too much of a coincidence to think the clues were random. The only thing he and Peterson could conclude was that Jayden was giving them bread crumbs to follow her.

They had picked up on the unusual scent of two shifters two days ago. Peterson pursed his lips and gave him a curt nod. He waited until his friend was closer before he spoke.

“What did you find?” he asked.

“Tracks leading north-northwest,” Peterson replied.

“Anything from Jayden?” he asked.

Peterson shook his head. “No, she is too good for that. I checked in with Grayson and Beau to give them an update and see if they have heard anything.”



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Van continued to study the campsite. While there was only the imprint of one shifter, his wolf had picked up a second scent. There had also still been a little heat under the ash. The fire was less than a half-day old. They were slowly catching up with whoever was searching for Jayden.

“Did they give you any clue about who might have leaked Jayden’s disappearance?”

Peterson shook his head again. “They haven’t found anything yet. Hell, it could have been anyone. It might not have even been intentional. Word spreads that a human is missing, someone mentions it over a beer, it gets heard, and every Tom-Buck-and-Beaver gets the bright idea to go looking for her. There are a lot of workers who might not even realize they screwed up.”

His expression tightened. “They need to be aware.” He looked down at the fire pit again. “Thank the Goddess it didn’t rain last night. The soil under the ash was still warm. We’re catching up to whoever it is.”

“Do you want to shift? We could cover more ground if we do,” Peterson suggested.

He was about to agree when a heavy thud in the bushes ten feet from him had him twisting. The hair on the back of his neck rose and a low snarl of warning slipped from both himself and Peterson. He motioned for Peterson to take the left while he took the right.

They moved in unison toward the noise. Peterson lifted his chin and sniffed the air before giving him a negative. Scanning the ground, he paused when he noticed a candy wrapper. He lifted it to his nose and sniffed. His head jerked back when he

caught the unpleasant scent of a warthog.

“Damn it.”

Peterson came up to stand beside him. “What is it?”

He held the candy wrapper out to Peterson. Peterson took a tentative sniff. Peterson’s powerful reaction mirrored his own.

“Damn.”

They both knew how dangerous a warthog could be—even for a wolf. He searched around the area, noticing the large boot print in the soft soil. It looked fresh.

“Well, we know what at least one shifter is,” Peterson muttered.

“Let’s shift. We need to find those sons-of-shifters,” he replied.

He pulled the modified bag off his shoulders, stripped, and shifted. Peterson did the same, placing their clothing into the bag. Van stood still while Peterson attached the bag to his back and tightened the straps. Once the bag was secure, Peterson shifted.

They took off, following the distinctive odor of the warthog. His paws dug into the forest floor, kicking up dirt behind him. Peterson kept pace with him, clearing a fallen tree that blocked the path.

Jayden warily sank down on a boulder near the river. She winced when the movement pulled on the deep line of scratches that ran along her lower left leg. She was silently cursing her carelessness. Fear had made her clumsy and was probably going to get her killed.

She bent forward and studied the bloodied material. There was another rip in her hiking pants. Muttering a string of curses under her breath, she rolled up the thin material to study the wound.

She gritted her teeth when she noticed the ragged lines. They stung enough to bring tears to her eyes when she dabbed at the blood seeping down her leg. In her haste to put as much distance between herself and the two strange shifters she knew were tracking her, she had shredded her leg on some saw vines growing along a tree.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she muttered as she retrieved a piece of gauze from the first aid kit in her bag.

The scent of her blood would be strong. It wouldn't take long for the shifters chasing her to pick up on it. Her hands trembled as she pressed the rectangular cotton pad against her leg and held it there to stem the blood.

She breathed in through her nose and released through her mouth at the pain. To help distract herself, she focused on the river. Her best chance of escaping her two pursuers was to float downstream as far as possible before they detected her scent.

Studying the contents of the small first aid kit, she pulled out a round package and squeezed it. Tearing open the paper surrounding it, she breathed a sigh of relief at the thin, breathable fabric. She adjusted the gauze pad over the deepest cuts and wrapped it around her leg.

A light breeze caught the wrapping from the bandage and blew it out of her reach. She couldn't grab it without letting go of the bandage. A choked laugh slipped from her when it was suddenly caught by a sharp talon. The owl fluttered onto a nearby boulder with the white paper crumpled in his claw.

“Thank you,” she said.

She glanced behind her when the owl turned its attention to the tree line and ruffled his feathers. A sense of urgency filled her. How had the two shifters from earlier circled back?

Releasing a shaky breath, she hurriedly tied off her makeshift bandage, looked up, and studied the river again. The current was strong here. She would have to be careful of the boulders that littered it and hope that she didn't get pulled under. There was a higher-than-average chance that she would drown, but it was a chance she would have to take if she wanted to escape being captured by that nasty-smelling shifter.

If she remembered correctly, there were a series of small waterfalls a little over a mile downriver. She could handle them. She would need to reach shore after the second one, though. There was a higher waterfall shortly after the second falls that she wouldn't survive.

The crack of a branch hitting the ground behind her sent her to her feet in a panic. Her heart thudded as she scanned for the source. It wasn't until she located it that she breathed a sigh of relief.

The noise came from a dead limb that had broken off a nearby tree where the owl had perched. She shook her head at the creature when it tilted its head and studied her. A reluctant smile curved her lips when it fluttered its feathers.

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“Crazy owl. If only I had wings. I would rather fly away than swim like a fish,” she murmured before she slid the strap of her bag over her shoulders.

She limped toward the river’s edge. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the icy water and gritted her teeth. As she waded deeper, the cold water helped numb the pain in her leg.

At least I’ll have a little relief.

When she was waist deep, she sank down and pushed off. She was almost to the section where the current would pull her into the fast-moving water when some instinct warned her that she was no longer alone. She looked back at the tree line. The owl released a loud hoot of warning before it took off in the opposite direction.

Thank you for the distraction, my friend, she thought as the current gripped her in its icy fingers and began carrying her downriver.

Her last glimpse before her view was obscured by water and rocks was of two shifters emerging out of the forest. One was lean while the other was thick and hairy. She forced her body to relax and became one with the current, and allowed it to carry her away from the danger that had been following her.

## Chapter 15

The black wolf came to a sudden halt, his senses heightened as he recognized a familiar scent in the air. As he pressed his nose to the ground, his head moved in a sweeping motion, searching for the origin of the elusive scent. As he moved through

the dense foliage, branches rustled against his sides and the scent intensified.

Once he and Peterson detected the unmistakable odor of the shifter they were chasing, their pace quickened. The warthog left a trail that was impossible to miss, with its strong and distinct scent lingering in the air. As they got closer, the scent became more intense, confirming their proximity.

The scent, now stronger and more identifiable, mingled with the faint one, filling him with a sense of dread. The idea that the shifters were close to Jayden filled him with a deep, bone-chilling fear. Among the animal kingdom, warthogs stood out for their impressive strength, which allowed them to survive in the harshest of environments. Jayden's slight frame made her vulnerable to unintentional harm, especially if she put up a fight, which he would be shocked if she didn't.

"Hey, Van, I found something," Peterson called.

His body went rigid as Peterson's voice suddenly broke the silence, calling out his name. With a slight bend of his head, he released the pack he was carrying and felt the weight shift on his shoulders. With a quick movement, he bent over, unzipped the waterproof pack, and rapidly got dressed. He hopped as he put on a sock and slid his foot into a boot, then repeated the process. He scooped up the pack and zipped it as he navigated the narrow animal trail that had been cut through the brambles.

Tracks from deer and raccoons were visible in the soft ground. He twisted to avoid catching his pants on some razor vines that were mixed in. He ran his fingers over the deer hair that had become entangled on a branch. The delicate hairs were dislodged as soon as he touched them and floated away in the gentle breeze.

He stopped when he reached Peterson. Peterson had already shifted, changed into his clothes, and moved to a different location when they stumbled upon the newly made footprints. He watched as Peterson ran his fingers over the razor vine before lifting

them to his nose and taking a sniff. Peterson's expression turned into a scowl, causing him to raise an eyebrow.

"What is it?"

"I found a piece of clothing. It has Jayden's scent on it," Peterson replied.

Van accepted the piece of fabric from his friend and took a deep breath. Jayden's scent permeated his senses, eliciting an instinctive reaction. He closed his eyes at the powerful response to even the slightest connection.

Mate.

He tightly gripped the fabric while his inner wolf let out a silent howl. They were getting closer. His eyes swept across the surrounding area.

Peterson proceeded further along the path before coming to another halt beside a sizable tree. Van carefully studied their surroundings, in particular searching for any signs of movement among the leaves and branches. Jayden's people were well known for concealing themselves among the dense foliage of the canopy. Was it possible she was there—hiding, afraid to reveal herself?

"I found something else," Peterson called out.

Van's brow furrowed in response to the noticeable alteration in Peterson's tone of voice. There was a sudden, unexpected catch in it. Determined, he pushed through the low brushes, ignoring the resistance of the foliage as he made his way to the tree. Peterson was crouched next to the trunk, examining it.

Peterson rose and held out his hand. "Blood."

Van leaned forward and sniffed the tips of Peterson's fingers. His nostrils flared at the tangy aroma of plant mixed with the scent of blood. The wolf in him strained to be released.

Mate hurt!

Calm, my friend. Calm. We will find her.

His canines extended, causing him to wince as he rolled his tongue over their sharpness. His wolf was obviously not interested in listening to him. He and Peterson had been keeping their wolves under tight control. The challenge in finding their mate was beginning to wear on them; especially knowing she was in imminent danger from other shifters.

"I would say the scent and tracks can't be more than an hour old," he replied, scanning the surrounding area.

"Let's hope that the assholes chasing her didn't find this as well," Peterson muttered.

Van murmured in agreement. He squeezed past Peterson and walked down the trail at a slower pace, scanning the ground. There were no signs of a struggle. That gave him a small measure of hope.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Bishop cursed as he stared at the river. His fox had picked up the scent of the human woman. The taste of her blood was seared into his senses.

“Damn, but I hate water,” Carter grumbled.

Bishop’s nose wrinkled with distaste. “I know. I’m surprised I can smell anything over you.”

Carter growled and shoved him. Bishop turned with a snarl of warning. He was at the end of his patience with the warthog.

“You smell like piss and shit,” he snapped.

Carter waved his hands. “What the hell do you expect? Do you see a fucking shower anywhere? I’ve been sleeping on the ground and shitting in the woods. I’m tired of this garbage. I’m not swimming across any cold ass river. I say let the damn wolves catch her, then we kill them and take her.”

Bishop pursed his lips and stared out across the river. Had the human swum across, or floated downstream? Had she circled around them? After almost two weeks in the forest, he was as fed up with sleeping on the ground and shitting in the woods as Carter. Hell, he could smell his own stench, and it was nauseating. They were so close to finding her. When they had come across the faint odor of her blood a couple of hours ago, he thought they had finally gotten a break.

Now we are back to square one.

“You’re right. Maybe we have been approaching this all wrong,” he murmured.

“I am? We are?” Carter muttered, staring at him in surprise. “What do you want to do?”

“Instead of following the woman, we follow the wolves,” he said.

Carter gave him an uneasy look. “I’d rather take my chances with the human. Those wolves are dangerous.”

“Yes, they are... unless we use their connection to the woman. They won’t do anything that will put her in harm’s way. We let them find her and we take her from them,” he explained.

Carter shook his head. “They ain’t going to just hand her over to us.”

“That’s why we kill them. But, that means we’ve got to make sure they don’t know we are coming,” he explained.

“How we gonna do that?” Carter asked.

Bishop motioned to the river. “We’ve got to get wet.”

Carter cursed under his breath before he stared moodily at the icy water. It was highly unlikely they could sneak up on the two wolf shifters. He had read the dossiers on Van Timberwolf and Peterson Redfoot. Ex-military special forces, two of the best trackers in the world, and highly motivated from what he had witnessed over the last month if the tension between them and the female was what he thought it meant. They wouldn’t do anything to put her in harm’s way.

She was hurt. He would use that to their advantage. He was tired of chasing the wild

goose. It was time to set a trap and let the wolves bring the human to them.

“Let’s go. The wolves will be here soon,” he said.

Carter started and glanced warily over his shoulder. “How do you know?” he asked.

“Because you aren’t the only one who stinks,” he said, walking toward the water.

The flutter of white paper caught Van’s attention as he jogged along the trail. He bent and picked it up. The paper was crinkled but still a pristine white. The name of the brand and the red letter showed it was from a two-inch roll of gauze that looked as though it had just been opened. He glanced around, searching for any other clues.

“What did you find?” Peterson asked.

He held the paper out. Peterson lifted it to his nose, sniffed, and nodded. “This was hers.”

“I can smell the warthog,” he said.

“The river?” Peterson muttered.

He nodded, unwilling to voice his fear. They didn’t know how badly Jayden was hurt. If it was bad, she might be trapped between the other shifters and the river. His worst fear was that she would try to cross it. The water would be high and treacherous after the recent storm.

“Be ready,” he said.

Peterson nodded. He regretted their decision not to bring a firearm. They had opted for light and minimal. They took off for the river, with him in front and Peterson on

his heels.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

“We have eyes on two shifters, General,” Ike Clanton said.

“Wolves?” Eric asked.

“Negative, sir. Looks like a warthog... and possibly a fox or wolverine,” Clanton responded.

Eric studied the feed on the camera being transmitted back to him. He would only have a fifteen-minute window before the satellite was out of range. His focus moved to two additional heat signatures that entered from the southwest.

“Do not engage. You have two additional bogeys incoming at five o’clock. Satellite range is about to pass. Split the team. I want eyes on both bogeys, understood,” he instructed.

“Roger that, sir, split, identify, but do not engage,” Clanton replied.

“I don’t want anyone interfering with the human. I want to know where she is going and what she is after. Do not engage until you are ordered,” he repeated.

“Roger that, sir. What do you want us to do if either of the targets intercepts the human?” Clanton asked.

“Eliminate the warthog and the other shifter. Let’s see how the human does with the wolves,” he responded.

“Roger that. Retrieval team out,” Clanton stated.

Eric kept his eyes on the satellite image. The first two had crossed the river and taken up a position on the far side. Their heat signatures wavered. He suspected it was a combination of the cold water reducing their body heat and possibly where they were sheltering.

His attention focused on the second two-shifter team approaching the river at a rapid pace from the forest. Those would be the two wolves. He thought of the dossier that he had pulled on the two. They were skilled in combat and extremely intelligent. What fascinated him the most was that the private detective he had sent in to learn more about what was going on at the complex had hinted at a bonding between the two wolves and the human female.

“Fascinating,” he murmured.

“Sir?” the tech asked, looking up at him.

“Let me know when the satellite is back over the site,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir,” the tech responded.

He was turning away when the tech cursed. Frowning, he turned back and watched as the young leopard shifter’s fingers flew over the keyboard. His frown deepened when the image on the satellite flickered before going dark.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded.

The leopard shifter didn’t look up. He was frantically typing lines of code and cursing under his breath. Sweat beaded on the tech’s brow before he reached over and yanked the power cable out of the wall.

“What’s going on?” the General demanded again.

The tech stared at the blank screen, his eyes slightly unfocused. The tech reluctantly swiveled in his chair and looked back at him with a worried expression.

“We’ve been found,” the tech said.

Irritation flared inside Eric. His eyes flashed to the black screen and the dangling plug. He employed the best hackers in the world.

“By whom?”

“I don’t know, but they are good—very good,” the tech said in a quavering voice.

Eric pulled his cellphone out of his pocket and punched in a button. He was already in motion before the call was answered. A calm settled over him.

“Operator,” a pleasant voice answered.

“Initiate Code Red,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir. Code Red has been initiated,” the Operator replied.

“Sir, what do you want me to do?” the tech asked behind him.

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He shot the young shifter an impatient glare. “Clear out this room and find out who in the hell got past the security system,” he snapped.

“Yes, sir.”

Victoria, Canada:

Pineminister Castle

\* \* \*

Isabella placed her cell phone beside her place setting, the soft glow of the screen contrasting against the rich, cherry-wood of the dining room table. Satisfaction and exhilaration coursed through her veins, lifting her spirits. She relished the satisfaction of outsmarting conceited male shifters who believed they were superior to everyone else.

As Frances entered the room, pushing a tray laden with a late tea, her smile faltered. Behind her loyal servant, her brother stepped into the room. As usual, he was weighed down by the burden of several ancient books and a thick folder overflowing with papers.

She carefully examined his messy appearance, noting his unkempt hair and rumpled attire. Despite his unbrushed hair, the dampness showed that he had at least showered. When Theodore looked up and noticed her, she instinctively bowed her head in acknowledgment of his presence. His eyes, magnified by his glasses, appeared unexpectedly clear and wide, with the corners crinkling slightly. Gone was



the mad, tired, and dazed expression that had been in his eyes since she arrived.

“You look like you slept well,” she commented.

Theodore nodded his head. “Very well, thank you. It is amazing what a nap can do to help clear the mind. I think having you and Frances here helps as well. I know having Frances’ wonderful cooking has certainly helped.”

“You needed some decent food, Mr. Theodore,” Frances replied with a beaming smile.

“My sister is a lucky shifter to have someone like you, my dear,” Theodore gushed.

Isabella couldn’t help but feel exasperated by her brother’s flirtatious behavior, making her want to roll her eyes. Sitting back, she watched as Frances carefully arranged her afternoon tea, the aroma of freshly brewed tea, soup, and sandwiches wafting through the air. With an impatient flick of her wrist, she snapped out her serviette and placed it over her lap, drawing a sheepish look from her brother and an amused one from Frances. With a thud, Theodore set down the heavy load of books and papers on the dining room table, causing the dishes to rattle. Isabella pursed her lips in disapproval at her brother’s nonchalant attitude towards the exquisite antique furniture that had been a cherished heirloom in their family for generations.

“Have you discovered anything new?” she inquired.

Theodore shook his head. “No, but I’m getting closer. I can feel it. Everything comes back to having a human. I just know it. I haven’t figured out why yet, but I will. If anyone can bring me a human, it’s you, Issy—Isabella. Thank you for that.”

“Find me the lost kingdom and that will be thanks enough,” she murmured, lifting her teacup.

“Have you heard anything from the men you hired?” Theodore asked.

“Not yet.”

Her brother was reassured with a serene smile, as if all the worries in the world had momentarily vanished. It was better for both of them if he remained blissfully ignorant. There was no point in alarming him about the added threat. If she wasn't already certain that Hyder was dead, she would have taken matters into her own hands and ended the life of the hyena shifter herself. The unexpected call from Eric Singleton had caught her off guard and left her feeling uneasy. There was only one shifter who could have shared the information about her interest in the humans—Hyder.

At least I know who he was working with.

The thought offered no solace, intensifying her feelings of uneasiness. She knew exactly who the Dii Bellatores were, and she understood the immense danger they posed. Their missions were driven by their insatiable hunger for power rather than a genuine devotion to God. That was something she could connect with.

