

A RAYTHE REIGN PUBLICATION

CRIMSON



X. ARATARE

(Yaoi, M/M, Werewolves)

CRIMSON - A Modern M/M Retelling of Little Red Riding Hood

Jude Connor has always been an outsider. Orphaned at ten, he learned quickly to be wary of people. Luckily, he's always had a sixth sense to pick out the ones to avoid and an ability to calm the savage beast whether it be animal or man. But his early experiences have soured him on the possibility of relationships and family, even though a part of him still wishes he could find a place to belong.

His fierce foster sister, Tessa Cambridge, fears that Jude's aimless, solitary life will never bring him happiness. When there are hints that their foster mother, known as “Grandmother Sophia” to all the countless foster kids she raised, may be suffering from dementia, Tessa sees this as a chance to Jude to set down some roots. She asks him to go check on the woman who saved both their lives in the small town of Forest Glenn.

Werewolf, Gareth the Gray Wolf, became Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack after a tragedy. Their former beloved Alpha, Mack, went rogue after the death of his mate Eliza, killing and devouring human beings and risking the exposure of werewolves to the human world. After seeing how the loss of his mate turned a good man and a great Alpha into a killing beast, Gareth knows that he can never take a mate of his own. He cannot risk his pack or the rest of the werewolf world by becoming like Mack.

As Alpha, Gareth is now tasked with hunting Mack down before he causes any more harm. He tracks Mack to a small town that goes by the name of Forest Glenn ...

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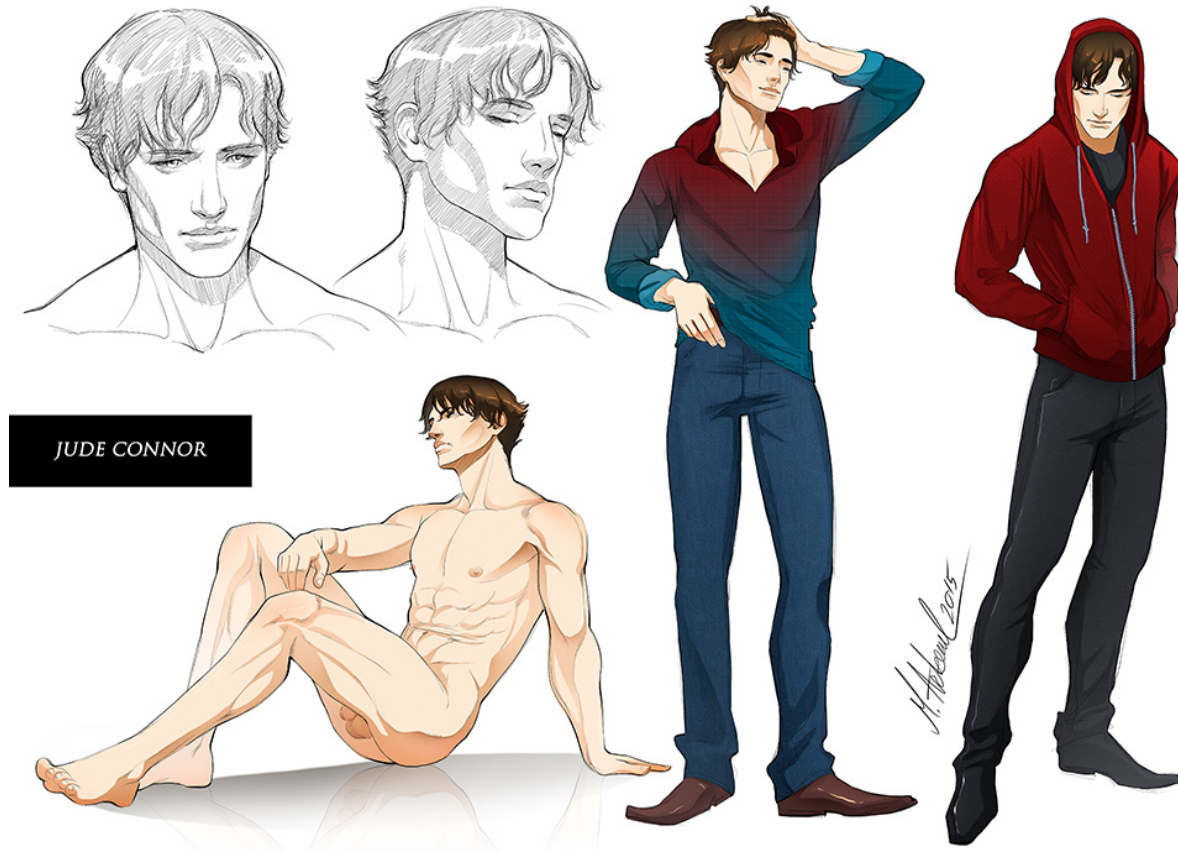
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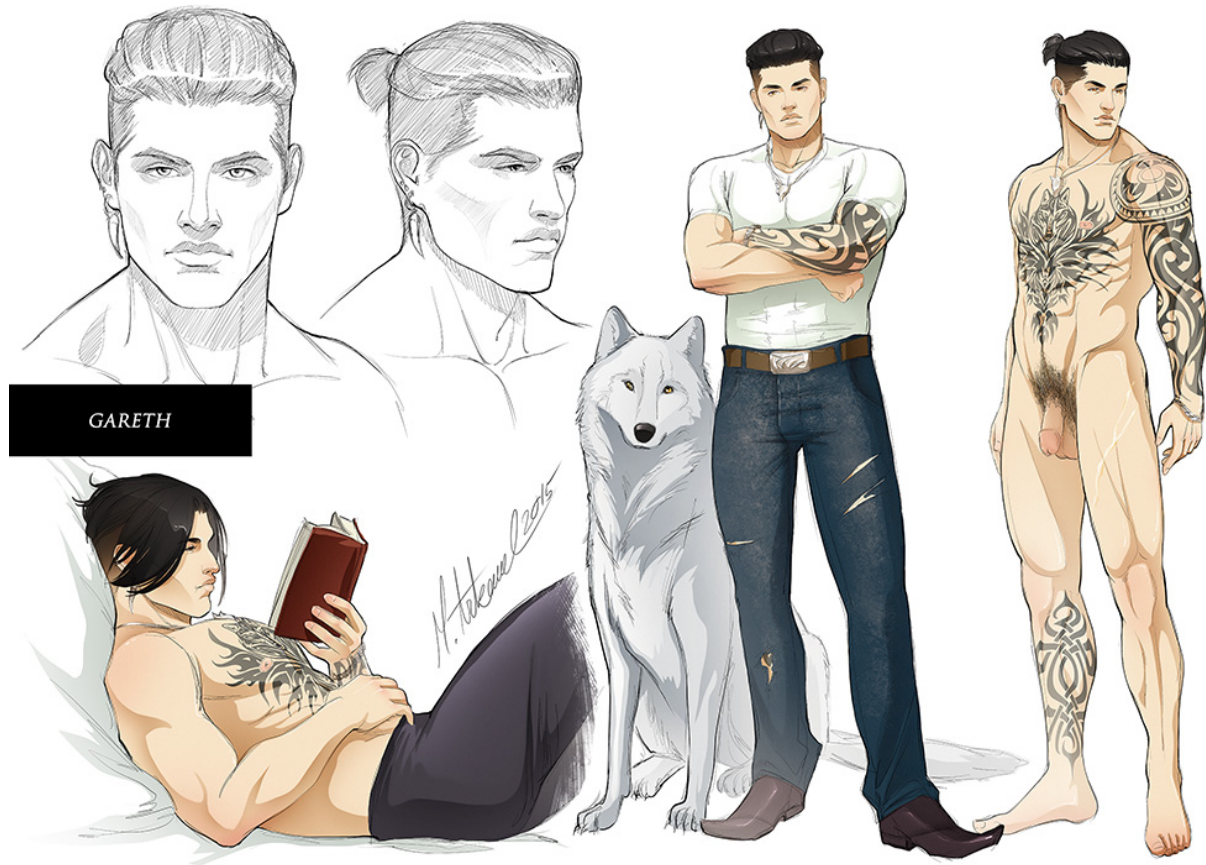
Crimson – Characters



Jude Connor

Jude Connor has seen plenty of the bitter side of life. His beauty brought him unwanted attention from the predators of the world. Thankfully, he seemed born with an innate ability to sense who will cause him trouble and calm those who are ruled by their more beastly instincts. Yet now he avoids people as much as possible, believing he can only be safe if he's on his own even as his heart still yearns for a people to belong to.

But his foster sister, Tessa Cambridge, knows that Jude's heart is being overridden by his head and that Jude really needs to be a part of a family to find happiness. Though she tries to get him to join her and her party, Jenny, in New York City, Jude cannot bear being in crowds of people. Instead, he roams the highways on his motorcycle, picking up odd jobs as he goes to pay his way, which allows him to stay near the forests that call to him.



Gareth The Gray

Gareth has always been known as "The Gray" in the Cold Moon Pack for his ability to seemingly disappear in a forest mist only to reappear at his enemy's throat. Mack called him an old soul from the moment they met on a battlefield when Gareth's life's blood was flowing out of him and the Alpha asked if he wanted a chance to continue to live.

Gareth never thought to take over the Cold Moon Pack, though many saw in him Alpha potential from the beginning, but he believed and was content at the thought that Mack would lead them forever. Yet when tragedy struck and Mack went rogue, it was Gareth's strength that kept the pack from self-destructing. He was named the pack's Alpha unanimously, nominated by the pack's Beta Nina. He is one of the youngest Alphas ever.

When asked why she didn't take over the pack herself as she was more than respected and worthy to do so, Nina gave him a cool-eyed glance and said,

"My skills go to keeping things running smoothly. Yours are to get out front and *lead* us in this new world, Gareth."

Now with the responsibility and burden of the pack on his shoulders, Gareth believes that he must at all costs avoid the same trap that Mack fell into:
loving someone more than life itself.



Mack The Rogue

Once one of the most respected Alphas in the werewolf world, Mack lost everything -- including his mind -- when his beloved mate Eliza was killed. He killed the humans who had caused her end, but after tasting human flesh and blood he went feral. No longer the calm, intelligent, steady Alpha, he became an incorrigible killer of humans, always eager for the slaughter.

Now he is hunted by those who once thought of him as a father. But Mack is still as powerful as he ever was with keen intelligence that he has now turned towards destruction of everything and everyone he once loved.

CHAPTER ONE: THE WHITE WOLF

“I’ll let you fill up your motorcycle for *free* if you give me a taste of that sweet mouth of yours,” the gas station attendant offered.

He was a pudgy man in his mid-fifties, married according to the ring on his finger, but evidently had a *taste* for desperate young men. The patch on his shirt said his name was “Merv”, which Jude Connor was having a hard time not translating to “Perv”.

Merv had a double-chin that he clearly was trying to hide with a scraggly beard that only accentuated the rolls of fat. His gut was just barely covered by a too-tight t-shirt stained by grease and oil and hung over the waistband of his pants like it was trying to escape the rest of him. If Merv weren’t male, one would have thought he was expecting. The leer and licking of rubbery lips by a tobacco-stained tongue just made the whole offer that much more revolting to Jude.

But I only have five dollars left and that’s not going to fill the bike let alone get me something to eat.

Jude hadn’t eaten in two days and his lean, muscular frame was looking more lean than muscular. He normally was able to find odd jobs as he rode around the Midwest, but for the past two weeks he hadn’t found any work for more than a couple bucks here or there. Not enough to get by. He’d taken to sleeping in fields with a plastic tarp to keep off the rain to save money, but he was down to the bitter end of his finances. The bike had coasted into this gas station on fumes and there the gas station was the only business around for miles. So it was take Merv’s offer or ...

There’s always the credit card that Tessa gave me. It’s in my wallet. God, I hardly need one. My license, her credit card and an old condom are the only things in there. Might as well put the damned thing out of its misery.

Tessa Cambridge was his foster sister and now a big time lawyer in New York City. The last time he had visited her and her partner Libbie Meyers

she had handed him the cell phone that occupied the other back pocket of his worn jeans and the credit card.

He'd tried to wave her off, but she'd pressed both the phone and credit card into his hands. "Take them, Jude. If you can't take them for yourself, take them for *me*. I can't stand to think of you alone out there with just your motorcycle. It's not safe."

"I can take care of myself." He lifted his chin mulishly as he said it. "So you can give it to me, but I'll never use it. I don't need charity."

"It's not charity, Jude. You're my *brother*." She sighed and passed a hand over her forehead and suddenly he saw tears in her eyes. "You need ... *people* in your life, Jude. A family. You know that Libbie and I would be thrilled if you stayed with us --"

"Tessa." He grasped her shoulders, shocked at the sudden tears in her dark brown eyes. Tessa was tough as nails and *never* cried, not even when she'd found out that her mother had finally died from her drug addiction. Now she was weeping over *him* and the fact that he was alone on the road? "I'm okay. Really. I'm happy being by myself. You and Libbie are the only people I need. But I also need to be ... on the road. Just moving, you know?"

"But why, Jude?" Her beautiful ebony face lifted up to his and she studied him with an intensity that he'd seen her only use in the courtroom. He struggled not to squirm under that insightful look.

"I -- I just like not being tied down," he answered her lamely.

One elegant eyebrow lifted. "Or maybe, just maybe, you're running from everyone and everything because you're afraid of being hurt again. Could that be the real reason, Jude?"

"So ... what do you say? A kiss for a tank full of gas?" The gas station attendant asked, drawing Jude out of his memories.

“I said I’d do *work* for the fuel,” Jude’s voice took on a slight edge. “I could pick up around here.” There was trash all around the station from chip wrappers to beer bottles. “Or clean your windows.” The station’s windows were so filthy that they looked like they were tinted even though they weren’t. “There’s plenty of work to be done for the price of a tank of gas and some food.”

But even as he said these things he knew this man wouldn’t let him work for the fuel and food. He knew Merv’s type. This man saw a kid -- not that Jude was exactly a kid any more, he was twenty-four, but Jude was aware that he had a certain appeal, a prettiness that made him look vulnerable -- who was alone and desperate and instead of giving a helping hand, Merv asked for sex. *Just a taste. Just a touch. Just don’t scream while I* -- Jude blinked, thrusting back memories he didn’t want to ever remember again.

“There’s no work here. Unless it’s work on your *knees*.” Merv’s leer went a little stiff, showing some yellowed teeth even as his suggestions got ruder. He didn’t like Jude’s tone evidently. Probably thought it was disrespectful.

Anger flooded Jude’s mind for a moment. A red haze covered his vision as he remembered being held down, his pants cut off of him and -- no! He would not think of that! He would not! Fine tremors coursed through his body then. His hands fisted as he imagined busting Merv’s lip open with a punch to the face. Merv would fall down, gasping and bleeding and bleating that he would call the cops. Jude knew he could intimidate Merv into staying in place while he gassed up the bike and stuffed bags of chips and donuts into his bags before hightailing it outta there.

If he had been fifteen that’s what he would have done. Definitely would have done before he had lived with Grandmother Sophia and met Tessa. He would have reacted to the memories and the sickness that lived in this man. But though there was *nothing* wrong about taking down a creature such as this, he would pay the price for it. Merv *would* call the cops and claim that he’d been all innocently minding his business when a punk on a bike came

in, punched him and robbed him. Merv would get to go on pursuing desperate young men for sex and Jude would be the one locked up.

Merv's leer had loosened up again at Jude's long silence. He undoubtedly thought he had a live one here. He'd get his kiss and maybe he'd get Jude to blow him. Maybe if he convinced Jude there would be more money in it Jude would stay for awhile and he'd get to fuck Jude's tight ass. Merv's little cock gave a jerk. Or that's what Jude thought the gas station attendant was thinking and feeling. He normally was pretty spot on about this stuff.

And that was when he realized that he should never say never.

Jude pulled out his worn wallet, flipped it open and took out the credit card. He handed it to Merv. "Actually, I don't need any work from you. I'll take a tank of gas and a few other things. You can charge it to my card."

He almost laughed at the gas station attendant's crestfallen expression. That eased the sting of having to use Tessa's credit card. He vowed to find work as soon as possible and pay her back.

Jude had left the gas station far behind and had pulled off the two-lane highway. He was sitting in a field on the side of the road. He had devoured two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. The gas station had surprisingly had relatively fresh bread and the peanut butter and jelly didn't need refrigeration. That and some sodas and a few bags of chips were all he could fit in his saddlebags with his clothes. But it was more than enough for him for a few days.

He tilted his head back and let the sun bathe his face. The sweet scent of flowers and fresh grass filled his nose. There was a whispery sound as the wind rustled through the trees that were just ten feet away. Out in nature like this he felt a sense of peace he never felt in cities or even small towns. He was free. He might be a little lonely, but that was a small price to pay to not have to fend off the Mervs of this world.

The Pervs of this world, he mentally corrected and grinned.

His eyelids fluttered shut and he laid down fully on the ground. The sun-warmed grass cushioned his back and head. He felt drowsy after the food and stress of the last few days. Maybe he would just catch a nap for twenty minutes or so. He found himself slipping into sleep faster than was usual for him.

And he dreamed.

He dreamed that he was padding through a forest. The trunks of countless trees streamed up over fifty feet above his head. The earth was cool underneath his feet -- *not feet, paws* -- as the sun could not reach through the canopy of thick trees to warm the ground where he tread. With a sense of wonder, he found himself *loping* through the trees. He saw a fallen branch and he *leaped* over it, neatly landing on four paws. He was then running again. His tongue lolled out in pleasure.

I'm dreaming I'm a dog! No, that's not right. I'm a wolf! Jude thought and laughed.

Never had he had such a vivid dream like this where he could feel everything from the rush of air over his coat to the stick of wet mud between the pads of his paws. A wild joy flowed through him as he leaped over another log. He saw a deer leaning down and nibbling on some leaves. Its head raised in alarm as it sensed him. Their gazes met and the deer took off. He dashed after it, giving chase.

He realized with a start that he *could* catch it as the distance between them shrank from twenty to ten feet. He could fasten his jaws around its throat and take it down. He could almost taste its hot blood flowing down his throat and the chew of its flesh. His stomach growled. He wanted meat not peanut butter and jelly! The deer's scent was tinged with fear though and his hunger suddenly eased. He didn't really want to take this deer down. It was a dream. It wouldn't satisfy his hunger. So he stopped following the fleet footed animal, watching it disappear between the tree trunks.

He turned his head to the right and saw a raised open circular clearing. Sunlight poured down onto the grass and flowers that grew there. He effortlessly ran to the center of the clearing before standing still in the light. Wind ruffled his fur. He lifted his nose into the air and breathed in the scent of green, growing things.

That was when the howling began.

Jude froze for a moment, heart hammering in his chest. Though he might be a wolf in his dream, he was a human in his mind and the howls had the hairs on the back of neck rising. The urge to bolt into the trees nearly overwhelmed him, but he wasn't sure where the howls came from. His ears flickered, trying to catch any noise, as he peered into the circle of trees around him. But the sunlight blinded him. He backed up a few feet, deciding to go back the way he came, but then he heard a howl from *behind* him. His four paws nearly left the ground at the sudden shock of that mournful yet frightening sound. Just as he was about to shoot forward another howl came from there, too. Then the howls came from every single direction. He was surrounded!

His heart beat so hard that it felt like it was going to burst from his chest. He lowered his body to the ground so that his belly was brushing the grass and let out a wolfish whine. There was no where to go! What did these other wolves want from him? Now the fact that this didn't seem like a dream took on nightmarish aspect.

Suddenly, the howls stopped. Jude let out a thin whine. The silence was more frightening than the howls had been. Then something caught his eyes to his right. Another wolf had stepped into the clearing. It took but a few steps in before standing still, almost as if it was letting him see that it was there. Its coat was pure white and it had glowing topaz-colored eyes. Those eyes regarded him steadily, without blinking. Jude lowered himself even farther onto the ground as if he could disappear into the earth.

This magnificent animal with strangely intelligent eyes padded over to him, never seeming to blink. Jude whined for a third time, this time it sounded

even more piteous to his own ears than before. Why couldn't he go back to the part of the dream where he'd been running joyously through the woods? Why didn't he wake up? But the sense of reality, that this was as real as the field he had fallen asleep in, kept him securely rooted in place.

The white wolf was almost on top of him now and to Jude's horror, he found himself lying fully down, rolling over onto his back and exposing his throat. The white wolf placed one paw on Jude's chest and then leaned over. Its topaz eyes seemed to burn with command. Jude was helpless to resist. The white wolf -- carefully, almost gently -- put its jaws around his throat. Jude stayed absolutely still.

The press of fangs did not hurt. It was just a pressure to let him know that the white wolf was in charge. A thrill of unexpected excitement and arousal rolled through him. The pressure of those teeth suddenly left his throat and the white wolf's head was lifted so that they were eye to eye. Those topaz eyes *blazed* and seemed to grow larger and larger and larger until they were all he could see. He was lost in gold.

I'll know these eyes. I'll know them. When I see them again.

Jude awakened to a vibration in his back pocket. He blinked and all he could see was gold again. But it was the gold of the sun instead of the wolf's eyes.

There was no wolf. That was a dream. A strange, messed up dream.

But he still felt the pressure of the white wolf's jaws on his throat. He was about to reach up to touch where the memory of those teeth had held onto him, but the vibration in his back pocket distracted him. He realized he was getting a call. The only ones that knew the number was Tessa and Grandmother Sophia.

How ironic would it be that Tessa would call me on the one day I used the credit card. Unless ...

He frowned as he dug out the cell phone and saw that it was indeed Tessa. He put the phone to his ear. "Tessa?"

"Jude!" Her voice was falsely bright. "How -- how are you?"

He smiled in spite of himself. Hearing from Tessa always made him smile even if he had a sinking suspicion that she had an alert on the credit card she'd given him and was calling because he'd used it.

"I'm great, Tessa. How about you?"

She was quiet for a long moment. The great lawyer indeed! When it came to him she was transparent. "I'm ... fine."

"So you got an alert that I used the credit card?" he prompted her.

She let out an audible sigh. "I wasn't doing it to spy on you --"

"Tessa."

"All right, not *just* to spy on you, which is really *caring about you* by the way. I knew you would only use the card if things were really bad," she confessed. "So ... they're really bad?"

It was his turn to sigh. He sat up and scowled into the air. The warm feelings from the dream were fading already as he thought back to Marv and all his ilk. How strange that though he had been afraid of the white wolf in his dream -- a cold hard fear, almost pure somehow -- and yet he preferred the dream over reality.

"I just haven't been able to find work in a while," he said, which was *part* of the truth, but not all of it. Tessa had escaped the world he still lived in. He wouldn't bring her back into it even through his own stories. "But now that I know you're *monitoring* the card I won't do it again and I promise I'll pay you back with interest."

“Oh, Jude, no! I *want* you to use it!” The words tumbled out and he knew she meant them. “In fact, I’d love it if you used it for more than just some convenience store food and gas. It’s one of those cards with no limit. You could --”

“Tessa,” he said firmly.

“All right, all right, I know that tone.” She paused and then said, “I noticed the purchase was in Michigan --”

“TESSA!”

“No, no, don’t say it like that! This is a *legit* thing,” she said and he imagined her waving one hand in the air in her large office with the floor to ceiling windows. “When was the last time that you spoke to Grandmother Sophia?”

Guilt suddenly pierced him. Grandmother Sophia had taken him in at fifteen and Tessa at thirteen. She was the last stop on his way to juvie or worse. He’d been too old when his parents died to be considered for adoption so into the foster system he’d gone. He’d run away from all his other foster homes for good reasons. So many good reasons. Grandmother Sophia had saved him from a life on the streets where the Mervs of the world lived to hurt boys like he had been. But he hadn’t called her in *months*. She’d left Chicago and moved to a small town in Michigan called Forest Glenn. It had been her dream to leave the city for small town living. She’d gotten her wish just last year.

I should have called her before now. What if something’s happened to her?

“It’s been awhile, why? Is something wrong?” he finally got out.

“She’s all right. Well, *mostly* all right. I got a call from Sheriff Fairweather,” she began.

“The *sheriff* called you?” Alarm tinted his voice.

“I asked Georgia to give me a call if Grandmother Sophia had any troubles,” she quickly explained.

“You have the sheriff reporting to you, too? And on a first name basis! You have the credit card companies and now a sheriff in your back pocket, it’s the beginning an empire!” he teased her even as he felt anxiety about what the sheriff had thought troubling enough to call Tessa about. He pulled at a piece of grass and stuck the end of it in his mouth, relishing the almost sweet taste of the grass’ green juice.

“You jest, but ...” Her voice took on a serious notes. “I’ve been concerned about Grandmother Sophia. She’s been forgetting things.”

“She’s seventy-four. I’m pretty sure that she’s forgotten more things than the two of us know together,” he said lightly, but his memory prodded him about how Grandmother Sophia had been the last time he’d called her. She’d repeated a story a few times about going to the store and finding this certain marmalade she’d had in her youth. He had put it down to simple excitement at finding something she’d missed, but maybe that wasn’t the case. Maybe she didn’t remember she had told the story at all.

“I know, but she left a pot on the stove. The fire department had to be called,” Tessa explained. “That’s what Georgia was worried about. She said that Grandmother Sophia was upset and confused --”

“Who wouldn’t be? That’s frightening!”

“*More* upset and confused than would be normal,” Tessa corrected gently.

Jude felt a deep desire to raise up more objections. Grandmother Sophia couldn’t be getting Alzheimer’s. That’s what Tessa was suggesting. He wanted to shout that Grandmother Sophia was fine. She was always fine. She had to be always fine. But he swallowed back the grief of a child. If something was happening to his foster mother, he had to know, not hide in the dark from it like a child.

“You’re thinking that it’s more than just normal memory loss,” he said, unable to say the name of the disease.

“Yes, though she won’t go to the doctor to confirm anything ...” Tessa let that sentence hang.

“I’m not that far away from her,” Jude suddenly said. “Just three hours away. I can stop in. Stay for awhile. Check things out.”

Tessa let out a relieved breath. “I was hoping you would say that!”

“Of course. I would do anything for her,” he said, slightly hurt that she evidently had worried he wouldn’t go and check on the woman that had saved both their lives.

“I know you would. It’s just not going to be an easy thing. You know how she is,” Tessa reminded him unnecessarily. “She’s a firecracker at the best of times and so fierce about her independence ... but I think she knows that something’s wrong. She’s sure to be defensive, Jude.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he agreed, running a hand through his dark brown hair. “I’ll find out if there’s anything to really worry about, Tess. I promise.”

His foster sister let out a laugh. “I knew I could count on you, Jude.”

They hung up and Jude stood. He quickly packed up everything in his saddlebags. Unlike Merv, he made sure to clean up his trash as well. He’d dump it at the next town. He would leave this place as pristine as he found it.

As he mounted the motorcycle, his gaze strayed to the woods. For one moment he remembered the experience of running through the trees on four paws and a pair of golden eyes. The motorcycle roared to life beneath him and he pulled onto the highway somehow feeling less lonely and more hopeful than he had in a long time.

CHAPTER TWO: ROGUE

The Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack, Gareth the Gray, opened his eyes as the vision released him. The sunlight in the forest glade painted the world gold. He didn't fight the gold, but embraced it. Instead of trying to see clearly, he let the rest of his senses come back online slowly, relishing the experience of reconnecting.

Though he was in his human form, his enhanced werewolf hearing allowing him to hear the tick of a squirrel's claws as it scampered up a nearby tree. There was a rustling to his left where a bird was hopping on the ground, searching for seeds and insects to eat. A white-tailed deer fled through the underbrush. In his wolf form these sounds would have been even more pronounced, but they were ten times what the keenest human would have heard.

Once Gareth felt the press of grass and soil beneath his crossed legs and smelled the green, growing scent of the forest around him, he knew he was back in the moment and no longer in the vision. He rose to his feet in a graceful singular motion. The wind and sun caressed his bare back. He drew one hand over the elaborate tattoo on his chest. A tribal design with an image of his wolf was tattooed across his chest. He placed his palm over the wolf to center himself fully.

The Beta of the Cold Moon Pack Nina Ibarra swam into view as Gareth's eyes suddenly cleared from the vision. Her olive-toned skin glowed with health. Her fall of black hair stirred in the wind. But it was the intent look in her dark chocolate covered eyes that arrested him. She *knew* he'd had a vision.

"What did you see?" she asked, her husky voice low like the rustle of leaves over grass.

"We'll be having a new addition to the pack soon," he said and a ripple of *something* went through him at that thought. It wasn't just that he *knew* that there would be a new pack member, which was always a cause of

celebration -- and an essential piece of good news considering all the bad things that had happened to the pack recently -- but there was something about this new wolf that spoke to him. Something *different*.

He could still smell the other wolf in his nose. His scent had been made up of sunlight and pine with a dash of frost-melt. This new wolf was -- or *would be* -- magnificent. The wolf had a mixture of black, white and brown in his coat and the most stunning red-brown eyes. The wolf had looked up at him from his position of surrender on its back and immediately, completely, and utterly Gareth had thought, *You are mine. Mine.*

He told himself that this feeling of possession was normal whenever a new pack member was to be welcomed into his protection. This was the first new pack member since he had become Alpha. But something tugged at him, told him that this was special.

Nina's hands clasped together in front of her chest. Her excitement lit her eyes from within. "A new brother or sister?"

"Brother. He has not turned yet, but it's soon to come upon him," Gareth said and a little shiver of anticipation and regret ran through him. Those red-brown eyes haunted him already. The Werewolf Gene was present in only a small percentage of the entirety of humans and of those who had it, only a small percentage of *those* actually turned. The turning usually happened because of a traumatic experience or exposure to the saliva or blood of another werewolf. So no matter what, this new member of their pack would have to go through something harrowing before he joined them. To distract himself from this sad fact, he said, "He is beautiful, healthy and strong."

"*Beautiful?*" One of Nina's arched eyebrows rose.

He sighed and said, "That is simply a *fact*, not an *opinion* of mine."

"An Alpha should have a Mate. It steadies the pack," she said with authority.

Gareth's broad shoulders tensed. "That has *not* been this pack's experience, has it?"

Nina though did not back down from his steely gaze. "Mack went Rogue because Eliza died, Gareth, not because they were mated in the first place."

"He went Rogue because the loss of her caused him to lose his mind, for him to turn against those he considered his children, his friends and family." Gareth's back was rigid. "If he had not been mated at all then *none* of that could have happened."

Nina studied him in that quiet, all-encompassing way of hers. She saw his pain. She knew that for him Mack had been like a father.

He found me bleeding out on the battlefield and gave me another life. A better life. A family. Friends. Hope. And then he betrayed everything he ever stood for and the love we all had for him.

"So you intend on never mating?" she asked finally.

"I think I owe it to the pack to protect myself -- and *them* -- from me going Rogue. Not making myself vulnerable by bonding with another is part of that protection," he answered simply.

Again, there was another steady look from her that made him almost feel like a liar even though he meant what he said. He did not think it would actually be a hard promise to keep. In his over one-hundred and fifty years of living, he had never met anyone that he had dated for very long let alone a potential Mate. Perhaps he was never destined to have one.

"Let us not talk of my love life," Gareth said as he pulled on a tight white tank top that hugged his muscular frame and accentuated his summer tan.

"Or lack thereof." Nina laughed and knocked her right hip against his left one.

“We could talk about *your* lack of love life, too, Nina.” He grinned at her as he dug a hair tie out of the back pocket of his dark jeans and drew his loose hair into a ponytail. The shaved sides of his scalp were tickled by another flower-scented breeze.

“True, that’s why I was hoping you were going to say that we had a new *sister* joining our group, but alas, another *brother* for me to train.” She laughed again. “I *knew* I was right to nominate you for Alpha! You do realize that only half a dozen Alphas have visions like you do? And only Paavo sees as much as you do.”

Paavo was the Alpha of Alphas. To be compared to him in any way was considered the highest of praise. Yet Gareth had issues with Paavo now and the visions that he had were not something he had *earned*, but instead was something that was innate to him so he could take no credit for this ability.

And also, this ability to see what was coming had set him apart from the other werewolves. It marked him as an Alpha of potentially great power, but until tragedy had struck the Cold Moon Pack, Gareth would have been content to have simply remained the pack’s Scout forever. For as much as he had the ability to lead, Gareth needed solitude, too, which was something an Alpha got little of.

And I could never envision leaving the Cold Moon Pack and Mack was never going to stop being the Cold Moon Pack’s Alpha.

Except Mack *had* stopped being the pack’s Alpha after his mate Eliza had been killed. And it was into this crucial void that Gareth had stepped. He had stopped Mack’s slaughter of the pack members and held the remaining members together after Mack had fled.

“It could have been you as Alpha, Nina. You were Mack’s second and everyone recognized your authority,” Gareth said as he strode away from the sunlit glade towards the large lodge by the lake where the Cold Moon Pack now made its home.

“Like I told you at the time, Gareth, my skills go to keeping things running smoothly. Yours are to get out front and *lead* us in this new world.” She dropped into step beside him. They walked in companionable silence along the path towards the lodge. Sunlight dappled the ground in front of them and warmed their skin as they passed through it. Just as the lodge’s massive timbered sidewall came into view, she asked with a tightness in her voice, “Do you think our new brother will come to us through some -- some intersection with our other duty?”

The “other duty” she spoke of was the tracking and killing of Mack. A Rogue werewolf could not be allowed to live for a Rogue hungered for human flesh and thirsted for human blood. Killing humans was forbidden for many reasons, but the largest of which was the risk of exposure of the existence of werewolves. Already, the advancement of science was threatening to expose them in any case. There was talk that such exposure was inevitable. But if humanity discovered them after a Rogue feasted upon a family ... That was not how they wanted the introduction between humanity and werewolves to begin.

“Though Mack seems the ultimate of calamities of us,” Gareth said evenly, even as his stomach twisted. As Alpha of the pack that Mack had once led, it would be *his* duty to kill the man who had been his father in every respect of the word, but the least, blood. “But there are plenty of other bad things out there that happen to people. It is unlikely that this new pack member and Mack will ever meet.”

Gareth hoped that he would end Mack before the new pack member was introduced. It was always a complex and fraught time for a new brother to adjust to being a werewolf and a member of their family. To add to that the hunting and killing of a former and beloved Alpha? That would be too much.

Besides the pack needs closure before we bring someone in. Mack needs to be put to rest. If his mind was not poisoned he would want this over before more people are hurt. I must remember that when the time comes to face him. Death is what he would want.

“I hope you are right,” Nina said as the front of the lodge came into view.

The lodge, which was called Fallowmere, was huge. It was a sprawling three-story structure made of huge logs and ancient stone. There were wraparound balconies on every floor that allowed excellent views of Wolf Lake. The sliding doors that led into the soaring raftered great room were open to let in the sweet late summer breeze and Gareth heard a rare laugh -- rare these days though laughter had been as plentiful before.

Fallowmere was built to house a pack of one hundred members. At Cold Moon's peak they had had numbered fifty with the idea being that they were prepared for the future when Fallowmere would groan to the rafters with brothers and sisters. But now they numbered only twenty-five. Mack had killed twenty-five of his own pack before Gareth had stopped him.

He sent me and Nina to the Alphas Council to represent the Cold Moon Pack while he mourned his Eliza. Only it was revenge he really intended. He slaughtered the humans that had killed her, but then he devoured their flesh and he changed. When he came back here ...

The vision of Mack's fall had struck Gareth in the middle of the Council Chambers. They had thought he was having a fit. It was only Paavo, the Alpha of Alphas, who had realized what was happening to him. Gareth awoke, keening with loss, with Paavo cradling him like he was a child against the Dane's powerful form.

“He's killing them,” Gareth had gasped out. “He's killing the pack.”

Paavo's sky blue eyes had shut just as understanding flowed through him. “Mack has gone Rogue.”

That pronouncement had rocked every Alpha in the room back on their heels. Mack was one of the most respected of their rarified group. There had not been a dry eye in the house when Gareth and Nina had told them of

Eliza's death. These grim and powerful men and women had understood Mack's loss, but now he had done what was unforgivable.

"Only you can go to Fallowmere, Gareth. No other Alpha can enter Cold Moon Pack's territory. Not even to stop a Rogue. That task falls to you and Nina," Paavo said with great solemnity.

Gareth wanted to scream then. He could hear the screams of his pack in his mind. The vision clung to him like dark cobwebs. Despite knowing that others of their kind were being slaughtered, these great Alphas would do *nothing*. At least not until every Cold Wolf Pack member were dead and unable to deal with Mack themselves. Gareth had argued often with Mack about how foolish this stance was. If Rogues risked exposure to all werewolf kind then did it not make more sense for all werewolves, the same pack as the Rogue, to go after him or her?

"It is a matter of respect, Gareth," Mack had answered him. "To have a Rogue at all is a great stain upon a pack's honor. Letting that pack handle the death of the Rogue is to let it restore its honor."

"That's garbage and you know it, Mack. You may be our leader, but each of us have minds of our own," Gareth had argued. "We act without you. We can do terrible things."

Mack had clasped his arm. "An Alpha must know what acts his pack members do. He or she must anticipate them and stop them. If an Alpha does not then he or she has failed."

As Gareth had looked into Paavo's sky blue eyes he wondered who would be considered to have failed with the going Rogue of an Alpha? Something that had *never* happened in recorded werewolf history? Was the Cold Moon Pack itself at fault? Was every member tainted by Mack's acts? And Gareth saw the answer to all those questions in Paavo's eyes. Yes, the members were all seen as at fault and tainted. He would get no help from the other packs. He saw these Alphas wished he and Nina gone from there.

He saw the werewolf world closing the doors upon them. And for a moment, he had hated them all.

But, as was his way, he had said nothing of what he felt. He simply rose on unsteady legs from the Council Chamber's floor. His face was grim and determined. The only people who mattered were his pack members. The rest of the werewolves could go to Hell.

"Gareth?" A bright and sweet voice called out to him from Fallowmere's porch. It was Brandon, the Cold Moon Pack's youngest member. Few could survive the first turn if they were not beyond puberty. Brandon had been only thirteen when he had turned. He was sixteen now, but looked little older than when the pack had found him. The first turn slowed then stopped the aging process. There were some concerns that Brandon might never reach adulthood or that it would take decades. "Gareth, you're back! What was your vision? What did you see? I can tell it's something good!"

Gareth found himself smiling so hard that his cheeks hurt as Brandon flew out of the lodge on slender brown legs and into his arms. The Alpha swept Brandon up and spun him around and around until both of them were dizzy. For one moment as he placed Brandon down, he thought of the two juxtaposed moments in Brandon's short life that had involved violence.

Brandon's turning had come about when his mother's boyfriend had killed her and gone after him. He had hidden himself in a closet then to escape the boyfriend's drunken rage. When Mack had gone Rogue he had done the same, but he had not gone into that closet alone. He had pulled a pack member, Isabel "Izzy" Andrews, who had been badly injured inside with him, saving them both.

Gareth was not surprised when he saw Izzy standing on the porch, watching over Brandon. Since that night with Mack they had been inseparable. Her red corkscrew curls were done up in an elaborate hairdo on the top of her head and bobbed in the breeze. She had a lean, lithe figure and constantly wore sleeveless shirts with suspenders, cargo pants and high boots.

“Brandon, you shouldn’t ask about the visions,” Izzy chastised Brandon gently.

“Oh, come on, Izzy, you totally want to know, too! Besides if it was about - about Mack, Gareth would look different than he does,” Brandon stammered only a little saying Mack’s name.

Nina and Gareth shared a look. Brandon was intensely insightful. He then passed a hand over Brandon’s head.

“You’re right, Brandon, but this is an announcement that the whole pack should hear,” Gareth said.

Brandon’s brown eyes opened wide and he gripped one of Gareth’s large hands in his slender ones. He looked so hopeful that Gareth’s heart leaped again at the thought of the new brother to join them. The wolf with the unusual red-brown eyes that seemed to float before him even now, staring into his, trying to tell him something.

Where are you, brother? What tragedy will befall you that will bring you to us? I hope that whatever it is that we find you quickly so that your suffering is ended and your new life with our family begins.

“The whole pack is inside.” Brandon tugged him towards the sliding doors.

“Not Cassidy,” Izzy pointed out.

Brandon shrugged. “Cassidy never leaves his bat cave and his computers! He thinks he can track Mack that way. But everybody else is here.”

It was a Saturday so none of them were working and all pack members stayed in the lodge often on their days off. Them being there now made things much easier as he had intended to speak that night at the Circle. A Circle was when the pack built a fire in the large fireplace in the great room and talked of the pack’s past and future.

There had been few of those since Mack went Rogue as none of them could think of anything in their past, but that terrible incident. But Gareth also knew it was important that they find good things in their pack so that they could see a brighter future. The Alpha Council might not recognize them any longer, but Gareth knew that the Cold Moon Pack would be a power in the future just like it had been in the past. Yet seeing Brandon's face alight with curiosity and hope, Gareth realized he shouldn't wait to share this news.

"Izzy, would you go get Cassidy? I will share my vision with everyone once you bring him out into the light," Gareth requested.

She gave an eager grin and nodded.

Brandon let out a woot and said, "I'll help her!"

Nina smiled at them as they disappeared into the house. "Good decision to share the news now. We need something good to think about."

"I don't think I could have kept it secret with Brandon glancing at me every five seconds with a look like the cat that got the canary," Gareth remarked dryly.

The two of them walked up the wide plank steps and through the open sliding glass doors. The great room's ceiling soared two stories above their heads. There was a massive fireplace in the very center and deep low slung couches that just begged people to sit back and relax in them. There was no fire yet in the fireplace as the August day was too warm for one. Only when the cool evening fell would the fire be lit and all of them would gather around its merry glow. Right now, his pack looked like a bunch of puppies sprawled in the sun that streamed through the windows.

Taking up one whole couch all to himself was Jacob Mills. He stood over six feet and was close to three-hundred pounds and all of it muscle. He had arms and legs the size of tree trunks. He had protected over ten of the remaining pack members from Mack. His wolf was a massive black beast

with yellow eyes. He had been limping on only two paws, both ears mangled and blood streaming from dozens of bites when Gareth had arrived at the lodge.

“Hey, G-man, what’s shaking?” Jacob asked, his rumble baritone like the purr of a large cat.

“Quite a bit. I see Brandon wasn’t exaggerating when he said you were all here,” Gareth said as he took in the other pack members.

Nearest him was the indomitable yet petite Molly Ivers who hid behind her straight black hair. The Ragsey twins, Ilara and Natasha, both plump girls with quick smiles and quicker wits who were playing chess at a nearby table. Watching the game was the tall and rangey Ollie Finn and beside him was a middle-aged man who looked like he should be mining named Haggerty Grant.

There was the elegant Raj Avninder leaning against the fireplace’s stone side and near him, holding a pool cue, was the wiry Hoshido Hanida.

Hoshido was playing against the inscrutable Robyn Wynder, her head shaved and half covered with tattoos of snakes and leaves. Placing a bet on the pool game was the grandfatherly Powell Holmes who turned when he had grandchildren. There were over a dozen more.

He knew all their stories and all their cares. He knew what each had faced when Mack had gone Rogue. He trusted each and every one of them with his life. But it was his job to keep *them* safe. Killing Mack would do much towards that goal. But he had to give them hope, too. At that moment, there was a clattering of feet and he looked up to see Brandon followed unusually quickly by Cassidy with his mess of blond surfer’s curls and Izzy bringing up the rear. There was something in all their expressions that had caused his tongue to cling to the top of his mouth.

“What is it?” Gareth asked.

Cassidy blurted out, “I know where Mack is hiding. There have been deaths that they’re blaming on a wolf. It’s not that far away.”

All his happiness forgotten, Gareth asked, “Where?”

“Forest Glenn.”

CHAPTER THREE: LURED

Jude slowed then stopped fifteen feet from the two sheriff's cruisers, a coroner's van and a Pontiac GT. The official vehicles were blocking the two-lane highway that led into Forest Glenn. The GT was sitting on the side of the road as if someone had pulled over to change a tire or take a leak. There was something about it that made him think it was abandoned though now. As if the driver had gone into the woods and ... vanished.

The motorcycle's engine purred beneath him, but he didn't hear it as he saw a stretcher being brought out of the dense woods that bordered both sides of the road. There was a black, zipped body bag on top of it. So the driver hadn't vanished. He or she was just coming out of the woods in a very different way than they had gone in.

A car accident? No, car's fine. So what's going on here?

The dark, suspicious glare the deputy -- whose nametag read "Reynolds" -- gave him told him that whatever was going on wasn't good. The deputy stomped towards him on tree-trunk sized legs. He was over six feet tall and reminded Jude of a Cyberman with the stiff, almost mechanical way that he walked. The man's eyes were covered by reflective sunglasses, but his lips were peeled back from his teeth slightly making his anger apparent.

Why the Hell is he angry at me?

"You! Who are you?" Reynolds snapped at Jude.

Jude's bewilderment immediately was replaced with a familiar desire to push back at authority wrongfully used. He was allergic to police of any kind, because they always seemed to see him as trouble, especially when he was on a motorcycle. They all assumed he was up to no good and he assumed they were going to abuse their power. Most cops hadn't disappointed him in his beliefs. But the wrong move was to give them *more* reason to be aggressive towards him by being surly or rude so Jude smoothed his expression into one of perfect calmness.

“Jude Connor. I’m Sophia Leonard’s grandson. I’ve come to visit her,” he said politely, making sure to connect himself to a member of the community.

But instead of this establishing a measure of trust between them it made Reynolds angrier. “Nice try. Sophia Leonard is *black*. You’re clearly not.”

Jude gritted his jaw. All the answers he wanted to give to Reynolds’ ignorance -- or rather *how* he wanted to give them -- to explain how he could have a black grandmother would likely get him sent to jail so he just answered tightly, “Her *foster* grandson.”

A flicker of annoyance crossed Reynold’s face. He clearly recognized his mistake and maybe even the stupidity of his statement, but he was not the kind of man to admit it. So he plowed on, “What brings you here now? What business do you have in Forest Glenn?”

“Like I said, I’m visiting,” Jude answered tightly. He didn’t have to explain himself. He wouldn’t be kept from Grandmother Sophia by this mechanical man.

Reynolds planted his tree-trunk like legs farther apart and put his fists on his hips. “I’ll have to check that you really have business here. Don’t move while I --”

“Reynolds, what are you saying to that good citizen?” It was a woman’s voice who asked this. She didn’t shout. Her tone wasn’t particularly sharp either. She had a calm, conversational, and completely pleasant tenor but it had Reynolds straightening up so fast that Jude wouldn’t have been surprised if the man got whiplash.

“I was just checking to see if he *belongs* here, Sheriff,” Reynolds explained.

Belongs? I belong here as much as anyone else! But though Jude’s anger whipped up like a cobra deep down he agreed with Reynolds. He didn’t belong. Not here. Not anywhere. And he was fine with that. The pit that seemed to open in his stomach, the sense of aloneness and alienation, though gave lie to those beliefs.

He was distracted from his self-pity by the appearance of a petite woman with ginger hair who stepped around Reynolds' side. Her approach had been hidden from Jude's view by Reynolds' body. She was barely five feet and slender as a reed yet she practically had her massive deputy quivering with nerves.

"I think I'll take over from here. Why don't you go oversee the crime scene technicians?" she suggested in that quiet way that had even Jude wanting to do as she said.

"Of course, Sheriff." Jude wouldn't have been surprised if Reynolds saluted her, but he didn't. Instead he did a neat about-face and strode off in that stiff, mechanical way.

Both of them waited to speak until Reynolds was out of earshot then she smoothed a hand down her neatly pressed brown uniform before offering Jude that now dry hand for a shake and introduced herself, "Sheriff Georgia Fairweather."

He took her hand and said, "Jude Connor."

"Ah, Tessa's brother!" She gave him a Crest-white smile. Tessa had that effect on everyone, even opposing counsel, though she often wiped the floor with them in court. "She told me to expect you."

"I guess you're the only one who realized I belong here," Jude said, thinking on Reynolds' earlier words.

She sighed and her grass-green eyes looked very tired for a moment. "I want to apologize for Reynolds. I would say that it's the circumstances that are making him so impolite, but that would be a lie. He's always that way. Just know that it's not personal" She gestured back to the forest which had seemed to swallow Reynolds up. "We're all a little on edge, but that's no excuse for such behavior. Forest Glenn is a *friendly* town ... or it used to be."

She looked so troubled by that last fact that he almost felt sympathy for her. But he had found all towns, big or small, to not be as friendly as those in power liked to think they were.

“What happened here? Traffic accident? Heart attack?” Jude asked as he watched the crime scene techs load the coroner’s van with the body.

“We’ve had a rash of wolf attacks, if you can believe it.” She took off her broad brimmed hat and wiped sweat off of her forehead with a handkerchief. “This time it wasn’t a local. Since the attacks started we’ve been getting a lot of out of towners who want to kill a man-eater wolf. Not that an outsider’s death is any less a tragedy.” She added the last quickly.

He thought it was normal for a stranger’s death to hit less hard than someone whom she had known and maybe was friends with. But he appreciated that she didn’t want him to think that a stranger’s death -- like, for instance, his own -- wouldn’t get her full attention, let alone her empathy. But it was not that part of what she had said that had struck him.

“Wolves?” His voice sounded amazed and unnerved, which was exactly what he felt. He had meant for it to come out just curious.

“They’ve been making a comeback recently, but never like this. Wolves are normally *afraid* of human beings. They might go after livestock or pets, but people? Full-grown men with *guns*? Never.” She had mistaken Jude’s shock with the idea of wolves being in Michigan, but what Jude was really reacting to was the dream he’d had earlier.

How weird to dream of wolves and find out that Forest Glenn is having wolf attacks. Strange coincidence.

His right hand went up to his throat and lingered there as he remembered the pressure of the white wolf’s jaws on his neck. It was strange that even now he, face with what a real live wolf could do, the remembered sensation of that pressure wasn’t unpleasant.

“So other people have died from these wolf attacks?” he asked as the silence had stretched on too long.

She nodded. “Five so far. Actually, this will be the *sixth*. That’s another reason I’m so glad you’re here. Sophia lives out in the woods and that’s where the attacks are mostly taking place. This one was the closest to civilization.”

“What do you think happened?”

She let out a breath that stirred a few strands of her ginger-colored hair. When she spoke she did so with an almost distracted air, “I think the driver saw something in the woods, pulled over and was *lured* out to his death.”

“*Lured*?” The use of that word struck him. It held such a note of *menace*.

“Wolves can do that? Think like that? Plan an attack that gets a man out of his car?”

She blinked as if realizing then that she had spoken her private thoughts outloud. “Oh, don’t listen to me. It’s just been a long few months.” She had her professional face back on. “And with people here *hunting* the wolf there have been even more injuries and all around complaints. I haven’t had a chance to sleep for the week I need.”

“So Reynolds thought I was another person here to shoot the wolf then? I don’t think I look like a hunter,” Jude said with sudden understanding though he was still inclined to think of the deputy as an asshole. “But with a wolf about maybe I *should* look into getting a weapon.”

“Sophia has a shotgun and knows how to use it.” She flashed him that bright smile again and he wondered how old she was. She had the bearing of someone in her fifties, but there were few wrinkles on her face.

“Well, I should let you get back. Is there another way I can get into town?”

He pointed towards the blocked highway. He could just maneuver his bike around the cars, but he wasn’t sure if that was part of the crime scene.

“The coroner’s van is leaving now. You should be able to get through here,” she said and sure enough the white van was performing a neat three-point turn and driving off. With the body gone it seemed like nature turned back

on. He hadn't realized that there had been no bird calls or insect whirrs until now when they came back on in full force as if a switch had been flipped.

"Sophia's place is on White Hen Road. I get there by going through town and then taking a right –" he began asking for directions.

"It'll be the first road after you leave the downtown," She explained.

"She's about two miles down White Hen. House is tucked back in the trees, but you'll see an ancient blue mailbox at the end of a gravel drive. That's hers."

"Thanks so much," he said and genuinely meant it.

She pulled out her card and handed it to him. "Those are all my numbers. Home, cell and the station. Please let me know if Sophia needs any help. She's a real character and the world could always use more of those. We're glad to have her in Forest Glenn."

He tucked the card in his back pocket. "I will. Thanks, Sheriff Fairweather."

"Georgia, please. Take good care of yourself, Jude." She waved him on.

He dipped his head to her and rode through the space between the cruisers.

He headed down the road for only a few miles before the downtown of Forest Glenn appeared on the horizon. It wasn't as small as he had assumed it would be, having been to many small Midwestern towns that seemed to have little reason to exist any longer, not being near any highways or any larger cities where the jobs were. But these towns clung to existence nonetheless.

The downtown consisted of a main drag and three crossroads. There was a grocery store, three bars, a few restaurants though nothing fancy, surprisingly, no chains either, various shops that sold everything from animal feed to bicycles to books, and a small motel whose parking lot was stuffed with too many pickup trucks and men in camo.

These must be the out of town hunters. God, how much firepower do these people think they need for one wolf?

The men with bristling with rifles, shotguns and side arms. There looked to be enough weaponry to fight a small war. But then Jude thought of six people dead and, supposedly, how the last victim was *lured* from his car into the woods. Jude revised his opinion. Maybe they didn't have *enough* guns.

He found White Hen Road just where Sheriff Fairweather said it would be and sure enough, two miles in, he caught sight of a faded blue mailbox. He opened the front of it and took out a roll of bills, circulars and magazines.

He stuffed these into his right saddlebag. Grandmother Sophia would be glad he was sure not to have to make the trip down to get the junk mail and bills. Then he rode up the gravel drive for about a hundred feet before a house appeared under the shadow of the forest.

The house was two stories, but compact with a neat front porch up two rickety steps. The house had green shutters and peeling white paint. There was a hanging swing on the right side of the door also painted as green as the shutters. There were a few pots with flowers that were nodding in the afternoon's drowsy passing on the porch's railing. All the windows were open. He saw white curtains fluttering in a stray breeze. There was a scrubby little garden around the right side and the grass needed to be mowed. It was a lush green that gave off a sweet yet earthy fragrance.

He started mentally making a list of things he could fix for Grandmother Sophia while he was here. Scrape and repaint the house. Replace the front steps. Rewire the screens. Mow the lawn. Weed the garden. He was sure there would be plenty of other things to do inside as well. The satisfaction of being of use to the woman who had saved him from others and himself flowed through him.

He stopped the motorcycle and turned off the key in the ignition before bringing down the kickstand and swinging his leg over the bike to dismount. He fished out the mail from his right saddlebag and hopped up the two stairs that creaked alarmingly under his weight to the front porch.

He would definitely would have to replace these though the porch itself appeared sturdy. The thought of one of those steps though snapping under an elderly foot and sending Grandmother Sophia to the ground, breaking her leg or a dreaded hip, caused him to swallow down bile. This would be his first task.

He rapped smartly on the frame of the screened front door as he brightly called, “Grandmother Sophia! It’s Jude! You in there?”

He could see a short hall in front of him. There were pretty redwood floors and the ceiling was high and molded with a fleur de lis pattern in the plaster. There was a soft creak and a shadowy figure appeared at the end of the hall holding a frying pan. The delicious scent of bacon wafted out to him.

“Jude?” Grandmother Sophia’s voice was still rich and redolent of the feeling of home.

Jude found his heart beating a little faster and a rare real smile lighting up his beautiful face. “It’s me. Can I come in?”

“Of course, child! What are you doing standing on the porch? My house is your house. Always,” she replied gaily.

My house is your house. Always. That was the first thing she had ever said to him when he came to her as a surly fifteen year old who thought that no one could be trusted.. He had thought she was full of it when he heard it from her that first time, but it was true. Totally and utterly true.

He came inside and she was already extending her arms to him, having set down the frying pan back onto the burner from which the delicious smell of bacon rose up. As he embraced her, he heard the spatter-pop of hot fat.

Grandmother Sophia was a small woman, barely five foot two inches. Her back was bowed forward probably taking a few more inches off her height. Her formerly black hair was now completely white. Her nut brown skin though was still soft and mostly unlined. He kissed one of her cheeks and looked into her deep brown eyes.

“It’s so good to see you,” his voice was hoarse with love for her. Tears actually pricked his eyes. It had been too long since he’d seen her. He was so glad that he’d used Tessa’s credit card and so glad that his foster sister had urged him here.

She patted his cheek and with a twinkle in those brown eyes she said, “And just in time for lunch, too.”

“BLTs?” he guessed.

“On fresh bread! Oh, and the bacon is from a local farmer. I actually think I *met* this pig, too. Hopefully, I didn’t name him,” she said then gave a soft laugh.

She had gone back to the stove where she expertly removed the sizzling bacon from the cast iron pan and put it on folded paper towels to drain the fat away. He saw that there was a loaf of very fresh bread sitting on the countertop with a serrated blade beside it. Jude headed towards it to begin cutting thick slices of it for the bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches.

They worked in companionable silence. He sliced bread and tomatoes. She lathered mayonnaise on the bread and then layered on the bacon, ripe tomatoes and crisp lettuce before capping it off with another slice of bread also covered in rich, creamy mayo. Jude brought the bright yellow plates with the sandwiches over to a small formica table by a window that looked out onto the overgrown back yard. Grandmother Sophia put down two mason jars and brought out a pitcher of what suspiciously looked like fresh lemonade.

Seeing that, Jude laughed. “I see the country agrees with you. Fresh bread and homemade lemonade? I think I’m moving back in!”

She chuckled as she took the chair opposite his. “Now that I’m not dealing with ten children’s schooling and after school activities and sports games and my work at the County Clerk’s office, it’s *amazing* how much time I have to do things like bake fresh bread.”

“You loved every minute of being crazy busy though,” he said as he bit into his sandwich. The statement ended in a moan as the salty bacon, yeasty bread and sweetness of the tomato and mayo. “God, this is good.”

“Yes, it is. Even better to share it with someone, especially if that someone is my favorite son.” She grinned at him and took a small ladylike bite of sandwich.

“You say that to *all* your foster sons, Grandmother Sophia,” Jude pointed out. When he had come into her house, he had only met a few of them as he was the last foster child she had taken in before retiring.

“I do and it’s true. You’re all my favorites,” she said and sipped some lemonade.

“You look ... really good.” Jude had been watching her carefully and, though he was no doctor, she didn’t seem senile to him at all. She appeared a bit more frail than he liked, but her mind seemed terribly sharp.

Her dark brown eyes narrowed. “Tessa been telling you that I’m *not* good?”

He squirmed a bit in his chair. “She may have mentioned something.”

Grandmother Sophia leaned back in her chair and let out a tired sigh. “You would think with a successful law practice and a partner that that girl would have *enough* to occupy her time without worrying about me.”

“She loves you more than anyone or anything. You sort of take top billing in her life,” Jude pointed out.

Grandmother Sophia dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. “Forget a pot on the stove *one time* and you’re labeled senile! I might be old, but I’m *not* batty. Not any more than I’ve ever been. Truth is that I ... fell asleep. I didn’t forget the pot, but just drifted off. Woke up and there was black smoke pouring out. Scared myself half to death.”

She looked so disgusted with herself that a wave of pity and understanding went through him. He reached over and covered one of her hands with his.

“That could happen to anyone,” he said loyally.

“It could!” She lifted her chin up, but then lowered it. “Not that I’m saying I’m as spry and alert as I was ten years ago. I love this house, but it’s quite a bit to upkeep. I thought I could hire some local children to help, but there aren’t many of those around.”

Jude immediately thought of his mental checklist. “Well, would you be willing to hire someone maybe a little older?”

“You making me an offer, Jude Connor?” She gave him a wink.

“Maybe I am.”

“Jude, I don’t want you to stay here because of anything that Tessa said or even --”

“I’m not.” He held up a hand to stop the flow of reasons why he shouldn’t stay. He found himself telling her some of what was really going on with him. “The truth is that I could really use a break from the road. Things haven’t been ...” He thought of Merv the Perv, the gas station attendant, and swallowed. “Things haven’t been going so hot for me and I could use a place to stay for awhile. If that’s okay with you.”

He looked up at her, half hopefully, half ashamed that he couldn’t hack it out there right now.

I’ll be of use to her. It won’t be freeloading.

Those deep brown eyes seemed to see into his soul right then. She cupped his cheek and said gently, “I think you may be the forgetful one between the two of us, Jude. My house is your house. Always.”

Jude found himself smiling even as his chest clenched with gratefulness. For the first time in a long time he felt like maybe things were looking up for him.

CHAPTER FOUR: SCENT

Gareth lifted the handful of earth to his nose and drew in the scents it held. They were at the site of the second to last killing. It was the second to last, because the last had just occurred a few hours ago and the police and evidence technicians still swarmed there. Cassidy had reported the last killing to them when he, Jacob, Molly and Raj were on the road to Forest Glenn.

Gareth's jaw had tightened letting out an audible crack as his teeth came together at the news. With all the grim faces in that car, he decided to tell the three pack members the one good thing that he knew, which was that there would be a new brother joining their pack soon.

"I was planning to tell you at the Circle tonight, but I do not believe we will be back in time," Gareth had said.

"It would be even better if we could return with news of Mack's death and a new brother among us," Jacob had rumbled from the passenger seat of the Jeep.

"It would, but I do not want our new brother *anywhere* near Mack." Gareth thought of those stunning red brown eyes. No, he did not want to such a one near Mack.

"It's our first new member since ... since Mack attacked us," Molly said, her eyes barely visible through her curtain of hair. "It is a *good* sign, Gareth."

"Yes, I hope it is," Gareth answered.

His news had lifted the mood somewhat, but even with the knowledge of one good thing to come, the Jeep had remained silent during the remainder of the drive to Forest Glenn. Now as Gareth sniffed the earth where blood had flowed, searching for a week-old scent of his former Alpha, he held onto the thought of that new brother.

“Is it Mack?” Jacob’s asked. His rumbling deep voice was even deeper than normal. His massive arms were crossed over his broad chest and his tree-trunk like legs were spread wide apart as if he were a forbidding statue in the forest to warn people to come no farther. They would need Jacob’s strength if they were to go up against Mack and win.

Gareth let some of the dirt sift through his fingers and breathed in again. There was the rich, loamy smell of the forest floor and the sweet rot of vegetation and beneath that, faint but there, was the coppery tang of blood and beneath that ...

“Yes,” Gareth said and he felt everyone around him tense.

He took in another deep breath. Mack’s scent had changed when he went Rogue going from a clean piney smell to a dank odor like something left in a moldy basement too long. He kept sniffing though, because he thought he caught wind of other scents there, too. He couldn’t quite figure out what they were, but they *nagged* at him. He felt he *should* know them, but somehow his mind was rejecting what he was picking up as *impossible* so he could not put his finger on the answer.

“One wonders why he needs so much meat. Is he *just* feeding on humans now?” Molly asked.

Her black hair hung down over her face with just the slightest parting in the very center to show a flash of intelligent gray eyes. She wore a simple sundress with green stripes and spaghetti straps. It made her already thin frame look almost emaciated. She appeared to all the world like some dreamy college student, which she was in a way. She was over one hundred years old and was working on her fifth PhD, but that hardly described her. For though Molly loved knowledge, she fought like no one else. Molly had gone up against Mack *alone* and survived. She had been so fierce that Mack had actually *abandoned* his fight with her to go after easier prey. Gareth had named her the new Scout of the pack, his old role, because of this indomitability.

“They say the desire for human flesh only grows in time for Rogues until it becomes all they can think about,” Raj remarked. “In some ways I am surprised that he has only killed *six*.”

Raj was dressed in a suit despite the heat and the location. Leaning against one of the trees with his arms elegantly crossed over his slender frame, he would have fit in far better on the streets of Paris, London or New York rather than in the middle of a forest. He actually *preferred* city life to the forest despite being a werewolf. He managed the pack’s investments, which included tea plantations in India, several wineries in Italy, restaurants in Tokyo, among many others. He often jetted around the world to make sure that all was going well with their investments. His ability to put people at ease as opposed to Jacob’s intimidating appearance and Molly’s fey one was one of the reasons why Gareth had asked Raj to come with them.

“He’s killed more than that,” Gareth answered neutrally. “But he hasn’t stayed in one place long enough – especially one place as relatively isolated as Forest Glenn – that it’s become obvious he’s been there. Also, I am guessing that his *choice* of victims has changed likely from those that society will not miss such as the homeless or prostitutes to those that can’t be ignored.”

“Why is he here though? Why is he staying in this place? It’s not as if Forest Glenn is a *hot spot*.” Raj waved a slender brown hand through the air. “It’s like he’s ... *held* here in some way.”

Something *clicked* in Gareth’s mind at Raj’s questions. The scents that had eluded him, because they *shouldn’t* be, but somehow *were* there suddenly made complete sense. They were other werewolf scents, more than just Mack’s! He drew up sharply to his feet, which startled the others though their reactions were to go *still* rather than to fall back.

“He’s building a pack. Two ... no, *three* are with him,” Gareth said. “That’s why he can’t leave here. One of them must be very young unable to travel well. Likely needs the familiarity of this forest.”

“But Rogues *don’t* have packs,” Molly pointed out.

“There has never been a Rogue Alpha,” Jacob grunted and shook his mane of long black hair. “We have no idea what Rogue Alphas do. So he *could* have a pack.”

“But *why*?” Raj’s golden toned skin reddened with sudden anger. “Why create another pack when he sought to destroy the one he *already* had?”

Raj had been out of the country when Mack had attacked the pack. The guilt of not being there, of not being able to protect his family, still weighed heavily upon him. It was the second family he had lost. His birth family had been killed during flooding caused by a huge typhoon. Only he had survived and *that* had triggered the Werewolf Gene in him.

“Because none of us was going to eat human flesh,” Jacob said. “I’m betting it’s a pack of *Rogues*.”

The thought of a pack of Rogues chilled Gareth and he was sure that the others felt the same. For now it wasn’t just having to kill *one* Rogue, but *four*. Pack members are devoted to their Alpha, will give their lives for him, in normal circumstances. Would the Rogues be like that with Mack? Getting to Mack and killing him just got that much harder.

“We’ll have to kill them, too, won’t we, Gareth?” Molly asked. Her voice was inflectionless. He wondered what a person who didn’t know Molly would think of that flat statement of fact.

Gareth nodded. “We have no choice.”

“He is *ruining* young wolves!” Raj sounded aghast. His sing song cadence reaching new highs. “He *teaches* them to eat humans. They do not know it is forbidden! Can we truly just hunt them down and destroy them? Is there no way to -- to uncorrupt them?”

Gareth felt the waste of it, too. There were so few werewolves. To have to kill four, three new ones especially, felt wrong on all sorts of levels.

“They can’t come back, Raj,” Molly said, again that soft flatness in her tone. She was already placing those three unknown new werewolves in the dead column of her mind. It was a way for her to deal with what they had to do. Molly wasn’t a cold person. Not exactly. But her ability to kill those that were threats? That made her an asset as a Scout. She was the exact opposite of Raj in temperament who was a wonderful bleeding heart.

“Rogues need to be dealt with for the sake of all of us.”

“But –”

Gareth held up a hand, interrupting the nascent fight. “First things first. We must find them.”

“Is there enough of a scent to go by to track them?” Jacob’s furrowed brow told Gareth that his keen nose wasn’t catching the faintest of scents he had found in the earth.

Gareth stared into the forest. He listened to the birdsong. He heard the scamper of paws on earth and wood and stone. There was a burbling brook nearby and mice were rustling in the underbrush.

“No, The air here has long been cleared of their scent. But maybe from the fresh site though,” Gareth finally answered.

“But the police are there. They won’t allow us to come and muck up their crime scene.” Raj pointed out.

“They believe these are wolf attacks and nothing more,” Gareth responded. “They *could* be done with their investigation of the site now.”

“If they aren’t, we could wait until they’re gone and then check it out,” Jacob said.

But Gareth shook his head. “I do not think we can delay. New werewolf with him or no, Mack may decide to leave this area. We can’t wait for another cluster of dead to alert us to his location. No more humans must die.”

“So what do we do?” Raj asked.

Gareth answered, “I have another plan. Actually several plans.”

The plans were relatively simple. Raj and Jacob were to go into town and see what they could ferret out from the locals. People saw things. They might not recognize what they saw as a threat, but the presence of four Rogues would not have gone completely unnoticed. For those that wouldn’t respond to Raj’s charms, Jacob’s intimidation very well might make people more forthcoming.

“Keep a low profile,” Gareth cautioned them.

Raj put a hand on Jacob’s shoulder that was almost higher off the ground than his head. “With Jacob here, we will be quite the unobtrusive pair.”

Jacob rolled his eyes. “That Armani suit will draw more attention than my size will in a town like Forest Glenn.”

“People will recognize my good taste.” Raj straightened his tie.

Jacob snorted this time. “They’ll see a preening peacock while I’ll be invisible in my plaid.” He was wearing tan shorts, a white t-shirt and a red plaid shirt on top of that. He didn’t seem to mind the heat much in it.

“Work it to your advantage.” Gareth allowed a grin to alight his face.

“If the boys are going to town, are we going to the last death scene?” Molly asked.

Gareth nodded.

“So what’s the plan for us?” she asked.

“You need to change,” he said.

Her eyebrows rose and a smile curled her lips. “I’m assuming you don’t mean change into another outfit.”

“No.”

Molly was to change into her wolf form and she was to pretend to be a tracker dog in the event the police were still on the scene. Gareth would offer their services, but even if the police turned him down – which they likely would – they would get near enough to find a scent before they were turned away.

“Do you need us to drive you to the last site?” Jacob asked after Gareth had tossed him the keys to the Jeep.

Gareth shook his head. “The location isn’t far away and I want to get a feel for this forest.”

Jacob and Raj started to trundle off towards the Jeep, still poking at one another good naturedly when Molly called them back.

“I need you to take my things and keep them in the car,” she explained.

Molly then began to undress. She stepped out of her sandals and unashamedly pulled off her sundress and handed both to Raj. Her bra and panties followed. She tossed those on top of the pile that Raj already carried.

Unlike what was shown in the movies and on television, the change into one’s wolf form wasn’t painful. It didn’t involve the breaking of limbs, the tearing of skin, or the rearranging of organs. Instead, a mist obscured the person for a moment and then the person was replaced by their wolf. That is exactly what happened with Molly. She was there and then a gray and white wolf was standing on four paws in her place. Besides being his Scout and being naturally more attuned to tracking, he had chosen Molly to accompany him, because she wasn’t as large as most werewolves were. She almost could be mistaken for a dog by the uneducated. Almost.

“I’ll call you when we’re ready for a pickup,” Gareth said and waved Raj and Jacob off as Molly padded to his side.

The two of them walked silently through the forest. The light slanted through the treetops, leaving little pools of sunlight in their path. He cast his senses out. Each forest had its own feel, even those as similar as the one here and the one that surrounded Fallowmere. These two forests could be as different as night and day. In this case, the forest felt silent and stripped of life unlike by Fallowmere where the forest pulsed with life. This made sense with four alpha predators on the loose. Gareth sensed the forest's fear and he did not like it.

Molly often roamed ahead of him, protecting him, he knew. But she appeared by his side as they neared the site of the last killing. He saw a flicker of yellow ahead of them and a line of blue-gray that sliced through the forest like an artery. The yellow was a piece of crime scene tape stretched between two trees while the slice of blue-gray was the highway. He saw Molly's ears twitch as she took in how close the kill site was to civilization.

Bold. Mack is being bold ... or sloppy. Why leave a kill so near to the road that people could find it? It is almost as if he is taunting the humans. Look what I've done! Find out what I am! Come and get me! If this is true then it just shows how far he's fallen from the man he was before.

"Gareth," Mack had said after one of the younger werewolves in the pack had changed too near a group of campers and had *almost* been seen. "If the humans ever find out about us, the *luckiest* of us will be killed. The others will be experimented on and never see the light of day. Even if we *manage* the way we introduce ourselves to humanity, there are huge risks."

Gareth focused back on the present moment as a large deputy with the name tag identifying him as Reynolds caught sight of him. The man immediately scowled and stomped towards him, bellowing something about what he was doing there and who was he and didn't he see this was a crime scene. To some people this show of aggression would have had them retreating or getting angry in return. But Gareth saw where it came from. Despite his size, Reynolds was no Alpha. He wasn't a Beta either. He was middle of the pack, but felt somehow because he'd been born big that he should be more and had been disappointed all his life about not meeting his own

expectations. That caused him to lash out and bully all he could. Gareth knew this because he'd met many a man like Reynolds.

Gareth stood perfectly still as the deputy got up into his personal space.

"Didn't you hear me?" Reynolds shouted into Gareth's face.

He had asked so many questions and made so many contradictory commands like stay and leave that even if Gareth had been willing to comply, he wouldn't have been able to.

"I hear you," Gareth kept his voice very low. Not dangerous. He didn't need to be.

Molly moved a little to the side so that she could take Reynolds down in one leap. He made the faintest movements with the fingers of his left hand to let her know *not* to attack. He made another movement to indicate she should creep over to the crime scene and scent the area. Already, his nose was filled with a myriad of smells. He was sorting through them as the deputy addressed him.

"Then why are you not answering my questions?" Reynolds scowled.

"Because you are not the one in charge," Gareth answered. "And I do not wish to repeat myself."

Reynolds' face purpled and he tried to loom over Gareth. "I am a *deputy* and you will respect –"

"I respect your badge, but you are *not* the one who makes the decisions here." Gareth was shorter than Reynolds by a couple of inches, but he was far broader and in much better shape. Even if he were not an Alpha and a werewolf he would have no concerns about this man's attempts to dominate him.

Reynolds purpled even *more*. Clearly, he knew that Gareth was right, but didn't know how Gareth knew that. "I am in charge –"

“No, *she* is.” Gareth tipped his head to the side to indicate the female officer that had approached almost silently.