She couldn't help but feel a sense of unease with Eric Singleton's involvement, knowing that it brought an added layer of danger to herself and Theodore. She had her own set of resources at her disposal. The long-standing alliances and accumulated wealth of multiple generations proved helpful when confronted with situations like Singleton.

As she looked at the books and papers scattered around Theodore's plate, she tried to make sense of the organized chaos. Lost in a different time period, her brother's mumbling drifted through the air. Her attention was captured by a vivid illustration in a nearby book, and she couldn't resist pulling it closer for a better look. Theodore's head popped up, his eyes dazed as he gave her a glare.

The madness is back, she thought with wry amusement.

“I’ll return it,” she promised.

With a nod, Theodore immersed himself back in his book. She enjoyed the delicious tea Frances prepared while she studied the illustration. In no time, she found herself completely immersed in the same realm as her brother, captivated by the tales of noble kings and valiant knights.

## Chapter 16

Staring downstream from the river’s edge, Van felt a cool breeze brush against his face. Jayden’s scent had been strong here. Unfortunately, so was the scent of the other two shifters.

“They are close. Their scent is too strong for them to be far,” Van said.

“Yeah, but that means Jayden is too damn close to them,” Peterson growled.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

“You don’t think—” His throat tightened as he continued to stare across the expanse of water. “You don’t think they caught her... do you?”

Peterson snorted. “Hell no! She would fight like a she-devil and we would have heard the men howling like babies. You saw what she did to Brennan. No, I hate to say this, but if I were a betting shifter, I would say she let the river take her downstream.”

His eyes were studying the swiftly moving water. “Why do you say that? It’s cold as hell and higher than normal because of the recent storm.”

“I didn’t say I liked the idea, only that I bet that is what she did. She’s smart. She wouldn’t have gone in if she didn’t think she could handle it. Remember, humans have had centuries to learn how to hide. Jayden knows her blood would be easy to track. What’s the best way to cover it? By going in the water. It would also make it harder to catch her,” Peterson reasoned.

“Bloody hell,” Van replied in a low voice before he released a huff. “She could be anywhere downriver. There’s no telling where she might come out,”

“She would’ve wanted to give herself ample space before coming ashore to put as much distance between herself and the shifters.”

“That’s if she knows she is being followed,” he pointed out.

Peterson grunted in agreement. “There are a series of waterfalls downstream. She’ll have to come out before the third one. Which side is the question? I suggest we split up. I take the far side and you take this one.”

Van nodded in agreement before a noise behind them had both of them swiveling with alarm. Peterson cursed when a large barred owl launched into the air from a nearby tree. He shaded his eyes and followed the owl's flight. It was headed along the river.

"For once, I wish I spoke owl," he muttered.

Peterson chuckled, stripping out of his clothes. "I'll meet you downriver."

He gathered Peterson's clothes and stuffed them into the waterproof bag. He remained in his two-legged form while Peterson shifted into his wolf. Minutes later, Peterson swam across the river and emerged on the far side.

He waited as Peterson shook the excess water off his fur and sniffed the ground, searching for the other shifters. After several passes, Peterson stopped and shook his head back and forth. No scent meant one of two things: either the men had floated down the river like Jayden or they had circled around. It was hard to tell as the scents were already fading.

Not wanting to waste any more time, he sprinted along the jagged shoreline of the river. Across the river, Peterson's red wolf kept pace. As he moved, he inhaled deeply, hoping to identify any abnormal odors. Twenty minutes later, his attention was drawn to the barred owl when it swooped past him and landed on a boulder fifteen feet in front of him.

The owl didn't move until he wove around several boulders. He was forced to climb up in order to traverse the narrow section where the boulders had formed the first set in a series of short waterfalls. There was no way to get around it without going back into the forest for a short way. Peterson appeared on the pile of boulders across from him. He returned his focus to the owl when it made a series of clicking noises before it took off again. Peterson's ears twitched, perking up as he watched the bird.

“Let’s keep going,” he called.

The red wolf dipped its head before jumping from one boulder to the next then disappearing from sight. He scrambled down over the boulders and climbed along the wooded bank. He wondered if it might have been easier to dive into the river and let the current take him after a section of soft soil collapsed and almost sent him tumbling onto the rocks below.

Grabbing a young sapling, he pulled himself up onto stable ground and breathed deeply, hoping to catch the familiar scent of Jayden. A mile farther downstream, he reached the second set of falls. A light breeze picked up and with it a tease of something carried on the wind.

He picked up speed when he heard Peterson’s low howl. Breaking through the forest to the river bank again, he climbed the series of boulders until he reached the top. There was a ten-foot gap where the water was funneled through the narrow opening over the second short spillway. Backing up, he calculated the distance before he jumped the gap, joining Peterson on the other side. He shrugged the bag free and retrieved Peterson’s clothes as his friend’s body shimmered and he shifted back to his two-legged form.

“She’s close. She came ashore before the falls,” Peterson murmured, drying off and dressing.

“Did you get a good scent of her trail?”

Peterson nodded. “Yeah. I found some tracks as well. It’s the strangest damn thing. I would have missed the spot if it wasn’t for that damn owl. It landed right in front of me and scratched at the ground before flying into the tree above.”

His eyes lifted to the sky above. It would be dark in less than an hour. The

temperature plummeted quickly as the sun went down. The scent of Jayden's blood lingered in his thoughts. She would be wet and possibly hypothermic after spending so much time in the river. Concern pushed him forward with a brisk nod to Peterson once he was dressed.

Peterson pointed toward the tracks he had found leading into the shadowy forest. Van gritted his teeth when they had to stop and double-back a few times. Even wet and injured, Jayden didn't take any shortcuts in hiding her tracks. Darkness had fallen by the time they were sure they were close.

When they finally caught up with her, Van estimated they had covered close to eight grueling miles over treacherous terrain. He had cursed every step of the way. Halfway from the river, Peterson had surged ahead of him, taking the lead.

The sight of a fire, its flickering glow and dancing shadows on the rocks, filled him with a sense of relief. After almost three hellish weeks, they had finally caught up with Jayden. He didn't know which he wanted to do first: kiss her or throttle her for causing him to age a hundred years from worry.

As the breeze shifted, a subtle smell of burning wood wafted through the air. He sniffed the air, his senses heightened, alert for any trace of the other shifters in the vicinity. Peterson's eyes scanned the area, taking in every detail.

"It looks clear, but I'll do a perimeter check once I know she is safe. At least she found shelter from the wind in the rocks. You take the right while I go up on the left. Whatever you do, don't spook her," Peterson murmured.

He nodded in agreement. Together, they moved in unison, each taking a side, and emerged at the same time on the flat outcrop of rock. Van carefully scanned the area, noting the overhang that protected Jayden from the wind and any rain that might fall. She had built a small fire using dried wood to keep the smoke down. A pair of leather

boots were positioned upside down on twin branches, still damp from her earlier swim.

A frown creased his brow when he noticed that Jayden was lying on her side with her back to the fire. She was tucked between the wall of rock and the flames. Their mate was lying on a thin, silver emergency blanket and had another covering her. The crinkle of the blanket and a low, muffled whimper mixed with the crackle of the fire and wind blowing through the trees.



“Damn it!”

The howling wind swallowed his curse, leaving only a faint whisper in the air. In just five swift strides, he closed the gap between them. Peterson matched his strides.

He gently turned her over onto her back, swallowing another curse when shivers shook her body. Her eyes flew open and he barely dodged the knife clenched in her hand.

“It’s okay, Jayden. It’s okay, love. Peterson and I are here. We’ve got you,” he murmured, holding her wrist in his hand.

“She’s burning up,” Peterson muttered, pressing his hand to her forehead.

“No shit, wolf-brains,” she retorted before closing her eyes.

“Told you she was a fighter,” Peterson replied with a snort of laughter.

“We need to get her warm. She won’t make it through the night otherwise,” he growled.

He shrugged off the pack he was wearing at the same time as Peterson pulled the one Jayden had toward him. They searched through both, seeking any items that would make Jayden more comfortable. The backpack he had been carrying contained only a few essential items. Fortunately, they had a pair of lightweight wool blankets. He pulled them out.

“There’s not much in here,” Peterson said before he pushed Jayden’s backpack to the side and rose. “I’ll get more firewood.”

“And some moss. We can use it to make her a decent bed,” he said.

As he assessed their meager supplies, he wished they had brought more. Neither he nor Peterson expected to be gone as long as they had been. They had opted for light and fast.

“We need a frigging medical team,” he muttered.

The first thing he needed to do was get warmer clothes on Jayden. He gritted his teeth when she shrank from his touch and mumbled for him to go away. Grim determination filled him.

“Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you warm,” he coaxed.

“Turn into a dog. That might help,” she mumbled.

He chuckled. “I may end up doing that, then you can wear my clothes along with your own.”

“Don’t-don’t re-remind me of wh-what you look like naked. I can’t stop-stop thinking about it as it-it is,” she said in a chattering voice.

He winced at the raw, scratchy sound of her voice. “So, you like what you saw. That’s good to know.”

“O-of co-course th-that’s what you’d remember,” she mumbled in a barely audible voice.

He leaned over to catch her words above the wind. His lips twitched with amusement. She was the most obstinate woman he had ever met—and his wolf loved it.

She perfect. She strong.

Yes, she is, but it won't do us any good if we don't get her warm.

He shrugged out of his jacket, pulled the silver blanket back despite her growling and threats, and slid it along one slender arm. The second she felt the warmth of his jacket, she was practically clawing at him to snuggle into it.

She leaned weakly against him as he pulled the other sleeve and adjusted the warm jacket around her body and zipped it. Her head fell forward against his chest and she released a raw cough.

“The water... was cold.”

He pulled the hood over her head. “I know. It was too cold for me. I let Peterson swim across,” he teased.

“Smart.”

He looked up when Peterson returned. His friend had his arms filled with branches. On top of the treasure of kindling were patches of moss.

“How is she?” Peterson asked, dropping the wood and moss he had retrieved on the ground by the fire.

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“Good. She said I was smart for letting you swim across the river,” he replied.

Peterson chuckled. “It was cold enough to freeze my?—”

“Ca-Can you two go away? I’m trying to sleep,” she grumbled.

Peterson’s grin grew. “Let’s get you comfy.”

He cradled Jayden in his arms, trying to warm her up while Peterson spread the moss over the rocky surface. Peterson disappeared two more times, returning a short time later with more moss. Once he was satisfied there was enough to provide some cushion and protection from the hard, cold, rocky surface, he placed an emergency blanket on top of the moss.

Jayden moaned in protest when he loosened his hold on her. He brushed her fevered cheek with the backs of his fingers. She twisted her face into his chest, trying to burrow as close as she could to him. He looked up when Peterson bent to scoop her into his arms.

“Peterson’s going to lay you on a bed he made.”

“Co-cold.”

He grimaced and looked at Peterson with a worried frown. She wasn’t shivering as much as before, but she was still shaking. They needed to get some medicine into her.

“Come on, little tigress. Let’s get you closer to the fire,” Peterson encouraged, lifting

her as if she weighed no more than a feather.

“I-I like that,” she moaned.

“What do you like?” Peterson asked.

“Being-being a-a-tigress. They-they eat dogs for-for breakfast.”

“You can eat us any time you want,” Peterson teased.

“In your dreams,” she scoffed before releasing a dry, hacking cough that left her weak.

“Oh, we’ve been dreaming it, love. I can assure you—we’ve been dreaming it,” he teased, covering her with the wool blankets.

“That is-is wrong on-on so many... levels,” she retorted before sighing and closing her eyes as the combined warmth of the jacket, blankets, and fire began to sink in.

“Peterson, grab some pain reliever and the water bottle for me. I want to get some in her. The sooner I do, the sooner her fever will come down,” he requested.

Peterson retrieved the first aid kit and handed it to him. He opened it and pulled out a packet of the pain relievers and two cough and cold tablets. He wished he had something stronger, but this would have to do.

“You need to take a look at where she was bleeding,” Peterson said.

“Yeah. I want to get the pain pills in her first. Why don’t you do a perimeter search to make sure we don’t have any surprise visitors,” he quietly requested.

“Sure thing. I’ll bring back more firewood as well,” Peterson said, adding several pieces of wood to the fire before he disappeared into the darkness again.

He gently slid an arm under Jayden’s shoulders and lifted her up far enough to give her the pills in his hand. She tried to push his hand away and turn her face, but he was persistent. She reluctantly opened her mouth and took the pills followed by a sip of water to wash them down.

She was shivering again and softly moaning. He gently laid her back down and tucked the blankets around her upper body. Breathing deeply, he leaned forward, trying to pinpoint where she was hurt.

“Are you sniffing me?” she snapped, forcing an eye open to glare at him.

His eyes lifted and locked on hers. “I’m trying to find out where you’re hurt.”

“It’s my leg. The razor vines got me,” she groaned before sighing. “I didn’t think I’d ever feel warm again.”

He grunted in response. It was probably better if he kept his mouth shut. Sliding down, he gently probed her left leg before touching her right leg.

“Ouch! That hurts!” she snapped, swatting at him and trying to move away.

“I need to take a look at it,” he growled.

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“No, you don’t. It’s fine. I put stuff on it. I just want to sleep and you are keeping me awake,” she retorted.

“I don’t trust you to have taken care of it properly.”

“I don’t need you to take care of me. I can take care of myself.”

“Not from where I’m sitting,” he snapped back.

They glared at each other for a good minute before she laid back, pulled the blanket back over herself, and muttered something about making him into a coat when she was feeling better. His lips twitched at her grouchy mood. Pulling the blanket back, he carefully pulled the hiking pants up. The lower half of her leg just below her knee was covered in a white gauze bandage. He removed the outer gauze before peeling back the thick patch. A half-dozen deep cuts ran a good six inches down her leg.

“I’m surprised it took you so long to find me,” she murmured.

He glanced up at her face. She was lying with her eyes closed. It was hard to tell if her face was flushed with fever in the firelight. At least she had stopped shivering.

“You didn’t make it easy... neither did the storm. We found where you must have stayed. That was pretty clever,” he said.

Twisting around, he searched through the medical supplies until he found a tube filled with hydrogen peroxide. He leaned over her leg and twisted the top off of the tube. Bending forward, he softly blew as he poured the clear liquid along the cuts. She

wincing as the peroxide bubbled up.

When it was finished, he gently dabbed the excess liquid away and followed by filling the cuts with a Betadine gel. It was hard to see if any of the thorns were still embedded in her skin. The points, curved like a shark's tooth, were razor sharp, and the tips often broke off deep in the skin. If they weren't cleaned out, they could lead to infection. He could only hope the peroxide had removed any particles.

"It was too dangerous to travel. I was lucky I found the spot. Talking about danger, where's Peterson?" she asked, struggling to sit up.

With a panicked expression, she scanned the campsite, her eyes darting from one corner to another. He pressed his hand firmly against her shoulder, his eyes conveying a silent message of disapproval. She reached up and gripped his hand. He was relieved to discover that the previous icy chill had been replaced by a comforting warmth, causing him to breathe a sigh of relief.

"He's fine. He's doing a perimeter check and gathering more firewood," he said.

Exhausted, she laid back and closed her eyes. Playing with the edge of the blanket, her eyes continuously scanned the surrounding area, occasionally glancing over at him. She anxiously chewed on her bottom lip, deep in thought.

"You don't understand. There are two shifters in the forest. I overheard them. They said they are going to kill you. They were going to let you find me first, and then they were going to kill you," she whispered.

"We know they are here. That's why Peterson is checking the surrounding area. You did a good job covering your tracks," he said.

"Not good enough if you found me. Please... be careful, both of you. I don't want



anyone else getting hurt because of me,” she murmured, closing her eyes again.

“You should be glad you aren’t feeling well, otherwise I’d let you know what I think about that,” he bit out.

“I had to... leave. I promised I would....”

He frowned when her voice faded. He wasn’t sure if it was the antihistamine he had given her or exhaustion, but she appeared to have fallen asleep. He finished doctoring her leg, wrapped it in another bandage before he pulled her pant leg down and tucked the two woolen blankets around her.

Rising, he added more wood to the fire. The wind was howling, delivering a bone-chilling cold that would be brutal outside the protection of the rock overhang. He looked up at the patch of sky visible through the treetops. It was a brilliant night.

He gathered their combined resources and inventoried them. Van kept going back to check on Jayden’s serene face. She was the bravest woman he had ever met. She was perhaps the most stubborn one he had ever met as well and he knew quite a few of them, starting with Tracy.

Shaking his head, he repacked their supplies into Jayden’s backpack. There was only a day or two worth of food left. He didn’t know how she had stretched what she must have taken so far.

“What are we going to do with you?” he murmured, his expression turning tender when she rolled onto her side, facing him, and tucked her hands under her cheek.

Love her. Hold her. Keep her safe, his wolf replied.

It’s not going to be easy, but someone’s got to do it.

## Chapter 17

Peterson entered the campsite nearly three hours later. He placed the firewood he had gathered next to the fire and squatted down. His eyes locked on Jayden's face.

"How long has she been asleep?" he asked.

"She's been asleep since shortly after you left," Van said.

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“I can’t believe she actually ran,” he murmured.

“I know. She said something strange before she fell asleep.”

“What?”

Van pursed his lips, frowned, and shook his head in bewilderment. “She said she had to leave. That she made a promise.”

“What kind of promise? To whom?”

Van shook his head again, this time in frustration. “I don’t know. She also overheard two shifters saying they were going to kill us.”

Peterson snorted a terse laugh of wry amusement. “Those two and about a hundred others. I ran a security check about two miles. It was clear.” He shook his head and threw a stick into the fire. “I can’t believe she was close enough to hear them saying that and not get caught. I swear that woman has a death wish.”

“I agree. We’ve got to get her out of here and back to a place where we can keep her safe, but it’s going to be a few days before she is strong enough to travel. There’s no way a rescue copter can get to us here. We’ll need to get her to Hurricane Ridge. Then we could get her airlifted to Bremerton or Seattle,” Van suggested.

Peterson frowned and waved a hand at Jayden. “You just said it’s going to be a few days before she is strong enough. She needs time to rest and we need to get some food in her stomach. Damn, but I wish we had brought more supplies.”

Van pursed his lips. “You aren’t the only one. We’ll need to build a temporary shelter. My wolf senses rain and we need to keep her warm and dry. I’ll scout the area for materials we can use and start bringing them up once it gets light.”

He nodded. “Why don’t you get some rest? I’ll take the first watch and wake you in a few hours.”

Van nodded, rubbing his arms. “Thanks. I didn’t realize how damn cold it was getting.”

He chuckled and nodded to the pallet where Jayden was curled up. “You can help keep her warm. I’ll give you my jacket when we switch out.”

“I appreciate it,” Van mumbled.

“Let’s just hope she doesn’t kill you or me in the morning when she wakes up and finds out she isn’t alone,” he added as Van slid down next to Jayden.

“It might be worth it—to get warm and to hold her,” Van replied.

He released a low chuckle and placed a few more thick branches on the fire before he turned away from it. He didn’t want the light to affect his night vision. While he hadn’t picked up on the shifters they had smelled and Jayden had overheard, that didn’t mean they couldn’t be close. He sat back with his back against the rocks, drew his legs up, and slid his hands into his pockets to keep them warm.

She can’t get away again, he thought.

It felt strange being close to her again. The few times they had been together had been far too brief. He leaned his head back and stared out at the dark forest. Flashes of those times swept through his mind. Seeing her laugh with the few human

children. The compassion on her face when she looked at her grandparents. The defiance in her eyes when he tried to steal a cookie from her.

And the look of longing and curiosity when she gave me one.

It had been a long and difficult road to catch her, but it had been worth it. He never imagined that he and Van would find their mate, much less that it would be with a human woman. He also never expected it to be so tough to court her.

She a fighter.

Yes, she is.

I like that.

So do I, my friend. So do I.

Images of what their life would be like kept him warm as the night wore on. He imagined Jayden picking out what furnishings would go in their new home, riding horses on the ranch he and Van had purchased, exploring the trails and mountains of her people's new home, and possibly one day having a larger family—if she wanted children. A smile curved his lips at the thought of a having a little girl with her mother's hair and attitude running around the house with a toy lance.

We've just got to convince her to give us a chance.

"I'm freezing my ass off," Carter grumbled.

Bishop gritted his teeth to keep from snapping at the warthog. Carter wasn't the only one who was cold. Between their swim earlier in the day, the temperature drop, and the damn wind, he'd be lucky if his balls didn't freeze and fall off. The idea sent

another wave of shivers through him.

“Why can’t we build a fire?” Carter whined.

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He glared at Carter. “Do you want to alert those damn wolves to our location?”

Carter huffed and tucked his hands in his armpits. Bishop suppressed a shudder of distaste. He knew how bad the other man smelled even after their frigid bath in the river. He also knew that Carter wouldn’t be washing his hands before he ate.

If we can find anything.

This mission had gone about as far south as he was willing to go. Their clothes hadn’t fully dried before darkness fell, they were out of food, and he was out of patience. He was having serious second thoughts about capturing this human. She had led them in circles, chasing their tails.

How in the hell had she run circles around them? Every damn time we picked up her trail, it led back to the same spot where we started.

He rubbed his raw hands together, wincing at the cuts on them. They had found where she had been hiding on the cliff. Hell, they had probably been standing right on top of her!

The thought that they had been so close and clueless burned at his pride. He had expected to catch her within a few hours of her escaping. The storm hadn’t helped. Still, she was a damn human! It shouldn’t be this difficult. His fox should have been able to track her.

Their lone break had come when he caught the scent of blood where she had run into the vines. That had eventually led them to the river. He didn’t know if she had been

crazy enough to swim across or had doubled back. The scent had ended at the water, but with the water as high as it was and cold, he couldn't imagine a human female being crazy enough to go in it. Hell, he wouldn't have made it if not for Carter grabbing him when the current sucked him under.

"Screw this. Let's head back," he growled, rising.

Carter looked up at him with a surprised expression. "What about the boss? What's she going to say when we come back empty-handed again?"

"We aren't going to tell her," he snapped.

"But-but, she told us to not come back without one," Carter stuttered.

He sneered at the other man and waved his hand. "Do you want to freeze your balls off?"

"Naw. I like my balls," Carter mumbled, lowering his hands to cup his groin.

Another shudder of distaste swept through Bishop. "We'll find another way to get the boss some humans—ways that don't involve freezing to death."

"I like that idea," Carter eagerly agreed.

Bishop gritted his teeth and prayed the journey back to civilization went a lot better than their mission had so far. He needed warmth, food, and sleep so he could plan his next move. Maybe Lorne Timberwolf could be of use—if he wasn't dead.

The hoot of an owl above them drew his attention. He sneered at the creature who was watching them from a nearby branch. He wondered if owl tasted anything like a chicken. His stomach rumbled with hunger and his eyes narrowed.



The owl, possibly sensing it was in peril, took off into the night. His lips curled into a vicious smile. Roasted pork was beginning to sound good right now, so he knew it was definitely time to get the hell back to civilization.

Anchorage, Alaska

\* \* \*

“Sir, the report you requested.”

Eric reached out and took the folder his lieutenant was holding out. With a nod, he dismissed the man and returned to his seat. After the Nova Principia was compromised, Eric and his crew had retreated to their northern complex. The move, while always a possibility, had still been an inconvenience and costly. Neither of which sat well with him. The humans were already an expensive expenditure when he considered the losses he had incurred in human resources, equipment, and political connections.

He opened the report and read through it. As he suspected, Isabella Wyland didn't appreciate having her toes stepped on. He had suspected she was the one behind the sudden interest in his business.

That still didn't explain how she knew about the satellite.

He turned to the page on Talon Nightsky. The Director of the SBSI was a shrewd shifter. The documentation said he was a Snow Leopard, but there was something off about the man—and that irritated Eric. He didn't like it when his gut warned him that not everything was as it appeared.

Turning the page, he studied the last set of satellite images that had been taken. He spread them out on his desk and stood back. His eyes moved from the first in the

series to the last. The frown creasing his brow deepened as he compared the track of the human female with the map he had on the far wall.

Comprehension dawned and a curse slipped from his lips as he rounded his desk and placed his finger on the last spot he had pinned in blue and the white dot that indicated the cave where the humans had been evacuated from a few months ago.

“Son-of-a-shifter,” he cursed.

He twisted, returning to his desk, and reached for the satellite phone. Staring at the map, he waited for his team leader out in the field to answer. His impatience built when there was no answer.

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He tried three more times to connect before he disconnected the phone and dropped it back onto his desk. It was possible that there was no satellite reception at the moment where his men were. There was also the possibility that his men had been taken out by the same source that had killed the last teams. He wished he hadn't been quite so hasty in ordering Hyder's termination now.

Picking up his desk phone, he punched in the number for the operator.

"How may I direct your call, sir?" the Operator greeted in a pleasant voice.

"Disregard this call," he stated.

"Yes, sir," the smooth feminine voice replied without hesitation. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No."

He disconnected the call and lowered the receiver back to its cradle. Sliding his hand into his pocket, he retrieved his cell phone. In seconds, he had typed out an encrypted message and hit the send button.

The definition of insanity was repeating the same actions relentlessly, only to experience the same disastrous outcomes. Two teams had already been lost by him. He wouldn't risk losing another.

No, this called for an elite group of soldiers. It also called for the most extreme secrecy.

The Knights of the Dii Bellatores, known far and wide as the epitome of excellence in warfare, were the soldiers he knew he could rely on. They were unrivaled, known for their unwavering loyalty and ruthless tactics when the situation demanded. There were ten shifters, a diverse group comprising both men and women, each possessing their own unique set of specialized skills.

On his way back to the map, his eyes lingered on the white pin, almost as though he thought it could reveal all the solutions he was looking for. He considered it dispassionately. In certain situations, taking matters into your own hands was the only way to ensure a job gets done.

## Chapter 18

Jayden snuggled back against the heater curled around her. She was enjoying her dreams too much to wake up. After yesterday, she wasn't sure she would ever feel warm again. Right now, she was nice and toasty. Her bed wasn't super soft, but it was soft enough that she didn't want to leave it.

The only problem was her bladder. She groaned, hating the idea of getting up, but realizing she had little choice unless she wanted to have an embarrassing accident. With a sigh, she forced one eye open, then the other.

A frown of confusion caused her to blink and rub at her eyes. She didn't remember building a shelter. In fact, she wouldn't have unless she was in dire straits. Building a shelter like this would make it too difficult to conceal her tracks.

She stiffened when the heavy band around her waist and the heater pressed against her back moved. Her eyes widened as memories that she had thought had been dreams came flooding back.

Van and Peterson—They had found her.

She slid her hand down to the weight holding her down. Yep, it was an arm. A large hand was curled against her belly, reminding her that she needed to visit a tree or bush soon.

She carefully lifted the hand without waking the man. Gingerly scooting out from under the blankets covering her, she rolled onto her knees and glanced at the sleeping man. Her breath caught at the beauty of Van's face relaxed in sleep.

He mumbled in his sleep. Worried that he would notice she had risen, she pushed the pillow they had made using a shirt and moss up against him. It was still warm.

Pushing off the ground, she rounded the firepit, grabbed her boots, and exited the makeshift tent. Shivering, she pulled on her boots before her feet could get cold, then hugged the oversized jacket she was wearing closer to her body. She stuffed her hands in the pockets. It felt like another storm was moving in.

She glanced around the ledge, searching for Peterson. Another blast of cold air hit her and she grimaced. She would worry about finding Peterson after she relieved her aching bladder.

Spying her lance, she grabbed it and worked her way up and over the rocks until she was a good hundred yards from the camp. Scanning the surrounding area to make sure she was safe and alone, she squatted and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Nothing like a bit of frigid air in the nether regions to wake a girl up," she muttered.

"Jayden!"

Her head jerked up when she heard Van's panicked shout. She muttered an oath before she rose, pulled up her pants, and fastened them. She blanched when he shouted her name again.

Nothing like letting the bad guys know where they were! she thought with dismay.

Grabbing her lance that she had dropped next to her, she hurried back the way she came. She was rounding the rocks when she heard Peterson's voice. He was livid!

"What do you mean you lost her? How the hell did you do that?" Peterson snapped.

"She snuck out while I was asleep," Van retorted.

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“How the hell did you fall asleep?”

Van released a low growl. “I was up all night on guard duty so you could get some rest, remember?”

“I’m sorry, man. I shouldn’t have left. This is all my fault,” Peterson muttered, dropping the string of fish he had been holding.

“Well, I’ll forgive you if you plan on cooking those for breakfast. I’m starving,” she said, peering down at them. “You know, the way you two were yelling, anyone within five miles of us probably heard you.”

In perfect unison, the men turned, their scowls conveying disapproval while their expressions hinted at a subtle sense of relief. Leaning against her lance, a sudden bout of lightheadedness washed over her, causing her to sway slightly. She wondered if her exhaustion and feeling unwell were causing her vertigo, or if it was the intense, relieved glances they were giving her.

As she swayed, they must have noticed because in an instant, Van had swept her up in his arms while Peterson stood close by, concern etched on his face. Peterson reached out to caress her cheek with his fingers. As she involuntarily shrank back, a mischievous twinkle appeared in her eye and she twitched her nose playfully, accompanied by a wry smile.

“Your hands smell like fish. I want to eat some, not smell like one,” she replied with a wary expression tinged with amusement to ease her response.

“Oh, right. Sorry. Why did you take off? How are you feeling?” he muttered.

“I needed to pee, and I’m fine. I think I’m just hungry,” she replied.

“Peterson—”

“I’m on it,” Peterson replied.

Jayden rested her head against Van’s shoulder, savoring the gentle rise and fall of his chest with each breath. The rhythmic thumping of his heartbeat offered a strangely reassuring sensation. She fought against acknowledging the overwhelming feeling of comfort and safety that washed over her as she melted into his embrace, but it was a losing battle. Her senses were overwhelmed by the two wolves’ presence. She was overcome with another wave of lightheadedness, leaving her feeling weak and disoriented, as if she had become a stranger in her own body. As hunger gnawed at her, she realized she needed to eat.

She was honest enough with herself to admit that it felt good to have some company after weeks of solitude, with only the hooting of the owl for companionship. Peterson retrieved her lance from where she had dropped it after Van’s sudden embrace. He carried it back down to the camp as Van gingerly navigated the rocks while keeping a firm grip around her. Despite her desire to assert her self-reliance, she couldn’t help but be entertained by the men fussing over her, treating her like a fragile blossom. In this unfamiliar territory, she felt a mix of excitement and apprehension, unsure of what to expect.

“I did a perimeter check before I went fishing,” Peterson was saying as he placed her lance against the lean-to before picking up the fish he had caught.

“Did you find anything?” Van asked.



Peterson nodded. “Yeah. I went out a few more miles and found where the shifters who had been following Jayden had made camp. It was empty. I followed their scent for another couple of miles. I think they got tired of chasing her because they were making a beeline back toward the service road and not bothering to hide the fact.”

Jayden felt a glow building in her stomach when Peterson shot her a warm smile and winked at her. Van carried her over and lowered her to her feet. She sank down on a log they had added to her campsite. She looked around her with a bemused smile.

“I must have been out for a while for you guys to have done all of this,” she said, waving her hand at the shelter.

“Almost two days. You needed your rest and time to heal,” Van replied.

She looked up when Van wrapped one of the wool blankets around her shoulders before placing the other one over her legs. She didn’t move when he laid the back of his fingers against her forehead. He released a pleased grunt when he noticed her skin felt cool to the touch instead of heated.

“No fever, that’s good. How is your throat? Do you feel any tightness in your chest? Headaches? How does your leg feel?” he asked.

“I’m fine. No aches or pains except in my stomach because I’m hungry,” she replied.

“There are some crackers and a couple of energy bars in the backpack. That should hold her over until I’ve got the fish ready,” Peterson said.

Van gave a curt nod in response and disappeared back into the lean-to where her backpack was stashed. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders more tightly when another stiff breeze swept through the trees. It felt like there was another storm coming.

“Why are you two here?” she blurted out.

Peterson paused as he bent over the fire and frowned at her. “Because you are.”

Van partially unwrapped the protein bar and held it out to her. She took the offering and bit into it. Her stomach twisted with hunger pains and she had to resist the desire to eat too fast.

“Thank you,” she mumbled around the sweet and salty bar.

“Would you like something to drink?” Van asked.

“A cup of tea would be wonderful,” she replied.

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She decided if they wanted to pamper her, who was she to argue? It would keep them busy and give her time to sort out the emotions raging through her like a raging river. The idea sent a shiver through her.

No more cold water, she thought with distaste.

Peterson's low growl of concern made her realize he had witnessed her shaking and pulling the blanket tighter. She gave him a reassuring smile and shook her head when he opened his mouth. Pampering was okay, but there needed to be a limit.

"I'm fine. I was just remembering how cold the river was," she said. "That fish is beginning to smell delicious."

Peterson looked down at the fish he had placed on a spit over the fire. "I found some salt and pepper in your supplies."

"Right now, I'd probably eat it raw if I had to," she confessed.

She averted her eyes when she saw the flash of anger in his. Van stepped close and held out a cup of hot tea. She took the cup, moaning with pleasure at the heat and tantalizing aroma of orange spice.

"Thank you again. I could get used to this. I don't think my parents or grandparents ever spoiled me this much," she teased, trying to ease the awkward tension she was suddenly feeling.

"Get used to it, because it is going to happen frequently," Van said, sitting down

beside her.

She swallowed before taking a sip of her tea. “Are you sure that the two shifters following me left?”

Peterson nodded. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure. From the last place they stayed, I’d say they were probably out of food and not prepared for the weather to be so crappy.”

“Why do you say that? How can you know?” she asked.

Peterson touched his nose. “There was no scent of food or any remains and they bulldozed a path through the forest—at least the warthog did. It was hard to miss his scent. He was pretty ripe.”

She bit her lip and looked out over the forest. From their position on the rock ledge, she could see a pretty good distance down. The trees were swaying in the stiff wind.

“This fish is done,” Peterson said, placing the piece of fish skin-side down on a piece of bark. “Sorry about not having a real plate.”

She snorted out a laugh. “Until I ate at the compound, I’ve never eaten on a ‘real’ plate before. At least not the glass ones they had there.”

Her stomach growled as the delicate succulent aroma of the cooked trout rose from her plate. Van held out the spork she had brought with her supplies and she gingerly pulled a piece of the fresh meat off and popped it into her mouth. Her eyes closed as the flaky white meat melted over her tastebuds. A low groan of pleasure slipped from her and she gave up caution as her stomach demanded more.

“This is so good,” she moaned.

Both men chuckled at her obvious pleasure. She didn't care. She had devoured almost a third of it before she realized no one was talking. Looking up, she felt her face warm at being the center of both men's attention. She swallowed the piece of fish she was chewing and motioned at the two fish cooking over the fire.

Peterson picked up a piece of fish, placed it on another piece of bark, and held it out to Van before retrieving a piece for himself. Unease built inside her when he came and sat down on the other side of her. While her body was thrilled about being nestled between the two men, her mind was frantically sending her a warning that she was about to be in big trouble if she wasn't careful.

"Now that you've had some rest, are feeling better, and have a little food in your stomach, perhaps you can answer a few questions that we've both been asking ourselves since you left," Van said.

She warily glanced at him. "What sort of questions?"

"Like why you've been resistant to letting us court you," Van replied.

"And what promise you made that was so important that you would risk your life to keep," Peterson added.

She made a face, picked at her fish, and mumbled, "I must have been out of it if I told you about that."

Pineminister Castle, Victoria, Canada

\* \* \*

Isabella Wyland had been raised with too much discipline to curse, but she was very close to losing the precious grip on her temper. Once again, those she had hired had

disappointed her. Turning, she shut the door to the den and twisted the lock. She did not want any interruptions or distractions as she laid out her next plan of action.

The phone call from Hyder's business associate had been extremely disappointing. The call from Bishop had been short and tense. He did not have the same fortitude for discipline that Hyder had. That acknowledgement made her grimace. Perhaps she had been a bit overly optimistic when she left Hyder to deal with the mess he made.

Crossing the elegant, richly furnished room, she pulled her cellphone out of her pocket. The call she was about to make would be a difficult and humbling one, but it needed to be done. She pulled up the number that she had paid a considerable amount to secure, pursed her lips, and punched it in. The call was answered on the first ring.

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“Operator,” a young, female voice greeted.

“Lady Isabella Wyland for Eric Singleton, please,” she replied.

“One moment, ma’am,” the woman replied.

There was a pause. There was no annoying music, just silence and the sound of her own breathing. She walked over to the window and stared out at the growing darkness.

“Ms. Wyland, this is a surprise,” Eric Singleton greeted.

“Isabella, please, and I hardly doubt it is much of a surprise, Eric,” she responded.

His sardonic chuckled made her wince internally. “You’ve caused me a considerable inconvenience, not to mention money.”

She lifted an eyebrow at the unexpected comment. “How so? I hope you don’t think dealing with Hyder as being an expense. I know it couldn’t have been that much of an inconvenience.”

“I’m not talking about Furman. I’m talking about notifying the SBSI of my Port Angeles headquarters.”

“I have better sense than that, to do something that would jeopardize our acquaintance, Eric,” she replied with a frown.

Her statement was greeted with silence. She was responsible for many things in her life, but she knew better than to mess with someone like Eric Singleton. She wouldn't doubt he would return from the dead if he could to haunt her... or worse, drag her down to hell with him.

"How did you get this number?" he asked.

"It was not difficult to put two-and-two together when I realized that even Hyder was terrified. There are very few shifters in the world that could scare him. I was one of them. I simply needed to find out who the others might be and create a short list. It required calling in some favors. Your number was the most expensive, so I'm assuming Hyder was working with you when the mission he was on didn't turn out," she explained.

"Who gave you my number?" he demanded.