“Reynolds, I do think this is a *record* day for you being rude to our citizenry,” the woman with ginger hair and startling green eyes said. She was small, but she was an Alpha. He could scent it on her.

Reynolds stood for half a second more in Gareth’s personal space. They both heard her open her mouth to say his name again, but before she could, Reynolds stepped back a few feet. Gareth slowly took his gaze off of Reynolds and turned it to the sheriff.

She was looking at him warily. She, too, recognized an Alpha. He was not someone that would *accept* her protection and she knew it. But to her credit she didn’t allow her wariness to turn into unnecessary aggression.

“Now, my name is Sheriff Fairweather, and yours?” she asked crisply.

“Gareth,” he answered simply.

“What brings you over here, Gareth?” He could feel her desire to ask him his last name, but she didn’t have cause to really.

“I’m here to help,” he said.

Reynolds sneered, “What *help* could you give us? You’re not law enforcement.”

“No, I’m not,” he answered. His appearance would have told them both that. “I’m a tracker.”

“A tracker?” the sheriff repeated curiously.

“Another *hunter* who thinks he can run our wolf problem down? As if we don’t already have our own –” Reynolds began and then he noticed Molly who had just returned. Her tail was up and he knew that she had a scent trail. Reynolds literally jumped away from her even as she glided up beside Gareth and stayed by him, making no aggressive move.

“Molly and I can help you,” he said, which was true, but in the unlikely event that they took up his offer of help he and Molly would lead them well away from where the scents actually led. They couldn’t have law enforcement finding a werewolf den.

“That’s – that’s a pretty big dog!” Reynolds swallowed and edged towards the sheriff. “We have leash laws you know!”

“In town there are laws, but we aren’t in town,” Gareth answered civilly. Mack had always made it a habit to know the laws in regards to animals in a 100 mile radius from Fallowmere and Gareth had followed suit. Mack had been considering telling them to all wear collars when they changed so that if people caught sight of them they’d think they were pets. But no one in the pack was keen on having anything around their necks.

The sheriff stared at Molly speculatively. “That’s not a dog. That’s a wolf.”

Reynolds literally danced behind her and his hand went to the butt of his gun. “A WOLF?!”

“Yes, she is, but not the one you’re look for,” Gareth answered.

“Having a wild animal as a pet is unwise.” The sheriff’s grass green eyes rose to his face.

“Only if you don’t respect what they are,” he answered her even as Molly stayed perfectly still by his side, more obedient than the most domesticated dog.

“Well, we appreciate your offer, but we have a tracking team ourselves,” she said quietly. “Are you staying in town?”

“Don’t know yet,” he admitted.

“The hotel’s full so you won’t have much luck finding a bed for the night in Forest Glenn,” she offered. “The nearest town’s about 20 miles away. You might get something there, but you might not. Best to leave now and see if you can find a spot for yourself.”

He read between the lines that she wanted him to *leave* Forest Glenn and *not* return. She sensed that he was not only not under her protection, he didn't need to be a part of her "pack", but would likely cause trouble. She was right though not in the way she thought about the last part.

"Thank you for the advice," he responded neutrally.

She gave him a long stare and then dropped her gaze to Molly. "You might want to put a leash on her even if it isn't required, Gareth. People are very edgy about wolves around here. Don't want her mistaken for the one causing all the trouble."

He tipped his head to her and turned on his heel, walking slowly deeper into the woods. He felt both of their eyes on him and Molly, but he did not turn around. Molly had the scent and he thought he might have found it, too. There was a rotten musk that drifted just underneath the scent of flowers.

He was about to call Jacob and let him and Raj know about finding a scent when the phone in the back pocket of his jeans vibrated. He pulled it out. It was Jacob.

"What's going on, Jacob?" he asked the moment he put the phone to his ear.

"You need to get to town," Jacob's voice was cast so low that it would have been hard to hear him without his werewolf senses.

"Can't. Molly's found a scent trail –"

"You *must*, because the scent trail will lead here. To town," Jacob's voice was nearly frantic. "Gareth, we just saw Mack head into the damned local grocery store."

CHAPTER FIVE: CONNECTIONS

“Now you have the list?” Grandmother Sophia asked for the fifth time as she pressed yet another twenty dollar bill into Jude’s hand.

“You’ve given me enough money, Grandmother Sophia.” He felt the burn of shame on his cheeks. He still had no money other than Tessa’s credit card. He wanted to take care of his Grandmother Sophia. He wanted to be the one to buy *her* groceries. He tried to hand the twenty back, but she closed his fingers around it and shook her head.

“That’s your walking around money. Every young man’s got to have some.” A broad smile crossed her beautiful, worn face.

“But I should earn --”

“You *will* earn it!” she laughed. “Don’t you see the paint on the list? The two by fours? The gardening supplies? I intend to have you so busy around here that you’ll drop into bed at night and sleep dreamlessly. That’s the best way.”

“Wine and cake?” Jude chuckled as he caught sight of those two items on the list on the same line. “Why are they together?”

“Because one **MUST** have wine with cake. You’ll try it tonight and you’ll see.” She smoothed a hand down his arm. “Now take my truck and go do the shopping, Jude. Shoo! Shoo!”

After being shooed from the house, Jude had driven in Grandmother Sophia’s powder blue pickup to town. The pickup had more dents and dings than undamaged surface, but the motor purred and he made it into town in no time at all. He managed to get all the home supplies like the paint and lumber from the local hardware store. Now all that was left was the food to buy. From the list it appeared that Grandmother Sophia was intent on making every single favorite dish of his. His mouth started watering just thinking about her famous cheddar burgers and flank steak.

He pulled into the grocery store's parking lot and took a place near the front doors. He got out and froze just as he was about to shut the door. A man with thick steel gray hair and a military bearing caught his eye. The skin between Jude's shoulder blades twitched. The man wore just a pair of jeans and t-shirt yet his straight, erect bearing proclaimed him as someone from the military even without the uniform. He was flanked by a girl of just ten holding onto a teddy bear in one fist. She had bright blonde curls that bounced as she skipped a few paces behind him. To the other side of the military man was a slender young man with a cocky grin on his lips and a rather dreamy cast to his gaze. Something about them had his sixth sense for danger bristling. Even the little girl caused him to flinch.

They're not right. Really not right.

If he wasn't there for Grandmother Sophia he would have jumped back in the pickup and never looked back. Enough danger found him all on its own without walking into it. These three were dangerous. But he thought of Grandmother Sophia's perplexed expression if he came back without the food. She wouldn't understand or, worse, she would think he was being paranoid and want to talk about the past. She likely would go to the store herself and then she would be the one in danger. So he had to go in. But maybe he could delay going in. Use some of that walking around money. But ...

It's a grocery store. A public space. What could they do if they are going to do anything at all? And I'll just stay out of their way, get the groceries and go. Nothing bad is going to happen.

His one hand on the top of the frame of the door tightened. He didn't like his mode of thinking. It was the mode he always had, but now it seemed very unsatisfying. He probed his own feelings and figured out what it was that was giving him pause. If he was going to stay here he couldn't just ditch out the moment something looked dangerous. Grandmother Sophia lived here. He was going to live here. At least for a time. These people could become his neighbors. They ... they shouldn't be left to fend for

themselves. But he immediately rejected these thoughts. Grandmother Sophia deserved his help and protection, but these people? They were strangers and they would stay that way.

Pack, a voice whispered inside of him almost as if it were a rebuke. He blinked in confusion. Why would he think of that term? The memory of the wolf dream floated to the surface. *Why won't that dream go away? I never remember dreams in that detail for this long! They never stay with me like this.*

At that moment, he saw the strangest pair of guys walk into the grocery store after the military man, little girl and arrogant young man. One was a well dressed Indian man whose suit likely was worth more than Grandmother Sophia's truck. He only knew this because Tessa loved well made men's suits. Even though she was a lesbian, she said there was nothing prettier than a man in a tailored suit. She'd bored him endlessly with pictures of such clothing, which had him now identifying the worth of a person's suit. Not that he saw many fancy suits on the road until today that is.

In contrast to the man in the suit was the behemoth beside him. The behemoth stood over a head taller than the Indian man and was twice his width. A mane of dark curls fell down to his mid-back. He didn't walk so much as stomp. They were truly the equivalent of the Odd Couple. While the differences between them might have drawn his attention anyways what really had him interested was the fact that he was certain they were tracking the other three.

They're going after the military man, the little girl and the arrogant guy.

Again, the instinct for flight nearly overcame him. But he had groceries to get. He wasn't going to let some weird people keep him from obtaining what Grandmother Sophia needed. He shut the truck's door and strode inside, grabbing a cart without stopping.

He scanned the inside of the grocery store. It was pretty lightly populated, which made sense as it was the middle of a work day for most people. Yet there were a few scattering of women with squalling kids in tow. There were elderly men likely past retirement age who were checking items off of lists and then backtracking as they forgot something in the last aisle.

Finally, there were the checkers and baggers that ranged the gamut from disinterested automatons to chirping well-wishers. He made a mental note to *not* check out with the woman that sounded like a chipmunk and seemed to make comments on every item she scanned. He did not see any of the five people who had drawn his attention.

That's good. I'm going to keep out of their way.

He steered the cart into the vegetable aisle and started filling it up with what was on Grandmother Sophia's list. Red and yellow bell peppers. Zucchini.

Red leaf lettuce. Cherry tomatoes. Onions. Potatoes. His shoulders relaxed as he continued on shopping with no sign of any of the five. Maybe he would not meet up with them again. Whatever strangeness was going to happen might just pass him by.

But then he turned the corner into the canned goods aisle and saw the Odd Couple about twenty feet from him. He hesitated in the aisle's mouth for several moments, debating whether to retreat or simply ignore them.

Realizing that continuing to stand there or moving out of the aisle would only draw attention so he positioned the cart to the side of the aisle as if he were considering the canned goods.

He looked at the Odd Couple out of the corner of his eye. The Indian man was speaking low to the behemoth. Jude's eyes flickered to the Indian man's mouth. From the distance he was at he shouldn't have been able to hear them. But he *could*. There was a high-pitched whine for a moment and then their voices popped into his hearing as clear as day. He was slightly alarmed by this, but then his attention was totally occupied with what they were saying.

“ -- told us *not* to follow! Mack will know he’s being tracked,” the Indian man hissed as Jude lingered at the end of the aisle, pretending to compare two cans of tomatoes.

“He’s not hiding,” the behemoth rumbled. “He doesn’t care if he’s being tracked.”

“Rogues are supposed to be arrogant and careless,” the Indian man said.

“But Mack was always the best at knowing when he was being followed. He’ll figure it out and then he’ll go after us! Only Gareth can take him down!”

Jude frowned at the canned peas. *Tracked?Rogue? What the Hell are these guys on about? It doesn’t matter. I just need to ... why aren’t they saying anything more?* He turned his head slightly to the side and saw that the two of them had left the aisle. Something like dismay bubbled up in his chest, but he said to himself, *Good. I don’t care what this is about.*

Yet he found himself walking swiftly down the aisle with the cart without picking up any of the things that Grandmother Sophia needed. The voice he’d heard in his head before didn’t whisper “pack” again, but he thought it just the same. The Odd Couple clearly didn’t belong in this town. But neither did the other three. And he really felt he didn’t want the mismatched pair to get into trouble.

This is insane!

That was his last thought as he turned the corner and entered the meat section of the supermarket. It was there that he found the military man grinning an unsettling grin at the Odd Couple. He froze. It was just the four of them in that area. The butcher’s door was swinging behind the meat counter. Likely, the employee had gone in the back to get something or maybe he had gotten out of Dodge. There was no sign of the little girl or the arrogant young man nor any shoppers.

Jude jerked back into the aisle, hands sweating and heart thumping against the wall of his chest even though the military man had been smiling as if pleased to see the other two. There was no violence happening. Yet he still thought of heading out, telling an employee that something was up by the meat counter, that maybe she should call the police. But he didn't. Instead, he stayed and listened.

"Well, well, well, Jacob! Raj! It's been some time since I last saw you both!" the military man chortled as he greeted them.

"Mack," the Indian man, likely Raj, said. He pronounced the military man's name almost like a curse. He spat it out quickly as if it left a bad taste in his mouth.

"Rogue," Jacob rumbled even as his ham-sized hands fisted at his sides.

There's that word again! Jude thought even as he peered at Mack from between cans of creamed corn.

Mack's steely gray eyes narrowed. "Now, now, I don't remember you being so juvenile to call people names, Jacob, though that one actually pleases me a bit."

"How about *monster, killer, traitor*? Do those names *please* you, too?" Raj said in his musical voice that was tense with strain.

Mack stroked his strong chin as if considering his response to those titles. "Well, now, they *do*. They are accurate after all."

"They are," Raj's voice held a raw grief that was painful to hear. He did not lunge towards Mack, but Jude could see he wanted to in every inch of his well-dressed body. Jacob must have seen it, too, because he put up a restraining hand in front of Raj to keep him where he was. "You *killed* members of your own pack! You *killed* your friends. You *killed* those who thought of you like a father!"

He killed people. Oh, fuck, he really has killed people. I can see it on his face! The killing part almost completely overwhelmed the part where Raj said “pack”. It was an odd coincidence with the wolf dream and his own thoughts recently, but that was hardly as important as the fact that Mack was a killer. *I knew something was wrong with him!*

Again, Jude knew he should leave, but he couldn’t move. He half hoped that another shopper would come by. Maybe they wouldn’t be frozen in place. Maybe they would go for help. The air sizzled with violence.

“I did.” Mack’s gray eyes remained riveted upon Raj, but he didn’t seem to see the Indian man, but something beyond him. “Because I learned one thing after Eliza’s murder. That unless you’re *strong* you’re *nothing*. If you can’t protect what you love then you might as well up and die.”

“You don’t have the right to say her name,” Jacob said. “Eliza would *hate* the man you’ve become. She would be leading the charge to take you down.”

Mack gave him a strange smile. “She likely would at that.” His gray eyes went flat and dead. “But since the hunters murdered her there’s nothing she can do about it now is there?”

Jacob took a menacing step towards Mack. “Her memory and the memory of all those you’ve slaughtered gives us the strength to take you, Rogue. You’re coming with us. Gareth will deal with you.”

A rather expectant expression crossed Mack’s face. “Gareth! How is he doing as Alpha? I’m betting that he’s still struggling with the togetherness aspect of being the leader. Having to be present and accessible to everyone. He was always been a bit of a *lone wolf*.” That seemed to strike Mack as funny as he began to laugh long and loud.

Where are the other shoppers? Where is the butcher?

“Gareth is a better Alpha than you ever were,” Raj said through clenched teeth.

Alpha? Okaaay ...I guess that goes with the pack language.

Mack shook his head and chuckled. “Oh, I doubt that. Gareth is just beginning his path. Maybe if he were to live long enough he might be something in the end. But that’s unlikely since he’s so intent on going up against *me*.”

There was a dangerous lilt to Mack’s voice. He seemed obscenely eager to have this fight with this Gareth person. His gray eyes gleamed *yellow* for an instant like animal eyeshine rolling over them. Jude took in a sharp breath and nearly toppled some nearby cans of green beans as he jerked back. He caught them just before they tottered off the shelf and cold sweat beaded on his brow.

I should go get help. I really should report this.

But even as he thought those things, he stayed. He just couldn’t leave. It was then that Jacob and Raj began to move towards Mack in a pincer-like attack. Mack just stood there in his jeans and white t-shirt. His hands were actually jammed into the pockets of his jeans and he made no move to remove them to defend himself. In fact, he looked completely at ease except for the yellow nightshine that rolled across his eyes like storm clouds.

Jude again thought of the missing girl and young man. They were on Mack’s side. They wouldn’t let him be taken by Raj and Jacob.

But what can a little girl and a lanky guy do against the behemoth? And Raj looks pretty powerful there, too. More ropey muscles going on in his physique but still strong.

But he had this ridiculous idea of letting Raj and Jacob know about the other two, to warn them. He actually opened his mouth to speak, but his

voice wouldn't come and he was grateful for that. As crazy as it was to stay there, it was even crazier to speak up and draw attention to himself.

"You're really going to try to take me in a *public* place?" Mack snickered and the two stopped moving. "Do you think I'm going to go quietly? Hell, I might actually *shift* right here and now. There's even a security camera right there that will catch the existence of werewolves quite nicely."

Werewolves?! Jude's mind stutter-stopped at that statement. These people are looney tunes!

"Then all the Alphas would be coming after you and not just Gareth," Raj said though he was not advancing any longer. "Whatever illusions you have about besting him, you can't seriously think you can take on all the Council!"

"Do you really think the *Council* will get off its fat asses and *act*?" Mack let out a roar of laughter. "They've abandoned the Cold Moon Pack, haven't they? Cut you off without a thought. Your very existence shames them because you come from an Alpha that finally stopped following pointless laws and *took* what is rightly ours!"

"I'm not listening to any more of this bullshit," Jacob muttered and he lunged for Mack.

It was at that moment that the little girl appeared. She danced out of the aisle directly opposite Jacob with her tatty bear still held in one hand and a sucker stuck in her mouth. A normal child would have screamed and backed away from a violent scene such as this, but this little girl *stepped between* Jacob and Mack. She slammed her one free hand into Jacob's stomach and he went *flying* back over ten feet. Jacob let out an oomph sound and staggered, nearly losing his balance.

Holy shit ... holy shit ... holy shit ... what just happened?!

“Jacob!” Raj cried, his voice high and tight with shock and concern. He rushed to Jacob and steadied the big man.

Mack stepped up to the little girl’s side and put an arm around her slender shoulders. She continued to suck on her lollipop and Jude realized that she was humming under her breath a little tune.

“Raj, Jacob, meet Clara. Clara, say hello.” Mack patted her blonde curls with affection.

She took out the sucker and said in a sweet, high voice, “Hello. Can I kill them now, Mack? I’m hungry.”

That last sentence had Jude’s stomach curdling and, strangely, it made him *angry*.

“What have you done?” Raj breathed as he looked at the little girl with horror. “You’ve corrupted a *child*.”

“I’ve made her *strong*. She’s just begun her life in my pack. Imagine how strong she’ll be when she’s fully grown? A steady diet of human flesh and blood has done this. I imagine that *werewolf* meat will increase that strength *exponentially*.”

“You’re a sick fuck,” Jacob rumbled, a look of such scorn on his face, but Mack did not seem to care.

“Maaaaaaaack!” Clara whined. “I want to kill them.”

“You can kill them for sure, Clara, but not here. Out back. You and Pierce should take them both away from the town,” Mack said agreeably to her. Then he looked up at Raj and Jacob even as he continued to speak to Clara, “Leave their faces untouched. I want Gareth to see them.”

At that moment, the young man -- Pierce -- suddenly appeared behind Raj and Jacob. Jacob growled low in his throat and Raj bared his teeth. He saw

both men's gazes snap between the little girl and the arrogant young man.

Pierce was smiling in this eerie, dreamy manner. That was when Jude caught sight of his hands. Pierce's fingers are abnormally long and were tipped with claws. Raj and Jacob got back to back to face each of their assailants.

This was the moment when Jude should have run for sure. He should have screamed his head off for someone to call the police. But that's not what he did. Later, he would have no explanation for what happened or why he acted as he had, but he moved with grace and assurance out of the aisle and into the action.

He stepped out and said simply, "Stop."

Maybe it was just shock at his appearance and the single word he spoke that had Pierce and Clara freezing in their attack. All eyes were suddenly on him. He hadn't screamed that word. He hadn't even raised his voice. He felt absurdly calm in fact.

This is crazy. But then he thought, *This is what I'm supposed to do.*

There was this lightness in his chest. It reminded him of the dream when he had raced through the woods after the deer.

"This isn't any of your concern, son," Mack said almost genially. "Pierce, take care of him."

"Get out of here!" Raj yelled and gestured for him to run, but Jude stayed exactly where he was.

Pierce grinned and advanced on Jude. But Jacob stepped into his path. He struck out at Pierce, but Pierce was too fast. He dodged Jacob's swipe and clawed the big man's arm. Jacob only let out a grunt as four lines of crimson appeared on the sleeve of his flannel shirt. Pierce twisted towards Jude, ready to slice him to ribbons, too.

“Stop,” Jude said again.

And Pierce stopped. His one hand was raised above him, claws still blood-tipped. His mouth was open in a snarl. But he did not move. His eyes were blank as if there was no person behind them.

“What did you do to Pierce?” Clara’s voice was shrill. He heard the slap of her feet on the tile coming towards him.

He turned his head just before she reached him, her face screwed up in absolute fury, ready to shove him like she shoved the behemoth.

“Stop,” he said with finality.

She quivered to a halt and her eyes looked like Pierce’s.

“What are you?” Mack’s voice was dangerous. “What have you done? Release them back to me!”

Jude’s head snapped up and he could *feel* the connections between this man and Pierce and Clara. There were thin silver strands that he could almost see and he realized that there were strands between Clara and Pierce to *him*.

These strands were gold. As soon as he made eye contact with Mack that sense of connection with the other two increased. Mack’s upper lip writhed back.

“You need to stop,” Jude said and licked his dry lips. More words bubbled up inside of him and he said, “You know that you need to.”

Mack’s gaze went unfocused for a moment and Jude thought that he would go still like Pierce and Clara, but then Mack shook his head violently and growled at Jude.

Just like a wolf! Jude almost wanted to laugh.

Fear and rage filled Mack's gaze. Jude half expected him to charge and so he began to speak again, but then Mack whipped a can at him. He ducked, covering his head with his hands, and heard both Clara and Pierce let out gasps. The connections he'd had with them had snapped. Then Mack was screaming at them to run, run, run.

The silence after they were gone was profound. Finally, he lifted his head up to see Jacob and Raj looking at him with awed expressions.

"How did you do that?" Raj asked finally.

Jude stared at his handsome face for a long moment before he finally said, faintly, "I have no idea"

CHAPTER SIX: PACK BONDS

Gareth, with Molly still in her wolf form by his side, raced into the grocery store. He saw no evidence of a fight. No people fleeing for their lives. No cries of “WEREWOLF!” This confirmed what Jacob had told him earlier over the phone that somehow this strange young man had not only stopped the violence that Mack and two of his pack intended, but had sent their former Alpha fleeing from the grocery store in a panic.

“I can’t explain it, Gareth,” Jacob’s normally deep baritone had been jumping into higher octaves as excitement and awe tinged his voice. “He just said ‘stop’ and they stopped. Their eyes went funny and they were like frozen. Then he does the same thing to Mack. Mack was able to resist, but like *barely* and he knew it, too. He bugged out of there like the kid had set him on *fire*.”

“Keep the young man there. Don’t let him out of your sight,” Gareth had ordered. He had no idea how this person had been able to affect the Rogues like that, but he intended to find out

“I’ll try, Gareth, but I don’t know if he’ll stay. He looks pretty freaked out. Raj is using his normal charm to keep the kid from bolting, but ... Gareth, he’s one of *us*. Not turned yet, I don’t think, but holy Hell, he’s *strong*.” Jacob had then asked the question that Gareth was wondering himself, “Could he be our new brother?”

Gareth’s heart had done this strange flip as he remembered those stunning red-brown eyes in his vision and how the wolf had gazed up at him from his prone position on his back. Submissive, but strong. Ready to accept his mastery, but clearly saying back that he was a force to be reckoned with.

Gareth had told Jacob to do whatever it took to keep the young man there. He and Molly were coming. And then they had continued to run. They had been only two miles outside of town when this second call had come so they got to the store in a little over ten minutes. His nose told him where

his pack members were in the store, still near the meat counter. The scent of raw beef, pork and poultry had his stomach growling.

Someone yelled after him, “Hey, mister, you can’t bring your dog in here!”

He shot the person a look. It was a plump, balding man who had spoken. He had a nametag on that identified him as “Carl” and that he was the store manager. But that one look from Gareth had Carl taking a few steps back and putting a fluttering hand up to his throat. Gareth hoped the man wouldn’t call the sheriff. He had to assess this situation with the young man first without having to deal with Sheriff Fairweather and Deputy Reynolds in the mix.

Especially if this young man is our brother. He will be skittish.

He heard Raj’s dulcet tones before he saw the Indian werewolf, “Please, Jude, stay. Gareth will be here any moment. You will want to speak to him. He will be able to explain everything.”

“I don’t want anything to do with you guys or this Gareth!” A young man’s voice rose in bewilderment. “Look, I helped you out with whatever that was. Now I just have to finish shopping for my grandmother.”

Gareth burst out of the aisle with Molly loping at his heels. Time seemed to slow as he took in the scene before him. Raj was speaking to a beautiful young man with wavy dark brown hair that kept falling into his eyes.

Jacob was standing to the side, back to the meat counter. The young man though held his near complete attention after he ascertained that neither Raj nor Jacob were hurt.

The young man had a long, lean body that bespoke strength earned by manual labor and not from the gym. He had a dreamy yet wounded expression on his beautiful face that was alight more with frustration and anxiety now. His forehead was bunched. His brows were drawn together. His full, plush lips were pulled back from his teeth in a half snarl.

A frightened wolf that just wants to get back to his den.

Then Jude turned his head and Gareth saw those rich red-brown eyes and everything else vanished. Instead, the image of the forest vision filled his gaze for a long moment.

“You!” Jude cried, his voice heightened with shock. “You!”

Gareth blinked and he saw the grocery store again. Jude was pointing at him. His hand was shaking.

“You’re the white wolf!” Jude gasped out and then, upon hearing his own words, shook his head as if to deny them. “That’s impossible! That was a dream!”

Gareth shut his eyes for one long moment. This was their brother and he was *magnificent*. When he opened his eyes again, Jude was backing away from him. His gaze flickered from Gareth to Molly.

“And *you* were there, too!” he said to Molly.

She tilted her head to the side in confusion and looked up at Gareth as if to ask, “What does he mean?”

“It’s all right, Jude. That is your name, isn’t it? Jude?” Gareth asked as he slowly stepped towards the retreating figure. He held his hands up to show that they were empty of all weapons and he meant Jude no harm. The desire to race over there and *stop* Jude from leaving him was almost overwhelming. The Alpha’s need to protect and comfort throbbed through him. He had never felt it so strongly before and he found himself taking in deep, soothing breaths to calm his own heart rate. Jude was *still* though backing away. “Stop, Jude.”

He was surprised at the pretty yet mulish expression that crossed the young man’s face. “That doesn’t work on me.”

He doesn't like it when he thinks people are trying to control him. I wonder why.

"Please," Gareth added. "Please, stop."

Jude stopped. The "please" had done it. There were fine tremors running through his lithe body. He wrapped his arms around his chest. The red t-shirt he was wearing, faded to an almost rose from plenty of washings, seemed to be too thin in the air-conditioned store to keep him warm.

Or perhaps it is fear, shock or stress.

"Just -- just stand there, okay? Don't come any closer," Jude demanded.

Gareth stopped moving. They were about five feet apart. His Alpha nature wanted to move in close, to nose the young man for injuries, to draw in his scent, but he remained where he was. The tick of Molly's claws stopped as soon as she reached his side. He felt the solid warmth of her on the outside of his pant's leg.

"I would never hurt you, Jude," Gareth promised.

But that did not calm the young man at all. Instead Jude's knuckles went white as he tightened his hold on himself. He let out a sharp laugh as well before saying, "How do you know that? We've just met. You might *want* to hurt me later."

He's been attacked before by someone he trusted or someone he should have been able to trust, Gareth intuited. Likely a parental figure.

"I would never hurt you," Gareth repeated.

"Why not?" Jude struck his chin out as if asking to be hit, daring him to fail in his promise immediately.

“Because you saved Jacob and Raj.” Gareth took a deep breath and added, “And because you’re pack.”

All three of his other pack members grew still with excitement and anxiety. They were thrilled, he knew, that Jude was one of them, but they also knew how hard it was for acceptance to come from a brother who had not yet changed once. It would be even harder for Jude as it seemed he had powers of some sort. Gareth needed to consult with Nina. But all of that could be done after Jude had been secured in Fallowmere.

“I’m what?” Jude’s voice went up at the end and he let out a strangled laugh. “Wolves run in packs! And whatever you may be ...” His gaze flickered to Molly. Gareth realized that Jude *knew* Molly was not what she seemed. “I’m *human*. So I can’t be pack. I’m --”

“Jude, how do you explain what just happened with Mack, Clara and Pierce?” Raj asked gently.

The Indian werewolf’s handsome face was set in a tender expression. He understood very well the cognitive dissonance that Jude was experiencing.

After his family had died in the storm, he had completely turned away from the idea of their being any order to the universe. There could be no gods or magic because so many bad things happened to good people. Therefore, finding out that he was a werewolf had completely gone up against the nihilism that he had adopted in order to protect himself from any more disappointments.

“I ...” Jude opened his mouth then shut it. He shook his head and raised his hands to his temples. A piece of paper that he had been holding onto in his right hand fluttered down to the ground by Gareth’s feet.

Gareth immediately picked it up. Jude had an almost comically distressed look on his face as he reached for the lined paper in Gareth’s hands.

“I need that!” Jude cried, but did not come near Gareth to get it.

“All right.” Gareth extended his hand, but did not move towards Jude. The young man had to be the one to come to him. This was the first step in creating trust.

Jude stood there for a long moment. His red-brown eyes were flickering all over Gareth’s face, trying to gauge whether he could snatch the list without being snatched himself. Gareth’s opinion that Jude had been hurt by someone in authority grew even stronger. Inwardly, he growled. The thought of any of his wolves being harmed made his hackles rise. But he knew that Jude would take any outward showing of aggression as aimed at him so he kept his expression almost blank. Finally, Jude danced within range and grabbed the list back. He actually held the list flattened against his chest as if he were guarding a treasure map.

“That looked like a grocery list to me. Is that what your grandmother needs?” Gareth asked carefully.

Jude nodded. “Yeah.”

“Why don’t we walk and talk? You can get the things she needs and we’ll keep pace with you?” Gareth suggested. Jude stared at him out of doubtful, soulful eyes. “Jacob told me how you were able to stop Mack and the other Rogues. You could always use that power against us, couldn’t you?”

“I -- I could, but I wouldn’t,” Jude answered then blanched as if he had given something away. “I mean I totally *would* if ...”

“If?” Gareth prompted.

“If you acted like they did. You seem okay, but I really -- really don’t want to be involved in this,” Jude confessed.

“You already are,” Jacob spoke for the first time. His baritone rumble comforting even as what he was saying caused Jude to blanch again.

“I ... *damn*. I knew they were bad news. Why did I ...” Jude looked down at the cracked linoleum floor and worried at his lower lip. He clearly believed Jacob on some deep level. Now he was just as clearly was deciding what he was going to about it. Finally, he lifted his head and stared straight into Gareth’s eyes, not something anyone who was less than an Alpha should do. The stare was not challenging though to Gareth’s position or power, but was a look that almost beseeched him not to hurt Jude and his heart clenched. “I need to get the groceries for my grandmother. You -- but only you can come with me. The others and the -- the *werewolf*.” He dipped his head to indicate Molly and let out a slight laugh as he said it as if he couldn’t quite believe he was saying it. “Need to go elsewhere. Okay?”

Gareth nodded and indicated with a movement for the others to head out of the store. “We will meet you in the parking lot.”

Raj, Jacob and Molly all strode away. Molly cast a look back at Jude and he could not quite read her expression. Molly was no stranger to violence. Before she had werewolf strength, she had been seen as an easy victim. Maybe she saw some of that in Jude.

“So what is first on the list?” Gareth asked after long moments of Jude staring at him out of those wounded eyes. The eyes that just made him want to crush Jude to him and tell him that it was going to be okay.

Jude blinked and finally brought the list up to his face so that he could read the spidery handwriting. But the young man was having a hard time focusing on the written words as he kept sneaking glances over at Gareth.

“What is it that you want to ask me?” Gareth asked, intuiting the glances as curious and not frightened.

Jude gave him this quirked grin that had Gareth smiling in return. He felt a little breathless at that grin and, for some reason, desperately wanted it to stay on that beautiful face, but Jude quickly dropped his gaze from Gareth’s and the smile lessened in intensity.

“It’s just ...” Jude let out a self-conscious laugh, but then decided to go on, “You look like such a *badass*. You’re built like a *tank*. The earrings, tattoos and boots? Holy crap. Not to mention the steely gaze. I bet people who see you on the street cross to the other side to stay out of your way.”

Gareth shrugged. He had always been a big man. Far bigger now as a werewolf and Alpha. It was a part of him. But it didn’t rule him like it did the Reynolds of the world.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” he answered neutrally.

Jude snuck another glance up at him. “But your voice, the way you talk ...” Jude bit his lower lip. “I don’t know. It’s the *opposite* of how you look. I could see you curled by the fireside with a book of poetry or something. That probably sounds stupid.”

Gareth froze when Jude said that as he *did* curl down by the fireside with poetry. “You’re very intuitive, Jude.”

“You’re a contradiction, Gareth.” Jude was smiling at him again though so it took any sting out of the comment. It was the first time Jude had said his name and he liked it.

At that moment, the butcher came out from the back room. There were blood smears on his apron that was taut over a bulging belly. He was as bald as a cue ball and looked incomplete without a half-chewed cigar in his mouth. He had massive arms that were still heavily muscled even as the rest of him had gone soft with age. Gareth pegged him as an ex-boxer.

“Can I help you?” he asked as he wiped his bloody hands on a towel.

To Gareth’s surprise, Jude’s eyes sparked with anger and he asked, sharply, “Where were you?”

The butcher blinked watery blue eyes. "I -- I hope you weren't waiting long. I was just cutting some chops in the back room. Couldn't hear over the meat saw."

Jude seemed to deflate. "No, it's not that. There was this guy and ..." Jude shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"Was somebody hassling you?" The butcher's gaze swung immediately towards Gareth. He sized the Alpha up. Gareth gazed back at him, unblinking, before the butcher grunted and turned back to Jude.

"Not him," Jude quickly assure the butcher. "The guy I was talking about was harassing his friends. I just don't think he would have done that with you here."

Gareth was certain that Mack might have killed the butcher as easy as breathing if he had been here and was therefore grateful to the bone saw. The butcher though puffed up, believing that Jude believed his size would have impressed Mack.

"Well, I'm sorry about that. I would have kicked his ass," the butcher chuckled. "Now what can I get for you today?"

Jude still looked disturbed as he was clearly remembering the scene with Mack. He looked at his list but couldn't seem to find the items he needed. Gareth swiftly stepped to his side and took the list from him. A quick scan brought up exactly what Jude's grandmother needed.

"Two pounds of hamburger, 85 percent lean, two strip steaks, four bone-in pork chops, a dozen spicy Italian sausages," Gareth continued with the list. As every meat item was added, his impression of Jude's grandmother went up a notch. The woman understood meat. Considering Jude's unique abilities she likely had the werewolf gene, too.

If she's blood, Gareth thought as he looked over at Jude out of the corner of his eye. *No werewolf would allow her pup to be so injured not even if she*

remained unchanged.

After he helped Jude load up the cart with white-wrapped packages, they headed towards the produce section. Jude walked at a normal pace. His tightly clenched hands on the cart's handle were the only sign of stress. That and he kept glancing over at Gareth, who made sure to keep a foot between them at all times. For a while, Gareth would read off the items needed and point where they were. Jude would then put them in the cart. They said nothing else. Finally, it was Jude who spoke.

"Are you guys really ... *werewolves*?" he asked, with that high, breathy chuckle of disbelief on the end of his question.

"We really are, but you already *know* that, Jude. You picked up what Molly was right away," he pointed out.

"Molly? So that's a girl werewolf?" Jude asked.

"Yes." Gareth grinned. "She's a female werewolf and the pack's Scout."

"What's that?"

"She goes ahead to scout out terrain and report back on danger," he explained. "You recognized her from the vision we shared, didn't you? She was one of the wolves in the clearing when you submitted to me."

Jude's cart suddenly rammed into the lettuce station and the young man let out a low curse. "Vision? It was just a dream!"

"Call it what you will, but we both shared it and it is a portent of things to come," Gareth answered neutrally again.

Jude's head shot towards him. The young man's nostrils were flared and his chin jutted forward again. His voice, when he spoke was low and dangerous - and though Gareth was sure he hadn't intended it to be -- it was also full of old fear and hurt, "I'm submissive to no one."

“Is that what bothers you about what you saw?” Gareth turned and faced Jude head on. “Not the part about you being a *wolf*?”

Jude immediately looked away from him and started pushing the cart aggressively between the potatoes and mushrooms. He shoved things into the cart that Gareth reminded him about without looking.

“I’m the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack, Jude. There is *no* shame in submitting to me. It is the way of wolves. We have a structure in the pack,” Gareth gently tried to explain.

“Oh? Well, I bet you *like* that structure plenty fine, because you’re at the *top*!” Jude’s eyes flashed.

“Someone in authority hurt you, didn’t they? Used their power for ill?” Gareth kept his tone low, but his eyes were fixed on Jude’s.

He saw the flash of pain and panic. Jude tensed and muttered, “None of your business.”

That was as good as a “yes” screamed from the mountaintops.

“I’m sorry, Jude. I didn’t mean to pry,” Gareth responded softly. “I just wanted to know if there was something I was doing which was making you so distrustful or if it was more general. I want you to be at ease around me. I would never use my position as Alpha to harm you. That would be a violation of everything an Alpha is.”

“You aren’t my Alpha. I don’t need an Alpha. I can take care of myself,” Jude answered briskly without looking at him. Silence fell again except for the squeak of the cart’s wheels. Jude finally asked, “What was the deal with that Mack guy? The little girl he had with him talked about *eating* your friends! Like it was no big deal. And Pierce ... there’s all sorts of wrong there.”

“That was your impression of them? That they were *wrong* in some way?” Gareth was curious to see how much Jude was already picking up about the Rogues.

“Other than the creepy talk out of Clara it was obvious that ...” Here Jude stopped and his forehead furrowed. “They seemed *sick* to me. They smelled ... like spoiled meat.” He paused beside the radishes and patted a tattoo with his palms against the cart’s handle. “When I connected to them --”

“Connected?” Alarm rang out in Gareth’s voice. The last thing he wanted was for Mack to take Jude from him and the Cold Moon Pack. Jude was sensitive and wounded, but brilliant, too. It would be a hideous waste.

The alarm had Jude turning to look at him. “Yeah, there were these silver lines connecting Clara and Pierce to Mack. When I told them to stop ... I don’t know. It sounds so crazy, but I *connected* to them, too. My lines were gold though.”

Gareth stood stock still. What Jude had just described were pack bonds. That Jude could *see* them, let alone *create* them, an alternative pack bond, was incredible. He must have looked as shocked as he felt because Jude was smiling at him uncertainly.

“Uhm, Gareth, you okay?”

“I ...”

So many questions went through his head. Forget the fact that Jude could see the pack bonds. He had created new ones with the Rogues. What if he could *break* the bonds they had with Mack and bring these Rogue wolves back? It was too much to take in. He had to think. He had to talk to Nina and the others. He had to get Jude out of this town and back to Fallowmere.

“Let’s check out. I believe we’ve gotten everything on your grandmother’s list,” Gareth said faintly.

“Okay.” Jude still was looking at him curiously, but they both went to the checkout counter. Gareth noticed gratefully that Jude avoided the checker that seemed to enjoy the sound of her own voice as chipmunk-ish as it was.

As the checker scanned each item, Gareth swiftly moved to bag everything. He did so with neat, orderly, almost military precision so that the bags were each filled to capacity without overstraining the paper and slid them neatly into the cart like Tetris pieces. Jude’s eyebrows rose at this, but he said nothing ... until Gareth attempted to pay.

Frowning, Jude asked, “What are you doing?”

“After saving Raj and Jacob, will you not at least let me pay for your groceries?” Gareth asked. It was only natural that as Alpha he should provide for his pack, but Jude clearly was having none of it.

“Ah, *no*. I didn’t help your friends in the hopes of a reward. I pay my own way. Thanks,” Jude said.

He pushed Gareth’s hand with the twenty dollar bills away. It was their first touch and there was a burst of electricity. Gareth was surprised at it and his hand jerked back. Jude stared at both their hands for a minute but, without a word, he just paid the cashier. The cashier, an elderly man raised his eyebrows at the exchange, but said nothing. Gareth was glad as this was pack business whether Jude recognized it or not.

Jude wheeled the cart outside to a battered powder blue pickup. Raj, Jacob and Molly appeared. She was no longer in her wolf form, but Jude recognized her just the same. He saw the young man’s eyes widen and he would have steered the car into a curb, but Gareth grabbed the cart and redirected it at the last moment. The others stopped about twenty feet away, sensing that Jude was still leery about being outnumbered.

“Still don’t believe in werewolves?” Gareth asked with a twitch of a smile on his lips.

“Scarily, I think I did the moment I saw that Mack guy,” Jude answered.

Gareth started putting bags of groceries into the back of the pickup as he said, “We will deliver these to your grandmother, but then we need to get you out of the area.” He frowned as he thought of Jude’s grandmother alone and the thought was not a good one. Perhaps he should have her come to Fallowmere, too. “Your grandmother ... what? What is it, Jude?”

Jude was giving him that “are you crazy” look that he was starting to recognize. “I’m not going with you. You are not going to my grandmother’s. We are parting ways here and now.”

The last bag was slid into the truck’s back. Gareth turned towards Jude slowly. He had known that this would be the young man’s response, but he had *hoped* that after seeing Mack that Jude would understand he was in danger.

“Jude,” he began. “It’s not safe for you here. Mack will find you and he will make sure that you do not have a second chance to use your powers on him. He cannot allow someone like you to exist. You are a threat to him. You showed him up to the other Rogues.”

Jude’s red-brown eyes darkened at the thought and old pain swam in those dark irises. “I know how to take care of myself. I’ve been doing it for a long time.”

“You need the protection of the pack. You’re one of us,” Gareth told him. How he wanted to grasp Jude’s arms and gently shake him!

“I’m not one of you. I’m not a -- a werewolf. Believe me, I would have noticed that.” Jude gave him a lopsided smile. “And I’m the one that protected your - ah, pack members, right? It seems like Mack has a

problem with you guys. Not with me. So if I stay away from you, I should be all right.”

Foolish boy. He isn't hearing what I'm saying. But I must use logic, cool reason, not emotion. He'll just back away.

“You took control of his pack members from him. You are to be one of my pack. You are now very much on his list of people to go after,” Gareth reasoned.

But even as he spoke, Jude had pulled out his car keys and hopped up into the truck's cab. He shut the door as Gareth came over to it. The Alpha did not get angry. He felt Jude's fear, not of him, but of whatever had happened in his past, and the anger that rolled out from it. He wasn't going to win the young man with a few words. As much as he feared they had no time for the courtship of this wolf into the fold, it would have to be done.

“Look, thanks for the offer. But I've got this,” Jude said. “I don't need your help.”

Jude then pulled out of the parking space, headed out of the parking lot and up the road. Gareth shook his head and sighed. The other pack members flowed around him.

“Where's he going?” Raj asked, alarm written in his high tone.

“The kid's strong, but Mack's going to take him out,” Jacob grunted.

“He's our brother. We cannot abandon him,” Molly added.

“We aren't.” Gareth stared after where the blue pickup had disappeared.

“We're going to protect Jude whether he likes it or not.”

CHAPTER SEVEN: VISITORS

“Cake and wine are the way to end the day,” Grandmother Sophia said and smacked her lips in satisfaction as she placed her fork on her empty plate and set it by the side of her rocking chair on the porch. She picked up her glass of cold white wine and took a large sip.

“I have to agree. We should make this a daily tradition,” Jude said.

He was sitting beside her, not in another rocking chair – there was only one of those – but a comfortable enough folding chair. He pressed the back of his fork into the crumbs of angel food cake on his plate, licking them up. The slightly sweet, moist cake was delicious especially with the fresh berries and homemade whipped cream that Grandmother Sophia had added. He took a long swallow of wine as well. It tasted of grapefruit and grass.

“I’m all for that.” Grandmother Sophia sighed with pleasure.

They went silent for a moment as they listened to the creak of Grandmother Sophia’s rocking chair and chirrup of night insects. Unlike in the city where they used to live together, there were no car horns, people shouting epithets, or drunken laughter. Jude watched as lightning bugs rose up from the grass and performed their glowing mating dance.

“Are you feeling better, Jude?” Grandmother Sophia turned inquisitive, gentle eyes on him.

“Much better,” he assured her.

When he’d come back from the grocery store he’d been a mess. Shaking and sweating like he had a fever, he’d stopped the truck out by the side of the house and just rested his forehead against the steering wheel.

Everything that had happened with Jacob, Raj, Pierce, Clara and Mack rushed back over him. The *insanity* of it. A sweet-looking little girl talking about *eating* people. Pierce’s claw-tipped hands. The violence that lived in Mack’s eyes.

And then there was Gareth.

Gareth got his own thoughts. The man was maddening. The way he had read all of Jude's moods and tried to control him made Jude's hackles rise up. He sensed that Gareth wasn't like the other people he'd met who tried to do that to get something from him. The man wasn't that type.

But he had no right to try and manipulate me! Even if it was for my own good ...

That last phrase was something he had heard often by psychologists and social workers that had met with him after his parents' death. But it was only Grandmother Sophia who *actually* did things for his own good. She told him what she planned and why and went through with it. She'd solicited his thoughts, but in the end she was the parent and she would make the decisions. He'd respected that. He sensed Gareth was the same type.

But still he chafed at a *stranger* coming into his life and doing that so easily.

But he didn't feel like a stranger exactly.

Because Gareth was the white wolf that he'd dreamed of. He could have somehow convinced himself that everything else he saw in the grocery store was some kind of hallucination, but, ironically, not that dream. That dream made everything else that had followed *true*.

Werewolves are real. Gareth says I'm a werewolf. But even if I believe that he and the others are werewolves that doesn't mean I'm one, because I don't change into a wolf.

Yet he'd had that effect on Pierce and Clara. He even believed he could have overcome Mack in time. That must mean something. Maybe it was the start of changing *into* a werewolf. A cold chill ran through him.

Grandmother Sophia had found him in the truck just as he'd had that last thought. She had asked him what was wrong. Her nut brown face had been creased with worry and concern. Jude had opened his mouth to tell her that he was fine, but nothing had come out. She hadn't pestered him about it though. Instead, she had helped him out of the truck and up to his bedroom.

She'd tucked him into bed. He'd tried to resist, to tell her that he needed to unload the groceries, but she had shushed him and smoothed a hand over his forehead. Somehow he had fallen asleep and, thankfully, hadn't dreamed.

He'd woken up for dinner, feeling much better. His mind was still foggy at the edges with the memories of what had happened, but they stayed in the background. Grandmother Sophia had made pot roast, whipped potatoes, glazed carrots, collard greens and corn bread. It was one of his favorite meals of hers. Back before she retired to the country, Grandmother Sophia had been a working mother so weekday dinners were handled more on the fly, but Sunday dinners were always a big deal and pot roast had appeared often. So they'd eaten heartily with Grandmother Sophia twittering about old friends she'd heard from. She hadn't asked about what had happened in town. Then she suggested they take dessert on the front porch and Jude was positive she'd bring up the subject there, but so far she hadn't. He didn't know if he was relieved or more anxious.

"Isn't it peaceful like out here?" Grandmother Sophia asked, the squeaking of the rocking chair a soft accompaniment to her words. "In the city, there were always noises, remember? Always lights. But now it's so velvety black except for the stars. So many stars." She sipped the wine meditatively.

Jude's gaze slipped up to the sky above as well. There were many nights when he had laid out under the stars and had them sing him to sleep. He understood her wonder and satisfaction with the sight of them. He'd slept out even when he'd had the funds to sleep inside, because he felt immeasurably wealthy to have such magnificence above him.

"You haven't asked me about this afternoon," Jude said finally, bringing the subject up himself.

"No," Grandmother Sophia agreed.

Her gaze remained on the sky. Yet he knew that she was aware of every molecule of him. She always had been. She always understood him without

answers. He'd always loved her for that as well as many other reasons. She was wise and kind and strong and courageous. He wondered if he'd told her that enough.

"I ..." he began and swallowed as the words failed him again.

I cannot tell her that I interrupted a fight between two packs of werewolves! I can't tell her that they said I'm one of them! I can't tell her about the white wolf...

Grandmother Sophia put a hand on his forearm and patted it. "Not now, dear. You're not ready. Tomorrow will be soon enough or the next day or the day after that. We have time."

A lump formed in his throat. She understood him better than he had himself. And maybe tomorrow he would feel he *could* tell her about the werewolves and she'd take it as a ridiculous and funny story. Maybe he would find it funny then, too. Gareth and the others had to be insane to say they were werewolves after all! But he didn't really think he'd ever found Mack or Clara or Pierce ridiculous. They had been terrifying and *wrong*. Twisted in some way that Jude thought he could feel and almost *untwist*. But such untwisting would take time and the three of them would never stay still for him to do it. Or he didn't think so.

He shook his head. What was he thinking of *untwisting* for? Even if he could help them – and really, what made him think he could? – he didn't want anything to do with them and they wouldn't want his help anyways.

He realized that Grandmother Sophia was standing up. The rocking chair slowly stilled in its movement as she grabbed her plate and empty wine glass, readying herself to go inside. He made a movement to jump up and take the dishes from her, but she shooed him back into his seat.

"You sit out here a spell and enjoy the night. Just leave your dishes in the sink. There will be time enough to deal with them in the morning," she told him. "That's the joy of retirement. Plenty of time. Not a lot to do. Well,

that's not quite true anymore. With you here there will be some excitement in my life."

"Excitement? I'm not that exciting, Grandmother Sophia," he said.

"Oh, child, watching grass grow is exciting for me so you are a *wealth* of entertainment and interest."

She chuckled throatily and patted his shoulder before she shuffled inside, leaving him alone on the porch. Jude cradled his wine glass in his hands even though he knew that his hands were warming the still cool white wine.

He drank and stared at the stars, his mind thankfully empty. There was a pressure in that emptiness though which indicated that plenty of thoughts wanted to make themselves known to him, but were being pressed back by the magnificence of the sky. He took another swallow of wine and his eyes dropped from the sky to the surrounding forest.

It was amazingly dark and deep. Only the tops of the trees - where they were outlined against the sky - allowed Jude to see any distinction between them. But near the ground he only saw universal darkness. Suddenly, though there were two pinpricks of red eyes. He stared at them blankly for a moment. His brain not processing what his eyes were seeing. But his *body* knew what they were and fear that Jude's mind didn't even know he was feeling had him rocketing forward in his seat, but then freezing as he confirmed that the red eyes were *real* and not some kind of trick of the mind.

Movement will attract them! They'll realize I see them!

The glowing red eyes were about four and a half feet off the ground. That was too high to be a rodent or other small mammal in the forest. They weren't owl eyes either as they were too low down and not big enough to be. They seemed not to blink. They were fixed upon him. His mouth went dry.

Jude thought he heard movement from the right and his gaze darted away from the eyes for a moment towards the sound. When he looked back there

was *another* set of eyes by the first.

Wolves! Jude knew it was wolves. And then other things all clicked together. The attacks by wolves that Sheriff Fairweather had told him about and how unusual they were yet five people had already been killed. The standoff with Mack, Pierce and Clara in the grocery store. Gareth's warning that Mack would not let Jude just walk away from it. It all made sense in this terrible way. *Werewolves! Werewolves are killing people in town and now they're here! Mack ... Mack is here. Is that Clara or Pierce or some other werewolf?*

At no time did Jude think it was Gareth out there in wolf form. The white wolf did not have glowing red eyes. The white wolf would not hurt him, but there was *only* the desire to hurt in those red orbs that stared at him with such naked anger.

The sick, sour tastes of fear flooded Jude's mouth. He moved slowly to hoist himself out of his chair. Even as he wanted to flee he did not. He kept his movements very, very smooth and unhurried so that maybe those eyes wouldn't notice what he was doing. He didn't straighten all the way up, but kept his body crouched down so that his own eyes were at the same level they approximately had been when he was seated. He slowly inched to his left towards the screen door.

Sweat coated his palms and beaded on his upper lip. His breathing was fast and shallow. He reached back with one hand for the door. One set of the red eyes raised slightly as if the wolf were sniffing the air, sniffing his fear and enjoying it. He continued to inch backwards, still searching with that one hand. His fingers brushed the wiry mesh of the screen.

To the right. A little more to the right.

His fingertips touched the wood of the frame and he thought he hit the very edge of the handle. He crept a few more inches backwards and reached back again. The eyes started to approach. Both pair. In a rapid loping movements that ate up the distance between the forest and the porch. The

certainty that he'd had in the grocery store that he could simply *stop* these wolves from ripping him into shreds was completely gone.

Jude spun around and grabbed the handle of the screen door. His palm was so sweaty that his hand just *spun* on the handle without the handle moving at all. He tightened his hold and his hand spun, but then *caught* and he wrenched the door open. He heard the rustling of the long grass in the front yard as the wolves ran through it. Jude slipped into the house then grasped the edge of the heavy wooden door that in this heat had have been left open to let the air through, slammed it shut and snapped the deadbolt in place.

There was no chain to be drawn here as Grandmother Sophia – and, likely, the person before her who had owned this house had never thought about needing one out here this far out in the country. After all who would be trying to get in?

Werewolves! Fucking werewolves!

He heard the thunder of paws outside on the wooden porch and the low growls of the animals that were thwarted. Jude backed away from the door as he felt certain that they would burst in at any moment. Wood would splinter and crack and a furry body weighing more than 200 pounds would fly against his chest.

Then he saw something waving in the corner of his left eye. He turned and saw that it was one of the curtains moving in the slight wind from the open window. Jude dashed over to the window and shut that and locked it. More taps of claws and he thought he saw a furry body racing around the house.

The back door! The other windows!

With his heart in his throat, he race around the house, shutting and locking every window. When he reached the kitchen, he shut and locked the back door. He thought he saw a flash of red eyes and an angry growl.

Then the howling began.

It wasn't from the wolves that were circling the house, looking for a way in, but from farther out in the woods.

Gareth?! It was an absurd thought. But Jude suddenly believed that it was Gareth, Raj, Jacob and Molly whose howls he was hearing. Somehow they had found Grandmother Sophia's home and somehow they had arrived at the same time as Mack and his crew. But then he knew how that could be possible without any coincidences involved. They were tracking Mack. That's how they found him and me at the same time. Thank God!

The howling was faint at first, but then it became far louder and Jude wanted to cheer. He heard angry – and *worried* -- snuffles and snarls from the nearby wolves. He then thought he saw two dark streaks running through the long grass, heading towards the forest, away from the house. But he did not trust his eyes, because seeing the wolves fleeing was too much what he hoped for. Even when the howls that had been coming nearer suddenly turned direction and seemed to be heading deeper into the woods he couldn't believe the danger was over.

That was when he saw the shotgun that was hiding in the corner. He grabbed it in shaking, sweaty hands.

This was new. Grandmother Sophia had hated guns back in the city and wouldn't have one in the house. But now there was this well-oiled and cared for weapon right by the back porch.

Maybe she bought it because of the wolf attacks. I wonder if lead shot will do anything to werewolves though. Might need to clunk them over their fury heads with the silver candlesticks!

Hysterical laughter bubbled out of his belly. Jude clamped his mouth shut to hold it in. He held the shotgun up in shaking hands as he silently moved through the house towards the front door and the porch. He listened with every ounce of his being for the sound of paws, whines, growls, any and every sounds that wolves might make.

They left. I saw them leave. Chased away. But maybe it's a trap? What if they went into the woods, changed back into their human forms and now are at the front door?

A cold trickle of fear corkscrewed down Jude's spine and he swallowed dryly. He imagined Mack standing in front of the door, silent, listening just as intently for him. He imagined the other wolf – was it Clara or Pierce or another one of Mack's pack? – peering into the front window, into the darkness, and at him. The shotgun's twin barrels swung over to the window, but nothing was there.

Slowly and silently, Jude stepped over to the window. The moonlight streamed down at an angle onto the porch so that he would be able to see if anyone or *anything* was there. Jude held his breath and kept a firm hold on the shotgun. Wolves could easily break through glass. He imagined one smashing through the window in a massive leap, front paws impacting his chest and sending him flying back, shotgun spinning from his hands. A trickle of sweat crawled down his cheek.

He'd made it to the window. The top of Grandmother Sophia's rocking chair was visible as was a corner of the chair he'd been sitting in. There were no wolves or people standing leaning against the porch railing in front of them. He turned his body so that he was angled towards the front door as he leaned forward so that he could see the rest of the porch. As inch by inch of the porch was revealed, more sweat skimmed down Jude's face. He expected to see Mack's grinning face or worse there would be Clara smiling like an innocent child, her mouth smeared with blood or the fey Pierce with claws for hands. But there was no one there.

The wolves were gone.

Jude lowered the shotgun and let out a soft moan of relief. His shoulders sagged and his head lowered. Sweat pattered onto the floor. With a shaky sigh, Jude ran his forearm over his forehead. He felt so drained that he needed to sit down. He wasn't going to go to bed tonight. He had to stay downstairs with the shotgun, ready for the wolves to come back. But he had to sit. Just for a moment.

Gareth and the others will keep Mack away.

For Jude who trusted no one to help him, let alone protect him and his, he should have scoffed at such an innocent belief, but he *did* believe it. He rested the shotgun against the couch and sagged into it. He shook for long moments. The sweat on his body cooled and he actually drew a blanket that was thrown over the back of the sofa around his shoulders. He thought of calling Sheriff Fairweather and reporting the “wolves”. But his natural fear of police reasserted itself and he didn’t know what she could do about them anyways. They were gone. For now.

Gareth ... Gareth ... Gareth, keep Mack and his pack away from Grandmother Sophia and me.

That thought circled over and over again in his mind. His eyes closed and he imagined the white wolf’s ghostly form running through the woods after Mack and his pack. He imagined that he saw the huge black wolf form of Jacob behind him then the leaner wolf form of Raj, followed finally by Molly’s small yet fleet wolf form.

Gareth, chase them far away. Far, far away from me.

Somehow, impossibly, Jude fell asleep dreaming of Gareth’s white wolf running, running, running. What woke him were happy voices, warm breezes and the twin scents of frying bacon and buttery pancakes. Jude’s eyelids fluttered open. He was stretched out on the couch. The blanket was neatly tucked around him. The shotgun was gone. For one moment he wondered if it had all been a dream. He had wolves on the brain, but then the voices – ones *not* coming from the television and radio – really clicked in for him and he realized who it was that was speaking.

Jude jerked up on the couch. The blanket pooled into his lap. His gaze snapped to the threshold between this front room, the small dining room and beyond that the kitchen. Gareth’s huge form filled the doorway.

Gareth strode towards him out of the kitchen with a plate piled with pancakes and bacon in one hand and a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. Jude’s mouth opened, but nothing came out as Gareth set the plate and glass down on the coffee table right in front of him.

“Gareth ...” Jude finally got out. To see Gareth *here*, in the house, when he had been dreaming of him made Jude feel like perhaps he was still dreaming. A sense of unreality flowed through him.

“It’s all right, Jude. Everything is all right,” Gareth’s voice was pitched low. His eyes met Jude’s and Jude found his breathing evening out and his heartbeat lowered. The sense of unreality also fled. He felt anchored gazing into Gareth’s eyes.

“How are you ... *here*?” Jude asked as he slid his legs off the couch.

“We tracked Mack here.” Gareth handed him silverware and a napkin. Jude took them from him with shaking hands.

“So that *was* you guys last night,” Jude whispered and stared blindly ahead of him.

“Yes,” Gareth answered.

Jude focused in on Gareth again. The man was really huge. Muscles bulged under the white t-shirt that was like a second skin. The silver wolf’s head necklace glinted at him. That reminded him of the wolves that had circled his home.

“Werewolves are real.” Jude dropped the silverware on the table and it clattered loudly.

“Yes, but, Jude, that’s nothing to be afraid of. Not from me. Not from the pack,” Gareth assured him.

“But Mack was *trying* to get in. He was *going* to get in! Grandmother Sophia!” Jude tried to get up to go to her, to check she was all right, but Gareth gently pushed him down. “Hey! Let me –”

“Jude, you go to her in the state you’re in now and she’ll be frightened. You don’t want that, do you? You don’t want that.” Gareth’s gray eyes bored into his.

Jude resisted for a moment – though Gareth was so much stronger than him and he was pretty sure that the man wasn't using a tenth of his strength to hold Jude there – but then slumped back onto the couch.

“Isn't she scared now with strangers in the house? What did you tell her? You didn't say you were werewolves, did you?”

But just as he asked all this, he heard Grandmother Sophia's laughter ring out of the kitchen and then he heard her say, “Now, Molly, you are thin as a *rail*! We've got to get some food into you.”

“With food this good, Molly will be eating like a horse,” Jacob rumbled happily.

“I *already* eat like a horse. Now I'll eat like a – like a – what eats more than a horse? A cow? A rhino?” Molly's voice was light and curious.

“A Jacob,” Jacob laughed.

“I'll eat like *two* Jacobs then,” Molly answered merrily.

“How do you make the pancakes so light?” Raj asked.

“Now that is a secret that I just might *whisper* in your handsome ear, Raj,” Grandmother Sophia twittered.

Their voices lowered or maybe his hearing readjusted to normal levels instead of super-sonic ones when he realized that Grandmother Sophia was fine, better than fine from the happiness in her tone.

“We told her that we are friends of yours. That you told us you were coming to stay with her for a time and that we decided to stop by to visit,” Gareth explained.

“Friends? Of *mine*? She *believed* that?” Jude's eyebrows rose.

Gareth tilted his head to the side, an uncertain smile on his lips. “You don't have friends?”

“I ... that’s none of your business.” Jude glowered at him. The feeling of relief that had flowed through him at seeing Gareth dampened now as he remembered some of the more *annoying* qualities of the man.

“All right,” Gareth’s tone was mild. He then picked up the silverware that Jude had dropped in his desire to get to Grandmother Sophia and began to cut the pancakes up into bite-sized pieces. Jude watched him doing this silently for a time.

“I thought that this plate was for me,” Jude said finally.

“It is.” Gareth continued to cut pancakes.

“Then why are you cutting up my food like I’m two-years-old?”

“An Alpha’s job is to take care of his pack.”

“And you think I need *help* with cutting pancakes?” Jude’s eyebrows lifted into his hairline.

Gareth froze in his cutting. His blue-gray eyes met Jude’s. He carefully placed the fork and knife down and sat back into a chair opposite Jude.

“Eat,” he said.

“I will when I’m ready.”

The two of them had a stare-down. To Jude’s annoyance, he looked away first, but it did not appear that winning caused Gareth any pleasure.

“I would ask that you not do that again in front of the pack,” Gareth said softly.

“Do what?” Jude couldn’t resist the pancakes any longer either and started to wolf them down.

“A staring contest. It’s a sign that you are challenging me for the pack’s leadership,” Gareth explained.

Jude snorted. "I don't want your pack."

"And I would not give it to you," Gareth answered. Jude glanced up at him and he was smiling faintly.

"No, you're the type of guy who likes being in charge, right? Taking care of people and cutting their pancakes? Me? I'm more of a lone wolf. I cut my own pancakes," Jude remarked between bites of bacon.

"There is no such thing as a *lone* wolf. At least not in the long term, Jude. That is what they call wolves that are normally lower in the pack order that leave their pack either to form a new one or join another, but they don't stay by themselves forever. Wolves are social creatures," Gareth answered.

"We're *humans*, not *wolves*," Jude stated firmly.

"We're not human or wolves, Jude," Gareth's answer was mild again, full of patience, which made Jude paradoxically want to pull his ponytail or something. "We're werewolves, which makes us different than both. But we are pack animals. *You* are a pack animal."

He thought of Tessa's concern for him being alone and he couldn't help flashing back on the night before with Mack. Without Gareth's help, Grandmother Sophia could have been hurt. Sometimes even he needed people.

But Mack wouldn't have been here at all but for me getting involved with Gareth's pack! If only I had just turned around and left the damned grocery store then none of this would have happened!

But he realized just as quickly that Jacob and Raj could have been hurt if he had just left. Not *could* have been. *Would* have been. If he hadn't done whatever the Hell he had done against Mack, Clara and Pierce then Raj and Jacob likely would have been killed and *eaten*.

"You're thinking that we brought trouble to your door," Gareth's voice was cast low. His intense storm-sea colored eyes flickered over Jude's face.

“I don’t regret helping,” Jude answered quietly and drank down his orange juice. “And you paid me back by getting rid of Mack last night. We’re even now.”

“Mack is not gone. We were only able to chase him away. He *will* be back. He *has* to come back.” Gareth’s expression was intense.

“Why? Why can’t he leave me alone? Because he think I’m part of your pack or whatever? Because I’m *not* part of you pack and –”

“That’s *only* part of it,” Gareth interrupted. “You took control of his pack members. You nearly took control of *him*. As an Alpha he *must* answer your challenge.”

“You said something like this before!” Jude pressed a hand against his chest. “But I’m *not* challenging him! I’m not doing anything! Who would want Clara and Pierce? The little girl was talking about *eating* people!”

Gareth nodded. “I know, Jude, but you must see how it came across to *him*. An Alpha must resist all challenges. He must overcome every obstacle. If he does not then his pack may lose faith in him and faith in an Alpha is necessary.”

“Great so because I hurt this guy’s pride or whatever he wants to kill me. Sounds like an Alphas got a caveman mentality. No offense, Gareth,” Jude said.

Gareth surprisingly smiled. “Sometimes. But it depends upon the type of Alpha one is. What I’ve told you is the type of Alpha I believe Mack has become, but it’s not the kind he *was*.”

“You knew this guy before he was all crazy scary?” Jude’s eyebrows drew together.

A flash of pain went through those expressive eyes. “Yes, he was the Alpha before me. He was like a – a father to me.”

Jude bit his lower lip and felt suddenly very guilty for speaking so harshly. Even though he was big and strong, Gareth was hurt by someone in power, too. “Oh, I’m – I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

“Is it?”

Gareth’s eyes rose to his and he gave a quirked smile. “Maybe not. But it is what it is.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Jude fidgeted. “So there are different kind of Alphas?”

“Yes. And as you know, I am the pancake-cutting kind.”

“Obviously.” Jude smiled even as he tried not to. He looked down at his nearly empty plate. “So if Mack’s coming back ... what do I do? How can I protect Grandmother Sophia and myself?”

“You should come with us to Fallowmeer –”

“No. My grandmother should not have to leave her house to be safe. I can’t do that to her. There must be another way without exposing her to this werewolf craziness,” Jude interrupted. This talk of Fallowmeer had him feeling odd. That was where the pack was, where Gareth wanted him to be anyways, part of them, but he wasn’t a part of anything.

“Then we will stay nearby to keep you safe until Mack is handled.”

Jude was about to ask what “handled” meant when Grandmother Sophia came into the living room with a wide grin on her face followed closely behind by Raj, Molly and Jacob. The three pack members looked like little kids asking their father if they could go to a carnival.

“Gareth,” Grandmother Sophia began. “I just asked these lovely people behind me if they would like to stay here during your visit. They told me that it’s up to you.”

Jude's mouth fell open. Gareth here? In his house? But before he could say a word, Gareth was smiling back and said, "We would *love* to, Grandmother Sophia."

Grandmother Sophia twinkled as she said, "Then it's *settled*."

CHAPTER EIGHT: HERITAGE

Gareth watched Jude trying to dig out a stump in Grandmother Sophia's backyard. Jude's shirt was off and he wore only a pair of faded, torn jeans that clung to his long legs and pert ass. Sweat slicked his bare skin as he strained with a shovel to try and lever the stump out of the clinging earth.

Gareth knew that Jude hadn't likely dug deep enough and the stump with its huge root ball caked with dirt would be much too heavy for even Jude's muscled body to move.

"Are you going to help him?" Molly asked, tipping her head towards Jude. She had sidled up to him in her silent way and stood there looking pretty in a wispy baby doll dress of pale blue.

He turned to look at her and was surprised to see that her hair was drawn back into a ponytail. A pink ribbon – something that Molly would never have had with her, but Grandmother Sophia might – had been used to tie it back. Her angular yet pretty face was exposed to the sun. She immediately saw his surprise that her hair was not curtaining off her face and, self-consciously, she tugged at the rope of hair, bringing it over her shoulder as if she could shelter behind it. Gareth decided to not remark upon her new look that Grandmother Sophia had, undoubtedly, brought about. Silence would likely make her feel better than telling her that she looked nice.

"I have to call Nina, get her up to speed and ..." he paused as he saw the way Jude's muscles bunched and flexed as he worked. "Jude wouldn't appreciate me helping him."

"That's only because he's afraid," Molly said.

Gareth's eyebrows rose. "You know this about him already? It seems that I haven't quite absorbed that fact."

Molly laughed and rocked back and forth. "Because you're *you*, Alpha. He's exactly the sort that you love to help."

“What sort is that?” Gareth’s gaze was on the young man again, their new brother, who was brave and foolish, stubborn and kind, giving and isolated.

“The ones that need it the most, but won’t accept it. Just give it time. He’ll come around.”

She smiled and danced away from him and back towards the front of the house where she and Jacob were working on repairing the front steps. The two of them were also tasked with making protective wood covers for the windows on the ground floor for when Mack and his crew came back. These preparations were to be hidden from Grandmother Sophia. Maybe they wouldn’t have to explain to her the existence of werewolves. Maybe Mack would stay away. But Gareth highly doubted it. But at least they could hide their “real” work to secure the house with work to improve the property.

After breakfast, everyone had uniformly asked to pitch in to help with the house and garden. Grandmother Sophia – she insisted quite jovially that they all call her that as she thought she was the eldest among the group – hadn’t batted an eye. He thought she might be too proud to admit needing any help, but that was not the case.

“I used to have quite the brood to help me, didn’t I, Jude? All you kids helped out around the house. I’m not shy to ask for assistance,” she’d said with a twinkle in her dark brown eyes.

“You were busy working at the county office or working on the house yourself, Grandmother Sophia,” Jude pointed out. “It wasn’t like we were your minions and you sat back and did nothing.”

She’d chuckled. “Well, I will be working today, too. Jacob and Molly have informed me that they have quite a bit of meat for a barbeque. I’m going to start slow cooking that.”

“I’ll assist!” Raj had put up a hand into the air like a child in school hoping to be called on.

“That’ll be just fine. Your nice suit would be ruined working outside,” Grandmother Sophia had said.

They had only each brought one or two outfits with them for the hunt and all of Raj’s were suits. He simply did not understand the concept of dressing casually. Today he had on a pair of dove-gray trousers, matching suitcoat and tie with a crisp white button-down shirt with silver cufflinks.

Everything he wore looked immaculate and pressed though Gareth hadn’t seen him whip out the iron he’d brought.

“He only dresses that way so he doesn’t have to do the hard work,” Jacob had grunted though a smile lifted his lips.

Raj had narrowed his eyes at the much bigger man and said, “It takes a certain kind of person to hit two things together. That type of person would be *you*. And it takes another kind of person to create a gorgeous meal. That type of person would be *me*.”

The two of them had faced off until finally a smile cracked on Raj’s lips and Jacob guffawed. Jacob slapped Raj’s back with affection, which sent the smaller man almost flying, but Molly steadied him just in time. Despite their differences, Raj and Jacob were the best of friends.

Now Raj was busy marinating meat with Grandmother Sophia in the kitchen. They’d bought ribs, steaks, and brisket along with plenty of easily roasted vegetables like onions and peppers. Gareth hadn’t known if they would be invited into Grandmother Sophia’s, so he had made sure that all of their groceries could have been cooked just as easily over an open fire. It would have been too dangerous to assume their wolf forms and hunt with all the killings taking place.

Gareth took one more look at Jude. The young man was facing him now. His chest was highly defined. He was long and lean and beautiful. Gareth’s gaze followed length of his chest down to the waistband of Jude’s jeans.

Desire corkscrewed down his spine and heat bloomed between his legs. He shifted from foot to foot as the arousal built inside of him. Gareth was not one to repress his desires. If he wanted something, he went for it. But Jude

was different. He was Gareth's *first* wolf and the young man seemed so distrustful of authority.

How would he react if I admitted to desiring him? Probably not well.

Jude looked up then, feeling Gareth regarding him, and his already flushed face turned redder. He quickly spun around to face away from Gareth, but then he turned his head to look back, almost shyly. Gareth smiled at him in what he hoped was a comforting manner. Jude slammed the tip of the shovel into the earth again. Gareth gritted his teeth. Another wrong move with Jude. What a surprise!

He turned away from the young man, still aroused, still wanting, but trying to put it out of his head. He fished out his cell phone and called his Beta.

Nina answered immediately.

"Any luck with Mack?" she asked, sounding breathless like she had been running.

"They lost us. Went down a river. We lost their scent," Gareth answered, his voice clipped with disappointment that Mack and three Rogues were still out there. And now it wasn't just humans in danger but their newest brother, too. He clenched his free hand into a fist.

"You'll get them," Nina said confidently. "How's Jude?"

"A little freaked out. He believes in werewolves, but not that he's one," Gareth answered.

"He hasn't shifted yet, but he will. And with all this stress ..." She left that sentence hanging.

"It will likely happen soon," Gareth filled in.

He sincerely hoped it was *stress* rather than a bite from one of the Rogues that caused Jude to shift. When he was with the young man he could *feel* the wolf inside of him, though it tried to stay hidden as if looking out at him from behind a tree trunk with those red-brown eyes. Eyes that regarded him

with suspicion and longing. He ached to draw the wolf – and the man – out and into the arms of the pack that would accept him and cure the hurts in his heart.