She huffed out a sigh of irritation. "I'll let you figure it out and hope you don't because my source has been a very good one. I would like to discuss hiring your services."

"To do what, exactly?"

She stared out of the window with a smile. There had been a note of curiosity in his voice that meant he would at least entertain her proposition.

"To finish what Hyder couldn't—bring me two humans, preferably a breeding age male and female," she said.

His low chuckle caused her hand to tighten around her cell phone. "That's it? You want to breed humans—or rent them out?"



She pursed her lips again before forcing her mouth to relax. “What I want them for is none of your business. I’m offering you a job. You are an entrepreneur, aren’t you?”

“It will cost you,” he replied.

“I would have been shocked it if didn’t,” she scoffed.

“Three million—each,” he said.

“Done.”

Silence followed her ready agreement. “No argument. Interesting. Something tells me that you know something about the humans that others may not,” he suggested.

“Six million—and the head of Lorne Timberwolf,” she said.

“Done,” he replied, mimicking her.

This time when he chuckled, it sent a shiver down her spine. The sound was filled with menace... and promise. She was glad it was not directed at her.

“I’ll let you know when the assets have been obtained,” he said before disconnecting the call.

Chapter 19

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Peterson watched as Jayden washed her hands and face in the warm water Van had heated for her after their meal. He hadn't missed how she had redirected the conversation after their questions without answering them. She entertained them with tales of her journey, and they were particularly surprised when she mentioned the owl that had accompanied her shortly after leaving camp. He couldn't help but wonder if it was the same one that had been following himself and Van.

When she described her harrowing close encounter with two shifters named Bishop and Carter, he found himself less entertained. He stored those names in his memory to investigate later when they were back in civilization. His expression softened when Jayden yawned and pulled the wool blanket around her shoulders.

"It feels like it is going to rain," she said.

"It is," Van replied.

As soon as the words left her lips, the sky opened, and raindrops started to fall. Jayden sprang to her feet from the log she had been sitting on and swiftly made her way towards the lean-to. With the three of them huddled around the small fire, the space would be cramped.

We'll just have to suffer through it, he thought with amusement.

Van shot him a mischievous grin, their eyes locking in silent understanding. Being trapped between them in the lean-to would make it much more challenging for Jayden to evade a serious conversation. He followed Van, squeezing through the narrow opening.

“I’m glad you built this,” Jayden said.

In the narrow opening, he paused and winced as cold rainwater trickled down his spine, sending a shiver through his body. Jayden draped a woolen blanket over the moss bed. Van squatted next to the foot of the bed and added some wood to the fire.

“My ass is getting wet,” he muttered.

Jayden looked up, offering an apologetic smile, before crawling onto the bed. Van twisted and sat on the end. Crouching, he moved in a circular motion, skirting around the fire on the left. Sinking down onto the other end of the bed, he shivered slightly, feeling the chill in the air.

“Here, this might help,” Jayden said.

When she lifted the second wool blanket and wrapped it around his shoulders, he scooted closer to her. She extended her other arm, inviting Van to come closer. A different type of warmth filled him as he pressed against her side.

“Don’t get any ideas. This is just temporary,” she muttered.

“It doesn’t have to be,” he said.

She bowed her head and drew her knees up. Feeling her shiver, he gently wrapped his arm around her, providing a protective embrace. They had added extra branches to block the wind and rain, but it still seeped in through the entrance. They had left a small opening near the top of the structure to allow for ventilation for the fire.

“Jayden... talk to us. Why are you afraid of us? You know we would never hurt you, don’t you?” Van murmured.

“Yeah, I know that.”

“Then what is it? Why do you keep pushing us away?” he asked.

She lifted her head and stared out at the rain that was coming down fairly heavily now. The air felt strange, with an otherworldly quality that gave the surroundings a surreal atmosphere. The wind whispered through the trees, blending with the crackle of the fire and the gentle patter of raindrops, creating a symphony of nature’s sounds. It felt as though an eternity had passed since they first caught wind of her presence. The anticipation had been building for a while, and he had worried that this day would never come.

“I’m not... afraid of you. I’ve never been afraid of either of you,” she finally replied.

“Then what is it, love?” Van asked.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“What don’t you understand?” he asked.

“This.”

She turned her head toward Peterson, placed her hand against his cheek, and leaned forward. His eyes widened briefly before his eyelids lowered when she pressed her lips against his in a soft, uncertain kiss. He wasn’t sure if the groan came from himself, her, or Van.

Curling his fingers against her hip, he kept tight control over his raging emotions. He wanted to give her the chance to take this first kiss to a point where she was comfortable. She slid her hand along his cheek and tangled her fingers in his hair, tugging on it enough to elicit a low growl that he couldn’t contain.

Her tongue slid along the seam of his lips and he parted for her. She twisted, winding her other arm around his neck as she slid one leg over his lap to straddle him. Captured in her arms, he felt his control slipping as she deepened their kiss.

Their breaths came as one, breathing in and out in unison, as she fisted his hair in her hands and began to rock against his swollen cock even as their tongues danced a provocative ballet of sensual desire. The fire raging inside him was as wild as the growing storm outside.

He grasped her hips, moving his hips in unison with hers. A savage growl from Van pulled them apart. Van's eyes glowed with desire. His wolf was barely contained.

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He thought for sure Jayden would pull away. He was shocked when she began moving against him again as she locked gazes with Van. Her lips parted as she breathed in quick breaths, fueled by her growing desire. Van shifted closer, his hand reaching out to fist a handful of her hair.

Her lips silently moved. Kiss me.

Van's chest rumbled as he leaned in and captured her lips. The erotic sight was almost too much for him. Jayden's hips started doing a crazy figure-eight movement. The only thing separating them was their thin hiking trousers. He was half afraid his cock would burst through the seam of his. He was slowly going mad with need.

He slid his hands under Jayden's loose top and cupped her unbound breasts. Her nipples were taut pebbles. He pinched them between his thumb and forefinger. Van jerked back and lifted a hand to his lip. A low, feral growl slipped from Van. Van lifted his hand and touched the spot of blood on his lip where Jayden had bitten him.

Van's eyes darkened with warning. Jayden leaned into him and began kissing him again. He could feel her climax building. Her body suddenly stiffened, pressing down against him and locking him to her with her strong thighs. The scent of her orgasm was a potent aphrodisiac to them and their wolves.

She pulled back, ending her kiss with Van. Her eyes were still locked with Van's as he nuzzled her throat. She turned her head and stared back at him. Her eyes were still dazed with her climax, but there was more. He could sense her confusion, vulnerability, and something deeper—fear.

“You’re beautiful, love,” he murmured, hoping to reassure her.

Van caressed her cheek with his fingertips. She closed her eyes, leaned forward, and buried her face against his neck. He tilted his head, silently conveying the need for them to proceed with caution to Van. Van nodded in agreement.

“Why don’t you two get some rest? I’ll keep watch,” Van suggested.

“That’s sounds good. Wake me in a few hours,” he said.

Van gave him a brief nod and rose. He tried not to wince when the seam of his pants pushed against his still engorged cock as Jayden silently slid off his lap. Thankfully, his wolf seemed to understand the sensitivity of the moment and remained docile.

Behind them, Van stripped out of his clothes and shifted into his wolf. He didn’t miss the way Jayden’s eyes were locked on his friend and brother-of-the-heart as he shifted. Nor did he miss the silent longing and worry in them.

“You don’t have to worry about him. Our wolves are well adapted to dealing with the rain. Our fur keeps us warm and our body temperatures tend to run hotter. Besides, a run right now might do the both of us some good—to cool off,” he said.

“Oh. That’s, uh, that’s good to know. Do you—?” she mumbled, glancing up at him before averting her eyes again.

“I’m good. One of us should stay with you,” he murmured.

She looked up again when he tenderly caressed her cheek. He gave her a wry smile and brushed his thumb along her bottom lip. She nipped at his finger, drawing a surprised, low growl from him.

“I should warn you,” he cautioned, “that biting like this is how wolves show affection.”

She wiggled her nose at him. “I’ll try to remember that. At least I know you aren’t going to eat me.”

He released a dry chuckle and shook his head. “I wouldn’t be too sure of that.”

She frowned before understanding dawned at the double entendre of what he was saying and her eyes widened. Her face heated and she scowled back at him. He chuckled when she pushed him aside and crawled to the top of the bed.

“I’m going to sleep. If you want to get wet, be my guest,” she said, with a wave of her hand toward the opening.

He rose when she tugged on the wool blanket that had slipped down. He added wood to the fire while she settled before he rounded the bed and laid down behind her. He half expected her to protest, but she surprised him by lifting the blanket for him to cover up.

He slid closer and wrapped his arm around her waist, spooning her and rested his chin near the top of her head. She didn’t touch him, but she didn’t pull away either. A silly grin curved his lips.

Baby steps.

You not last long if she do baby steps on lap again, his wolf sniped.

No, but what a way to die!

His wolf’s huff told him that the beast side of him was not as impressed as the man



side. He sighed and tightened his hold. He would be glad when they were in a proper bed.

“I enjoy holding you,” he murmured.

“Yeah, well, don’t get used to it,” she retorted.

“Too late, both Van and I are more than happy with being with you.”

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“How does that work? You guys—you guys don’t mind sharing?”

“We don’t think of it as sharing, but as being complete. You complete us. Between the two of us, we can love and protect you.”

With a shake of her head, she expressed her skepticism. The wisps of her hair danced around his nose, and he couldn’t resist rubbing it against the back of her head. The primal urge of the wolf inside him was to cover her with its scent through rubbing. The thought of possessing her stirred a primal desire within him. He hesitated, unwilling to mark her without Van by his side to do the same.

“I don’t understand any of this. Why do I feel so strongly about you both? I fought it. I don’t want to feel this way,” she confessed.

A deep sense of hurt washed through him. “Why? What’s wrong with us? Van and I are the good guys. Yeah, we have our faults, but it isn’t anything bad. I tend to be messier than Van, but at least I can cook a decent meal. Van’s idea of cooking is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not super messy. I just file things differently than Van.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

She released a long sigh. “You guys are... Others.”

“Others? What the hell is that?”

She rolled onto her back and scowled at him. “You’re an Other, a shifter. The natural enemy of humans. We aren’t supposed to, you know, be together. We aren’t even supposed to like each other.”

He leaned up on his elbow and frowned down at her. “Says who? Hell, until a couple of months ago, Van and I didn’t even know a human existed! How the hell are we not supposed to like humans if we didn’t even know you existed? I’ll tell you this one time and one time only, Van and I... we don’t just like you, darling, our hearts, happiness, and lives are in your delicate little hands. Our wolves have imprinted on you. That means for better or for worse, you have the power to take us to the stars, or?—”

He pursed his lips together, feeling the tension in his face, and then fell back onto his back, seeking solace from the world by covering his eyes with his arm. He wasn’t going to manipulate her into feeling something she didn’t genuinely experience. The choice had to be hers. She had two choices: either to accept them or not.

The heavy weight in his chest seemed to increase, pressing down on him with each heartbeat. The only sounds that filled the air were the raspy, heavy breaths escaping his lips, the crackling of the fire, and the rhythmic pitter-patter of the rain. With each passing moment of silence, his feeling of desolation increased and became more pronounced. The visions of a never-ending longing for his mate, unable to experience the sensation of her lips or the warmth of her embrace, filled him with an indescribable sadness.

“Or—?”

The question was so soft that he almost didn’t hear it. With a gradual movement, he brought his arm down, his gaze fixated on her with an unwavering intensity. He had been so lost in his misery that he hadn’t felt her move. Uncertainty filled her eyes, reflecting her inner turmoil.

“Or tear our hearts out until we are nothing but a shell of who we once were.” He lifted his hand to trace her cheek with his fingers. “I know this must seem strange to you. Humans are different from shifters. We must contend with our primal self. When we wolves discover our mates, we imprint on them. It is a connection, an invisible thread, that connects our soul to our other half. Without it, we are destined to live a half-life. The emptiness grows stronger as we age. When I look at you, I see your colors. I see the vivid aura that reaches for me. It pulls at me, creating a warmth and light that is utterly amazing. My wolf is calm, happy, and content for the first time. You are the light to my darkness, Jayden. You are—life.”

She lifted her hand and pressed his against her cheek. “And Van? He... feels the same way?”

He nodded. “Yes. Probably stronger in some ways. He’s slightly older and the son of an alpha. Plus, he’s just more intense.”

“But... two? How does that even work?” she mused. “I’ve seen plenty of couples. I can’t imagine having to deal with two guys. There were times I thought my mom would strangle my dad when he was being ornery. It would be crazy dealing with two of you guys when you were in a mood.”

“We’d work it out,” he promised.

Her eyes darkened with emotion. “I never wanted—” She shook her head and averted her eyes.

He tenderly tilted her chin until their eyes met again. “What did you never want?”

Her face contorted with a mix of trouble and uncertainty before she finally spoke in a hushed tone, confessing, “I never wanted to experience love.”

With a gentle motion, he enveloped her in his embrace, bringing her close until her cheek rested against his chest. With a tender touch, he smoothed her hair and let his hand glide down her back, offering comfort. As he continued to caress her, she melted into his embrace, feeling completely relaxed.

“It will be alright. All we ask is that you give us a chance,” he murmured against her hair.

“I’ll... try.”

Her voice quivered with emotion, and he couldn’t help but feel his heart melt at the sound. His eyes moved to the entrance of the small structure. In the dim light, the silhouette of Van’s black wolf cast a dark shadow. His eyes gleamed with the reflection of the dancing firelight. Van had listened intently to their conversation, aware of the high stakes involved.

With each gentle stroke on Jayden’s back, he could sense her drifting into a much-needed, rejuvenating sleep. Van entered, turned in a circle, and laid down across from them on the other side of the fire facing the entrance. As they settled down for the night, he felt a deep gratitude, knowing that his friend would be their protector while they slept.

He gently repositioned Jayden, ensuring she was lying beside him once more, and tucked her in snugly with the blanket. As he wrapped his arm around her waist, he softly kissed the back of her head, relishing the intimate gesture before closing his eyes. With each passing moment, a sense of contentment washed over him, gradually causing his body to release tension.

She accept us. You see. She accept us.

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His lips curved at his wolf's earnest optimism. Yes, I think she will.

The stakes were high, but they had a chance. That's all that mattered. That she would give them a chance to prove they were meant for each other.

### Chapter 20

Van silently groaned when he woke the next morning. As he lay on the hard ground, he couldn't fathom why he had ever considered it a cool idea. He was getting way too old for this shit, he decided, when he felt the ache in his back and hip as he rolled over.

Slipping his hand out, he felt for Jayden. Panic hit him, and he shot up with a low groan when he found the spot next to him empty and cold.

"Good morning, sleepy-head," Peterson greeted.

He lifted both hands and rubbed them up and down his face, grimacing at the whiskers that were growing thicker by the hour. He wanted—no needed—a shave, hot shower, decent food, and a soft bed. He dropped his hands to his lap and scowled back at Peterson's amused face.

"What's so good about it? Where's Jayden? What time is it?" he growled.

Peterson glanced at his watch. "It's almost eight. Jayden is freshening up. We've already eaten, but we saved you some trout."

His eyes narrowed when he caught a slight change in Peterson's voice. Rolling off the pallet, he put a hand to his lower back as he stood. He scowled down at the lumpy moss and crinkled blankets.

"What aren't you telling me?" he demanded.

Peterson reached for the blankets and began folding them. He frowned when he realized that his friend was doing more than cleaning up. He was packing up. Peterson shot him a wry smile.

"Jayden wants to head out this morning," Peterson responded.

"Thank the Goddess," he groaned, rubbing his lower back and stretching.

Peterson shook his head. "Not in that direction."

He paused and stared in disbelief at Peterson. "What do you mean... not in that direction? We're heading home... right? Please say we are heading home. I've had about all the living in nature that I can stand."

Peterson shook his head. "Nope. She is on a mission."

"What mission? What could be more important than a working bathroom, a soft bed, and a pizza?" he groaned with a weary shake of his head.

When he felt the pinch of a nerve in his neck, he grimaced and instinctively began rubbing at it. Hell, it sucked getting old. Okay, he wasn't that old, but in that moment, every joint in his body seemed to ache.

He looked up when a shadow in the doorway caught his attention. Jayden stood bowed in the entrance. She turned away from him and walked to the edge of the small

ledge where she had originally set up camp. Guilt filled him. They had been in the wilderness for a little over two weeks and he was acting like a whiny pup! Jayden had never known the luxury of a cushy house with a garden tub, central air and heat, a modern kitchen, and a thousand other conveniences.

Feeling like a heel, he pushed past Peterson, stepped out of the lean-to, and crossed to stand next to her. Peterson followed and came to stand on the other side of Jayden with his hands in his pockets. He released a weary growl of resignation and wound his arms around Jayden, turning her until she was nestled against his body.

“So, where are we heading this time?” he asked.

Her body trembled against his. He thought it was because of the chill in the air before he realized she was laughing... at him. He realized that there might have been a small pout in his voice when he asked his question.

“You know, you don’t have to go with me. I can do this on my own. Especially now that I know that the two shifters chasing me gave up and went home,” she said.

“Like hell!”

He bit off the rest of what he was going to say when he realized that she was teasing him. She snorted out a smothered laugh and shook her head. He leaned down and pressed his lips against her forehead.

“Okay, seriously, what is more important than a working toilet, a shower, and pizza?”

He didn’t want to add a soft bed, but the dancing bed fairy was floating through his mind as he stared down into her amused eyes. A slight flush rose in his cheeks when she lifted an eyebrow and glanced down. She must have felt his reaction.



“My grandfather left something of value at the cave. I promised him I would retrieve it,” she said.

He looked over her head at Peterson who had turned to face them. Pride and love shone in his friend’s soft eyes. He understood both emotions. Their mate was fierce, loyal, hard-headed—which would be desperately needed with the two of them—and incredibly brave.

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“Then we retrieve it,” he murmured, tucking a stray strand of her hair back behind her ear.

Her eyes darkened with emotion. “You both confuse me.”

“How so?”

She looked over her shoulder at Peterson. “You’re nothing like I thought you would be. I expected?—”

She stopped and shook her head. He caressed her cheek with his thumb. His lips curved into a rueful smile. It wasn’t hard to imagine what she expected after the history between humans and shifters.

“Humans and shifters aren’t too different. We want love, a family, and a place to call our own. Yeah, there are some bad shifters out there, but the good far outweigh the bad ones,” he said.

“I know.”

Her words were spoken softly, so softly that they were almost indiscernible. With a slight lean, he halted right before her lips, almost touching them. Her eyes dropped to them and she leaned towards him, gently pressing her lips to his for a moment before hiding her face against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close to him. It was a quick and hesitant kiss, but it filled him with optimism.

Their foreheads touched, creating an intimate and tender moment. With a gentle

gesture, Peterson extended his hand and delicately grazed her shoulder. His friend's eyes glowed with an unmistakable love.