“How did the rest of the pack react to the news of a new brother at the Circle last night?” Gareth asked.

Nina let out a low chuckle. “About how you’d expect with lots of cheers and toasts. Brandon blurted it out practically the moment we sat down for the Circle and I think he’d already been telling people.”

Gareth smiled at Brandon’s exuberance though it was naughty since he should have let Nina announce it. “I hope you didn’t punish him too badly for speaking out of turn. I know he wasn’t trying to be disrespectful by co-opting the Circle.”

“He’s doing the pack’s dishes today and for the rest of the week. And I’ve warned Izzy not to help him,” she assured him.

He laughed. “Not helping Brandon will be a punishment for her, too.”

“Yes, well then she might take more seriously her role in helping him turn that exuberance towards something useful,” Nina responded.

“True.”

There was a pause on her end and then she asked carefully, “Should we let the Council know about Mack making other Rogues? I mean it is rather *unheard of*.”

Gareth considered this silently. On the one hand, he felt that the Cold Moon Pack owed the Council nothing, less than nothing. They had all been excised from the werewolf community because of Mack’s crimes. On the other hand, the Council should be aware that when an Alpha went Rogue that the Alpha could make a new pack.

“Not yet,” he finally said. “After we’ve dealt with them. Then there will be plenty of time for the Council to wrap their heads around a Rogue Pack.

Besides it's not as if they would help us with the problem now if let them know its four Rogues and not one."

"Good point," her tone was dour.

"It's going to be okay, Nina. We don't need the Council. We have each other," he said.

"And a new brother to boot. We're growing," happiness flowed back through her voice.

"I'm going to go. If you need me, call."

They said their goodbyes and hung up. Gareth swung back towards the house and yard. He thought about helping Jacob and Molly with the porch, but his gaze went unerringly to Jude who was still struggling with the stump. He sighed then grinned.

I can't help myself with him. I want to be near him. Maybe he'll allow it.

Gareth stuck his phone into the back pocket of his jeans and then took off his t-shirt, which he scrunched up and tucked through one of his jeans belt loops then he stalked over to Jude. When he reached Jude's side he heard the young man cursing up a storm at the stump under his breath.

"Goddamn you, stubborn thing, come out! How deep are your roots anyways? You were just a little tree and you snapped during a storm. Why won't you let me dig you up?" Jude asked it.

He had dug a trench around the stump and part of its massive root ball was exposed, but Gareth's earlier assumptions that Jude hadn't dug deep enough and the root ball would be too heavy for him looked to be correct. But he was pretty sure that he would be able to get it out with his enhanced strength.

"Mind if I give it a try?" Gareth asked.

Jude jumped straight up in the air and spun around. He gasped as he caught sight of Gareth. “Shit! Where did you come from?”

“Over there.” Gareth pointed towards the edge of the woods about fifty feet away.

“You know what I mean! You snuck up on me!” Jude breathed heavily and swiped his damp locks away from his forehead.

“I’m sorry. I thought I was noisy enough that you’d hear. But you *were* in deep conversation with the stump.” Gareth didn’t try to hide his grin.

Jude gave him a narrow-eyed glare, but then let out a snort of laughter. “Yeah, this bastard’s not coming out without a backhoe.”

“Are you sure? Let me try.” Gareth reached for the shovel.

It was at this point that Jude seemed to notice two things. One was that Gareth had taken off his shirt and two was the large tribal tattoo with his wolf in the center of his chest and the mirroring design on his right shoulder and arm. Jude’s gaze slid up and down his chest. The young man’s cheeks flushed a becoming rose and Gareth scented arousal from him.

“It’s my wolf,” Gareth said and touched wolf’s head tattoo.

Jude’s gaze snapped up to his face and the young man swallowed. The scent of his arousal was heavy in the air, but it was clear to Gareth that Jude hoped that Gareth hadn’t noticed his too long gaze. “It’s – it’s cool. Every werewolf has a tattoo like that?”

Gareth shook his head as he eagerly explained, “No. Some might have something on their bodies related to their wolf, but it’s not a requirement or anything.”

“Oh, right. Well, that’s a pretty good representation there of what I remember your wolf looking like. In the dream, I mean,” Jude said awkwardly as his eyes continued to drop down to the tattoo.

“You can look at my tattoo carefully, Jude. I don’t mind.” Gareth stood there with his arms now down by his sides, facing Jude directly.

Jude’s mouth opened likely to make a remark about not wanting to stare at Gareth’s chest, but then he shot it as his gaze fixed on the tattoo. Gareth held his breath as Jude’s right hand rose and hovered over the wolf’s head. Excruciatingly slowly, Jude lowered his hand and his fingers barely brushed the wolf’s nose. He stroked the wolf’s muzzle as if it was a real animal and he was petting it. Realizing what he was doing, Jude snatched his hand back, holding it against his chest as if burned by the touching.

“Is there something ... *magic* about it?” Jude finally asked.

“Yes.” Gareth did not explain more. This tattoo had been inked upon him by a witch. He’d dreamed this image, sketched it out and asked her to magically ink it upon his skin. The tattoo sometimes burned when danger was near. But werewolves, in general, stayed clear of witches. Everybody steered clear of them. But he’d saved Bronwyn's life and she seemed to think she owed him for the rest of hers. They’d become friends. Not wanting to discuss this with Jude right now, he reached for the shovel again, “Let’s talk and work. Give me a shot at the stubborn stump.”

Jude handed the shovel over to him before grabbing the t-shirt that he had thrown down on the grass and wiping the sweat from his face with it.

Gareth proceeded to dig deeper around the root ball. He would have no problem with his strength extracting it, but he didn’t want to snap the shovel in the process.

“Are there other questions about werewolves you want to ask?” Gareth asked nonchalantly even as he felt Jude’s hungry gaze this time on his muscular back.

“Ah, yeah, yeah, a few.”

“Ask away.” Gareth began shoveling dirt.

“Why do you think I’m a werewolf?” Jude asked bluntly.

“Good question,” Gareth admitted. “The answer is because we had a shared vision of you in wolf form.”

“But that was just a dream! Even if we shared it or whatever does it really mean anything?” Jude balled his shirt in his hands in front of him.

“Yes, it means you are a werewolf,” Gareth laughed softly. “We would not have had this vision or dream or whatever you wish to call it unless you were one of us.”

“But don’t you have to be bitten by a werewolf and survive to become one?” Jude objected.

Gareth shook his head. “It doesn’t quite work that way. If a normal human being were bitten by a werewolf and survived they wouldn’t become one. Only those with the Werewolf Gene turn when bitten, but that’s not the only way the Werewolf Gene can be activated.”

“How else can it be activated?” Jude’s gaze was riveted on him now.

“Stressful situations can trigger it. A fight or flight response. As a werewolf you are much stronger, faster and capable than as a human so the theory is that the Werewolf Gene is activated by adrenaline,” Gareth explained.

Jude crossed his arms over his chest. His red-brown eyes were dark with remembered pain. “I can tell you that there have been *plenty* of times when I was in a fight or flight situation and werewolf strength would have come in real handy, but that never happened.”

Gareth paused in his work to regard Jude evenly. The young man met his eyes at first, but then quickly looked away. He stared at the ground and Gareth wasn’t sure if this was because of his request that Jude not challenge him or if Jude couldn’t meet his eyes because of the memories he was clearly experiencing. Gareth went back to the work of digging out the stump. He didn’t want Jude to shut down on him.

“So did you always live with your grandmother?” Gareth asked.

“She’s not ... I mean she *is* my family in every sense. Every sense but blood. Not that blood is important,” Jude quickly added. “She took me in when I was fifteen.”

“No, blood isn’t that important. There are only a couple of people in the pack that are related by blood. The rest of us are a family, because we choose to be,” Gareth agreed.

He felt Jude studying him after he said this and he knew that if he looked up he’d catch that longing look in those red-brown eyes, a snatch of sadness and yearning for what the pack could offer.

“What about your blood family? Something happen to them?” Gareth asked casually.

“My parents died.” Jude was quiet for a long moment and then said, “If this werewolf thing is passed down in the genes wouldn’t my parents have had to be werewolves?”

“At least one of them would have had to have the gene. Not all change who have it, but you can’t change without it.”

Gareth had dug down deep enough to get the root ball out of the ground.

He firmly slid the shovel along the outside edge of the root ball. Feeling that he had a strong enough hold on both the ball and the shovel, he levered the root ball up. The muscles in his back, chest, neck and arms strained for a moment. It wasn’t that great of a strain before the root ball popped out of the ground. It was five feet across and over five feet deep. It likely weighed several hundred pounds with all the dirt. Jude stared at it with wide eyes.

Those eyes snapped over to him.

“Whoa! How did you –”

“Werewolf strength.” Gareth shrugged. “Come on. There are a few more we have to dig up so that Grandmother Sophia can have her garden and a nice even lawn.”

Jude nodded and trotted after him as they went to another stump.

“Let me dig and you get them out of the ground,” Jude offered.

“It’s no trouble. I don’t mind doing the work,” Gareth said.

“I don’t like being idle,” Jude admitted after a moment.

“Is there another shovel? If there is then we can both work ... and keep talking,” Gareth suggested.

Jude brightened. “I’m pretty sure I saw a spade in the crawlspace under the house. I’ll get it and be right back.”

Gareth watched Jude’s long loping strides to the house. He admired the way the young man moved. He was graceful and agile. Just like his wolf was.

Gareth’s cock pulsed in his pants and he sighed. His desire for Jude was not to be intellectualized away evidently.

Nina would say that means I need a mate and Jude is the one for me.

Even as he had that thought, a shiver ran through him. Hadn’t he just sworn never to have a mate? It made Alphas weak. Like it had made Mack weak.

When Mack had lost Eliza he had lost his reason and his goodness. Was he being tested so soon? Had fate decided to see how dedicated he was to keeping the pack safe as opposed to satisfying his own desires? But before he could think anything else Jude was returning with the spade.

“I got it!”

The young man sank the spade almost immediately into the moist earth around the second stump. Gareth joined him and they worked in comfortable silence for a little while. Gareth was trying to order his thoughts and *not* notice the fact that Jude was stealing glances at him and the scent of their mixed arousal was filling the air.

“Did you parents ever ... mention werewolves, Jude? Or maybe did they have a very large group of friends that they hung out with regularly?” This

latter question would indicate a pack. But if Jude's parents were members of a pack then Jude would have been taken in by the pack when they died. He knew that Grandmother Sophia was not a werewolf. She didn't have the right scent for that, though her scent was interesting and sometimes Jude seemed to exude it to. It was a cinnamon-vanilla scent like cookies baking. The scent of a werewolf was more like pine.

Jude's shoveling became a little slower and he finally said, "I don't know."

That was not the answer he had expected. "You don't – don't know?"

Jude stopped shoveling. "When I was twelve we got into a car accident. My parents were killed in the crash and I was ... was injured. Bad head injury. They didn't think I would make it, but somehow I healed up. Problem was that I couldn't really remember much of my past. I couldn't really remember *any* of it."

Gareth stopped shoveling, too. "I'm so sorry."

Jude tried to shrug like it was no big deal, but he didn't completely succeed in hiding the pain of that loss. "I don't even know what their names were ..."

"But surely there was that information in your house," Gareth pointed out.

Jude shook his head. His hair hung down over his eyes so that Gareth couldn't see them. "Maybe my parents *were* werewolves or something anyways."

"What do you mean?"

"The licenses they had? They were fakes. The car we were in was stolen and had stolen tags on it," Jude rushed out. "Their fingerprints weren't on file, but that doesn't mean they weren't – weren't in trouble just that they hadn't gotten caught before. And from the fact that there were suitcases in the car and other stuff it looked like we didn't live in the area either."

"That sounds like your parents were on the run," Gareth agreed.

Jude nodded. “Sounds like it to me, too. I was put in the foster system and three years later Grandmother Sophia took me in.”

A lot could happen to a kid in the foster system in three years and from the way that Jude avoided his gaze again and went back to attacking the stump with the spade told Gareth that a lot *had* happened.

“Where did the crash happen?” Gareth asked.

“In Wisconsin. Near this town called Hamilton, but like I said, we didn’t actually live there or anywhere near there. Maybe not even in the state.”

Jude paused in his digging and looked up at Gareth. “You’re *sure* I’m a werewolf?”

“I’m certain of it.”

“And you’re *sure* that I’m going to change into a – a *wolf*?”

Gareth nodded. “Into the exact wolf you were in the vision.”

“I didn’t get a chance to see myself. Your wolf though was really cool. All white and big. Really big.” Jude sent him some shy glances. “You’re really big in human form, too. Is that a werewolf thing? Like will I suddenly bust out with muscles like yours?”

Jude’s half suppressed smile had Gareth snorting.

“You might get a little more muscular, but *no*, you won’t suddenly become a behemoth,” Gareth assured him.

“You’re not a behemoth,” Jude said and there were high spots on color on his cheeks. “You’re just ... massively well endowed.” Jude, hearing the double entendre in that statement, flushed hotly.

Gareth laughed long and hard. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was ... a compliment, I mean,” Jude told him with an almost shy grin.

“I see.”

They worked companionably together after that, talking about Jude’s foster sister Tessa and some of the funny things that had happened during his teenaged years. It seemed like he and Tessa had gotten into trouble, not the bad kind, but the adventurous kind and Tessa had been able to talk their way out of anything. They had also managed to dig up six stumps, until lunch when they broke off to have ham sandwiches and cold iced tea.

Gareth took that opportunity to slip away and call Nina again.

“Gareth! Something wrong?” she asked.

“No ... well, I’m not sure. There’s another thing that I need you to do for me,” he said. “Actually, I need Cassidy’s help. I want him to research Jude’s family.”

“All right,” Nina said.

He told her everything that Jude had let him know. He also explained again about Jude’s ability to take over pack bonds.

“He’s special, Nina. His parents must have been, too,” he explained. “At first, I thought that maybe his parents had simply never gone through the change, but seeing the abilities he’s got I just can’t quite believe that. The fact that they were on the run, too, tells me that *something* was going on with that family.”

“There’s not a ton to go on considering Jude Connor then isn’t even his real name, but I’m sure that Cassidy will just take that as a challenge,” Nina said after a moment’s thought on it. “I’ll fill Cassidy in right away and keep you updated.”

“Thanks, Nina,” he said and they hung up again.

Gareth’s gaze swung over to where Jude was talking animatedly with Jacob and Molly. Already, their new brother was starting to open up. He hoped that whatever he found out about Jude’s family would help him find his place.

CHAPTER NINE: TO TALK OR TO HOWL

The smell of barbequed meat and roasted onions still hung in the night air though the meal was over. Grandmother Sophia had managed to dig out a bag of marshmallows that were too old to eat raw, but were perfect heated over the bonfire in the fire pit that Jude and Gareth had put together after finishing up with the stumps.

Jude looked over at Gareth now. The Alpha was sprawled on the ground rather than in a lawn chair or seated on one of the cut and smoothed logs they'd set up as additional places to sit. Gareth was resting on his elbows, staring at the fire, while talking to Molly and Jacob. He would often smile and look up at Molly seated in the chair beside him. She would laugh and bring her ponytail across her mouth as if to hide her amusement from the world.

Jacob was also on the ground, his back resting up against one of the cut and smoothed logs. He rested a beer on his large belly and looked quite mellow. But Jude noticed that his gaze often swung to the woods.

He's looking and listening for the Rogues. He might look like he's relaxing, but he's really on watch.

Raj was still inside the house. He was doing the cleaning up. The Indian werewolf had shooed Grandmother Sophia up to bed when she had started to yawn. He would take care of the dishes and wrap up the leftovers in foil and place them in the fridge for the next day. When Jude had offered to help Raj, the Indian werewolf had shooed him out, too.

"You worked enough today. Go enjoy the fire," Raj had said with a laugh and gave Jude a gentle push out the door.

And Jude had though he sat apart from the others on his own log. He held a bottle of beer, too, but had taken only a few sips out of it. As he regarded Gareth - he couldn't seem to *stop* looking at the Alpha - he felt some of his preconceptions about the big man and pack life being tested.

There was no sense of the other members of the pack *serving* their Alpha.

Instead, there was genuine warmth and affection. Gareth more often than not was *serving* the others. He had made sure that everyone had enough to eat *before* taking any food himself that night. He had then given all the best pieces to Grandmother Sophia first, Jude next and the rest of the pack.

There hadn't been a repeat of the pancake cutting incident, but Jude had had a puckish urge to ask Gareth to cut his brisket for him. But he'd resisted it. Though the Alpha had glanced at him once or twice, checking to make sure he had all that he needed.

I thought that he would have his people running to fetch him things. Taking care of him. Making sure that he was king of the mountain. But it's not like that at all. He serves them. He takes last. He cares ...

That had Jude feeling all sorts of strange things like maybe considering what it would be like to be a werewolf in Gareth's pack. To have Molly, Jacob and Raj as *his* friends. He imagined horsing around with Jacob and Raj, being part of their jokes. He imagined understanding Molly's deep water silences and giving her strength and support simply by being there.

He imagined doing things to ease the burden of leadership from Gareth's shoulders.

These were alien feelings for him. Only for Tessa and the kids at Grandmother Sophia's had he ever cared for others. And that had come from the fact that unless he stepped up things would have fallen apart or so it seemed. Grandmother Sophia had to work and work hard to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. If he hadn't helped with the littler kids she would have been overwhelmed and that would have been so wrong. But the pack didn't need such help or saving. It clearly operated quite well without him.

But I want to be a part of it.

That unsolicited thought stunned him.

He'd had it at dinner and he had been quiet since then. He worried that Gareth or one of the others might notice, because he had talked more today

than he'd done in years. Normally speaking to people was exhausting for him and he was not usually keen doing it anyways. Often people had little to say and more often ... well, he didn't react the way they expected so it led to uncomfortable situations.

In addition to the rage he felt at the Pervs of the world, he always had to watch himself carefully so that he didn't come across as somehow "off".

But that hadn't been the case with the pack or at least these members of the pack. It had been easy to talk to them. He hadn't felt drained by it at all. And he'd actually stopped watching himself so carefully. One of the "off" moments had occurred though.

Jude had been in the middle of a conversation with Molly. They were talking about how they both like drive-in movies more than the kind that you sit in a theatre when he'd abruptly stopped talking. All sound had dropped away. Molly's voice. His voice. The tick-tick of little claws of creatures in the underbrush. The chirruping of the birds. The buzz of insects. There was a hollow rushing sound. His gaze swung out to the forest. He heard or more like *felt* a cry. A thin, hopeless scream. A chill went through him and then normal sound came back. Jude felt like he could breathe again.

"What is it, Jude?" Molly asked, but only when he had "returned". Her voice was calm. Her manner peaceful, but alert.

"Something died," he responded without thought and immediately knew that this was "off". He flushed and was about to explain that it was nothing. Not to worry, but then Molly nodded.

"Let one of us know if whatever killed it comes here and wants to cause trouble," she said.

And that had been that. Like what he'd done was *normal*. Like talking about sensing things dying was a-okay. She'd directed the conversation right back to movies and let him gather his thoughts together by speaking more herself than was likely her wont.

Now Jude was sitting away from all of them, separating himself, which usually kept people from talking to him. Yet he sort of *did* want to talk. He *did* want to be a part of their conversations. He watched how easily Jacob added bits of droll commentary to the conversation with Gareth and Molly. Even Raj – through keen werewolf hearing evidently – could yell his part of the conversation to the others often with laughter in his voice through the kitchen window.

So far no one had tried to *make* him talk, but he swore that there were some pauses when he had opened his mouth *maybe* to say something. It was like they were giving him the opportunity to join in, but then shyness had clamped his lips shut. No one remarked upon it though - if that was really happening - for which he was grateful because any comment would have made him more self-conscious.

Molly getting up from her chair drew Jude's attention. She offered Jacob a hand up, too, and said, "Time to start the first patrol, brother."

They call themselves brother and sister like they are family.

"At least the bastards have waited to attack until I had a chance to digest dinner," Jacob rumbled and took her hand.

Though Jacob was three times her size, Molly lifted him up from a prone position easily with one hand. At that moment, Raj came out wiping his hands on a towel. The Indian werewolf realized that Molly and Jacob were leaving and that would make him a third with Gareth and Jude. He clearly did not want that.

"Hey, wait up, I'm coming with you!" Raj slung the towel over his shoulder and raced over to the other two.

The three of them then ambled off into the darkness leaving Jude and Gareth alone together. Gareth got up and Jude had a momentary fear that *he* was going to leave, too, but instead he put another log onto the fire. Red sparks drifted up to the night sky. There was a delightful crackling and the renewed scent of burning wood filled Jude's nostrils. He was so glad that

they had built the fire pit. With Gareth's help, getting out the stumps had been easy, which had left them plenty of time to dig the pit and line it with the concrete blocks that Grandmother Sophia had purchased just for this purpose. If Jude hadn't been concerned about Mack and his crew of creepy Rogue werewolves coming back he would have really loved that night.

Tipping his head back, the stars were so bright. The night was so peaceful. There were the whirr of night insects, the crackling of the fire, Gareth's powerful yet careful movements as he poked at the logs and the sound of Jude's own breathing. It was so peaceful. He imagined spending a whole summer like this with Gareth, the pack and Grandmother Sophia. If Tessa and Libbie joined them it would be absolutely perfect. They could completely redo Grandmother Sophia's home and make sure that she was taken care of.

Gareth sat down on the ground just to the left of the log Jude was perched on and disturbed Jude from his thoughts, but not unpleasantly. Jude found himself once more fascinated by how Gareth moved. He was so graceful despite being so big and the way he collapsed on the earth reminded Jude of how dogs did when they stretched out before a fire.

I suppose that makes sense. He is a wolf after all.

That idea no longer sounded crazy to Jude. Having the Rogues surround the house last night had chased away any lingering doubts he might have had. Having Gareth here now meant that he and Grandmother Sophia were safe.

I couldn't protect her, Jude realized with a sick twist in his gut. Without Gareth and the pack, Mack would have gotten in last night and he would have ...

He couldn't finish that sentence. Not even in his mind. It was too much to think of.

Gareth did not start talking to him. He just stared at the fire, one leg drawn up while the other was stretched out towards the flames. Gareth acted as if they could sit there silent for the rest of eternity and he wouldn't mind.

Normally, Jude was not afraid of silence. He usually welcomed it. But not this time. Now he *wanted* to talk.

“Dinner was really good,” Jude’s voice sounds loud in the silence. It was also the most inane thing he could have said. He winced.

“Hmmm,” Gareth said, obviously thinking the same thing or waiting for Jude to start a conversation he really wanted to have.

“The weather is ... chillier tonight than last night.” Jude wanted to kill himself as he said that. He didn’t think there was something more inane he could have said other than the food comment, but talking about the weather? How low could you go?

“But good weather for a fire,” was all Gareth replied and Jude swore the man was going to close his eyes and go to sleep.

Feeling glum and frustrated that the one time he actually *wanted* to talk Gareth did not, he snarled, “We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. Silence is --”

“I want to talk to *you*, Jude.” Gareth twisted his head around to face Jude. He was smiling welcomingly.

“Well, it *didn’t* seem like you did,” Jude grouched.

“I’m not one for small talk and I knew you were working your way towards what you really wanted to say. I thought my responses would urge you towards it. I see I miscalculated.”

“Do you always *calculate*? I mean don’t you just do things because they’re -- they’re *natural* to you?” Jude narrowed his eyes at Gareth.

The Alpha sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair dislodging it from the careful ponytail. With another sigh Gareth pulled the tie out and let his hair hang loose. “In the past, no, but as Alpha I have to be what my pack needs me to be.”

Jude's first thought was to retort that he wasn't pack, but since he sort of wished to be he didn't say that. He then thought about how Gareth had behaved that night. He wanted to do *good*.

"You ... you don't have to do that with me. You can be yourself, Gareth," Jude said quietly.

"You - above all - I can't do that with." Gareth shook his head sadly.

"Why not? I don't need you to manipulate me --"

Gareth just *looked* at him and Jude flushed, ducking his head.

"You have to understand, Jude, you will be my *first* wolf as Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack." His voice sounded rather yearning. "I have to convince you that being with us is -- is what you want to do."

"I make up my own mind, Gareth. And, truthfully, what makes me like you and your pack is when you're acting *normal*," Jude said.

There was a silence and Jude trusted himself to glance over at the Alpha. Gareth was looking rather glumly at the fire. He felt Jude's eyes upon him and swung his head towards Jude.

"I'll try not to ... well, not to *try* so hard," Gareth said then he patted the ground beside him. "Come closer to the fire. You're looking like some cold, forlorn bird over there."

Jude hesitated for a moment, but then he lowered himself to the ground beside Gareth. The fire's heat bathed the fronts of his calves. It felt good and he crawled closer.

"Do you think that the Rogues will attack again tonight?" Jude asked once he settled himself

"I am certain that they will attack again. Tonight or tomorrow or ... the thing is that they *will* return," Gareth answered. "And we will protect you and Grandmother Sophia."

Jude wrapped his arms around his knees. “If they’re after me maybe I shouldn’t stay here. Maybe I should lead them away from her.”

But Gareth surprised him by shaking his head. “Mack knows you love her. He’ll attack her to get at you. He’ll destroy her just for fun.”

Jude pulled his knees tighter against his chest. “Right. That makes sense.”

“We could take you both to Fallowmere. That would be *best* --”

“How would that work exactly? Grandmother Sophia there are these Rogue *werewolves* after me, we have to go stay with these *other* werewolves to remain safe. But don’t you worry, Gareth and his group are *good* werewolves. Oh, and by the way, *I’m* a werewolf, too.” He gave Gareth a look.

Gareth laughed dryly. “I see your point. It’s actually against the rules to tell humans about our existence. But we may need to break that rule with your grandmother to keep her safe.”

“She won’t leave here unless we tell her the full truth and I don’t want to scare her if we don’t have to.”

“I don’t want to scare her either. I’ve become quite fond of her.”

Jude believed that. Grandmother Sophia endeared that kind of loyalty in people, but also he could see that she was just the sort of person that Gareth would enjoy.

“What will you do to stop Mack and those others?” Jude asked.

Gareth lowered his head. “There’s only one way to stop a Rogue. Kill them.”

Jude’s shoulders twitched. While Clara, Pierce and Mack were *wrong* he didn’t want to see them dead.

But they’re killing people. Eating them. They want to kill and eat me. They want to kill Grandmother Sophia and eat her, too. It’s like Little Freaking

Red Riding Hood.

“What makes a werewolf a Rogue?” he asked

“Eating human flesh,” was the simple response.

Jude’s stomach roiled at the thought. Clara had seemed so keen on it. The thought of that *chewiness* of human flesh horrified him. He swallowed hard and tried to distract himself by asking, “If they stop eating human flesh will they not be a Rogue any longer?”

Gareth seemed to consider this for long moments. “The eating of human flesh *changes* the nature of the werewolf forever or ... that’s what said.”

“*Who* says that?”

“The Council of Alphas,” Gareth answered and his lips flattened for a moment as if talking of this Council made him deeply unhappy.

“How do they know?”

Gareth considered that. “I don’t know. It’s just what’s said.”

“So you *kill* people based just upon what some council says?” Jude’s disbelief shone in his voice.

“It’s not that simple,” Gareth answered.

“I think that’s what it sounds like.”

Gareth looked even unhappier. “After Mack went Rogue he attacked his own pack. Killed so many of us. Then he changed Clara and Pierce. He taught them to eat human flesh. He corrupted them. Destroyed two more beautiful young wolves. Killing him and them would be a blessing.”

The sadness, the sheer grief in those words, had Jude aching. Tentatively, he laid a hand on one of Gareth’s massive biceps. The Alpha stilled beneath his palm, which almost had Jude withdrawing that hand, but then

he felt Gareth relax under his touch. He felt the Alpha's gratefulness for the comfort he was offering and he left the hand there.

"You don't have to comfort *me*, Jude. I'm the --"

"Alpha, yeah, but you're not *my Alpha*."

Gareth looked like Jude had stabbed him in the heart. Shock followed by bewilderment chased through Jude.

"What did I say?" Jude asked him. "What did I say to upset you?"

"Nothing." Gareth's jaw clenched. "I have not earned the right to be your -
_"

"No, I mean *no*, that *not* it." Jude shook his head frantically. "No one is my Alpha. I'm not a -- a follower, Gareth. I'm not Beta."

"Nina is my Beta." Gareth gave him a sly grin.

"Okay, whatever. I'm not -- I'm not pack material. It's not you, it's me," Jude assured him.

"But that's just it, Jude. A good Alpha, the *right* Alpha, could show you that's not true." Gareth regarded him with a yearning look that had Jude looking away quickly.

"Some part of me just can't believe this, you know? My life was not ... well, it wasn't complicated before," Jude let out a bitter laugh.

"Right now you're likely only thinking of the *bad* things that have changed from finding out the truth about yourself, but there are so many *good* things, Jude." Gareth had turned so that he was facing Jude fully now. Though he had on his t-shirt, Jude remembered the tattoo on his chest and imagined the wolf peering out at him through the cotton.

"Other than the *Alpha* thing and being beneath you --"

Gareth let out a strangled laugh. "*Beneath* me?"

“Not literally!”

“Of course *not*, Jude.”

Jude sputtered for a moment, but then took a breath and composed himself.

“You’re trying to tell me that one of the good things is the pack. And ... and *you*, in general, if not in Alpha form.” Jude flushed and looked back towards the fire. “Right?”

“I hope you feel that way,” Gareth said softly.

“I - I like the pack. Molly is really nice. Thoughtful. Raj is so smart and Jacob is kind. And I guess you’re ... you’re all right.” He colored again and lowered his head.

He felt Gareth looking at him. The Alpha used silence so well. He wasn’t afraid of it like so many people were. Jude found himself less comfortable with it when facing a master such as the Alpha.

“How – how did you become a werewolf?” Jude asked.

“I was dying on a battlefield.”

Jude’s head snapped towards him. Gareth was actually smiling. It was a sad smile though.

“You – you were dying? You shouldn’t joke about that.” A bitter taste was in Jude’s mouth and he tightened his arms around his knees. He felt this crazy sense that Gareth could suddenly be dying *again*.

“I’m not joking. I would never joke about that.”

Jude considered this and crouched down further into his red hoodie. “So the stress of dying caused you to change?”

But Gareth was shaking his head. “My Werewolf Gene did not activate because I was dying. I was one of the unlucky ones where the stubborn bastard just wouldn’t turn on until I was bitten.”

“Who bit you?” Jude drew closer to Gareth and the fire.

“Mack.”

Jude let that sink in for a long moment. “Mack the Rogue?”

Gareth looking at him again. He was so close. His topaz eyes reflected the fire. Jude was careful not to stare into them too long. It wasn’t just not to challenge him. It was because strange things happened when he looked into another person’s eyes. If he was attracted to them they would be able to see it and everything he felt. At least, people like *Gareth* would know.

“He wasn’t a Rogue back then.” Gareth’s large hands clenched for a moment. “He was Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack. He offered me a choice. I could take the natural *human* course and die from my wounds or take the natural *werewolf* route and live.”

“So werewolves are immortal?”

“We do not die of old age, but we can be killed. We stay whatever age we were when we changed for the first time except for children. They age very slowly towards adulthood and then they stop, too,” he explained.

“Oh, so if I changed *now* --”

“You’d be this age forever,” Gareth agreed.

“Weird ... and cool. More cool than weird.” Jude let out a huff of laughter. He could feel a line of heat now between him and the fire and between him and Gareth. He imagined what it would be like to be engulfed in those huge arms, to lean back against that massive chest, to smell Gareth all around him. “What -- what war were you in when you nearly died?”

Gareth smiled slowly. “The Civil War.”

Jude gaped at him. “You mean the Civil War that was over one hundred years ago?”

Gareth nodded. “Yes, *that* Civil War.”

Jude shook his head. “Amazing.”

He was about to ask Gareth more questions when the howling started. The sound had the hair rising on every part of his body. Gareth went from prone to standing between one blur and the next. Jude scrambled to his feet and his gaze darted everywhere. But he couldn’t tell where the sounds were coming from.

No, that’s not true. It’s coming from everywhere ...

CHAPTER TEN: ROGUE SECRETS

“Jude, get in the house!” Gareth shouted.

The Cold Moon Alpha was on his feet and practically lifting Jude onto his own. He pushed the young man towards the relative safety of the house.

His pack members had already put up the wooden barricades for the first floor windows and barred the front door. Once the back door was locked, Jude and Grandmother Sophia would be as safe as he could make them.

Once Jude was in the kitchen, he dug his heels in, not letting Gareth move him any farther. He spun around to face the Alpha. He gripped Gareth’s upper arms with surprising strength. His red-brown eyes were huge and his nostrils flared with fear. The howling of wolves did that even to other werewolves.

“You’ll be all right in here.” He picked up the shotgun from its place beside the refrigerator and pressed it into Jude’s hands. “This won’t kill a werewolf. It will only slow it a down. Slow it down a *very* little.”

“So if they get in ...” Jude swallowed.

“They won’t get in. The shotgun is just to make you feel better,” Gareth admitted. “Don’t depend on it. Not that you will have to. I will keep you safe, Jude.”

He then tried to take a step back and pivot towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Jude’s voice rose a few octaves. He’d set the shotgun on the kitchen table, practically dropping it. Considering how useless it was against his kind, perhaps it would be better if Jude didn’t have it at all.

“I have to go out ...”

He could hear snarls and snapping of teeth. There were high pitched yelps as bites connected with flesh. The urge to transform and rampage bloomed inside of Gareth like a flower. Fighting was in his blood. Protecting was in his bones. His pack was under attack and he had to get out there.

But he bit back the growl that wanted to sneak out. Jude was scared and that sharp, bitter smell had him wanting to crush the young man to him as much as crush the enemies' throats beneath his jaws. His voice was gruff as he said, "I'll be close. You'll be safe in the house. I won't let Mack get to you or Grandmother Sophia."

His hands gripped Gareth's broad shoulders, not letting go, as another chorus of howls rose up outside. He could hear his pack's howls joining those as they gave chase to the Rogues. The howls were moving *away* from the house. That was good. Grandmother Sophia hadn't woken yet. Maybe she wouldn't. Maybe they could kill all the Rogues that night and spare her the knowledge that the world wasn't as she had always thought it was. There were things that went bump in the night.

"I wish I could be out there with you," Jude said. "Maybe if I did go I could stop them again --"

"No, Jude, we don't know if whatever you did before will work again. Especially if they're changed. And they won't give you any time to try anything" Gareth interrupted, knowing what Jude was going to say.

Jude looked disappointed, but relieved at the same time. Gooseflesh rose up on his arms. Finally, he said, "I don't want ... I don't want you guys to get hurt," Jude said finally even as his fingers clung to Gareth's broad shoulders. "I don't want ... *you* to get hurt."

He gently disengaged Jude's hands from his arms, but he kept them enfolded in his. He swallowed Jude's hands up. "We won't. I won't. I promise."

Jude nodded jerkily. He was shaking. "O-okay."

“It’ll be all right. Just stay in the house, lock the door and don’t open it unless I tell you that the Cold Moon Pack has risen. Got that?” Gareth asked. The pass phrase was if Mack somehow got a hold of him and tried to use him to get to Jude.

“The Cold Pack has risen. I got it.” Jude pulled his hands from Gareth’s and wrapped his arms around himself.

Seeing Jude looking so small and afraid had Gareth reacting rather than thinking. He leaned in and kissed Jude. It was a soft press of lips, hardly sexual. It was just to offer comfort. The young man stilled and then let out a breath as Gareth pulled back. Jude’s red-brown eyes were unreadable.

Gareth could still taste Jude’s sweetness on his mouth. A surge of utter protectiveness went through him. He would protect Jude no matter what the cost.

“Lock the door, Jude,” he said and turned on his heel and launched himself out of the door.

He didn’t bother stripping off his clothes before he changed. They would have to be sacrificed. The clothes shredded and then disappeared as between one step and the next he turned from man to wolf. His four paws landed on the damp ground. Immediately, his senses which were ultra keen in human form became so much more in wolf.

He heard a soft gasp from behind him and turned his furry head back towards the door. Jude was standing there, hands on the frame, staring at him with wide eyes. This was the first time the young man had seen him change and the first time he had seen his wolf form in real life as opposed to the dream. Jude’s gaze slid all over him and Gareth felt a sense of pride that there was awe in Jude’s eyes. He stood up straighter, chest thrust out and head held high. But then he realized that *this* was not the time. He gave Jude a soft chuff and looked meaningfully at the door.

Close and lock it, Jude.

Jude blinked and then understanding flooded his face. “Right! Locking it!”

Gareth continued to watch until Jude shut the door. He heard the thunk of the lock coming home. He then let the other sounds wash over him. His pack was fighting two others in the front still though their howls were fainter now. Then he heard the solid thumping a heart he knew very well. It was coming from deeper in the woods behind the house.

He had been Mack’s Point for over hundred years. He could recognize the sounds of his former Alpha in a crowded city. The wind blew Mack’s scent to him and though it was now changed as he was a Rogue it was still as familiar to him as his own.

Gareth raced through the backyard and through the treeline. While two of the Rogues -- perhaps Clara and Pierce -- were out front with his three pack members, Mack had circled around behind, trying to oil his way around Gareth’s defenses. The only unease Gareth felt was at the fact that the *fourth* Rogue wasn’t part of this fight as far as he could see.

Mack’s scent was strong and led him between the trees and up a rise. The trees suddenly thinned and there was a clearing at the very top of the rise. Mack was standing there. Not in his wolf form, but in his human one.

Mack was naked and standing very still, a small smile on his lips. Gareth’s lips writhed back from his teeth and a low dangerous rumble left him. He padded into the cold, clear light of the moon, still growling, even as emotions ping ponged within him. Rage and grief. Sadness and love. All this time he had been tracking this man and now here he was and Gareth felt the loss of him all over again.

I have to kill him for those of the pack he killed. To keep the pack safe now. To protect Jude and Grandmother Sophia. To stop him from ruining more wolves like the three he’s already turned to the path of death.

But even with all of these good reasons to end Gareth, he still mourned.

“Talk to me, Gareth,” Mack said. His voice was the remembered voice of a father. He didn’t seem crazed now. He seemed almost tender. “Please. Talk to me.”

Part of Gareth told him to spring upon Mack now. Go for the throat. In human form, Mack was far more vulnerable. His chin was actually *lifted* as if giving Gareth a clean shot.

Perhaps he wants to die. Perhaps he wants me to put an end to him.

But Gareth had never considered that he could *talk* to Mack again. Even though he knew that Jacob and Raj had done so that afternoon. He just hadn’t thought that Mack would seem so much like *Mack*. He almost wanted to howl like a child, *Not fair! Not fair! NOT FAIR!*

“I’m not the ravening beast that the Council prepared you for, am I?” Mack asked as if reading his thoughts. He’d always been able to do that. He extended his arms to the side as if to show how in control he was of himself.

Talk of the Council had Gareth’s ears flattening.

Mack laughed. “I see that *you* are as fond of them as I ever was!” He grimaced then. “But you don’t even know the *half* of it. You have no idea what they’ve done. The hypocrites they are. I didn’t know it myself until ...” A ripple of rage crossed Mack’s handsome features transforming him into something *else* for a moment, stealing his speech, eliminating the facade of humanity.

Gareth had been slowly circling Mack, looking to see if his heightened senses were telling him the truth that there were no other werewolves present, that Mack truly was alone.

Talking with him will only make killing him harder.

But then he thought of his slain pack members and another growl, low in his throat, full of murderous rage, came out of him. They were ten feet apart. He and this man who had been his father. They had never been lovers. Mack loved Eliza absolutely. But there had been a tenderness between them that Gareth had never received from a father-figure before. His own father had been brutish, cruel, quick with his fists. Mack had never raised a hand to him. Perhaps even when he had deserved it as a young werewolf with willful ideas. Mack had always used words to reel him in.

Which makes it all the more dangerous to speak with him.

“I can’t talk of this if you’re a wolf. Come, Gareth. Transform. *Speak to me,*” he pleaded.

One more chance to say all I’ve felt. One more chance to say goodbye.

Gareth transformed. From wolf to man in a puff of smoke. He stood there, looking up at Mack, seeing him with human eyes.

One last time. Why, Mack? Why did you do it? I know you loved Eliza. But I thought you loved the rest of us, too.

“There is *nothing* you can say that will stop me from killing you,” Gareth’s voice was gruff, still filled with his wolf and raw betrayal.

“I didn’t expect there would be,” Mack said, still with a smile. “But I have to *try.*”

“You *killed* our people!” Gareth’s voice shook and lowered into a growl.

A shadow crossed over Mack’s face. He ran a hand through his short, gray hair. “Yes, yes, when I was in the first throes of my *change* I did. When you move from man to werewolf *fully* you lose yourself again just as we often do during our first part of the change.”

“You mean when you move from werewolf to *Rogue*, to *murderer*, to *flesheater*, you mean.” Gareth stood very still. Mack was a leap away. He was also a leap away from Mack. Though they looked thirty years apart, Mack was hundreds of years older than him, and like vampires, strength grew with age for werewolves.

“That’s what the Council told us, but that’s not the truth,” Mack said with a shrug. Then his eyes went shrewd. “Have you never wondered why they order that Rogues must be put down?”

“Because you risk our existence becoming known to the humans! Because eating human flesh drives us *mad*! Are we going to do some kind of remedial history now?” Gareth sneered.

“I know that’s what I told you. It’s what I was told. But I didn’t believe it fully. Eliza *definitely* didn’t.” Mack pressed his hands together and looked down at the forest floor as if to gather his thoughts, make his argument.

“Eliza had a *theory*. You see her brother went Rogue.”

Gareth blinked. He became interested in spite of himself. “Her brother ... I didn’t know she had one.”

“Rogues are never spoke about once they are killed, Gareth. They are *wiped* out of one’s family tree, you know that.” Mack smirked. He never had smirked in the past. It gave him almost a roguish cast. “But yes, Eliza had a brother. He went Rogue and he was hunted down. But before they killed him he managed to leave a note behind for Eliza.”

“And what did it say? Forgive me for being a killer?” Gareth snarled.

“No, it asked ...” Mack actually laughed. “It asked a *simple* question.”

In some ways Gareth did not want to know what the note had said. It did not *matter* what mad ravings Eliza’s brother had left behind. But he found himself wanting to know just as much as he did not care to. He wanted to

understand how the man he'd loved and respected had become this -- this thing that would create other Rogues, that would corrupt good wolves.

"It asked why the Alphas on the Council were so much stronger than any other wolves." Mack stared at Gareth with this expectant smile on his face.

Gareth's interest died. This was merely more madness coming out of Mack's lips. The Alphas on the Council were all born with special gifts, but more importantly were simply *older* than all other werewolves. That was why they were stronger! There was no grand secret as Mack seemed to be indicating.

"Enough of this --"

But Mack held up a hand as if understanding his disbelief. "No, Gareth, *listen*. I know you think it the age of the wolves on the Council that's determined their strength, but there were *older* werewolves before them.

Paavo is the Alpha of Alphas, but he is hardly the oldest werewolf ever born. In fact, the Alpha of the Wilding Moon Pack, Eliza's brother's pack, was just as old. So why is *Paavo* Alpha of Alphas?"

"Better suited to lead. A better fighter. A visionary," Gareth spat out the reasons. "Who knows? It's a conspiracy!"

But Mack shook his head. His hands went to his trim hips and he sighed.

"Paavo isn't simply stronger than the Alpha of the Wilding Moon Pack and every other Alpha out there by a *sliver*, Gareth. He's one hundred times stronger. Now how could that be?"

"You speak in riddles. Tell me why you think so. I do not have time to guess." Gareth's hearing told him that Molly, Raj and Jacob were holding their own against the two Rogues, but he didn't want to leave them alone.

Or Jude.

“It’s simple really. It’s the same reason that they want us to kill Rogues right away. The longer the Rogue is alive, the greater the chance their secret can be revealed,” Mack said, his fingers flexing as he pushed his hands together in front of him.

“What secret?” Gareth crossed his arms over his chest.

“All the Alphas on the Council *are* Rogues. That’s how they’re stronger. Because human flesh *makes* them so.”

Gareth laughed. He actually let out a sharp, clear bark of laughter. He never thought that he would laugh again in Mack’s presence, but he was now. Mack was still smiling, but that smile had turned brittle and sharp. He didn’t like being laughed at. In the past, Mack was too sure of himself and his position to ever care about petty insults or laughter. But Mack the Rogue evidently was not.

“The Council members are *not* Rogues, Mack. Paavo is not a Rogue. I can *smell* the difference between Rogues and normal werewolves,” Gareth said.

“They don’t smell like you. They don’t act like you.”
Another ripple of emotion crossed Mack’s face and Gareth saw the nightshine in his eyes. That wild, untamed, mad light.

“It’s because they found a way to keep the *power*, but strip away the *other* effects,” Mack laughed rather shrilly. “I thought that maybe it was just *time* that would blunt the need for -- for, well, sustenance.”

Gareth’s gorge rose. “You *need* to eat human meat?”

“It’s rather like a drug,” Mack confessed. “And there are other effects like when I -- I attacked my pack --”

“NOT YOUR PACK!” Gareth roared and then bit back the rage. He didn’t want to kill Mack with rage in his heart. He wanted to do it because the *old* Mack, the *real* Mack would have wanted him to. Mack was dead. This

thing was just masquerading in his place. His words though seemed to echo in the woods and everything around them went silent.

I'm going to kill Mack. My father. My Alpha. Mack.

Mack's eyebrows rose. "It appears that even *without* being Rogue, you are having a time controlling your *temper*. You, always so calm, cool and collected. But it makes sense. You're a born protector, Gareth. A born Alpha."

"I never wanted ..." Gareth bit back the words. Now that he was Alpha he couldn't imagine giving it up. He thought of Jude. His first wolf. His ...

"No, you never did, but it suits you well. Just need to get a Mate now." Mack nodded as if still giving Gareth advice.

"Don't pretend to be my friend. You are not my Alpha. You are a *thing*," Gareth hissed, shaken by this talk more than the others.

"I'm a werewolf, actually." He touched his chest with one hand. "A *true* werewolf now. I've made the next step in our evolution. I just need to ..."

Again, the ripple of rage and nightshine appeared on Mack's face. He closed his eyes, shut them tightly and whispered something that not even Gareth's ultra hearing could catch. When he opened them again they were bright yellow like pennies. "This is what we're meant to be, Gareth. But ... but there's a piece missing."

"Your soul. Mack's soul. You aren't him. I can see it in your eyes," Gareth said.

Mack pointed a finger at him as if to say, "Yeah, you got it!" In fact he said, "You might be onto something there. When I lost ..." More nightshine. His teeth went long and then short again. "Eliza and I killed those who killed her ... I felt something just *rip* out of me as I *ripped* into them. I could feel it floating away from me. At the time I didn't care, but now that I'm more *myself* again, I realize that I need that bit back."

Gareth felt a wash of sadness go through him. Even in this state, with his mad ideas, Mack knew he wasn't right.

"But to get back to what I was trying to tell you at the beginning about the Council," Mack said and his words blurred a bit as his teeth lengthened into sharp points, half a change, that shouldn't be possible. "You see Eliza was looking into what her brother had written her. About that question. And she discovered what I told you --"

"That the Council are all Rogues, right?" Gareth was gauging the distance between them again. While the change was like breathing for him, he imagined it gathering behind him like a cape that he could pull on in half a second.

"Yes, and so they killed her, you see." Mack let out a soft laugh and shrugged.

Gareth stared at him for a long time, too stunned to speak. Mack's delusion was so much greater than he had any idea. But he'd never known a Rogue. "Your mate was killed by hunters, Mack. *Human* hunters. It was an accident."

"It *wasn't* an accident. They killed her for what she knew. For what I just told you." That ripple of rage crossed his face. "Maybe they'll be thinking of *killing* you next."

A sound caused Gareth's head to twitch towards the house. It was a cry. A sharp, high cry. It was Jude. It was then he heard a much closer sound. A growl. Mack's wolf form slammed into his body, sending Gareth toppling to the ground. He felt Mack's hot breath against his throat.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CHANGE

Jude stared through the small window in the upper half of the back door as he twisted the last lock in place and slid the chain home, but all the while, as his hands worked blindly, he kept his gaze on Gareth. The white wolf stood still and silent for long moments before he suddenly took off, a ghostly blur, into the forest and out of sight. Jude took a step back from the door. His arms slid around his torso again.

Get it together! They'll take care of the Rogues and if they don't ...

He turned back to where the shotgun lay on the kitchen table. Gareth had said it would have little effect on werewolves. He hadn't thought to ask why. Was it because it was filled with lead buckshot and not silver? Did Grandmother Sophia have any silver knives he could use for protection?

No. Silver was too expensive and impractical for her. If she had silver she would have sold it long ago so that she could have fostered more children or gotten them new clothes, toys or tutoring. So there was no family plate he could wield against the Rogues.

Jude picked up the useless shotgun anyways and decided to go position himself on the stairs. That would offer the Rogues only the slender width of the staircase to approach him, hopefully, meaning they could only come at him one at a time. Also, he would be between them and his grandmother.

His heart thudded dully in his chest and his palms sweated. The night before facing the werewolves had convinced him that he wasn't much use against the beasts. He had always been on his own against danger, but his life usually was the only one at risk. Now there was Grandmother Sophia's and he tossed any pride he had in his abilities to the side. He was glad, more than glad, that Gareth and the Cold Moon pack were there. He flushed a little at the memory of how he'd clung to Gareth, almost not letting the other man leave to fight the Rogues. That wasn't like him, but the howls had skittered up his spine and Gareth had seemed almost ... almost *trustworthy*.

I felt I could trust him to keep Grandmother Sophia and me safe.

His lips flattened into a thin line as he knew that this was just what an “Alpha” expected of the lower members of his pack. He was the one they all blindly trusted and offered their loyalty to. Gareth would take care of everything!

Jude let out a bitter huff of laughter. No one could take care of everything. Blind trust was just that: *blind*. Yet he had *instinctively* turned to the man to help him. He had felt that burst of gratefulness that Gareth was there. He couldn’t deny these things. Jude didn’t know how to feel about them though.

Less thinking and more acting. If, somehow, those Rogues get past Gareth and the Cold Moon pack then it’s just me protecting Grandmother Sophia. I have to be ready for them.

He passed down the hall on silent feet and turned to go up the stairs. He screeched to a halt at the very bottom of the stairs. All the lights in the house were off and Jude hadn’t turned any on. He didn’t want to give away to the Rogues that anyone was inside. So the only thing he saw of the Rogue before him were eyes glowing like floating witchfire mid-way up the staircase.

The werewolf was three times the size of the normal wolves he had seen in the zoo. In the shadows on the stairs it looked to be a dark gray color though he wouldn’t have been surprised if in sunlight it looked very different. Its eyes were a blazing yellow and he saw them narrow at him. He knew somehow that this was not Clara, Pierce, Mack, Raj, Jacob or Molly. He guessed it was the fourth Rogue that none of them had seen before. He didn’t know how this wolf got inside. All he knew was that it was between him and his grandmother. A low, menacing growl caused Jude’s hair to stand on end.

Without thought, Jude lifted the shotgun to his shoulder. He didn’t even try and control this wolf like he had Clara, Pierce and Mack. There was no

time. Coherent thought slipped through his mind like sands through an hourglass. The twin roars of the barrels of his shotgun were drowned out by the werewolf's roar as it leaped down on top of him.

It's front paws hit his chest and Jude went flying. His back slammed against the floor, pushing all the air from his lungs, and stunning him. The useless shotgun skittered away into the darkness. The werewolf's weight pinned him to the floor. It's hot breath gushed over his face bringing the reek of raw, hot meat. It mixed with the scent of cordite and Jude almost vomited.

Jude thrust his hands against the front paws that were holding him flat against the floor, trying to dislodge the Rogue, but the beast's claws dug into his skin. Jude let out a strangled shout. He felt the blood bubble up from where the claws dug into chest and stream down his sides before it soaked into his shirt. Jude punched the Rogue's head. The werewolf snarled and snapped at his hands.

At that moment, Jude looked past the werewolf's massive shoulders and saw his grandmother's small figure at the top of the stairs. The shotgun blast and yells had woken her where the howling had not. Jude's heart thudded in his chest. Both he and the werewolf froze when she called out to him.

"Jude?" Grandmother Sophia's voice sounded uncertain with sleep. She peered down at them. The bottom of the stairs was swathed in darkness and she couldn't see them. "Jude, are you all right? What's going on?"

"No ..." Jude was able to get out only a whispered word as the Rogue was compressing his lungs.

His grandmother took one step down, the wood creaking under her slippered foot. The Rogue suddenly turned and tried to *leap* up the stairs towards her. Jude rocketed up and grabbed the massive creature in a bear hug before screaming, "NO! GRANDMOTHER SOPHIA, RUN!"

He held onto the beast with both arms and legs. He wrapped himself around the Rogue like an octopus. The beast roared and he heard its teeth snapping together as it tried to reach any of his limbs to bite him. Those jaws found Jude's right arm and bit down with fierce might. The pain was like nothing Jude had experienced before. It was sharp and dull at the same time. He felt the werewolf's teeth scrape against his bones. Hot blood spurted everywhere and his stomach clenched at the coppery scent.

But even as the werewolf continued to worry at his arm, Jude would *not* let go. He wasn't sure where his grandmother had run. Logically, she would retreated back up the stairs to her room and locked the door. But the flimsy wooden doors in this house wouldn't stop this beast even for a second. So he had to keep it down here until Gareth or one of the other members of the Cold Moon pack arrived.

He began to shout their names. He screamed for Gareth the loudest. But then the world started to blacken. The pain and the blood loss were too much and his grip slackened. The Rogue was going to get away and kill and likely *eat* his grandmother.

"No!" he cried weakly.

The werewolf seemed to let out a huff of laughter.

"No, you don't! You damned Rogue!" It was his grandmother's voice.

She was standing on the steps just a few feet away from them. Her hands were above her head and they were limned with purple fire. She muttered a few words and the scent of ozone filled the air, cutting through even the meaty scent of blood. Purple lightning crackled in the darkness and struck the werewolf on its back. The Rogue howled and leaped off of Jude. Its fur was on fire! Purple flames raced up its shaggy body. It snapped at the flaming parts of itself. It raced down the hallway to the back door. He heard a shuddering crash as it must have run *through* the back door and into the yard.

“Oh, Jude!”

Grandmother Sophia was suddenly down on her knees beside him. He had collapsed and hadn't realized it. One of her hands was resting on his forehead by the other touched the elbow of his injured arm. He felt the pulses of blood coming out of him and fanning across the floor. He was so cold, but at least the pain was down to a dull throb.

I'm bleeding out. I'm dying ...

“You are not dying, my Jude, no, you are not!” Grandmother Sophia proclaimed and he wondered if he'd said those words out loud.

Grandmother Sophia murmured more words in that strange language. The hair on his body all stood up on end and the scent of roses filled the air this time instead of ozone. The cold retreated inside of him. Instead, he began to feel warm, *very warm*.

“It's started. Both at once. Dear lord, I had hoped to ease you through one, but both?” Grandmother Sophia muttered and tsked.

“What's -- what's happening to me?” Jude asked, his voice sounding distant to his own ears.

The warmth now suffused his whole body. There was no pain from his wounds. What was strange though was he no longer felt the press of the floor against his back. It was like he was floating above the ground.

Grandmother Sophia's gentle hands stroked his cheeks. “I should have told you about all this long ago, but I kept thinking that there would be a better time or maybe you would be spared altogether. But that was foolish thinking. That was an old woman's desire to keep you safe.”

“Grandmother --”

“Both sides of your parentage are coming to the fore and I have no idea what will happen other than that you will *survive*, Jude. You are a survivor above all else. Don’t fight it. Just let it take you and heal you and transform you,” she told him.

My parentage? What does she know about my parents?

And was she talking about him being a werewolf when she mentioned transformation? Did she know? She clearly knew about Rogues and she’d used *magic* - yes, it was *magic*, no denying that - to send the one Rogue flying out of here like a bat out of hell.

Should have let her protect us from the get go. Wouldn’t have needed to get my arm shredded ...

He lifted that arm up so that he could see it the damage. He wondered if it was salvageable or if he’d lose it. But that would only be a concern if he was going to live and he wasn’t all that sure about that.

But that was when he saw his arm was *glowing*. Glowing red. He watched as the terrible, ragged wounds caused by the werewolf’s teeth stitched themselves together leaving only thin white lines in his flesh to show where the damage had been.

“What the ...” he gasped out.

The terrible weakness that the blood loss and pain had caused fell away. A sense of health, well being and *hunger* flooded him. He was twisting his hand from side to side, wondering at the glow and healed wounds when he saw the smoke or mist that had enveloped Gareth’s body just before he changed from man to wolf suddenly appear at the tips of his fingers.

“Your magic and your wolf are working together to heal you! Don’t fight it! Don’t be afraid!” Grandmother Sophia advised. Her voice was tinged with awe.

The mist flowed down his arm and over his shoulder and along his chest. It covered all of him, but his head. Panic fluttered inside of him as he imagined drowning in the cool white smoke. His eyes met Grandmother Sophia's. Tears were running down her cheeks, but there was a smile on her lips. She had her hands pressed together as if in prayer.

"Let it happen, child. You'll be all right," she assured him.

Maybe he believed her, because right then the mist suddenly surged up and covered his face. There was no pain. There was no breaking of bones or sloughing of flesh. For a moment, Jude did not feel his body at all. It was as if he were a ghost, a spirit, but still very much him. And then the mist cleared and he was standing on four paws.

The sensation was not unfamiliar. The dream -- or shared vision -- he'd had with Gareth had prepared him for what it was like to be a wolf. It felt remarkably *normal*. Grandmother Sophia let out a soft pleased sound.

"Oh, my Jude, you are *beautiful*." She moved towards him to touch him, but he danced out of reach.

He wanted to tell her that he was *hungry* and felt so strange. He didn't want to chance her getting near. What if he lost control of himself and attacked her? But when he opened his mouth to speak all that came out was a rather sweet bark. She didn't seem offended.

"I see. You're not ready for that. Though you look so soft and fluffy I *will* have to pet you, Jude," Grandmother Sophia said with a small laugh.

Jude found himself wagging his tail, but he still stayed out of petting range. He couldn't risk hurting her. He felt completely himself, but the hunger was there with every beat of his heart. At that moment, he heard a howl. It was Gareth! Both of them immediately looked towards the back door. The sound was coming from the woods out back of the house. Every fiber of his being wanted to respond to that cry.

I need to stay though and protect her!

But then he remembered the magic. Grandmother Sophia could protect herself. She seemed to sense his indecision.

“Go, Jude! Your Alpha is calling!” She shooed him towards the back door.

There were so many questions in Jude’s mind. So many things he had to ask her. The fact that she called Gareth his “Alpha” caused them all to bubble up, but he wasn’t going to be able to ask any of them in his wolf form and he had no idea how to shift back to his human one. But then Gareth cried out again and Jude wasn’t thinking anymore. He was running.

Jude was amazed at how well his wolf moved. It was like flying just like it had been in the dream. He leaped out of the house and landed on the ground just beyond the steps in one single bound. Then he was racing through the grass, breaking past the tree line, and unerringly heading towards where Gareth was.

The darkness was nothing to him now. He could see as easily as if it were day. And he knew where Gareth was, not only because of where his sensitive ears told him the cries had come from, but also his nose had picked up the Alpha’s scent. Jude did not have to think about using his nose or ears to track Gareth, it came to him naturally.

There were vicious snarls and yips coming from directly ahead of him. The scent of blood drifted from there, too, and that caused Jude to increase his already prodigious speed. He burst through another line of trees and barreled up a slope. There, in a pool of moonlight, were two wolves facing off against one another.

The familiar, noble figure of Gareth had his teeth bared against a tan wolf with bright, blue eyes. He recognized Mack’s scent, that slightly *wrong* odor that hung around the Rogue was stronger now than when he was in human form. Both of them were larger than Jude by half and were circling each other. There was a bright crimson patch on Gareth’s left shoulder and

he was limping slightly. There were deep gouges dripping red along the top of Mack's muzzle and a red streak running down his back leg. It appeared they were in a standoff, neither able to overcome the other. But his heart *twisted* at seeing and smelling Gareth's blood. Anger bloomed in him.

At Jude's approach, both wolves froze and then looked at him. He saw recognition immediately in Gareth's eyes and there was the slight flutter of his tail. Mack took a moment longer to recognize his scent. He gave what looked like a sneer at Jude. But Jude had no eyes for Mack. He looked only at Gareth. He felt Gareth wanting him to go, to leave, to be safe and let the Alpha take care of this.

But you don't have to do this on your own! Let me help you! Let me help protect the others!

Somehow Gareth seemed to understand him. Gareth hesitated as if considering if he would accept the help. With a soft huff, Jude went to Gareth's side. He was going to help, dammit. Pride or duty or whatever it was that was making Gareth do this by himself was not going to make Jude stand by like some damsel in distress.

Mack let out a growly huff of amusement. He clearly didn't think Jude was a threat. Mack puffed up to look even bigger and let out a low snarl in the back of his throat. But Jude didn't back away from Mack. Instead, he found himself *snapping* at the other Alpha werewolf. He wasn't afraid of him at all. He was *angry*. Mack jerked back in surprise or perhaps fear.

Immediately, he saw how he had just shown weakness and leaped towards Jude. But that was a mistake. Gareth took that moment to attack. The Alpha of the Cold Moon pack crashed into Mack's side and took the Rogue down

The two Alphas rolled over one another, snarling and snapping, but it was Gareth who ended up on top. Almost like in the dream, Gareth stood with his paws pressed to a furious Mack's chest. Moonlight poured down on the white wolf and there was a stirring of admiration and respect in Jude. He

thought that Gareth looked just like an Alpha should and acted like one, too. And that was when Jude knew what was going to happen next.

He's going to kill Mack now. He has to.

Jude's ears flattened. Mack had been Gareth's Alpha, a man he cared for, and yet he had to do this terrible thing to him. Jude hurt for Gareth.

Gareth's gaze flickered to him for a moment and understanding passed between them. Jude's caring for him and Gareth's gratefulness for it.

I understand. I support you, Jude sent with a look and a wag of his tail.

Gareth opened his mouth, showing sharp, white teeth, and was just about ready to bite down on Mack's neck, ending him, when there was the sound of racing paws and the howl of wolves. A small white and brown wolf, followed by a gray and black one burst into the clearing. They threw themselves at Gareth. He had to jump back to avoid their jaws, which released Mack. The three of them then hightailed it out of the clearing.

Jude was about to give chase when he realized that Gareth was limping badly. He *couldn't* run. He collapsed before heaving himself up again.

Gareth!

Immediately, Jude went over to Gareth and nosed his wounded shoulder. He whined low and began to lick the fur clean of blood. The taste was strange and coppery on his tongue. Gareth staggered to a sitting position and let Jude groom him. The wound was far worse than he had seen earlier. He was amazed that Gareth had been able to stand and leap and continue to fight with it. Gareth sniffed Jude then and licked his nose. Jude snorted and shook himself as the licking tickled. Gareth let out a huff, which was the equivalent of laughter.

At that moment, three wolves burst into the clearing. It was the Cold Moon pack. Molly was a slender gray and white wolf. He remembered her wolf from the grocery store. Jacob was a huge black wolf, almost as large as a pony. Raj was a red and white wolf with huge ears and a fluffy tail. Each

of them had cuts, scrapes and bites, but none appeared seriously injured.

When they saw Jude and Gareth they all stopped. Molly then came over to Jude and rubbed the side of her head against his in greeting before she started nosing Gareth.

Jude took a few steps away as the other two approached. Raj wagged his tail eagerly, but Jude's only flickered in response. Jacob's ears twitched in welcome, but Jude found himself backing away further. He felt suddenly nervous and an outsider. He was and wasn't one of them. He had no idea how to get back to being human. He was still starving. Grandmother Sophia had used magic and knew about werewolves and his parents and --

He was making low whines and covering his head with his paws. It was too much. He was panicking. He didn't know what to do!

And then he felt Gareth's warm body pressed up against his own. The Alpha had gotten up and limped to him. The limping was less, he was healing, but he should be lying down, not taking care of a hysterical Jude.

But Gareth proceeded to gently lick him and move against him, letting Jude take comfort from his strength and nearness. Both of them lowered to the ground and Gareth curled around him.

Jude's panic lessened and then slowly fell away. The three other wolves of the Cold Moon pack slowly moved around him and Gareth. Each of them laid down in a protective circle. He could feel their warmth. Jude buried his face in Gareth's fur. The Alpha rumbled appreciatively. He closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of their heartbeats and soft breathing. So much had happened. Adrenaline still coursed in his veins. He was hungry and confused.

But ... for the first time, ever, Jude also felt completely safe with the Cold Moon pack and their Alpha surrounding him.

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE OTHER HALF

Gareth watched Jude across the doused fire pit in Grandmother Sophia's back yard. The young man was sitting on one of the logs opposite him, by himself. Jude had purposefully isolated himself from the pack and even his grandmother. So while Gareth sat surrounded by their pack – Molly sitting on the log beside him, Jacob lolling on the ground by his feet and Raj on a chair that he'd pulled over so he wouldn't soil one of his suits – Jude sat by himself, staring warily at all of them and inhaling the breakfast that Grandmother Sophia had prepared for them.

This was Jude's third helping, which Gareth approved of. He had been worried that Jude wouldn't eat enough. Extreme hunger was a normal reaction to the first shift plus Jude had been bitten and rather desperately injured. That would require an even greater amount of protein to restore Jude's energy levels.

There was the screech of the porch door and Grandmother Sophia appeared in the morning light with more eggs in a skillet. She went towards Jude, hope and anxiety written on her nut-brown face. Jude allowed her to pile some more eggs onto his mostly empty plate, but then turned his back on her the moment she started to speak. Gareth frowned. He knew that something had happened between the two of them during the fight the night before, but this coldness, anger and hurt was extreme. He frowned even more when he saw Grandmother Sophia's shoulders fall in defeat and distress.

Jude had been acting standoffish to all of them ever since they had awoken that morning in the woods in their naked human forms. Gareth remembered what it had felt like to have the slide of Jude's bare hip against his own just as consciousness prodded him. Jude had rooted against him during the night, trying to get as close as possible, so that when they woke up in their human forms, Jude's head had been tucked under Gareth's chin. The young man's hands had been pressed between them and Gareth's arms had been around him.

The chirping of birds had woken Gareth. His eyelids had slowly opened and he could see that particular green-gold color that the sun made when it streamed through a forest canopy. When he first woke, he hadn't remembered what had happened the night before. He only knew that he was surrounded by his Pack and that was a good thing. But there had been something *different* this time than all the others. He was holding someone and that someone made him feel ... *complete*. He'd looked down and seen Jude and everything had come back to him: the fight with Mack, Jude appearing in his new wolf form to help attack the Rogue Alpha, and then Jude's collapse, as well as his own.

Jude's eyelids were tightly shut, but instead of looking peaceful, he seemed strained as if fighting off bad dreams. Gareth couldn't help smoothing his thumb over Jude's furrowed brow and watching those lines disappear. Jude's red-brown eyes opened slowly. In that first moment that Jude saw him, the young man looked so happy, so content, so at peace. But then it was as if a door slammed between them and Jude's expression went blank. The next thing he knew Jude had wrenched out of his arms, sprung up and dashed to the edge of the clearing. His movements woke everyone else.

"Jude ..." Gareth's voice was always a rough rumble in the morning when he first got up and it was no different today especially since they'd laid outside and been covered in morning dew.

Jude's arms wound around his torso. He shivered in the early morning cold. The day would likely become just as hot as the one before but right now in the woods with their skin dotted with dew it was chilly without each other's body heat.

"What – what's happening?" Raj asked as he lifted his head up and looked around sleepily. His hair stuck up in all directions.

Molly slapped his thigh. She was not at all sleepy but completely and utterly awake. "Quiet. Jude is --"

"Freaking out," Jacob rumbled. He, too, sounded rather bearlike in the morning. He raised his shaggy head and gave Jude a sympathetic smile.

“Not quite used to waking up with other people like this, eh?”

“It’s not sexual or anything,” Raj called out to Jude, trying to be helpful. “I mean it *can* be. It’s really fun when it is but – OW!” Molly had slapped his hip again. “But it *wasn’t* this time.”

Jude’s nostrils though flared and his eyes flickered between them all, finally landing on Gareth. Seeing Gareth seemed to calm him somewhat though there was still this sense about him that he was about to take off, naked and bewildered as he was.

Gareth slowly sat up, keeping his movements predictable. “Jude, it’s all right. You are all right. Do you remember what happened last night? Do you remember shifting?”

Jude regarded him for long silent moments, but then this look of despair flowed over his face and Gareth hurt just looking at it. “Yeah, I remember.”

Raj frowned and looked over at Gareth in confusion. “Why isn’t he totally high about his first shift? I remember being so jazzed that I couldn’t sit still for a week.”

Gareth didn’t know the answer to that. Jude was different than any other werewolf he’d met so he wasn’t altogether surprised that Jude was different in his reaction to the first shift, too. But it pained him nonetheless. Joining with your wolf for the first time *should* be a joyous thing even after a bite.

Endorphins flowed like wine into the blood. Yet that was not the case for Jude. Some part of Gareth feared that it was something about him as an Alpha that was making Jude unhappy, that he had failed in some way. He knew that wasn’t the case, but Jude was his first wolf and Jude was ... special.

Molly was lightly on her feet and padded towards Jude. Gareth wanted to call her back, but though Jude stiffened at her approach at first, he relaxed when she stopped a foot from him. Unashamed of her nudity, she placed her hands on her hips and regarded Jude critically.

“Are you hurt?” she asked him.

He shook his head and then paused before saying, “I *was*. I was bitten really badly by the fourth Rogue.” He extended his right arm to her, his unmarked right arm. Showing no signs of injury wasn’t completely unheard of after a night’s rest, but that first bite normally *did* leave marks. Gareth was amazed that Jude had healed so thoroughly to come to his aid last night, too, if the bite was as bad as Jude described. But then Jude continued, in almost an awed manner, “There was this red light surrounding my arm after it happened. I healed and then the mist came.”

“Red light?” Molly’s forehead furrowed.

“Magic,” Jude whispered.

“Werewolves don’t have magic, Jude,” Gareth explained as he, too, got up from the cool earth. “We *are* magical, but we don’t wield it.”

“I know,” Jude continued to say in a soft tone as he stared at his arm. “But I’m both.”

“Both *what*?” Raj asked, standing up beside Gareth.

“A werewolf and ... and *something else*.” Jude’s arm dropped to his side and a flash of anger appeared in those red-brown eyes. “I can’t believe she didn’t tell me!”

“Who didn’t tell you what?” Raj was looking at Jude with a modicum of alarm.

“She lied. All this time. About everything,” Jude muttered, not answering him.

The young man had then started stalking back to the house. He wouldn’t let any of them near him, not even Molly. He shied away from Gareth especially. It was only when they were heading onto the back porch that Gareth caught Jude’s arm.

“Jude, we should talk about a lot of things, but most particularly for the moment, what we’ll say to Grandmother Sophia about what happened last night,” Gareth said.

Those red-brown eyes had looked back at him with need burning brightly for the moment, but then the shutters returned. He let out a sharp laugh. “She already knows *everything*. Don’t worry about it.”

“But, Jude, she’s not a werewolf –”

“No, she’s something else, too.” Bitterness crept into Jude’s voice again and the anger appeared once more.

Something else? Like you said you were? What is that, Jude?

“Tell me what happened. Tell me what’s wrong,” Gareth requested.

But Jude’s mouth just flattened into a thin line as he said, “If I can’t trust *her*, do you think I’m going to trust *you*? I just met you. I don’t know you. And it seems like I don’t know Grandmother Sophia either.”

Jude shook off his hold and went to shower upstairs. They heard Grandmother Sophia call Jude’s name, but he did not answer her. That was the first of many times he would do that. The rest of the pack stood, uncertainly behind him, in the yard.

“Do we just go in?” Jacob asked, scratching his rear end. “I mean she’s going to have issues probably with a bunch of naked people tromping through her kitchen even if she’s cool with the werewolf thing.”

“I think we should get our clothes from the Jeep before we barge into Grandmother Sophia’s kitchen,” Molly suggested before she went to do just that.

They had changed and gathered in the kitchen where Grandmother Sophia was cooking up a huge breakfast. Jude came down dressed in a pair of oil-stained jeans and a ratty t-shirt. He immediately went out and started

working on his motorcycle. Grandmother Sophia had tried to call him to her again, but again, he ignored her.

“What is going on?” Raj asked.

The Indian werewolf’s gaze swung to each of them, but none had any answers or rather, Grandmother Sophia did, but she wasn’t talking. Not yet. And that wasn’t the strangest thing of all of this. Like Jude had said, Grandmother Sophia *knew* that werewolves existed, she knew they were werewolves, and she knew Jude was one of them. But she wouldn’t say more than that.

They had then filled up plates of bacon, eggs, pancakes, waffles and French toast that they proceeded to eat out in the back yard. Gareth had called Jude in to eat, but he wasn’t sure if Jude had come in because of him or because of the likely insatiable hunger he was feeling.

There were platters of food. More than enough for five hungry werewolves, which confirmed for him that she had experience with their kind, but she clearly *wasn’t* one. But that *scent* she carried with her was so familiar and yet not.

Jude has a bit of it, too. So this “something else” means that they’re both the same thing. Or, at least, Jude’s half of whatever this is.