"I'll finish packing up while you grab something to eat. There is some trout left. Jayden and I have already eaten," Peterson murmured, his voice slightly deeper than normal.

Van lifted his head and nodded. "Thanks for letting me sleep in."

"No worries."

Jayden kept her head bowed as she pulled away from him. He could already feel the emptiness in his arms. Brushing a hand over his face, he shook his head. He walked over to the log and picked up the trout wrapped in a large leaf and ate.

"Here's some coffee," Jayden said, placing a cup on the log.

"Thanks. You know, I think I'm actually going to miss spending time in the forest once we get back home... for a few minutes," he joked.

She chuckled at his wry comment and looked around. Her eyes softened with emotion. A pensive expression crossed her face as she stared out at the forest.

"I'm scared," she confessed.

His hand froze in midair at her confession. "What are you afraid of?"

She glanced at him before looking away again. "Losing everything."

His gaze followed her as she turned away. He could tell she wouldn't elaborate on her comment. There had been a raw note in her voice that spoke of a deeper pain. There

was so much he and Peterson still needed to learn about their mate. Jayden was a woman of many layers. It would take a while to earn her trust, but he was looking forward to peeling back each layer and discovering the remarkable woman beneath.

“Everything’s packed. Are you ready?” Peterson said.

Van nodded, casually flicking the leaf and fish remains away, and cleansed his fingers with a splash of lukewarm coffee, before downing the rest. Peterson held out the pack, and he tucked the collapsible cup into its side pocket. Sliding the pack onto his shoulders, he adjusted the straps snugly.

“Ready. Jayden, you lead the way,” he said.

The moment Eric stepped into their camp, the elite group of soldiers stood at attention, their eyes fixed on him with unwavering focus. Before centering his attention on their leader, Damien Bardo, he nodded in acknowledgement to each shifter. Dressed in military camos that seamlessly blended with the forest, their faces painted to match, they were an intimidating force and the pride of the Dii Bellatore.

Damien matched his pace, and together they walked over to the edge of the cliff, where they were greeted by a breathtaking view of the valley below. In the distance, he could see the exposed ridge, its jagged edges contrasting against the clear blue sky.

“Status report,” he said.

“I’ve sent two trackers ahead. We are keeping radio silence, doing this old school. I thought it best after the information you sent about the retrieval teams since and what happened before. We don’t know what we are up against, and I didn’t want to chance a mole,” Damien replied.

“Whatever it is, it isn’t the government—at least no division I’ve ever heard of,” he

said.

“I agree.”

As he looked at Damien, he noticed the slight twitch in his left eye, betraying his disquiet. There was an unsettling aura surrounding the man, and he could sense the apprehension emanating from him. Damien’s gaze constantly shifted, never settling on one spot in the surrounding area.

“What is it?”

Damien flickered a worried expression at him before he continued his wary search. “Something’s not right. In our recon, we found evidence of Clanton’s team. Tracks, blood, but no bodies. It’s bizarre. We didn’t find any evidence of a fight. It was as if something came out of nowhere and took them out before they fired a single round.”

It wasn’t until he glanced at the other men that he realized that most were standing, their eyes constantly surveying the surrounding area. Inside the protective circle formed by those standing were four of the men who had laid down and closed their eyes to rest, their weapons within reach on each chest. He returned his attention to Damien.

“What theories do you have?” he asked.

Damien hesitated and looked out across the valley. Eric studied the thoughtful, intense expression on Damien’s face. He valued Damien’s opinion.

“I believe we are dealing with an outside force, similar to who we are,” Damien murmured.

He frowned at Damien’s response. He knew of only five organizations in the world that resembled the Dii Bellatore, each with its own unique purpose. Their code, bound by blood, ensured that the organizations would never turn against each other. The longevity of each organization relied heavily on safeguarding this code. The group had an unspoken pact—if anyone were to start an attack, the others would join forces to deliver a decisive and fatal blow.

“Do you think it is a rogue group?” he asked.

Damien shook his head. “No. I’ve made it my business to study any threats. This is different. It wasn’t a rogue group from one of the other agencies,” Damien replied.

He could feel the annoyance building up inside him, a dam on the verge of breaking. He wanted straightforward explanations, not enigmatic, obscure theories. Losing two teams only fueled his determination to uncover the answers he needed.

“I need more, Damien. I’ve lost a lot of good men and equipment on what should have been a simple mission,” he ground out.

Damien pursed his lips and shrugged. “I can’t give you information I don’t know, General. The scouts are following the two shifters and the human. Redfoot and Timberwolf have maintained a constant surveillance of the area.”

Eric’s eyes narrowed as a thought occurred to him. “Whatever has attacked our men hasn’t attacked them. Why is that?”

Damien shrugged again. “Maybe whoever it is realizes they are protecting the woman?”

“Possibly... but how? How would they know? They are shifters. The same as we are. They were following her. The same as we are. What gives them a free pass?”

“I don’t know. It isn’t like whoever it is can read our minds... which means there must be an inside mole giving whoever it is information. We haven’t been attacked... yet. Who knew you contacted us?” Damien asked.

“No one.”

“Then let’s hope that helps keep us alive,” Damien replied, staring out across the valley.

## Chapter 21

Van was absorbed in focusing upward as a shadow gracefully passed over him, capturing his full attention. He studied their surroundings and spotted the owl gracefully alighting on a branch in the distance. It had been tailing them since they left their cliffside abode that morning, its presence becoming more and more palpable as time went on.

“What is it?” Peterson asked, coming up behind him.

He nodded pointedly at the owl. With a silent nod, Peterson acknowledged his understanding and followed his line of sight, no words needed between them. The creature’s unwavering determination to follow them was filling them with growing unease.

Their attention shifted back to Jayden, who was now the center of their world. Gracefully navigating the rugged landscape, she traversed the uneven terrain with unwavering confidence. Even now, Van couldn’t shake the overwhelming feeling of awe and wonder that suffused him upon finally finding her.

“There’s something off. It’s more than the owl. I feel like we are being watched... followed,” he murmured.

“Do you want me to shift and do a recon?” Peterson asked.

“Not yet. We are almost at the cave. Once we get there it wouldn’t hurt,” he said.

“We call for an airlift out once Jayden finds what she’s looking for. I’m ready to get



out of these damn woods,” Peterson muttered.

“You aren’t the only one.”

He had originally intended to call in reinforcements by this point in time. The trouble was that the signal was weak and unreliable under the thick canopy. In order to establish a connection with the satellite signals, they required a spot with a wide, unobstructed view of the sky. Once they reached the crest and ascended above the tree line, the vista of the vast expanse of mountains unfolded before him.

They exited the forest and began to climb by mid-afternoon. He searched the area as they ascended, searching for any tracks. Jayden hesitated at the area where blood had littered the ground months before. It was obvious she was thinking about the last time she had been here.

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He exhaled a sigh of relief when they finally reached the entrance to the cave. With luck, they would be flying home before dark. If not, he could think of worse places to spend the night.

He followed Jayden through the narrow opening into the sizeable area of the cave's first chamber. Markers and ropes, embedded by eager scientists, divided the enormous cavern area into sections. Jayden paused and stared at the bright yellow lines and white signs with a puzzled frown.

“What happened here? What are all these yellow things?” she asked.

He stepped up beside her. “Finding humans is pretty cool; and well, our archeologists think they’ve discovered a brand-new toy store.”

She snorted out a laugh and shook her head. “Shifters are weird.”

He grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. “Yeah, but we are also very cute, cuddly, and lovable.”

Her smile faded and her eyes swept down to his lips. “Yeah, some of you are.”

Peterson's low rumble filled the air, capturing her attention as she locked eyes with him. Van was certain she had no idea of the effect she was having on them. Her hair was tousled from their trek, her lips slightly parted in anticipation, and her eyes locked onto them like a child being offered a tray of freshly baked treats.

The mere thought of her succulent, pink lips enveloping a specific area of his

anatomy made Van let out an involuntary groan as he moved closer to her. Their lips met in a fiery kiss, her arms coiled around his neck, their embrace filled with intensity.

Her lips parted under his and her tongue teased the edges of his teeth. Their breathing became as one. He loved the way she tangled her hands in his hair and tugged on it, demanding more.

Her breath hiccupped and her eyes, which had been closed, flew open when Peterson stepped close enough to sandwich her between them. Peterson's eyes glittered with desire and determination.

"You two aren't making this easy," Peterson muttered.

Van didn't break his kiss with Jayden. He was pleased—very pleased—when she pressed back against Peterson. It was getting harder to wait for her full acceptance of them. She broke their kiss and bent her head until his lips rested on her forehead.

"I need to find... what my grandfather sent me to retrieve," she said, lifting her head to study his face.

"We'll set up camp. It's too late for a retrieval team to come today," he said.

She nodded, looking over her shoulder at Peterson. Van chuckled when Peterson dropped a quick kiss to her lips. She released a strained snort and shook her head.

"I have a feeling you two are going to drive me crazier than I already am," she muttered.

"We'll do our best," he teased.

“When it comes to driving someone crazy, no one is better than we are at it,” Peterson agreed.

“Whatever. As long as you two set up a place to sleep and cook something to eat, I’ll deal with it,” she retorted, slipping out from between them.

“Damn, but I love a bossy woman,” Peterson muttered.

He couldn’t help but chuckle at the delight clearly depicted on his friend’s face. Jayden held onto her spear firmly as she walked towards the back of the cave, and he couldn’t tear his eyes away from her. He found himself in silent agreement with Peterson’s viewpoint. Jayden’s playful defiance added an exciting twist to their interactions, promising years of lively experiences ahead.

“She is finally trusting us,” he murmured.

“Thank the Goddess. It’s taken long enough,” Peterson replied.

“Yeah, but it was worth it. Let’s check in and put in a pickup request. I don’t know about you, but I’ve had about all the primitive life that I can take for a while. I’m ready for a hot shower, proper food, and a soft bed,” he replied.

“Oh, I’m ready.” Peterson grinned. “I’ll take care of the setup if you want to get a fire going and start dinner. There should be something around here that I can use to make us a decent bed.”

Van’s chuckle was warm and infectious as he nodded in agreement. His laughter came to an abrupt stop as a faint scent wafted towards him. Just as he was about to warn Peterson, he suddenly lurched backward. His hand trembled as he reached for the silver cylinder embedded in his chest.

Peterson's furious growl echoed through the room as he shifted, catching his attention. Peterson's clothes were ripped to pieces as his wolf materialized. Peterson's red wolf filled the cavern with its menacing snarls that reverberated off the walls. He knew his friend was trying to warn Jayden of the danger they were in.

His forward stumble ended with a sudden drop to his knees, followed by a tilting motion that led to his collapse onto the cave's sandy surface. Peterson let out a sharp yelp of pain. Van watched helplessly out of the corner of his eye as Peterson staggered, an expression of fury crossing his face. Through his blurred vision, he faintly noticed the silver darts piercing Peterson's shoulder, chest, and hindquarter. His paralyzed body was consumed by a sweeping wave of rage. A dose of tranquilizer that large could be lethal for a person—even a shifter with a high metabolism such as theirs.

Jayden... please... run.

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The silent plea swept through his mind even as a pair of camouflage green and sand-covered boots appeared in his line of sight. A man squatted next to him, gripped his shoulder, and rolled him onto his back.

The man stared down at him with shrewd dark brown eyes and a slight smile of satisfaction on his lips when he realized that Van was immobilized. Another man, this one carrying an assault weapon, stepped up behind him. Van's vision was edged with darkness, and it was impossible for him to get a good look at the man.

"Find the human," the man squatting next to him ordered.

"What do you want us to do with these two?" the operative behind him asked.

"Secure them. Once we get the information we want from them and the human, you can dispose of those two," the man stated, rising to his feet.

Van tried to grit his teeth, but his whole body had gone numb. His eyes flicked over to where Peterson's red wolf lay unmoving. As the darkness grew in his mind and the drugs overtook control of his body, he cursed his inability to keep his promise to protect Jayden.

"Get them out of here," the man said with a jerk of his head.

"Yes, sir. You heard him. Find the human female and move 'em out. I want everyone back at the base camp before dark," his second-in-command shouted.

"Who-who—?" Van forced out between numb lips.

The man gave him a smile that didn't reach his eyes and chuckled. "That human has cost me a lot of money. It's nothing personal... well, except for your brother's helping out."

Shock hit Van hard at the mention of his brother. His mind struggled to piece together what the man meant, but the drug had done its job and he was losing his battle to stay conscious. His eyelids slid closed despite his fight to keep them open and darkness descended as Jayden's name whispered through his last conscious thought.

Jayden's mumbled words were barely audible as she hurried away from the two infuriating men, determined to resist the temptation that threatened to break her promises. She was going crazy with desire for both of them, the longing burning deep within her. It became apparent to her that she would now be forced to swallow her pride and admit her mistakes.

"So much for never falling in love," she muttered.

The impact of her words dawned on her with sudden, crystal-clear realization. As the epiphany hit her, she felt the ground sway beneath her, causing her to grasp onto the wall of the narrow passageway for support. She turned and leaned back against the wall, raising her hand to her chest, covering her heart, as she stared back in the direction she had just come.

"I love them," she whispered.

Despite her softly spoken words, her voice reverberated loudly in her ears. How had things ended up like this? Her laughter bubbled up, almost reaching a hysterical pitch, and she hastily muffled it with her hand.

Hell, how did it happen?

She had done everything she could to drive them away. Biting her lip, she closed her eyes and dropped her chin as she pictured everything that had happened since she had first seen them. That had been the hook, she realized. The first moment she had seen them in the snowy woods, first in their wolf forms, then in all their splendor of naked, male flesh.

“Damn it to hell,” she groaned.

She opened her eyes and with a slight push, moved away from the wall, feeling the rough texture against her fingertips as she trailed them along the uneven surface. Fighting her feelings seemed to be an impossible task. She had enough self-awareness to recognize that about herself. Her desire for them burned fiercely, and she was willing to do anything to make them hers. Moving through the different stages, her mind swirled with emotions from anger and denial to eventual acceptance.

Her lips curved into a bemused smile as she ventured into the dark crevice, the musty smell of damp earth filling her nostrils. She rummaged through her pouch and retrieved a small flashlight she had swiped from the compound. The cold metal cylinder in her hand served as a stark reminder of the gradual changes in her life.

It’s a lot easier to press a button than light a candle from flint, she mused.

Pressing the raised button on the side, she directed the light down the twisted passage, feeling the walls closing in as she ventured further into the mountain. It didn’t take her long to locate the rock her grandfather had mentioned, nor the loose stone concealing the hole where the inscribed cylinder was hidden.

She was sliding it into her pouch when a strange noise filtered down the passage. Curious, she started forward when Peterson’s enraged howl, amplified by the contours of the passage, filled her with terror.



Her initial reaction was the desire to rush to them, but a lifetime of caution and the need for survival overrode the impulsive emotion. Her people had learned that rushing in could have devastating consequences.

Instead, she opened her senses, listening to anything that sounded out of place. She started when she heard a sharp yelp of pain. Lifting her hand, she rubbed it over her heart. As she inched forward to the opening where the passages branched, she picked up the murmur of unfamiliar voices.

“You heard him. Find the human female and move ‘em out. I want everyone back at the base camp before dark.”

Her body tensed up as a shiver of alarm coursed through her upon understanding the threat in the order. She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply to combat the overwhelming fear consuming her. A profound resolve took root within her, guiding her actions. As she opened her eyes, she pondered the different choices laid out before her.

The men could harm Van and Peterson, or even manipulate them against each other, if she fell into enemy hands. If she were free, their chances of survival would increase. Her eyes were drawn to a passage a short distance down. The faint, but familiar rush of water was barely audible. In order to remain undetected, she needed to mask her scent.

She felt a sudden spark of inspiration, pushing her to spring into motion. Entering the passage, she was met with the musty aroma of ancient rocks, drawing her closer to the crevice shaped by melting ice within the mountain. As she entered the area used as a bathroom by her people, she could hear the sound of rushing water from the nearby stream. One area was allocated for the toilet, and the other was designated for bathing purposes. The waterfall, fed by the snow runoff higher up, flowed through the rock, its icy-cold water creating an almost surreal atmosphere. The water exuded a unique mountain freshness, intermingled with the smell of musty smoke.

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The sound of running water echoed in the alcoves that had been carved out by millennia of erosion. A shiver ran down her spine as the icy mist from the water enveloped her. The ground was littered with charred logs and ashes, remnants of old fires that had crackled and popped in the past. Centuries of fires had left a dark, sooty layer on the walls and ceilings of this part of the cave. The air was still heavy with the lingering smell of smoke.

She cautiously made her way around the waterfall, relying on her memory to guide her in the dark. The rocks, wet from the water, were slippery, causing her foot to slide more than once. She slid behind the waterfall, enveloped by the darkness and the echoes of falling water.

As she waited, each second seemed to be an eternity. All other noises faded into oblivion as the waterfall's powerful rush dominated the surroundings, with only the steady thump of her heart discernable. Clutching the spear close to her chest, she could feel the soothing, smooth texture of the wood against her palm. Her eyes honed in on the entrance through a shallower flow of the water. Time seemed to stretch on endlessly during the wait, even though it was likely just ten minutes.

The sudden flash of light signaled that the men had found the passage. Bright beams of light flooded the interior of the cavern just a minute later, casting long shadows on the walls. Pulling her head back, she shivered as the cold, damp, rough rock pressed against the back of her head.

Her hands grew numb from the frigid water continuously spattering her unprotected skin. She pushed past the discomfort, staying completely still as she observed the torches scanning the area.

“Looks like we found their latrine,” a male shifter said.

“I can’t smell anything but smoke and shit,” a woman replied. “What about you?”

“Nothing. I would’ve thought humans would have a stronger scent,” the man said.

Jayden watched with anticipation as the female shifter moved closer, holding her breath. The torch’s flickering light danced along the thin stream of water, casting eerie shadows on the moss-covered rocks before fading into darkness. Methodically moving the light, the woman inspected the wet ground by the stream before shifting her attention to the soot covered walls, seeking out any evidence of any recent activities.

The rhythmic thud of Jayden’s heart resonated loudly in her ears as the torch light flickered on the fast-moving water keeping her presence hidden. The tension in her muscles was palpable as she stayed perfectly still, the light visible through her half-closed eyelids before moving on. With a quick pivot, the woman kept a vigilant eye on the passage in front of her.

“There’s nothing here,” the man said.

“Are there any more passages?”

“No. It dead ends right after this,” he replied.

“It’s hard to believe humans were able to survive living like this,” the woman said.

The man chuckled. “And they used to call us animals. We aren’t the ones shitting in a cave.”

“Isn’t that the truth? Let’s go report. Hopefully, the others found her hiding under a

mat in the main cavern,” the woman muttered.

Jayden stood her ground as darkness enveloped her, ignoring the increasing sense of unease. The looming prospect of the shifters returning preyed on her mind. It was what she would do if she were the hunter. She needed to maintain the impression that she had never been there.

With the minutes slipping away, she repositioned herself to slip her hands into her fur jacket, feeling the softness and warmth enveloping her frozen flesh. Despite the cool mist from the waterfall soaking her clothes, they still managed to shield her from the cold. Unfortunately, she had no protection for her head, hair, and exposed skin. Her cheeks and lips felt numb, as if they were frozen, and she couldn't feel the tips of her fingers.

When the faint glow of torches illuminated the passage again, she couldn't help but stiffen in response. Her initial wariness was proven to be well-founded. Pressing herself against the frigid, slick rock, she steeled herself to remain perfectly still. The cavern was filled with an eerie silence as two more shifters made their way inside, one of them moving gracefully on all fours in their animal form. A beast, with features akin to a wolf but possessing longer legs, a tail, and a more slender physique, was sniffing the ground.

The sound of the man's footsteps echoed through the cavern as he swept it with his torch, casting light into the darkness. Their slow, deliberate movements filled her with a sense of unease. The sound of her thudding heart filled her ears as the coyote shifter approached the stream. His head was in constant motion, scanning the area from left to right. His nose was almost touching the rough, rocky floor, making her cringe at the thought of him scraping off some skin. His sable-haired pelt was shrouded in a layer of mist, adding a mystical aura to his appearance when the torch light swept over him.

Standing on the same rock she had slipped on, he inhaled deeply, shook his head, and then sneezed loudly. With the torch in hand, the shifter walked over and directed the beam of light to highlight the cascading waterfall.

“You smell anything?” he asked.

The coyote shook his head. “No, just piss and shit.”

“Let’s confirm that she isn’t here. I wouldn’t want to be those two shifters when they finally wake up. Singleton is going to work them over good until he gets the information on where they stashed the human,” the shifter chuckled.

“He’ll probably send us dogs out to find her,” the coyote-shifter mumbled.

She could feel the anger bubbling up inside her as she watched them callously revel in the misery they would be causing. There were at least five shifters, possibly more from the way they were talking. Her chin dropped and she closed her eyes as tears burned in them.

How can I possibly take on that many beasts?

With each deep breath, she fought back against the doubts and the sense of being helpless. She was a hunter. A serene determination overcame her, filling her with a sense of calm resolve. She was fed up with all of this crap.

Gripping her spear tightly, she rose from her hiding spot, feeling a newfound sense of purpose. The time had come to transition from being the prey to becoming the predator. The beasts were about to discover just how primitive and dangerous a human could be—especially when the lives of the men she loved were at stake.

Chapter 22

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Using her high-powered binoculars, Commander Chawni Reed meticulously observed the cave entrance from beneath the timberline. Her lips were a thin line, revealing the frustration bubbling inside her. The lone human woman was a thorn in her side, always causing trouble. The clear bond between the two shifters and the woman further entangled the already complicated situation.

“You’re sure about them imprinting on her?” she demanded.

“Yes, Commander,” the barred owl quietly responded.

As the group of shifters exited the cave, her focus stayed fixed on them, intrigued by their movements. A group of at least twelve mercenaries were making their way out. The two wolf shifters her scout had spotted lay motionless on the ground surrounded by eight of the mercs.

This situation could get very messy, she grimly acknowledged to herself.

General Eric Singleton’s appearance only added to her growing sense of unease. The situation had reached a critical point where the risks involved were too high to ignore. She grappled with the dilemma of whether to expose their existence in order to protect a lone human and her shifter companions. Sacrificing them as collateral damage might be a more strategic approach.

“I don’t see the human among them,” Julius murmured.

She didn’t either, and that surprised her. Watching intently, she observed the group moving downwards. Five of the mercenaries had shifted and were in tracking mode.

Just as she was about to lower the binoculars, a subtle movement above the cavern grabbed her attention. Zooming in, she was taken aback to see the human woman positioned above the group, causing her lips to part in surprise.

“Well, well, well,” she murmured.

“Ma’am?” Julius’ tone was questioning.

“Twelve o’clock.”

It took Julius two sweeps of the area before he spotted the woman. A low whistle escaped his lips, followed by a chuckle. A smile played on her lips at his reaction.

“Unexpected,” she commented.

“What are your instructions?” he asked.

After a moment of contemplation, she lowered her binoculars. It could be prudent to exercise patience at this juncture. It was clear that the woman possessed a great deal of resourcefulness.

“Keep an eye on her. Instruct the others not to engage unless they have a clear path to take the mercs out without being seen,” she instructed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Chawni remained where she was as Julius left to instruct the four members of the team she had brought. Her eyes shifted to the barred owl perched on a nearby stump. Its piercing gaze was fixed on the distant point of the cave.

“Axios,” she murmured.

“Yes, Commander.”

“Help her mates if you can,” she ordered.

Axios bobbed his head slightly before taking off into the air, his wings creating a soft whooshing sound. She lifted the binoculars to her eyes once more, this time taking extra care to focus on the distant object in the distance. The woman vanished from her hiding spot above the mercs. As she glanced back at the group of men, she silently prayed that the decision she was about to make was the correct one.

“Julius.”

“Yes, Commander,” Julius said, stepping closer.

“I need the satellite phone,” she murmured.

SBSI Headquarters

\* \* \*

“Agent Southpaw, there’s a message for you.”

Darlene Southpaw casually lifted her hand in acknowledgement, the soft glow of the computer screen casting a soft light on her face as she picked up the phone. She was meticulously analyzing the evidence collected by the Bearclaw, Timberwolf, and Redfoot Security Agency, along with the mysterious disappearance of Lorne Timberwolf, to determine any possible connections to the shifter’s body found washed up in the Sound.

“Darlene Southpaw, how may I help you?” she greeted.



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“Does the name General Singleton mean anything to you, Agent Southpaw?”

The woman’s question caused Darlene to stiffen involuntarily. The mere mention of Eric Singleton brought back vivid memories, making her stomach clench with unease. The name was not unfamiliar to her. Unfortunately, she had encountered it many times before. The truth she had discovered was met with a cold, calculating gaze from Eric the last time she confronted him.

“Why do you ask?” she asked.

“He’s in the Olympic National Park hunting a human woman with a team of mercenaries. There are two shifters being held hostage,” the woman continued.

Before Darlene could inquire further, the call abruptly ended. Staring at the receiver for a few seconds, she suddenly sprang into action. Dropping the phone by her keyboard, she felt a sense of urgency as her fingers rapidly typed on the keys to locate the number. Startled by the sudden sound of her hand hitting the desk, the agent in the next cubicle turned to look at her.

As she rose from her seat, she hastily grabbed her jacket from the back of her chair before briskly walking out of her cubicle and down the rows towards the exit. Three minutes later, she was standing outside the grand mahogany doors adorned with a gleaming metal office plate. She took a deep breath before lifting a hand and knocking twice.

“Come in.”

She took a deep breath as she entered, feeling the intense scrutiny of Talon Nightsky on her. Closing the door behind her, she walked towards the desk, the sound of her footsteps loud in the silent room. Talon closed the laptop he was using and stood.

“Director,” she greeted. “Sir, you instructed that you wanted updates about any activity regarding the humans. I received a call a few minutes ago stating that there was a human woman in danger in the Olympic National Forest.”

Talon frowned at her. “Did the caller give any idea of where the woman was?”

“Yes, sir, though it was cryptic. She said a cave. You should also know the caller specifically identified General Eric Singleton as being part of the team pursuing the woman. There are also two possible shifter hostages.”

The cold expression that came into Talon’s eyes made her thankful that they were not focused on her. She waited for his instructions. When they came, it surprised her.

“Thank you. I’ll handle this.”

She frowned with confusion. “Would you like me to call the team?”

He sent her an impatient glance and shook his head. “No. I’ll oversee this myself.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but closed it when he shot her a warning look. Still, her past with Eric refused to allow her to let the situation go. She waited half a second before she stiffened her spine and spoke.

“Sir, Eric Singleton is a very dangerous man. I can’t emphasize that enough. I... would like to go after him,” she said.

His intent gaze lingered on her face. She hoped that she had kept on her mask of

professionalism and not revealed her personal feelings. He paused before he shook his head.

“Not this time, Darlene,” he said.

“Talon... I know Eric. I know how he thinks,” she argued in a low voice.

He paused again, his frown deepening. “I know your history with him... and your desire for revenge. This is all the more reason that you should step aside. I’ll handle this. Eric won’t get away.”

Her shoulders slumped slightly and she looked away from his intense scrutiny. “I understand. Let me know if you need a team put together. I can still do that.”

She waited a fraction longer to see if he would request one. When he didn’t, she bowed her head, turned, and crossed to the office, exiting as quietly as she had entered. Outside the door, she breathed deeply before stiffening her shoulders.

There were some things in life you just needed to take care of yourself, she decided, turning left outside the outer office door and heading for the elevator.

Jayden listened as she worked on sharpening the green branches she had cut. Despite the shifters’ impressive speed and strength, her thorough knowledge of these mountains provided her with a crucial advantage over them. Using that knowledge, she retrieved supplies from the back of the cave and managed to escape through a hidden opening that had been sealed to keep animals out and prevent chilly drafts.

The narrow slit she squeezed through led to a ledge where she could feel the mist from the cascading waterfall that plummeted several hundred feet. She clung to the rock face, moving inch by inch until she found a way to climb higher. She couldn’t have asked for a better vantage point.

The wind was on her side, helping to conceal her scent as she perched high above, out of sight of the group of shifters below her. She listened intently as the leader of the group directed five of the shifters to track her down. The others would travel down to their base camp.

Crawling backwards, she had slipped down back along the ledge and worked her way down far enough where she felt confident the trackers wouldn't locate her scent. Setting her plans into motion, she took the first steps towards her goal. She knew she had to eliminate the trackers first before she could proceed with her mission. Once they were no longer a threat, she would turn her attention to rescuing Van and Peterson.

She collected the armful of sharpened branches. Less than half a mile from her, a ravine cut through the landscape, adding depth to the river. Several years ago, a tree had fallen across the path, and now her people used it as a makeshift bridge. That was the spot she chose to set her first trap.

It took her close to an hour before she dug into one of the woven bags she had grabbed from the cave during her escape. The heavy, fist-sized bag contained the magic black powder that her grandfather had warned should only be used in emergencies.

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With precision, she wound a thin cord around the bag before tucking it away in the hollowed-out section of the trunk. A grim but pleased smile curved her lips as she glanced over the side. Surviving the three-hundred-foot plus fall to the river below would be just the first obstacle for the beasts, as they would also have to contend with the rocky terrain and fast-flowing water.

With each step along the trunk, she felt the smooth texture of the wood beneath her feet as she carefully untangled the bundle of cord. After completing that task, she gathered the sharpened branches and carefully set up a second trap. She gathered four sharp branches and meticulously secured them together to create a trip wire. Testing the tension multiple times, she aimed to guarantee the weapon's ability to cause maximum damage. A few paces from the first trap, she carefully set up another one.

There was a wall of tumbled rocks a hundred yards up the path, creating a natural barrier. She made her way to the top, feeling the burn in her muscles with each step. Climbing most of the way to the top, she came across a round boulder precariously resting against another, supported by a decaying tree. Testing for weakness, she carefully examined the area surrounding the rock. The image of the boulder gaining momentum down the incline, causing chaos in its wake, flashed through her mind.

By the time she finished setting the trap, darkness was starting to creep in. Around the fallen tree, she had carefully tucked three bags of the black powder. A mere half-inch adjustment was all it would take to release the boulder.

She stood up and carefully scanned the area surrounding her. Her top priority was to ensure she had a secure and reliable escape plan in place. Half a mile away from her current position, there stood a slender tree that could provide her a way back across

the ravine. The safety of it had never been verified by anyone from the clan.

At the sound of a low howl, her head lifted and turned in the direction of the noise. They had picked up her scent. As she descended the rocks, she could feel the rough texture scraping the palms of her hands. The warning of the shifters closing in came in the form of a second howl, quickly followed by a third and fourth.

Five against one. Don't think about it, Jayden. You are the hunter. Surprise is your superpower. They will not be expecting you to fight back.

The brief pep talk eased her anxiety while she waited. With steady hands, she retrieved the lighter from her pouch. She brought it close to the wick, her hand steady and focused. After igniting it, she would stand in a way that ensured they could see her without any difficulty.

Nothing like a little bait to distract them, she thought with wry amusement.

A dark shape suddenly appeared on the other side, causing her to tense up. Soon, four others joined the first one. Two of them had their noses to the ground, while the third one lifted its head to take in the scents around them. The two other figures walked hesitantly, casting wary glances at the tree trunk before stepping back.

Advancing slowly, the first beast that appeared approached the fallen tree and bounded onto the trunk. The instant it did, she swiftly flicked the lighter, setting the wick ablaze. She estimated she had around forty-five seconds before the bag would burst into flames.

If it works.

The thought flashed through her mind, but she ruthlessly pushed it away, the sound of her pounding heart filling her ears. She wasn't going to let doubt cause her to make a

stupid mistake. She needed to get on the other side of the second trap. If luck was with her, all five would go down into the ravine. If not, she needed to ensure there was enough distance between herself and those who survived the explosion before the tree blew up.

Standing, she darted to the spot in front of the second trap. The first beast's head shot up, and a tense silence filled the air. Staring back at the creature's glowing red eyes, she tightly gripped her spear in front of her.

"No beast will ever catch me," she snarled.

The group emitted a collective rumble of growls. The other four beasts hopped onto the trunk one by one, their claws scraping against the rough bark. The first beast moved closer with deliberate, measured strides. The sound of its low warning growl made her pause and take a step back. She felt a lump in her throat as it suddenly paused and sniffed the air.

Fearing the smell of black powder or smoke would give her away, she frantically searched the ground for something to distract the creature. She felt the rough texture of the rock as her fingers closed around it. Moving closer, she hurled it towards the beast with all her strength.

The first beast ducked and the rock hit the beast behind it. She picked up another one and threw it, counting down what she hoped were the last seconds until the black powder ignited. The first beast's head suddenly turned to the side, its nostrils flaring as it sniffed the air. Jayden knew the moment it realized that it and the others were in mortal danger.

"Get back!" the beast shouted.

While the first two beasts charged forward, the other three scrambled backward in

fear. As they tried to turn around, their paws struggled to find traction on the slick surface of the trunk. As a brilliant explosion lit up the sky, Jayden turned and bolted. The night was shattered by the sound of loud, mournful howls as the trunk broke in half.

Looking back, Jayden caught a glimpse of two beasts as they swiftly disappeared from sight. Another clawed at the loose soil on the opposite side. Unable to get a grip with its paws, it shifted. The haunting sound of the female shifter's screams echoed through the air as she fell.

She skillfully navigated past the second and third traps without breaking her stride. The beasts were frantically clawing at the edge of the ravine, struggling to pull themselves up. They had also shifted into their two-legged form. The last thing she saw before she disappeared into the darkness was the fury on their faces as they struggled so as not to follow their comrades.

Just as she reached the halfway point to the rock incline, a faint noise reached her ears, indicating that the second trap had been sprung. A man's agonized cry was cut short. She tried not to picture his death nor the terrible wounds the sharpened spears would have inflicted. Instead, she focused on reaching the boulder and decaying tree.

The crashing of foliage and the heavy pants behind her signaled the failure of her third trap to halt her pursuer. Climbing up the uneven waterfall of boulders, she could feel the rough edges digging into her palms. She ignored the cuts to her palms and the bruises she knew she would have if she lived to see tomorrow.

Startled by a menacing snarl that sounded uncomfortably close, she instinctively checked behind her. In the darkness, she was met with the chilling glare of the first beast, its red eyes glowing ominously. She continued to climb, twisting and crab crawling, her hands feeling blindly for the next grip.



“We were supposed to bring you back alive,” the shifter said in a rough, deep voice. “The General didn’t say anything about bringing you back in one piece. I’m going to rip a limb off you for every one of my men you just killed.”

“That’s not my problem. If you had left me alone, they’d still be alive,” she retorted.

With a quick glance behind her, she strained to determine how much farther she needed to climb. She looked back down when she heard the sound of claws scraping against the rock. With each step, the wolf-beast’s powerful muscles flexed as it climbed up the steep terrain. The sound of his snapping jaws sent a wave of terror through her.

“I’m going to take your pretty little fingers first. You can watch and listen as I crunch on them and swallow them,” he said.

She wiggled her nose with distaste. “There is something seriously wrong if you think that would taste good,” she scoffed with false bravado.

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With a menacing snort, he licked his muzzle with his long tongue, making the sound even more frightening. She moved closer to her goal little by little, trying not to make a sound. Three feet... she only needed three more feet... and the lighter. She let out a terrified cry when he closed the distance between them with a sudden jump.

Her booted foot connected with his chest as she kicked out, giving her the momentum to twist and scramble the last few inches. She rummaged through her bag, feeling for the lighter. When he regained his footing and leaped again, another cry was torn from her. His teeth sank into the thick leather near the top of her boot, causing a sharp, piercing pain. A wave of agony shot through her as his fang punctured her leg by the edge of her boot. Frantically flicking the black button on the lighter, she kicked at her attacker in a desperate attempt to defend herself.

“Leave me alone,” she snapped.

She twisted her body as she reached out her other hand. She stretched her arm as far as she could, but her spear remained just out of reach. She reached out frantically, trying to grab it multiple times, but each attempt failed as he pulled her down and to the side. The flame on the lighter swayed back and forth, casting shadows on the wall of rock.

At a crossroads, she weighed the options of lighting the fuse or going for her spear. Doing both tasks simultaneously was impossible for her. As the lighter slipped from her grasp, she swiftly rolled and lunged for her spear. Rolling onto her back, she jabbed him in the chest with all her might.

He let out a yelp as he released her, falling back a few feet in surprise. Her spear,

embedded in his shoulder, was ripped out of her hands. She pushed herself up, using her good leg to reach the same level as the fuse.

“That is going to cost you,” he said.

In the darkness, her fingers moved tentatively, feeling for the lighter lost in the shadows. She tightened her grip on the smooth red handle just as he focused his attention on her again.

With each foot she pushed herself up, the tension around them grew palpable as he slowly advanced. She lifted her hand, revealing the lighter. Stopping in his tracks, his eyes gleamed with an otherworldly glow as they mirrored the dancing flame. As he lifted his head, his nostrils flared as he sniffed.

“You shouldn’t have messed with a human,” she said, lowering her hand and lighting the wicks.

As fast as she could, she twisted and climbed up the steep path. As desperation took hold, she felt a surge of strength coursing through her. The shifter’s fierce growl was overshadowed by a sudden eruption of the black powder. Around her, fragments of wood and rock fell, creating a cacophony of crashing sounds. The force of the bits and pieces hitting her left small, jagged tears on her thick coat.

She rolled onto her back and peered up at the dark canopy of trees silhouetted by the night sky. She strained to listen through the acrid smoke and could make out the distinct sound of rocks scraping against each other. Her eyes connected with her pursuer’s as he struggled to rise from where he had fallen in an effort to seek cover. She watched as the boulder teetered for an instant, then slowly started its descent down the rocky slope.