Though Gareth wanted nothing more than to take the young man into his arms and hold him until that pain and hurt went away, he knew that was *not* the right move. Even if it was what Jude might need, he would react badly to being touched or approached right now. Gareth would let him act the lone wolf for a little while, but then he’d reel the young man back in.

Grandmother Sophia offering him more eggs drew him out of his reverie. He met her dark eyed gaze and set his plate down. He took the skillet from her and handed it to Raj.

“Please take care of this, Raj,” he asked the Indian werewolf who had already finished eating. “I would like to talk with Grandmother Sophia.”

“Oh, I can do both. Talk and clean, I mean,” Grandmother Sophia began to protest.

But Raj jumped to his feet, assuring her, “Don’t worry about it! I like to clean actually. I find it soothing.”

Molly and Jacob also stood up and began collecting plates and silverware.

“We’ll help,” Jacob rumbled.

“See, I have *two* minions!” Raj told her brightly.

“You wish,” Jacob said with narrowed eyes.

Molly just hit his hip again. It had less power because Raj was now dressed, but he rubbed the spot anyways and feigned pain.

“Make her stop hitting me, Gareth!” Raj protested.

Jacob swung a meaty arm over Raj’s slender shoulders. “Nobody like a whiner, Raj. Come on. Let’s do dishes.”

The three of them went towards the house. Each of them gave Jude a mournful look. They wanted him to be with them, to be a part of the pack, but they intuited he wasn’t ready.

Gareth gently took Grandmother Sophia’s arm. “Shall we walk and talk?”

Her head lowered and she let out a sigh. “Yes, yes, we should. I wanted to tell Jude all this first, but he won’t listen to me right now. I don’t suppose I can blame him. He’s had such a tough life. So many reasons not to trust people and here I go not telling him the truth, too.”

The truth. What is the truth?

Feeling slightly uneasy, but even more determined to speak to Grandmother Sophia and understand Jude’s past. “Let’s walk. Jude might come find us. You never know.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. He *could* change his mind and wish to speak.”

The two of them then walked slowing along the tree line of the property. The morning sun painted the grass gold. The grass crushed beneath their feet, releasing that pleasant green scent that always reminded Gareth of summer. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, Jude go still and track their progress. The young man then purposefully looked away from them, but as if against his will, Jude’s head twisted around to follow them once more. He saw Jude finish up his last bite of eggs, put his plate down, and then get up to come after them.

Jude was following them at what he likely thought was a discreet distance, but to Gareth his amateurish tracking was as apparent as if he had held up a neon sign announcing his intent. With Jude’s newly gained werewolf hearing, the young man would have little trouble overhearing their conversation so Gareth kept their steps measured and pretended he didn’t notice their follower. Perhaps hearing whatever Grandmother Sophia had to say would calm the young man’s anger.

A momentary stab of dismay went through him. There were so many changes going on with Jude at that moment, things that Gareth needed to teach him about his new life as a werewolf, but he couldn’t, because Jude simply couldn’t trust him yet. He ached at the confusion that was likely going through Jude’s mind. The strange things that his body was likely causing him to feel that might be frightening or disturbing. But more than that, that first shift brought wolf and man together for the first time and dealing with not being human wasn’t exactly easy.

I must take this slow, but not too slow, with Jude. I hope my instincts will help me with him. I especially hope that Grandmother Sophia’s information will do more.

“You know about werewolves, but you are not one,” Gareth stated rather than asked as an opener.

“No, I’m not a werewolf.” She glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes.

“What are you then?”

She took in a deep breath. “I don’t know how you will react to what I’m about to tell you, but it’s absolutely crucial in some ways that you *not* have the prejudices that so many of your kind have. That is likely a vain hope, but I see how much you care for Jude so ...”

And that was when he realized what that scent meant that had been tantalizing his memory. Bronwyn, the woman who had inked his tattoo for him, had the same scent. He’d smelled it for hours as she’d tattooed his flesh.

“You’re a witch,” he said abruptly and blinked.

She paused and looked up at him in surprise and relief. “You know?”

“Your scent ... I recognize it now. A friend of mine is a witch and she smells the same way.”

“Your friend is a ... *witch*?” Grandmother Sophia questioned carefully.

“Bronwyn has been my friend for over fifty years,” he answered, understanding her surprise. Few supernatural creatures would associate with witches, because witches were said to be untrustworthy and their power made them dangerous on many levels. But he had never found Bronwyn to be so towards him in any way.

“Bronwyn O’Dubhuir?” she clarified, recognizing the name.

Gareth nodded. Bronwyn was an exceptionally powerful witch and, at one time, had aimed to bring all the covens together under a council much like the werewolf’s Council, but it had not gone as planned. Her enemies had banded together to stop the council from being formed and to kill her. It was this attempt on her life that he had saved her from and earned her eternal friendship. After the attacks Bronwyn had retreated from the Witch World and even from her own coven.

“You are the White Wolf she spoke of who saved her then during the Council Wars?” Grandmother Sophia’s eyes went wide. “Of course, you are! I didn’t realize ...”

“She has saved me many a time since then. We are more than even,” he said.

She let out a breath. “I cannot tell you how *relieved* and *amazed* I am to know this. To think of all the Alphas that should be Jude’s, it would be the White Wolf! A werewolf who is friends with a witch!”

That was when Gareth remembered the fact that Jude had that vanilla scent of witches, too. Jude had also said that he and Grandmother Sophia were both “something else”.

“Is Jude ...” He paused, unsure how to ask this. A werewolf and a witch having a child together? He had never heard of such a thing. It was thought it wouldn’t work as witches were normally sterile. “Is Jude part witch?”

“Yes,” she said and nodded. “His mother was a witch while his father was a werewolf.”

Gareth had been so caught up in what she was saying that he had forgotten that Jude was pacing behind them, listening to everything they were saying. He’d forgotten until Jude stormed up to them right then and there, unable to just listen any longer. He was shaking with anger and his eyes burned with betrayal.

“You knew my parents!” he hissed at her.

Grandmother Sophia shook her head and tried to touch him, but he stepped out of reach. “No, Jude, I didn’t. I just knew you were special when I saw you at the orphanage, but I had no idea of your history until much later.”

“How much later?” Jude’s eyes narrowed at her.

“A year ago I put most of what I have to tell you together,” she answered.

“A year ...” Jude shook his head violently. “But you knew from the beginning that I was – was a werewolf and a – a witch! But you didn’t tell me! You didn’t tell me what you were either! Why not? Were your foster kids not worth telling? Were we not good enough to know?”

“Of course not!” Tears appeared in her eyes. “But being a witch ... oh, Jude, so many people fear us and *rightfully* so. I had left that life behind when I took in you kids.”

“What life? Are witches like in Hansel and Gretel eating kids and –”

“They can be,” she interrupted him in a soft, mournful voice.

Jude blinked at her, the confession throwing him off whatever he intended to say. He straightened. “Are you serious?” He turned to Gareth. “Is that true? Are witches ... *evil*?”

Gareth said carefully, “I only know one witch ... well, now three, and none of the ones I’ve met has been evil. But are there evil witches out there? Of course. Like there are evil humans and evil werewolves.”

“We have earned our reputation, Gareth,” Grandmother Sophia said. “Especially among werewolves.”

“Why *especially*?” Jude asked sharply.

“In the past, we were able to control them. We used werewolves as our personal bodyguard, even our shock troops,” she said.

Gareth immediately thought of how Jude was able to take control of the pack bonds from Mack.

“I should clarify that only the most powerful witches could do this, but it was enough to make the werewolves hate and distrust all of us,” she explained.

“So my parents were some kind of supernatural Romeo and Juliet?” Jude snorted.

Grandmother Sophia nodded, her expression serious. “Yes, they were and not just for the fact that they were a witch and a werewolf who were capable of conceiving a child.”

“What other reasons are there? Those things alone would be more than enough,” Gareth said, unease prickling down his spine.

Grandmother Sophia wetted her lips before saying, “Jude’s father was a *Rogue* and Jude’s mother *cured* him.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: NORMAL WEREWOLF

Jude turned away from Grandmother Sophia and Gareth with the words *witch* and *werewolf* chasing each other in his head like a snake eating its own tail. He began to walk blindly forward. He wasn't sure where he was going. Only that he was going. Now.

He heard Grandmother Sophia call out to him, to beg him to come back, that there was so much more to explain! He was sure there was. His life – whatever he had believed it to be just two days ago – was based completely on a lie. On a bunch of lies. On a *mountain* of lies.

And he needed a breather before he learned more.

He knew that Gareth was walking about ten paces behind him, keeping him in sight, making sure he was okay, ready to spring forward and save him from Mack or any other enemy that might appear. Why did Gareth care for him? He wasn't even a normal werewolf! He was some kind of freak even among the freaks. Yet Gareth was not rejecting him.

But he will or the Cold Moon Pack will and I'll be alone again. Except for Tessa. Then he realized that he couldn't count on his foster sister either.

Werewolves? Witchcraft? Tessa's a hardheaded lawyer. She wouldn't understand. Couldn't understand. This separates us, too. So I have no one.

Jude felt a wave of grief crest over him. Grandmother Sophia lied to him. His “true” nature separated him from his foster sister. His witch-werewolf nature would, undoubtedly, cause the Cold Moon Pack to reject him. And even his own senses seemed alien to him.

His hearing was so acute that he could actually hear the grass swish and crunch under Gareth's feet. It was almost *deafening* if he didn't actively try to suppress it. And his hearing wasn't the only sense that was supercharged.

He could *smell* everything. The scents in the air were insanely detailed now. He didn't just smell flowers. He smelled the different *types* of flowers. He

could peel back layers of scent and know the lemony smell came from the white flowers that clustered by the tree he just passed by while the lavender along the side of the house gave out the sweet, pungent aroma that reminded him of grapes.

His vision, too, was so good now that everything looked like it was on a high-definition television. He could focus in on the robin that was twittering on a tree limb about fifty feet away and see the individual feathers.

He could also hear its heart and the whoosh of its blood. He quickly looked away, because even though he'd just eaten enough food to choke a rhino his mouth began to water as he imagined biting down on the bird's soft, feathery body and hearing its hollow bones crack between his teeth.

Stop! Stop doing this! I don't want to hurt that bird! I'm not hungry!

But his senses would not listen. He sank down onto his haunches onto the dark green grass in the front of the house and wrapped his arms around his head as if he could physically stop his senses from bombarding him with sights, sounds, smells and touches.

Gareth stopped ten feet from him. The Alpha's desire to come to him was like a physical caress, but he stayed away. Jude *wanted* him near, but at the same time he was so damned irritated with the Alpha that he wanted him away at the same time!

"For god's sake, Gareth, if you want to be near me then be near me! Don't hover!" Jude growled and, immediately, regretted his harsh tone.

The Alpha was only hovering because of Jude's own indecision about what he wanted. Gareth was trying to help him and he was snapping at the Alpha as if the man wasn't doing *him* a favor by being near. If Jude kept being a brat Gareth might leave and then what? What would he do if Gareth left? A pit seemed to open in the bottom of his stomach and he thought he was going to be swallowed by it.

But Gareth did not leave. He hunkered down beside Jude, but didn't touch him. That was good. Jude really couldn't stand to be touched right now.

He glanced over at the Alpha through his fingers. Gareth's expression was calm. Everything about him indicated calmness, peace, acceptance, patience. These were the last things that Jude was at that moment. Only when he was alone on the road had he ever come close to those things. He suddenly hated the Alpha for this complete comfort and assurance in himself.

"Why aren't you mad at me? I'm acting like a jerk. Why aren't you telling me off?" Jude snapped, lowering his arms and showing flashing red-brown eyes at the Alpha.

Gareth's right eyebrow rose up and a faint smile crossed his lips. "Because of *why* you are being a jerk. I do agree that you are being one, but it's understandable."

"Understandable?" Jude let out a high pitched laugh. "Yeah, right like *any* of this is understandable!"

"What do you need, Jude?" Gareth asked. Those topaz eyes flickered over his face, looking for meaning in every twitch.

"I need for this to be over!" Jude shot to his feet. Energy thrummed through him and he wanted to run. He felt like he could run forever.

Is that because I'm a werewolf? Or because I'm a witch? What can a witch even do?

Gareth stood up, but his movements were graceful and sure. "What is *this* that you need to be over?"

"All of it." Jude rubbed his suddenly sweaty hands on the fronts of his jeans. He felt so damned warm now like his very skin was smothering him. "I don't want to be a werewolf. I certainly don't want to be a witch! I just things to be how they were!"

Gareth didn't say that things, of course, could *never* be how they were. He made no placating, empty promises that things would get better. He didn't

tell Jude that he even understood what Jude was going through though he must have at least some clue. The werewolf part of it anyways. Gareth just listened, allowing Jude to rant, which made Jude angrier.

“How are you *good* with this?” Jude thumped his chest.

“Good with *what*?”

“Me! Being part of your pack!”

“Why would I *not* want you?”

“You want a *hybrid* witch-thing in your pack? You want a *freak* in your pack?” Jude pressed his hot, sweaty hand harder against his own t-shirt and he swore that his skin burned beneath it. “Because that’s what I am! That’s what I’ve always been, but before I thought I was just another human, but now I find out that I’m *not* even that!”

“You’re *different*, Jude, but that makes you *special*, not *freakish*, in my opinion,” Gareth answered.

There was something in the Alpha’s eyes – *hope* – and, for a moment, Jude realized that if his mother had been able to bring his father back from being a Rogue, Gareth might think he could do the same for Mack and his Rogue pack. If such magic was something innate between him and not a spell of some sort. He thought of how he was able to supplant Mack with the other Rogues in the grocery store. Could that have been magic? His *mother’s* magic? For a moment, the idea that he could wield such power almost had appeal to him, almost gave him hope that he could help others ... but anger and fear slammed that hope into the ground and crushed it beneath his heel.

“In *your* opinion? Yeah, but what about in *theirs*?” Jude shot a hand towards the house where his ultra-hearing told him that the other Cold Moon Pack werewolves were. “Do you think they’ll see me as *special*? Or as a *freak*? Once again, I *won’t* fit in! I’ll be on the *outside* like always! I can’t even be a *normal* werewolf!”

Jude spun away from Gareth and his hands fisted at his sides. Rage bubbled up inside of him. He had always been apart from everyone. Strange. Different. From his amnesia to other things about himself. Things he had ignored, but wanted to come to the fore of his mind now. But the things in him that had kept him apart from normal people had allowed the bad people to circle him. Like any isolated member of a flock, he had been fair game for the predators because there was no one to protect him. He had been vulnerable.

Until Grandmother Sophia came and got me from that hellhole.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't want to remember what had happened at the orphanage. He didn't want to feel that powerless again. Gareth put a tentative hand on Jude's shoulder. Jude snarled and hit it away even as he missed it immediately. He glowered at Gareth, who was still not upset.

"I don't need you!" he lied. "I don't need your –"

"Do you want to spar?" Gareth interrupted.

"What?" Jude asked, utterly confused by what seemed like a non sequitur.

"As a werewolf, your strength and speed are hugely enhanced just like your other senses," Gareth said as he calmly stripped off his shirt, showing that incredible tattoo again. Jude's fingers itched to trace it.

"I don't care –"

"Simple physical exertion helps after the first shift. While we do not know what your witch genes are doing to you right now, I know that some wolves simply have to blow off steam before they can settle," Gareth explained.

"They feet too hot. Their skin seems *too* tight. Their emotions fly every which way."

That described what Jude feeling, but it wasn't the werewolf in him! It was the damned situation! But the thought of actually physically moving, pounding at something, was appealing to him. He narrowed his eyes.

"Wouldn't that be challenging you as Alpha though?"

“Do you want to be Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack?” Gareth asked with that eyebrow rising again.

“Hell no!”

“Then it is not a challenge. It’s just sparring. So ready to go?” Gareth bent his knees and extended one arm towards Jude and let the other hang straight out at his side.

“Definitely.” Jude peeled off his t-shirt and threw it onto the ground before claiming a similar stance to Gareth’s.

He had learned how to fight after he was attacked. Nothing fancy just self-defense classes and some basic street fighting. It had stood him in good stead against most opponents. He knew that Gareth was really strong though, but he’d faced bigger opponents before and taken them down. He’d used his speed and his long legs. Gareth was big, so surely the man would move slowly. Now with his werewolf strength and speed Jude felt he would be even better than before.

He darted in low, avoiding that outstretched hand, moving so fast he was amazed at himself. For a moment, simply moving brought him *joy*. He went to clip Gareth’s left leg, to bring him to the ground, but instead Gareth *twisted* at the last moment and Jude’s momentum had him stumbling past the Alpha. He growled and spun on his heel to face Gareth again. The Alpha stood there, calm as ever, which had Jude growing angrier.

He balled his right hand into a fist and went to hit Gareth’s left side with it. Not hard enough to break anything, just give him a bruise. He brought his left hand up to block any blows that would be incoming, but Gareth didn’t raise a hand to him. Again, the Alpha danced out of reach and Jude’s punch hit air and nothing else.

“Cut it out!” Jude snarled even as he knew that was a ridiculous thing to say. “Engage with me!”

Gareth spread his arms wide and said, “All right. Let’s engage.”

Jude swooped in. A one-two punch to the solid, center mass of the Alpha. Except Gareth blocked each punch with ease. Gareth was a blur. Jude thought he was fast, but the Alpha was like nothing he had ever seen. Even as Gareth blocked him though the Alpha threw no punches of his own.

“You can go faster, Jude. Try,” he said, not even a touch out of breath while sweat poured down Jude’s face and chest.

Jude narrowed his eyes, but said nothing. He *did* go faster though. Two lefts, a right, a leg sweep, a jumping kick. Gareth blocked them all. Jude though didn’t mind that. It allowed him to keep going. More kicks, more jabs, ending with a roundhouse. Sweat coated his skin and darkened the waistband of his jeans. Gareth looked at him with pride.

He went in and grappled with Gareth. He wrapped one arm around Gareth’s neck while the other grasped the Alpha’s right wrist. Their sweat-slicked skin slid against one another’s. The heat that was under Jude’s flesh bloomed and seemed to race through him and *into* Gareth. The Alpha froze as if stunned by a cattle prod.

Then Gareth’s pupils expanded by two times until there was only a thin ring of topaz showing. His nostrils flared and a low almost growl exited Gareth’s mouth. Jude’s nostrils were suddenly filled with a warm, musky scent and he knew that it was desire. He didn’t have to look down to know that Gareth’s cock was erect. He felt the press of that hard cock through their jeans. A corkscrew of matching desire wound down Jude’s spine and pooled in his groin. He was hard, too.

Their mouths were only inches apart. They were breathing in each other’s air. Jude’s grip around Gareth’s neck changed from a grapple to merely holding on. The wrist of the hand that Jude held opened and shut and Jude’s hand released its grip only to slide down until their hands were pressed one against the other. Gareth linked their fingers together.

They were in a passionate embrace now no longer a fighting stance at all. Gareth’s thumb trailed along the back of his hand. Jude trembled. He felt

something *more* than desire. Something similar to what he had felt with the two Rogues, Clara and Pierce, was building inside of him. It was like there was a line attached to his soul and it was reaching out to a matching line in Gareth. If those two lines touched ... *something* would happen. Maybe it would be marvelous. Maybe it would be terrible. But *something* would change.

Is this magic? Is this something I'm doing to Gareth? Or is this inevitable? But if I can't be sure ... if I'm making him do this ... if I'm ...

Jude stepped back. Gareth lunged for him, but Jude said, "No."

Gareth stopped. And then in a flash, the Alpha's back was to him. His shoulders were rising and falling as he took in deep breaths. His hands flexed convulsively at his sides. Gareth, for once, seemed on *edge* as if he were about to lose control.

And I did that. This thing inside of me is reaching for something inside of him.

Guilt flooded Jude. "Gareth?"

He stepped towards the shivering Alpha. Gareth held up a hand and Jude stopped. He wasn't sure what was happening. But the line inside of him quivered, still reaching, still wanting something, but what? It made Jude calm, this strange thing that was happening while it unnerved Gareth.

We were going to kiss. More than kiss. But what more? And was I making it happen?

"A moment. Just a moment, Jude," Gareth's voice was a growly whisper.

"Are you all right?"

Gareth let out a bark of laughter. "Yes, I'm ... I'm very well."

"You don't look like it. You look worse than I did before I beat you up," Jude said.

“You did *not* beat me up, Jude.” Gareth cast a glance over his shoulder.

“Oh, I totally would have taken you if we’d kept going,” Jude continued to tease as that seemed to be helping the Alpha out of whatever it was that was distressing him.

What if I’m what’s distressing him?

Gareth let out a snort before saying under his breath, “I highly doubt we would have been *fighting* if this had gone on a moment longer.”

“No, we would have been kissing.” Jude grabbed his shirt and sat down cross legged on the grass. He used his shirt to wipe up the sweat.

“Yes, we would have.” Gareth twisted halfway around to face him. Jude was struck - not for the first time - how beautiful the Alpha was.

Would that have been bad, Gareth? Did I control you somehow?

“I’m sorry, Jude. You wanted to stop and I couldn’t control -”

“Not your fault,” Jude quickly stated.

It’s me. I think it’s me. Oh, God, what did I do to him?

“Jude, I am your Alpha --”

“So you can’t be -- be motivated to do something you don’t want to do? No one can *move* you --”

“You *move* me, Jude.”

Jude’s mouth opened and shut, unable to say anything at first and then he got out, “That’s not what I meant.”

Gareth joined him on the ground, stretching his long, powerful legs out in front of him. He leaned back on his elbows. His massive chest was bathed in sunlight. Sweat beaded along his muscles and Jude suddenly felt very thirsty. He quickly looked away from Gareth’s chest.

“Did you want it to happen? Or would you have regretted it if we kissed?” Jude tossed at him.

“If it was something I *didn't* want to happen then it wouldn't have been so hard to stop.” The Alpha wasn't quite as calm as before, but he was regaining that iron control again.

“You kissed me before. Last night when you left me,” Jude said, remembering that. He hadn't done anything to make that happen. He felt a rush of relief. It might mean that he wasn't responsible for Gareth suddenly wanting to kiss him again.

“Yes.” Gareth's gaze flickered to and away from Jude.

“Why did you do that?” Jude knew he was looking far too intense for the question to be taken casually.

But Gareth answered it that way, “You are beautiful. You are vulnerable --”

“Vulnerable? And that turns you on?” Jude's eyes widened.

“No, but protecting you does. Making that hunted look leave your face does. Eliminating that lonely look in those haunting eyes of yours does as well.” Gareth reached over and ran his thumb along Jude's cheek, but then he quickly pulled that hand away. “You are pack, Jude. Your safety and happiness is my priority.”

“From cutting my pancakes to kissing me. What an all-encompassing job an Alpha's is.” Jude shook his head.

“Did you miss me cutting your French toast this morning. I was tempted.” Gareth flashed him a smile.

Part of him *had* missed that. “Maybe a little. I might let you cut my meat for me tonight. I'm assuming we're having another BBQ.”

“I'm thinking that we shouldn't stay here, Jude,” Gareth said. He looked thoughtful. “I would feel better about getting you to Fallowmere and the

rest of the pack. Grandmother Sophia would, of course, come with us.”

Jude’s shoulders hunched as his fear at being ostracized rolled over him again. The thought of Grandmother Sophia also was not as comforting as it once would have been. He was still angry with her. He still felt betrayed yet part of him knew that she wouldn’t have lied to him unless she thought it was for the best. But still. He could only muster a mild, “Oh? Do you really think that’s a good idea? I mean wouldn’t taking me to Fallowmere bring Mack and the Rogues there?”

“I’m rather hoping it would. We would have a better chance of ... trapping them with the rest of our numbers,” Gareth said.

“We don’t know I can cure them, Gareth!” Jude cried even as he wondered if he could. It had been so easy, so natural in the grocery store.

Though last night I just flailed around and couldn’t even think when I saw the fourth Rogue. But now I think I might have made you want to kiss me.

“I think you can. It would be worth trying, wouldn’t it? To save four wolves?” Gareth looked at him keenly. The desire in his topaz eyes almost hurt to see.

“You want Mack back even after everything?” Jude asked.

Gareth looked away from him then and off into the forest. “You’ve only seen him like this, not like how he was, not how he *should* be.”

“Would you give the Cold Moon Pack back to him if he was cured?” Jude found himself pressing. The truth was that while he resisted the idea of anyone as his Alpha, there were moments when he *could* see himself accepting it so long as it was Gareth. But if Mack were Alpha no way.

“I don’t know. We aren’t there yet,” Gareth answered.

“You could give up the leadership of the pack so easily?”

Gareth's head shot around towards him and the Alpha showed the first touch of temper, "I never said it would be *easy*. But I never wanted to be Alpha. I would have been content to have Mack run things forever."

"But that's like me saying I want things to be like they were before I was a werewolf and a -- a witch. Can't happen. You *are* Alpha now. I don't think you can go back," Jude said.

Gareth studied him and Jude found himself flushing under that close appraisal. "Perhaps. But to have Mack back as himself ..."

"We don't know I can do it. It might make things worse if we try to find out." Jude shrugged. "Because while we're trying to keep them alive they'll be killing other people."

Gareth sighed and undid his ponytail, letting his hair hang down. Gareth then scraped his hair back to redo it but it wouldn't all stay put. Jude watched the Alpha do this simple act several times and fail at it. He realized that Gareth's hands were shaking slightly.

Not as calm as he seems. Still recovering from whatever I've done. Yet ...

"Let me," Jude said. "You take care of everyone else, but no one takes care of you."

He scooted over to Gareth and took the hair tie from the Alpha's suddenly still fingers. He gathered all of Gareth's hair in one hand, relishing the softness of it and carefully tied every strand back. The whole time Gareth did not move. Jude didn't move away after the deed was done. He ran his fingers through the tail of hair.

"Jude," Gareth whispered and nothing more.

"What is this feeling I have when I'm near you? It's like I have compass in my chest and its ... its pointing directly at you. Is this a werewolf thing or ... or a witch thing?" Jude held his breath while he waited for Gareth to answer.

But before the Alpha could answer, Molly burst out of the door. Her raven hair flew back. “Gareth! We need to get back to Fallowmere!”

“Why?” Gareth tensed under Jude’s hands.

Molly skidded to a stop. She had her phone in one hand. “Nina just told me that Paavo is there!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: MATE BOND

With his skin still tingling with desire for Jude, Gareth jumped to his feet in one fluid movement and took the phone from Molly's outstretched hand.

He pressed it against his ear and said, "Nina? What's going on?"

His Beta's voice was low and rushed as she said, "Paavo showed up here with two of his top wolves."

"What are they there for? Do they know about Mack and his Rogue Pack? Or ... or it is about Jude?" Gareth's shoulders tensed as he asked the last.

Could the Alpha of Alphas know somehow about Jude's parentage and potential ability to cure Rogues? Jude's parents had been fleeing someone when they'd died. Could it have been the Council? He couldn't help but reflect on Mack's claims that the Council itself was made up of Rogues.

Maybe Jude's mother had cured them of the madness but left the other benefits that being a Rogue gave?

Without knowing about Jude all along, it seemed unlikely that Paavo and the Council could learn of Jude's heritage. Jude had no knowledge of it.

Grandmother Sophia had kept that knowledge from the young man until now so she was hardly likely to tell anyone else. So perhaps the Council had known all along that Jude existed, but had held off doing anything about him until his mixed blood showed. Yet only those here and the Rogue Pack knew about Jude's first change. Even if someone had revealed this information to Paavo, the Alpha of Alphas had been in Europe last Gareth had heard. He could not have crossed an ocean and gotten to isolated Fallowmere in that short of time. And wouldn't Paavo have come to Forest Glenn if he had been informed about Jude?

Too many questions. Not enough answers, Gareth told himself firmly and shunted those thoughts to the back of his brain.

"Jude? Why would Paavo visit us about our new brother?" Nina sounded perplexed and some of the tension bled out of Gareth.

“Long story. Will tell you later, but not over phone,” he said quietly. “What does Paavo have to say for himself? What reasons has he offered for this unexpected visit?”

“Claims he’s here to check on how we are doing, but there are also some issues he’d like to discuss with you and you alone. Won’t tell me what they are,” she answered. “He wanted to know where you were, but I wouldn’t tell him that. Figured it would be better if you two were to meet that you meet here with the rest of the pack around you.”

“What are you sensing, Nina? You must be sensing something bad from him to be so cautious,” he said.

“I’m *always* cautious.” He could hear the smile in her voice, but it almost immediately left as she added, “But while Paavo is trying to play this off as a *friendly* visit ... well, I’m not so sure about it. I mean he and the rest of the Council basically disowns us, but now he actually comes here? He didn’t do that when Mack was Alpha. So if you agree to meet him I want it *here* where you have your pack at your back. No matter how strong he and his wolves are, it’s three against over twenty-five.”

“I agree and appreciate the support.”

“Are you going to meet with him or should I tell him to shove off?” Nina asked.

“I think so. I’m not sure how I could avoid it without causing bigger issues for us. Besides I’m curious what he’ll say.” Gareth turned towards Jude, who was also now standing a few feet away, watching him out of those large red-brown eyes. “And we were planning on heading to Fallowmere anyways. Jude and his grandmother will be coming with us so can you have rooms prepared for both of them?”

He wondered if Jude was going to object to that, but the young man just regarded him silently. While Molly had been standing so still beside him that she might have been a stone statue, he *felt* her excitement at Jude’s acceptance of going to the pack’s house. Her fingers curled and then she

went back to being still as stone. Raj and Jacob, who had been hesitating in the doorway of the house, suddenly headed back inside. Raj's voice rose up calling out Grandmother Sophia's name. They would get her ready to leave for Fallowmere as soon as possible.

"Of course, I'll make sure everything's taken care of," Nina said and he imagined her standing up straighter as if she was a recruit in the army.

"Keep Paavo away from Cassidy and don't let anyone discuss Jude with the Alpha of Alphas, okay?"

"Not a problem. Izzy has Brandon practically muzzled and I have Powell chatting Paavo up about the old days so everyone is keeping clear except for Robyn and Hoshido. They are tracking our guest wherever he and his wolves go," she said.

"Is Powell doing his garrulous old man routine?"

"With *flair*," she laughed. "Last time I listened in, Powell was talking to him about the *Crusades*."

Gareth snorted. He imagined the grandfatherly Powell taking Paavo's large arm and starting to reminisce about the "good old days". Powell was *not* a boor, but his late in life transition – he was sixty-five when he changed to his wolf form for the first time - made people mistake him for an elderly man whose own glory days were behind him, instead of the fiercely intelligent and incredibly strong werewolf he really was. Powell saw people's misconceptions about him as a good thing and he used it to the pack's advantage plenty of times. Even Paavo, who was much older than Powell, would likely be taken in by the ruse as there were few who failed to change well before their sixtieth year.

"Oh, man, if Paavo really is here for a friendly visit he'll never come back again after Powell gets done with him," Gareth laughed.

"Can't say I'd be all that broken up about it," Nina replied dryly. She evidently did *not* like the Alpha of Alphas. He couldn't blame her. When things were at their worse Paavo had abandoned them. The whole Council

had. She would never forget or forgive and maybe there was something good about that in this case.

“We’ll be there in a few hours. Call me if anything happens.”

They said their goodbyes and he hung up before handing the phone back to Molly. She slid it into a pocket in her dress. He stepped over to Jude.

Again, as he neared the young man he felt the Pack Bonds tingle, except it was slightly different. He stopped nearly dead in his tracks. This wasn’t just a Pack Bond - though there was nothing “just” or “mere” about - this was something *more*.

Is this a Mating Bond?

Mack had told him about first meeting Eliza and the way a special bond had formed between them, connected to the Pack Bonds, but far stronger and more intimate. Was that what this was? Gareth had thought Mating Bonds imaginary. Other than Mack, he’d never heard of such a bond actually existing. They were only talked about in stories or someone knew someone who knew someone who had one. And, truth be told, he thought Mack was exaggerating this magical connection between himself and Eliza. He had assumed that Mack’s feelings for her had simply made their Pack Bond seem greater than his connection to the others.

Gareth’s heart thudded in his chest and a sheen of sweat appeared on his face. He almost felt a little dizzy. That *magnetic* pull between him and Jude seemed to swell larger and larger. Jude’s pink lips parted. The young man’s heartbeat was matching his in rhythm and tempo.

If this continues much longer something will happen. But I cannot have that happen now. I must keep Jude safe and the pack safe.

With a mighty use of will, Gareth ripped his gaze from Jude’s and forced himself not to approach the young man any closer. His heart slowed. Jude’s did the same. He breathed more easily. Jude did as well. A flicker of excitement and fear raced through him. There was something between them.

But if it a true Mating Bond then I run the same risk to the pack as Mack did. If something happens to Jude or something happens to me ...

The thought of becoming like Mack and slaughtering his family was abhorrent to him. He swallowed. Realizing that he had been quiet too long - he could feel Molly's confusion and Jude's ... *understanding?* - Gareth cleared his throat said, "Jude, I assume by your silence that you are agreeable to going to Fallowmere."

Jude shrugged as if it didn't matter to him where he went. One place was as good as another. But there was the faintest look of longing in his eyes - and a *pinging* in the potential bond between them - that told Gareth Jude longed for a home he could call his own.

Yet Jude was not going to admit his own feelings to Gareth or to himself clearly as he said with another nonchalant shrug, "I guess. Though I don't know if I'll stay around after this thing with Mack is taken care of. Probably won't. Most probably."

Gareth felt Molly tense behind him and his own heart slammed against his chest wall at the thought of Jude leaving, but he recognized this for what it was: Jude protecting himself by saying he would leave first instead of the pack leaving him.

"Many have lives outside of the pack. Raj travels extensively and returns to Fallowmere only occasionally," he answered neutrally.

What he did not say was that even the world-traveler Raj *loved* Fallowmere and considered it *home*. Most of the pack, if at all possible, lived at the mansion on the lake and spent all their free time there. Jude would discover that for himself.

And once he realizes he will not be thrown out of the pack for being special, he'll want to stay. Gareth's heart added, He must stay. He cannot leave me. A shiver went through him. Mating bond. Oh, gods, it is. It must be.

"Yeah, well, I like being on the road, you know? I'm not someone who is tied down to one place. And I like being by myself. Not crowded by a lot

of people.” Jude truculently stuck out his chin to emphasize the fact that he didn’t need them or their damned pack, but there was that *hungry* expression in his eyes that belied his words and the beginnings of a bond pinged as if in alarm.

“I understand. Being part of a pack is voluntary, Jude. No one that is going to tell you how much you should contribute to the pack. You just *are* a part of us. If you wish to be at the heart of us then you may. If you wish to be a distant star then ... so be it,” Gareth explained in as neutral a tone as he could muster even as the beginnings of a bond was bonging now like a church bell instead of pinging. Jude shifted from foot to foot as if he wasn’t sure how to respond to that. So Gareth said, “How about we go get your bags packed and brought down?” When Jude nodded and started heading into the house, Gareth turned to Molly and said, “Scout the woods and see if there’s any evidence of Mack or his pack around. Do *not* engage. Just report back.”

She nodded and lightly dashed into the woods. He walked up the porch stairs and through the front door that Jude was holding open for him. The fact that Jude had *waited* for him brought a flush of pleasure to his cheeks. The beginnings of a bond settled, especially as they walked side by side up the stairs.

“Who’s this Paavo guy?” Jude asked, casually though it was clear from the slight tenseness in his shoulders that he was worried about the Alpha of Alphas though he did not know him. He had, undoubtedly heard and *felt* Gareth’s alarm at finding him at Fallowmere. “Some bigwig in the werewolf world?”

Gareth’s heart beat harder as the backs of their hands brushed together as they climbed the steps. He heard Jude’s heart race, too, and knew he was not the only one that felt this *connection* between them.

The Fates are laughing at me. I cannot take a Mate and here they put before me I cannot resist. But I must resist him to keep him and the Cold Moon Pack safe.

Yet that beginning of a Mate Bond tingled, eager to connect them forever. Gareth cleared his throat, before he said, “He is the Alpha of Alphas, head of the Werewolf Council.”

“There’s a Council?” Jude’s eyebrows rose.

“Yes, though each Alpha is ultimately responsible for his or her pack, the Council governs overall. Mostly though their role is to keep us hidden from the human world,” Gareth explained. “At least, that’s what they’ve been doing lately. They used to arbitrate disputes between packs and grant favors. But we – the Cold Moon Pack – were cut loose from the Council, because Mack went Rogue. It wasn’t official, but it seemed clear we were outcasts. So his coming is unexpected and I am uncertain what he wants.”

“Sounds like an asshole to leave you guys in the lurch like that,” Jude said.

Gareth was pleased that Jude felt the same way as the rest of the pack did about the abandonment. “It was hard to take, at first, but I think we handle things just fine on our own. Less politics anyways.”

“Werewolves have politics?” Jude shook his head in amazement.

“Oh, yes, and that seems to be the only thing the Council is good at. We haven’t really missed their *guidance*,” he couldn’t help the sarcasm that dripped into his voice, “at all.”

“So why did he come?”

“I don’t know.”

“You were afraid it was about me and my parents thought, right?” Jude asked, those red-brown eyes flickering over to him almost guiltily.

Of course, he feels guilty. He thinks he only brings trouble to the people who take him in.

“I was, but that is only because my thoughts are rather ... *centered* on you,” Gareth admitted.

“Are they? Yeah, I guess I’ve made things difficult.”

“Jude, *no*, that’s not what I meant,” Gareth said firmly and this time he touched Jude’s shoulder.

“How did you mean it then?” The beginnings of a bond jangled as if Jude was scared of the answer.

“I find you ...” The beginnings of the bond grew very still. “I’m so *happy* we found you, Jude, that you’ll be a part of the pack.”

“Oh.”

“So you see, *you* are on my mind. That’s why I jumped to the conclusion that Paavo would be here because of you, but that seems unlikely to me,” Gareth explained. “I think he’s heard of all the killings and wants to make sure I’m capable of handling Mack. With every death the likelihood of werewolves being discovered increases.”

“You’re *totally* capable of taking that guy down,” Jude said with surprisingly loyalty. “Especially if you let me help.”

The addition had Gareth grinning. “We did make a good team last night. You were quite fearless, Jude.”

“I’m not fearless.” Jude’s jaw clenched.

“From what I saw last night –”

“Fear pushes me to do stuff,” Jude interrupted him.

They’d reached the landing and were standing there outside of Jude’s bedroom. Jude put his hands on his hips and looked grimly determined.

“You were hurt,” Gareth guessed.

Jude nodded tightly. It wasn’t a new admission, but it *felt* new somehow.

“It was someone stronger than you –”

“More than one.” Jude’s fingers flexed. He didn’t look at Gareth as he said, “Look, you’re bound to find out anyways so I’d rather you hear it from me.”

“All right. Tell me.”

“Things happen in orphanages where there aren’t enough staff to keep track of what everybody’s doing and the kids are fucked up. And some of the *staff* is fucked up, too.” An angry light appeared in Jude’s eyes and his hands fisted.

Gareth nearly held his breath. “You were attacked by some of the staff at the orphanage?”

Another tight nod. “It was this guy, Crowley. Fucking bastard. He’s the type that befriends the kids who are most vulnerable, right? The kid that’s needy and not worldly yet.” Jude glared at the floor as if that was Crowley. “Anyways, I’d just been placed there and I didn’t know better so I thought he was my friend. Some of the older kids were giving me a hard time and Crowley stood up for me. I thought I was *lucky* to have him on my side.”

Gareth felt his claws wanting to burst through his skin all of the sudden. He knew what this story was likely to be and he *hated* that it happened to anyone at all, but to Jude? He nearly saw red thinking of it. But he kept himself very still and his expression neutral. The beginnings of a bond jerked and shivered.

Jude let out a sharp laugh. “*My friend*. God, I was so fucking stupid!”

“You weren’t stupid. You were a kid who wanted someone to care about you. For an adult to make things better,” Gareth disagreed.

“Well, maybe I was *understandably* stupid, but it was stupid nonetheless.” Jude’s shoulders lifted for a moment as tension seemed to grip his entire body. But when he spoke his voice was almost colorless, “So, yeah, you can probably guess what happened. He’s touching me, you know, a hug, a

brush of his hands, all that stuff to see if I'm *good* with him doing it. Then he tries to do *more* and I – I freak the fuck out. So he backs away, acting as if it was a big misunderstanding. But I can see it's bullshit then. I finally figure a little bit of it out. So I told another one of the staff what happened. Her name was Carrie or something like that. She was nice. Always smelled like plums. Well, Crowley was gone the next day. I thought he was fired for what he did."

"He should have been," Gareth said. "You were brave to tell."

"You say brave, I say stupid, because, you see, there wasn't any evidence other than *my* word that Crowley did anything wrong and kids like me are *liars*, right?" Those red-brown eyes rose to his for a second and then darted away. Despite Jude's tough talk, it was obvious he still hurt at not being believed. "So he was back on the job in no time, only he's not pretending to be my friend anymore and one night ..." Jude suddenly stopped talking and swallowed hard as if the words had crammed into his throat and he simply couldn't speak. "One night, I wake up with someone's hand over my mouth and ... and I'm being yanked out of bed."

Gareth closed his eyes for a moment. He could see Jude awakening with a man's cruel palm locked over his lips. Jude would try to scream, but the man would threaten him, tell him the ugly things he will do to him if Jude makes a sound. So Jude would go limp and silent as the man took him from the relative safety of his room to a secret spot where his screams will go unheard.

"The orphanage was only half-occupied, because the place was a shithole. It was falling down all over, but in the west wing where he took me part of the ceiling had collapsed so they weren't using that area," Jude explained. Fine tremors were running through his lithe form and Gareth wished with all he was that he could comfort the young man, but touches, as almost always with Jude, would be the wrong move especially when talking about something like this. "So he takes me to the farthest room in the empty wing from the occupied area. It's like half a fucking mile away. There's this stained mattress on the floor and it *smells*."

Gareth's shoulders jerked as he imagined the scent of semen, blood and pain all mixed together. The smells were so acute it was almost as if they rose up right then and he wondered if it was *Jude* who was remembering and passing on that information to him over the beginnings of a bond.

Jude licked his lips and swallowed hard again. "So Crowley sets me down on it, but I jump up and rush past him. He doesn't even *try* to stop me. I get to the door to the room and then these other two older boys are filling the threshold. It's the same assholes that Crowley *protected* me from in the first place. Except he was never *actually* protecting me. The whole thing was a setup. Do you see? He'd had them harass me so he could play the savior and then – then ... They held me down for him. I was helpless. I was such a fucking little victim and my blood is on that mattress with all the other victims' forever and ever."

"Jude," he whispered, horrified at how Jude saw himself.

"No, Gareth, it's *true*. When you're weak you're vulnerable. So after that I learned how to fight, but mostly fighting is about not backing down so that the other guy thinks you're crazy. Too crazy to deal with and they'll just go onto the next victim." Jude gave him a brittle smile. "Unless they're like you, of course, who aren't impressed by theatrics like that. But, thankfully, there aren't many people who can fight like you do and are bad guys."

"Jude, I –"

But Jude held up a hand to silence him. "Thing is that I'm *good* in a fight, Gareth. You *should* let me help you with Mack, because I won't back down. Not ever. And even that crazy bastard might think twice when he sees that."

There were so many things that Mack wanted to say to Jude as he looked into those fierce red-brown eyes. Jude's expression though was *daring* him to say any of them, to spout some response that contained phrases about how he had been child when this happened, that he wasn't weak or responsible for anything that Crowley or any of those boys had done. But though those things were true, Jude would sneer at them, because the young

man would think Gareth was treating him like a victim that he so didn't want to be. That was much how Gareth had been with Mack when the former Alpha had gotten out of him some of the terrible things his father had done to him and his mother. He tried to remember what he had needed to hear when he'd first vomited up some of it and used that with Jude.

"I'll remember that and when the time comes to go up against Mack again and you want in ... you have a spot on the team," he said. "I can tell you're someone I can count on not to back down or let their fear rule them."

That was *not* what Jude had been expecting him to say. The young man blinked and his shoulders lowered. He opened and shut his mouth a few times, but finally said, "Good. I'm glad we figured that out."

There would be so many more conversations they would have to have about Crowley and the other bad things that had happened to Jude, but these would happen over time. Healing would never happen all at once and Jude might always bear some scars, but it would get better. Gareth just wouldn't force it.

"We should -- should get packing, right? I'm sure you want to get back to the rest of the pack as soon as possible," Jude said.

The young man abruptly turned away from him and headed into his bedroom. There was a set of saddlebags on top of the lone dresser. Jude started yanking drawers open and pulling clothes out. Gareth couldn't help but start folding them neatly to fit in the saddlebags. When Jude caught sight of this he let out a laugh. Gareth scowled at him playfully.

"What?" Gareth challenged.

"Oh, nothing, Mr. OCD."

"It will fit better in your saddlebags if it's *folded*." Gareth raised an eyebrow at him as if challenging him to say something different.

"No doubt." Jude sniggered again. "I should have *known* that you'd fold my clothes considering the pancake cutting behavior."

“You think they are related?” Gareth frowned.

“Oh, yeah, it’s all about you taking care of people.” Jude stopped laughing and rolled his lips together. He met Gareth’s gaze straight on. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Gareth stopped folding and gave Jude his full attention. “What is it?”

“Earlier when we ... outside, when we ... when we were going to kiss ...”

“I think it would have been more than just kissing,” Gareth remarked dryly even as his heart started doing that lurching thing in his chest. The beginnings of a bond was *trembling*.

Please let that not have reminded him of Crowley!

“Yeah, I think so, too.” Jude got a *longing* look on his face, which told Gareth that it had *not* reminded him of Crowley at all. “But I think I might have been the cause of that.”

“Yes, Jude, I am pretty sure that *you* are the cause of me wanting to kiss you,” Gareth said with a sage nod and smile.

“No, I didn’t mean that. I meant ... like magic or something. I could feel something *inside* of me reaching for something inside of you and then you had that weird reaction,” Jude struggled to explain. “I knew that if those two parts of us touched that *something* was going to happen. We would be connected and ... I don’t know. It was a little like what I did to Mack’s Rogues. I was going to bind you to me somehow.”

“And you think that it is some kind of *witch* magic?” Gareth asked.

Jude nodded. “I just wanted you to know that if you might be feeling something *more* for me than maybe is -- is *natural*. I’m trying to control it! I --”

“Jude, it *isn’t* anything to do with your witch side,” Gareth interrupted him.

“Then it’s a werewolf thing?” Jude cocked his head to the side and the beginnings of the bond seemed to do a rumba. Doubts assailed him on all sides about telling Jude what this was. He couldn’t have a Mate! Jude wouldn’t likely want to be a Mate! Not now. Not yet.

But Gareth nodded, because he would not lie to Jude as others had. Just as he was about to explain, he heard the crunching of tires on the gravel drive. Immediately, he went over to the window in Jude’s bedroom that faced the front. A sheriff’s cruiser had pulled up in front of the house. Gareth frowned. Sheriff Fairweather and Deputy Reynolds got out.

“Georgia! What brings you here? Not that it isn’t a pleasure, but I’m afraid you’ve caught me getting ready to go out,” Grandmother Sophia’s voice drifted up from the porch.

“Sophia,” Sheriff Fairweather’s voice held a note of sadness. She did not ask how the old lady was doing or make any small talk at all. Instead, she got right to the point, “Is your grandson here?”

“Jude is here. I think he’s upstairs,” Grandmother Sophia said, a note of alarm entering her voice. “Why?”

“We need to speak to him,” Sheriff Fairweather answered tightly.

“About what?” Grandmother Sophia questioned.

Sheriff Fairweather’s voice was cold yet sad all at the same time. “About a *murder*.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: QUESTIONING

Jude withdrew from the window, a sort of lurching backwards shuffle, so that Sheriff Fairweather and Deputy Reynolds couldn't see him if they chanced to glance up. His heart was thudding dully in his chest and the sour taste of fear flooded his mouth. The authorities wanted to talk to him. He didn't even really register *what* they wanted to talk to him about. It was enough that he was on their radar.

But it's more than just being on their radar. They want to question me for murder! That's crazy! Totally and utterly crazy and no way am I just going to trot out there and get in the sheriff's vehicle and let her drive me to the station. No fucking way!

He might have said that last bit out loud as he stumbled away from the window. He felt that strange connection to Gareth flare up inside of him. It wanted to complete the circuit stronger than before. It seemed to think that he would be safe if just he and Gareth were together.

I can't do that to Gareth. It feels like mind control or something. Maybe not quite like that. Maybe it would be voluntary, but But he'd be saddled with me and I'd be saddled with him. No matter how close to him I feel, we just met. Maybe he's a good guy, but I don't know that!

Yet Jude *did* know that. He knew it in his bones. His "logical" mind was the thing fighting against what he felt. Normally he was trying to logic himself into trusting people, rationalizing that not everyone was a Crowley. But this thing with Gareth was so overwhelming. He just knew if he gave into it that everything would change. Forever. There was no going back. So he resisted.

"Jude, it will be all right. This is just a misunderstanding." Gareth pivoted from the window, too, and patted the air between them in a calming gesture..

Jude shook his head and let out a frantic, brittle laugh. "It doesn't matter! I'm *always* blamed! You can't trust them!"

Gareth's expression darkened for a moment and his topaz eyes glowed like gold. Jude realized that the Alpha's protective instincts had flared to life on *his* account. *His* fear was making Gareth wolf-out a little bit and some part of him tingled with the knowledge that he wasn't alone this time to face the threat. That calmed him somewhat. Just as Gareth was about to say something more Grandmother Sophia's voice rose up from down below.

"What murder, Georgia? The wolf attacks?" she asked, sounding bewildered yet Jude knew the underlying tone. It was the Mama Bear tone she got when someone was threatening one of her kids. He felt a flare of the old trust in her come back to life in his chest.

"No, Sophia, not a wolf killing. This is plain human on human crime," Sheriff Fairweather answered.

"My goodness! Who died? And how? And why would you think my Jude has anything to do with that?" Grandmother Sophia gasped.

"It was Geraldine Higgins," Sheriff Fairweather said with an exhausted sigh as if the words were tiring to even say.

"Oh, no! She has - *had* - three little ones!" Grandmother Sophia's voice cracked with sadness.

"Yes, now they're motherless," that was said flatly and Jude imagined the sheriff's Coke-bottle colored eyes narrowing with determination behind her mirrored sunglasses. She was not the type of woman who would allow murders to go unpunished.

"Jude does not know Geraldine, Georgia," Grandmother Sophia said. "He would have no reason to kill her."

"Some crimes are just *senseless*," the sheriff responded.

"Jude *isn't* like that," Grandmother Sophia said with no hesitation. "I've known sick people and Jude is not one of them! Why do you think he's involved in this? You have to at least tell me that."

“I’d rather talk to Jude *first*.”

Grandmother Sophia seemed unimpressed as she asked, “When did this murder take place?”

“Late last night, early this morning,” Sheriff Fairweather answered.

“Sophia, we –”

“Well, it can’t have been Jude that did that, Georgia. He was here all last night with me and his friends. You have five eyewitnesses to tell you that Jude didn’t leave the house,” Grandmother Sophia told her in her sweet as honey voice yet it was also the voice she used when telling people that they were *not* getting anything past her.

“Were you awake *all* night, Sophia?” Sheriff Fairweather asked gently. It was clear she thought Grandmother Sophia was an old lady who didn’t realize that if she was asleep that he could have snuck out without her knowing.

“Actually, I *was*,” Grandmother Sophia’s voice sharpened. “You see, Georgia, we had a little trouble with *wolves* last night. One actually got into the house. Jude and his friends fended it off.”

“Wolves?” Reynolds’ voice rose up for the first time. Jude was amused that he sounded a little nervous and he imagined the big man glancing nervously around him at the forest, expecting shaggy shapes to be seen loping between the trees. The man had been such a hard ass, know it all that he was surprised by the fear.

Did something happen since I saw him?

“Yes, *wolves*. There are *four* of them. They’re responsible for the deaths,” Grandmother Sophia informed the sheriff coolly. “Including Geraldine’s!”

Sheriff Fairweather’s tone continued to be gentle as she said, “This death, Sophia, was done by a human. We really need to speak to Jude.”

“You’ll talk to him here?” Grandmother Sophia asked.

“No, we think it would be better if we spoke to him at the station,” she answered.

Sweat broke out across Jude’s upper lip. He had done nothing wrong, certainly hadn’t killed a person! But he didn’t believe that the authorities would figure that out or even care to. They had picked a culprit and - like always - it was him.

A thousand thoughts flittered through his mind. All of them focused on escape. Could he race outside through the back door and lose himself in the woods? Maybe he could even shift into his wolf form out there and then they *never* would find him. Once the coast was clear he could grab his bike and take off across the country. Maybe *then* they’d look for whoever really killed this Geraldine.

But why do they think it’s me in the first place? It doesn’t matter. I just need to go ...

His gaze went to Gareth and, suddenly, he realized that if he left that the Rogues would still keep attacking Gareth and the Cold Moon Pack. Gareth would have no choice other than to try and kill them in return. He and Mack were evenly matched from what Jude had seen last night, but Gareth was too proud and Alpha-ey to accept help unless it was Jude’s. He knew that killing Mack would hurt Gareth, scar him perhaps forever. This strange connection to Gareth quivered again almost like it mourned that pain already.

I might be able to stop that from happening. Maybe I have my mother’s power. Maybe I can turn the Rogues back into good werewolves again.
Jude snorted. *Good werewolves sounds like an oxymoron.*

And there was one more *selfish* consideration he had that made leaving unappealing. He’d be alone again. Only this time he would know that there could be a true place for him. He loved Tessa and Grandmother Sophia, but this taste of pack was ... he might resist it. He might even resent it at times.

But there was something about it that called to him. Walking away before seeing if it was possible? He didn't know if he could do that. But then again wouldn't it be better to have the illusion of a choice? That the pack wouldn't turn on him and kick him out for being a hybrid? Yet when he pictured himself on the road now there was no pleasure in it. It felt cold.

And this time he'd have to deal with being a werewolf and a witch. He could feel the strange magic underneath his skin and his werewolf senses were pinging in all directions. He began to hyperventilate.

Gareth's large hands landed on his slender shoulders. The Alpha stared into Jude's eyes. "Listen to me. Everything is going to be all right. Running is not an option. Not now."

"How did you know I was thinking of running?"

Gareth gave him a sympathetic look. "Your eyes show everything you're thinking."

"Yeah? Well, then you should know that every time I have a run in with the authorities they pin things on me. They don't care about the truth!" Jude sputtered out.

"They'll care. We'll make them care. You're not alone. But running now will just confirm what they're thinking. We need to find out what evidence they have against you --"

"I didn't do it!"

"Of course not." Gareth pulled Jude against him.

At first Jude held himself stiffly in Gareth's embrace, not returning it, but then he found himself clinging to the other man. "I'm scared. I can't be ... be locked up again. I can't stand it. I feel like it would kill me."

"That's the wolf in you needing to run free." Gareth ran a hand up and down his back. "Listen to me, we're going to take care of this. We're going to keep you safe."

Jude flashed back to when he'd fled the orphanage after Crowley's attack. He'd been picked up for shoplifting and dragged to a dingy police station. The ironic part was that he *hadn't* stolen anything from the shop they claimed he had. But he had stolen some food earlier at another store.

They'd put him in a holding cell with ten other men. The clang of the cell door closing had filled his veins with ice. The skin on his back had twitched as he felt the predators in that cell zero in on him. They knew prey when they saw it.

"Jude!" Sheriff Fairweather called from the bottom of the stairs. He was amazed at how his new werewolf hearing allowed him to determine her exact location. He was also annoyed with himself because he hadn't heard her enter the house. "Jude, please come down!"

"We will be down in a moment, Sheriff," Gareth called to her.

Jude tunneled further against him. He didn't want to go downstairs, but he knew that this was not a completely rational desire.

This is murder. Not a petty theft. Sheriff Fairweather seemed nice and fair. Tessa likes her. So maybe she won't railroad me, put me in prison and throwaway the key.

"Jude, we need to deal with this as calmly as we can. I know your wolf is in a fight or flight mode, but nothing bad is going to happen. I *won't* allow anything bad to happen," Gareth reassured him, his voice soft and gentle.

Some more of the tension in Jude bled out. Gareth was right. He couldn't run. He was innocent. He didn't *have* to run. He wasn't a little kid any longer. He could hold his own. He let out a breath and pulled out of the embrace. Faint tremors still moved his limbs slightly, but he fisted his hands and they stopped. Gareth cupped his face and Jude had this wild idea that the man was going to kiss him again. Instead, Gareth just looked deeply into Jude's eyes - maybe to read more of his thoughts - but then Jude found himself calming more. He was falling into those amber eyes. Those amber eyes were all around him. Gareth kissed his forehead, breaking the eye contact. Jude blinked. The fear was gone. He was quite settled.

“How did you do that?” Jude asked him.

Gareth flashed him a smile that was a strange mixture of elation and worry. “We have a connection, Jude. We can influence how each other feels. Take away fear and stress.”

“Why do we --”

There was a creak of a floorboard outside his room and Jude saw Sheriff Fairweather standing there. His words were lost as he stared at her. The intruder. The authority. Her hands were loose at her sides. Her gun was on her hip like it probably always was, but the snap that held it in place was still firmly fastened. She looked almost as friendly as the day before. She looked far more tired and Jude guessed she had been up half the night.

Strangely, she smelled of copper. The scent hung heavy on her and he couldn't figure out why at first. But then he realized what the scent was.

Blood. She's cleaned herself up but she's been around a lot of blood.

“I didn't kill anyone,” Jude told her.

“I'm sure you didn't, but we have some questions for you,” she said evenly.

Jude heard another creak downstairs and his eyes narrowed. He asked sharply, “Is that Reynolds?”

Sheriff Fairweather sighed and turned her Coke-bottle green eyes towards the bottom of the stairs. “Reynolds, I've got this. Why don't you go wait outside like I told you?”

“But, Sheriff!”

“No, but, everything is fine here. We're just talking.” She turned back to them and scrubbed a hand over the back of her neck saying, “Sorry about that. He's just seen too many cop shows.”

“Is Jude a suspect in this murder?” Gareth asked.

Sheriff Fairweather regarded Gareth for long moments. “You’re Gareth, right? The tracker? You had the wolf with you.”

At first this made no sense to Jude, but then he remembered that Molly had been in her wolf form when they’d come to the grocery store. Gareth must have met the sheriff before that.

“Is Jude a suspect?” Gareth stepped between her and Jude.

Jude hadn’t seen Gareth use his sheer size to intimidate anyone before. So far the Alpha had almost tried to *minimize* how big he was. But not any longer. He loomed over the sheriff. She was not a small woman but she looked like it in comparison to Gareth. She had to tilt her head back to look into his eyes and he stood close enough that she was dwarfed by his breadth.

“Where’s your wolf?” she asked.

“Is Jude a suspect?” Gareth repeated.

They stared into each other’s eyes, but it was certainly *not* lovingly.

It’s a challenge, Jude realized. His heart started thumping hard. He wanted Gareth to win this challenge, but it seemed like the sheriff wasn’t going to back down, but then ... she did. After impossibly long moments.

Her gaze dropped and she said to the floor, “No, not at this time. But he *is* a person of interest.”

“If Jude is *not* a suspect then he does *not* need to come to the station with you nor answer your questions,” Gareth said firmly.

“If he’s innocent -” she began.

“Exercising his rights does not make him *guilty*,” Gareth interrupted coolly.

“It would assist in our investigation and it would clarify if Jude has any involvement - including *innocent* involvement - in what’s happened if he

were to speak with us,” she said. Her gaze drifted over to the saddlebags on top of the dresser half filled with clothes. Jude realized then how guilty this must make him look like he was running away. Her gaze was inscrutable as it swung back to him. “Are you going somewhere?”

“After the wolf attack last night it’s not safe to stay here,” Gareth answered. “All of us are leaving including Grandmother Sophia.”

“I’m afraid that Jude can’t leave Forest Glenn right now. Not until we get things cleared up,” she responded shifting her weight from one hip to the other.

“Didn’t we just tell you that four wolves were here last night?” Jude growled, finding his voice again. “You expect me to stay here with man-eaters circling?”

“I’m sure we could find a place for you all in town. Might be a little tight for a while, but --”

“That’s not acceptable, Sheriff. I have the right to take my people home,” Gareth said sternly.

My people. Home. Jude was shocked by how those words reverberated in his chest. They made him feel warm inside. They exposed a hunger in him that he thought he had banished, or, at least, his association with Grandmother Sophia and Tessa had quenched a little. But clearly not. *When he says those words I feel like I belong.*

“All the more reason for Jude to talk to us,” Sheriff Fairweather said, sounding eminently reasonable, but Jude’s panic began to spike again.

Gareth gripped Jude’s closest hand and Jude wanted to lean into him for support. He immediately stopped himself from doing that. Maybe it was reliving the Crowley incident or just having someone in a uniform ask to question him, but he felt like he was regressing to when he was a child. Jude couldn’t -- *wouldn’t* - let himself be made a victim again. But he kept hold of Gareth’s hand. That line inside of him that wanted to connect with Gareth *quivered* in almost happy manner.

“Forgive me, Sheriff, but until you tell us why you believe Jude has anything to do with this murder I don’t see why he should talk to you at all,” Gareth said.

Jude was impressed by how Gareth’s tone never changed. It was calm and authoritative. No matter what the sheriff did or said, he remained implacable.

Must be another Alpha thing.

Jude found himself looking up at the other man in admiration, but he quickly stopped that. Soon he would be asking Gareth to cut his pancakes and pack his clothes for him. He was an adult damnit! He should stand on his own two feet and deal with all of this himself.

Besides if I start depending on him when he decides I’m too much trouble it will be all the harder to handle things myself. Can’t trust anyone.

Jude tried to withdraw his hand, but Gareth did not let go. The Alpha’s eyes flickered down at him and in that momentary meeting of the gazes Jude realized that Gareth *knew* where his thoughts had already taken him. He flushed in shame. It was so needy to *want* people to take care of you. You couldn’t expect people to take care of you. Gareth’s thumb moved up and down along the back of Jude’s hand. It was a comforting touch.

“Tell me about this wolf attack. Sophia said there were *four* wolves?” she questioned, not answering Gareth’s query.

“That’s right. Three circled the house while the fourth got inside and tried to attack Grandmother Sophia. Jude protected her,” Gareth said, his voice clipped.

“What time did this happen?” she asked. She didn’t pull out a notepad and pen, but Jude was certain that she was memorizing everything that they said.

And if we say something different later, even the littlest bit of difference, she'll pounce.

"Around midnight," Gareth answered.

It likely had been midnight when the Rogues attacked. Jude flashed back to the battle in the hallway. There had been so much blood. Grandmother Sophia had cleaned it up but blood always remained. Maybe that was what he was smelling now and not Sheriff Fairweather. That blood could have been proof that he had been here last night, fighting wolves, instead of out killing someone. But they couldn't tell Sheriff Fairweather about the near death experience he had, because there weren't even faint scars on his arm to back him up. They couldn't tell her about the other parts of what happened last night either. Werewolves, packs, Rogues, Alphas and standoffs were beyond her jurisdiction and, likely, her imagination.

"And you chased them off?" she asked, tilting her head to the side curiously.

"Yes, into the woods," he said.

"Jude, did you go into the woods?" the sheriff asked.

He glanced at Gareth - then realizing that looked guilty he quickly looked away - then said firmly, "Yes, I did."

He knew that telling lies as close to the truth as possible would be better, because he'd be able to keep it straight in his head.

"And you were within visual sight of each other all the time?" she asked.

"Not for enough time for me to go kill this Geraldine person! A few minutes maybe, not more," Jude cried out. He wondered if he should have lied. Just told her that they *never* were separated, but she wouldn't have believed that.

"It was a few minutes at most that we were out of each other's sight," Gareth confirmed. "Where was this woman killed?"

“Her home is about three miles from here. She was found there,” Sheriff Fairweather said and a feeling of dread went through Jude.

Three miles for a wolf was nothing. Could the Rogues have killed this woman? After all, what were the odds of another murderer running around the town of Forest Glenn? Not very high.

He could tell from Gareth’s slightly tensed shoulders and immediate wariness that the Alpha thought there must be a connection, too. Sheriff Fairweather fished out of her back pocket her cell phone. She unlocked it and flicked to something. She turned the phone to face Jude so he could see what she had pulled up. Both he and Gareth crowded in to look.

It was a photograph of a woman’s bare leg in the unforgiving light of a strobe flash. Her skin looked like alabaster against the dark wood floor and the pool of crimson spreading all over it. But it wasn’t her leg or the blood that held his attention. It was the *wallet*.

The wallet looked like it had fallen out of someone’s pocket as they were leaning over and, in the dark, hadn’t realized that it was gone. Jude recognized the wallet. It was his wallet. The wallet he didn’t really need since it contained only his license and the credit card that Tessa had given him.

Now it was covered in blood and left at a crime scene.

How did I lose it? Must have been during the struggle with the fourth Rogue. Though I didn’t notice it carrying anything out of there in it’s mouth but ... but it must have. And after losing the battle to us, the Rogues must have gone and killed that woman and left my wallet there to frame me.

“You recognize the wallet, don’t you, Jude?” Sheriff Fairweather asked quietly.

Jude opened his mouth to answer, but at that moment Grandmother Sophia appeared in the doorway. She was holding her cellphone out in front of her like it was a shield. Jude saw that she had put a call on speaker.

Tessa's voice came out loud and clear, "Sheriff Fairweather, you are to cease questioning my client until I arrive. Do you understand?"

"Tessa," the sheriff said but got no farther.

"Jude did not do this, Georgia. I will *not* let anyone harm my little brother so no more questioning until I get there," Tessa said firmly. "I'm getting on a flight now. And, Jude, I know you can hear me. Don't say a word without me present. Do you understand?"

"I -- Tessa, you shouldn't come --"

"Jude, this is legal territory you're into now. That's *my* territory. I will be there in a few hours," Tessa talked over him. "Hang tight."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: CANNOT RUN

“So you’re *not* coming back to Fallowmere?” Nina confirmed. Her tone was neutral even though he knew that he’d just made her dealings with the Alpha of Alphas, Paavo, that much harder, but she was his Beta and she saw it as her job to take on impossible burdens and make them look easy.

“No, can’t. Though Sheriff Fairweather left she made it clear that Jude needs to remain in the area,” Gareth explained.

After Tessa’s warning on the phone and her statement that she was boarding a plane and would be in Forest Glenn in several hours, Sheriff Fairweather – her jaw set in unhappiness, as it was clear she *liked* Tessa and knew that questioning Jude would damage their friendship – had agreed to wait to talk to Jude until Tessa arrived. She warned though that Jude was not to leave Forest Glenn, which meant their plan to go to Fallowmere was delayed.

Gareth hadn’t been pleased with any of this, wanting to get Jude and Grandmother Sophia to the far greater safety of the pack house, but it could have been worse. They could have insisted that Jude come back to the sheriff’s office with them and wait in a cell until Tessa got there.

“It doesn’t sound like the sheriff thinks Jude did it. Surely, she wouldn’t let a murderer walk around free,” Nina said suddenly.

“She likely has someone watching the roads.” Gareth scanned the lush woods around them. These went for miles in every direction. Werewolves like them could disappear in them. So could humans given enough gear. Sheriff Fairweather was *not* stupid. She would know that, too. The fact that she let Jude alone on his own recognizance meant something. “Actually, you’re right, she probably personally does not, but with all the deaths I imagine she is under extreme pressure to do something. Anything. So unless Jude can explain why his wallet was at the crime scene, I think that she will have to take some kind of action.”

His eyes sought out Jude. The young man was sitting on the ground with his back to a tree. Molly, Raj and Jacob had each taken time to go sit with him ever since the sheriff had left. Jude had actually cracked a smile a few

times as Raj had entertained him with stories of his travels. He'd sat mostly in silence with Molly and Jacob, but Gareth could tell their presence comforted him. He was now on his own, chewing on a piece of long grass, gazing into the woods with a terrible longing and then swinging that gaze to Gareth with that *same* longing as if Gareth offered the same freedom as those woods did, the same belonging. Those red-brown eyes were so beseeching.

Are we mates? Could this be happening truly between us?

The fact that he might have found his mate in this cauldron of uncertainty and danger somehow did not surprise Gareth. He felt that the fates might be laughing at him. Hadn't he scoffed at the idea of a mate? Hadn't he said he was beyond taking a mate? The fact that he'd vowed it in order to protect the pack only made it slightly less ironic, but not much. When he looked at Jude his heart swelled just as his protective instincts kicked on overtime. It was the most natural feelings in the world.

"I've contacted Thomas, too," Nina said, naming the pack's attorney and drawing Gareth out of his thoughts. "He's ready to come to Forest Glenn at a moment's notice. I told him about Tessa though. He looked her up and saw she has the right to practice in Wisconsin. Seems she's pretty impressive, and he's happy to play second to her."

"Thomas plays second to no one!" Gareth snorted. The tall, blond English werewolf was aggressive with everyone except Gareth. With the Alpha he was a puppy.

"I know it surprised me, too, but he said that no one is more loyal than a sister in a case like this," she said.

"Yeah, that's true. Tessa seems rather fierce. I would expect nothing else from a sister of Jude."

"I'm sure though ..." she hesitated. "Wouldn't it be better to have someone who knows the *whole* story? Just in case?"

She meant that Thomas, who was a pack member as well as their attorney, knew all about the supernatural world that lay hidden just underneath the human one. Tessa was supposed to be a human, but that wasn't exactly true.

"Well, she's going to learn about it. Seems that Grandmother Sophia *only* took in kids that were special," he remarked dryly.

Nina drew in a sharp breath and asked hopefully, "Another sister?"

"No, not a werewolf. Seems Tessa is a witch, too, though she has *no idea* about it. She showed no real aptitude for magic so Grandmother Sophia decided not to embroil her in our world, but after Jude's reaction to being kept in the dark, she's decided to tell all her kids. Tessa next," Gareth explained.

Jude's expression when Grandmother Sophia had explained that Tessa, too, was not human had been interesting.

"So I can tell Tessa about what I am?" Jude's eyes had gone to Gareth even as he was asking Grandmother Sophia.

"Yes, my Jude," she'd answered and Gareth had confirmed it with a brief nod.

Jude ran a hand through his hair and his mouth opened and closed several times. Finally, he said, "I'm so glad that I don't have to lie to her, that I can share this with her." But then he shook his head and looked at Grandmother Sophia with a touch of betrayal again. "Did you tell her about – about all of this before?"

Jude was clearly imagining being the only one not in the know about the supernatural world in his foster home, but Grandmother Sophia quickly stated that was not so.

"No, her magic has not bloomed. It normally happens around puberty, if it will happen at all," she explained.

"But mine didn't and I have magic!" Jude held up his fully healed arm.

“Yes, but you are not like other witches or other werewolves. I had no idea what to expect. I still don’t,” she said.

“So you *are* going to tell her about all of this?” Jude stared at her.

“Yes, my Jude. I’m going to tell her. I’m going to tell all of you kids now.”

She sighed, her old eyes looking wistful. “The supernatural world can be so *complicated* and *unforgiving*, Jude. I know you think I should have told you all from the start, but I thought it was best if you all kept out of it. I’m still not completely sure telling those whose non-human side is inactive is the right thing to do.”

“Tessa would *want* to know,” Jude insisted.

Grandmother Sophia sighed. “I think she would, too, and she shall learn.”

The way that the old witch said those last words had Gareth believing that the knowledge of being a witch would be more of a burden than a joy in the end. Gareth knew that Bronwyn sometimes felt the same.

“To be a witch is to always face temptation. You know that, one day, you will *fall*,” Bronwyn had told him.

To Gareth it was clear that Grandmother Sophia had fallen, how and why and what exactly had happened were unknown to him, but he was just as certain that Sophia was someone in the witch world, but was hiding her past.

“Damn, I was so hoping to have another woman in the pack,” Nina sighed.

She quickly became all business again, “Should I send more pack members to you? Mack and the other Rogues are clearly behind this framing of Jude. Who knows what else they’ll think of!”

“It’s a classic Mack tactic in a way,” Gareth remarked.

“The sane Mack would *never* have framed an innocent person!” Nina protested.

“No, I know. But he would have found a way to keep his enemy pinned down where he wanted them,” he said.

“Yes, I suppose you are right at that,” she said slowly as she considered his words.

“Nina, I want you to have Cassidy look into something else for me in addition to Jude’s parents,” he said.

“Of course, what?”

He hesitated. He hadn’t told her about Mack’s claims about all the Council being Rogues. “I want him to research everything he can about Rogues. The history. The legends. Everything.”

“All right. I’ll get him on that right away,” she said and he knew it would be done.

“Do you think you can keep Paavo occupied there for a bit?” he asked.

“I can at that. It won’t be easy, but I’m rather itching for the challenge of it.” He could hear her smile in her voice.

“That’s one good thing then.”

They said goodbye and he slid his cellphone into his pocket. Jude’s red-brown eyes caught the movement and though the young man had quickly looked away from him, Gareth *felt* as much as *saw* that momentary revelation that Jude wanted him near. The beginning of the bond thrummed. He strolled over to the young man and looked down at him with a smile.

Is this my mate?

Gareth was so stunned by how the question interrupted his intentions. Jude cocked his head to the side.

“Gareth?”

“Uhm, yes ...”

“Yes?” Jude’s mouth twitched suspiciously.

Gareth put on a mock scowl. “You think to tease me?”

“Never, my pancake-cutting Alpha,” Jude chuckled.

Gareth’s mouth pulled into a grin. “Want to shift and go run in the woods?”

Jude’s eyebrows rose and his pink lips parted. “We – we can do that? But it’s daytime and there’s no moon.”

“Neither are necessary. You can whenever you like,” Gareth said.

The young man got to his feet and dusted grass off of his jeans. He threw the grass stem down as well. “What about if Tessa comes while we’re out there?”

“I’ll know when she returns through the Pack Bonds. You might feel it, too,” Gareth explained.

Jude’s eyes widened at that. “You mean there’s like a form of telepathy in the pack?”

“That makes it sound like we can hear each other’s thoughts clearly like we’re speaking now, but it’s more like we can feel each other’s emotions and some thoughts if we concentrate on them *very* hard,” he explained.

Jude thought on this and nodded. “So it’s safe to go out then?”

“Yes, so the only question remains is whether you want to,” he said.

Jude brightened. “Absolutely, I’m feeling so fidgety like I want to crawl out of my skin.”

“In a moment, you literally will be,” Gareth said. “Let’s head out.”

The two of them walked deep into the woods and stopped finally by a fallen down tree. While Gareth had no issues with nudity, he knew that Jude

wasn't at the place yet where being naked in front of others was casual. So the spot he chose by an old, moss covered tree was hidden from the house and felt isolated like it was just the two of them. The log would be a handy place to store their clothes as well. Gareth took off his shirt and laid it down. He felt Jude's uncertainty and arousal immediately.

"We need to undress, Jude, otherwise what we're wearing will disappear just like our human body does, only the clothing doesn't reappear when we shift back," Gareth explained, smiling.

"I wondered where my stuff went last night," Jude laughed. "Do you suppose there's some magical realm where all our clothes are?"

Gareth snorted. "I'm only guessing here but I think the clothing is actually consumed by the magical energy that it takes to change. Though can you imagine if you were right and the inhabitants of that realm suddenly found clothing appearing everywhere?"

"Like raining clothes?" Jude grinned wider. "That would be a pain."

Gareth looked meaningfully at Jude's shirt. "I would let you undress alone, but you're going to have to be with me naked anyways in order to accomplish your first voluntary shift."

"Right, it's cool. I mean we were naked before together. I – I slept in your arms naked all night," Jude replied, clearing his throat and blushing adorably.

"Nudity is undoubtedly equated with sexuality in your head, but you'll find that this goes away. When you shift between man and wolf constantly you won't be bothered by it. It's just practical," Gareth explained.

Those red-brown eyes lifted to him and Jude surprised him when he said, "It's actually being naked with *you* that makes me think of sex. I wouldn't have an issue if I was out here with Molly, Raj or Jacob."

Because he is my mate and he will always think of me that way. This thought like the others had come unbidden.

“Ah,” Gareth said.

There was a rush of heat to his groin. He had told himself that he was going to be completely neutral with Jude during this excursion. He needed to be the teacher, the Alpha, not a potential lover, not a prospective mate. That almost bond between them quivered though to give lie to his plans.

Jude seemed pleased by his reaction though. He calmly took his shirt off and placed it on the log beside Gareth's. He stepped out of his shoes then in one fluid movement he took off his underwear and jeans. He folded those over the log, too, stood up and looked expectantly at Gareth.

Gareth's gaze slid down Jude's lean, muscular form. The young man had the longest legs that Gareth automatically imagined wound around his waist. His mind then, unhelpfully, also offered the image of him thrusting inside of Jude with those legs crossed at his ankles behind Gareth's lower back. He imagined the young man's head thrown back in ecstasy as they mated. Gareth's cock was immediately fully hard and he cursed internally as he realized he had to undress and show Jude *exactly* how interested he was in things other than running.

“Problem?” Jude asked with a curious tilt of his head.

“No, no. Just one moment.” Gareth turned away from Jude and slid off his own jeans. He was willing his erection to calm down and being rough with the material against his skin in the hopes that this would work when Jude murmured something that had him even *harder*.

“Don't turn away. I want to see your tattoo.”

Gareth felt the lightest press of Jude's fingers on his left arm. His cock was at full attention. He sighed and swallowed. So much for his hope that he could instruct Jude on the fundamentals of shifting without revealing his massive erection. He turned around and waited for Jude's reaction. Would it be good or bad?

Jude's soulful eyes immediately dropped to his erection and he let out a soft whoosh of air. "You really are big all over."

"I'm proportional, I think," Gareth found himself saying and he wondered if Jude was imagining him as he had Jude earlier.

With an impish grin, Jude looked up at him through dark lashes. "I thought nudity isn't sexual when you shift from man to wolf all the time."

Gareth's voice dropped another octave than usual as he found himself saying, "It's only *you* I act this way with."

Their gazes met again and that sensual heat passed between them. The almost bond was vibrating so fast now that Gareth could almost physically see it thrashing inside of him. He cleared his throat and forced himself to look away from Jude. The vibration eased, but only enough to let him breathe.

I must be calm. I must be in control. Jude must be safe with me above all things.

"So ..." he sounded strangled. He cleared his throat and tried again, "So this will be your first voluntary shift."

There was a momentary silence and Gareth chanced the quickest glance at Jude. The young man didn't look angry or hurt that Gareth had broken the moment. Jude was nibbling on his lower lip and frowning at the forest floor.

"How?" Jude asked. "I don't know how I did it last night. I don't feel ..." He stopped.

Gareth smiled. "You do feel it, don't you? Like your wolf could simply jump *through* you?"

The furrows in Jude's forehead grew deeper and Gareth found himself reaching over and smoothing them. His hand was there before he knew it. Jude glanced up at him surprised, but then a softer expression took its place before a third, and unexpected, shuttered look came soon after.

“What do I need to do to let my wolf out?” Jude asked.

Gareth slowly lowered his hand and cleared his throat. “You need only picture your wolf. Imagine you leaping into the wolf’s body and it will be so. It may take a few times. Do not be frustrated --”

He did not get to finish his sentence before the familiar white mist surrounded Jude and out of it jumped Jude’s beautiful wolf.

“You did it! That’s incredible! First try! You’re a natural,” Gareth praised.

Jude looked down at his paws, at first with confusion, as if he hadn’t quite realized he had shifted. He lifted one front paw then the other and almost fell over. He kept both paws on the ground. He scrunched his toes in the dirt. He must have caught sight of his tail in the corner of his eye because he started turning around in circles trying to get a better look at it. Gareth couldn’t stop the burst of laughter that came out of his mouth. Jude stopped chasing his tail and looked at the Alpha balefully.

“Oh, Jude, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make fun. But if he could see yourself -- no, no, I know, tails are the best.”

Jude’s tail wagged once. Gareth sank to his haunches so that they were almost eye to eye again. The earth was cool beneath his feet. He reached out tentatively and petted Jude’s neck with both hands. Jude stiffened, but then relaxed under the massage, his eyelids half closing. When Gareth stopped, Jude immediately nosed under his hands to get him to start again.

Gareth petted the soft head, scratching behind Jude’s ears and under his chin. Jude’s eyes had completely shut by the time he was making long slow strokes from head to tail.

My mate is beautiful, the thought came, as always, unbidden and alarming, though somehow less so. He quickly stood.

“I need to shift, too, now, Jude, and we can run together.”

Jude though still looked rather longingly at Gareth's hands, clearly realizing that once Gareth was in wolf form there would be no pettings from them. Gareth couldn't resist digging the fingers of both hands in Jude's silky fur one last time before releasing the young man and swiftly shifting himself. For him to go from wolf to man took half a heartbeat. When he turned towards Jude he saw admiration in the other wolf's eyes.

Gareth gave one wag of his tail and dipped his head indicating that they should run now. Jude surprised him by immediately leaping over him and the log with a mighty jump. Jude paused when he landed, giving Gareth a challenging look over his shoulder.

Think I can't do that? Let me show you a thing or two!

Gareth's wolf, which was much larger than Jude's, sprang over the log as well in a graceful bound, but he didn't stop. He raced ahead. Jude gave chase. He slowed until they were running side by side.

The air whooshed through his fur as the two of them darted between trees and leaped over or dove under fallen limbs. At times, they were flying past one another, one taking the high road while the other took the low. They crisscrossed through the woods until they reached a rushing stream and they paused to drink.

As he was lapping water, he felt a sprinkle of water across his nose. He looked over at Jude and the young man looked suspiciously innocent.

Gareth lowered his head to the water to drink again when he caught sight one of Jude's front paws lifting from the stream and flicking the water at him. His head jerked towards Jude while the young looked up at the sky as if he had *no* idea that anything had happened. Gareth lowered his head one last time. Jude did the same and the Alpha struck.

He leaped onto Jude causing the young man's right shoulder to splash into the water. Jude let out surprised yips, but then he got his footing again and he wiggled out from under Gareth and jumped on the Alpha. The two of them rolled over and over again, play fighting with gentle bites. Finally,

Jude was on top for a moment and he licked Gareth's nose. Gareth licked Jude's. And they stared at one another with pink tongues lolling out.

Normally, Gareth would *never* let another wolf be on top of him even in play. But this was Jude and he knew the young man *feared* being dominated. Considering what happened with Crowley he completely understood it. So he let Jude look down upon him. There was no challenge there. Just companionship. Then Jude licked him again and heat rolled through the Alpha. Without thought, Gareth shifted back to human form as did Jude. Now Jude was astride his naked groin.

This was a mistake. Why did I do that?

Jude's pupils were huge with desire and both of them were erect. Jude's breathing was also heavy from the play or need, Gareth wasn't sure which. Jude lifted his right hand and reached down to touch Gareth's tattoo like he had in the past. Gareth's cock *quivered* as Jude traced the intricate lines with his fingertips.

"Jude," his voice was almost guttural with need. "Jude, you need to -- need to stop."

"Why?" a breath of a question.

Jude's expression was almost dreamy as he touched Gareth. The tattoo felt like it was on *fire* and the almost bond between them wasn't just vibrating it was *straining*.

"Because ... because ... because it's making me lose control. I don't want to lose control with you," Gareth found himself admitting.

"I can feel the magic in the ink," Jude whispered. "It calls to me."

In that moment, with that statement, Gareth suddenly understood that Jude was half witch. As much as he could teach him about his werewolf side, there would be a part of him that Gareth could not help with. He almost felt the need to howl at this thought. His wolf wanted there to be *nothing* that they didn't share.

Mates, he heard that word repeated in his head. He dug his fingernails into his palm. *We can't be. This puts the Cold Moon pack at risk!* And then he heard another phrase that Mack had often used, *Your mate is a part of your soul. You cannot deny the existence of something that is a part of you. At least not without going mad.*

“What does it call you to do, Jude?” Gareth asked, his voice husky. Jude felt the almost bond, too. He had to explain what it was so Jude would understand that something irrevocable was happening to them.

Those fingertips did not stop following the swirls of ink in his flesh, unerringly tracing them perfectly, even as Jude looked up at his face and away from his chest. “To join.”

“What do you mean?” Gareth asked even as his heart hammered. The almost bond between them *strained* more towards Jude even as he tried to hold it back. It was a losing battle and some part of him did not care.

But Mack was made weak by Eliza! But before she died, she made him strong and happy and complete. I didn't know. I couldn't know. Could that be for me, too?

He had not yet explained to Jude what this was or could be. Could one not accept such a bond?

“Jude, I need to tell you something –”

“You’re supposed to be mine, Gareth,” Jude was saying and his red-brown eyes were black with just the thinnest ring of color around them. It was arousal and something more.

“I am yours. I am your Alpha,” Gareth responded, trying to put strength behind his words even as his wolf cried, *Mate!*

“No, not that. More. There’s more. There’s this *thing* between us and it calls to me. The magic in your tattoo tells me so and this sense of having a broken connection inside of me *hurts*,” Jude answered.

Hurts? Oh, Jude, my Jude, my mate, I would not see you hurt for all the world.

Jude suddenly wrapped his left hand around Gareth's neck and pressed his body full length against the Alpha's as he pressed their lips together.

Arousal coursed through Gareth like champagne bubbles in his blood. His arms surged around the young man's waist and back. He was lost in this moment.

This is what I have been missing all my life. I have not been complete. But I will be. With Jude.

But suddenly Jude was yanking away from him. The young man held both of his hands against his chest like the were wounded paws, but Gareth saw they were limned with red.

Magic!

Jude's cock was still as hard as an iron bar, but his confusion stopped Gareth cold even as desire still corkscrewed up his spine.

"I'm sorry!" Jude suddenly gasped out and held his hands out to Gareth as if evidence of some hidden guilt. The red flared around Jude's fingers and it was beautiful. "I don't know what came over me. I -- I almost ... *trapped* you. God, Gareth, I'm so sorry! I can't help myself!"

Jude was about to scramble off of him when Gareth caught his waist and held him there. "Neither of us can. We're fighting against ... against our *souls*. It won't work. Not without us going mad."

"What are you talking about? It's this magic in me! Maybe the stuff the old witches used to enslave werewolves! I --"

"No, it isn't. Please listen," Gareth said firmly.

"What is it then?" Jude still looked ready to bolt.

Gareth felt his eyes welling even though he had not cried in more than a century. These were not tears of pain though, not exactly though this joy was almost painful. He swallowed and said, "It's a mate bond, Jude. That is what is pulling us together. It wants us to join."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: MEASURE OF A MAN

Mate bond. As alien as those two words sounded together to Jude on the surface of his mind, something deep within him resonated at the sound of them. *Mate bond.*

“What is a *mate bond*?” Jude asked. The words should have felt alien on his tongue, too, but they rolled off of it as if he said them every day.

Gareth licked his lips and Jude found himself simply *fascinated* by the Alpha’s tongue and the way his lips shimmered afterwards in the sunlight that dappled them and the ground around them.

“It’s ... it’s that feeling - that *fluttering* feeling - in your chest. The sense that there’s this line within you wanting - no, *needing* - to connect,” Gareth struggled to explain, but Jude knew what he meant. He felt it, too.

“But what does it *mean*?” Jude pressed even though he thought he knew that as well. The words conjured up a married couple, only *more* than married. They were inseparable. They shared the sort of love that was only in stories. They had the sort of lives that Jude had never even allowed himself to wish for.

Gareth licked his lips *again* and Jude bit down on his own lower lip to repress a moan. Everything Gareth did had thoughts of erect cocks, dripping with cum popping into his consciousness, which caused a surge in his own cock. He was sure that he was dripping himself at that moment.

He enjoyed sex. But it had always been a *mild* pleasure for him. He’d never obsessed about it. He certainly had never felt so overcome with it.

Crowley had perhaps taken some of the joy and spontaneity out of it. After all, Jude *always* topped. That let him keep control of the situation and made sure he could bolt if he had to. Couldn’t be too careful. He was coupling with people he’d met on the road after all. It wasn’t like there was any great connection between them and after it was over he thought never to see them again. And he rarely had the money for a bed or even privacy. So mostly his couplings were done quickly and fiercely in an alleyway or behind a

store. These people were interchangeable and forgettable. He used them and forgot them. They were not important to him.

But Gareth was a completely different experience.

He was nothing at all like those faceless people he thrust himself into.

Not at all.

Jude was pretty sure that Gareth had never bottomed in his life for one thing. And as for connection ... even if there hadn't been this fluttering, desperate thing in his chest and the tingle of magic in his fingertips he already had a connection with the Alpha. For all his tough talk, he felt as close to Gareth as he did to Tessa and Grandmother Sophia and he thought this might be *mild* compared to how he would come to feel.

A shiver of pleasure and fear went through him. The silky slide of Gareth's outer thighs against his inner ones had the deep part of himself on top while the logical part of his mind was kept suppressed. And the way Gareth looked up at him. So *wild*. So *needy*. Jude was the same. He felt like he was riding a knife's edge. He could tip over at any moment.

Jude could feel the coiled tension within Gareth, felt the Alpha's need to be in control, to dominate. That last bit had Jude's thoughts tumbling over one another. He remembered Crowley and the others on top of him, hurting him. He remembered being made to do things he did not want and to feel shame like a scalding brand on his back. He knew that Gareth would *never* do that to him. Though he had only known the Alpha for a short time it was more than long enough to understand Gareth's nature and know what he was or wasn't capable of. But still the fear persisted though he realized it was muted, separate from him. An old wound.

"A mate bond means that we're *meant* for one another," Gareth explained. He opened his mouth to say something more, but didn't. He just watched Jude carefully.

The words didn't quite register. Because never in Jude's life had he felt *meant* for another person or had the sense that another person was *meant* for him. Because that would mean he wasn't meant to be alone and isolated, which were the things that paradoxically kept him safe and stopped him from feeling true happiness.

"Jude, say something," Gareth begged, his voice a deep rumble in that magnificent chest.

Jude's fingers had gone back to tracing the wolf design on Gareth's skin. The tattoo called to him. It told him that Gareth was *his*. Jude had never had anyone. No one had ever been *his*. He'd always been alone and, for the most part, liked it. But the past year he had started keenly feeling the empty hours on the road with no one to talk to. He thought of Molly, Jacob and Raj. The way they had been with him, not overwhelming him or annoying him or demanding things of him, but instead just *being there*. With him and him with them. And he had never felt so ... so *good*.

And then there was Gareth, the Alpha, *his* Alpha. The man was maddening in so many ways. He wanted to save everyone, but he never saved *himself*.

As his mate I could do that. I could take care of him, Jude realized and that felt right. But the scared little boy in him, the scarred part of him that Crowley had made, imagined Gareth ordering him about, not letting him make his own decisions, not respecting Jude if he became Gareth's. After all, if he submitted then he was *lesser*, wasn't he? His head spun.

"Jude?" Gareth repeated again and clarity entering his eyes and Jude thought of something else.

If he let Gareth get control of himself, if he had them pass up this moment, then maybe Gareth *wouldn't* be his. He might lose his chance to make Gareth his and his alone.

But do I want that? He asked of himself and the answer came back quicker than he ever expected, *Yes*.

But does he want me? Jude stared down in Gareth's topaz eyes and what he saw there was a mixture of emotions.

Concern? Yes, he worried that Jude wasn't talking. Lust? Yes, the hard press of his cock against Jude's belly confirmed that even if the blown pupils didn't. Love? Jude tried to tell him that it was simply too soon for Gareth to *love* him, but he was sure that he saw that in the Alpha's gaze, too. And there was also something else. Uncertainty?

That had Jude trying to escape again. If Gareth was *uncertain* about the mate bond that meant he was uncertain about what he felt for Jude and that might mean ... The thoughts ran into each other and became a mess of fear and self-loathing, but Gareth did not let him go.

"Jude, please! This isn't me trying to trap you!" Gareth explained, his hands tightening on Jude's trim waist. "The mate bond is something beyond us. Some people say that the fact that werewolves have true mates is a sign that we're blessed, not cursed!"

"Or magic! Maybe it's not a mate bond at all. Maybe --"

"It is! It's not *bad*. It's ... *incredible*. Don't you feel that?" Gareth asked, searching his face for confirmation that Jude felt something good about this situation.

Jude stopped struggling as Gareth's words had a chance to penetrate.

Gareth wanted him to want the mate bond. So was Gareth uncertain of *him* or of *his reaction* to the news?

Seeing him stop flailing, Gareth continued, "I know we just met, but from the moment I saw you I felt ..." Gareth rolled his lips, clearly looking for the right words. "*Bound*. I had always scoffed at Mack when he told me how it was between himself and Eliza. I actually told Nina that I would never take a mate, because it would endanger the pack and --"

“Endanger the pack? What do you mean? How could this endanger anyone?”

Gareth thumped his head back down against the grass. He had been straining upwards to catch Jude’s expression. “Mack went mad after Eliza’s death. Once a werewolf mates it’s for *life*.”

For life ...

Again, those words like *mate bond* resonated with that deep part of Jude as right and true. For a moment he could see his desire to be a part as an *alien* thing, a reaction to being *wounded* by Crowley and others. Tessa saw it that way. Grandmother Sophia did, too. What if it was? What if all his life he was to be intrinsically bonded to another person and to a pack? What if that was his true nature? The fact that this deep part of him *wasn’t* scared of the very concept surprised Jude and it made him wonder.

“So when Eliza was killed ...” Jude left that sentence hanging for Gareth to fill in.

The Alpha did so, “Mack lost his mind, went Rogue, and started the killing the pack.” His voice was rough and raw. Tears appeared in Gareth’s stunning topaz eyes and he looked off into the woods as if unable to look at Jude while he explained, “He came back to Fallowmere. The pack members that were there were waiting to *help* him. To help him *mourn*. To *ease* his pain. He was a father to many of us. He was one to *me*. He was the man we trusted above all others. And then he ...” Gareth swallowed. He turned his head to look up at Jude. “We were *fifty* strong, Jude. *Fifty*. Now we’re *twenty-five*.”

Jude understood then what he was saying. Mack had slaughtered *half* of the pack. He had killed people who trusted and loved him. Thinking of how strong Molly, Raj and Jacob were, he guessed that the pack members who died had been so shocked by Mack’s attack that many of them likely didn’t even *try* to defend themselves. They had been likely cut down where they stood to greet him.

“I swore that I would not take a mate, because it would risk the pack. After all, what if something happened to my mate? Would I do what Mack did? Would I make twenty-five and turn it into *zero*?” Gareth asked. He looked haunted. More than haunted, he looked *terrified* at the very thought.

He cares so much about the pack and I understand. I see how much Molly, Raj and Jacob love and trust him. It's more than family. It's ... purer than that. As Alpha he is their protector and guide. They are powerless against him.

“Gareth,” he whispered the Alpha’s name.

“I wasn’t there until Mack had already ... I wasn’t strong enough ... I wasn’t fast enough ...” Gareth shook his head. His unbound hair spilled over the ground. Jude was tempted to run his fingers through the silky strands, but he needed a clear head, not one muddled by desire.

“I know you did all you could.” And Jude really was sure of that. Gareth was the type to sacrifice *everything* for others.

That's why he needs me to step in and stop him from burning out, that voice inside of him said, the deep part where *mate bond* was right and true.

“I’m not sure.” Gareth cleared his throat. “So you see ... to find I have a mate *now* ...”

“Just when you pledged *not* to have one must suck,” Jude finished.

“No! It could *never* suck.” Gareth laughed sadly. “It’s as if I’m being tested.”

Jude thought on that. “So how do you pass the test? Ignore the mate bond?”

Even as Jude asked that he felt a welling of nausea in his stomach. Though he wasn't sure what he felt about it fully, the thought of Gareth wanting to *ignore* or *resist* it was terrible even if he understood the reasoning.

Gareth's topaz eyes were fixed upon him. "No. Whatever I believed before I know now that I ... that there is no stopping this. So I must figure out what to do for the pack."

"Gareth, you would never harm the pack even if you went Rogue," Jude found himself saying with utter conviction.

"I would have thought that about Mack," he said gently, but still there was this yearning to believe Jude. "I would have never believed he could go Rogue at all."

"I don't know what Mack was like before, but I know that you wouldn't hurt the pack if something happened to me - I mean your mate," Jude quickly corrected, high spots of color were on his cheeks.

Gareth's fingertips went to that pink flush and trailed over it. "Do you think I would do something different? Do you think I would love you any less than Mack loved Eliza?"

Love? That word is so strange. So tangled. So hard to trust.

But Jude didn't let it stop him from saying the simple truth, which was, "Yes, even if you were to go Rogue the only person you would hurt would be *yourself*."

Gareth stared up at him in a sort of wonder as if Jude had said something profound. But in Jude's mind it was obvious that Gareth would always turn his bad emotions upon *himself*. It was something Jude saw him doing even *now*.

"I would like to think that I would direct my madness and grief only at myself," Gareth said thoughtfully.

“You would,” Jude assured him.

“Am I a good enough Alpha that I would always protect the pack and that the twenty-five of us ... actually, we’ll be *twenty-six* with you. A new wolf. A new brother. And ...” The Alpha’s gaze grew wet and *hopeful* again even as he clearly was conflicted about the pack’s safety. “And perhaps something *more* to celebrate.”

“A mate for the Alpha?” Jude asked, surprised by how his mouth did not stumble over the words. What would the others think if he came out of the woods as Gareth’s mate? They’d accepted the half witch part, but now he was suddenly going to be sitting beside Gareth? He wasn’t sure how they would react.

“Yes. A beautiful, intelligent, wonderful brother and Alpha’s mate.”

Gareth’s hands lightly ran up and down Jude’s sides. Jude shivered under the Alpha’s touch. It felt so right to him and he had this urge to roll over and offer his throat to Gareth. But he stayed on top and only allowed his own hands to caress the Alpha’s chest. If Gareth *ever* thought that he would be the type to roll over and *submit* he needed to get that thought out of his head.

“Are you sure you want me as that, Gareth? You hardly know me,” Jude pointed out.

“I can take the measure of a man in a few seconds, Jude,” Gareth said with a huff of laughter. “I knew when I met you that you were extraordinary.”

“A freak,” Jude corrected, his fingers stilling on the tattoo.

Gareth’s topaz eyes actually flashed angrily. “No. You’re special, Jude.”

The magic in the tattoo surged up into his fingers and Jude shifted. This caused both of them to moan softly.

“We should get up and perhaps get dressed to talk more,” Gareth suggested.
“My body is finding ways to endlessly distract me.”

“No.” The Alpha actually tried to get up, but Jude lightly pushed him down flat on his back again. Though his touch was not enough to have kept a normal man down, it definitely wasn’t enough to move Gareth. Yet the Alpha laid back.

Gareth’s eyebrows rose. “No?”

“I want you here. Just like this,” Jude breathed. “I won’t let you go.”

Gareth’s own breathing quickened and his eyes became pools of velvety darkness that seemed to want to swallow Jude whole. Jude stopped himself from falling into them with a surge of willpower, but he felt he was hanging on only by his fingernails.

“Why don’t you want me to get up, Jude? What are you afraid will happen if I do?” Gareth’s voice was deep, but soft.

His hands covered Jude’s and started running up and down Jude’s arms.

Gareth’s hands weren’t exactly rough, but Jude could feel that he used them to work and likely spar. They were utterly masculine hands and they were so large that it seemed he swallowed all of Jude’s arms within them.

Part of him thought how very *right* it was to have such a powerful mate.

His mate was strong enough to keep him safe, to protect him and love him in the way he should be loved. Jude shook his head as these thoughts seemed to crowd out any rational conversation he could have with Gareth and the Alpha was still waiting on his answer.

“I don’t want you to leave me.” Again, the words just slipped out and Jude’s heart clenched in his chest.

Gareth’s expression immediately softened and his hands stilled in their rubbing. He held firmly onto Jude’s arms. “I would never do that.”

“I shouldn’t care if you did,” Jude’s voice was tight and he was shocked at the sudden hot tears in his eyes. “We just met. I’m fine on my own. I shouldn’t --”

“I will *never* leave you.”

Gareth reached up and pulled Jude down completely against him. Those large hands were on his back, tracing up and down his spine, as Gareth held him. He felt the Alpha’s hot breath against the side of his face and he could hear the steady thump of Gareth’s heart in the ear he had pressed against the massive chest. The sound of the Alpha’s heartbeat was so comforting.

Jude’s eyes half closed without him being aware of it. The few tears that had already formed dropped onto the tattoo.

“I’m scared, Gareth,” Jude confessed, his voice a bare whisper.

“Of being my mate?” Gareth asked.

“Yes, and of *not* being your mate.” Jude let out a bitter laugh before

“I understand. You’ve had so much to absorb. This on top of everything else ...” Gareth let the sentence hang and he just petted Jude.

Jude rooted against him. The feeling of the Alpha’s skin and warmth had his body both waking up and calming down.

I’m safe, Jude realized. *I’m utterly safe in his arms.*

His body relaxed even more and his eyelids completely shut. Gareth began to hum at some point. It was a tune one might hear sung over campfires. It was an old song, Jude guessed. Maybe it was something Gareth had learned in his childhood or another, even older werewolf might have taught it to him. The Alpha’s hands were in his hair, his fingers carding through Jude’s curls. Even as their two erections pressed between their bellies,

Gareth made absolutely no move to turn this moment sexual. He kept it tender and gentle and safe.

Because this is the type of man - or werewolf - he is, Jude determined. So what am I scared of? Crowley's memory?

"Jude?" Gareth asked, pausing in his humming.

Jude must have physically shown something of what he was feeling. "I was just thinking ..."

"About?" Gareth's hands were starting to still.

"Don't stop!" Jude cried.

"Stop?"

"Petting me. I like it." Jude snuggled closer.

Gareth chuckled and the sound echoed in his chest. "All right. I won't stop petting you. You seemed to enjoy it just as much when you were in your wolf form."

Jude remembered very clearly how it had felt to be touched by Gareth when he was all furry. It had been wonderful! He almost thought about turning into a wolf just so Gareth would scratch behind his ears and under his chin again. But then one of Gareth's hands slid down Jude's spine and rested on the swell of his ass and he didn't want to become a wolf at all. Being human was wonderful, too.

"What would happen if we had sex?" Jude asked.

He felt the large body stiffen beneath his then relax. "Well ... other than the *obvious* things?"

Jude whapped his arm. “Yes, other than *those*. As you know I’m not a virgin, Gareth. I don’t know if werewolves are supposed to wait and have sex only with their mates, but if that’s so that ship sailed a long time ago.”

Crowley had been his first, but Jude shoved that thought away. He didn’t consider Crowley to be the first of *anything*. Only when he had *chosen* to give his body to someone else had it counted.

“No, and werewolves are rather ... promiscuous,” Gareth replied almost neutrally.

Jude’s forehead furrowed. “Raj did mention something this morning about it being sexual sometimes when you guys were all curled on top of one another.”

“Yes,” Gareth agreed and Jude felt all the meaning behind that word or thought he did.

“You guys have orgies?” Jude asked, deciding to just come out and find out the truth.

“Yes, we’ve had them. Sex is ... a bonding experience for a pack,” Gareth was clearly explaining carefully.

“Even people who have mates join in?!” Jude heard the scandal in his voice. It came from him imagining Gareth with someone else. He didn’t like that. He *hated* the idea of that. He could very well imagine ripping a person limb from limb if they touched the Alpha. Jude was shocked at the immediate and overwhelming negativity he felt about the other man being with someone else.

“That’s decided between the mates. When you find your true mate you don’t ... you don’t want anyone else,” Gareth said quietly. “But sex is such a small part of what makes a couple work I think for some it does not matter. Not that I would know about the couple part.”

“You’ve never been in a long term relationship?” Jude was both surprised and glad. Surprised, because Gareth seemed like the faithful boyfriend type, but glad for obvious reasons.

Or maybe they aren’t obvious. He’s not mine. But that deep part in his mind begged to differ as did the magic in the tattoo that beat a steady rhythm in his mind.

“No. I’ve never found anyone that could ... keep me interested. My loyalty has been to the pack alone,” Gareth replied and there was a heaviness in his tone.

“You’re thinking again that you don’t deserve any happiness outside of your role as Alpha and that is just *wrong*, Gareth,” Jude intuited and squeezed the other man’s shoulders.

“I ... perhaps.”

“Even if ... even if this mate thing wasn’t possible between us I would still want you to be happy. I would want you to be with someone. As my Alpha --”

“Your Alpha?” Gareth sounded *thrilled*.

Jude realized what he had said. Was there any reason for him to deny it? No. It was true and he actually *liked* the idea of Gareth as his Alpha. So he said, “Yes, you are my Alpha.”

Gareth held him tightly. Jude could feel him grinning even though he couldn’t see his face.

“Stop getting all excited! I’ve told you in other ways that this is true, haven’t I?” But even as Jude teased him, he loved how happy Gareth was it.

“You have, but --”

“But I finally admitted it fully? Yeah, I know. I bet you never thought I’d say it..” Jude laughed and tucked his head under Gareth’s chin. “You sound happier about it then about the mate bond.”

“No, it’s just ... less complicated,” Gareth answered. “Because you’ve *chosen* me as your Alpha but the mate bond is ...”

“What if I chose it?” Jude asked. “How would I choose it, I mean?”

“There’s a ceremony,” Gareth said. “Days of feasting and --”

“So it’s not just that we have sex and poof! We’re mated, right?”

Gareth stilled again. “Well, it’s *sort of* like that.”

“Oh.”

“Why?”

Jude struggled to put his feelings into words. “I want to get to know you. I want to explore this attraction to you. I want to be sure ... to be sure that it’s not this thing *outside* of us that’s driving us to be together, but that we want to choose each other.”

Gareth sighed. “I want that, too, but ... but, Jude, I don’t think I can resist this for much longer. Can you?”

Jude was silent. He rose up on his elbows to see Gareth’s face. His cock was a hard bar between them. Gareth’s was as well. “If I kiss you ... if I stroke you ... if we cum together will that bind us?”

Gareth’s topaz eyes regarded him quite seriously even as his cock twitched between their bellies. “I think we would be safe doing that, but if we were to couple --”

“I only top and I’m betting that you *never* bottom so ... I’m guessing we’ll be okay on that score,” Jude told him, feeling his excitement grow at the thought that he could explore Gareth’s incredible body without risk.

One of Gareth’s eyebrows rose at this. “You truly do not think you will ever submit to me?”

Jude flashed back on that initial shared dream they’d had of the woods where he had rolled over for Gareth. That same shiver of arousal and fear filled him. But he would not speak of that mixture now. Instead, he teased, “Maybe I’m just intent on making *you* submit to *me*.”

Gareth gave him a challenging look. “Let’s see you try.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: PAST BONDS AND PACT BONDS

Playfulness filled the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack at Jude's challenge and like a wolf pup at play, Gareth sprang into action. Gareth flipped their positions with Jude letting out a yelp of surprise as he flew over onto his back and Gareth sat astride him. Stunned, Jude looked up at him with his mouth sweetly open in an "O" of surprise, but then Jude froze and Gareth realized his mistake. Hadn't he told himself *not* to pin Jude earlier because of what it might inspire, like memories of Crowley? But he'd forgotten with Jude's challenging words. He was about to hop off, but then Jude grasped his cock. It was Gareth's time to freeze.

With his red-brown eyes twinkling, Jude said, "The person who has your cock in their hand controls the world."

Gareth grunted as Jude stroked him once and heat bloomed hotter than ever between his legs. "I see."

Jude swiped his thumb along the slit and precum wetted the heat, making it glisten. "Not yet you don't. I'm going to make you *beg*."

Gareth bared his teeth in a smile. "I don't think so."

"Oh, do Alphas not beg?"

"Rarely, if ever."

Gareth let out a hiss almost immediately as Jude used his pointer finger to swipe up another bead of precum and brought it to his lips. The Alpha wondered if he had just tempted fate by that statement. Jude had this grin on his face that was completely open and happy. There were no shadows in his eyes so Gareth realized he could stay astride this bewitching young man.

Jude's one hand began to stroke him in a steady up and down motion, but his other hand rose to Gareth's mouth. Jude pressed them against the Alpha's lips. Gareth opened his mouth and his lips parted. He started to lick Jude's fingers. The young man's red-brown eyes hooded as Gareth's

tongue slid meaningfully between Jude's pointer and middle fingers. There was this faint, seductive smile on his lips. He abruptly pulled his fingers from Gareth's mouth. They were wet and slick with his spit. He didn't know *why* Jude had done this until that hand slipped around his hip to his ass.

Jude had to sit up, shifting Gareth down to his thighs to reach. Jude's mouth dragged along his jaw, mouthing his skin and licking lips, but not letting Gareth complete the kiss. That teasing hand on his ass had him drawing in a sharp breath as it wandered between his ass cheeks.

Those fingers drew down his cleft until the fingertips seemed to dance over his anus. Gareth growled and he captured Jude's mouth in a kiss the moment the young man's fingers pressed against his anus. Heat seemed to connect his ass and cock. Jude's pointer finger wiggled inside of him and delved deeper. Gareth's breathing grew harsh as he frantically fluttered his tongue inside of Jude's mouth. That caused the young man to moan helplessly against him.

Jude's cock had been trapped beneath Gareth's body, but now it was brushing against his belly. He grasped Jude's cock just like Jude was holding onto his and he stroked the young man in turn. Jude's movements stuttered and Gareth grinned into the kiss. As if in revenge, Jude slid a second finger inside of him and found that special spot that had his cock quivering. Jude crooked his fingers and rubbed it. Gareth pressed frantically against Jude's flat belly. He felt Jude grinning into their kiss.

Gareth was betting that Jude believed that being penetrated meant that one was being submissive, but that wasn't really true. Submissive or dominant was a question of a person's perception. He had found he could be dominant whether he was taking or giving during sex. There were times when he had been even *more* in control when a man slid his cock inside of his ass.

He could make his partner lose all control just with a few squeezes of his powerful ass muscles. He'd ridden men to spectacular endings. Lips raw from kissing. Cum coating their sweaty skin. Cum leaking from his ass.

The scent of it wrapping around their spent bodies like the sweetest perfume. He wanted that with Jude. He wanted to be *in* Jude, too. But that could only happen if they determined to bond and Jude trusted him. So he had to resist the urge to draw Jude's pretty, pink cock inside of his ass that was getting wonderfully stretched and prodded.

And he thought that he was doing a really good job of keeping control of himself, but that slowly changed.

As they rocked together, frantically pumping each other's cocks, Jude's fingers scrabbling inside of him, arousal burning hotter and hotter, the beginning of their bond vibrated again until it seemed a blur inside of him. It wanted to connect. It wanted to complete. It was so overwhelming that Gareth had to pause their kissing to control it. His desire to just thrust his body down on top of Jude's cock was almost impossible to resist.

He shut his eyes tightly. He heard Jude's frantic breathing in his ears. Their hands had both stilled even though Jude's fingers were still deep inside of him. He squeezed his ass muscles around Jude's fingers and the young man shuddered beneath him. He felt the quiver in Jude's cock as well. The young man wanted to be inside of him, too. He opened his eyes and he saw that Jude's were mostly a velvety black now, just the slenderest ring of red-brown surrounding his pupils.

"If we mate, Jude, the bond will complete," Gareth's voice was low and raspy.

Jude nodded and swallowed. "It's so hard to ... I want to ... to be inside of you. I want us to be joined ..."

"You're not ready," Gareth said with no uncertainty.

A flash of anger appeared in those eyes that had been limpid pools of desire. "Speak only for yourself, Gareth!"

Gareth didn't get angry in return at Jude's determination to not be talked for. He understood. "All right. You tell me. Are you ready for us to mate?"

Jude blinked, but then looked away, his cheeks flaming. “You called my bluff.”

“Yes, I did.” Gareth smiled, not unkindly. He took in a shuddering breath. “But here’s the deal I can’t keep doing this without mounting –”

“*Mounting?*” Jude’s eyes widened.

“Without taking your pretty cock inside of me, better? Less wolf-like?” Gareth gave him a small nip on his lower lip. “So I think we need to switch this up.”

“How so?” Jude’s eyebrows drew together suspiciously.

“I think our cocks need to be securely in *other* openings,” Gareth explained and urged Jude onto his back again.

Understanding dawned on Jude’s face as Gareth then got off of Jude and turned around as he straddled him again. This time his cock hovered over Jude’s mouth and his mouth was over Jude’s cock. He breathed down onto the top of Jude’s penis. It quivered. He craned his head to look back at Jude’s face. The young man was staring at his cock with the hungriest expression on his beautiful face. He watched as Jude’s lips parted and his pink tongue came out and followed along them, leaving them wet and plump. Gareth’s cock now quivered.

Jude’s hands came up to his hips and started to bring the Alpha’s cock to his mouth. Gareth grinned, knowing that Jude was all right being beneath him as they did this. Soon, he hoped, that Jude wouldn’t be thinking much of anything at all.

The almost bond trembled as his lips suctioned around Jude’s cock. In an almost mirroring move Jude’s tongue lapped at his slit. Gareth’s knees spread apart further as he tried to lower his cock into Jude’s mouth. The young man opened his mouth and Gareth sank down into that hot, wet opening.

Gareth's fingers dug into the ground on either side of Jude's hips. The damp ground scrunched against his palms. As he felt Jude's tongue press up against the back of his cock, Gareth opened his mouth wide and swallowed Jude's cock whole. There was a deep sense of satisfaction as he felt Jude suck on him while he sucked on Jude. There was this continual circuit of pleasure as he swallowed around Jude's long, slender member while Jude salivated over his thicker one.

Jude tasted of salt and earth and lemons. The last was a sweet-sour taste that was addictive. He fluttered his tongue against the back of Jude's cock, pressing up against the prominent vein there that had the young man moaning. The vibrations of Jude's moan traveled down his cock and deep within his body. A wave of heat that reminded Gareth of stepping into the sun out of the shade flowed through him. The almost bond seemed to heat up, too, as if it was softening for the connection to be made, for it to fuse with the answering line inside of Jude.

Meant. This is meant. Mine. This is mine.

The young man's fingernails dug into hips as Jude swallowed him down to hilt. He felt Jude's bottom lip press against his balls and Gareth couldn't help but pressing down. He was in Jude's throat. A hot cavern that formed tightly all around his cock for a moment as Jude swallowed convulsively.

Gareth's lips were fastened around the head of Jude's cock and he sucked hard, hard, hard in response to Jude swallowing around him again and again. His balls were already drawing up tight against his body. He knew that he was going to cum soon. Sooner than he wanted, but he soothed himself with the thought that this was the first time of *many* between them. They were *mates*. And a wild feeling of joy followed after that even as his cock jerked in Jude's mouth.

He lapped frantically at the tip of Jude's cock. Precum gushed onto his tongue. More of that lemony taste flooded his mouth. He licked that up and swallowed it down, wanting Jude's semen to become a part of him. He imagined that taking his mate's cum into himself was connecting them more

closely even though the bond quivered and strained to complete. If it felt this good now what would it feel like when they were fully connected?

His thoughts were blown apart though as Jude bobbed up and down on his cock fast and furious. Heat and cold, heat and cold, alternating sensations flooded him. His cock plumped larger as his balls almost *ached* with the need to release his seed, but he wanted them to cum together. He had to up his game.

He reached between Jude's legs and rolled his soft, furry balls with his hands. He knew he had gotten gold when Jude nearly screamed as he combined it with another round of swallowing around Jude's cock. Like his own, Jude's cock swelled. He pressed the area behind Jude's balls, massaging it, and the young man whined.

And then Gareth felt the first hot gush of semen hit the back of his throat.

His own cock jerked and spurted semen inside Jude's mouth at almost the same time. Gareth drew back so that Jude's semen would course over his tongue. He wanted to taste his mate. He would recognize it anywhere after this.

Jude's cum was earthy, but again that lemony taste was a pleasant undercurrent. He swallowed it down eagerly, but soon the amount was too much and some of it dribbled out of his mouth and down his chin. He pulled off as the last spurt ended. He pulled off and just breathed.

Jude had managed to swallow down all of his cum. The young man was now licking his softening cock lazily. Jude's eyes were half shut and he looked incredibly content. Gareth's muscles felt rather weak with his release. So before he collapsed, he gave Jude's cock one more satisfying kiss before twisting around to lie beside Jude. The young man let out a disappointed groan as if Gareth had taken away his favorite toy.

Gareth pulled Jude half on top of him. The young man came like a sleepy pup and immediately cuddled against him. Gareth kissed the top of his head. Jude's hair was slightly sweaty and was causing it to curl. They laid

there, quiet, but not uncomfortable, just breathing and coming down from the high of their arousal.

“We almost ... completed the bond,” Jude said quietly. He was touching Gareth’s tattoo again. Running his fingers along every line.

“I imagine that it’s going to get harder with time,” Gareth admitted.

“You shouldn’t think that I don’t want ... want you. I mean I ...” Jude’s voice drifted off.

“You’ve gone from being a complete loner –”

“Not *complete*. I have Tessa and Grandmother Sophia,” Jude mumbled.

“All right, not a *complete* loner, but you were intent on not depending on anyone to now having a pack and a mate -- well, almost a mate.” Gareth pointed out. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“You’re right at that. I just don’t want to be dependent at all and that won’t change even if – I mean *when* we ... when it happens.”

He could feel Jude’s warm breath on his chest and though Jude’s words were trying to tell him that there would *always* be distance between them, Gareth couldn’t help but feel that distance wouldn’t last.

“I know that you are independent, Jude, and strong and speak for yourself and have your own thoughts on things,” Gareth said, smiling as he listed off just some of Jude’s good qualities. “So my point is that it’s going to take time for both of us to figure this out. We’re coming to it unexpectedly.”

“And at a bad time,” Jude murmured. “That’s what you’re thinking, too. You want to focus on Mack, but suddenly, you’ve got me.”

“I don’t regret you at all,” Gareth said quickly and ran his fingers down Jude’s back. “You must never think that.”

“But you never imagined having a mate,” Jude pointed out, snuggling down again.

Gareth looked up at the sun dappled canopy of leaves above them both. “No, because I thought having a mate would be like having a lover and my experience with that was ... well, it wasn’t that spectacular. And after I took over the pack, having seen what Mack had done for love of Eliza, I couldn’t imagine it would ever be worth it.”

“It’s not like that at all though, is it?” Jude asked softly. “It’s like this feeling that you’ve been missing something all your life and now you’ve finally found it.”

Gareth shouldn’t have been surprised that Jude could describe the bond. It was something one *felt* and could not be learned. After all, how often had Mack told him about Eliza and his feelings for her? He had thought Mack was romancing, exaggerating. He’d had no doubt that Mack loved Eliza deeply, but he downplayed Mack’s words. Now he was starting to realize that Mack had *underplayed* the mate bond.

“Will you tell the others in the pack about us?” Jude asked. He felt curious red-brown eyes on him.

“Only when we’re ready to complete the bond,” Gareth said after a moment. “I don’t want people pressuring you.”

“Molly wouldn’t let them,” Jude snorted.

Gareth grinned. “She’s taken to you. Though people in the pack are always friendly with one another, Molly’s always kept herself a little apart. She needs her quiet.”

“I get that,” Jude said.

“Yes, I thought you might. You’ve taken to her, too,” Gareth remarked.

Jude nodded against his chest. The brush of the young man’s damp curls tickled slightly. “I like all of them actually.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I don’t normally like people.” Jude gave a shudder. “Most of them are ...”

Jude’s voice dropped off, but Gareth had a feeling that he was going to end that sentence with “like Crowley.” But that wasn’t what most people were like. Yet Jude had experienced the tougher side of life. A life where he had no backup since he’d left Grandmother Sophia’s. A life where predators featured prominently because of Jude’s beauty and vulnerability.

“I’m not saying that you’ll love everyone in the pack. Werewolves are people and the pack is varied, but there’s a difference between a pack member and an acquaintance,” Gareth explained. “There’s a connection between you and each of them. It’s a family, Jude.”

“A family,” Jude’s voice was filled with a momentary longing. He sat up to look into Gareth’s face. There were so many emotions showing in Jude’s face that Gareth held himself very still. “I haven’t let myself want ... want *things*, do you know?”

“Tell me,” Gareth said quietly.

Jude’s gaze went distant as he said, “In the foster homes before Grandmother Sophia’s anything that mattered was always taken away. People. Toys. Food. School. You couldn’t count on anything or anyone. Foster family number one was just in it for the money. They actually had a spreadsheet where they’d list how much they had to spend on us while saving as much as possible. That spreadsheet was the end of them, because it showed the abuse they’d committed. You know, not buying food?”

Gareth’s breath drew in sharply. “They – they didn’t feed you?”

Everything in his Alpha nature roared to life. Young wolves especially needed plenty of food. It could stunt their growth. Luckily, Jude wasn’t seemingly physically harmed.

Jude nodded. “I got picked up by the police for the first time for shoplifting food. Of course, the police and store owner didn’t care *what* or *why* I was stealing, only that I had. I even only took the stuff that was going to go off.”

Gareth swallowed shallowly. He could imagine a younger Jude, all legs and big eyes, looking longingly at all the food in the grocery store that was just *sitting* there while he was starving. It was a crime for him *not* to have it.

“Foster home number two had, ironically, two issues. The wife was quick with a belt while the husband was just as quick with his hands, but while she was trying to cause pain, he wanted ... well, you know.” Jude gave him a meaningful look.

So yet another abuser had gone after Jude. First, raped. Second, starved. Third, attacked again. Gareth felt sick. What other things had happened to Jude in his short life? What other hurts? His Alpha nature ached for his little wolf.

“Foster home number three had these religious freaks that locked kids in the basement who didn’t remember their bible verses. I got out of there right fast, because I’ve found the people who are the most religious – you know, wear it on their sleeves – are often the cruelest. When I heard the knob to my bedroom door rattle in the middle of the night I was so out of there.” Jude shivered.

Gareth closed his eyes again. The thought of *anyone* harming Jude made him more than sick. It filled him with rage, but he had to control it. Those people weren’t before him, but he would find them later, after this thing with Mack was over, and he would make them pay. He held that to himself even as he held Jude, keeping his emotions in check.

“And then ... Grandmother Sophia took me in,” Jude said, his expression distant again, but this time he looked fond and happy. “I thought there must be a catch, you know? She had to be handy with switch or something.

Maybe she would withhold food and lock the refrigerator. But she wasn’t like that at all. She let time show me that she wasn’t. And then there was Tessa. She was so *determined* that I join in, that I felt welcomed, that I ... *connect*.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting her then.” Gareth smiled for the first time since Jude began to confess this.

Jude’s head sank back down onto his chest. “I guess what I’m trying to tell you by telling you about all this stuff is that ... it might take me a little time to ... well, to understand this pack stuff.”

Gareth smiled broader. “You can have as much time as you need.”

As almost to give lie to Jude’s last words, the young man suddenly jerked upright again. His eyes were wide and alert. “Tessa’s here!”

Gareth knew at the same time. Molly had sent a message and Jude had heard it loud and clear. Understanding dawned in Jude’s eyes.

“Pack bonds?” Jude asked.

Gareth nodded. “Pack bonds.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN: TESSA

Tessa pulled into the gravel driveway of Grandmother Sophia's cottage.

When Grandmother Sophia had told her about the cottage Tessa had immediately brought up dozens of reasons why it was a bad idea to move there. She'd even generated a spreadsheet and Powerpoint presentation to explain why moving from the city to the country was something the elderly woman should not be doing. She'd actually *presented* the whole thing as she would have an argument in court in Grandmother Sophia's old apartment kitchen. The older woman had watched the whole thing with an affectionate - if exasperated - look on her face and then told Tessa in no uncertain terms that she was moving in a month.

The cottage was beautiful and exactly what Grandmother Sophia had always wanted. Tessa took in the deep front porch with the swing, the large yard, and the thick, green forest surrounding it. Tessa pulled the car into a spot between Grandmother Sophia's blue truck and a new Jeep.

Who owns that Jeep? It isn't one of Georgia's vehicles. Something more is going on here than Jude being a person of interest in a murder - and I cannot believe I am saying that!

One of the things that had worried Tessa the most about Grandmother Sophia moving out into the country was how isolated it was and what that would mean if the elderly woman had a fall or hurt herself. There was no neighbor who might hear her cry out or notice that she wasn't getting her mail and check on her or alert Tessa. Out here there was no one at all.

Except the sheriff and now I feel a fool for trusting her!

As if to confirm her fears about the location's isolation, when she turned off the ignition of her rental car, silence fell all around her. Not complete silence. There was the chirp of birds, the rustle of animals moving through the undergrowth and the whir of insects. She shifted uneasily in her seat and the sound was so *loud*. In New York, she would hardly have been able to hear herself think let alone her shifting in her seat. The honk of horns,

the bark of exhaust, a million people talking seemingly at once in every language on the planet ... She loved it! But here ... there was nothing to distract her from her own thoughts.

And why is that a bad thing? It should be something I welcome! A break in the insanity of being a lawyer and the problems between Libbie and I.

She would not think of her lover and partner, Libbie, here. That was something she needed to divorce herself from. She needed a clear head. She was here to be a lawyer and her client was the second most important person to her in the world, her foster brother, Jude. Grandmother Sophia only ranked a smidge above him in importance to her and she felt that was an artificial smidge. The moment she'd met Jude - she'd been seventeen and he'd been fourteen - they'd just *clicked*. Family. Tessa's life had never been the same.

At that moment, a young woman in a sundress appeared on the porch, barefoot, with her hair tied back in a loose ponytail. She cocked her head to the side and regarded Tessa with an absolutely blank expression. Except it wasn't blank. Tessa was certain that this young woman was thinking many things about her.

She's assessing me.

A faint smile suddenly appeared on the young woman's lips and she turned her head, "Grandmother Sophia, Tessa is here!"

"Oh! Wonderful!" Grandmother Sophia's rich voice came out of the screened door and Tessa's heart skipped a beat. It had been too long since she'd seen the older woman. Grandmother Sophia appeared at the door and her hands were full of flour. She gestured for Tessa to get out of the car and come into the house. "Molly, child, could you help Tessa with her bags?"

"Of course!" Molly said.

The young woman danced down the steps and across the grass to Tessa before Tessa had even a chance to open the car door. It wasn't really dancing, but more that this Molly was so graceful that her movements seemed like a dance. The black skirt suit and Manolo Blahnik shoes that had seemed so sleek and sophisticated now made her movements wobbly and uncoordinated as she tried to gain her footing on uneven ground. She held onto the door's frame so tight that her knuckles went white.

"Can I help you?" Molly's voice was low and pleasant.

"No, no, I'm all right. Just didn't dress for the country," she explained with a brittle laugh. "I wanted to be all high-priced lawyer and now I'm stumbling around on heels that want to sink through the earth to China."

Molly gave her another faint smile, but did not laugh and made none of the comments that most women would in that situation like: Don't be silly! Or, you look wonderful! Or, I see what you mean! No, nothing inane came out of Molly's soft, pink lips that were untouched by makeup yet were the perfect shade for her pale coloring and dark eyes.

Tessa was practically her opposite. Where Molly had pale as ivory skin, Tessa's was a rich, deep black. Where Molly's hair was straight as a stick and dark, Tessa's was in light, tight curls. Where Tessa had perfectly manicured nails in a rich umber color, Molly's were unadorned and bitten to the quick. Molly's sun dress was flowy and already had a stain on it - jam, maybe - while Tessa's was tailored to her curvaceous form and immaculate even after a mad cab ride and several hours on a plane. They were as different as could be and yet ... Tessa felt a kinship with this young woman who though she held herself very still seemed wild, almost feral.

Molly shocked her when the young woman reached, without asking, and plucked the keys from her right hand and popped the trunk.

"What are you doing?" Tessa found herself asked sharply.

“Getting your bags. You should go inside. Jude and Gareth will be back any moment and they’ll want to talk to you right away,” Molly said as she handed the keys back to Tessa.

Gareth? Who is Gareth? Who is Molly? What are they doing here and what do they have to do with my little brother?

“What relationship do you have with Grandmother Sophia and Jude?” Tessa asked as she took the keys from Molly and slid them into her Coach briefcase and slipped the supple leather strap over her shoulder.

“Jude is my brother and Grandmother Sophia is a friend of the pack,” Molly answered, but did not pause in her movements to the trunk where she picked up Tessa’s suitcase as if weighed nothing at all and wasn’t packed full of shoes, suits, makeup, hair accessories and more.

“Y-your brother? Like in *blood*?” Tessa felt an ache in her chest, which she immediately squashed, at the thought of Jude having an actual *blood* sister. She knew that she would never diminish in Jude’s heart no matter how many blood siblings he had and she should be glad if he had one hundred.

Molly shook her head and a strand of her hair broke loose of the ponytail and drifted over her shoulder. “No, *better than that*.”

“What do you mean? Better? And what’s a ‘friend of the pack’? And when did you meet Jude?” The questions came out of her mouth like bullets in a gun. The lawyer in her rising to the surface when her brother was concerned.

She would have asked more, but Molly turned towards the house and said over her shoulder, “Come on, let’s get you inside. You’re in danger of twisting your ankles in those shoes.”

Tessa sighed, smoothed down her skirt suit, and, carefully, walked after her saying, “You haven’t answered any of my questions, you know!”

“I know,” Molly laughed and disappeared inside.

Despite the lawyer’s frustration she found herself smiling and letting out a laugh. Molly was aggravating, but also fascinating. As soon as the screened door closed behind her, she saw Grandmother Sophia wave a spoon at her.

“Come in here, Tessa, we’re making cookies!” Grandmother Sophia called gaily.

Tessa wondered who *we* was. Molly had already taken her suitcase upstairs, obviously placing it in one of the spare rooms. Now that she was off the soft earth she walked confidently down the hallway to the kitchen. There she found her beloved grandmother standing at the counter with an Indian man beside her, stirring a bowl full of dough. The Indian man was adding chocolate chips to the bowl.

“Not so fast there, Raj,” Grandmother Sophia said to the Indian man.

“I like them chocolate-chikey,” he whined almost like a little boy despite the fact he was wearing a suit that cost the earth.

At the small kitchen table sat a mountain of a man. “You’ll let us eat some of the dough, won’t you, Grandmother Sophia?”

“Of course, Jacob! That’s half the fun with chocolate chip cookies,” Grandmother Sophia agreed. She turned around with a spoon that she held out to Tessa a spoon with a scoop of cookie dough studded with chocolate chips. “Have some, Tessa.”

Tessa took the spoon in one hand while wrapping her other arm around the elderly woman’s shoulders. “Grandmother Sophia! How I’ve missed you!”

“And you, too, my good girl!” Grandmother Sophia kissed her cheek. They broke apart and the elderly woman said, “You’ve met Molly, but these are Raj and Jacob. Everyone, this is Tessa, the woman who will put

Sheriff Fairweather in her place that Jude had *nothing* to do with that terrible death.”

Tessa started a little to realize that Molly had come into the kitchen and was leaning against the wall. She had come in so silently that Tessa hadn’t heard her enter. The others smiled and nodded at her. Silence fell and Tessa realized that there was a lot going on in this room beyond making cookies. She grasped her grandmother’s arm and tried to move her into the hallway.

“Grandmother Sophia, we should talk ... *privately*,” Tessa said.

But her grandmother shook her head and gently disengaged her arm as she went back to the dough bowl to mix in the rest of the chips. “Won’t do any good, Tessa. Werewolf hearing is *especially* keen. Might as well talk in here. Besides they can help me explain things to you.”

“*Werewolves?!* ” Tessa’s tone was utterly incredulous and, yet, something in her thrilled at the thought. As a child, she had believed in magic, unicorns, vampires and werewolves. She had believed that there was more to this world than what one could see. But then she grew up and became an attorney. All she could think was that Grandmother Sophia’s dementia had flared up again in the most extraordinary way.

“Yes, dear. Raj, Molly and Jacob are werewolves. So are Gareth and ... and Jude, though he’s something *more* as well,” Grandmother Sophia said and indicated for Raj to keep putting chips into the bowl.

Tessa gave out a sharp, disbelieving laugh but then the laughter boiled out of her and anger replaced it. “Did you three put this nonsense in her head? Did you see a defenseless old woman and --”

“Defenseless! Tessa, I swear I love you to pieces, but this going on about me being in my dotage to Georgia and Jude and now accusing these lovely people of bamboozling me --”

“But, Grandmother Sophia, you’ve just claimed these people are *werewolves*! What am I supposed to think?” Tessa interrupted.

“That it’s true?” Raj made that a question rather than a statement.

She gave him the patented “Tessa-stare” which had him quickly looking down at the bowl of dough. “I don’t know who these people are or what --”

“She’ll take too long to believe this way,” Molly said and she pushed off the wall.

“Take to long to believe *what*?” Tessa snapped at the beautiful, feral girl.

In response, Molly lifted her dress above her head - she wore no underwear, Tessa noted idly - and dropped it to the floor. Before Tessa could get over the shock at the disrobing of the young woman in her grandmother’s kitchen, her nude body was obscured by mist and then a *wolf* appeared in Molly’s place.

“Well, that lets the werewolf out of the bag,” Raj said into the silence.

Jacob let out a rumbling laugh. “She’s got to know to defend Jude and she’s ... well, she’s one of the club in a way.”

Tessa’s mouth opened in shock. Words completely escaped her. Her legs felt weak beneath her as the wolf - *no, Molly* - tapped over to her on elegant paws. Tessa sank down onto her haunches in front of the wolf. She reached with her free hand tentatively to touch Molly’s head. Her fur was so *soft*. Molly lowered her head so that Tessa could scratch her behind her ears. The wolf’s eyes - *no, Molly’s eyes* - half shut in pleasure. Tessa petted her some more. She then rose back up and stuck the spoonful of dough into her mouth and ate the entire lump before turning back to her grandmother and the others.

“Tell me everything,” she said.

And they did. From Grandmother Sophia being a witch to her finding *special* kids at orphanages to foster to Jude's mixed heritage of witch and werewolf. Tessa had a moment when she almost asked why Grandmother Sophia had chosen her. After all, she wasn't *special*, but something held her back. Maybe it was because she didn't want to hear that while the magical world was very real she wasn't any part of it.

Every word, every revelation should have been too much to take in. Grandmother Sophia a witch! Magic existing! Werewolves were real! Yet, somehow, this all fit with her deepest, most cherished beliefs about the world and so it made *sense*. So she could accept it.

As they talked, Grandmother Sophia passed the bowl of dough from hand to hand and each person took spoonful after spoonful. By the time they had finished the fight with the Rogues and their likely attempt to frame Jude, most of the dough was gone.

"Looks like there won't be any cookies," Raj remarked mournfully even as he took the last spoonful out.

"Don't be silly. We'll just make some more. There is nothing more homey than the scent of baking cookies. It will relax everyone," Grandmother Sophia said and started measuring flour, sugar and getting sticks of butter out of the refrigerator to soften.

"So, Tessa, what do you think?" Raj asked her after the tale was done.

She let out a soft laugh and squeezed the top of her nose. "I admit that when Grandmother Sophia told me that Jude was being framed for murder I didn't think it would be *simple* per se, but now? Somehow I have to keep from Georgia the truth while showing her it couldn't have been Jude."

"Exactly, my dear girl, but you'll figure something out. You always do," Grandmother Sophia said with ultimate confidence in her voice.

“We think that they’re just trying to keep Jude here so we can’t get him and Grandmother Sophia back to the safety of the pack,” Jacob said.

“While you all stayed here to fight the Rogues?” Tessa’s eyebrows crawled up to hairline.

“You don’t think Jude would go for it?” Raj asked.

“Of course, he wouldn’t. Nor would I!” Grandmother Sophia proclaimed with a shake of a her spoon. “Especially since Jude might be able to *cure* them. The killing must be stopped. And the supernatural world’s secrecy must be kept.” She paused for a moment and then bit her lower lip. “The werewolves think of themselves as separate from the rest of the supernatural order, but they aren’t. If this matter grows more public, I fear that one of the other groups will step in.”

“One of the other groups? Like the witches?” Tessa was proud that she didn’t stumble over the word.

Grandmother Sophia gave her a long, sad look, but then nodded. “Yes, it would give them an excuse to try and claim that werewolves should serve them once more.”

“While I wouldn’t mind serving you, Grandmother Sophia, but I don’t think I’d be fond of doing so for anyone else,” Raj said.

Grandmother Sophia patted his arm. “I would *never* let you be pressed into serving anyone, Raj. Not even me.”

Tessa sank down on the other kitchen table chair. Molly tapped over and sat by her feet. The young woman had chosen to remain in wolf form for the whole telling of the story.

“Doesn’t Molly have anything to say about all of this?” Tessa had asked.

“She’s a deep one,” Raj said with an affectionate nod to the wolf. “A thinker, not a talker. Besides, if we forget anything important she’ll nudge us.”

“Nudge you?” Tessa’s eyebrows rose.

“Pack bonds. They are a form of crude telepathy,” Jacob explained. “She’s also able to communicate more clearly with Gareth and Jude in her wolf form.”

“Where are they?” Tessa asked and actually looked down at Molly at her feet. The wolf looked up at her and, for half a moment, Tessa *thought* she saw a white wolf and a red-brown one running through the trees not too far away. But in a moment the image was lost.

“They went for a change and a run in the woods,” Jacob explained.

Tessa blinked and felt a strange pressure behind her eyes. Molly kept looking up at her. “A change? You mean into --”

“Wolves, yep! I think they were probably making out, too,” Raj said as he licked the back of his spoon clean. He let out a yelp and dodged Jacob’s spoon that was sent his way. “What was that for?”

Jacob shook his head. “That was because Molly isn’t in her human form to whap you on the arm.”

“Gareth and Jude are ... together?” Tessa asked, surprised.

She knew that Jude liked men sexually. She had worried after what had happened to him in the orphanage and at the foster homes that he wouldn’t reject his preference, but he hadn’t exactly allowed himself to become close to any of the people he dated.

If I’m honest, calling it ‘dating’ would be a stretch.

Jude was incredibly beautiful and drew people to him like a flame did moths on a dark night. But Jude's life had taught him not to trust and, as he explained to her once, he was with people as a *release* physically, but never an emotional connection. But the way they were talking about Gareth and Jude it seemed like a real *relationship*.

"Who is Gareth?" she asked.

"Our Alpha," Raj said as he helped to spoon the new bowl of cookie dough onto cookie sheets. "And he and Jude have been like gasoline and a match since they met."

Tessa searched Grandmother Sophia's face to see if that was true. The older woman nodded briefly and Tessa felt a welling of warmth in her heart. Hadn't she been hoping that Jude would find a connection or two? From the way that the people here spoke of Jude it was clear that all of them was fond of him and now this Gareth person.

"I look forward to meeting him and seeing Jude," Tessa said.

Molly suddenly was standing, ears alert, tail up, and staring at the back door. Tessa soon realized why as Jude and a beautiful and huge man appeared on the back porch. She rose up and Jude saw her. His face lit up and she knew she was grinning back contagiously. Jude flew into the kitchen and lifted Tessa up off the ground. She let out a squeal of delight, which was more like the girl she'd been rather than the woman she was now.

"Jude, Jude, let me down!" she laughed.

"Oh, are you too fancy now in your suits and high heels for me to give you a proper hug?" Jude asked her, but he did set her down.

"Considering that we need to go to the Sheriff's Office for you to be questioned I'd like my suit not to be rumpled, thank you very much." She kissed his cheek.

Immediately, she noticed that he was *glowing*. His mouth was wreathed in smiles. His red-brown eyes were bright. He should have shown some signs of stress even if he was happy to see her. No, his happiness was greater than just at her presence. Her gaze went over his shoulder to the massive, beautiful man behind him and she had a feeling she knew the cause of it.

Oh, Jude, have you found your someone special?

“You must be Gareth, the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack.” Tessa stuck out her hand towards him.

Despite his size, and the massive muscles in his arms, he took her hand very gently and shook it as if she was made of porcelain. “Good to meet you, Tessa.”

“You know Gareth’s an Alpha?” Jude’s face was just luminous with happiness and relief. “So you know about -- about --”

“About werewolves and witches and all of it? Yes, they explained, but before that Molly changed, which was sort of hard to deny,” Tessa said and tipped her head back to where the wolf had been, but Molly was no longer there. In fact, she was no longer a wolf. She was pulling her dress over her head. “I can see why she wears those flowy dresses. Easy to get on and off.”

Desire flowed through her as well as guilt. She and Libbie were on a break. They were *not* broken up. She turned back to Jude. His eyes flickered all around her face.

“If you know about me,” Jude said carefully. “I mean *us* ... do you know about you?”

“Me?” Tessa smiled uncertainly at him.

“I haven’t told her yet, Jude,” Grandmother Sophia said gently.

“Told me what? I can’t imagine after everything you’ve already told me that there’s more to reveal!” She smiled widely at everyone, but no one would meet her eyes except for Molly.

The young woman was also the first to speak and, just as she seemed to do everything, said plainly, “You’re a witch, Tessa.”

CHAPTER TWENTY: WITCH BLOOD

“I’m a witch?! But how can I be?” Tessa’s gaze flickered between Jude and their grandmother. “I don’t have any magic!” Tessa’s words were more a wail as she said the last. She didn’t seem shocked or horrified by the prospect of witch blood in her veins. In fact, she sounded rather desperate for it to be *true*.

Jude’s eyebrows rose up. Yet he shouldn’t have been surprised. Unlike him, Tessa had never shied away from being different. She embraced it. She’d told him often enough that being a black woman already made her “other” in some people’s eyes. Why not really pick up that mantle and be extraordinary?

And it wasn’t just that, though intensely practical, his sister had always had a romantic streak. She wanted life to have greater meaning, deeper mysteries, and more adventure. It gave her passion. For example, she became a lawyer in order to ensure she wouldn’t live in poverty, but, in addition to taking on corporate clients that would pay the earth for her services, she also donated her time to the poor, the elderly and the disenfranchised. She made the money she wanted, but she helped those in need, too. Passion and practicality. But it was full-on passion on display now. She was looking at Grandmother Sophia with such distress.

Grandmother Sophia seemed to understand what she feeling and why. She went over and grasped Tessa’s upper arms in a gentle grip. Her expression was tender. “Not all witches manifest power, dear, but you *are* of witch blood. I knew the moment I saw you in the orphanage that you were one of us. You glowed with it.”

“So you sensed I was *special* back then? That’s why you took me in as a foster child?” One of Tessa’s hands fluttered up by her chest. “But if I showed such promise when I was little then why am I *ordinary* now?”

“Tessa, you *are* special. Being able to wield magic couldn’t make you *more* so.” Grandmother Sophia squeezed her arms. “And your witch blood

wasn't the only reason I took you in. You had the most soulful eyes and I knew that given just a little encouragement that you could rule the world someday."

"Perhaps the *human* world! But now you've told me that there's something far more, but I'm not ... special in that at all!"

"You didn't even skip a beat when she told you that you were a witch, you know?" Raj shook his head in wonder. "I think it makes you pretty damned *special* already."

Tessa, though, still did not look convinced. "What does being a witch matter if I can't do what witches do? I am assuming that witches perform magic, right?"

Grandmother Sophia confirmed it with a slow nod. "Yes, we can."

Tessa's stare was intense as she asked, "Is something wrong with me then that I can't perform magic? Can it be fixed? Or is it something you have to be taught?"

"Magical ability is innate and will usually show up in adolescence. A witch has *one* ability at least that appears without teaching such as the ability to control the elements or summon spirits," Grandmother Sophia explained carefully. "Study of grimoires and the complex spells they hold will allow a witch to perform magic outside of her ability."

Tessa's hands clenched together in front of her. "So I could *learn* then?"

Grandmother Sophia looked sad as she said, "If a witch has no innate ability, she will not be able to master the spells."

Tessa's hands fell to her sides. "I see. So I'm a dud."

"You are *not* a dud!" Grandmother Sophia responded passionately. "You are a gifted lawyer and wonderful human being!"

“But a failure as a witch,” Tessa said, her voice dull and lifeless.

“Are you certain that she has no innate ability, Grandmother Sophia?” It was Molly who spoke. She was leaning one shoulder against the wall, her arms loosely crossed over her chest. “What if it was weak? Maybe it was so subtle one wouldn’t notice it.”

A flash of hope crossed his sister’s features. But Grandmother Sophia immediately shook her head and that hope died a quick death.

“No, I’m afraid not. I would have known no matter how small the spark.” Grandmother Sophia ran her hands up and down Tessa’s shoulders. “I didn’t reveal this to you in order to make you doubt yourself or your worth, Tessa.” Her gaze shot to Jude and he winced. “I just learned that keeping secrets from my kids is not a good idea.”

Tessa’s eyes welled with tears though she did not let them fall. “Is -- is the fact that I’m a non-magical witch why I was abandoned by my parents?”

Jude’s heart clenched. He felt like all the air had been sucked from the room. Had he been right to want Grandmother Sophia to reveal the truth to Tessa? Or had he caused her simply more pain? And for the selfish reason that he didn’t want to lie to her ...

“No,” Grandmother Sophia said firmly.

“How do you know that for sure?” Tessa frantically blinked back tears.

“Because of the adolescence part, my dear girl.” Grandmother Sophia let out a breath. “No one could know for sure that you wouldn’t have magic until you were much older.”

“Ah,” Tessa said, but her voice still held that lifeless quality. “I wonder if they would be relieved to have given me up if they knew the truth of it.”

Grandmother Sophia wrapped her arms around Tessa and fiercely kissed her. “You must *never* think that! Tessa, you are the most brilliant person I know and I’ve known a lot of people. You are a bright spark in the darkness. Don’t let this undermine the greatness of *you*.”

Tessa stayed still in Grandmother Sophia’s arms, half-heartedly returning the hug, but then she responded with a frantic hug back. Tears spilled down her cheeks onto Grandmother Sophia’s shoulder. Her voice was blurry with tears as she said with a watery laugh, “It’s so ridiculous! Until twenty minutes ago I didn’t even know that magic, witches and werewolves existed outside of stories and now ... now I’m disappointed that I’m not a part of all that.”

“You totally are a part of it, Tessa.” Jude embraced both women, wanting to put all the love he felt for both of them into that touch. “I’m sorry to tell you that if I’m in it, *you* are in it. I’m not doing this without you. I *can’t* do this without you.”

Tessa kissed his cheek even as her tears stained the collar of his shirt. “Taking care of you, Jude, is a full time job when you let me do it.”

“I promise that you can do it all the time if you want,” he said against her fragrant hair. He, who wouldn’t let people in for his own sake, would open himself for hers.

“I knew that whenever you found your fate that it was going to be spectacular, Jude, and you haven’t disappointed!” She dabbed at tears.

“You thought something spectacular was going to happen to me? I was going for uneventful, under the radar.” Jude pulled back gave her a lopsided smile even as he warmed at Gareth’s presence at his back and the pack members’ presences all around him. He found that he was rather glad that this had all happened to him, too.