Her stalking predator, realizing he was in the direct path of the rockfall, twisted in a

desperate bid to outrun certain death. Even in his shifter form, he was no match for the force of nature. She turned her head when the boulder overtook him. His yelp of pain and terror couldn't hide the sound of bones being crushed under a ton of rock.

Struggling to keep her stomach in check, Jayden collapsed to the side, feeling queasy. Covering her eyes, she focused on what needed to be done next. The group still consisted of seven shifters. In the darkness, she would have to search for Van and Peterson, rescue them, and make a daring escape. The combination of doubt, fatigue, and pain washed over her, leaving her feeling overwhelmed and alone.

She focused on the pain. That was something she could do something about. Opening her eyes, she pushed herself up. Jayden reached into her bag and pulled out a small torch and a first aid kit tucked in a pouch.

Blood had soaked into her pant leg just above her boot. The wound, although just a puncture mark, felt deep and throbbing. Taking care to clean it thoroughly, she wrapped a bandage around her leg and the outside of her pants, feeling the tightness of the bandage as she secured it in place. To mask the scent of her blood, she would have to rub it with leaves or dirt.

She stood up, sparing a moment to look down at the lifeless body of the beast, now in pieces. The only thing that could be seen was his upper body, the rest hidden from view. She shuddered as she realized he had transformed into his human form. His left shoulder and arm were at an unusual angle and blood darkened the rocks around him.

She refused to feel any sympathy for the operative. He had made his decision. She returned her attention to the path she would need to take.

"I'm coming for you guys. Hang on until I get there," she murmured.

## Chapter 23

Van woke up slowly, feeling a pounding headache, the smell of smoke lingering in his nose and his mouth was so dry it felt as if he had cotton balls instead of a tongue. His body and mind felt as heavy as molasses, slowing down his every thought and action. He shook his head, hoping to shake off the confusion, but winced as the pounding in his temples intensified.

Struggling to focus, he blinked his sandy eyes and tried to make out the object in front of him. He was hunched over, leaning against a tree trunk. His wrists were tightly bound behind his back with a plastic strap. Seeking relief for his right shoulder, he adjusted his position to alleviate the pressure. His movements were restricted by the plastic tie strap binding his ankles together.

At his feet, Peterson remained motionless in his wolf form. Van felt a wave of relief wash over him as he saw the gentle rise and fall of Peterson's chest. Memories of the number of tranquilizer darts protruding from his friend were still vivid despite his current brain fog.

Van surveyed his surroundings, tilting his head back to get a better view. In the pit, a small fire crackled softly, casting a warm glow. Across from him, a spacious tent blended seamlessly with its surroundings. In the dim light of the lantern, he made out the shapes of two shadows. By the fire sat a man and a woman, both clad in camouflage, their faces illuminated by the flickering flames. Next to each person lay an automatic weapon, ready to be accessed quickly.

He peered into the darkness, searching for any signs of more mercenaries. A figure quietly glided past the tent. He was clever enough to avoid looking directly at the dancing flames of the fire.

He shut his eyes to concentrate on the various noises that surrounded him. His head tilted to the right when a light cough followed by a loud fart made another man laugh.

“You need to put a cork in your ass, Bailey,” a woman called out of the darkness.

“I’d be happy to put one in yours, Red,” the man replied.

“In your nasty-ass dreams,” Red retorted.

There’s at least seven.

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He groaned silently at the thought. These mercenaries were unique and distinctive. These were the kind that put the bad in bad-ass.

His eyes snapped open as Peterson released a soft whine and twitched, making his head fall forward. The bastards had cruelly tied Peterson's front and back legs together. In addition, there was a collar with an explosive device secured around his neck. If he tried to transform, it would go off, taking his head with it.

"Peterson, don't shift," he mumbled through parched lips.

Peterson's legs twitched again and he whimpered, but he didn't open his eyes. Van nudged his friend with his foot. Peterson's eyelid flickered this time.

"Don't shift. They have an explosive collar on you," he warned.

Peterson's head made a barely perceptible movement before his eyes drifted shut once more. The drugs would slowly make their way through his body, taking their time before finally fading away. Hell, they had shot him with enough to bring down a herd of elephants.

He breathed deeply and leaned his head back. His eyes widened with surprise when he found himself staring into a pair of dark brown eyes. He blinked twice to make sure he was not hallucinating. The barred owl that had been their traveling companion was still there.

The owl's head turned towards the tent as tent flap opened and two men emerged from within. He drew his legs up when the man from the cave looked in his direction.

Cold eyes stared back at him before he spoke in a low voice to the man next to him.

Van braced himself, the heavy silence broken only by the man's measured footsteps, his gaze burning as he returned the man's cold stare. A jolt of recognition shot through him, as he recalled the exact moment he had seen the man before. They had both been a lot younger, back when he had been naïve and Eric Singleton had already made a name for himself as a hard-ass. His eyes quickly scanned the faces of the other members in Singleton's unit. The fact that he had been right about the other members didn't bring him any satisfaction. These were the cream of the crop, the most skilled and dedicated soldiers, who pushed themselves to excel at the highest limits of their training.

"Timberwolf," Eric greeted.

"Singleton," he replied.

He noticed the subtle tightening of Eric's lips, a telltale sign of irritation, when Van deliberately addressed him by his last name instead of his formal title. He wasn't worried about hurting Eric's fragile ego; instead, he was concerned about the whereabouts of Jayden. He glanced past Eric, his focus drawn to the canvas of the tent, where shadows danced in the flickering firelight.

"Your human is proving a bit more difficult to capture than you and Peterson," Eric commented.

Eric's confession brought a wave of giddy relief. It must have shown on his face because Eric lifted an eyebrow and studied Van, a silent challenge in his steely eyes. The glint of steel as Eric unsheathed his large, serrated blade shattered the momentary calm, replacing it with a palpable sense of tension that hung heavy in the air.

"Where's the human?"



“I don’t know,” he replied.

Eric’s eyes narrowed. He stared back at him without blinking. He was telling the truth.

“Was she with you?”

“Obviously not if she isn’t here,” he dryly retorted.

Pain slashed through his shoulder when Eric squatted and pressed the blade through his jacket into his flesh. He gritted his teeth, the muscles in his face tightening, and glared back at the man, his eyes filled with hatred. If this was how Eric wanted to play it, then fine, they would play torture the prisoner. They wouldn’t him break. He had gone through the same trainings they had and not broken.

“Do you really want to play twenty questions over some primitive human? Give her up, Van. You and Peterson would break a female like her. Find yourself a nice shifter.”

“Go fuck yourself, Eric.”

Eric slid the knife into Van’s shoulder, the metal slicing easily through his flesh, until the tip vanished beneath the skin. A sticky, warm sensation spread across his chest as the blood soaked into his shirt. He knew when the serrated portion of the blade started cutting, it wouldn’t be pleasant.

Van hissed when Eric suddenly jerked to the side and withdrew the knife as Peterson released a ferocious snarl and snapped at him. Eric twisted on the balls of his feet, the muscles in his calves tightening, and rose to his feet. The two mercs sitting next to the crackling firepit rose in unison, their eyes narrowed and weapons trained on Peterson’s struggling body.

“Stand down,” Eric ordered.

Peterson’s lips curled back as he tried to straighten himself. He flopped over, his limbs flailing wildly, resembling a fish that had just been pulled from the water. The tight bindings on his legs and the heavy dose of drugs left him partially immobilized, unable to stand. Eric chuckled at Peterson’s uncoordinated attempt to defend Van.

“Maybe the human should be looking for better shifters if she has a taste for us,” he commented. He leaned down and wiped the blood on the tip of the blade along Peterson’s side before sheathing it. “Maybe I’ll give her a taste once the others bring her in.”

Van held his tongue, his lips pressed tightly together. It was clear that further antagonizing Eric would only lead to more trouble, so it was best to avoid initiating any further conflict. An injury would render him useless, making it impossible for him to protect Jayden or provide aid to Peterson.

He kept his features blank, his face a mask, as Eric studied him for a moment longer. Van’s relief was short-lived when the man who had been in the tent with Eric approached him with a tense expression.

“We’ve lost contact with the trackers,” the man murmured.

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Eric's brow furrowed as he glanced between Van and Peterson, his eyes narrowed as he listened. His concern grew that the conversation was about Jayden when Eric jerked his head toward the tent. He strained to hear the men's conversation, but their voices were lost as they disappeared into the tent. He glanced up to the tree limb above him, but the owl had vanished without a sound.

"Van."

He turned his head and focused on Peterson. "Yeah."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, man. It's just a scratch," he replied.

Peterson tried to lift his head, but gave up. "Looks like a lot of blood for a scratch."

"I've had hangnails that hurt worse."

Peterson snorted and blinked. "Jayden?"

The question hung in the air, unasked but heavy, and the knot of dread tightened in his stomach. Eric called out to the two guards who were sitting by the fire. The instructions must have been crucial, as both nodded and vanished into the night without a word.

"They won't find her. You know how smart she is," he said.

Peterson lifted his head. “You gotta get this thing off of me. I’m going to rip that bastard’s throat out.”

“You and me both. Just... don’t piss him off until I do. Promise?”

Peterson snorted, laid his head back down, and closed his eyes. “I feel like shit.”

Van chuckled and leaned his head back. “You look like shit, too.”

Jayden peered down from the tree, the branches creaking softly beneath her weight as she watched the forest below. Through the branches, she saw the warm glow of a campfire and the faint light from a lantern inside a tent. The full moon turned out to be a silver lining. It had given her enough light to follow the men’s tracks.

She might have missed their camp if the night’s silence hadn’t been interrupted by the shifter’s loud fart and the low crude comments that followed. The sudden gentle whoosh of wings startled her. With a silent curse escaping her lips, she glared at the barred owl, its piercing dark eyes fixated on her as it perched on a nearby branch.

The owl’s head swiveled, its dark eyes staring at her for a moment before looking down. Following the owl’s gaze, Jayden froze, her heart pounding in her chest as she realized what the owl had spotted. A guard, barely visible in the shadows, had stopped just twenty feet beneath her. She wrinkled her nose in revulsion when he bent forward and expelled a noxious cloud of gas, before letting out a sigh.

“I told you not to eat those damn freeze-dried beans,” a woman stated.

“I feel like I’m about to shit them out. There ought to be a law against those things,” the shifter moaned.

“Go take a crap while you can. If you don’t stop farting, Singleton will kill you. I’ll

cover for you,” the woman snapped.

“Thanks, Red,” the man muttered.

“I just don’t want to stand downwind of you all night,” Red snapped.

From her vantage point, Jayden observed Red continue her patrol while the gas-man moved further into the woods. She returned her attention to the male. She might never get another chance to take him. With a firm grip on the trunk, she was just starting her quiet descent when the owl, a silent predator in the night, swooped down towards the shifter.

The shifter, alerted by the owl’s whooshing wings, turned and looked upward. Jayden wasn’t sure what happened. One second the shifter was staring up at her with a shocked expression on his face, the next he was clutching his throat, a strangled gasp escaping his lips.

With a nearly silent whoosh of wings, the owl angled upward, landing on a branch several yards from her. Her eyes, wide with shock, moved slowly from the lifeless shifter to the silent owl watching from the shadows. A shaft of moonlight illuminated the crimson blood dripping from the talons, each drop sparkling like a ruby. She nodded slowly, her head barely moving, a silent acknowledgement of her understanding. She felt a surge of hope, knowing that this creature, whoever or whatever it was, could help her rescue her mates.

She glanced at the lifeless shifter, her mind racing. Had this been the same creature lurking in the woods with her and Tracy? And were there others? The owl had vanished when she turned to look at the tree again. Aware of the body’s inevitable discovery, she descended from the tree. Her abused palms stung from the rough bark, and her throbbing leg ached as she landed silently on the mossy forest floor.

She moved stealthily; her footsteps muffled by the soft earth as she crept closer to the camp. The approaching footsteps, slow and deliberate, sent a shiver down her spine, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She sank down, flattening herself against the cold, hard ground. With a practiced motion, she slid her hand down her leg, her fingers brushing the rough leather of her boot, until her hand met the familiar, reassuring weight of the knife. With a gentle tug, she freed it from its sheath.

“Have you seen Bailey?” a man asked.

“Yeah. He needed to take a crap. I warned him about eating those beans. Maybe next time he’ll listen to me,” Red replied.

“Now’s not the time to have a fucking stomach ache. Something’s wrong,” the man said.

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“What are you talking about?” Red asked.

The man’s voice dropped. “He sent Tweed and Hancock to find out what happened to the trackers. I overheard Damien said they lost contact.”

“With which one? They were all wearing collars,” she said.

“All of them.”

“Shit! I better find Bailey,” Red muttered.

“I’ll find him. You keep an eye on the prisoners. If that red wolf growls or snaps again, put a bullet in him. You can always ask Singleton for forgiveness afterwards.”

“Let’s hope Bailey is finished with his business, or I might be tempted to put a bullet in him. His farts stink,” Red replied before heading toward the camp.

Jayden held her breath as they walked by, barely a foot from her side. Her eyes darted upward, scanning for the barred owl. The creature remained perched in the tree above her, motionless until both soldiers had walked away from each other. The owl spread its wings and soared silently into the air, following the man who was about to join his friend Bailey, if she was lucky.

She shifted onto her belly and mentally tallied the number left. If what the man said was true, there were two other shifters somewhere out in the forest. It would take them a while to find their friends.

They'll be in for an unpleasant surprise when they do, she thought with grim satisfaction.

As she moved closer to the camp, she could hear the faint murmur of voices coming from the tent. Across from her, she could see the female shifter named Red. The firelight danced across the woman's short, bright red hair, making it appear to glow.

Her eyes shifted to the tent. There were two men inside talking in low voices. From the tense tones, they were not happy.

Wait until they find out what I did to their friends, she thought with grim satisfaction.

"What is so important about this female?" one man demanded. "We have the right to know, Eric. The Knights have always had equal say."

"I know, Damien. I know. Have you heard of Isabella Wyland?"

"Of course. Who hasn't? She's one of the wealthiest shifters in the world," Damien replied.

"She wants the human and she's willing to do whatever it takes to get one."

Damien's frustrated breath sounded loud. "Why? It doesn't make sense to call in the Knights to capture a single human. Hell, there has to be someone in the government she can bribe who will give her one."

"Not with Michaela in charge. Isabella knows something. She wouldn't go to this much trouble, take this many chances, unless it was worth her while. Think about it, Damien. Who is her brother?"

"I don't know. What does her brother have to do with all of this?"



“His name is Dr. Theodore Badger. He is a leading researcher on human history,” Eric explained.

“Who cares about their history? Up until... what, a year ago... we all thought humans were dead,” Damien growled with impatience.

“Do you remember that old song that we all learned when we were kids?” Eric asked.

“You mean the old one about that old shifter king taking the humans and hiding them away? It’s a song to give shifter kids complexes for being bad,” Damien scoffed.

“What if it’s real? What if—and I’m just making an assumption—what if Theodore found something and needs a human to tell him what it means? What if a human is the key to finding this lost civilization?” Eric suggested.

“Who... the... fuck... cares? Everyone will be dead. There are thousands of lost human villages scattered around the world. They were vermin, Eric, and nature took its course.”

“They may have been, but Or’Ang was a real king who is said not only to have vast wealth that he took with him, but discovered a power source unlike anything else on the planet. An infinite power source that enabled him to conceal the kingdom from the rest of the world. Now, imagine if you found this source. What do you think it would be worth? The shifter who controls this type of power could conceivably control the planet.”

“Are you saying you think the legends of Or’Ang are real?” Damien asked.

“I’m saying that Isabella Wyland thinks they are and is willing to do anything to find out. There’s one more thing,” Eric said.

“What’s that?”

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“It’s said this power can make whoever has it immortal.”

“Now that would be worth killing for,” Damien agreed.

As a man walked towards the part of the tent where Jayden stood, she retreated back into the shadows. Her eyes darted around the campsite, looking for the woman known as Red. The sound of a twig snapping beneath a foot made her whirl around. If she hadn't ducked, the woman's powerful blow would have landed with a sickening crunch, shattering her cheekbone, instead of just grazing her skin and sending Jayden tumbling to the ground.

She rolled, the motion a blur, and came up with her knife in her hand, her eyes narrowed on the woman who had struck her. Red's lips curled into a sneer, and a harsh, mocking laugh escaped her. Jayden stumbled out into the open circle of the campsite. The noise drew the attention of the two men inside the tent. She kept her eyes on the advancing woman even as the tent flap opened and the two men appeared.

“Well, well, well. Speak of the devil and she will appear. It would appear it was a waste of good men to send them looking for you. All we needed was to use your mates as bait.”

Jayden recognized his voice as the one belonging to Eric. She kept moving backward, getting closer to Van and Peterson. Van's low, angry mutterings mixed with Peterson's enraged growls. She paused near Peterson. Her anger flared as she saw the straps digging into his fur, restricting his movement.

Kneeling down, she ran her fingers softly through his fur, her touch moving from his

head to his side, and finally reaching the strap holding his paws together. In a swift motion, she cut the restraint with a flick of her wrist. She reached up and traced the edge of the collar with her fingers.

“I wouldn’t do that if you want him to keep it attached,” Eric said.

Her eyes were drawn to the object he extracted from his pocket and held aloft. There was a button on the object, which was surrounded by flashing red lights. She rose to her feet, a defiant expression on her face, and moved to Van. Her eyes stayed on the three shifters, and she kept her movements slow as she squatted down and cut the strap around his ankles. With a gentle but firm hand, she clasped his arm and pulled him to his feet.

He wobbled for a moment before he grew steady. She reached for the straps binding his wrists, poised to cut them free, when Eric let out a low, disapproving sound and shook his head. She froze when his finger caressed the button on the device.

“You have a choice to make, my dear. I really only need one of your men alive. You see, wolf shifters can be rather... defiant. Especially if they are in a pack. But, being the kind man that I am, I’ll let you chose which one lives,” Eric said.

“That offer won’t work for me. You see, I’ve always been selfish and greedy. Why choose when I can have it all?” she retorted.

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way in the real world. Make your choice or I’ll make it for you,” Eric said.

“You need me. Do you honestly think that I’m stupid enough not to realize that you’ll kill them both the moment you get what you want? No, the fact is, the only one you can’t risk is me,” she replied.

Eric gave a dismissive wave, taking in the campsite and the two shifters flanking him, their eyes narrowed in anticipation. She pursed her lips, her gaze hardening as she saw the smug smile playing on his lips. She hadn't lied when she said she had always been on the selfish and greedy side.

"You're right. I don't need either of them," he said.

She lifted the sharp blade to her throat at the same time as he lifted the device in his hand. She pressed the tip into her flesh over the artery. She had killed enough wildlife in her life to know how fast a creature could die once the main artery was severed.

"Kill them and I'll be dead before I hit the ground," she said.

"She's lying," Red retorted.

"Am I? I thought shifters could smell a lie. I swear, if you harm either one of them, I'll slice my own throat before either hits the ground," she vowed, staring Eric straight in the eyes.