“Of course, I did!” she laughed and kissed him again before quickly swiping away all remnants of her crying. She sniffed and waved her hands

in front of her face. “I’m sure I’ve messed my makeup now and I need to appear all elegant and sophisticated with Georgia.”

“You don’t need makeup to look like that. You *are* like that,” Molly said quietly.

Jude saw Tessa’s head jerk towards the female werewolf and a look of pleased surprise fill her face. Though he hadn’t kept in touch with Tessa like he should, the few times they had talked, he’d noticed that she spoke less of her partner, Libbie, than in the past. Was something wrong there? Or maybe Tessa was just moved by Molly’s natural beauty. Whether Molly was embarrassed by the reaction she got or simply had nothing more to say, the female werewolf suddenly turned and loped out of the house. Tessa’s dark eyes followed her with a mixture of consternation and interest. She turned back to Jude and Gareth as soon as Molly was out of sight.

She clasped her hands together in front of her. “So, I need to know more of this Mack and his Rogue pack since they are the ones framing our Jude here for the murder of a woman.”

“Geraldine Higgins,” Grandmother Sophia said the name of the victim with a pained sigh. “She was a good woman. Not perfect, mind you. Not too good for this Earth. But decent, intelligent and kind. She was raising three boys and made it look *effortless*.”

“Why do you think the Rogues went after her?” Tessa asked. “Jude, did you meet her?”

Jude shook his head. “I have no idea who she is. I wouldn’t recognize her if she walked right past me.”

He found himself reaching back for Gareth’s hand as he talked of the death the Rogues wanted to lay at his door. The Alpha caught it and laced their fingers together. The almost bond thrummed and comforted him. He saw Tessa’s gaze had dropped to his and Gareth’s linked hand. His cheeks flamed. His sister would read so much into this gesture. She might even

realize the truth before the pack did that he and Gareth were meant for one another. Raj and Jacob seemed unaware of what was going on or maybe they were just being discrete. Jude could *feel* their presences without looking at them though. Raj was a ball of energy that seemed to zing around the room while Jacob was a solid, anchoring presence that radiated calm.

Pack bonds. I have them with these people. I just met them but I feel so close to them already.

“I’m wondering if it wasn’t just her location. Her home is closest to mine,” Grandmother Sophia said and went back to sifting flour to make the dough for actual cookies this time. “I know she had trouble sleeping despite the three boys running her ragged during the day. She often sat out on her porch at night. I know Georgia warned everyone about doing that due to the wolf attacks, but Geraldine wasn’t afraid of anything.”

“And the reason that Georgia thinks you had something to do with the death, Jude, is because your wallet was found there?” Tessa’s eyebrows bunched together as if she couldn’t quite figure this out.

“We think the fourth Rogue took Jude’s wallet. He or she was in the house and attacked Jude. The Rogue must have taken it then,” Gareth said, shrugging his massive shoulders.

“But how? The Rogue was in its wolf form, right?” Tessa asked, repeating what they had told her on the phone. “Did it carry it off in its mouth? You didn’t notice that?”

“No, I didn’t see anything in its mouth other than parts of my arm.” Jude ran his free hand through his hair in frustration. “Maybe it was in the house earlier, grabbed the wallet then and attacked later.”

“We would have smelled its presence,” Gareth objected.

“It was pretty darn bold to come in here with all of you about,” Tessa pointed out.

“I just wish I didn’t have to lower the protective wards on my property. I’m afraid that these wards don’t distinguish between different werewolves,” Grandmother Sophia sighed as she measured vanilla and splashed it on top of the softening butter and sugar.

“So if you had the wards up then Jude and everyone else here couldn’t have come in?” Tessa qualified.

The older woman nodded. “Unfortunately. There are elaborate spells one can do to keep out some, but not all, but they require blood and hair from the individuals you want to protect.”

“We’d all be willing to give you that for your spells,” Raj said, actually offering his arm to her.

She patted his hand and said, “Thank you, dear, but it has to be the full moon as well for the spell to be performed. That’s not for another two weeks. I have a feeling that if we don’t solve the Rogue problem before then no amount of spells will be enough.”

“How are you going to convince the sheriff that I had nothing to do with this woman’s death, Tessa?” Jude asked, his chest tightening as he thought of authorities closing in on him.

“By convincing her that you’re not so stupid as to leave your wallet at the crime scene.” Tessa squeezed his arm.

“With all the deaths recently in Forest Glenn, the sheriff will be getting desperate to find someone, anyone, to blame,” Gareth said and his hand tightened around Jude’s. Jude could see the concern in his eyes.

“Georgia isn’t like that,” Grandmother Sophia piped up. “She’s a fair woman with a deep and abiding respect for the law. She wouldn’t allow

anyone to railroad Jude no matter how much pressure she was under.”

“Have you ever seen her under *this* much pressure though, Grandmother Sophia?” Jacob asked respectfully. He hadn’t said much, but his questions showed just how carefully he was listening.

“You have a point, but I know Georgia’s soul and it is one full of justice. She would be betraying everything she is if she blamed Jude for this killing,” Grandmother Sophia said. “But I understand your concerns. I can see from your very posture that the thing you most want to do is bundle Jude up in your arms and take him back to your pack house.”

“Grandmother Sophia! I’m not some little fragile creature he needs to take care of,” Jude protested, but something in him warmed at the thought of Gareth wanting to take care of him.

“You may not be, but you could do with some taking care of!”
Grandmother Sophia shook her wisk at him. “Don’t you think so, Tessa?”

“Absolutely!” his sister said without hesitation. She looked Gareth up and down. “And it looks like there’s finally someone *big* enough to take on the job.”

Gareth’s arm curled around Jude’s shoulders. “I will do my best.”

“Between his pancake cutting and packing my clothes --”

“Packing your clothes *properly*,” Gareth interrupted with a gleeful smile, which had one twitching the corners of Jude’s mouth.

“Yeah, well, I guess if you care about that stuff, it’s true,” Jude grumbled.
“But, seriously, I’ve done all right on my own.”

“No one is saying you haven’t, Jude.” Gareth kissed the side of his head and heat flared in Jude’s groin, but it was the lightening in his heart that was

more powerful. “We just want to help you more than you can help yourself.”

“I guess.” Jude lowered his head even as he leaned more against Gareth. The solid, warm line of that big body against his was addictive. He found that he didn’t want to be out of Gareth’s arms any time soon. A part of him panicked a little at that. If you wanted something, liked something, enjoyed something it was often taken away. But he knew that was the old feelings from his foster home days. It hadn’t been true at Grandmother Sophia’s and so that meant it didn’t have to be true now.

He chanced to look up at Tessa and something in her eyes told him that she understood what he was feeling at that moment. She gave him a tender look that held all her love for him. She had always so wanted for him to find a home. She, evidently, thought he had.

Gareth as home ...

“I hate to do this, but we should go to the sheriff’s office and get this interview over with,” Tessa said, suddenly all business-like. “Now you have no duty to speak to them, Jude, but, I think this is one of those times when explaining away the evidence they have is a good idea. We want them to focus their attention elsewhere, considering who the real culprits are.”

“We need to take care of the Rogues and soon.” Gareth looked grim.

“You mean ... kill them? But maybe I can cure them!” Jude protested, remembering his sense at how killing Mack would hurt the Alpha.

Gareth kissed his head again, his lips lingering there. “I know you want to, Jude, but can we wait while other people are in danger?”

“I have to try!” Jude cried, but he knew how lame that sounded. People were *dying* because of the Rogues. He had no idea if he could really could save them. He didn’t have the faintest clue how to even begin.

“Maybe we can trap them,” Jacob suggested. “Jude can then figure out if he can save them or not.”

Raj was nodding. “Jacob and I could track them. Find out where they’re hiding out maybe. Their scent is way strong.”

Gareth looked slightly uncomfortable with the thought of two going after four, but he nodded his head reluctantly after a while. “I would go with you, but I must go with Jude to the Sheriff’s office.”

“You don’t have to do that!” Jude protested, but weakly. He *wanted* Gareth there with him. His stomach felt sick and he wanted to bolt again.

“I’m afraid that I’m coming no matter what you say,” Gareth said firmly.

Jude didn’t argue further, because it was what he wanted, too.

Tessa nodded. “I think having you there would be a good thing, Gareth.”

“I won’t let my ... my pack member face this without me,” Gareth said.

Jude wondered at the slight hesitation he made if he was going to say “mate” and not “pack member” Jude’s heart flipped and he swallowed, but not in fear, in *pleasure*. That was more shocking to him than a lot of the rest of what he had learned had been.

Gareth continued, speaking to Jacob and Raj again, “Take Molly with you ... if you can find her.”

“We will!” Raj grinned.

He and Jacob immediately headed out the back door into the yard. Tessa leaned over so that she could look out the screened door. After them She let out a gasp and Jude knew that the two of them had managed to strip and change in mere moments.

“I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to that,” Tessa breathed.

“I will reach out to some of my old contacts in the witch world while you’re at the sheriff’s station,” Grandmother Sophia said as she finished mixing the batter. “Maybe some of them will know more about curing Rogues.”

“T-thank you, Grandmother Sophia,” he said.

“No problem, my Jude. We will find a way out of these troubles.” She patted his cheek.

Jude’s stomach clenched. There was so much that he hadn’t had a chance to ask Grandmother Sophia about his mother and father. Unfortunately, now was not the time. He looked at Tessa, who was nibbling her lip, as she regarded the woman that had given both of them the only real home they’d ever known. Was she still disappointed she didn’t have magic? He was sure she was. What Tessa didn’t have in natural ability, she worked at. To be told that simply wasn’t possible when the world had been opened wide to her was likely intolerable.

“I clearly have a lot more to learn about this brave new world we inhabit,” Tessa said as she regarded Grandmother Sophia closely.

“You and me both,” Jude assured her.

“But let’s do the one thing I *do* know how to do and that is be a damned fine lawyer. Come on, Jude, let’s go. I’m driving,” Tessa said and led them out of the kitchen.

“It will be fine, Jude,” Grandmother Sophia called after them.

Jude found that his throat felt way too tight to respond to her. He held onto Gareth’s hand and walked as near to the big Alpha as he could, drawing strength from the contact. It was strength that Gareth seemed quite happy

to give. Over their almost bond, Jude could feel the Alpha swimming with joy that Jude was reaching out to him.

To serve others ... that's what pleases Gareth most. It's not what I thought Alphas were all about. I thought they would be into giving orders and having people do what they want. But Gareth is all about service.

He chanced a glance up at Gareth's profile. The Alpha immediately turned and gazed down on him with such tenderness that Jude's breath caught. He quickly looked away, but he stayed as close as he could to Gareth. When they got out onto the porch, Tessa stopped dead in her tracks. They would have run into the back of her but for werewolf reflexes. Jude was rather amazed at how aware he had been of his surroundings without realizing it when she spoke.

"There's a wolf in my front seat," she said mildly as if this was an everyday occurrence.

Gareth snorted. "It looks like we found Molly."

Molly was sitting primly in her wolf form in the front seat of Tessa's rental car. She looked over at them expectantly as if to say, "What's taken you so long?"

"I guess she's going with us?" Jude raised an eyebrow.

"Evidently. It's actually a good thing. The sheriff and deputy saw me with her yesterday. They may have wondered where she was on their earlier visit today considering the issues with wolves the town is having," Gareth remarked. "Not only that, but she can find out things we can't. The sheriff and deputy will speak openly in front of her without realizing that she can understand them and report back."

"Very handy." Tessa nodded. "Well, you all likely wanted to be in the back seat together anyways so it's good Molly took the front."

Tessa was striding towards the car again, rolling with the strangeness of it all. As she got in the driver's seat, Gareth and Jude slid into the back.

Gareth never did let go of his hand and the panic that was bubbling in Jude's chest subsided again. As long as Gareth was with him, in physical touching distance, his emotions were far steadier. Gareth letting out a brief chuckle had Jude distracted from his own thoughts and looking up front.

Tessa had reached over and *buckled* Molly into the seat. Molly's ears twitched expectantly as if asking a question.

"Everyone in my car wears a seatbelt, Molly," Tessa explained, looking only at the wolf and at no one else.

Molly's ears twitched in acceptance and she went back to looking out the window. Tessa started up the car and pulled into the gravel driveway. None of them spoke on the way into town. Jude was silent because of nerves.

Tessa was concentrating on driving. Gareth's eyes watched the scenery as if he expected to catch sight of Mack. And Molly didn't speak because, obviously, she was in her wolf form. But all too soon, the sheriff's office was in sight and Jude's breathing went faster and his heart beat harder.

Suddenly, he was forgetting all about his own fear of authority and being unjustly blamed for a woman's death. He was leaning forward, nose pressed practically against the glass, as he saw a familiar figure on the street.

"Jude, what --" Gareth began, but then he, too, stiffened. "Oh, *no*."

"What? What is it?" Tessa asked as she pulled over into a spot right outside of the sheriff's station.

"Do you see the little girl talking to the deputy?" Jude asked through numb lips as he watched Deputy Reynolds lean down and give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Oh, yes. That's Deputy Reynolds' daughter, Clara," Tessa said evenly. "Why?"

Jude swallowed. “Tessa, she’s one of the Rogues we told you about.”

At that moment, Clara turned her head towards their car and gave them a *bright* smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: A WITCH BY ANY OTHER NAME ...

“Stay in the car, all of you,” Gareth ordered, his protective instincts springing to the fore. The Alpha opened the back door. He heard both brother and sister protesting his going alone. Tessa called out that she was the attorney and would handle this. Jude squawked about Gareth not having to handle everything by himself. He felt Molly’s mind touch his with a question whether she should get out, but he sent back a negative. “Let me handle this. You’ll know when it’s time to assist. But for now ... *stay*.”

Gareth shut the door firmly and stepped out onto the sidewalk between Clara and Tessa’s car. He knew that his simple physical presence intimidated most people. Clara’s gaze snapped to him and he met her stare evenly. She quickly dropped her eyes and he saw the angry lines furrow her forehead. He was an Alpha, perhaps not her Alpha, but he was one of the strongest. She would respect that authority. Her father, however, respected no one, not even the sheriff, because the moment she was out of sight he disobeyed her repeated orders.

“What are you doing here?” Deputy Reynolds stuck out his chin as if begging for a punch. He likely assumed that he would *always* win the fight, not physically, but due to power of his badge and uniform. “The sheriff only asked for him and the lawyer.”

“Jude is family. Wherever he goes, I go,” he said simply without further explanation. The deputy could make of that statement what he would. He owed the man no explanation.

“You like being family with a *killer*?” Reynolds sneered.

Gareth stepped towards Reynolds and that chin lifted some more. “You are quick to make such determinations.”

“I could tell he was a wrong one from the beginning.” Reynolds spat on the ground near his daughter’s feet.

“Daddy, *gross!*” Clara whined, the first words she’d spoken since Gareth got out of the car.

“Sorry, honey.” He laid his large hands on her slender shoulders.

She sounded so *normal*. Like any other girl of her age. With her tanned limbs and sun streaked hair, he would more likely imagine her giggling and laughing with friends as they walked down the high street or getting into popcorn fights in the movie theatre or shrieking with delight as they raced into a lake full of cool summer water. But he doubted she was doing any of those things anymore. Even if she had been a normal werewolf, she would have been more fascinated by the changes in herself, the dappling of sunlight through the trees, the fish bobbing to the surface of the lake and spending time with her pack. Eventually, she would have reconnected *somewhat* with her old friends and old pursuits, but she would be changed forever. As a Rogue ... he couldn’t imagine what her life was like.

Does her father have any idea about that life?

Gareth’s eyes swept up and down the deputy’s body. His nostrils flared as he took in deep whiffs of the man’s scent. Was he the Fourth Rogue? Or was he so clueless as to what his child was getting up to that he didn’t realize she had become a beast?

There was no sweet rot smell coming from the deputy. There was no shimmer of magic coming from him either that clung even to those who had the Werewolf Gene, but never changed. Clara must have gotten the Werewolf Gene from her mother. Her father was straight human and nothing else.

“Do you often bring your daughter to work?” Gareth asked, his gaze dropping once more to the top of the pretty girl’s head.

“Before your boy there came to town we didn’t have the crime wave we’re having now.” Reynolds’ hands squeezed his daughter’s slender shoulders.

He imagined the touch would have been painful to a normal little girl, but Clara did not react at all to the touch.

Stronger than you look.

“So the people the *wolves* killed are no-nevermind to you?” Gareth replied coolly. He saw a smile twitch the corner of Clara’s mouth and a wave of rage ran through him. Could Jude cure *this*? She clearly enjoyed the thought of killing. She had likely killed some of the people. People she’d known, grown up with, said hello to on the street. She’d eaten their flesh and drunk their blood and she was *smiling* about it.

Mack did this. He ruined what could have been a beautiful wolf. Unless Jude can make this right, she has to be stopped.

Reynolds opened and shut his mouth before his lips pressed together into a thin white line. “Maybe he had something to do with that too.”

“He wasn’t in town then,” Gareth pointed out. “And they were killed by *wolves*, remember?”

Reynolds’ cheeks became a hectic red as his blood pressure rose. “Then maybe it was your animal over there. We should have her checked out.” The deputy jerked his head towards Molly, who was staring out the window.

“We weren’t in town either,” Gareth reminded him.

“Oh, doggy!” Clara cried as if she had just noticed Molly even though he knew she had been aware of her the whole time.

She slipped out of her father’s heavy grip, which surprised the deputy. She shouldn’t have been so strong. Gareth wasn’t. What he was amazed by was that she was as controlled as she seemed. Rogues were said to be highly aggressive and ruthless. He had seen that in her already yet she wasn’t showing it here.

She skipped to the door where Molly looked out at her and pressed her hands to the glass, acting for all the world like she was a normal little girl.

Molly did not react. Her ears did not even flicker back though Gareth knew she wanted to growl. The *wrong* scent of her was causing his own wolf to flatten his ears, but he stayed still. If she went for Molly or Tessa - *or Jude* - he knew he wouldn't have the strength not to react. He would not allow her to harm his pack.

"Clara!" Reynolds shouted, but though his voice was gruff, it was also tinted slightly with fear. He made an abortive movement towards her, to lure her away from the car, but he did not actually approach the vehicle. He was terrified of Molly.

"Molly won't hurt her." *Not yet. Not until I tell her to.*

Clara twisted her head to the side to look at him. "Can she come out and play?"

Her voice sounded so sweet and innocent, but Gareth knew the words were mocking and filled with contempt. She wanted to *hurt* Molly. She was probably *hungry*.

"Come on, honey, there's no time to play with the - ah, *doggie*," Reynolds said, swiping at a trail of sweat streaming down from under his broad brimmed hat. Gareth didn't think it was the *heat* that was making him perspire so badly. The irony of his fear of Molly was not lost on him. After all, the deputy should have been afraid of his daughter.

"Aw!" she groaned and stamped one foot.

"We can play another time," Gareth said softly. It was a *promise*.

Her eyes rose to his again, gleaming with animal night shine even though it was bright daylight out. She was hanging onto her control by a thread. The

eagerness to attack, to rend, to tear, to feast was just *glowing* in her.
“*Promise?*”

“I promise,” he said with a toothy smile.

“Goodie!” She flashed a brilliant smile and started skipping away behind the back of Tessa’s car.

Right at that moment, Jude got out of the car and stepped in front of her. She skidded to a halt and reared back from him, alarmed. Jude leaned in and said something to her, so low that the deputy couldn’t hear, only those with werewolf senses could.

“Tell Mack that if he wants to be cured he needs to stop the killing and meet with us at a chosen time and place,” Jude whispered, his lips barely moving.

Clara’s head jerked towards his and here was a look of consternation on her pretty face. She would have said something back, but Reynolds’ voice whip-cracked through the air.

“Clara, get on home *now!*”

For one moment, Clara’s Rogue temper flared and she shot her father a look of pure rage. Her eyes shone with a yellowish light, her lips writhed back from her suddenly too sharp teeth, and her hands half curled into fists.

Gareth heard Reynolds gasp, but the look left her face so quickly that it might never have been there. She had recovered, but how many more times would she be able to do that before she just *snapped* and showed Reynolds what it was really like to be afraid of wolves?

“I’m going, Daddy,” she pouted and skipped away.

Jude came around the car to Gareth’s side and Reynolds stuck a finger in Jude’s face, which had Gareth wanting to snap it off. “You don’t talk to my daughter, you hear?”

Gareth must have made some small movement in response to the disrespectful tone and attitude, because Jude placed a gentle hand on his chest. His gaze was fixed upon the deputy. His expression was mild.

“You worry about her, don’t you?” Jude asked.

Reynolds’ face grew bright red. “That’s none of your --”

“You should make sure she stays inside at night. I’m betting she *wanders*,” Gareth interrupted, realizing where Jude was going with this. Perhaps Reynolds hadn’t completely missed the changes in his daughter after all. He just had no idea what they meant.

“Forest Glenn is a *safe* town,” he growled. “She’s got a habit of going where she wants.”

And killing who she wants, too.

“You mean it *was* safe. It’s not any more. You should keep her in. Keep her close,” Gareth said and he knew that he might be signing Deputy Reynolds’ death warrant. Trying to keep Clara from going out to meet up with her pack, to obey her Alpha, could be quite dangerous. But he had no pity for the man. He was a bully and had no compunctions about using his badge and uniform to harm others. It spoke of a man without honor. A weak man. An unworthy man.

“You two are troublemakers! I can --” Reynolds sputtered.

“They are *actually* two law abiding citizens who are merely offering concern for your daughter’s well-being,” Tessa said smoothly as she gracefully exited the car.

Reynolds’ head snapped towards her and his eyes widened. Tessa was beautiful naturally, but she highlighted every asset she had with exquisite clothes, perfect makeup, expertly coiffed hair and a way of moving that was both powerful and graceful at the same time.

She would make an excellent wolf.

Reynolds' hands seemed to move of their own accord as they tugged at his shirt and then he lifted up his hat and quickly swiped the sweat away with an already damp handkerchief that he hastily pushed back into his pocket.

Tessa stepped up onto the curb on her impossibly high heels. They clicked as she walked right up to the deputy.

She was a hand's breadth away, too close really, right in Reynolds' personal space, but he didn't seem to mind. His gaze, which had crawled from her head to her toes, right back up to her face again flushed even hotter. Tessa simply smiled indulgently as if she didn't mind his frank appraisal.

Reynolds seemed yet *more* flustered by the acceptance of his uncouth behavior. It was as if Tessa was saying, without words, *We both know you're a dog, sir, and dogs can't help themselves. But nothing you do can cause me anything but amusement.*

At that moment, Molly started scrabbling to be let out of the car. Unlike with Clara, she was showing some aggression towards Reynolds, which had Gareth's eyebrows rising. But he opened the door for her anyways. She immediately leaped down and went to stand by Tessa's side. She flashed her white teeth at the deputy. Reynolds took several stuttering steps back, raising one hand between them as if that would ward off Molly. Tessa reached down, without looking, and smoothed the fur on Molly's head. Molly's eyes half closed, but she kept her gaze fixed on the deputy.

"Deputy Reynolds, there's nothing to fear from us," Tessa said with quiet authority. "My clients are simply *not* the people you're looking for."

Gareth heard Jude let out a half snort and turned to him curiously. Over their almost bond, he felt amusement building in his mate, but he had no idea why. He got a sense from Jude that he would tell him later.

"Does your daughter take an interest in your work? Perhaps comes to crime scenes?" Tessa asked sweetly.

Reynolds blinked in confusion. “She was at Geraldine Higgins’ place. I was surprised to see her there ...” His voice dropped off as if he realized what a *strange* question that was. “But she knew Mrs. Higgins! She sometimes played with their boys! I don’t know what you’re trying to suggest, but I *resent* it!”

She wanted to see your reaction to what she’d done. It’s like when a cat leaves a dead animal on your doorstep. Though she didn’t want to feed you. She just wanted to show you her hunting prowess.

Tessa put a hand on Reynolds’ arm which had him blinking again and half backing up, but swaying towards her, too, like he both wanted to get away and could not bear to.

She does have magic. Grandmother Sophia is wrong. I can feel it lifting the hairs on the back of my neck. He glanced over at Jude who was leaning against him. His mate’s expression had gone strangely blank, but then Jude’s red-brown eyes flickered over to his. *Jude feels it, too.*

“Deputy Reynolds --”

“David,” he corrected her, sounding almost breathy.

“*David*,” she said with a slight purr to her voice that had Molly tapping her claws as she switched from foot to foot. “You feel something is wrong, don’t you?”

“There’s been the attacks,” he said. His eyelids were half down. He looked as if he were sleepy or had a few drinks.

“You *want* to think that these things are happening to your town by someone *outside* of Forest Glenn, don’t you?” Tessa’s voice was sympathetic. Her hand tightened lightly on the deputy’s arm that she had a hold of. Her elegant fingernails glinted in the sunlight.

His expression became so pained that Gareth *almost* felt sympathetic towards him. “It *has* to be. We don’t have people here that would do things like that. It *has* to be wild animals. It *has* to be outsiders.”

“Are you sure about that? Are you sure that you haven’t been seeing strange behavior in people you’ve known your whole life?” Tessa pressed. It was a gentle push, but it was as if she had thrown open the doors to a vault.

Reynolds’ voice was rushed like a river it all spewed out around them, “It *can’t* be. But I swear there are times when people I’ve known all my life look at me *too long*. They have this *hungry* expression on their faces like they want to -- to ... I don’t know.”

“Who are these people?” Tessa asked.

His forehead scrunched as if he were trying to remember, but couldn’t quite remember. His next words confirmed it, “I don’t know. I’ll be thinking it’s strange at the time, but then when I go to say something I’m suddenly someplace else. Like I’m at O’Houlihans, having a beer, and there’s this -- this *person* at the bar. Someone I know. Someone who is a friend. And there will be this look on their faces and I’ll lean forward to ask them about it, but then I’ll find myself out on the street. I won’t remember talking to them, drinking my beer or paying my tab. But I have.”

“That’s very strange, David. I’m sure it’s unnerving,” Tessa said gently.

“It is! And it wouldn’t be so bad if it only happened when I was *out*, but there are some times when it happens at *home* and there’s no where that’s *safe*,” Reynolds confided to them.

He would never say these things without magic being involved. Powerful magic. But Grandmother Sophia thinks she has none. I don’t think Sophia is so unobservant. Something is off here about Tessa’s magic.

“Are there certain people in the room when this happens? At home, I mean. You can narrow down that person, can’t you? It can only be your wife or your daughter,” Tessa said, her voice neither rising nor falling. She acted as if she was only interested in this information because it affected the deputy.

Gareth’s hands curled his fingers against his palm. He was anxious. He wanted to *shake* the man to get more answers.

This kind of magic is beyond werewolves, beyond Mack. Someone else is involved.

The deputy’s expression was almost painful to watch as he *tried*, achingly tried, to remember who was in the house with him, but his shoulders collapsed and he sagged forward and shook his head in despair. He truly wanted to tell Tessa what she wanted to know.

“It’s all right, David. I can see that you’re quite distressed about not being able to remember. I’m sure you would tell me if you could,” Tessa soothed.

“I feel like I’m ... dreaming, but it’s a nightmare and I’m awake,” he admitted to her.

“Is there anything else you want to tell us?” Tessa asked.

He shook his head reluctantly and Tessa removed her hand from his arm. For a moment, he went rigid and then slumped again before shaking his head as if he had awoken from a deep sleep. Tessa smiled at him tenderly.

“Thank you for your assistance, Deputy Reynolds,” she said sweetly.

This time he didn’t ask her to call him David. He seemed confused and kept shaking his head as if to clear it. Before anyone could say anything more, Sheriff Fairweather appeared in the open door of the Sheriff’s Station. She had a weary look on her face. Her reed-thin body slumped and her red hair was just barely contained in a bun, but tight curls had sprung loose like wires.

“Tessa, Jude, Gareth,” she said all their names, which impressed Gareth. “Please come inside. The day is already getting fine and hot. It will be a scorcher. Reynolds, why don’t you start patrol? I think it would do the townsfolk good to see our presence on the street.”

Though it was posed as a gentle suggestion, he straightened upwards and almost gave her a salute. It wasn’t ironic. He was just still reacting to whatever Tessa had done to him. Reynolds walked off in that stiff Cyberman way. Sheriff Fairweather disappeared inside. Tessa moved to go into the Sheriff’s Office when Jude grabbed her arm.

“Tessa, these are *not* the droids you’re looking for?” Jude whispered fiercely.

A smile cracked Tessa’s lips. “It’s odd, but it does seem to work on the weak minded.”

“Yes, Tessa, because you are bespelling them,” Gareth pointed out.

Tessa’s plucked eyebrows rose. “Gareth, you heard Grandmother Sophia: I have no magic.”

There was again that ache in her voice. He recognized the Type A personality who was frustrated when someone she respected and believed told her “no” and “absolutely not” and “impossible.”

“Tessa, I agree with Gareth, you did something to that guy. You had him telling you everything.” Jude let out a disbelieving laugh.

Tessa’s eyebrows drew together. “No, it’s just a lawyer thing I learned. I’m good at it, but it’s not magic ... Grandmother Sophia said --”

“She’s never seen you in action as a lawyer, has she?” Gareth guessed.

“No. She refused to come to New York and, besides, I wouldn’t bore her with my cases.” Tessa shrugged, but she looked thoughtful. Molly licked her hand and she smiled down at the wolf, scratching behind Molly’s ears. “Well, let’s go in. Perhaps I can work some more magic in there?”

“Perhaps you can. Let’s go see.”

Gareth put a protective arm around Jude’s shoulders. He felt the young man lean against him. The three of them walked in together, Tessa first then Jude and then him. When he looked up, he was blinded for a moment by the sunlight streaming through the blinds. When his vision cleared, he saw a woman dressed in Sheriff Fairweather’s uniform, still had red hair and green eyes, but looked *quite different*.

“*Bronwyn?*” Gareth gasped.

“Gareth,” the witch said with a smile. “It’s so good to see you. I just wish it was under other circumstances.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: DISCRETION?

Jude knew that Bronwyn was the name of the witch that had given Gareth his tattoo – the tattoo that spoke to Jude on a primal level. He also knew that Gareth had saved her life and that this had led to an unlikely friendship between a werewolf and a witch. He remembered, too, that Bronwyn had retreated from the world of witches after she had failed to unite them under a Witch Council similar to the Werewolf Council.

But nothing he had learned about Bronwyn so far had made him suspect that she was Sheriff Georgia Fairweather. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Tessa hadn't expected it either and there was a guardedness in her expression. Like him, she was probably reeling at finding out that the people she thought she knew, she didn't know at all. "Georgia" had been her friend, someone she had trusted to look in on Grandmother Sophia, and now she had found out that "Georgia" was a powerful witch, too. As Gareth moved over to embrace Bronwyn, Jude slid over to his sister's side and put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

"She ... she's Georgia, but she *isn't* at the same time. Who is Bronwyn?" Tessa hissed.

"A *witch*," he whispered and told her in a few sentences all he knew about Bronwyn.

"This is so crazy. I mean ... how could this world be *real*?" She let out a soft, disbelieving laugh. "Werewolves, witches, *magic*?"

"I don't know, but when you turn into a wolf it's sort of hard to deny," he admitted.

"I don't ..." She pressed her lips together and then said, "I don't belong in this world."

"You do. Whatever you did with Deputy Dog was magic. Trust me. It was a Jedi mind trick or a witch mind trick," he assured her. She laughed and he

squeezed her shoulders. “I get it. “Feels like everyone’s been hiding beneath masks and, suddenly, they’ve pulled them off and yelled ‘surprise’.”

“A little bit. Makes me wonder if I’m such a good judge of character at all. Maybe I’ve just been deluding myself all this time,” she murmured in response.

Molly pressed her head up into Tessa’s palm and the wary look on Tessa’s face was replaced with one of affection. Molly really was the best. Tessa leaned down to scratch behind Molly’s ears before straightening up again.

“One good thing about this being Bronwyn the witch, we won’t have to lie to her,” Jude pointed out.

“I wouldn’t put all our cards out on the table, Jude. We don’t know what else she’s hiding. We don’t know if she’s friend or foe. She could be an enemy of Grandmother Sophia. I don’t think Sophia knew who Georgia really was,” Tessa said quietly.

That took Jude aback a moment. He had overheard Grandmother Sophia and Gareth talking about the witch world and Bronwyn. He didn’t recall Sophia having a *bad* reaction to Bronwyn, more an awed one. Bronwyn was, he gathered, a very powerful or important witch. Or, at least, she had been. He wondered what she had been doing since she lost her bid to run the witches. Someone with that kind of ambition didn’t just *stop* trying to gain power.

Once Gareth and Bronwyn had finished their hugs and greeting, they turned as one towards Jude and Tessa. Bronwyn *looked* like Georgia in the sense that they had the same coloring and bone structure. But while Georgia had been pretty, if slightly plain, Bronwyn was *beautiful*. She had that peaches and cream skin that many redheads had, but none of the freckles. Her red hair was a far more crimson red than he recalled Georgia’s being though it was just as unruly framed her heart shaped face. She was still slender, but had more curves than the sheriff had.

“I’m sure you have questions,” she said, her voice a pleasant contralto.

Tessa stepped between Jude and the sheriff with Molly at her side. Her voice was cool as she said, “We do.”

“Please, come into my office.” Bronwyn gestured towards the glass fronted office that was filled with midday light.

“Is it *really* your office, Bronwyn? Or is there a *real* Sheriff Fairweather stashed someone?” Gareth asked smoothly.

“Sheriff Georgia Fairweather has been an alias I’ve used from time to time,” she told him, a smile twitching her lips. She had known that the question wasn’t altogether friendly, but she had chosen to take it as such.

“You’ve been close to the pack for a long time yet you haven’t stopped by,” Gareth said smoothly. “You certainly didn’t contact me when you found out that Mack was ... *in town*.”

She looked down for a moment, a guilty movement. “I know and with all the trouble you’ve been having, you probably could have used my help. I can only say that I have been giving it as best I can. But, please, let’s sit down.”

When she went inside her office, she adjusted the shades so that they weren’t blinded by the sunshine before sitting behind a warm, maple desk that showed the scars of long use. She sat behind the desk while indicating that they could seat themselves in any of the chairs. While there were enough places for all of them to sit, Gareth stood, arms crossed over his impressive chest, topaz eyes hooded as he regarded Bronwyn. His expression was still not unfriendly, but Jude realized that he didn’t like the fact that Bronwyn had concealed her presence from him. Gareth was essentially guarding them. He and Tessa took the two leather backed chairs in front of the desk with Molly sitting between them.

Bronwyn pressed her hands together in front of her as if in prayer. “So where to begin?”

“Why are you here? Just like being a small town sheriff?” Gareth started the ball rolling.

She grinned. “I do actually. I enjoy helping people and making sure that justice is administered fairly.”

“Considering how witches have been treated in this country and the world, I can see where you’d want to be the one in control,” Tessa said.

“You’re correct on one level, but incorrect on the other. Those poor people in Salem and elsewhere who were burned as witches were none of our kind at all. They were just the impoverished, the disliked, the wise women, and the foolish, but humans couldn’t actually *catch* a real witch let alone *burn* us,” Bronwyn said with a shake of her head as if it was just too foolish to contemplate.

“You said *our* kind. What do you mean by that?” Tessa asked.

“*Our* kind as in *yours* and *mine* and, well, *Jude’s* as well,” she said simply.

“So you know that Tessa and I have witch blood?” Jude asked. Did everyone know but them? Was it written on their foreheads or something? He caught Tessa’s eye and he knew she was thinking the exact same thing.

“Yes, I do know,” she said. “And I was so grateful to Sophia for taking you both in from very distressing situations.”

“Why was she the only one that did? Why didn’t other witches step in when our parents failed us?” Tessa asked.

“I would like to tell you that we rarely give up our children, but that would not be the truth. Some are abandoned to protect them while others ...” She left the sentence hang with all the implications that those words brought up.

Tessa blanched for a moment and Jude reached over to squeeze her hand. No one could know Tessa and want to get rid of her.

“Sophia doesn’t know you’re Bronwyn though, does she?” Jude confirmed.

She shook her head, her red curls bouncing like springs. “No, I didn’t want to alarm her and, I know, that she has turned from the Witching Path. For

now in any event.”

“You mean you didn’t want her to *know* that another witch was near her territory?” Gareth asked gravely.

“She was actually in *mine*. I was here *first*,” Bronwyn pointed out. “But I didn’t mind that she came. I am *glad* she did. She is a witch of no small repute, but I understand why she left the witch world and I wanted to let her find her peace here.”

Jude wasn’t sure he really bought that, though there was likely *some* truth in it.

“There’s not much peace around here these days with humans dropping like flies and all the werewolves around,” Tessa pointed out.

“True, but in addition to being officer of the law so that I can *stop* humans from hurting other humans, I also ...” She bit her lower lip. “I also am here to step in when there is *supernatural* trouble with our kind and theirs.”

“Yet you let Mack and his pack kill five, no six, people? You didn’t even call Gareth and let him know that Mack was here,” Jude’s eyebrows crawled into his hairline. “That doesn’t sound like you’re stepping in very much.”

Bronwyn’s gaze snapped to Gareth and then back to Jude. “I have ensured that no one’s figured out that it is a group of werewolves killing people, but that is the limit of what I *can* do ... for now. I wasn’t sure who was doing the killings until recently and Gareth was already in town by then.”

Jude turned in his chair to look at Gareth and her at the same time. “She can’t do anything about Mack and the other Rogues, because *you* have to do it?”

Gareth’s expression was grim and it hurt to see it. “That is correct. Werewolves take care of their own.”

“Until they prove they cannot,” Bronwyn said softly.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Gareth’s expression went dark.

“A Rogue Alpha who is creating a pack is a greater concern than for *just* werewolves. The exposure of your kind will lead to the exposure of others who just as soon do *not* want to be dragged into the light at this time,” Bronwyn answered with that same softness.

“Why didn’t you come out to me as soon as I got here, Bronwyn?” Gareth asked. “That is the question I keep asking myself. The faster I knew about Mack, the faster I could deal with the problem.”

She tugged on her curls and looked rather torn. “Because some wish to use this Alpha Rogue situation for their own purpose and I am ... bound by certain covenants not to go against them. In the woods, we would be overheard. Here, I control things.”

“Those some people being other witches?” Gareth asked. There was a frown on his beautiful face. He shifted uneasily.

She nodded. “And some of these people are suggesting that we go back to old ways where werewolves were our familiars without wills of their own. That would eliminate the danger that Rogues bring to the entire supernatural community. At least, that is the argument that they are making to the other races so that they don’t interfere if we move against you.”

Gareth tensed and a growl entered his voice, “I assume that you are *not* one of those.”

“No,” she said with a look of sympathy towards him. “Never. But there are some who remember the *good old days* when werewolves were at our beck and call.” Molly growled and flattened her ears. Bronwyn addressed her, “You are so powerful, my dear, who would *not* want you on their side? I know it sounds abhorrent, but there it is. A werewolf bodyguard? A werewolf army? Imagine what one could do with that! Those are how their thoughts go.”

Molly stopped growling, but gave a high whine instead and looked at Gareth beseechingly as if she needed him to change these things. Tessa petted her and she seemed to relax again. Jude though, too, was tense as a bow. He felt naked, exposed again, like he had on the road when he entered a new town and suspicious eyes were turned towards him. He actually leaned towards Gareth and his Alpha pressed a hand on his shoulder.

I am here, Jude. You are safe. I will let nothing happen to you.

The rawness and clarity of his own emotions - and Gareth knowing them and responding as raw and clear in kind - shocked Jude for a moment and he *almost* drew away. But Gareth squeezed tighter.

It's not weakness, Jude. Protecting my pack gives me purpose. Protecting you gives me joy.

But I'm not weak, Gareth! I can take care of myself! And ... and I can help you ...

I know, my mate.

Jude blushed. Anxious for the others not to know what went between them, he got out, "So what you're saying is that there are some witches who want to make this deal with Mack and the Rogue pack a reason to step in and enslave werewolves again? Even if that's true, could the witches even do it? Sorry if this sounds bad, but you couldn't even protect the town from Mack and three other wolves, how could you take on a whole pack? Or all the packs out there?"

"The witches would find a war on their hands," Gareth agreed, ice sheathing his words.

"They would," she said without any prevarication. "Besides the whole moral aspect of enslaving people – which has *little to no effect* on some of my brethren – I've pointed out how very much we stand to lose if we go to war with the werewolves."

“Does Mack know that you’re here? Is that why he came to this town because he guesses that the witches want to enslave us and he’s seeking your help?” Gareth asked.

She looked thoughtful. “He did come here, but not for that. I think he hoped that I would give him the answers he’s seeking.”

“And what are his questions?” Tessa asked.

Her green eyes again flickered to Gareth and away. “He has certain *beliefs* about witches, Rogues and the Werewolf Council.” She tented her hands together and rested her chin on top of them. “He believes that the Council members are Rogues. That is how they are so powerful.”

“You can tell the difference between a Rogue and a normal werewolf with one breath. The Council Members are not Rogues. Not to mention they are not insane,” Gareth objected with a shake of his head. “He’s created some kind of conspiracy where there is none. His brain is addled. Maybe this conspiracy allows him to feel that he is fighting for something just when it is just madness that is running him.”

“He seeks a cure – well, perhaps not a *cure*, but he wants what he thinks the Council has, which is the strength of being a Rogue without the madness,” she explained. “He believes that the witches have one.”

Jude grew still. He wasn’t sure how much she knew of his heritage other than he had witch blood. “Is there a – a cure? Have you heard of one? A spell or potion or something?”

He had just told Clara to get ahold of Mack. He had all but promised the Rogue Alpha that he could cure him and the others.

Her eyes swung over to him and they seemed quite unreadable. “Not that I’m aware of. But I hardly know everything and I *am* looking into it. But I imagine that if there was such a power that it would *upend* quite a few cherished beliefs. It would shift power irrevocably. Eat human flesh, grown stronger and then be *cured* of the curse that afflicts you. Can you imagine what some werewolves would give for that?”

Jude swallowed. He hadn't thought about it that way. He had only considered what it would mean to stop Gareth from having to kill a man that was like a father to him. And whatever else he might think of Clara and Pierce, they were just kids. He didn't want them to die either. But what would happen when other werewolves found out about what he could do? Would they kill humans and then come to him to save them?

"I want to make sure that I understand this correctly," Tessa said and ticked off on her fingers, "You are here *solely* to keep the knowledge of werewolves existing from humans?" Bronwyn nodded. "You aren't allowed to actually kill or harm the werewolves yourself?" Bronwyn nodded again. "So you must be the one causing poor David so much confusion then."

Bronwyn's eyebrows rose. "You got him to tell you *that*?"

Tessa stilled a moment. She was clearly thinking about his and Gareth's comments that she had used magic on Reynolds to admit those things to them. But he guessed, too, that she was also remembering Grandmother Sophia's words that she didn't have magic. The conflict warred openly on her face.

"I can be highly persuasive," Tessa finally answered her.

Bronwyn gave her a curious look, but said nothing more.

"You realize that your deputy's daughter is one of the Rogues, don't you?" Jude asked.

She nodded sadly. "That was something I could not spare him. I did not even know that there was werewolf blood in the mother. The woman left them before I ever came here and, honestly, I thought that Clara wouldn't shift. I was very mistaken."

"You should have told me about Clara. I could have helped her. Brought her into the Cold Moon Pack," Gareth said with a suppressive look.

“Yes, that would have been better. That is what I wish I had done, but ... as I said, I’m being watched,” she explained.

“Watched? You’ve said that twice now,” Tessa pointed out.

“Indeed, I have,” Bronwyn answered, but gave no further information.

“We know that there are four Rogues, but we only know who three of them are: Mack, Clara, and Pierce, a young man, slender and rather fey. We’re looking for a fourth,” Gareth said.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on the populace, but other than Clara, I can’t say I’ve come across this Pierce or the fourth Rogue,” Bronwyn explained.

“Can’t you use magic to help us find them? Contain them? Something? Anything?” Tessa pressed.

But Bronwyn shook her head. “I cannot.”

“Because you’re being watched?” Jude confirmed.

“That and the other reasons I’ve mentioned,” she answered.

“Jude and I have witch blood. Are we stopped from helping, too?” Tessa asked. “Not that I would recognize anyone or any group’s limitations on my actions that I didn’t agree to in advance, but I am curious.”

“Neither of you is a member of a Coven, so no, you are not bound by the same rules I am,” she said. Her gaze settled on Jude. “And you, Jude, of course, are both werewolf and witch, a unique situation in our world. I don’t know if any of the rules really *could* apply to you. The only thing that you are bound by is to keep secret our existence. If you risk that, then you put yourselves at risk.”

“Why become a member of a Coven if it restricts so much?” Tessa asked.

“There are quite a few benefits of membership,” Bronwyn said with a sad smile. “I still cling to the hope that we can organize more effectively. It remains a dream out of reach. You might wish to join one as well.”

“Not if it doesn’t allow me to help Jude.” Tessa’s chin lifted defiantly.

“Loyal to your family and your friends to the end? I see.” Bronwyn nodded.

“I am and any group that wouldn’t allow me to keep that loyalty isn’t one I care to join,” Tessa said simply.

Jude felt a wash of warmth for his sister. She never took the easy road for herself. She would stand alone and apart so long as it allowed her to do what she thought was right.

“I take it that you know that Jude has *nothing* to do with Mrs. Higgins’ death. We actually think it might have been Clara responsible for it,” Tessa pointed out.

Bronwyn’s shoulders slumped and she looked impossibly tired. “I do know that. But I had to act when I found Jude’s wallet. Plus, it was a reason to get you in here and finally *talk*. No questions will be raised.”

“Who is watching you, Bronwyn? Who are you so afraid of?” Gareth asked.

“As I said, there are quite a few people interested in the outcome of this,” she said with a weary sigh. “I have to be very careful, Gareth, as do you. I’ll do whatever I can to help you, but there are lines I cannot cross this time out.”

He nodded. “We won’t need your help. Mack and the Rogues will be taken care of.”

Bronwyn opened her desk drawer and drew out a plastic evidence bag with Jude’s wallet. She handed it over to him. He took it with a wrinkle of his nose in disgust. The heavy scent of blood perfumed the air as he opened the bag.

“I don’t think I’ll be using this again,” Jude admitted, but he plucked out his driver’s license, the credit card Tessa had given him and the few dollars he had left over from his shopping trip for Grandmother Sophia and pocketed them. He tossed the wallet and evidence bag in the trash.

“Thank you for the advice, Bronwyn. I am glad to have seen you again,” Gareth said, stepping away from the wall and taking her hand. “I hope the next time is under better circumstances.”

“I hope you invite me to the after party of Jude’s acceptance into the pack. The last time I was at one of those ...” She gave a pleased shiver. “Well, good to meet you all.”

They all nodded in response. Bronwyn stood up as just as they did. Gareth led the way of her office with Tessa and Molly next and, finally, Jude left after them. He was just at the doorway when she called him back.

“Jude,” Bronwyn said.

“What?” He turned his head towards her. She moved around the desk and touched his shoulder. It felt like he had been touched by a live power line. She reacted the same way and rocked back. She blinked rapidly and refocused on him.

“Jude, the few who know your ... your *heritage* assume that since you’ve turned into a wolf that you will have little to no witch powers,” she said finally.

He said nothing in return. Maybe he didn’t though he had a feeling the healing he’d done had been pretty powerful. But perhaps he was wrong.

“I would just ... keep them thinking that way,” she said.

His eyebrows rose. “Assuming I had witch powers what would that mean to anyone but me?”

“You want to be with the pack, don’t you? With Gareth?” she asked, with a meaningful look in her eyes.

“Y-yeah. I do.” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “What of it?”

“Nothing, Jude. It’s completely normal and understandable. And it’s what I thought. Just ... keep a low profile.” She patted his arm and went back to her desk.

He lingered in the doorway. He wanted to ask her about the tattoo. It couldn’t be a coincidence that she had created it and he had reacted to it so strongly. But she started typing on her computer as if he wasn’t there and the moment passed. He felt Gareth calling him as much as heard the Alpha, and slowly turned away, knowing that Bronwyn had answers to questions that he likely hadn’t even thought of yet.

But would he have the courage to pursue them once he realized what they were?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: DECIDING TOGETHER

Gareth's werewolf hearing picked up every word that Bronwyn said to Jude. His shoulders bunched when she asked Jude if he wanted to stay with the pack, with *him*, but there was no hesitation in Jude's response or tone. Gareth let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding.

He's so strong willed. I have to admit that I'm afraid he'll back away from me and then ... then I will chase. He is my mate. I cannot give him up.

But then he was listening to what else Bronwyn said - or, rather, did *not* say - which was that if the witches thought that Jude had powerful in magic, *they* would come for him. They *wouldn't* allow him to live peacefully in the pack.

And if they know he can cure the Rogues what will they do then?

Gareth shut his eyes for long moments. His desire to bring back four good wolves suddenly ran head first into the reality of what that would mean for Jude. He heard Molly's whine and opened his eyes to look down at her. She was by his right leg, staring up at him, trying to tell him something.

Over the pack bond, he felt something that translated into, *We will keep him safe.*

The witches might have magic, but so did the pack. Yet he could not keep Jude safe with just the Cold Moon Pack. He would need all the werewolves to protect Jude.

Paavo is here. If he were to know what Jude could do he could move the entire Werewolf Council to our side. Every werewolf would be protecting Jude, Gareth thought. But at what cost? Would Paavo respect that Jude belongs to the Cold Moon Pack? Or would he interfere? And if there's any truth to Mack's crazy assertions that the Council are Rogues ...

He stepped out into the summer heat from the cool interior of the sheriff's office. Heat radiated up from the sidewalk in shimmering waves. He could feel it through the soles of his shoes that melted just a little and stuck to the ground. His eyes drifted up the street, watching the heat snakes that quivered in the air. There was no one else out. People were inside, behind closed doors, in air conditioning. This was good. He hoped that meant people would stay inside tonight as well when the Rogues roamed.

But will that really help? They attacked Jude inside a house.

Molly and Tessa stepped out of the office and joined him. The attorney looked displeased with something. Her mouth was downturned and her lips were pressed together tightly.

“What is it?” he asked, though he thought he could guess.

This wasn't a woman who liked secrets being hidden from her. She was too smart to not be in the know, but she was having to learn the world all over again. She seemed to be catching on quickly though. Molly was loitering near her left leg with her head perfectly positioned for petting. Gareth raised an eyebrow at that. Molly was not one to be touched no matter what form she was in, but, especially, as a wolf. Yet she was seeking Tessa's touch. The attorney willingly gave it and Molly leaned her head against Tessa's thigh. Tessa and Molly could not have been more different, but they were already friendly in an almost unconscious way.

Tessa touched his right arm. “I can see the wheels spinning in your head, Gareth. They're dancing in mine as well. But let's not talk here. Let's go back to Grandmother Sophia's.”

He nodded in agreement. Her advice was good advice. He wasn't one to blurt out what he was thinking in any event, but he, alone, could not make this decision. If Jude could cure the Rogues then it would affect everyone.

I wish I could have a pack vote. But that is not to be.

It was not that Gareth could not make a decision - even the *right* decision - on his own. He more often than not did that and could do that here. But this decision would have far wider ranging consequences than any other he had made before.

If I cannot make this decision on my own then who should I call upon to help make it with me?

The answer came the exact same moment that Jude joined them outside. His cheeks were flushed and not from the heat. His eyes were bright. He gave Gareth a too big smile as if to say, “Nothing to see here! Move along!” When there was *plenty* to see and even more to *discuss*. But he would play it the way Jude wanted.

For now. Until we’re away from prying eyes and ears. Jude will be the one who helps me decide. It is his power. It is his life. He needs to be in on this intimately.

Gareth shot a look down the main street. Still just heat snakes and baking cars. No sign of anyone watching them, but he *felt* someone - or many people - were. Tessa clicked on the unlocking button on the car keys. He opened the doors for Jude and Molly, but not the attorney as she had waved him off with a delighted laugh.

“You’re a gentleman, Gareth! I like to see that for my brother,” Tessa said.

“Tessa!” Jude’s cheeks were even redder. He looked for all the world like a younger brother being teased by an older sister for a crush. He slipped into the car though and scooped over so that Gareth could get in by the same door, too.

“What, Jude?” She pretended ignorance beautifully. “Are you going to say that Gareth is *not* a gentleman?”

“Of course he is!” Jude squawked. His gaze immediately swung to Gareth as if to apologize for even a *moment* making it seem like he didn’t think so.

“It’s all right, Jude,” he said with a chuckle.

“And you, too, *are* together, aren’t you?” Tessa asked. Her dark eyes caught his in the mirror.

“Yes,” Gareth said. “We are together.”

“Jude?” she asked.

“Yes! Okay, yes!, we’re together! Gareth’s awesome! We’re like ... *mated!*” Jude cried out.

He hadn’t likely meant for that particular word to escape his lips. Gareth felt a jolt of electricity at his acknowledgement of it. But the female werewolf spun around in the front seat to regard them both with fluffy brows raised. Tessa must have noticed Molly’s abrupt reaction, because her eyes brows rose, too.

“That’s ... *important*, is it?” Tessa asked.

Jude’s mouth opened and shut goldfish-like. His gaze darted to Gareth. “I - _”

“Yes,” Gareth said quietly as he snaked an arm around Jude’s shoulders and drew the young man flush against him in a pure show of territorialism and love. “It is.”

“Oh!” Tessa said. She opened her mouth to say something else, but then decided against it and simply put the keys in the ignition.

It took Molly a few more moments of looking at them before she, too, turned back around. Tessa had, once again, clicked the seat belt around Molly to keep her safe. Tessa pulled out onto the empty main street and they drove in silence back to Grandmother Sophia’s.

At first, Jude had merely allowed Gareth's embrace, but had not returned it. But by the time they had returned to the cottage, he was resting his head against Gareth's shoulder and he had reached across and linked Gareth's free hand with one of his. They actually sat in the car a moment longer than Tessa and Molly did.

"I'm sorry I let that out of the bag. About us being *mates*, I mean," Jude said quietly.

Gareth leaned down and kissed the top of his head. "It does not matter. I am *happy* for them to know. Are you?"

"Yeah," Jude said after a moment. "I *do* want them to know so if there's anyone back at the pack who still believes that they have a chance with you _"

"There's *no one*!" Gareth laughed.

Jude pulled back and looked at him rather solemnly. "I don't believe that."

"I am not lying to you, Jude!" he assured the young man.

"I don't think you are. I just don't think you *know* the truth," Jude continued on in that solemn way. "So it would be best if they contacted that person or persons to let them know you're off the market."

"I assure you that there is no one," Gareth began.

"How could there not be?" Jude asked, and, without waiting for a reply, he slipped from the car, leaving Gareth, behind, and quite flummoxed.

He quickly got out of the car and called out, "Jude, wait! Come with me into the forest to get firewood!"

Jude turned, without stopping, and asked, "Don't we all want to have a pow wow about what just went down with Bronwyn and witches and --"

“Yes, but I want to talk to you, *alone*, first. As my mate, I would ask this boon of you,” Gareth asked formally.

Jude blinked and stopped. “Is that like a - a *sacred* request or something?”

“Yes, it is. While mates are not always in agreement, they try to be,” he explained. “Especially, when one of them is Alpha of the pack. I need to talk this over with you first, not just to settle my own mind, but to know yours. Please, Jude.”

“Oh!” Jude blinked and looked a bit surprised, as if he hadn’t thought that Gareth would *care* what he thought.

He isn’t used to being asked and he isn’t used to sharing his own ideas either. This is going to be a learning process for both of us.

“Of course, I’ll come with you,” Jude said, formally, as well and loped back to Gareth’s side. As they walked into the forest together, he asked, “We planning on having a big bonfire tonight?”

“Yes.” Gareth nodded. “You told Clara that you wanted to meet with Mack.”

Jude’s head jerked up, but then he smiled as he confessed, “I totally forget you can like hear everything! Not that I wasn’t going to tell you about that, just I was waiting to do so until -- well, until we were alone!”

Gareth grinned. “You can hear *everything*, too. I’m rather amazed at how controlled you are. For most new wolves, their senses *rule* them. They have to learn to turn them down and ignore them. Not you though.”

Jude shook his head. “At first, it was a little overwhelming, but now ... I admit it seems normal. I don’t think that’s the witch in me.” His gaze slanted towards Gareth. “I think it has something to do with being your

mate. Maybe I'm learning more quickly to do things, because you need me to?"

Gareth ran a hand down Jude's cheek. "Yes, perhaps that is true. But do not grow too fast."

"You sound like a *father*." Jude rolled his eyes, but he was smiling

"Just a proud Alpha and a *concerned* mate." Gareth scooped up some good branches into his arms. Jude did the same.

"Why concerned?" Jude asked, without looking at Gareth. "I've done everything else in my life *fast*."

Gareth paused in his wood gathering. He said softly, "That's is why I want you to have *some* semblance of a young wolf-hood."

Jude let out a laugh and turned to look at Gareth over his shoulder. "A *young wolf-hood*? Is that even a thing? A word?"

Gareth snorted and batted Jude playfully on the behind with a stick, which Jude almost avoided and let out a yelp when he was paddled. "Yes, scamp, it is a thing and a term. It's a time when you get to truly realize what it is to be a werewolf. Our human lives had their special times for sure, but when you become a wolf ..." He paused and tried to remember his own early shifting years. "The *magic* of it seems most acute during that time. You can still remember when the world wasn't as vibrant."

Jude considered this, thoughtfully. "That hasn't gone away for me, Gareth." Then he quickly started picking up sticks again so that Gareth couldn't see his face, though the Alpha could *feel* the sharp grief over their bond - and the sense that it wasn't fair! - as Jude said, "But we really can't afford me to be like that, can we? I mean, with the Rogues and that Paavo guy back at the pack house and me being a half witch. And you heard Bronwyn, right? What she said to me when you guys had left the room?"

“I did.”

“People are watching what happens to Mack and the other Rogues. If I can figure out how to *cure* them, things might get a little hairy --”

“You still think you should try and cure them?”

Gareth was standing very still. He wanted Jude to tell him what he wanted and to try and not influence it in any way. Based upon the level of danger, he wasn't all that sure if he wanted Jude to even attempt to cure the Rogues. He had loved Mack like a son, but Jude was his mate.

Jude frowned as he picked up a few more dry branches. “Well ... yeah, why would my decision change?”

“You said so yourself: Bronwyn's words to you. Her *warning*,” Gareth answered simply.

Though it was much cooler beneath the trees than out in the direct sunlight, sweat was starting to stick the young man's t-shirt to his nicely muscled chest. Every time Jude leaned over to grab a branch, his pants encased the firm, round globes of his ass. Even though this was a desperately serious conversation, the mate bond *tingled* within Gareth, wanting to be completed.

He wrenched his eyes away from Jude's ass and fastened them on the young man's face. Not that this did much good as Jude's red-brown eyes were so soulful. They made Gareth want to scoop Jude into his arms and run away with him, somewhere safe, somewhere where they would be alone and no one could bother them. But such a place did not exist. They would be followed and harassed no matter where they went.

Jude straightened and met Gareth's eye. There was a warning glint in his own and his voice was too cool as he asked, “Could you really care for someone who didn't help another out of *fear*?”

“That’s not what it would be, Jude,” Gareth said. “It’s not like bravely facing down a bully. From what I read between the lines of what Bronwyn said, *if* people were to know about your ability -”

“My *alleged* ability. We don’t know if I have it yet,” Jude pointed out.

“Something tells me you do. I don’t think Bronwyn would have revealed herself like that otherwise,” he said, but without waiting for Jude’s response, he continued, “If people were to find out, you would be in danger.”

“From the witches? Who doesn’t want me unless I’m *good* enough for them? Screw them.” Jude waved a hand through the air as if he could swat the witches. “I want nothing to do with them. They cannot keep me.”

“Witches are powerful, Jude.”

“I don’t care. I’m not afraid. If I lived my life in fear of what the powerful might do I’d never leave my bed in the morning,” Jude explained with that mulish look Gareth was coming to recognize and rather adore.

“But there might be *werewolves*, too, who would try and abuse your gift. What if they kill humans and then come to you to be cured? They’d want the strength of being a Rogue, but would wish to pay no price for it. What will you do then?” Gareth played Devil’s Advocate.

“We’ll deal with them when and *if* that happens on a case by case basis. Maybe some won’t deserve to be cured. Maybe some will.” Jude shrugged

He is a strong mate. He has a sound moral compass. He will never take the easy way out.

Jude dumped his sticks and walked over to Gareth. He put his hands on the Alpha’s shoulders. “Tell me that you don’t want me to save Mack. Tell me that killing him won’t haunt you forever. Tell me that now that you know there is an alternative to killing him that the haunting won’t be *worse*.”

“I cannot say that,” Gareth answered truthfully.

“Then we’re not going down that road. I’m going to try and cure the Rogues though I have no idea how to do that,” Jude said as if it were as easy as that.

“But the danger to *you* --”

“Will always be there.” Jude shrugged. “Someone is going to find out. Someone always does. And we’ll be at this same spot again, except that we’ll have on our consciences a whole bunch of dead wolves that could be alive.”

“Yes, you are right,” Gareth said, a smile twitching his lips. “You are very brave and good, my Jude.”

Jude turned towards him. There was no pleasure in his eyes, only practicality. “I’m not going to run anymore, Gareth. For the first time, I feel like I actually have something that’s *mine*. I’m not giving it up because someone, sometime is going to do something bad. They always will no matter *what* we do so we might as well do what we want and that’s helping the Rogues.”

It was then that Gareth realized that Jude had been using the term “we” this whole time. He wondered if it was conscious or if the pack mentality was already working on Jude.

He’s always wanted to belong and be a part of something he could believe in. The pack is that for sure.

“I am with you, Jude. So will the pack be,” Gareth said certainly.

Jude blinked. “I -- I guess we should ask them, too, but I --”

“They will agree.”

“But if you thought that, if you wanted it, then why did you ask me? Why didn’t you just tell me that I would be curing the Rogues?” Jude sputtered.

“As if you would do what someone told you to do!” Gareth smiled at him.

“If *you* asked me,” Jude began, “I would --”

“No, Jude,” his voice was firm “You must *always* do what you think is right. It is natural as my mate to want to defer to me --”

“And *you* to defer to *me*, right?” Jude gave him a pointed look.

“Yes, I will be wrapped around your little finger,” Gareth admitted. “Even more than I am now.”

Jude stared at him, open-mouthed. “R-really?” His voice was so high, it squeaked. He cleared his throat and said in a deeper voice, “I mean, of course, I’m your mate or will be or --”

“You *are* my mate, Jude,” he growled. The sudden need to make Jude admit this overwhelmed him.

It was Gareth’s time to drop his sticks. He caught Jude around the waist and pulled the young man against him. Jude curled one arm around Gareth’s neck. He let out a little “whoop” in surprise, but then laughed and it was as if they were dancing together. Their gazes met and there was a rush of heat so powerful that Gareth nearly lost his footing and sank down onto the ground. Their lips were an inch from one another.

“I -- I am yours,” Jude murmured, his pupils blowing up so that there was only a ring of that particular red-brown color. “Gareth ...”

“The bond wants to complete,” the words were guttural, insistent. He swallowed. “But we agreed to wait and --”

“I don’t think I can ...” Jude licked his lips. Gareth’s eyes flickered to that lush mouth. “I don’t think I can resist this for long.”

He closed his eyes, nearly overwhelmed by the words of submission, of acceptance, but he needed to know if they were real. “But do you *want* to? Do you want ... *me*?”

“You know I do. You can hear my heart. The rush of blood in my veins. My *thoughts*,” Jude whispered.

Gareth listened to those thoughts over the near bond their shared. The whirls and eddies of those thoughts flowed through him. He saw them running as wolves, side by side, in the forest. He glimpsed Jude’s memory of being on top of him. Desire. Safety. Belonging. Jude wanted him. Jude wanted him and all he represented with more than anything. But he could see dark swirls, too. Those were the memories of trusting and being betrayed. Jude remembered his innocence being ripped from him. The men who violated him. The women who abandoned him. The largest dark hole was his past that he couldn’t remember.

When Gareth came back to his own mind, he felt something wet on his face. Jude reached up and brushed tears away he hadn’t been aware of shedding.

“Gareth, it’s okay. Whatever you saw, I’m okay now and --”

Gareth kissed him. It was a soft, tender kiss. When they broke apart, the overwhelming need to bond was muted, satisfied somehow though it was still not complete and would not be until they let their bodies come together as well. He rested his forehead against Jude’s and they just breathed for long moments.

“Are you okay?” Jude asked, his voice small.

He let out a sad huff of laughter. “Jude, all I saw was *your* life. I want you to be *all right*.”

“I am,” Jude said. “I mean ... I’m getting there.”

Gareth kissed his forehead. “I promise you will have goodness in the rest of your days that will outshine the darkness you have endured.”

“I ... I *believe* you,” Jude breathed.

Another kiss and then they reluctantly parted. They finished picking up huge armfuls of branches and carried them back to the cottage in companionable silence. The uncompleted bond was fluttering, trying to reach out and connect, but Gareth noticed that there seemed to be *less* space between the two fluttering ends as if he and Jude were moving inexorably together.

We are fated. We are mates.

“So why are we gathering enough wood to light the whole forest on fire?” Jude asked. “You started to answer me, but then brought up what I said to Clara.”

“They’re connected. The bonfire will be the signal for Mack to come meet us tonight,” Gareth explained. “He’ll see the large fire and know that we want to talk.”

Jude’s eyebrows rose. “But you had us gathering this wood *before* you knew I was going to try and cure him.”

Gareth dryly replied, “If you decided not to, I would have still built the fire, but then I would have killed him.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: SCENT OF A CURE

Jude watched embers from the bonfire take flight and head up into the night sky. Gareth's arm slid around his shoulders and he leaned into his Alpha, resting his head on Gareth's broad shoulder. Gareth's scent washed over him above the smoky smell of the fire. He buried his nose against Gareth's t-shirt and drew in deep breaths of that smell that was uniquely the Alpha's. He *felt* Gareth smile before he saw the corners of the Alpha's mouth lifting.

"Scenting me?" Gareth's voice was a low burr that seemed to skate up Jude's spine.

"Yeah, I guess so. Your scent is ... *comforting*." Jude's cheeks burned. That sounded so animalistic or something to his ears, but Gareth, of course, looked pleased.

"I'm glad it does." He pressed his nose in Jude's hair and drew in similar breaths. "I find that yours calms me."

Jude smiled at that. "I've never calmed anyone. I've made them nervous, suspicious, anxious and a little alarmed. But never calmed them."

"I don't know what they're smelling, but you are the equivalent of an hour of mediation." Gareth sniffed behind his ears and under his chin, causing Jude to laugh and push him off.

"Tickles."

Gareth kissed his nose. A wave of affection for this man ran through him. His pancake cutting, suitcase packing, brave, kind, beautiful Alpha.

"Your expression just went serious. Is it the waiting for our *friends*?" Gareth asked, meaning the Rogues that were supposed to come that night.

“No, actually I was thinking about something as far from them as possible. I was thinking of *you* and ...” Jude looked away, suddenly feeling shy and uncertain of saying his feelings out loud.

Gareth gently took his chin and drew Jude’s face back towards his. “*And?*”

“Just ... how did I get so lucky? I’m *never* lucky, Gareth. I’m *never* happy like this,” Jude explained haltingly.

His Alpha’s topaz eyes glowed with tenderness. He pressed their foreheads together. “If you knew how different I wish your coming to the pack was, meeting me was, you wouldn’t feel *lucky*.”

“Oh, you mean most members don’t join in the middle of Rogue hunts and crazy witch interference?” Jude grinned.

“Not many.” Gareth brushed his lips over Jude’s forehead. “Most just have the *trauma* of their first shift, that knowledge that they are not human, and their lives will be forever different. The pack is the eye in the storm. There is peace there and strength. There is also joy and parties.”

“Parties?”

“Oh, yes, there will be parties once you meet the rest of the pack. No matter *what* is happening they will insist upon it. It is a big deal, a cause for great celebration, when we have a new brother or sister join. You will see.”

Jude nodded and rested his head on Gareth’s shoulder again. Parties seemed the farthest thing from where they were right then. They were in the backyard of Grandmother Sophia’s. A bonfire so big that Jude was certain people could see it from the moon was burning.

He could see Raj and Jacob through the flames. They were like two disparate bookends, one massive, one reed slender, yet they belonged together. They were sitting on the other side of the fire. Jacob had his back resting against one of the large logs while Raj was perched on top of it. He

was still wearing a suit, which seemed so incongruous with the forest setting yet it was so Raj in Jude's mind now.

Molly prowled around the fire. Her eyes rose to the woods every few moments, looking for the Rogues. Grandmother Sophia and Tessa were inside the house where Sophia had cast powerful anti-werewolf spells so that no one could get in. Not even them.

Tessa hadn't wanted to be inside. She definitely hadn't wanted to be separated from Jude or Molly. But then it was pointed out to her that words would do little good against werewolf claws and fangs. Her shoulders had slumped and Jude had immediately known that she was wishing she had magic to help. They had told Grandmother Sophia about the deputy's reactions to her, and that had intrigued the elder witch, but she wasn't willing to have Tessa try untested magic against Rogues. Molly was of the same opinion. She and Tessa had exchanged a few whispered words, which Jude *hadn't* listened in on, and Tessa had finally agreed to remain inside. He did wonder what Molly had said.

"They *will* come, won't they?" Jude whispered. He wasn't sure why he was whispering. Werewolf hearing would let everyone know what he was saying.

Gareth nodded. "Just give it time."

It amazed Jude how calm Gareth seemed. He knew his Alpha wasn't altogether serene. Over their uncompleted bond he could feel Gareth's anxiety. But he was not anxious about what they were doing. He was sure of that. He only was concerned about those thing that they could not control: Mack and the other Rogues.

If they had not been waiting for Rogue werewolves to show up the scene would have been peaceful. The sky was filled with stars. The moon glowed through the branches of the trees. If this were a normal night with the pack - whatever that was - he imagined that they would strip off their clothes and go running in the woods in their wolf forms. There would be

comradeship and joy just in being together. This companionship should have been an alien thing for Jude to want. At least in the past he would have rejected desiring it at all, but now he knew that was only because he thought he would never have it.

So pretend you don't care about being alone. If that's how things are always going to be then act like you're good with it even if you aren't.

There was a rustle to their left in the woods. All of them tensed. This wasn't just wind through the trees this time. Someone was letting them know they were there. They were coming. And within moments, Mack, Pierce and Clara silently glided out of the trees and stood at the wood's edge.

Gareth put a hand on Jude's right thigh. The young man hadn't realized he had begun to get up. Gareth had told him that as this place was under the Cold Moon Pack's protection that it was considered Gareth's territory. They would remain seated while the guests would stand until allowed to do otherwise.

"It also shows them that we aren't there to attack. When you're seated, you're hardly being aggressive," Gareth had explained.

Jude though found that he didn't like not being on his feet, ready to move at an instant's notice, with these violent-eyed predators. But he settled down, drawing on Gareth's strength and peace. The Rogues weren't here to fight. They were here to convince Mack to give him a chance to cure them.

But where's the fourth Rogue? Is he or she hiding somewhere in the woods?

"May we approach?" Mack asked and gestured towards the fire.

"You may," Gareth said with equal solemnity and formality.

Molly glided to the side so that they had a free pathway to the fire. She stayed standing. The Point of the Pack was allowed to remain up during even such a meeting like this according to Gareth.

Jude noted that Clara looked *distinctly* uncomfortable though she skipped to the fire rather than walked. She was wearing a light blue pair of cut off shorts and a white tank that glowed in the dark. Her teeth and the whites of her eyes flashed as she entered the firelight. He wondered where Deputy Reynolds thought his little girl was. Did he realize she was gone? Or was Bronwyn's spells keeping him a haze of forgetfulness?

Pierce moved with an almost negligent grace. He looked almost dreamy. His didn't meet anyone's eyes directly, but rather seemed to look *beyond* them at something none of them could see. It was *eerie*. Jude sniffed and could differentiate the different smells of the Rogues from his own pack. But he realized he could also differentiate between the Rogues.

Mack's scent reminded him of Old Spice, but it was as if the scent was sprinkled over slightly off meat. Clara's signature was of flowers, but there, too, was a hint of dead flesh that hung like pall around her.

Pierce's scent though truly had Jude's hackles rising. It was the sweet scent of old rot and *nothing* else. Alarm raced through him. He turned to Gareth, but the Alpha was watching Mack. He opened his mouth to speak, but then shut it. What was he going to say? That Pierce smelled bad? Smelled worse than the others? Surely, Gareth would notice the scent himself without Jude saying something likely offensive. He practically had to sit on his hand though from drawing the Alpha's attention to himself.

The Rogues stopped a few feet from the fire. Mack stood in the center with Clara on one side and Pierce on the other. Jude saw that Jacob, who had been chewing on a stalk of grass, looking for all the world like he was completely comfortable, was watching them out of the corner of his eye. He was ready to leap into action if need be. Raj kept picking invisible pieces of lint from his pants also had a side-eye on the group.

When the two of them had been told that Jude might have the ability to cure Rogues they had surprised Jude by not being too keen on it.

“Mack’s earned his death,” Jacob had grunted. He cracked his large knuckles. “Twenty-five of us he slaughtered, Gareth.”

“But what about Clara and Pierce?” Gareth asked. “They were brought into the werewolf life being told that eating humans was what they had to do. They were corrupted before they had a real chance to choose.”

“But can they turn back?” Raj bobbed a knee up and down from his seat at the kitchen table. “They’ve eaten human flesh. It’s supposed to be addicting. Even if Jude cures them - whatever that even means - will they ever be truly ... *free* of the desire to hunt humans?”