Eric's eyes narrowed on her face, his gaze piercing and intense. His thumb moved away from the button and turned the device, holding it up between his fingers. A shadowy movement flitted through the corner of her eye, making her turn to see what it was. The widening of her eyes must have warned him that they were no longer alone. A large, snow-white owl, with its feathery wings spread wide, swooped out of the darkness. The blow was so powerful that it ripped through Eric's arm, sending a spray of blood onto the woman beside him.

Eric's face contorted in shock as he watched the device, clutched in his hand, slide across the hard-packed dirt. It rolled towards her, landing palm-up at her feet with a clatter. Eric clutched his wounded arm with his one good hand, his face contorted in pain as he stumbled backward. Gunfire erupted, the sharp cracks splitting the stillness

of the air as Red's bullets flew wildly. Jayden felt a sharp pain in her ribs as Van's body slammed into hers, his weight throwing her off balance and away from the barrage of bullets cutting through the trees.

"Cut the straps," he urged in her ear.

Jayden fumbled to slide the blade between the strap holding his arms behind his back. As soon as he was free, he snatched the device from the stiffening fingers, his grip tight and urgent. The collar around Peterson's throat suddenly clicked, falling to the ground with a metallic clang.

The collar finally off, Peterson charged with the fury of a wounded beast, his crimson fur a blazing inferno as he collided with the woman, sending her tumbling backward. The weapon slipped from her grasp as she stumbled back several steps, her form shifting and crackling with magical energy until she was a monstrous, crimson boar. Jayden quickly looked towards the other shifter. He was engaged in a desperate struggle against the barred owl, whose strikes were precise and lethal.

"Stay down," Van ordered.

She could only manage a quick nod before he transformed into his black wolf and joined the battle. She scooted back against the tree, her eyes wide with horrified fascination as she witnessed shifters battling each other. Out of the corner of her eye, a flash of white disappeared into the tent. The flap closed before Jayden could see anything more than a glimpse of dark hair and stylish clothing. The strange observation that she didn't know that shifters could shift with their clothes teased the back of her mind before Red's scream pulled her attention back to the battle in front of her.

The barred owl hooted softly as it flew into the tree above her, the sound of its wings barely audible over the thudding of Van and Peterson's finishing blows on the two

mercenary shifters. She pushed off the ground when Peterson turned and limped over to her. Red's tusks had left him with multiple deep wounds on his shoulder and side. She hugged him tightly, burying her face in his soft fur.

"I love you. I was so afraid they would hurt you. I love you," she murmured.

Feeling a warm tongue on her arm, she drew back and glanced upwards. Her eyes met Van's, and she felt a connection in his warm, dark brown eyes, a spark that ignited a thousand feelings within her. Pushing up under her arm, he rested his chin against Peterson's neck. Leaning forward, she pressed her forehead against his.

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“I love you, too. I meant what I told him... that I was selfish and greedy. I want both of you, all of you, forever,” she said.

“As long as you let us chase you every once in a while, you can have us anytime you like,” Van promised.

When the tent flap swung open, all three of them glanced upwards. The snowy owl, a ghostly white against the dark forest, swept out of the tent and disappeared into the darkness. Through the opening, she could see Eric lying motionless, his body twisted awkwardly on the ground. Her eyes shot upward, drawn to the thick, dark foliage of the tree above, searching for any sign of movement. The barred owl had vanished, leaving behind only the deathly silence of the forest.

“I vote that we hike out tonight and find a phone since we lost the satellite phones,” Peterson said, grimacing with pain.

A sudden flash of light, followed by the deafening whirring of a helicopter, jolted them into attention. They squinted, shielding their eyes from the intense light of the spotlight. Seconds later, government agents, clad in black, slid silently to the ground, their movements smooth and practiced. Jayden watched as a woman removed her helmet and shouted out an order.

“Secure the area.”

The woman walked over to them and nodded. “I’m agent Darlene Southpaw with the SBSI. Is Eric Singleton here?”



Jayden lifted her hand, her finger extended, and pointed at the tent, its canvas billowing in the down draft caused by the helicopter. Darlene turned and stared in that direction. The woman's face betrayed a quick surge of emotion, a fleeting glimpse of something Jayden couldn't quite place, before she turned to another agent, standing a few feet behind her.

"There're two more bodies in the woods," the man stated.

Darlene turned and looked at them. "I can have you airlifted out tonight or you can stay and go in the morning. Which do you want?"

"Tonight!"

The sheer force and enthusiasm of their unified voices brought a smile to the woman's lips. Nodding, she gestured towards a waiting agent.

"Airlift them to the military hospital in Seattle so they can be taken care of," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who killed him?" Darlene asked.

Jayden looked at tent. "I don't know. I didn't see who it was."

"At least, it is over," Darlene murmured.

Jayden didn't know what to say. Darlene's words seemed to hang in the air. A sense of unspoken meaning lingered, making Jayden feel like there was more to the story. Something far more personal than the unfolding events of tonight, something that had touched this woman deeply.

Her throat tightened as Jayden watched the basket descend from the helicopter. As images from the past danced in her head, a surge of longing for home washed over her. Though her eyes were drawn to the moonlit mountain, her heart was elsewhere.

The sound of Peterson's soft whimpers, combined with the feeling of Van's wet nose against her palms, drew her attention downwards. She felt the warmth of the two wolves' fur beneath her fingers, a reassuring comfort. No, her heart no longer yearned for the cold mountains. It belonged to the two wolves who had captured her wild instincts and filled the emptiness in her soul.

## Epilogue

Pineminister Castle

Victoria, Canada

\* \* \*

Isabella Wyland, feeling the weight of her age, slowly walked down the marble hallway towards the den. The rhythmic tap of her cane on the gleaming floor was a frustrating reminder that she was no closer to finding out the secret her brother held about the human world.

As she entered the sitting room, she was relieved to be greeted by the warmth of the fire. Sleep had eluded her, and she got out of bed shortly after midnight. Her attempts to reach Eric by phone were met with silence. He wasn't even answering the bloody Operator.

Mid-stride toward the fireplace, she noticed the gray trousers and shiny shoes. Her anger simmered, and she could feel it building inside her like a pressure cooker about to explode. The thought of spending even one more minute this evening with her

brother filled her with a lifetime's worth of weariness. Her home, once a sanctuary, now felt overcrowded and suffocating, and she desperately craved a moment of solitude.

"I thought you had gone to bed hours ago," she snapped.

"Tsk-tsk, Isabella. You are getting grouchier in your old age," the man responded.

"Hyder? I thought—Eric insinuated—the house?—"

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

Her voice faded as Hyder Furman shifted in the luxurious seat, angling himself so she could see his face. She couldn't help but notice the lines etched deeper around his eyes, making his face look harder, more weathered than she remembered. The wave of his hand towards the chair was a silent invitation, and she automatically stepped forward to take her seat.

Even as her knees protested with a sharp crack, she managed to sit down gracefully, hiding the discomfort of her arthritis with a practiced elegance. The sound of the tea being poured into her cup made her fingers tighten on the handle of her cane, and she felt a sudden surge of anxiety. She reached for the cup, her hand hovering hesitantly above the steaming liquid, as she eyed the brew with suspicion when he sat back.

“It’s not poisoned. You are too valuable to me at the moment to kill you—no matter how tempting it is,” he said.

She placed the fragile teacup on the end table between the chairs and sat back. “What do you want, Hyder? How did you get in?”

“I want to know why you want a human bad enough to work with someone like Eric Singleton. I want to know what you have on Lorne Timberwolf. There is a lot I want to know, Isabella, and this time, you are going to tell me everything,” he said.

The icy glint in his eyes had mellowed, but his voice still carried the weight of his hardened emotions. This was a different man from the one she had planned to kill at her villa. She wondered what Eric had done to change him.

“Eric—”

“Is no longer available. I heard through the grapevine that he met a rather unfortunate accident while exploring the wilds of Olympic National Forest. He and a dozen of the Knights of the Dii Bellatore. The elders will not be happy to hear that, I’m sure.”

She lifted her chin. “I had nothing to do with his demise. If he and the others are dead, then obviously they weren’t as good as they claimed they were.”

“They aren’t, but I am. Now, you can either tell me everything or I’ll get Theodore to do it. In which case, you will no longer be an asset,” he said.

“Perhaps I can have Frances?—”

The words died on her lips when he shook his head.

“Frances won’t be making any more tea. In fact, you may want to consider learning how to make it yourself,” he said.

Regret washed over Isabella, primarily because it would be a huge inconvenience to train another exceptional bodyguard who could also fulfill the role of her personal maid. She pressed her lips together and regarded Hyder with an air of thoughtfulness. Perhaps this new version would fit her needs better. A serene smile played on her lips as she relaxed comfortably in her seat.

“There’s no need to trouble Theodore. I’m sure we can come to a mutually beneficial agreement. Now tell me, are you familiar with the story about King Or’Ang?” she asked as she picked up her teacup and took a sip.

Four weeks later, Jayden stood on the front porch of her new home, a sense of excitement and anticipation buzzing in her chest. The railing that surrounded the wrap-around porch was smooth and cool beneath her fingertips, and she traced its curve as she walked. The ranch, purchased by Van and Peterson, was right on the

edge of the new human compound, a short distance separating her family and the rest of her clan from the sprawling property.

She watched as Van carried the last of bags from the truck, her eyes following his every move. Her heart raced with a mixture of love and joy, her eyes fixed on him as he ascended the stairs. The last four weeks had been a nonstop rollercoaster ride, filled with unpredictable twists and turns. Their trip to the hospital had lasted longer than any of them expected.

Red's attack on Peterson resulted in four cracked ribs and the need for stitches to repair the damage. Van had to get stitches for his knife wounds. Ben had arranged for a thorough medical checkup for Jayden, much to her dismay. Ella had gone into labor while she was there and given birth to a beautiful baby girl. Jayden had been there by her side, witnessing the raw intensity of labor, soothing both Ella's cries of pain and Ty's desperate pleas to protect his wife from such agony.

Holding his newborn daughter, Ty had been the epitome of a proud father. It was obvious he was a touch overwhelmed by his daughter's fragility and sweetness. The moment the baby wrapped her tiny hand around his finger and she saw the tears in Ty's eyes, Jayden knew why Ella had made the choice to follow her heart.

The nurses, their patience frayed, told the weary father that a sedative was their final option if he didn't allow them to care for the baby and prepare her for Ella's feeding. The family drama, with its dramatic outbursts, had left Jayden amused. The fierce grizzly, with its sharp claws and menacing growl, became as docile as a teddy bear under her friend's gentle touch.

“What do you think?”

Peterson's arm found its way around her waist, drawing her near. She met his gaze, her heart skipping a beat at the warmth of his touch. A wave of awareness washed

over her, igniting a curious warmth that hinted at the intoxicating experience of surrendering to both men. Her fingers traced the matching gold bands on her ring finger.

“I can’t believe that we’re married,” she murmured.

“We can’t believe you said yes when Michaela asked,” Peterson confessed.

She giggled. “Tracy and Ty’s aunt has a very forceful way about her. I was afraid she would eat me if I said no.”

Placing her bag on the chair, Van walked over and raised her hand to his lips. He gently kissed the rings they had just put on her finger, a few hours earlier. They had given her the last four weeks to adjust to life outside of the forests. They aimed to dispel any uncertainty she might have about their feelings. The courtship process had left her both confused and hungry for them.

“Do you two have any idea how much I want to jump your bones?” she blurted out.

Her bold statement brought a bright, rosy blush to her cheeks, a clear sign of her nervousness. The men had been attentive and polite, their chivalry great, but she craved something a little less civilized. A feverish heat had consumed her for the past week, leaving her aching and restless, and now she felt the pressure building, much like a volcano about to erupt.

“Van and I tossed a coin. He gets to carry you across the threshold, I get to carry you to bed,” Peterson said.

“Unless you want to see the rest of the house,” Van said.

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She rolled her eyes and turned into his arms. “I can explore the house later... much, much later.”

“Thank the Goddesses. This courting shit is hard on the balls,” he muttered.

Van leaned down and swept Jayden into his arms, her joyous giggles filling the air. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and playfully bit at his throat, her teeth grazing his skin. Peterson made a beeline for the front door and flung it open. Peterson sprinted ahead, leaving Jayden to take her time exploring Van’s neck.

Anticipation flickered in her eyes as she saw Peterson begin undressing. Peterson was only wearing his silky gray boxers when they reached the master bedroom. His desire was so apparent, it made his boxers bulge, and she couldn't help but stare, her eyes widening in disbelief.

“Are you sure we are going to fit together?” she asked, her eyes glued to his groin.

“You’ll be amazed at how well we will fit,” he promised.

With a tender touch, Van transferred her to Peterson, who held her close. Jayden was relieved that she had opted for a more comfortable outfit earlier, ditching the restrictive bra and underwear in favor of looser clothing. Her nipples were swollen and tender, a heavy ache pulsing through them and making them sensitive. As he carried her to the king-size bed, Peterson stole a kiss, his lips lingering on hers.

Van pulled the bedspread back, revealing the crisp white sheets, and rolled across to the other side as Peterson gently lowered her to the mattress. A low moan of longing



escaped her lips as Van pulled down her thin linen trousers, the soft fabric whispering against her skin as it fell to the floor, along with her slip-on shoes. She heard a ripping sound, like fabric being torn, and instinctively pulled back. She blinked, a little shocked, and then laughed, her eyes crinkling at the corners, when she realized Peterson had ripped the buttons off her blouse.

“Michaela gave this to me this morning as a wedding present,” she gasped, falling back against the pillows when he suddenly straddled her.

He pulled her blouse off with a rough growl, sending it flying to the floor as her arms raised in response.

“I’ll buy you a new one,” he promised.

Van locked her arms above her head, holding them with one large hand while he cupped her small breast in his hand. Her eyelids fluttered when he pinched the sensitive buds straining for more attention.

“Heads, tails, or buffalo nickel, Peterson,” Van muttered.

“Let’s let Jayden make the call,” Peterson suggested.

“What-what does that mean?” she asked.

“Heads, Van gets to slide his cock between your sweet lips while I get to devour your sweet clit,” he replied.

Her body bowed when Van bent and captured her nipple between his lips, sucking deep until she felt like he was sucking on her core. Her fingers flexed, wanting to wrap around his cock and bring him the same pleasure he was giving her.

“And-and buffalo nickel? What’s that?” she breathed.

“That’s when you get both of us at the same time, honey. You get to ride and be ridden in the most delicious way,” Peterson said.

Her legs fell open when he slid his hand down between them and cupped her buttocks. Her breath caught when he gently caressed the crack of her ass with his thumbs. The vision of what he was telling her sent a shaft of pleasure-pain through her. She wasn’t sure she was ready for that, not the first time.

But, maybe the second.

“Heads. Let’s start with heads and work our way to the buffalo—to the buffalo nickel,” she moaned.

“We’ll make sure you are ready,” Van promised.

Jayden was certain she was already ready. Her body felt as if it was filled with molten liquid. Her gasp turned to a muffled scream when Peterson cupped her buttocks and buried his face between her legs. She locked her legs around his head, pulling him closer even as she reached for Van.

Her lips parted and her hand wrapped around his straining cock. She would have to remember to thank Michaela for the videos she had shared on shifter sex. This was way better than any video explaining how things worked between shifters. It was a hell of a lot more satisfying than doing it herself.

Her body was locked in spasms of delight. Her orgasm pulsing in endless waves of intense pleasure. She didn’t think anything could be more mind blowing until Peterson slid deep inside her, stretching her and stroking her pulsing channel.

Her eyes flashed open to see the intense expression on Van's face. Sliding her lips from around his cock, she breathed deeply before speaking.

"Buffalo nickel," she panted. "I want a buffalo nickel."

"Oh, baby. You are about to be so thoroughly loved," Van groaned.

The owl perched on the wind vane soared behind the barn and shifted position. The task of spying on humans filled Axios with a deep, visceral loathing. He walked over to the small bag he had dropped earlier and pulled out the satellite phone, its sleek design feeling cool in his hand. His focus lingered on the house, vigilant and attentive, as he waited for the phone to connect.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:10 am*

“Does she have it?” Chawni asked.

“I’m not sure. If she does, she hasn’t left it out. The old man doesn’t have it,” he replied.

“Monitor the situation. If she has one of those cylinders, we need to retrieve it before anyone discovers how to open it. Keep me advised on your progress.”

“Yes, Commander,” Axios replied.

After ending the call, Axios put the satellite phone back in the bag containing a single change of clothes and concealed the bag in the barn’s wall cavity. The marking on his arm was a raised scar, and he felt the ridges with his fingertips, the memory of its creation distorted. The snowy-owl shifter had had a marking just like this when he shifted. It was the only time he had ever seen another with the marking before.

Looking toward the house, he knew that there would be no chance of him searching for the device any time soon. He turned, his eyes moving to the west. He could return to the human compound. Perhaps the old man would let slip where the cylinder had been hidden.

He strode forward, his muscles shifting and flexing as he prepared to take flight. He would return to the human settlement, driven by the need to find the cylinder, certainly not his yearning to see the delicate human woman with the gentle touch.

A faint blush of pink was spreading across the eastern sky as Jayden woke, signaling the arrival of a new day. A sense of contentment, like a warm, soothing melody,

pulsed through her body. Van and Peterson had shown her pleasure in ways that were both unexpected and exhilarating. Every inch of her body had been explored with such fervor that she felt weak and trembling, a delightful sensation that left her yearning for more.

The warmth of their embrace and the love in their eyes enveloped her completely. Peterson lay on his back, his face turned towards her, one arm thrown over his head in a relaxed pose. Her fingers had run through his hair, leaving it in a tangled mess, and the scent of him lingered on her fingertips. She longed to run her fingers through his soft, thick hair and pull his lips down for a kiss, feeling the warmth of his skin against hers. The memory of his lips against hers, the way he had given her pleasure, sent shivers down her spine.

On the other side of her, Van lay completely relaxed on his stomach, his face pressed into her pillow, his hair tousled and his body radiating warmth. He reveled in her complete surrender, taking pleasure in both giving and receiving. He was more demanding than Peterson, constantly pushing for more and not afraid to speak up about his wants. Her body flushed as she thought of some of his requests.

“That’s it, baby,” Van murmured in his sleep.

She felt a jolt of electricity run through her body as his hand slid over her stomach, the warmth of his touch and the husky sound of his voice making her heart race. Her lips parted on a gasp when she felt his desire nudging her to open for him.

When she looked to Peterson, she was captivated by the intense blue of his eyes, feeling as though she was being pulled into their depths. A knowing smile curved his lips, revealing a glint of mischievous amusement. Her hand stretched out, seeking his, as Van pressed forward, his body tense with purpose.

“I love you, Jayden,” Peterson murmured.

“Show me how much.”

“Head, tails, or buffalo nickel,” he teased, kissing her fingers.

“All of the above,” she said, tangling her hands in his hair.

To Be Continued...