“We don’t know,” Gareth answered honestly.

“Let’s say we spare those two, but Mack? Can you just let him off?” Jacob sounded appalled.

“If you kill Mack, what happens to those young ones?” Grandmother Sophia asked as she stirred tomato sauce for that night’s supper on the stove. “We have no idea what magic ties them all together as Rogues. You could be destroying them just as much as him. Maybe in order for Jude to cure them he has to cure Mack as their Alpha. We simply do not know.”

Raj’s arms protectively curled around his chest. “I don’t want to kill good wolves or wolves that could be good, but ... I’m not really keen on having Mack around while Jude plays witch on him.”

“We will kill him and them if they step out of line,” Molly said and Tessa gasped.

“Molls! How can you say that so -- so *easily*?” Tessa asked.

Molly did not look repentant at all. “You have to understand, Tessa, that when it is a choice between friend and foe, I will do whatever I must to keep my friends safe. Mack is a foe right now. The worse type of foe, because he betrayed us.”

“If Mack could be brought back to us just as he was would you all still feel this way?” Gareth asked, his gaze jumping from one to the other of them.

No one met his gaze.

Finally, Jacob said, “I guess a part of me feels that he can’t come back from that. It was a choice to taste human flesh. He knew what the consequences would be. Everything that’s happened since the moment he chose to kill a human being was the result of that *conscious* choice.”

“He was out of his head because Eliza was killed,” Gareth reminded him.

“When he came to Fallowmere that night, he was smiling at us. He wasn’t crazed. He spoke *normally*,” Molly responded quietly. “He didn’t smell right but they let him in because it was *Mack*. He had all our trust and love. He relied upon that. It made us lower our guards. Then he ripped open Barb’s stomach and her insides fell out onto the floor with a wet *plop*.”

Tessa covered her mouth with one hand and made a disgusted noise as if she were going to be sick. Grandmother Sophia who was over by the stove stirring tomato sauce pursed her lips in dismay.

Molly continued in this soft, almost droning voice, that should have stripped some of the horror out of what she was saying, but instead just gave rise to the belief it was simply *too horrible* to say any other way, “Half a dozen were down in five minutes. I was upstairs when I caught his stink and heard the high-pitched yips. I don’t even remember shifting. You’ve got to understand that so many died because they were too -- too *frozen* with the idea of it being *Mack* attacking us. No one could believe it. Even as there was so much blood ...”

There was silence for a long time after that. Tessa put a gentle hand on Molly's shoulder, but Molly didn't respond to it. Her eyes were shadowed and she was staring down at the floor though Jude was pretty sure she wasn't seeing it. She was still remembering the attack.

"So," Raj began. "Let's say Jude cures Mack. What then? He comes back as pack Alpha? Because if that's what everyone thinks, I'm leaving the pack. You're my Alpha, Gareth. Mack can't be that anyone. I don't even think he can even be a Pack brother to me if I'm honest."

"Are we just going to let him remain *unpunished*? Not for just what he did to us, but what about to the wolves he corrupted and the humans he's killed since then?" Jacob shook his burly head. "It seems to be that *curing* him, if Jude can do that at all, creates a Hell of a lot of questions we don't have answers for."

"So, in the past," Tessa clarified, "when one of your kind went Rogue, the solution was death? And that was the only solution?"

All nodded.

"You don't have laws in place for this. It sounds like Mack did some of this in his right mind and some of it when ill." Tessa tapped her chin thoughtfully. As an attorney, Jude guessed that the idea of creating laws for this kind of situation was intoxicating for her.

"If this is something I can really do, we *will* need some laws in place," Jude said quietly. "I know you've got at least one pack member who is a lawyer, right? And we've got Tessa ... Maybe they could come up with something that the pack could vote on?"

"I'd be happy to help," Tessa volunteered. "I know that there are a ton of things I would have to learn about werewolf culture and heritage, but I'm more than willing to put in the time to come up with something."

“We may very well take you up on that offer, Tessa. Thank you,” Gareth said with a nod of his head in her direction.

“This is bigger than just us.” Raj tightened his hold on himself. “It will change *everything* if Jude can do this.”

“Who else is going to make the decision? Jude is part of our pack. We’re on our own,” Jacob grunted.

“Paavo is back at Fallowmere,” Raj said uncertainly.

“Yeah, but if we come back with anything less than Mack’s head ... they’ll be questions we won’t want to answer,” Jacob said with a wave of a meaty arm. “Just think about how they’ll handle it. They’ll see Jude as some kind of *asset*, not our pack brother. For all the *help* they haven’t given us so far, suddenly they’ll be all up in our business in ways we won’t want.”

“I don’t trust the Council anymore either,” Raj said, dragging a hand through his hair. “But it’s not like we can hide the fact forever that Jude can cure Roges. I mean ... they’ll find out. The witches already guess Jude is special. From what you guys explained, Bronwyn was practically warning Jude off from helping the Rogues.”

“I’m not afraid of the witches,” Jude said mulishly just like he had said to Gareth.

Grandmother Sophia let out a sigh. “Jude, you are a brave boy. You always have been. But the witches ... you don’t want to cross them. And if they want a thing or *someone* they get them.”

“So you’re saying that we should get the Werewolf Council on our side?” Raj asked, looking half hopeful and half worried. Jude sensed that the Indian man was more comfortable with rules. He wanted there to be, at least, a semi-orderly way of doing things. That’s likely why he did so well for them in business.

Grandmother Sophia looked over at Gareth and she didn't seem any happier about the Werewolf Council than she had the witches. "Jude's going to be a bone that many people will be fighting over. Anything that *ties* him to where he wants to be is best to be put into place."

Jude's cheeks suddenly flamed. His grandmother's knowing glance between the two of them meant that she knew they were mates. He didn't think that Tessa had said anything to her, but maybe it was apparent to someone like her who could control magic. The uncompleted bond did seem like a magical thing to Jude. He glanced at Gareth and saw high color in his cheeks, too. His Alpha quickly sent a look his way. Maybe waiting to complete the bond had been a really bad idea.

"The Werewolf Council abandoned us when we needed them," Molly finally said. "Trusting them would be a last resort. Let's try to handle this within the pack. Safer that way for all involved."

Jude watched as the others nodded. Gareth though did not nod. His eyes were alert, taking in everyone else's behavior, but he hid his own. Jude guessed that he likely agreed with them. But he imagined as Alpha, Gareth had to be more politic in what he said about the Werewolf Council.

"Tonight is just the first step," Gareth said finally. He slung an arm over Jude's shoulders. "Jude doesn't yet know if he can help them at all."

"If they even show up tonight, we'll, at least, know if they're interested in being cured or not, I guess," Raj sighed.

"We don't have all the answers, Hell, we don't have all the *questions* that this is going to raise, but I don't think we can ignore the possibility of saving some wolves, can you?" Gareth asked each of them.

One by one there were shakes of the head around the room

And now the Rogues *had* shown up. Jude wondered if anyone was really happy about that or not. It meant that they *wanted* to be cured.

Not so easy to kill them now. Pandora's Box has been opened.

"Clara informed me that you wished to speak about a *cure* for the madness," Mack said.

Jude watched as he shifted from foot to foot. The Rogue Alpha was never still. Every time he tried to stop the movements of his body, a limb would twitch, his brow would worry up, his foot would tap. Yellow nightshine rolled over his eyes every few seconds.

"First, I think you need to address while not all of your pack is here. Where is the fourth Rogue?" Gareth asked. His voice was even, but there was a hardness in it that would not take no for an answer.

"Not everyone wished to attend," Mack gave out a huff of a laugh.

"I didn't want to either!" Clara stamped one tiny foot on the ground. "But you *made* me!"

Mack ruffled her hair, which she tolerated, but looked ready to nip his hand. "That is because you are too young to make such decisions on your own. You and Pierce are under age."

So we know that the fourth Rogue is older at least, Jude thought.

"What you're saying is that the fourth Rogue does not wish to be cured?" Gareth asked carefully. Again, his voice was smooth and unruffled, but Jude knew what this meant. They couldn't let *any* Rogue escape. They either had to be cured or to die.

Mack's smile became a little tighter. "Not at this time."

"You do understand that we can't let any of you live if you aren't cured?" Gareth asked.

“We haven’t heard that you can actually cure us.” Mack’s gaze went to the cottage and Jude realized that he thought that Grandmother Sophia was the one that could help him. He never even considered Jude at all. Werewolves and witches didn’t mix. His next words confirmed this, “Besides, werewolves don’t have the power to undo this part of the curse. Only a witch would.”

“Grandmother Sophia cannot help you,” Gareth said, his eyebrows drawing together. “So if you think stealing her away - if you even could - will get you what you want, you’re quite mistaken.”

“I don’t need a cure! I’m not sick!” Clara stamped her foot again.

Jude thought of how her temper had risen at her father earlier that day. Did she even *realize* the danger she posed to him? Did she even care?

“So the cure ...” Mack tried to steer things back to what he wanted to know.

“We don’t know that we can cure you yet. But we have ... the *possibility* of it,” Gareth said carefully.

Mack’s forehead furrowed. “That doesn’t sound like much of an answer. If you don’t have it --”

“It’s a spell, Mack,” Gareth interrupted. “Or an ability. One person may have it due to their heritage. But it’s not a certain thing and there would be trial and error.”

“How much trial and error?” Mack demanded to know.

“We don’t know. Nothing is certain. But we’ve spoken to people knowledgeable about these things and they seem to indicate that a cure is possible,” Gareth said, careful to obscure that it was Jude he was talking about.

Mack's eyes narrowed. "So how would this work exactly? We'd come by every once and awhile for you to experiment on us?"

"No," Gareth said quietly. "You'd surrender yourselves to us now and be imprisoned until a cure could be found."

Mack let out a twitchy laugh and was about to say something sneering when they all heard a twig snap. The sound was too near. They should have been alerted to the person's approach far before now. But they hadn't been. Jude would realize all this later. But at that moment, all he could do was be shocked when Deputy Reynolds emerged from the forest with flashlight and revolver in hand.

"Clara? Clara, come over here! Come over here right now! The rest of you stay where you are!" Reynolds called, his voice shaking only slightly. "I don't know -- what the Hell?!"

Pierce had shifted. One moment he was a man and the next a wolf. That wave of foul sickness rolled over Jude as Pierce lunged for Reynolds. He heard Mack snarl a command, but Jude knew that Pierce wouldn't listen.

"Pierce, don't! That's my dad!" Clara screamed.

But he didn't listen to that either.

Pierce went for Reynolds' throat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: HOWL

Gareth had felt the tension building in Pierce like a rising storm as he had spoken with Mack. Outwardly, the young wolf had seemed calm, if not completely blasé, about the meeting, but Pierce's inner control, as well as Mack's outer control, had frayed so thin as to be threadbare. Gareth had felt this before in war. Soldiers wound so tight that they simply just snapped. So when Pierce transformed and leaped towards the deputy, Gareth hadn't been ready for *exactly* that, but something close enough that he was primed to react before anyone else was.

Gareth leaped towards the lunging wolf. As he flew through the air to grab Pierce around the middle, everything slowed down and he could see Reynolds' almost comic reaction to Pierce's transformation. The deputy's mouth opened in an 'O' of shock and terror in his doughy face. Gareth could see the sweat that dotted the deputy's upper lip and forehead shining in the firelight. There were dark stains on his uniform's shirt under his armpits. He had come directly from work to look for his daughter evidently. He had tramped through the woods after her from the state of his shoes, which were no longer polished to a mirror shine, but instead were caked with mud and forest debris.

In that moment, it took him to wrap his arms around Pierce's middle and *roll* both himself and the struggling wolf to the ground, Gareth had time to wonder how neither the Rogues nor him or his people had heard the man crashing through the forest, let alone his huffing and puffing, until he appeared in their midst at the worst possible time. As he hit the ground with that furry body beneath him, he thought he knew the answer.

Bronwyn

And he thought he knew why.

She doesn't want Jude to reveal his ability to heal Rogues. She thinks this will make me kill all of them so he won't get a chance to try.

Then all thought was abandoned other than to subdue Pierce as the Rogue thrashed and howled beneath him. But he was not alone in wrestling the young wolf into submission. *Jude* was right beside him. Jude pinned Pierce's furry shoulders to the ground while Gareth slipped over on top of the young wolf. He straddled Pierce's middle, using sheer body weight to keep the young wolf's bottom half down while Jude held the upper in place. Their eyes met over the struggling wolf's body and Jude flashed him a grin. It wasn't a happy grin. It was an I'm-in-it-with-you grin. A mate's grin.

He wants me to know that I'm not alone in this, in anything. Oh, my Jude. My beautiful wolf.

Pierce let out an ear-piercing howl and Gareth had to pay attention to the matter at hand. His Jude knew that he loved him. He could express himself fully later.

Pierce's body felt unnaturally warm. The scent of rotted meat wafted up from him in gag worthy amounts. Gareth's stomach *churned* and he had to force himself to swallow down bile before he threw up. Pierce snapped the air with sharp, white teeth. His breath was more rancid than the scent exuding from his skin and Gareth thought he saw strips of flesh - likely human - between the incisors.

"*Still,*" Gareth commanded, putting all his Alpha strength into that word as he forced Pierce to meet his eyes.

And, at first, it seemed to work. Pierce quieted underneath him, his body going limp, and his neck extending back as if to offer his throat to Gareth.

But then Reynold's voice rose up in a near wail, "What in God's green earth is that thing? He turned into a wolf! Clara, get over here!"

And Pierce began to writhe again. Clara, who was being held back by Mack, broke free of her Alpha and dashed to her father. She might be a Rogue, but she was also, clearly, a little girl who wanted her dad, too. And

that made Gareth realize that he simply could not kill her. They had to find a way to *fix* this.

Jude's eyes followed her, too, as she barreled into her father, wrapping her arms around his middle. The deputy was still too stunned to have drawn his sidearm, but he started to do so now. Pierce writhed underneath Gareth in the desire to bite the man, nearly unseating him. Gareth could only shout at Reynolds to not shoot and to stay back.

"Deputy, you need to just stay away!" Gareth shouted. "That weapon will only end up hurting you!"

Normal lead bullets could not kill a werewolf. Even a headshot wouldn't keep a wolf down for long. The bullet would be *pushed* out of the body and the healing would begin immediately. Molly appeared by the deputy's side and neatly plucked the gun out of his shaking hands and dashed away with it.

Reynolds cried, "Hey! Come back here you!"

The deputy swiped at the air where she had been moments ago, but, of course, caught nothing. Not even the hem of her dress. Clara tightened her hold on him when he tried to go after Molly. Gareth wasn't sure if she was doing so because she feared Molly would hurt him or if she just wanted her father close.

"No! Daddy, *stay!*" she cried and her strength being so much more than his, kept her father in place. Her eyes flashed to Pierce and her lower lip wobbled. She had clearly felt a kinship - still did - with the young man.

She's not fully ruined after all. She feels pack bonds.

His own pack was joined together as well. Jacob and Raj were on their feet. They did not approach him, Jude and Pierce, but instead kept their gazes firmly on Mack. They didn't spare any concern for Reynolds. The lawman was helpless really. Even if he ran away they could track him down easily.

Jacob and Raj clearly feared that Mack would attack while he and Jude were busy with Pierce.

“Stay where you are, Mack,” Jacob grunted, confirming Gareth’s belief. He felt the pack bonds between all of his wolves present here *tighten* as if they could protect each other that way from attack, too.

Mack held up his hands as if to show he was weaponless. “I’m not the one that’s pinning a member of another pack.”

“*Pack?*” Raj gestured towards the writhing, out of control Pierce and the sniffing Clara. “That’s *not* a pack! Those are two sick little kids that *you* made that way! You have no right to use the word *pack*!”

Mack’s eyes narrowed angrily at Raj. “I am their Alpha.”

“Really?” Jacob gave him a sharp smile. “Then why did Pierce completely ignore the Hell out of you?”

“Watch your mouth!” Mack hissed and his hands clenched at his sides.

“Or what? You don’t have any power over me any longer, Mack. It looks like you don’t have power over anyone,” Jacob taunted. Every word he said dripped with repressed rage. Gareth understood. Jacob had loved Mack and Mack had betrayed him. Jacob had seen countless of his brothers and sisters slaughtered by this man. Gareth had asked them all to just ignore that tonight. Hearing Mack talk about *packs* was just a touch too far for Jacob and Raj. “Go ahead. *Attack me*. I dare you. Hell, I *want* you to. I was never really into the idea of letting you *walk* --”

Mack took a step forward. “I’ll finish what I started --”

“ENOUGH!” Gareth roared and even Pierce stilled for half a second beneath him as the echo of that word filled the backyard. “All of you back off! We need to get this under control.”

Jacob and Raj froze, their jaws clenched, sharp teeth showing, but they went silent though Jacob stared daggers at Mack and Raj looked ready to back his best friend up in a fight. Molly, too, had started to approach the fire again. She’d gotten rid of the deputy’s gun somewhere and had been

stalking across the grass as Mack and Jacob argued. But she had frozen along with the others.

With an effort, Mack got himself under control, too. He relaxed his hands from fists and rolled his shoulders. He gave Jacob and Raj a smile before turning back to Gareth.

“Always knew you would make a powerful Alpha and here you are, already doing it,” Mack said.

“Being a good Alpha was something I learned from *you*, the *old you*. The you who knew that *control* was everything. That we must never give into our bestial natures entirely,” Gareth answered coolly. “But I understand the rage my people feel towards you.”

“Do you feel it, too?” Mack asked. His eyes flickered to Gareth’s and then away.

Gareth didn’t answer that. He just stared a dead-eyed stare at Mack. The Rogue Alpha, surprisingly, looked away. Slowly, Gareth let out a breath. He looked at Jude and all of the tension bled out of him. Jude was still holding down Pierce who was now lying prone. Jude’s eyes were closed, but he could see Jude’s eyes flickering underneath his lids as if he was in Rem sleep. But as soon as he felt Gareth’s gaze upon him, Jude opened them.

“What is it, Jude?” Gareth sensed that his mate was feeling something from Pierce.

“The pack bond between Pierce and Mack is nearly severed,” Jude said.

“It’s like the thinnest thread ... or, at least, that’s what it feels like to me. I could be wrong but –”

“Jude, trust yourself. Do you believe it’s nearly severed?” Gareth asked gently. Now that Pierce was still, Clara’s sobs had subsided into hiccups and Mack was silent, he felt a deep calmness settling over him as it always did in a crisis.

Jude nodded. “Yes, I do.” He looked up at Mack. “You still have *some* control, Mack. Maybe together we can bring Pierce back from this.”

Mack’s gaze zeroed in on Jude. “You ... *you* were the one that nearly took control of them away from me in the store.”

Jude did not look away from Mack though he licked his lips just once with a touch of nervousness. “Yes, I did. I wasn’t aware of what I was doing at the time, but you gave me no real choice. I could do it again now, but I’m afraid that Pierce won’t come back if I snap the connection with you.”

“Won’t come back?” Gareth asked, his brow furrowing with confusion.

“The madness,” it was Mack who answered. When he saw Gareth’s confusion, he explained, “Imagine you are in the deepest, darkest wood and you are on a path. A thin, struggling thing, but so long as you stay on it, you are safe. You are yourself. But if you leave it, you will *never* find it again. That is what being a Rogue is like. Pierce has only a few toes on the path and he’s yearning to just run off into that darkness.”

“We can pull him back,” Jude said with quiet certainty.

Mack’s gaze flickered to him. “Who says I want to? Maybe it’s best if he goes. He wasn’t sure about the cure.”

“If you don’t help then he dies. Do you really want that?” Gareth asked.

“You want a *child* to die? Right when there’s a chance he can be saved?

You made him *pack*. You must want to protect him on some level. Is there *nothing* left of the old you in there?”

That last sentence had Mack stepping back as if struck. Anger *roiled* over his features, contorting them until they looked more like a Kabuki mask than an actual, real face. But then the look was *gone* and *that* was more disturbing than the anger had been. Mack brushed a hand over his forehead. It trembled just slightly, but when he brought it down it was steady.

“I will help you,” Mack said finally.

“First, Jacob, Raj, Molly, keep the deputy from doing anything else foolish like trying to run away,” Gareth said.

Reynolds had been surreptitiously urging Clara towards the woods. Her gaze was fixed on Pierce and she had loosened her hold on her father.

“Will do,” Raj said and gave the deputy a jaunty grin, which had the man nearly jerking away as if he sensed the wolf in Raj, too.

“Are you like them?” Reynolds asked Raj.

“Depends on which part of *them* you’re referring to! But I think the questions need to wait. Let’s just keep things cool,” Raj said calmly.

Jacob positioned himself on one side of Reynolds, Raj on the other and Molly behind him near the woods. Reynolds was going nowhere.

“Jude, what does Mack need to do?” Gareth asked him.

“Come down here with me on Pierce’s other side. Put your hands on him. The physical connection will help ... I think. I mean it’s helping me,” Jude said, falling back for a moment into uncertainty. Mack though did as he requested.

Pierce let out a low whimper when Mack touched him, but then he settled. Gareth saw Mack’s fingers sift Pierce’s fur in an almost affectionate touch. He remembered when Mack would pat his head when he was transformed. It had always felt good and comforting. Seeing that shred of the old Mack in his actions had Gareth’s chest tightening.

“Will my holding him down get in the way of this?” Gareth asked Jude.

The young man shook his head, but then added, “Even if it would, we can’t risk letting him up anyways.”

“So what do I have to do?” Mack asked.

“Gareth does this thing with me, like a mental *tug* that tells me when he wants me. Is that something you can do with Pierce, but like *stronger*?” Jude stumbled over the words. Gareth understood why. This was all new to Jude. “Like you’re crying out to him to come to you beyond all things?”

Mack nodded. “And what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to *strengthen* Pierce’s connection with you and with -- with *himself* again. It’s like his wolf has pulled free of the man part of him. That’s the best way I can explain it to you,” Jude hesitatingly said. “I’ve never done this. I’m just going on what my gut says.”

“Are you the one that can cure the Rogues?” Mack asked. His gaze was intense.

“I don’t know,” Jude answered honestly. “But we’ve got to do this now for Pierce or the bond is going to snap and that’s ... well, that won’t be good, okay?”

Mack nodded again. His gaze stayed on Jude. So did Gareth’s. Jude closed his eyes again and pressed his lips together. Mack kept his eyes open. After a few moments, Jude was frowning.

“Mack, you’re not trying!” Jude’s eyes opened. “You have to *try*!”

“I *am*,” Mack hissed.

“No, you’re not. You’re keeping Pierce at arm’s length from you. You’re holding him away,” Jude insisted. “You can’t be afraid of him being near you.”

“Afraid?” Mack’s voice went up an octave as he scoffed.

Jude fixed him with a steely stare. “I get it. You feel you’re not worthy of being anyone’s leader any longer, but you’ve got to let that go and help Pierce now.”

Gareth's heart flipped. He chanced a glance at Mack. His former Alpha was stony faced. He didn't deny it though. Gareth felt Raj and Jacob's anger, bright and hot, for a moment, spike. He *wasn't* worthy in their minds. He had *betrayed* them. He felt Molly's need not to be in Mack's presence though she did not leave. He thought again that he shouldn't have asked his pack members to come out that night. They had come to Forest Glenn to kill Mack, not to forgive him. This encounter was causing them great stress. But what was done was done.

"Fine, I shall try again," Mack growled and this time he closed his eyes.

Jude waited a moment and then nodded, as if satisfied, and closed his, too. Almost immediately, Gareth felt something *different* with Pierce. The rotten scent *lessened*. The unnatural warmth cooled somewhat. Pierce, who had still been fighting them weakly, slumped against the ground. His breathing became even and soft. His eyes fluttered closed.

"Yeah, that's right," Jude murmured. "Relax. Remember. You're safe. It's calm. Serene."

Every word that Jude said seemed to sink into Pierce. Gareth was not having to hold him down any longer. His hands were just lightly in Pierce's fur. Things became so peaceful. There was a *thrum* over his almost bond with Jude. It passed into the general pack bond and he realized the others felt it, too.

Molly lifted her face towards the moon and let out a soft, mournful howl. Her voice was that of her wolf even though she was human. Jacob and Raj joined their voices with hers. Clara tipped her head back and let out a sweet howl as well. Finally, Gareth found himself adding his voice to the choir.

As soon as their howls died off, Gareth realized that his hands were no longer touching fur, but *flesh*. He looked down and saw Pierce curled in a fetal position beneath him. He let out a gasp.

"Jude, *you did it*," he whispered.

Jude opened his eyes and swayed forward and back a little bit as if awakening from a deep sleep. Gareth gently took his hands off of Pierce to touch Jude. His mate leaned into his touch and seemed to draw strength from it. At that moment, Pierce lifted his head and blinked. He looked at Gareth with no understanding. His head jerked towards Jude then, finally, Mack.

“Alpha?” Pierce’s voice was rather sweet and so very young.

“Pierce,” Mack breathed out and cupped his cheek for just a moment.

I remember that touch. I remember ...

Mack straightened and took two steps back from Pierce who reached after him. Mack’s eyes hooded.

“You’re all right now? Back in control? Ready to listen to *me*?” Mack asked coldly.

“I -- yes, Alpha,” Pierce got out, tears filling his eyes almost immediately and Gareth’s heart twisted. The old Mack would have been there holding this boy, stroking his hair, telling him that there was no need to worry. He would make it all right. He would show Pierce the way forward. He wouldn’t back away like this. ‘I’m sorry, Alpha. I don’t know what happened. I --’

“Excuses are excuses, Pierce. They aren’t worth *anything*,” Mack snapped and turned away from him to Clara. “And *you*, running from me like that when I said *no*.”

Clara’s eyes filled with tears, too. “But he was going to hurt my dad!”

“Your father.” Mack’s eyes narrowed at the deputy who kept his hands protectively on her slender shoulders. “He has seen what we are. He is human with *no chance* of joining us, Clara. You know the rule.”

Gareth tensed. Surely, Mack wasn’t suggesting that Reynolds had to die! But that was the *rule* though they had never had to practice it in over fifty

years. Clara went white. Her mouth opened and closed.

“But - but he’s my dad!” she said as if every argument against Mack was contained in those few words.

And it is. But Mack won’t see it.

“He knows and he can’t be turned so he must be killed,” Mack said simply.

Reynolds jerked back and he reached for his gun again, but his hand grasped air. The gun was gone. “What the Hell are you talking about? I’m an officer of the law!”

“No, Mack, no killing,” Gareth said.

Mack gave him a sad smile. “While you might be able to *cure* Rogues, Gareth, you can’t make Reynolds *unsee* what he’s seen. There’s no other choice here. Just the rule.”

“Perhaps for a Rogue like you there’s only one choice, but we witches have other options.” It was Grandmother Sophia who spoke. “Making someone forget something is simple as pie.”

She and Tessa were standing on the back porch. Though she had a shawl drawn over her shoulders and stood half of Mack's height, she seemed more formidable than the Rogue Alpha, than any of them really. She snapped her fingers and Reynolds collapsed on the ground. Clara cried out and dropped to her knees beside him.

“Grandmother Sophia!” Jude looked awed.

“Don’t you worry, Jude. He’ll be fine, unfortunately, considering how *unpleasant* a man he is,” she said gently. “Now, I believe that Gareth gave you a choice. Surrender or ...” Her hands limned in blue fire.

Mack gritted his teeth and Gareth thought he might snarl at her, but his eyes dropped to Pierce and *something*, perhaps guilt, perhaps seeing how

unstable their control really was, flashed over his face. He suddenly grinned. He then held out his hands, wrists together as if for cuffs.

“We surrender, Grandmother Sophia.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: WELCOME HOME

The cottage had been locked up. Reynolds had been taken home and tucked into bed. The next morning he would only remember good dreams and nothing about werewolves. He'd also believe that his daughter had gone away to summer camp. The Rogue werewolves had been magically bound. And they'd all been on the road for almost four hours now. Fallowmere, the Cold Moon Pack's home, would be in view any minute.

Jude was sitting in the passenger seat of the Jeep beside Gareth. The Cold Moon Alpha was driving. In the back seat were Mack and Pierce with Molly in her wolf form sitting between them. Tessa's SUV followed after theirs through the winding two lane highways with thick forest on either side. The rest of the group was in her vehicle.

While Gareth had wanted to have *all* of the Rogues with him in one car, Grandmother Sophia had pointed out that she could most certainly handle Clara on her own. Not to mention the little girl was going to be crushed between Jacob on one side and Raj on the other.

"I don't think even werewolves like pepper spray," Tessa had said and lifted up her key chain that had a pressurized bottle of the stuff. "I'll spray Clara to Hell and gone if she even *looks* at any of us funny."

Not that Clara looked like she was in any state to fight. After what had happened with her father, she had become incredibly docile. Tears had still run down her cheeks as Grandmother Sophia had bound her wrists. The witch had brushed some of them away and Clara had looked up at her, appearing just like the preteen she was and not the Rogue killer she also was.

"If you want to keep your father safe you're doing the absolute right thing by coming with us," Grandmother Sophia had told her softly.

"I can't believe that Pierce was going to hurt Daddy," she had sniffled.

Without mincing words, Grandmother Sophia had answered, “That could have been you, child. If we don’t cure you, you *will* go after your nearest and dearest. More than that, you won’t care about them any longer. Clara will no longer exist. Only a rabid wolf will.”

Clara’s eyes had widened in shock. Jude had wondered why the little girl hadn’t recognized that the *other* things she had done, the killing of innocents, of eating human flesh, wasn’t *like her* either. But, evidently, Clara differentiated between those in her circle and those outside of it.

And if I cure her, will that distinction go away? Will she look back at what she’s done and wish we had let her become the rabid wolf or just put her down? Will the guilt swamp her?

Those were just some of the questions that had circled in his mind as they readied the vehicles to go.

Molly had surprised Jude when she said she would ride with them instead of Tessa. His sister had been surprised, too, and a little hurt. But Molly had gone over to her side and had said something in her ear that had Tessa slowly nodding. The hurt had disappeared and understanding had replaced it. Molly had then taken off her dress, shucked off her ballet flats and handed both to a blushing Tessa and transformed into her wolf. She had lightly jumped up into the back of the Jeep after Gareth had opened the door for her.

Looking on, Raj had said almost mournfully, “That’s the one bad thing about the wolf form: no opposable thumbs. So you can’t quite open doors.”

Jude had wished the Indian werewolf had been in their car as the ride had gone on in silence for hours. They could have used some of Raj’s witty quips. Jude *always* enjoyed talking to Gareth, but he knew that the Alpha needed to keep alert and focused, both for the nighttime drive and also to keep an eye on Mack and Pierce, so he didn’t bother him with small talk. But the silence grew oppressive, even for him and he enjoyed the quiet.

Mack and Pierce sat like two little soldiers in the back seat with their seatbelts on. He'd caught Pierce looking longingly at Mack several times. Mack had *never* looked back over at him though. Yet the Rogue Alpha *was* aware of those looks. A muscle in the side of his face would twitch when Pierce glanced at him.

Jude, normally not one to interfere in others' relationships, was tempted several times to shout at Mack to just reach over and give Pierce a hug or something. The young Rogue was still fragile, but Jude could sense him holding himself *tightly* in control. Mack had been mated with Eliza, but Jude thought that his sexuality was likely fluid. He wondered, with a bit of jealousy, if Gareth and Mack had ever been together sexually. He was almost *positive* something had happened between Mack and Pierce.

Jude tried to put it all out of his mind. Maybe it would be a useful thing when he tried to cure them, but it wasn't now. It sounded corny to him, but *true* at the same time, that *love* would help cure the Rogues. He'd had this niggling feeling as he had been examining the pack bonds between Pierce and Mack when Pierce had nearly lost himself, that *connections* were important in reversing the slide into the beast.

He shook himself. It was all so vague! He had no idea what he was doing! And the Rogues seemed much more fragile than he'd imagined. He could see that they were *sick* now rather than simply *evil*. That made finding a cure for them even more important.

Jude snuck a glance at Gareth. Early morning light was beginning to break through the trees on Gareth's side of the car, limning his face in a silver-gold radiance, bringing out a different beauty than sheer night had. The Cold Moon Alpha's expression looked serene and when he caught Jude looking at him, he sent a smile Jude's way. But his hands were tense on the wheel, showing the strain he was under from driving all night with the Rogues in the car.

Jude immediately wanted to ease that tension. The connection he felt to Gareth and the others was still so new, but it was *old* as well. He'd felt this

utter trust with Tessa and Grandmother Sophia. He could be warm and loving and even outgoing with them. He could do that with Gareth. He *knew* the Cold Moon Alpha was not going to reject him. Quite the opposite. Yet it was still an act of courage and trust to simply reach over and put one hand on Gareth's nearest shoulder and lightly squeeze the muscles there.

The Cold Moon Alpha leaned his head over and rubbed his cheek against the top of Jude's hand. Gareth's hands relaxed on the wheel and a truly happy smile played over his lips. Jude had made the right decision and he glowed with it.

"I remember when I brought Eliza to Fallowmere for the first time as my mate," Mack said from the back seat. Clearly, he had seen their reactions to one another and put two and two together.

Gareth immediately stiffened again. Jude understood why. The Rogue Alpha had killed those that Gareth loved. The last thing that Gareth wanted was for Mack to know how much Jude meant to him. He probably feared that Mack would try to hurt Gareth by going after Jude.

But that's not going to happen. Mack needs me alive so that I can cure him.

That thought wasn't exactly warm and cheery, but there was a comfort in it that Mack would be going against his own best interests if he went after Jude. It was some sort of insurance policy against violence from the Rogue Alpha. Though if Mack snapped like Pierce did, Jude wasn't sure what would happen.

I am certain though. Gareth will kill him.

"She practically was pressed to the glass waiting for Fallowmere to come into view," Mack continued.

Jude saw that Pierce was looking at Mack avidly as he spoke. The Rogue Alpha's voice was soft and a fully different expression was on his face than Jude had seen on it before: tenderness. A sad smile lifted the corners of his

mouth and his eyes were distant with memories as he looked out at the glowing forest.

“She couldn’t wait to meet the rest of the pack. She wondered if they would *like* her. As if *anyone* couldn’t like her!” Mack continued on with a soft huff of laughter. “She was like a little kid on Christmas morning. Unable to sit still in the car. Eyes shining. Nervous laughter bubbling out of her. She was talking a million miles a minute. But the moment we pulled up, the whole pack was standing out on the porch, just *waiting* for her. Each of them embraced her. One by one. We had the joining ceremony that night. Do you remember that, Gareth?”

“I remember,” Gareth said and his knuckles were white on the wheel again.

Jude couldn’t imagine being greeted like that. Considering the circumstances of bringing the Rogues in secretly and hiding them from Paavo and his people, Jude was pretty sure that bringing a new wolf into the pack would be the last thing on the pack’s minds. He, surprising, felt a little cheated that he *wouldn’t* be welcomed that way even though he’d be shy as all hell with the attention.

Gareth continued talking, his tone arctic, “I wonder what she would have thought about seeing you come back to our pack house and slaughter as many of us as you could. I don’t really have to wonder. She would have been the *first* one calling for your head.”

“No, she wouldn’t. Remember her brother? She knew there was a cure. She wouldn’t have given up on me,” Mack corrected him. His voice held no heat. It was just said matter of fact. “And she was right. There’s a way to fix this. There’s a way back.”

The wheel squeaked under Gareth’s hands. Jude reached across and brushed his fingers over Gareth’s knuckles until his fingers released the wheel slightly. At least, the dangerous squeaking stopped.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” Jude said though he felt stupid saying it. How could it be okay?

“Have you made any improvements to Fallowmere since I’ve been gone?” Mack asked, genuinely sounding curious.

Jude gritted his teeth. His description of himself as “gone” made it seem like he’d been away on a trip or something innocuous like that. But Gareth didn’t threaten to mangle the steering wheel again.

Instead, Gareth said simply, “That’s really not your concern. Besides, you *won’t* be seeing the pack house.”

“Oh?” Mack’s silver eyebrows lifted.

“You must be *mad* if you think I would expose the others to you again,” Gareth snorted with disbelief. “They would tear you apart if I brought you to the front door.”

“Yes, very true,” Mack let out a soft laugh. “You’re going to take us to the caves, aren’t you? Put us in the silver cells?”

Jude turned a questioning look towards Gareth. They hadn’t really talked about where Mack and the other Rogues were going to be kept. It made sense that they couldn’t bring them to the pack house, but Gareth hadn’t mentioned these caves or silver cells before.

“Silver cells?” Pierce’s voice rose up very young and quiveringly.

“I’m sorry, Pierce,” Gareth said, gentling his tone. “But yes, you will have to be locked up for now. The bars are silver.”

“But silver burns!” Pierce swallowed. His adam’s apple bobbed frantically as he looked between Gareth and Mack with huge eyes.

“So long as you do not touch them, they’ll do you no harm,” Gareth assured him. Then his eyes flashed to the rearview mirror and Jude knew he was looking at Mack as he said this, “I *wish*, Pierce, that I could bring you to the pack house, that you could know true pack bonds, that you could experience the love of brothers and sisters. But Mack has stolen that and so much more from you.”

Pierce’s chin lifted up and he said defiantly, “I know those things. Mack is my Alpha and Clara is my sister and --”

“Enough, Pierce,” Mack growled.

Jude wondered if Pierce had been about to say the name of the Fourth Rogue. Jude worried about his or her presence. That had been the one that had hurt him and tried to kill Grandmother Sophia. Pierce’s lips though were firmly pressed together and he wasn’t about to say anything more.

At that moment, Molly’s ears pricked and she shifted from foot to foot. She’d been so still during the car ride that she had seemed more like a statue than a real wolf. Jude saw what had caught her eye. There was a road that branched off from the highway with a large iron gate blocking the path. Gareth pulled up to a keypad that was on a metal post and punched in a code.

“I’ll give you the code later, Jude,” Gareth said quietly with a gentle smile. With a look back at Mack and Pierce, he added, “It will be *changed* in any case after this.”

Jude just nodded. He was a little overwhelmed at the thought of going into a place that had a *gate*. A *fancy* gate, not one to keep inmates inside. As they drove through, he realized that there was a stone fence that ran in either direction until it vanished from sight. It had seemed such a natural part of the landscape that he hadn’t noticed it even though it was over twelve feet tall. Jude knew that this was likely to keep humans away from Fallowmere and let the werewolves roam on the estate.

The road was paved and wound away into the trees, but they didn't follow the main track, but headed on a crushed gravel drive, much smaller and far more windy, off to the left. It led them to a jutting outcrop of rock. There was a large metal door built into the rock with invisible hinges. There was a flash of silver lacing through it that glinted in the early morning light.

A curvaceous woman with olive-toned skin and a long fall of black hair stepped out from the side of the rock. Her gaze was pensive. She gave Gareth a smile, but her expression quickly fell into seriousness again.

"That is Nina Ibarra. She's the pack's Beta," Gareth explained.

"Your right hand woman?" Jude asked with a smile.

Gareth nodded and grinned back. "Yes, exactly. I don't know what I would do without her."

He stopped the car and put it in park. When the engine turned off, it was shockingly quiet all around them. Nina's footsteps - though light - seemed awfully loud in the quiet as she came to Gareth's door and opened it. Jude quickly got out himself. He rubbed sweaty palms on the fronts of his thighs and wondered what he should do with himself to not make a fool of himself in front of Nina. This woman had a presence that was similar to Tessa and Grandmother Sophia's: warm, but powerful. He wanted her to like him.

When she found out he was Gareth's mate, he admitted to himself that he wanted her to *approve*. Not that it would change anything for him and Gareth, but it would make Gareth's life easier.

And it would be nice to belong.

"Gareth," she said and embraced the Cold Moon Alpha with evident love and respect. Her eyes only flickered to the back seat and Mack and Pierce after the embrace had ended. She leaned down so that she could look Mack square in the eye. She looked at him like he meant nothing to her. If she hated him, Jude couldn't see it. It was almost as if she didn't know this man at all. Jude had heard Gareth talking to her before they left, explaining with

little detail what he wanted to do with the Rogues. She hadn't questioned him so much as asked what he needed to make it happen. "So ... looks like your hunting expedition went well."

"Still short one, but we'll find them," Gareth said with certainty.

Nina nodded, clearly convinced it was true.

Gareth came around the Jeep and slid a hand around Jude's waist, resting it on his lower back possessively. "Nina, this is our new pack brother. Jude. Jude, this is Nina."

Jude fought not to turn his head to hide his face against Gareth's chest during the introduction. It was absurd to feel shy. He should at least pretend with her that he didn't care what she thought of him.

She *stilled*. She blinked and looked at him and then at Gareth and then back at him. Jude moved nervously from foot to foot, unable to keep the appearance of uncaring that he'd hoped. She suddenly moved swiftly to him and took his face in her hands.

"Oh, Jude, welcome home." She kissed both his cheeks and embraced him.

Jude went into the hug awkwardly, at first, but then he got his arms around her. The moment he did so, the pack bonds flared to life between them and it seemed like there was *communication* between them somehow. She pulled back, looking at him in amazement. Her lips parted and her eyes widened.

"Gareth, he's ... is he ..."

"He's my mate," Gareth said almost shyly and scuffed the ground with his boot.

She punched his arm playfully. "How could you not tell me? Gareth, this is *wonderful!*"

She hugged Jude tight against her again with one arm while she pulled Gareth into another hug with her other arm. The three of them were squeezed together so tightly that Jude let out a breathless laugh. She kissed him fiercely on the side of the head again and again.

“I’m so happy!” she repeated between each kiss. Finally, she stepped back, hands on hips to look at them both. Gareth’s arm snaked around him again and Jude felt absurdly pleased. “This is the most brilliant, wonderful thing ever. The pack is already breathlessly awaiting a new brother, but to have it be *your mate*, Gareth, makes it even *better*.”

“There’s more, Nina. So much more,” Gareth said with a deep breath. “But let’s get Molly out of the car and get the Rogues locked up. Then I have much to tell you and I have many questions as well.”

“I’m sure there’s a lot of talking to be done, Gareth, but we have a new pack member.” A smile twitched on Nina’s lips. “A new pack member that is heavily anticipated.”

“You’ve planned something?” Gareth perked up. “I didn’t think it would be possible with everything --”

“Of course, I did! And the others jumped to help. They can’t wait to meet Jude. Everyone is expecting him at the house,” she said.

Jude’s cheeks flushed. “I hope you didn’t go to any trouble --”

“It was no trouble!” She beamed at him and he felt the warmth of her regard like sunshine on his skin. “You’re our brother, Jude, and you’re our Alpha’s *mate*. I hate the fact that you had to come *here* first and deal with any of this. I want you to think of Fallowmere with only joy in your heart.”

“I -- I’m sure I will,” Jude stammered.

Gareth leaned down and kissed Jude's temple. Tessa's car just pulled up at that moment. The back doors flew open as Raj and Jacob howled out Nina's name. Their love for her was evident in their shining faces. They did not leave the car though. A rather shy Clara stared out from the back seat. Tessa and Grandmother Sophia climbed out, too.

Nina went over to greet them all. She shook Tessa's hand and then Grandmother Sophia's. She held the elderly woman's hand for a long time while they gazed into each other's eyes as if taking each other's measure.

"You so remind me of my abuela. I always wished she had the gene for the world lost a brave and wonderful woman the day she left this Earth," Nina said.

Grandmother Sophia cupped her face. "Oh, child, she knew that her legacy would continue in *you*."

While Nina then went to greet Raj and Jacob, Tessa came over to Jude and Gareth. She looked in the backseat at Molly rather longingly.

"Can't we let her out?" she asked.

"Of course," Gareth said. "I was just about to."

They opened the Jeep's back doors and Mack, Pierce and Molly got out. Molly transformed and Tessa pulled out the sundress and ballet flats for her. She quickly dressed with a flash of a smile of thanks.

Mack stared at Nina with a shuttered expression. Clara scuttled over to him and she and Pierce huddled near him, completely overwhelmed by coming here. They looked cowed. But Jude wondered how long that would last.

Grandmother Sophia joined Jude and spoke his thoughts out loud, "As the moon rises again, their aggressive instincts will rise up, too."

“Do you really think I can cure them, Grandmother Sophia?” he asked even knowing that this was an unanswerable question.

She took his hand and patted it. “You will try, Jude. That is all you can do. Mack made a choice. Pierce and Clara were innocents in this. But if they cannot be cured then it’s *best* if they’re ended.”

He swallowed hard at her words, but nodded.

Nina went to the door in the stone. She undid a hefty lock and pulled the door open. Jude nearly gasped as he saw the door was six inches thick. Beyond the door was a staircase that had clearly been cut into the living rock that went downwards.

She turned towards Mack and the other Rogues. Her gaze lingered on Clara and Jude guessed it pained her to see a child here. “Mack is familiar with this place so what I say is, obviously, not for his benefit, but for yours.

Below are cells with silver bars. There is no way out of this prison unless we let you out. Pursuant to Gareth’s orders, you will be treated with as much respect as we can. But the pack’s - and humanity’s - safety is paramount. So if something threatens that, we will not give it to you. Understood?”

The three of them nodded.

“When will Jude cure us? Can he not do it now?” Mack asked.

Nina started and her gaze swung to Jude. She hadn’t known about that. Jude colored again.

“I don’t know how, Mack,” Jude said. “I’m going to try, but it’s not --”

“Then let us start immediately,” Mack ordered.

“No,” Gareth spoke up before Jude could respond. “You are *not* in charge here, Mack. Jude is going to have a proper pack welcome and *when* he

feels it is right, he will try to help you. But you are *not* poisoning his introduction to his brothers and sisters any more than you already have.”

“You saw what happened to Pierce. We might not have that much time,” Mack said.

Pierce’s head rose up and he looked at his Alpha in alarm. “I’m all right now, Alpha! I promise that I won’t lose control again!”

Nina’s reaction to Pierce calling Mack “Alpha” showed the first real grief and anger from the woman. Her lips drew back from her teeth in a snarl, but then she quickly smoothed out her expression.

Her voice rose up, cold and clear, “The Cold Moon Alpha has spoken. You will be taken below now.”

With that, Raj, Jacob, Nina and Molly led the Rogues below as the sun rose on what promised to be a beautiful day.

Gareth’s arm tightened around Jude’s waist. “It *will* be all right, Jude. No matter what happens. You’re home now.”

Jude stared down the stairwell, wanting to think only of Gareth and the pack, but wishing he wasn’t haunted by Mack’s words.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: PACK WELCOME

Gareth took Jude's hand and said, "Let's walk to the house. We'll leave the cars for the others. That will give them a chance to get there before us."

Jude nodded, still looking at the stairs, but he dragged his gaze away to look up at Gareth and gave the Cold Moon Alpha an uncertain smile. "Sure."

Gareth looked over at Grandmother Sophia and Tessa. Tessa was staring anxiously at the stairs, too, awaiting Molly's return. The elder witch gave him a nod though. Grandmother Sophia understood. She would get the group back to Fallowmere at the right time.

He and Jude began to walk, hand-in-hand, through the woods. He chose no pre-existing path. He wanted Jude to forget about everything else, but the beauty and peace of the forest. Leaving paths behind was the first step.

Besides, there was nowhere on Fallowmere's grounds that Gareth did not know like the back of his hand.

At first, Jude was not seeing anything around them. His gaze was inwards. He was nibbling his lower lip and his brow was furrowed in concentration. Gareth guessed he was worry about how he was going to cure Mack and the other Rogues. He might even be worrying about the welcome that he would receive when they reached the pack house. Gareth could have said something to draw Jude out of these dark and worrisome thoughts, but he knew that the simple peace of the forest would do more than words from him ever could.

And he was right.

Jude's gaze started to dart around the trees and up to the sky. His full lips parted as he caught sight of sunlight streaming through leaves, making a beautiful pattern on the ground. His eyes widened in delight as they came upon a small bubbling brook. Gareth didn't rush them over it, but instead let Jude take the time to kneel down and look at how the cold, rushing water

smoothing over the gray stones. Jude smiled as the current sent leaves spinning on their way like out of control tops.

Gareth took Jude's hand and helped him across one of the smoothed old trees that had fallen over the brook, allowing them to cross the rushing water without getting wet. Jude wobbled at first, but then his natural werewolf grace took over and he was able to lightly spring over the fallen tree to the other side. He gave Gareth a toothy grin in pride. Gareth just grinned back at him.

After they had walked in silence for some time, Jude cast a curious look at Gareth through his lashes and asked, "Shouldn't we maybe, ah, *hurry* back to Fallowmere?"

Gareth merely shook his head. "No."

"But the pack has planned something for our return," Jude pointed out even as his hand tightened around Gareth's.

"You mean they have planned something to welcome *you*," Gareth pointed out in return.

Jude blushed delightfully and ducked his head. "I -- I guess. A new pack member is a big deal, right?"

"Meaning it's not *you* they're doing this for but a *general* pack member instead?" Gareth suppressed a smile, though it was a slightly sad smile. Jude *would* think he wasn't important.

Jude colored some more and ducked his head further. "Well, *yeah*. They don't know me."

"What about Molly, Raj and Jacob? They know you, don't they?" Gareth's gaze slid to Jude.

A stray ray of sunlight had snuck between the leaves and was playing over Jude's left cheek. The young wolf looked thoughtful. And *hopeful*.

"Yes, of course, they know me," Jude finally answered.

Gareth brought them to a halt in a patch of sunlight. He took both of Jude's hands in his and held them lightly. "I can tell you that they are *more* excited to welcome you into the pack than the others, because they *do* know you. Check the pack bonds if you don't believe me."

Jude's forehead screwed up slightly. "It's not that I don't believe you, it's just ..." Gareth felt Jude touch the pack bonds with the three wolves he'd named and Jude's face scrunched for a moment, but then it cleared and the young wolf was smiling bright as the sun. "You're right!" Jude must have heard the *shock* in his own voice so he quickly amended, "I mean ... I don't know what I mean. I guess I'm just ... *surprised*."

Gareth *could* have asked him why, but already knew. Life had proved to his mate that people were more often cruel than kind and that few went out of their way to actually *welcome* others. The pack being *eager* to accept him and know him must have seemed like some kind of strange dream to Jude.

"What I hope you will be is *happy*," Gareth said gently.

Jude gave him this look, which was a mixture of joy and pain. He saw the young wolf quickly blink back tears and look out into the forest to avoid Gareth's incisive gaze.

You've been hurt so much, my beautiful mate. It will take time to heal your wounds, but we have that time. I will replace every bad memory with twenty good ones or more. And, one day, you will cease to remember the bad memories first.

Gareth drew one of Jude's arms through his own and they began sauntering through the woods again. Birds were waking up and chirping happily. There were the sounds of insects whirring and small mammals sneaking their way

through the underbrush. They walked in peaceful, companionable silence amidst the wakening forest.

Jude leaned against him more and more with every step and Gareth felt a welling of joy growing bigger with every sign that Jude was *trusting* him and *letting* him take care of things. An Alpha derived no pleasure from *inflicting* his protective instincts on those that didn't want them.

"You wanted us to walk back alone together so that I could stop thinking about everything that's on my shoulders. About the Rogues and my parents," Jude guessed.

Gareth let out a soft huff of breath. Not quite a sigh, more like he was trying to set down the burdens he felt were on Jude's shoulders. "I have this dream, Jude, of you coming into the pack."

Jude looked up at him in surprise, but also with longing. "Dream?"

"We've met one another in the woods. You are *magnificent*. Proud and strong and independent. But also kind and generous and wise," Gareth explained. "And, *somehow*, you submit to me."

Jude's eyebrows rose. "Why do I have to *submit*? If I'm all those things, shouldn't I *lead*?"

"You mistake what that means." Gareth tucked Jude's arm against his body further. "It means you grant me the *privilege* of being a force in your life for good."

Jude mulled this over for a moment and said, "You didn't say *rule* me or *lead* me. That's different than I thought."

"It is very different. There are Alphas who demand fealty, but that is not who I am," Gareth explained. He had never put his leadership style into words before, but he needed to for Jude. Jude was his mate so he would need to see how his own leadership style matched Gareth's.

“No, you’re a pancake-cutting, suitcase-packing Alpha,” Jude teased as he normally did, but then added seriously, “You *serve*, Gareth. You lead through service. You see your role as one of making sure that everybody else has everything they need. Only *then* do you *maybe* look at what you need.”

Gareth’s eyebrows rose in surprise. Jude had summed his style up in just a few sentences far easier than he could have done. “I suppose you’re right. That’s what I *aim* to do anyways.”

Jude’s arm tightened around his and the young wolf had a surprisingly serious look on his face as he said, “And my role is to ensure that you don’t run yourself into the ground while you serve others.”

Jude had said similar things in the past before, but there was a true note of command and certainty in his voice now that had not been there before. Gareth’s eyebrows raised and he felt *treasured*.

“You’re going to take care of me?” he asked.

“Damn straight.” Jude grinned. “So you were telling me about this dream.”

“Yes, well, perhaps it becomes more of a *fantasy* from here on out. The first part I truly *saw* as did you,” he reminded Jude of their shared vision.

Jude nodded. “I can still feel the light press of fangs against my throat. I wasn’t scared you were going to bite me or anything. I just knew that it meant something *big*.”

“Yes, indeed it did. It *will*.” Gareth bit his lower lip as he waited for Jude to react to that last statement.

He *wasn’t* disappointed.

“Uhm, *excuse me*. I have to do that *again*? I did it once? I’m not lying on my back for you again and exposing my throat unless we’re alone and in bed!” Jude objected.

Gareth’s cock stirred at the mention of them in *bed* and Jude *submitting*. He cleared his throat and said, “Yes, I’ll want that *too*. The bed part, I mean.”

“Hey!” Jude gave him a playful bat to the shoulder.

“It’s part of the ceremony when an Alpha takes a mate, Jude. It’s tradition,” Gareth explained to him.

Jude looked *slightly* mollified, but said, “What’s the deal with *submitting*? I mean I *know* what you mean by it. But what is the deal with the obsession with everyone bowing down to the Alpha?”

“It’s part of our wolf heritage,” Gareth said with a shrug. “It’s not supposed to be threatening, but *calming*. Everyone knows their place and --”

“I’ve never known my place, Gareth,” Jude said with a slightly mulish cast to his tone. “Plenty of people have tried to make me know it - always lower than them - but I’ve always said; fuck that shit and done my own thing. It’s gotten me into trouble, true, but I haven’t felt badly about it. It was *worse* to submit to them than to fight and lose.”

A stab of pain went through Gareth at Jude’s words. He understood *exactly* where Jude was coming from. Those brief sentences and things that Jude had revealed to him in the past painted a vivid, *bleak* picture of what submission was painted to be.

“I could tell you that this is nothing like that, Jude, but you’ll have to judge for yourself when the time comes,” Gareth said quietly. He would not *insist* on Jude submitting if it was fraught with such terrible associations for him and he would damn the consequences of tradition. He cared about *Jude*, his mate, not what others had said or done throughout the ages.

“I don’t want to ... to let you down,” Jude finally got out.

Gareth tightened his hold on his mate. “You won’t. Trust me.”

Jude looked unconvinced, but said nothing. Gareth feared he would be mulling it over until the very moment he had to decide. That was *not* what this walk was about. Gareth had wanted Jude to *forget* all the stress in his life.

“The main part of my dream I think you’ll *like*,” Gareth said carefully.

Jude grinned. “I’ve liked what you said so far. Ignore my commentary.”

Gareth snorted. “Your *commentary* is very important to me. But, all right, I will tell you the rest. The rest ... is that you meet the pact in *peace*. Each of them welcomes you and comes to know you. Each of them comes to see what I already do.”

“Which is?” Jude had a half grin on his face, but his tone was seriously.

Gareth cupped his face. “That you are *wonderful*.”

Jude’s eyelids fluttered shut as he said that as if trying to imagine what he saw. Gareth couldn’t help but place kisses on those closed eyes. Jude let out a soft breath in pleasure and sagged against his chest. Slowly, as if waking from a sleep, Jude’s eyelids opened and he gazed up at Gareth with such *love*. There was no other word for it. Gareth forgot to breathe.

“How did I get so ... *lucky*?” Jude whispered.

One of the young wolf’s hands trailed down Gareth’s right cheek. Gareth turned his face into that tender touch and Jude’s fingers splayed out over his mouth, chin and jaw. The touch almost tickled. He kissed as many of those fingers as he could catch.

“I’m afraid that you’re going to disappear on me,” Jude said as Gareth kissed the last finger.

He frowned. “I would *never* leave you, Jude.”

Jude let out a rather soft, almost bitter laugh at that. “Oh, Gareth, that just makes me more afraid you’ll disappear in a poof of smoke! No one could truly be like you. Actually, scratch that, *I* couldn’t get someone like you to love me. This can’t be real.”

Gareth caught Jude’s retreating hand and brought it back up to his mouth kiss some more even though he was deeply worried by what Jude said.

“You *are* worthy. I swear it.”

But Jude didn’t seem worried at all. He simply shook his head and answered, “It doesn’t matter. You believe I’m worthy. You care for me. As crazy as that sounds. I’m just going to let it go as long as it does --”

“It goes on *forever*, Jude.”

Jude gave him a lopsided smile. “Then it will go on *forever* and I’ll still keep doubting, but *loving* every single minute of it. Now, come on, I want to see Fallowmere. I admit that I have *no* idea what it looks like or what the pack has in store. But I want to find out.”

Again that companionable silence fell until they came to the Wolf River that emptied into Wolf Lake just outside of the lodge. It was a small river that rushed through the woods of the estate and came down from the hills. The pack had built a steel and wooden bridge over it. The bridge was simple. It was about twelve feet wide and spanned the twenty-five feet of river. There were four posts, two on either side, that had been carved by Jolie McMahon, the local artisan in the Cold Moon Pack. The posts were of wolves howling, wolves hunting, wolves playing and wolves standing majestically on a rise under the full moon. The work was exquisite.

Jude slowed down to examine the first two carvings before they crossed the river. The rushing water made it almost too loud to talk, but Jude's expression of awe at the work was enough to show his thoughts. Jude's hands stroked the wooden carvings lightly, reverently. They crossed over the very solid bridge for him to do the same to the carvings on the other side.

Gareth's heart was starting to beat rapidly. All they needed to do was climb the rise and the side of Fallowmere would come into view. Jude would see the pack house for the *first* time. He hoped that Jude would adore it as much as he did. But he reminded himself that it was simply a *lodge*. It was a place to stay. It was the people who lived within its walls or visited that made it a home. Jude didn't know them yet. He couldn't fully comprehend the specialness of it.

Gareth took in a deep breath. He could smell pine, and good, raw earth and smoke.

Smoke? Wood smoke? A fire? Perhaps the pack has built a bonfire for Jude's appearance.

He truly had no idea what Nina and the others had planned. He wouldn't put anything outside of her capabilities.

They both strode up the hill. Jude's eyes were wide and his nostrils were flared. He likely smelled the smoke, too, and wasn't sure if it was something to be nervous about or thrilled by. Gareth tightened his hand around Jude's. But as soon as they cleared the rise and Fallowmere came into view, Jude *froze*.

His big red-brown eyes traced the three-story log-cabin lodge. His gaze lingered on the balconies that jutted out from every floor, which allowed pack members to sprawl on inviting outdoor furniture or view the moon with a drink in their hand as they leaned against the comfortable railing.

“It’s ... it’s beautiful,” Jude breathed. “I can just imagine how ... how *homey* it will be inside. I dreamed about living in a place like this, but *never* thought I would.”

“Welcome home, Jude,” was all that Gareth could get out.

The young wolf smiled at him, still looking awed.

Gareth expected Jude to be shy, to hang back, but Jude didn’t. As if drawn like a moth to a flame, Jude took them up the path that bordered the side of the house and drew them around to the front. Jude and Gareth froze together this time.

The entire pack was present. Brandon and Izzy were at the very front, but he saw Molly, Raj and Jacob, too. Behind them were Ragsey twins, Ilara and Natasha, Ollie Finn, Hoshido Hanida, Haggerty Grant, Robyn Wynder and Powell Holmes. Even Thomas Lightner, their English attorney, was there. Cassidy had emerged from his dark computer hole, too. The whole pack was present and they looked *thrilled*.

The pack was standing in two lines with torches held by the people in the in-most edge, creating an artificial walkway between them. The walkway led to the fire pit in the front of the yard. The pit was not yet lit, but it was ready to burst into flame as soon as someone dipped in a lighted torch.

Gareth looked down at Jude’s face. He wasn’t sure what he expected to be there: upset, fear, uncertainty, acceptance, joy, acceptance or a mixture of all of them? Jude’s expression though was *unreadable*. Jude gently let go of Gareth’s hand and took a few steps forward. Jude then sank to one knee and he lifted his arms toward Brandon.

The youngest werewolf in the pack sprinted towards Jude even as Izzy tried, unsuccessfully, to keep him back. He barreled into Jude’s arms.

Gareth watched, with breath held, as Jude wrapped his arms around the African-American werewolf and hugged him close. There were tears pouring down Brandon’s face as he held onto Jude as *tight* as he could.

They remained like that, embracing, without saying *anything* at all for long moments. The pack looked on. When he glanced up, he saw that Nina was silently crying. Molly took Tessa's hand and held it so tightly that their skin went white. Grandmother Sophia smiled knowingly even as she cried, too.

Jude did not release Brandon, but rather gathered the boy up in his arms and stood easily. Brandon's legs wrapped around Jude's waist. Jude turned towards Gareth and that was when the Cold Moon Alpha saw that Jude was crying, too. But his mate's, like those of the others', were tears of joy.

Jude reached out with one hand to Gareth, which the Alpha eagerly took. Then they walked towards the line of pack members. As they passed between them, hands were outstretched to touch Jude or Gareth. It seemed like hundreds of hands pressed against his face, his shoulders, or his arms, as he and Jude walked slowly towards the firepit. Jude continued to hold Brandon, who was grinning so hard his face must have hurt from it.

When they reached the firepit, someone - maybe Nina - put a torch into Jude's hand. He had gently deposited Brandon on the ground beside him. Jude kept the boy between him and Gareth as if he were their child. Jude also kept hold of Gareth's hand and took the torch in the other. Just before he touched the flaming wood to the dry, he spoke.

Jude's voice was steady as he said, "Thank you for welcoming me. As you'll soon find out, I'm not used to people opening their arms to me, but I've always ... I've *dreamed* about something like this. No, actually, I've never even dreamed of something this good. Even as I told myself I didn't care if I ever belonged anywhere." That got a knowing smile from the other pack members. Jude wasn't the only one that had thought himself friendless. "I'm not worthy of your friendship or welcome ..." There was a stirring of the crowd in disbelief, but Jude held up the torch. "But I intend to make sure I *am*. I will bring to this pack something of value." His eyes met Gareth's and the Cold Moon Alpha had to swallow hard as Jude added, "I swear I will be a better person for all of you."

Then Jude lightly touched the tip of the flaming torch against the top of the teepee of wood. It instantly caught. There was a crackling and then a whoosh as the fire billowed up towards the early morning sky. Jude tossed in the torch into the blaze. That, seemingly, was the signal for everyone to come and hug him.

Every pack member swarmed around Jude, hugging him, patting him on the back, telling him how welcome he was, suggesting that he hang out with them later, and more and more love and friendship offered. Jude was overwhelmed with it, but he didn't turn away, didn't curl against Gareth's side, instead, he greeted every single member of the pack. Just like the mate of the Alpha should.

And, in the midst of the pride he felt, Gareth looked up to the first-floor porch and saw Paavo there. He had forgotten that the Alpha of Alphas was at his home. But even as his appearance reminded Gareth of his presence, the Cold Moon Alpha still did *not* expect the expression on Paavo's face as the Alpha of Alphas gazed upon Jude.

Paavo looked at Jude as if he was seeing a *ghost*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Jude felt Brandon's small hand close around his own. He looked down at the boy and smiled. The moment he had seen Brandon he had felt this incredible connection and a wash of such *fierce* protectiveness. He wasn't sure why.

He knew nothing about this boy, but he'd known instinctively that they would be friends and that he *wanted* to keep him safe. Maybe it was because Brandon was at that age he'd been when things had gone so terribly *wrong*. The thought that Jude could stop that from happening to someone else was more than appealing. The tears he'd shed had been a little embarrassing, but he couldn't have stopped them if he'd tried - and he'd *tried*.

No one had seemed to notice - except Gareth, but he noticed *everything* - so Jude had contented himself with thinking that people wouldn't think he was strength for getting all choked up about someone he'd just met. He'd actually fallen to his knees and reached out to scoop the boy up. Brandon had come as if this was a *normal* thing between them. As the Alpha's mate, he probably *should* feel protective of the pack members, and maybe this was the start of that. He didn't know.

All of the pack members seemed so nice thought. Nice and interesting. He was surprised to see werewolves that actually looked old. One guy was as old as Grandmother Sophia. His name was Powell. Then there was this Haggerty guy that reminded Jude of someone out of those wild west movies, an old, craggy miner. He had a low, pleasant voice and an almost gentle handshake as if he feared hurting Jude with one of his oversized mitts. In contrast, there was the sleek and modern Japanese werewolf named Hoshido and the tattooed Robyn, who both looked like they belonged on the streets of megalopolis in a distant future.

Yet everyone seemed to *fit* together. There was an easy camaraderie amongst them that spoke of hardships faced together and won. Until Mack had gone Rogue and then they had lost. They'd lost *half* the pack from what

he'd gathered from Gareth and the others. Seeing the love and friendship that these people had for one another, Jude truly *realized* the full horror of it. Losing twenty-five people you *loved* to someone you'd thought would *never* betray you. That last part was almost the icing on a cake of horror.

Jude just couldn't conceive of it. He was suddenly *glad* that he couldn't remember his parents so he didn't miss them. But these people remembered those that they had lost yet they were *still* open to loving him.

Jude felt a wash of almost panicky sickness go through him. He suddenly needed to go someplace quiet and breathe for a moment, but he couldn't leave. Pack members were still coming up to him, greeting him, hugging him. Voices were raised in merriment. Even though Raj, Jacob, Molly and Gareth had only been gone from the pack a few days, they were besieged with welcome hugs, too, and questions. Tons of questions about Mack and the Rogues. Gareth was parrying all of the questions easily, telling them there would be a Circle that night, but for everyone to focus on what was right before them.

That was when Jude saw that there were two huge picnic tables behind the bonfire. They were heavily laden with food. Baskets of pastries were outmatched by platters of eggs, bacon, and sausages. There were piles of pancakes and waffles, too. Pitchers of orange juice dotted the table as well.

Werewolf sized portions! That had Jude grinning and the anxiety that had washed over him leached away a little bit.

"Hey, you want to go inside and look around? It'll be quieter," it was Brandon who asked.

Jude, still a little shaky, nodded. Going inside would give him some breathing space. He reached for Gareth, to ask him to come with or, at least, to tell him where he was going. He imagined that Gareth might want to be there for his first tour of the lodge. But Gareth was already turning towards him.

“Looks like Brandon wants to show you around inside, Jude. Would you mind?” Gareth asked.

“Werewolf hearing?” Jude found himself giggling. “You were totally talking to like five different people when Brandon asked me.”

Gareth drew a hand down Jude’s cheek. “I *always* pay attention to you.”

Jude found himself blushing and ducking his head. He looked up at Gareth through his eyelashes. “I like that.”

Gareth tugged him close to kiss his forehead. And there was a *lessening* of the noise level all around them. Jude realized that they were the *center* of attention. Every pack member had turned to look at them and every pack member seemed on the brink of bursting out in cries.

They don’t know we’re mates. Yet. But they will soon with Gareth and me touching each other like this.

A wave of utter shyness crashed into Jude as he saw the bright, inquisitive eyes of two dozen werewolves. Jacob was suppressing a grin behind one massive hand. Raj was rocking back and forth on his heels like a little kid who had a secret - or who had to pee. Molly merely gazed coolly on, her lips quirked into the smallest of serene smiles. Nina was completely hiding her own feelings behind an impassive mask, which Jude had to give her major kudos for considering her reaction to finding out they were together near the stairs.

Gareth turned to the expectant pack and he had high color on his cheekbones. His eyes were shining, too, and a grin threatened to break out. “Tonight, we are going to have a Circle to welcome Jude, but also to discuss some *other* critical - and *welcome* - things.” There were subdued hoots, which were quickly shushed up. “We’re going to show Jude around the lodge. Meanwhile, why don’t you all begin breakfast.”

“You hear our Alpha, go eat people!” Nina’s authoritative voice rose up and the crowd began moving towards the tables, leaving Jude, Gareth and Brandon by the steps to the shady wrap-around porch. A woman with bright red corkscrew curls, who had been standing with Brandon when they’d first arrived, stepped over to them.

“Izzy! Jude, this is Izzy! She’s my best friend,” Brandon said as he gestured towards the young woman. “Can Izzy come with us?”

Gareth nodded, but added, “Jude, do you mind?”

There was something in Gareth’s eyes that told Jude he really hoped he’d be okay with this. Jude was. He had no problem with the steady, quiet woman accompanying them as it seemed to make Brandon happy. She didn’t loom or hug. She held back, giving him space, but still welcoming him at the same time.

“Not in the least. Nice to meet you, Izzy,” he said awkwardly to her.

She bobbed her head, giving him this rather endearing lopsided smile that immediately put him at ease. “I hope you’ll like Fallowmere.”

“It looks great already.” Jude looked back at the lodge that seemed to beckon him inside. He couldn’t wait to see it also because it was *Gareth’s* home, the *pack’s* home, and, perhaps, *his* home, too.

“Are you sure you guys don’t want breakfast?” Jude asked them as he glanced over at the tables with the rapidly disappearing food.

“There’s more inside,” Brandon said with a shrug. “Maybe it might be nice to eat just the four of us.”

That actually sounded really good to Jude. He nodded. “Yeah, that’ll be good.”

“Maybe a little quiet for awhile would be a plan,” Gareth agreed. He was, of course, studying Jude with that intentness that was both wonderful and unnerving. Nothing Jude felt was missed by his observant Alpha.

“You’re bringing Brandon along and you think things are going to be *quiet?*” Izzy raised a flaming eyebrow at Gareth.

“I can be quiet!” Brandon shouted and then immediately clapped a hand over his mouth and mumbled, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Jude assured him. “I just need a breather and then I can face the crowds again.”

“Sometimes, I need to go to my room to be alone, too,” Brandon said with a nod then added, “Of course, Izzy is with me but that’s different.”

The red-haired werewolf gave Brandon a fond smile. Jude wondered if Izzy was Brandon’s mom, but no, he’d called her his best friend despite there being at least fifteen years age difference between them. At least, *physically* they looked that much apart, but Jude remembered that werewolves stopped aging when the Werewolf Gene was activated the first time. He wondered if that meant that Brandon would always be a teenager. He seemed a normal one. Yet another thing to ask Gareth about.

“You don’t have to worry about being quiet, Brandon. I’ll leave it to you to tell Jude all about the history of the lodge,” Gareth said.

Brandon immediately straightened and looked incredibly proud. “Oh, I could definitely do that!”

The Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack pulled open one of the doors to Fallowmere. Jude saw his gaze go from a spot on the porch farther down to the interior of the lodge as if looking for someone. Jude had vaguely seen a large blond man there earlier, but he’d lost him in the crowd. His own gaze went to the pack members who were seated at the picnic tables, but he didn’t see anyone there that looked quite right. He hadn’t seen the man

straight on, just enough to get an impression of Nordic looks and a massive frame. He wondered if that was who Gareth was looking for.

Just as they walked inside of Fallowmere, Jude heard Raj talking about him. The Indian werewolf was standing up at the table and demonstrating how Jude had attacked Mack that first night he'd shifted. Raj was acting it out with dozens of eyes fixed on him. Jude shook his head. The Indian werewolf was making him seem far more brave than he had been. Jumping to Gareth's defense had been *natural*. Was it brave to act when your other half was being attacked? No, that was simply self preservation. And Gareth was definitely his other half.

He met Gareth's gaze and found himself giving the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack a tremulous smile, but then he saw the space around them and let out an awed gasp. Jude's first overwhelming impression of Fallowmere's interior was of outside coming inside with comfort and that kind of rustic elegance that he'd only seen in magazines like Williams and Sonoma or Crate & Barrel where rich people had "log cabins" that were really mansions in the wilderness and they lived these lives of unattainable privilege. But here was that elegance made *real* and *approachable*.

About fifteen feet before them was what looked like a massive tree trunk rising up from the floor as if it were growing out of the very earth. It held up a second floor balcony with its spreading "branches". Two curving staircases made up of hewn logs led up to this balcony. Jude peered around the side of the trunk and saw there was a room beyond there with a large sofa and deep, comfortable upholstered chairs in front of a stone fireplace.

"So, Brandon, can you tell Jude something about this space?" Gareth prompted.

Brandon nodded eagerly. "The twin staircases aren't just there because they're cool." Jude snorted in amusement though he *did* think they were cool. "They actually represent two of our pack's values and the trunk stands for the pack."

“You have *values*?” Jude’s voice sounded sort of alarmed. Whenever people talked of “values” it always seemed to him to be accompanied by talk of “us” versus “them”. A pack was, in essence, the ultimate of “us” versus “them”, but having always been a “them”, Jude was highly suspicious of it. But he needn’t have worried. It wasn’t like what he was worried about at all.

“The pack is the trunk from which we get our strength. The strength of being together,” Brandon explained. “The staircases show that we come to the packs in many ways There is no wrong way. But we are all one in the end. All pack.”

“Oh, that sounds ... *nice*,” Jude meant it, too.

“A pack is made up of vastly different individuals,” Gareth told him. “Few in the pack are related by blood. Fewer still have the same interests. We are all nationalities and races. We are old and young and somewhere in between. Some of us had long lives as humans before the Werewolf Gene was triggered. Others had barely started their lives when they changed.” Though he didn’t say it, Jude guessed that Brandon was one of those while Powell and Haggerty were on the other end of the spectrum. “The pack itself connects us, binds us together.” Gareth went over to the trunk of the tree and brushed one powerful hand over it. “The idea that we are not alone, never alone, and can find meaning within and outside of our fellowship.”

“How do people become part of the pack?” Jude found himself asking. “I mean do they automatically become part of the Cold Moon Pack or can they choose to belong to *any* pack?”

He was wondering about the Rogues. Could they become a part of the Cold Moon Pack?

Everyone was looking at Gareth after Jude’s question and Jude realized that there might not be a settled answer. When Gareth spoke, he did so slowly, “There are *many* theories on this. A lot of us were approached by Mack and chose to join with him though we could have gone to other packs. None

did that I'm aware of. But then there are others that *find us*. Hoshido had a dream about us and he came here from Japan."

"When he arrived he was thin as a rail," Izzy remarked with a sad shake of her head. "His family hadn't understood his need to chase this dream he'd had and cut him off from his own money. He'd had to beg, borrow and steal to make it all the way here. He collapsed in -- in Mack's arms."

When she said Mack's name her voice broke a little. Gareth met his gaze suddenly and Jude knew that, even though Gareth didn't want to put any pressure on him to find a cure for going Rogue, that it would mean so much to everyone if he could.

Silence fell for a moment until Gareth patted the trunk and turned back to them all with a smile. "What about the room behind me, Brandon? What's that for?"

"That's where our visitors wait until you say that they might enter," Brandon responded to Gareth.

"It looks pretty cozy in there," Jude remarked. For some reason he thought of the stairs that led down into the ground where Mack and the other Rogues had been taken. Maybe it was his own fears about being excluded that the pack would make its visitors feel like welcomed, honored guests and not interlopers was something new for him as well.

"The rest of the lodge is even better!" Brandon enthused.

He pointed to the left where there was an arched opening over twelve feet tall made of packed fieldstone. Through it Jude saw a massive room two stories tall. The opposite wall was made of windows giving an unimpeded view of the forest and the river beyond. Jude could see the bridge that he and Gareth had walked over. It was breathtaking and he was immediately drawn towards the space.

Casting a warm golden glow over everything was a many-tiered chandelier made of antlers that spanned almost half the ceiling. Again, there was another fireplace that could have fit three Gareths standing side by side that bisected the room. Jude imagined that it was unutterably cozy in there when snow covered the ground in a blanket of white. He could easily imagine the crackling of logs while big, fat snowflakes drifted slowly down to land on ever deepening drifts of snow just outside the windows.

There was a dark blue oriental rug spread out on top of a gleaming maple floor. There were expansive couches covered in sturdy tartan materials that would allow lolling about without fear of wearing down the material. There was also a pool table right by the window that was already had balls racked in the triangle, ready to play.

Jude could imagine this room when filled with pack members. There would be some sprawled on the couches, watching the sixty-inch flatscreens that were on three of the walls. Others would be curled on the chairs by the fire, reading books from the one section of wall that held well-worn volumes. He imagined people sipping drinks while casting glances at people playing pool. He could almost hear the laughter as pack members talked in quiet corners. Though, really, he wondered if it was ever quiet in the packhouse with all the rowdy werewolves in it. The thought of this place filled with life and laughter made Jude smile.

“This where we have a lot of pack meetings. We call them Circles.” Brandon made a face, which indicated he wasn’t fond of hanging about in meetings.

Gareth saw it and chuckled, completely unoffended by the boy’s feelings on the matter.

Izzy put a steadying hand on Brandon’s shoulder. “You only dislike them because you can’t talk as much as you like when we’re meeting.”

Brandon sighed as only a put-upon teenager can do. “It’s just everything takes so *long*.”

“In the old days,” Gareth began with a rather mischievous look in his topaz eyes, “we didn’t allow the young wolves to attend the Circles.”

Immediately, Brandon looked alarmed. “But -- but that’s not fair! Young wolves are part of the pack, too!”

“Indeed, they are.” Gareth nodded solemnly.

“Which is *why* they have to sit through the boring stuff,” Izzy added with a grin. “So you see you can’t win. Either be excluded from the good stuff or endure the boring stuff, too.”

Brandon gave out a long sigh, but he did nod. “I guess. It’s just when Raj goes *on and on* about financial stuff that I want to go to sleep.”

“You do realize that without Raj, we couldn’t pay for Fallowmere?” Izzy pointed out gently.

“Then why doesn’t he say: we made lotsa cash this year, Fallowmere is in the clear, it’s all good and then be done? I mean we don’t need charts to say that, do we?” Brandon asked her.

Gareth turned to Jude and said *sotto voce*, “Raj *does* love his charts.” Then he said to the group, “Raj is absolutely brilliant with money. It’s his time to share all the hard work he does during the year with us. While I know it’s not as exciting as getting a new brother.” He squeezed Jude’s shoulder. “It’s very important to us and to Raj.”

“I know.” Brandon then brightened up, “This is also where we do the pool tournaments. Robyn is like the best though and -- oh!” Brandon’s explanation of who was the best at pool broke off as his eyes caught sight of someone standing behind Jude in the arched doorway.

“Forgive me, I did not mean to interrupt,” a deep male voice said. It was tinted with a foreign accent.

The voice caused a shiver to go up Jude's spine and he found himself frozen with his back towards this man. This man ... this man ...

I know his voice.

"Paavo, he is my son! Look at him! You'll see it!" his father had cried.

The huge, blond werewolf though would not look at him. "The child of a witch and a werewolf is an abomination!"

"How can you say that? How can you speak that way --"

"You've broken every law," Paavo gritted out, shaking his blond hair wildly. "And you expect me to protect you yet again."

"You are my brother ..."

The memory, just a snippet of a conversation and flashing images of faces, went through Jude's mind as he slowly turned around, feeling as if the ground beneath his feet were a sheet of ice that was cracking and creaking, ready to give way and plunge him into icy water.

"I am welcoming a new pack member, Paavo," Gareth's voice was cool. "While I am honored to have the Alpha of Alphas in my home, *this* takes precedence over anything between us. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course, I understand. There is something I must --" It was the huge Nordic man that Jude had caught sight of on the porch out of the corner of his eye who was speaking. But where, before, Jude had not truly seen him, *now* he did and it was as if Jude were suddenly *possessed* by someone else.

"You ..." Jude's voice was whisper, but it was an *angry* whisper. A whisper of *hatred*.

"Jude, are you all right?" Gareth's voice held a note of concern.

Jude's back was painfully rigid. He had no control over himself as he found himself growling at the blond man who his father had begged to protect them, but who would not, "You -- *you* killed my parents!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: WITCHFIRE

Gareth lunged for Jude even as his mate shifted into his wolf form. He experienced an awful moment of *deja vu* as he went to tackle Jude just like he had tackled Pierce. Jude seemed out of control in another way though, a *natural* way. But it did not make things any less dire. Jude had clearly been hit with a memory of the time before the accident. It had overwhelmed his rational mind and was clouding their connection even now. It was pushing Jude to turn to the wolf. Gareth could only hope to physically stop Jude instead of reach him mentally and emotionally.

Unlike Pierce, Jude anticipated his actions and pivoted out of the way so that Gareth's arms swished through open air. Jude stalked towards Paavo, body low to the ground, teeth bared, growling loudly. That sound, even to Gareth, was menacing and had the hair standing up on the back of his neck.

Jude's red-brown eyes were no longer filled with the familiar warmth and playfulness. Instead, they were a sulfurous red, burning with witchfires inside of them. Paavo's eyes grew wide at this and he took half a step back. He caught himself and firmed his stance.

"Paavo, back away!" Gareth demanded even as he rounded Jude to step between him the Alpha of Alphas.

"I do not need you to protect me. Not from him," Paavo said.

Paavo was bigger as a wolf and a man than Jude. He could shift and take Jude down, who was really only half the Alpha of Alphas' size. Yet his words sounded almost as if Paavo was not speaking of his strength compared to Jude's, but for Jude to have some *other* reason to stop, some *other* reason for being safe in Jude's presence. Clearly, Jude did not see this other reason. He kept advancing.

"He's not challenging you!" Gareth roared, thinking perhaps that Paavo believed that he had to stand his ground against Jude out of pride.

Anger flickered higher in Gareth. Was Paavo going to attack his mate? Jude was a new wolf! New wolves were notoriously unstable at first. Paavo should know this and should be backing away, defusing the situation. He should give Jude time to calm down, but he was not. He was standing there like a fool as the situation flared higher and higher.

Unless Jude is not unstable at all and Paavo did kill his parents. But why would Paavo think he was safe with Jude if he did that? And if he is responsible ... then Jude will not be alone in taking him down. I will be right there beside him. But now is not the time.

At that moment, Brandon gasped and pointed silently at the floor just behind Jude. Gareth saw what he saw and was stunned for a moment. A series of paw prints was being burned into the wood floor as Jude stalked towards Paavo. And that was not the only thing heating up.

The fire and kindling, which had been arranged in the fireplace for a blaze suddenly lit as well with a huge *whump*. A blast of overheated air dashed past them. Gareth found himself looking around at all the wood and cloth in this room. What would catch fire next?

“Jude, please stop this,” Gareth said. He met those sulphurous eyes, but he did not see his mate in them, just a force of nature. But he did not back away. He would never back away from the man he loved. He got down low so they were eye to eye. “Jude, please stop. Please.”

Jude paused. His lips that had been writhed back from his sharp, white teeth came forward again and he let out a short sharp whine. The fire in his eyes died a little, too. The blaze in the fireplace that had threatened to leap out of its stone confines and set something else ablaze died down a bit as well.

But then Paavo spoke again.

“It’s true. He has wolf and witch blood,” he heard Paavo whisper in a voice like that of a stunned man’s.

Everything raged to life once more and Jude prepared to leap past Gareth and onto the Alpha of Alphas, going straight for his throat.

“Jude, no!” Gareth cried, prepared to block his way.

Suddenly, there was a blast of arctic wind and the fire in the fireplace that had been licking the edges of the stone mantle went out. The footprints that had been sizzling into the wooden floor beneath Jude’s paws ceased to form. Jude hunched back, his body seeming to curl in on itself, as an elderly woman advanced into the room.

“My Jude, calm yourself! Do you want to set your new home on fire?” Grandmother Sophia asked. “We do not use magic when we are out of control. We do not harm others when we are beside ourselves. It is dangerous. Look at how you are frightening that little boy and his friend. Look at Gareth! He is scared for you as well!”

Jude whined and tucked his head down.

“You are a witch!” Paavo’s attention was turned to Sophia. He was stunned anew as if he was surrounded by enemies. He pointed to Jude. “You know of him? You are teaching him your ways?”

“Now may not be the time to raise your voice, Alpha,” Grandmother Sophia said.

And she was right. Jude immediately took Paavo’s words as a threat to his grandmother and leaped towards the Alpha of Alphas. Gareth though was more than ready. He tackled Jude and took him to the floor before he was halfway to Paavo. He twisted in mid-air so that he wouldn’t crush Jude beneath him. Jude’s legs clawed the air and he arched his back howling with rage. Over Jude’s shoulder Gareth saw Brandon’s mouth was open in an ‘O’ of shock. Izzy had moved between Jude and him though Jude wasn’t going to hurt the young boy.

“Jude! Jude! Calm down!” Gareth commanded. He felt his mate’s confusion on top of rage and loss.

“Use your dominance, Gareth,” Grandmother Sophia advised. “He is stronger than just a wolf.”

“I won’t! Jude would be afraid of me!” Gareth cried. Yes, he would be able to stop Jude in his tracks. Yes, he would have dominance over the young wolf. But if he did that then Jude would *never* see submission as anything other than control over him, something to be imposed to imprison him. It would never be the beautiful act it could be. He had to convince Jude to calm another way.

Paavo was suddenly kneeling down beside them. His expression was strange. It was not angry or fearful. It was almost filled with this stunned determination. These two emotions should not have been present together yet they were.

“Paavo, get away!” Gareth commanded. “You’re causing Jude more stress!”

But Paavo reached and stroked Jude’s coat even as Jude snapped at him and wriggled violently to get to the blond-haired werewolf.

“Please listen to the Alpha, Paavo.” Izzy’s hands were on the Alpha of Alpha’s large shoulders and she was pulling him back.

Paavo blinked as Jude snapped twice at him, nearly cutting his face. Suddenly, he firmed his expression and commanded the young wolf, “Still. You must *still*.”

Anger flooded Gareth anew as well as shock. Paavo was trying to exert *his* dominance over Jude. Before Jude formally joined the Cold Moon Pack there was a *chance* - a scintilla of a chance - that he could be forced into another pack by an Alpha asserting dominance. It had never happened during Gareth’s lifetime nor Mack’s, but Mack had told him it used to

happen in the past. Paavo was the Alpha of Alphas. If *anyone* could do it, it was him.

“This is *most* unwise,” Grandmother Sophia intoned. She was standing beside Izzy and Brandon. “Do not interfere in this, Paavo. You will lose if you do.”

“You are a *witch*! I do not listen to witches!” Paavo snapped at her.

“Then listen to *me*,” Gareth’s voice had gone into a low, throaty register. He grasped one of the Alpha of Alphas’ wrists, the one with the hand touching Jude’s fur. “Let Jude go.”

Topaz eyes met blue. They clashed for long moments. Paavo bared his teeth, but Gareth did not, nor did he look away or let go of Paavo’s wrist. And just as Grandmother Sophia had said, Paavo was the one to look away *first*. Though he did not move quite quick enough.

Jude snarled louder and wrenched himself free. He lunged for Paavo’s throat once more. He managed to graze the side of Paavo’s face with one tooth. A line of red ran down his cheek. Gareth wound his arms and legs around Jude and rolled them over until Jude was beneath him, pinned by his much heavier body.

“Get everybody out of here, Izzy,” Gareth commanded, his voice hoarse and angry.

Jude’s back legs frantically pawed at the ground, trying to get purchase as Paavo moved a few steps away on his own. Through the circle of his arm, he saw Izzy gently grasp Paavo’s left wrist and pulled him towards the archway. Paavo, at first, would not go, his gaze fixed on Jude, but, finally, he did. Brandon jogged off after them.

Grandmother Sophia looked grim as she gazed down at both of them. “You are strong and exceptional, Gareth, and now he knows it.”

Gareth blinked. He was just now feeling the aftershocks of his stare down with Paavo. Had that just happened? Had he just won a challenge?

But I was not challenging him for lead of all of the packs just of Jude. My mate. My one.

But Gareth knew that it didn't work that way. He had bested Paavo *once* that meant he could do it again. What would the Alpha of Alphas do? What would Gareth do? If Paavo had killed Jude's parents ... But he couldn't go there yet. All he wanted was leadership of the Cold Wolf Pack with Jude by his side.

And the Rogues cured, as if that is not too much to want as well.

He had no desire for leadership beyond that. But before Mack had gone Rogue, he'd had no desire for leadership of the Cold Moon Pack either, a voice reminded him that sounded a lot like Nina's.

He pushed all of it out of his mind. His mate needed him.

"Jude, Jude, you need to listen to me," Gareth said, making his voice gentle, but still firm. He put his mouth to Jude's ear. It was soft and twitched as his breath hit it. "Jude. Jude. It's me. It's Gareth." He mentally wrapped himself around Jude. "Do you hear me? Do you hear me, my mate?"

The almost-bond was flailing about like a live electrical wire, sparking and flashing and completely out of control. Still using his body weight to keep Jude down, he risked stroking Jude's head to tail with one hand. The first stroke had the back legs stopping their frantic attempts at running. The second stroke had Jude's head relaxing against the floor. The third had Jude's breathing easing slightly.

Over their pack bond, Gareth still felt anger and anguish in equal parts circulating through Jude's mind. Jude was replaying some scene from the past. Some scene with Paavo calling him an abomination. Gareth winced and stroked Jude again. There were tremors going through that strong,

furry body and Gareth didn't dare get up yet. He continued to stroke and talk to Jude. He told him how he was safe, how he was home, how he was always going to be welcome here, how Gareth would never leave him.

The tremors ceased and Jude's tail wagged tiredly. Those red brown eyes found Gareth's face and he gave a little whine. No more sulphurous glow. No more witchfires. Shame at shifting like that, at losing control, at fighting Gareth, at scaring Brandon and Izzy all poured over the pack bond. The almost-bond of their mating was no longer snapping and thrashing, but like Jude's tail, thumped a few times and went still as if it had no more energy to fight.

"It's all right, my love," Gareth assured him. "I understand. You remembered something. Something terrible."

Jude whined again, but it was soft and sad.

"Don't think of it now. Just rest. Just let your eyes close and let sleep take you. I will stay with you," he promised with more strokes and gentle kisses.

Jude's eyes were closing. He was exhausted. Bone tired. Gareth's muscles still jangled with adrenaline, but he took in a deep clearing breath and forced himself to go limp. He shifted himself off of the top of Jude's wolf form until he was curled around his back. They spooned together.

Jude had not yet returned to human form, but that was understandable. The stress would keep him in this form until he had recovered enough energy to shift. Gareth continued to stroke and kiss Jude's head and neck. He felt the young wolf slip into sleep. Gareth stayed where he was, holding him, just as he had promised. He closed his eyes, feeling sleep nipping at him as well. It had been a long couple of days and feeling his mate in pain was simply too much. He held onto the furry body, nose pressed against Jude's spine, breathing in Jude's scent until blackness took him, too.

It seemed like only a few minutes had passed when Gareth heard Nina's soft step as she entered the room, but Gareth knew it was longer because of

the position of the sun. It was shining through the windows fully on himself and Jude, warming their bodies. Jude was human once more and very naked. He'd turned in Gareth's arms and was rooted quite securely against Gareth's chest. He was still very much asleep. Gareth ran a hand over Jude's curls and kissed his forehead tenderly before he turned to his Beta.

Nina had quietly crept into the room so that he could see her without craning his neck around. She got down on her haunches. Her expression was filled with concern. When her eyes dropped to Jude there was a tenderness there. New wolves often shifted when emotionally distressed and she was undoubtedly concerned about that, but Gareth guessed, too, that Jude's sweet beauty also moved her even though she had no desire for men. Then her eyes went to the burned-in wolf prints on the floor. She said nothing, nor did she outwardly react to them, but he wondered what she felt. Fear? Unease?

She smiled at him, reading his mind as usual. "Actually, I was thinking how handy it would be to have a witch to help us fight."

His eyebrows raised. "You think we'll be doing much fighting?" Realizing that this sounded naive of him considering what had just happened, he added, "We've caught Mack and most of the Rogues. This is *not* Jude's usual behavior."

Gareth quickly checked in with pack bonds to ascertain if the rest of the pack was all right. Attacking the Alpha of Alphas on any day, let alone a day of welcome, was bound to have caused some consternation and worry. But he was relieved and happy to find that his wolves believed that *Paavo* must have somehow been to blame for whatever had triggered Jude's shift and attack.

"I'm sure it's not," she agreed neutrally. "I wasn't really thinking of *him* bringing trouble exactly to us, but *you*."

"*Me*?" Gareth couldn't help the surprise in his voice.

“Izzy told me what happened with lots of help from Brandon. Did you forget all of that?” She raised her eyebrow this time. “Did you forget that you challenged Paavo ... and *won*?”

Gareth let out a breath that stirred his hair. His ponytail had come undone and now his hair hung down in his face. “That was ... was not a challenge. He was trying to dominate Jude and I --”

“Challenged him and *won*.” Nina gave him a stern look.

Gareth raked his hair back from his forehead. “He will not view it as that. I am hoping that he is more ashamed of how *he* behaved, trying to take Jude from me ...” He stopped speaking as the anger flowed over him again. He could not speak of this now. “Where is he?”

“Back in the guest suite. Grandmother Sophia is in there with him as well as Raj, Jacob, Molly and Tessa. That old woman is formidable. He wanted to shut the door in her face, but she just *looked* at him and he let her in!” Nina laughed throatily.

“And the others insisted on going with her?” Gareth guessed.

She nodded. “They are quite protective of her - Tessa, understandably, as he foster daughter - but the others are ready to protect her to the death, too.”

“Grandmother Sophia inspires loyalty,” Gareth explained.

“Not only her. I had to fend them off from charging in here,” she said and cast a look down on Jude’s sleeping form. “Is Jude all right?”

Even when asleep, Gareth could sense Jude’s mood and feelings over their almost-bond. His mate was calm now. He was dreaming of running through green grass lit by sunlight with Gareth beside him. Gareth found himself smiling at that image himself.

“He’s okay.” He met her gaze. “But this has been too much. Everything that’s happened ... what’s going to happen ... too much.”

“He didn’t just snap and attack Paavo though out of strain, Gareth. He said that Paavo killed his parents,” she pointed out. He had hoped that this part hadn’t been reported as clearly.

“Yes, he did, but before today Jude had no memory of his parents or how they died,” Gareth reminded her. “We don’t even know if this was a true memory or ... or something else.”

“Seeing the man who was responsible for his parents’ death is a pretty good trigger of memories, don’t you think?” Her tone was probing.

“It could be,” he said slowly.

“You don’t want to say for sure?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

“I do not know for sure,” he said carefully. “If he did this --”

“Either he did it or he let others do it,” Jude’s voice was husky with sleep, but it was clear.

Gareth looked down into his mate’s red-brown eyes. “Jude!

“Don’t you believe me? About him, I mean? You heard what he said to Grandmother Sophia! The tone he used about *witches*? He thinks I’m a monster or something,” Jude said, his red-brown eyes filling with pain. He quickly looked away from Gareth and towards the windows. “I could feel the hate coming off of him in my memory even as my father begged him to -- to keep us safe!”

Gareth was quiet. He realized where his own uncertainty came from: it was from Jude.

“Jude, what exactly did you remember?” Gareth asked then clarified, “Did you see him do something to your parents’ car or --”

“No! Just a conversation. It was just the *look* on his face ... My father said they were brothers,” Jude whispered.

Gareth’s heart squeezed and he felt rather breathless.

“Brothers as in *blood* brothers or *pack* brothers?” Nina, who had been silent asked quickly. Her look was intent.

“I don’t know,” Jude said. “And I don’t care!”

Gareth’s gaze met Nina’s. He felt suddenly sick. She looked as grim as him.

Blood relatives are almost always in the same pack. I have never heard of them not being so. If Jude is Paavo’s nephew by blood it means that he could claim Jude as part of his pack. But Jude thinks he hates him, believes him an abomination. He won’t claim Jude then. But that look on his face when he tried to dominate Jude ...

“What is it?” Jude asked, gaze flickering between them.

“How do you feel?” Gareth changed the subject, not smoothly, but Jude went along with it. He needed to think. He needed to find out about Jude’s parentage. He hoped Cassidy had some reports for him.

Jude put a hand to his forehead and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know. I feel ... I don’t know. Good to be with you, but ...” Jude struggled to sit up. Gareth helped him. It was then he realized he was naked and Nina was there. “Oh, shit, my clothes! I --”

“Here you go. These should fit you. They’re our emergency sweats for all occasions.” She tossed a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt to him.

“Oh, thanks, I can get changed into my own clothes in a few minutes,” Jude assured her.

“We share clothes here and everything else. You’ll be lucky if Gareth doesn’t steal your toothbrush,” Nina laughed.

Jude’s face scrunched up. “Gross!”

“I don’t do that. Cassidy does and it’s been known to cause a little ... consternation,” Gareth assured him.

Nina stood up and dusted her hands on the thighs of her jeans. She then pointedly looked out the window, giving Jude privacy.

“Well, thanks for these, Nina,” Jude mumbled and pulled on the dark gray sweatpants. Gareth helped him as Jude seemed all legs and arms rather like a newborn colt. The young wolf smiled at him bashfully. “I’m so clumsy.”

“Part of the shift,” Gareth assured him. “Sometimes it’s effortless back and forth. Other times there is a delay for everything to work right.”

Jude nodded and then pulled the t-shirt over his head. His hair stuck up adorably in all directions. Gareth smoothed it down and cupped his mate’s face.

“Jude, are you all right? Truthfully?” Gareth asked as he studied the young wolf on the outside with his eyes and on the inside through their almost-bond.

Jude went still and licked his lips for a moment. “I need to talk to Paavo. I need to know the truth. He knows who my parents are. He knows how they died. He may have ...”

“Jude, if he’s responsible for killing them, he won’t tell you that and everything else he says will be suspect. Among werewolf kind, to kill one of your own is ... is unforgivable unless they are Rogue,” Gareth said.

“And I just went for his throat so why would he talk to me?” Jude realized and raked his hands through his thick hair. “Damn it! If only I hadn’t lost it, but when I heard his voice, everything came rushing back and I couldn’t stop any of it. I just couldn’t!”

Gareth pulled Jude against him. “Stop blaming yourself. You need food and rest. You’ve been stretched beyond imagining, Jude.”

“But I need to know!” Jude cried, but he sagged against Gareth.

Gareth pressed a kiss to his head. “And I will find out for you.”

He would also likely find out if Paavo considered him a threat for the position of Alpha of Alphas at the same time.

CHAPTER THIRTY: BLOOD VERSUS LOVE

Jude hung behind Gareth as the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack knocked on the door to the suite where Paavo and two of his wolves were staying. The door opened and sunlight spilled out, blinding Jude for a moment. He blinked his eyes to clear his vision.

Paavo wasn't at the door. It was one of his wolves, or so Jude suspected, because not only was he not smiling as all the Cold Moon Pack had at Gareth, but he had a different *scent*. It wasn't a bad scent, a sort of piney, earthy smell. It was Paavo's scent as opposed to Gareth's scent though and that meant stranger.

Stranger danger, Jude thought and almost laughed hysterically.

It was nerves. It was anger. It was fear. It was the wolf not liking an alien pack in their den. As much as he thought he knew about what must have happened in the past with Paavo and his family, he was really just filling in blanks from one remembered conversation. He could be wrong. But, thankfully, little worse seemed likely to be revealed.

The werewolf in the doorway was tall, about six foot, five inches. He was built like a wrestler with rippling muscles, a shaved skull except for a limp mohawk of blonde, almost white hair down the center of his head. His eyes were slate gray. He wore one of those Nike shirts for working out in that clung to every curve of his torso and a pair of gray pants, almost perfected fitted. He had a handsome Nordic face, but it seemed cold like cut out of planes of ice. The werewolf stared, unblinking, at the two of them. Jude had to remind himself that *he* had insisted on accompanying Gareth to this meeting. The Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack had urged against it.

"Jude, you *need* to rest." Gareth had put his massive hands on Jude's shoulders. No other man made Jude feel small and protected like Gareth did. "I can handle this. I can find out the information you need."

But Jude had shaken his head until he felt almost sick from the whipping it back and forth. “No, I have to hear it for myself. Besides, you might ...”

“I might *what?*”

“Hold stuff back, because you don’t want me hurt,” Jude answered. He searched Gareth’s face. “Tell me you wouldn’t do that?”

Gareth was the first one to look away. He pursed his lips. “I would tell you ... when you were ready to hear it.”

“Gareth! That proves my point! I’m going.”

“That mulish expression on that pretty face tells me that you better not argue, Gareth,” Nina chuckled. But then she was serious again, asking, “Do you want me to go to? After what happened downstairs ...”

She let the sentence hang. Jude’s cheeks burned. She must be talking about him and all the crazy things he had done. But, weirdly, Gareth *also* acted guilty. Clearly, more had gone on than he’d noticed.

“No, Nina, I think it best we act as if that didn’t happen,” Gareth replied firmly.

Nina stared at him hard for long moments. “*You* might be willing to pretend it didn’t happen, but will Paavo?” Yet then she shook her head and said, “I’ll go outside and join the breakfast feast. I wish you were both out there.”

Jude felt a prickling of guilt. All of this was *for* him, but he wasn’t participating at all. Instead, he was nearly burning the place down and causing friction for Gareth with the leader of all werewolves.

This is not the kind of mate I want to be, he realized with a start.

But it was too late to undo what he'd done. And there was no way that he could leave unanswered all the questions he had for Paavo. The only thing he could do now was see this through by Gareth's side.

And not lose it again.

But now that he was in front of one of Paavo's bodyguards or Betas or whatever this werewolf was, Jude suddenly wondered if this had been a good idea after all. He sensed that things were going on *beneath* what he was seeing. This werewolf was staring at Gareth, stonily, not like one would a favored host, but rather a potential *enemy*. That was raising Jude's hackles though Gareth merely looked back at this odd smelling werewolf with no expression whatsoever.

"Ask them in, Castor!" Grandmother Sophia commanded from the interior of the room.

"I listen only to the Alpha of Alphas," Castor answered, but there was a faint smile on his lips just for a moment. And Jude might have liked him just a little for it. But few could resist his grandmother's charm.

"It is all right, Castor. I wish to see them. I wish to see Jude," Paavo answered, his voice sounded farther away than hers like he was calling from a deeper interior room.

Jude let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. He had been worried that Paavo wouldn't even speak to him because he was a *witch*, not to mention that cutting his face thing and attempting to rip out his throat.

Yeah, he *really* hadn't thought Paavo would let them both in. Gareth gave him a comforting brief flash of a smile and their almost-bond quivered with relief. For a strong moment, Jude wished the bond was completed. He hated this feeling of something being unfinished even though he knew what that would mean: he and Gareth would be together forever. Somehow that didn't sound so bad at all anymore. His worries about putting himself out there seemed so much less than before. With those comforting thoughts, he followed the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack inside Paavo's suite.

The door opened up into a sitting room. There was a large circular fire pit almost directly in front of them with a huge stone hood that would draw away any of the smoke. An elaborate grating of wolves racing through the woods encircled where the fire would burn merrily, to keep the stray spark from landing on the floor of polished oak. There was no fire in there now as it was already becoming a fine, hot day. Large, comfortable-looking squashy chairs were arranged in a circle around it. Like all the rest of Fallowmere, this room was beautiful. A mixture of rustic and elegant and it was utterly inviting.

Grandmother Sophia was seated to their left. She looked like a queen, surveying her domain. Raj was perched on the arm of a chair beside her rather like her court jester. Tessa was the princess in the chair opposite him. Jacob was stretched sideways like a dangerous black bear stuffed into a too small space. And finally, Molly, slowly circled the room like a spymaster.

Other than Castor, who went to stand in a corner so that he could survey the whole room, Jude didn't see any evidence of Paavo at all. But Jude knew he was there. He'd called to let them in and, more importantly, his scent was fresh and heavy in the room.

"My Jude." Grandmother Sophia opened her arms to him.

He immediately went into them, getting on his knees to do so. Gareth walked over and stood beside her, leaning down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"I think I'd like to hire you as the pack's crisis counselor," Gareth said to her with a small smile.

"You don't have to hire me, dear. I'll do it for *free*." She smiled back at him broadly, her white teeth glowing against the darkness of her skin. "Good people deserve good things and I will try to be one of those things."

Jude did *not* feel like one of those good things at the moment. He felt like he was *trouble*.

Like always.

“I’m sorry, Grandmother Sophia, for what happened downstairs,” he murmured against her dress’ shoulder.

“I know.” She petted his head. “You’re doing very well considering everything, dear one. You’re doing *better* than that, but you are clearly the child of a powerful witch and a mighty werewolf. That means you need to be very careful, especially when you’re upset.”

Jude nodded. He could see that now. There were burnt paw marks on the living room floor to prove that.

“Did you really have a go at Paavo?” Raj’s eyes were wide and he leaned forward eagerly.

Molly hit the back of his head. He let out an “ow” and rubbed his skull, giving her a hurt puppy, put-upon look. Molly was not impressed.

“You earned that, dude,” Jacob laughed his big laugh that always made Jude want to smile.

“No, I didn’t!” Raj cried.

“Raj,” Gareth said with one raised eyebrow. It was a gentle nudge.

Raj then immediately admitted, “Okay, *maybe* I did. A little.”

“Jude is quite formidable in a fight.” Gareth smiled down at Jude who blushed.

“I’m sorry about that,” Jude muttered, remembering how he had fought *Gareth*.

“You needn’t be. I’m glad you’re so strong,” Gareth said with a smile lit up his whole face. It was only then that Jude realized that Gareth was nervous about something. He wanted to ask what it was, but he couldn’t with others in the room. And where was there a quiet place to talk in the Alpha of Alpha’s rooms where Paavo wouldn’t overhear? No where.

Tessa reached forward and ruffled Jude’s hair to get his attention. “Hey, what is this about remembering your parents?”

He turned to look at his foster sister. Her beautiful face was creased with worry. She had no memory of her parents either. It had been something that they’d bonded over. She’d convinced him that the fact they knew nothing of who they’d come from meant that they got to decide everything about who they were going to be. But that hadn’t been completely true for either of them.

“I -- I just remembered a conversation.” Jude’s forehead furrowed as he tried to honestly recall it all. “A bit of a conversation really between my dad and -- and Paavo...”

That was all that Jude had a chance to say, because then the Alpha of Alphas appeared out of one of the doors that likely led off to bedrooms. The cut that Jude had made on his cheek was gone. There was no trace of it. He saw Jude’s glance at it and actually smiled. It was a warm smile, if a little uncertain.

“Werewolves heal quickly,” Paavo said, running a finger down where the scratch had been. “You did no lasting harm.”

“Why do you think I’m worried about cutting you? I think you killed my parents. Causing you lasting harm was sort of the point,” Jude snapped, suddenly, completely unapologetic.

“Because your eyes tell me so,” Paavo answered with a larger smile, not getting angry at all even though Castor moved uneasily in the corner. He

turned to Gareth and asked, “You probably know that, too, about him, don’t you, Gareth? Those eyes say everything.”

“Were my father’s eyes like that when he asked you to help us?” Jude got to his feet, not liking to be on a lower plane than the Alpha of Alphas.

Gareth held up an arm in front of Jude. He hadn’t realized that he’d also advanced upon Paavo’s position. The Alpha of Alphas appeared unperturbed by this, but Jude swallowed hard. Grandmother Sophia had just warned him about his temper and being careful. He dug his fingernails into his palms.

“You have your mother’s eyes and her coloring over all. My brother’s eyes were as blue as mine.” Paavo moved over and sat down in one of the chairs. He stretched out his long legs as if there was a blaze, but it was too hot for that. His powerful arms were spread wide on the chair.

“Do you need anything, my Alpha?” Castor asked. His tone was respectful and a little awed as if he couldn’t quite get over that he got to speak to Paavo. Jude resisted the urge to snort. But then he thought of his own respect for Gareth and the urge fell away.

Paavo waved Castor’s offer away. “Thank you, no, Castor.” But then his gaze rested on Jude and something like *cunning* appeared there. “But what of the rest of you? You must be hungry, Jude. All young wolves are voracious and my brother was known to have a bottomless stomach.”

Jude was about to deny being hungry, but then his stomach rumbled, giving lie to whatever he would have said. Gareth laced one of his hands with Jude’s and led him over to a chair.

“Raj, please go get some food for Jude,” Gareth said and Raj immediately rose to do so.

“Castor can get it,” Paavo said sharply and his werewolf was at the door.

Gareth stiffened and his topaz eyes narrowed at Paavo. "It is *my* house."

Raj hastened towards the door to beat Castor to the food.

"And Jude is *my* nephew," Paavo said. His gaze narrowed, too.

Castor stepped out into the hallway. Raj followed, practically running. This would have been funny if it didn't seem deadly serious. Something werewolf was going on here that Jude hadn't been clued into yet. But it was clearly about him and he wasn't going to let Paavo provoke Gareth in his own home.

Jude frowned. "Everybody *stop*. Now. What's going on here?"

Gareth and Paavo were not in a stare down, but it was close. Jude remembered what Gareth had said about staring and dominance. He also recalled - as if through a fog - Gareth doing this before with Paavo and *winning*. That was likely bad. Or maybe it was good.

"Paavo's making a claim to you as a member of his pack, Jude," Molly said in her clear, unequivocal tone.

"*What?*" Jude breathed the word with all the shock inside of him. Gareth jerked, too, which told him it was true. But he couldn't believe it. Wasn't this the same man that had said his father could pound sand when he'd asked for the man's help? Hadn't he looked in horror - and a bit of awe - at Jude's powers? He didn't like witches. He didn't like witchcraft. But now he wanted Jude in his *pack*? After Jude had tried to kill him? Insane! He had to make sure he was following this here. "By offering his guy to get me food, he's showing he wants me in his pack?"

"An Alpha feeds his pack," Gareth said through tightly clenched teeth. "Another Alpha does not."

Jude remembered the pancake cutting then and how Gareth had always ensured that everyone had gotten food at Grandmother Sophia's before

anyone ate. An Alpha served to make sure that his pack was well-fed.

“But he thinks I’m a witch-thing!” Jude cried, still not believing this. “He didn’t help my family when I a child. He’s not going to help me now!”

“I -- I *regret* what I did then, ” Paavo responded with downcast eyes.

“And what about *now*? Like downstairs?” Jude’s eyebrows rose.

“Seeing you ... *shocked* me. I thought you were dead.” Paavo half lowered his head as if he were truly ashamed.

“You hate witches!” Jude shouted, remembering all too clearly what he said to Grandmother Sophia. But now his grandmother was sitting peaceably in the Alpha of Alpha’s rooms and Paavo seemed quite solicitous of her.

“I *hate* those who enslaved us long ago.” But Paavo’s jaw clenched just a little at being contradicted or maybe in memory of such enslavement. “But not *you*, Jude. I could never *hate* you.”

“But you tried to kill me!”

“No,” Paavo’s voice was firm and he held Jude’s gaze. “Never. I did not hurt your parents or you. But I did not ... *help* when my brother asked me. Not at first. Not until I thought it was too late.”

Jude was vibrating with anger again. Gareth touched his hand and Jude let out a breath, relaxing immediately. He had to keep control of himself. He couldn’t shift again or set things on fire. It was then that he could feel the tension in his mate through their almost-bond. He realized that Gareth was using every inch of control to stop himself from leaping at Paavo.

This is because of me. I can’t let them fight. It would be really bad.

“Please let *someone* get you food, Jude. You’re starving,” Grandmother Sophia finally said. “Then we can all talk properly. This is a long story, I

think, and you've always thought better on a full stomach."

"It better be a *good* story," Tessa crossed her arms over her chest. Molly put one hand on her shoulder. "You do realize that they put Jude in like the *worst* foster care homes before Grandmother Sophia found him, don't you? He had *family* in *you* and *you* just left him to *rot*."

For a moment, Paavo froze. His eyes went fully to Jude. He didn't know. That was genuine surprise. "What does she mean?"

"It's a long story and one I don't feel like offering right now," Jude replied coldly. Gareth's hand tightened on his own. Jude found himself taking strength from that simple touch. "But I do want to hear what you have to say." He turned to the door where Raj and Castor still stood, ready to move at a word. "Raj, would you please get me some food? Get some for everybody."

"Of course!" Raj responded brightly, but there was a worried light in his eyes. He didn't want to leave in case something happened, but Jude knew he'd made the right call asking Raj to go.

Jacob shared a look with Molly. She tilted her head towards the door almost imperceptibly. He quickly leveraged himself off of the couch as agilely as an acrobat. His huge bulk didn't seem to affect him at all.

"Hold up, Raj, I'll help," Jacob said.

The two of them headed out of the room together. Castor shut the door behind them. There was silence in the room. Tessa was glowering at Paavo. Molly was measuring the distance between herself and Castor.

Grandmother Sophia calmly sat with her hands in her lap like she was in church without any consternation at all. He wondered if she were hiding what she was feeling or if she was content to sit here until Paavo told them everything. Gareth was concentrating very hard on the floor while running his thumb gently over the back of Jude's hand in an infinity symbol.

He's an Alpha. He's my Alpha and my mate. But Paavo is supposed to be the ruler of all werewolf kind. Paavo has put him in a bind, I'm guessing. I can't make this harder for him, but I have to know the truth, too.

"I want something to be clear," Jude said, breaking the silence that was brittle like glass. He laced his and Gareth's fingers together. "I'm part of the Cold Moon Pack. Not yours."

"You're not part of the pack yet. You haven't gone through the rituals of joining," Paavo responded evenly.

"Gareth's my *mate*," he snapped back.

"No, he isn't. Not yet," Paavo said after looking at them both carefully as if he could see that the bond was not fully connected.

"It's inevitable that we *will* be mates!" Jude quivered with anger then.

Paavo looked perfectly calm as he shook his head. "That's what most wolves think, but that's not true."

"Yes, it is!" Gareth's voice dropped into a growl.

"All you need to do is be *separated* from one another and, eventually, the almost-bond will fade away." Paavo shrugged.

"I don't believe you," Jude said.

Paavo's blue eyes though seemed to hold no lie. "It's true, Jude."

"I don't care!" Jude found himself snarling back. "I want to be with Gareth!" Gareth's head turned to look at his face and there was something so wild and alive in his eyes. "I'd be crazy not to."

"You're my blood, Jude. You belong with me, in my pack," Paavo responded evenly. "If a mating is to occur with another pack then I have to

be the one that allows it.”

Jude just stared at him like he couldn't quite believe what he was saying.
“You don't care about me.”

“You're my nephew. You're all I have left of Theis.” Paavo stared into the unlit fireplace.

“Theis? That's my dad's name?” Jude swallowed. Learning his father's name knocked him off guard again. The name didn't feel familiar on his tongue. *Because I called him Dad, not Theis.* “What about my mom's? What's her name?”

It was at this moment that Jude felt Grandmother Sophia grow just slightly tense. *This* was what she wanted to know. *This* would reveal something about his mother, he guessed. Maybe Grandmother Sophia had known her or known of her. He wondered if before he'd gotten his werewolf super senses whether he would have caught these subtle signs.

“Eira,” Paavo said and it was like he'd dropped a bomb in the room for Grandmother Sophia.

She went so still that it seemed like she was just a picture. Then she murmured, “It all makes sense now. It *would* have to be her, but could it *truly* be the original Eira? How could it after all these years?”

“Grandmother Sophia?” Tessa asked as she tentatively raised out a hand to touch her. “Are you all right?”

Grandmother Sophia let out a breath. “I am, child, just give me a moment. I *must* think.”

Gareth was frowning, too, as if the name meant something to him as well. “Eira? Isn't that ... isn't that the name of one of the deities witches worship, Grandmother Sophia?”

“Deities? No, she is *not* a goddess. Goodness, no.” Grandmother Sophia put a hand over her eyes for a moment. “She was one of the first of us. The first witches. One of the women who figured out the ways to access magic, formed the first coven, and --”

“Enslaved the werewolves,” Paavo ended with a look of carefully suppressed rage.

“What?” Gareth gasped.

“Now you understand why I wanted my brother to have *nothing* to do with her and why I ... I *feared* the child she’d made with him was something ...” Paavo didn’t finish that sentence but merely shook his head.

Jude’s forehead scrunched. “Witches have been around a *long* time though, right? Like thousands of years?”

“Yes, my Jude,” Grandmother Sophia agreed, bobbing her head thoughtfully.

“So how could the *original* Eira actually be my mom? Do witches live forever?” Jude’s gaze switched from Grandmother Sophia to Gareth to Paavo and back again.

Grandmother Sophia’s nut brown eyes rose up to his and she looked grim, just like she had when she’d told him that witches had *earned* their bad reputation among the other supernatural creatures. “Only if they steal others’ lives to extend theirs.”

“What do you mean?” Jude asked this though he had a terrible suspicion he knew.

“She had to kill people to keep going?” Tessa asked, already getting ahead of him in the acceptance department.

Grandmother Sophia nodded. “And you only get what the person has left in them. So if you kill an old woman ... well, you might only get a year or so extension of life.”

“But if you kill a *child*?” Tessa’s words were soft.

“You get all the years they have remaining to them. It would be the most ... *efficient* way to do it.” Grandmother Sophia stared blindly forward. Then she said, more to herself than to any of them, “Imagine how many lives she’s had to have stolen to have lived so long.”

And Jude realized then that things *could* be worse than he’d imagined from that snippet of memory. Because nowhere in his imaginings had he thought that his mother was a monster. But, evidently, she was.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: BREAK FAST

The discussion was, thankfully, interrupted by the arrival of breakfast.

Jacob and Raj were followed in by half a dozen members of the pack who all carried platters of food. There were piles of pancakes, endless sausage links, miles of crispy bacon, a pyramid of mini quiches, platters of omelets, and baskets of pastries, bagels and fruit. Pitchers of fresh squeezed orange and grapefruit juices were served along with coffee, tea and champagne for mimosas.

Everything was placed on the large hewn table in the guest quarters in front of an arched window. Silverware, plates, glasses, bowls, napkins and anything else they needed to serve themselves were put on the table with equal care. The group then dispersed just as quickly as they'd come, sensing, if not outright knowing, that this was important pack business that shouldn't be interrupted. Raj and Jacob remained behind.

Molly specifically drew out a chair at the end of the table for Gareth to sit down. Jude was positioned to his right and she took the chair to his left.

Paavo took the other head of the table with Castor to his right. Jacob pointedly sat to Paavo's left. As the largest of the wolves in the room, except for Gareth, he was a hulking figure at the table, but Paavo was still a head taller than him. The others filled in the rest of the chairs.

"Jude, please pass me your plate," Paavo said, lifting his hand for it expectantly.

Gareth froze. Was Paavo really going to push this? If he put his hand down on Jude's plate or stopped Jude from responding to a *family* member, let alone the Alpha of Alphas, in any way, he looked like an aggressor. They hadn't had time in schooling Jude on all the intricacies of the food dance with werewolves for Jude to know that to give Paavo his plate was to insult Gareth. He had somehow figured out part of the dance when Raj and Castor were vying to bring up the food, but would he understand Paavo's seemingly polite request to serve him as another power play?

Gareth, typically, was loose about such formalities. He was not insecure in his role as Alpha to require that everything be done according to a strict protocol. He made sure that everyone was fed and then helped himself. They all waited for him to take the first bite before they ate. Jude had naturally adopted that though he had not been told. Now things were all topsy turvy because the *unthinkable* had happened, which was Paavo making a claim for Jude. Now the protocols were *necessary* to stop violence from erupting between him and Paavo.

He needn't have worried though. Jude picked up his plate and handed it to Gareth, with a very sweet, "Would you serve me, Gareth? I like how you cut my pancakes."

Gareth knew he let out a wolfish grin of triumph. "Of course. What would you like other than pancakes?"

"That's enough. I don't know if I'm really that hungry," Jude muttered and, ducked his head, clearly knowing that Gareth would be displeased with that answer.

"Jude," Gareth chastised gently. He *understood* why Jude was off his food, because of what he'd heard about his mother and this attempt by Paavo to take him away. "You've shifted and you've been up most of the night. You *need* to eat."

Jude nodded and didn't object when Gareth loaded his plate up with a little of everything, including a stack of pancakes in the very center. He put liberal butter and syrup on them so Jude would get a taste of both with every bite then proceeded to cut the pancakes into squares. When he eventually handed the plate back to Jude, his mate had the most adorable grin on his face. There was a barely suppressed giggle from Tessa. Raj was grinning like a loon. Jacob let out a chortle. Even Molly was studiously not looking at him as her lips wiggled together as she found back a laugh, too.

"That's perfect, Gareth, thank you," Jude said as he turned his plate this way and that as if to admire the Alpha's handiwork.

“Please, everyone, serve yourselves. Let me know if you need anything,” Gareth told the table.

This was when he allowed himself his first glance at Paavo since he had won the war of serving. The Alpha of Alphas stared at him without blinking. He saw a muscle in Paavo’s jaw *twitch*. But Paavo said nothing. Gareth noticed that Castor served the Alpha of Alphas. He did not get his own food. That was a choice an Alpha made: whether to serve or be served. Gareth had never truly realized that Paavo was far more old-fashioned in that way. In the past, he’d been in awe of the werewolf, believing him the fairest and wisest of wolves before what had happened with Mack. Even then, he had accepted the idea that no one would help the Cold Moon Pack with their troubles no matter that they had been nearly decimated. He’d seen Paavo’s hands as tied. But that wasn’t true. He could have taken action. He’d chosen not to.

I am seeing things much more clearly now.

When everyone had been served, Gareth made the move to take a bite so that everyone else could eat. In his home, even the Alpha of Alphas ate after him. But he heard the distinct scrape of a fork and knife over china. Even though he shouldn’t have been, he was surprised to see *both* Paavo and Castor eating before he has.

“But Gareth hasn’t –” Raj began, but he stopped the words without a bat on the head from Molly. The Indian werewolf was genuinely shocked, but he caught himself from making this rudeness further known.

Gareth took a measured bite of sausage and said in an equally measured tone, “Please, everyone, do eat.”

Everyone did, except for Jude, who was staring at Paavo with outright hostility. He clearly *did* know it was impolite to eat before Gareth.

“Why did you do that, Paavo?” Jude suddenly demanded.

Gareth put a hand on his, about to tell it was all right. He felt that hand *tremble* beneath his and he immediately looked to see if anything was

smoking. Grandmother Sophia met his gaze and he knew that she, too, was worried about that.

“Do what?” Paavo finally responded.

“Eat first. Be an asshole,” Jude said succinctly.

Raj’s eyes bugging out of his head. Someone took in a sharp breath. Gareth wasn’t sure if it hadn’t been him. Gareth himself wondered who had last called Paavo an “asshole” and not been disemboweled for it.

“Jude,” Gareth began, not sure what he was going to say.

“No,” Jude answered without looking at him. “No, Gareth, no. He did it to insult you. He thinks he can just insult you and get away with it! But he’s only *given* respect because of the same laws he just violated!”

Jude actually had a very good point. Gareth said nothing. He would let his mate handle this.

Paavo grinned. “That and the fact that I am able to take on all challengers.”

“Meaning you’re big and bad and all that?” Jude raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, exactly. That allows me to protect not only my pack, but all of us in the werewolf world,” Paavo explained.

“Until someone challenges you and *wins*,” Jude’s voice was low with anger coursing through it.

Gareth drew in his own breath. Did Jude realize that he had won stare down with Paavo earlier?

“Alpha, I know he is your nephew but he speaks too *freely*,” Castor began, casting a scowl at Jude.

“And *you* ate before Gareth, too, Castor! Don’t even *get* me started on what I think of you! You’re not even an Alpha!” Jude snapped and the silverware still on the table jumped a little like skittish kittens. At first, Castor had

bared his teeth at Jude, but when that happened, he withdrew slightly from the table. “Yeah, that’s right. I’m a *witch*. Did Paavo tell you what I did downstairs? Did you hear what Grandmother Sophia said about fire?”

There was a whoosh of heat through the room though no fires erupted that Gareth could see. The silverware though jumped again and began to rattle constantly. Raj put a hand down on top of his to keep it steady. “You might think you’re big and bad, but you’re *not*. Not in comparison to *fire*.”

Gareth did not interrupt his mate. What Jude was doing was actually good. It had to be said, but if he’d said it then he and Paavo would end up on the arena floor fighting. Instead, he laced the fingers of their nearest hands together. Jude held onto him tightly.

“You don’t *eat* until after Gareth eats. You don’t *insult* him in his house. You will be *good* guests or you will *leave*, maybe with your fur on fire,” Jude finished.

Paavo stared at him for a long moment, but then inclined his head and said humbly, “You’re right. That was rude. Gareth, I apologize.”

“Thank you, Paavo. I think we’re all a little ... tense. Please, let us feast together and remember the friendship among the packs,” Gareth smoothly replied.

“That would be most appreciated,” Paavo responded with an equal smoothness.

The silverware stopped rattling. The heat died and the cool air-conditioned air swept through the room once more. Everyone started to eat again, except Jude. He was now looking down at his plate and appeared to be speaking to himself. It was almost too low to hear, but Gareth caught, “Calm down. Calm down. Calm down.”

Gareth ran his thumb over the back of Jude’s hand, soothing him, pumping out feelings of love and comfort over the pack bond. He knew that if the mate bond were fully formed that would have been far better. He could have helped Jude calm himself. But he did all he could and, eventually,

Jude picked up the fork in his free hand and shakily speared some pancake squares. He chewed quietly, looking at no one, not even Gareth. But he didn't release Gareth's hand nor lessen his grip.

Gareth's gaze wandered over the table and landed on Paavo for a moment. The Alpha of Alphas appeared perfectly calm and composed, but Gareth wondered what he was really thinking. His blue eyes were opaque and unreadable. Mack would have told him to be cautious.

Mack. He told me that all the members of the Council were once Rogues who had been cured, leaving them with all the Rogue's benefits of greater strength and speed, but none of the detriments of insanity and the need for human flesh.

Seeing that Jude's mother was the infamous Eira – and that Paavo had known her – he gave those words far more weight now than he had previously. Perhaps they weren't just the ramblings of a deluded mind.

I have to talk to Mack about this. I have to know all he does.

He would do that later this afternoon. He would have to make sure that Mack was *securely* tucked away anyways. The havoc he could create on this already tenuous peace with Paavo was incalculable.

“Do you have any pictures of Jude's mother and father?” It was Tessa who spoke. She was seated, unsurprisingly, next to Molly. Not being a werewolf, and being a powerful attorney in her own right, she was *not* impressed by the Alpha of Alphas.

Paavo nodded. “I do have pictures of Theis. I also have his things. There may be some pictures of Eira, too.”

“I highly doubt that,” Grandmother Sophia objected. When everyone looked at her for explanation, she continued, “She wouldn't want to leave a trace of herself. Even if there *had* been pictures taken, once she accomplished her and Theis' *deaths*, all images of her would have disappeared.”

“Do you really think they’re dead?” Molly asked.

Grandmother Sophia was silent for so long that Gareth wondered if she would answer at all. Finally, she said, “Neither of them could have died in a car accident. Her magic would have saved them.”

“So ...” Tessa’s eyes flickered to Jude who was still slowly eating, eyes on his plate, seeming oblivious to all that was going on around him. “So if they aren’t dead then why ... why did they leave Jude in the foster system? Why didn’t they come and get him?”

“It would be all conjecture, but my assumption is that they thought he would be *safer* away from them,” Grandmother Sophia answered. “Eira wiped his mind thoroughly and, I think, he showed no signs of magic or shifting until now, because she delayed those attributes as well.”

“But why? Wasn’t she making Jude weaker by doing that?” Jacob asked, crunching a piece of bacon between his white teeth.

“Yes, in some ways, but no, in others. They must have thought that they couldn’t keep him safe while they were running so they first asked Paavo to take him. When that didn’t work –”

“It was a mistake. One I plan to rectify.” Paavo threw his long golden head back.

“Regardless, when it was clear that he couldn’t be placed with relatives, they must have decided he’d be safer *anonymous*. Repressing his powers, kept Jude under the radar. Though I recognized him as being a supernatural being, not even I realized the bloodlines he came from,” Grandmother Sophia explained as she fussed with her silverware instead of eating with it. She didn’t look like she had much appetite either. “Not having powers shielded Jude from the interest of other witches and werewolves. Now though ... he is incandescent and I do not think I am seeing the whole of his power yet.”

Bronwyn advised Jude against using his powers. She must know his heritage. Maybe she even knows where Theis and Eira are and what they

were running from. Once he helps Mack and the others he might become more visible to the witches.

Raj let out a whistle. “So where are Eira and Theis now? I mean why isn’t Theis with Paavo?”

“What danger were they running from, Paavo?” Gareth asked, guessing that this would answer Raj’s questions, too. He stroked the back of Jude’s hand more and the young wolf pressed up against his palm. Jude continued to eat and not look at anyone. Gareth guessed Jude was trying to control his nascent powers.

And he is, undoubtedly, exhausted. None of this is as it should be. He should have had a big breakfast then slept in our bed in the sun until the feast at dinner. I have failed him. My first wolf – my mate – and everything is wrong.

“He would not say. It was witch trouble. I did not bother myself with learning the specifics of it,” Paavo’s voice was clipped. He clearly didn’t like to be reminded of his little brother’s meeting with him.

“Have you looked for him?” Raj asked.

“Of course!” Castor snapped, blue eyes crackling. “Theis is the Alpha’s *brother*. He has searched the ends of the Earth for him!”

Raj held up his hands. “I thought they had a falling out from what he said. It wasn’t clear to me he’d realized that Theis was even missing all this time.”

“Yes, I looked. I’ve *scoured*, but there is no trace of him,” Paavo said and, for a moment, it looked like he was chewing ground glass rather than a ham and cheese omelet. “Eira has hidden them well.”

“Unless they were captured by other witches,” Jude said softly. “They could be imprisoned somewhere.”

“To imprison Eira would take all the most powerful witches working together, Jude, and, despite our covens, we don’t play nicely with others,”

Grandmother Sophia assured him dryly. “We’re all too busy trying to gain power for ourselves.”

“So you think that she and Theis are just holed up somewhere?” Tessa asked. Her delicate brows were drawn together as if she couldn’t quite believe that they had been hiding out for over twelve years.

Grandmother Sophia sighed. “I do not know, but that they are somewhere I am sure of that.”

“You said that you had my dad’s things. Can I see them?” Jude asked. Those red-brown eyes flickered up hopefully at Paavo for just a moment.

“Of course, Jude, but they are pack in Europe in the pack house. You will see them when you go there,” Paavo said gently.

Jude though tensed even as rage cascaded through Gareth. That he would speak so easily of taking Jude. It would not happen. Gareth would not allow it to happen.

“I won’t see them then,” Jude said frostily and went back to eating. “Unless you bring them *here*.”

Paavo actually flashed Jude a fond smile as if it were “cute” that Jude was “rebellious” against the inevitable. Gareth’s eyes narrowed.

“Where is Ajax, Paavo? I do not see him here with you,” Gareth asked, suddenly aware that Paavo’s second Beta was not in the guest space.

Unlike in most packs where there was only one Beta, the Alpha of Alphas had two. His pack was also the largest, numbering five hundred, and both Betas had many underlings themselves helping to run the pack.

“He is somewhere. Hunting perhaps. You have a nice little wooded area here.” Paavo gestured vaguely out the windows behind him.

Gareth’s eyes narrowed for a moment. That was said too airily. It was unusual for both Betas not to be in dancing attendance on Paavo. Ajax would only leave Paavo’s side if the Alpha of Alphas told him to.

So he is likely out spying on my people. Maybe he is even looking for Mack. They must know that I have not yet killed him and the other Rogues.

As if reading his mind, Paavo asked, “Since you have returned, I assume that you have dealt with your Rogue problem, yes?”

Gareth almost laughed. Until this moment, he’d nearly forgotten about the issue of Mack and curing the Rogues once Jude literally started setting the place on fire. He hadn’t actually thought of what he was going to say to Paavo. Hiding the fact that Jude might have the power to cure Rogues had been his plan, but knowing that his mother was Eira made that all the more difficult. Paavo might already have guessed – perhaps he even *knew* – what Jude could do better than Jude could himself.

“Three of the four Rogues have been captured,” Gareth finally said.

“*Captured not killed?*” Paavo carefully put his fork and knife down.

“Yes, captured,” Gareth said without explanation. “We will deal with the fourth soon. But I needed to get Jude back here.”

“Ah, yes, when your ranks are so *thinned* a new wolf is important to get into the pack as soon as possible,” Paavo remarked, which had everyone’s hackles rising. It was a dismissal of the Cold Moon Pack. It was also a much greater insult than it usually would have been because Mack had slaughtered half of them. Their own Alpha had *thinned* them. “That was before, of course, you realized who Jude is to me and his place in *my* pack.”

“I’m not going with you, Paavo. I want to be with Gareth. He’s my mate. I’m going to be with him and you can’t stop me,” Jude said, his head still down. He was trembling again, but this time with exhaustion. He’d eaten only half his pancakes and some sausage, but he was clearly too tired to go on.

“That isn’t your decision, little wolf,” Paavo’s voice was surprisingly gentle.

“Of course, it’s mine.” Jude lifted his head, but he trembled some more.
“Because I’ll never go with you. I’ll never be in your pack. I’ll do whatever I have to in order to stay with Gareth.”

“Jude, I think we need to get you to bed,” Gareth said soothingly even as he was fighting rage to snap and tear at Paavo himself.

Big, red-brown eyes turned to him. “Tell him that you won’t let me go either!”

“I won’t. He would have to kill me to take you away,” Gareth said simply and there was a collective hush in the room. Gareth had just made clear that he would challenge Paavo if the Alpha of Alphas tried to take Jude from him.

“I’m yours. Only yours.” Jude buried his face against Gareth’s chest. “I’m so tired.”

“I know. I know.”

Gareth lifted him lightly from his chair and began to carry him from the room. He called over his shoulder to Molly. “Please see to our guests’ comfort, Molly. I must take care of my mate.”

“Of course, Alpha,” she said, standing and putting a hand over her heart. The other pack members did the same. “It shall be as you command.”

And he knew that she meant *more* than just handling things at this uncomfortable breakfast, but that she and the rest of the pack would be behind his challenge of Paavo.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: SURRENDER TO THE WOLF

Jude drifted between sleep and wakefulness. He was dreaming of running through the forest like he had that first time when he'd experienced his vision quest as a wolf. When he'd submitted to Gareth. In the dream, sunlight streamed down through the breaks in the canopy. But he was also aware that the sun was shining down on him in warm waves in the real world, too.

The sun was so welcoming. He dreamed of stopping in a pool of pure sunlight and letting his head fall back, his eyes close, and bathing in the sheer warmth of the day. He turned his head in the real world and felt the sun caress his skin like fingers trailing over his cheek.

In the dream, he was alone. That used to be how he liked it. Being alone was safe. Being alone meant that he didn't have to deal with people.

People, other than Tessa and Grandmother Sophia, who always seemed to want to hurt him. But things were different now. There were other people in his life besides his sister and grandmother. There were all the members of the pack. Raj and Molly and Jacob especially had already become friends.

There were Brandon and Izzy. He'd felt an instant connection with the young teenager and that *never* happened. He knew as he came to know the other members of the Cold Moon Pack that he would care for them, too. As an Alpha's mate should. And that brought him to the one person he never wanted to be without: Gareth. He didn't want to be alone in the forest. He wanted to Gareth with him. His eyelids fluttered open.

He was lying on a bed piled with pillows. The mattress was so plush he felt like he was lying on a cloud. He shifted his legs and realized that he was naked beneath a light as air down comforter covered with a dark red coverlet. Jude blinked sleepily. He had no idea where he was exactly in Fallowmere, but he felt *safe*. So safe. This was a wolf's den, his den. This was home.

He stared up at a ceiling above his head. It was mostly white with maple beams running at even intervals across the ceiling. There were sky lights

where he could see the sky and the trees stretched above them like a blanket of glowing green and blue. He could see windows also stretching up behind the headboard of the bed to the ceiling. They stretched endlessly in either direction. To his left there were sliding doors out onto a balcony. He saw two generous chaise lounges with thick pillows out there with a table between them.

Fallowmere was a combination of comfort, luxury and safety. He already could imagine summers, falls, winters and springs here. He could imagine looking out those huge floor to ceiling windows as the trees changed color, or as snow fell softly down, or as rain streaked the glass. There would be warm fires with books. There would be late nights with popcorn and movies, snuggling on one of the many couches in Fallowmere. He could totally see Raj piling on top of him and Gareth just for fun during those films. And that would be *fine*, just *fine*, because they would be family.

Jude let out a laugh. Him thinking of family? Of safety? Of staying in one place? Of enjoying other people being around him? Touching him?

Maybe that's the type of person I was when I had a mom and dad.

But Jude immediately thrust that thought aside. He didn't want to think of Eira or Theis or Paavo. He remembered the Alpha of Alpha's behavior at breakfast and realized just how much he did *not* want to think of Paavo. He frowned slightly. Where was Paavo? What had happened at the breakfast? He remembered getting so terribly tired and Gareth lifting him up and --

He sat up quickly and put his hands to his sides. His right hand touched fur. He turned his head and saw a huge white wolf stretched out beside him, head on the pillows. It was Gareth. He was in wolf form, lying on his side, legs curled towards his fuzzy tummy, topaz eyes closed and tail slightly twitching as if dreaming something nice. Gareth made a soft wolf wheeze, which had Jude grinning.

Werewolves should not be cute, but damn, Gareth, you're adorable!

Jude glanced around to check out where they were. His nostrils flared and the breath he drew in was full of Gareth's scent. From the quality and saturation of the scent, this was the Alpha's bedroom. The bed was a few steps up from the rest of the space. It was an open floor plan. Gareth's bedroom appeared to take up the whole side of Fallowmere from what he could tell. They were high up. Maybe on the third floor. His werewolf hearing turned on and he could hear the rushing water of the river. They were on the far side of the house from where the party was. He had looked up and seen the balcony when he and Gareth had come up to the house.

There was a matching sized fireplace to the one on the first floor. Deep couches in dark leather strewn with plaid cushions and a coffee table that was a thick slice of cut and polished tree trunk on copper legs sat before the fire. It looked incredibly cozy. Jude could imagine being curled against Gareth, a fire crackling and popping, with snow falling outside. There would be long, slow kisses and Gareth would stroke his hair. They wouldn't need to talk. Just being together would be enough.

Jude had to drag his gaze away from his imaginings to take in the rest of the space. He saw double doors that likely led out into the hall. There were two other sets of doors into interior rooms. One he guessed from the scent of spicy soapy products to be the bathroom and the other to be a closet. Jude imagined himself wrapping one of Gareth's shirts around himself. He imagined that Gareth had some flannel. It would fit with the outdoorsy, woodsy thing he had going on with Fallowmere. He would love to be surrounded by Gareth's scent.

Everything was neat as a pin except for the books. There were books on every table. There were shelves of them in corners and along the walls. There were piles next to all the chairs. They looked well thumbed. They clearly were not there for show. They were there for *reading*.

There's so much I don't know about him. But I feel I know him to his bones. I just need to fill in the details. But we have time for that ... once we mate. Then neither Paavo nor anyone else can part us.

He turned his head back to Gareth and gently ran one hand from the top of Gareth's head to his tail. Gareth let out a contented sigh. Jude didn't pet him again though he wanted to. The reason was that he was pretty sure that the Alpha would wake up. Watching Gareth sleep was a revelation and he wanted a little more of it. Jude twisted so that he was facing Gareth fully and studied him.

Gareth was large as a man, but he was humongous as a wolf. He was as long as Jude was tall. His furry head was larger than Jude's. Seeing it cushioned on a pillow just like Gareth would lay his own head there was causing Jude to bite his lower lip to stop from laughing. Gareth's ears flickered though from the barely suppressed sound. There were long, white hair jutting out of those ears. Jude drew a finger along them and Gareth's ears flickered some more. He let out a soft whine, too, which nearly broke Jude's heart.

So much for being a scary werewolf.

"I'm sorry," Jude whispered. "I don't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep, Gareth."

Gareth let out a sigh and snuggled back down into the pillows. That was when Jude noticed that though his head was on the pillow, Gareth was lying on top of the blanket. Jude rather regretted that. He wanted to feel his bare skin against Gareth's fur. He bit his lower lip. This time though it was *not* to keep in giggles, but a moan of unexpected pleasure as his mind conjured up the sensual slide of Gareth's fur against his nakedness.

Is it totally weird that I'm turned on by this? He asked himself then quickly answered, *Probably. Definitely.* But the urge to have that fur glide over his hip, drag against his cock, press against his belly kept suggesting itself.

Jude took in a shaky breath. Being a werewolf was weird enough surely. Wanting something sexual with Gareth when he was shifted would surely be a road too far. Yet the arousal did not abate. *The question really is whether Gareth will think it's weird or sexy.*

Jude slipped out from under the comforter almost as if acting on auto-pilot.

His long, lean, bare body moved slowly on top of the covers. He laid down again naked where he had been before covered up the he moved over inch by inch over to Gareth's soft, furry form. He bit back a groan as he made contact.

This is insane. I shouldn't do this. I don't know if Gareth will like it. And what will he think of me wanting it?

But Jude felt almost *compelled*. Desire and this *need* to be as close to Gareth as possible raced through him. That tingling almost bond gave a full shiver and it was like a live wire again, jumping and snapping all over the place.

I should stop this. I really should.

Yet he slid one leg over Gareth's body and slipped arm around Gareth's powerful neck. His belly, cock and chest were pressed up against Gareth's belly. Heat built up in his cock and balls. That heat shot up his shaft and deep into his belly. Jude felt his cheeks flame from it. But he gently kissed Gareth's snout. The fur was so desperately silky. His wiry whiskers brushed against Jude's cheek. He felt the tremor of Gareth's lips moving in a contented sigh as he kissed up the snout, over the ears and between the Alpha's closed eyes.

I love you, Jude thought. This was something that he had only really allowed himself to feel towards Tessa and Grandmother Sophia. Maybe his parents before that, but he couldn't really remember them. *And they left me. But Gareth ... Gareth won't leave. What we have between us is eternal.*

He wasn't sure when he would be ready to say those words out loud to Gareth. They felt too volatile. Like they would blow up in his throat. He knew that the Alpha would never hurt him. He was pretty sure that Gareth actually *loved* him already and he likely would say it first while Jude stood there tongue-tied and stupid. But the Alpha would understand. He never would assume something bad in Jude's reactions towards him.

Because he is an Alpha through and through. Confident in himself and others. Especially in the goodness of others.

Jude drew his hands through the Alpha's thick fur. The wolf's body was so solid. He'd seen Gareth fight and run and play. He knew the power in that form.

You're so beautiful. Snow white fur. A black nose. Jude touched that wet black nose. Gareth scrunched it up and Jude grinned. And those eyes. Luminous topaz eyes. Not that I want them open now, because I'll be too shy to do this. To love you in this form.

Even as he said this though, Jude moved his body slowly up and down against Gareth's form. His cock immediately plumped and lengthened. Precum slicked the head of it. He found himself rubbing more frantically against that firm stomach. His fingers tightened in Gareth's fur. Digging into the underlying muscle. The Alpha's eyes came open immediately without any sleepiness. Jude froze.

"So I ... I can explain this. It's not what it looks like." Jude looked down between them. His nakedness and Gareth's furry form. His erect cock pressed against Gareth's belly. His legs and arms wound around the wolf.

"Uhm, okay, maybe it *is* exactly what it looks like. I just ... you were ... I couldn't help myself. I'm sorry. I'll stop."

Jude swore he saw a wolfish grin on Gareth's face. The Alpha leaned forward and gently licked Jude's cheek. He licked Jude's nose. Jude laughed, because it tickled. Gareth drew his slightly rough tongue along Jude's neck and then down lower to the hollow in the base of his throat. Jude gave a surprised gasp then moan. Gareth looked up at Jude out of hooded, golden eyes. Jude's heart pulsed in his throat, exactly where Gareth had licked him. He swallowed. His arousal deepened at this licking. He started to pull away. He needed to put a stop to this. Gareth was just humoring him.

“I’ll just get under the covers so you can shift back --”

Gareth’s one paw curled around his shoulder. He stared into Jude’s eyes.

Love me, Gareth sent to him over the pact bond. *Find release*.

“You want me to *finish* what I -- I started?” Jude gawped, unable to say the words even as his cock pulsed with desire. “You can’t be serious ...”

Gareth’s tail wagged. Another wolfish grin.

Find release, my mate, Gareth urged.

Another flaming blush heated Jude’s cheeks and then ran down his neck to his chest. It had been one thing to do this while the Alpha was asleep, but this time Gareth would know *exactly* what he was doing and why.

“Are you ... are you *sure*?” Jude asked. “Because I can’t believe I started this and --”

Gareth licked a stripe down his bare chest. *Find release. Love you. Love me. Find release.*

Jude took in a deep breath. He could feel the rapid thumping of his heart in his neck. It was like a hummingbird wanting to take flight. His palms perspired as he sifted his fingers through that thick, snowy fur. His Gareth. His mate. His love. Could he do this? It was allowed. It was encouraged. He was safe exploring this new desire. But could he actually do it?

“I just want to let you know I’ve never had this feeling for another wolf before and there won’t be anyone else but you,” Jude assured Gareth.

There was another happy wolf grin. *I love you, Jude.*

The words came across so easily, but with a depth of meaning that was as vast as the primordial forests. Jude shivered. He opened his mouth to say it

back. But nothing came out.

My Jude. Gareth's furry head tilted to the side. Affection was written large in those laughing topaz eyes.

"You don't expect me to say it back," Jude found himself saying out loud. "You know that I'm ... I'm ... I love you, Gareth."

It was like a release. Jude let out a little laugh. He'd said it. Out loud. To this beautiful wolf. To his beloved mate. It should have been said under the moon. It should have been said on one knee. It should have been more romantic. But he could say it again. And again and again. It wasn't a one time thing. He could do it right the next time.

Those topaz eyes widened and he felt a ripple go through Gareth's form. He was going to shift to his human form. But Jude sent a negative over their bond. He didn't want Gareth to shift. Not yet. Gareth gave him a quizzical look, but remained furry.

"I know you want to talk." Jude grinned. There was so much to talk about. But if they did, they'd go from loving one another to talking about Mack and Paavo and the stress would just build up again. And he might burn something. So no, he didn't want to talk. He just wanted them to be together.

I love the sound of your voice, Jude. I love hearing everything you have to say.

"Even when I can't say it?" Jude interjected with a laugh.

I hear even what you don't say. I hear the heart of you, Gareth responded.

"I know ... I know you do." He skritch'd behind Gareth's ears. The Alpha's eyelids lowered appreciatively. "And I feel the same way about your voice though I can hear you so clearly now over the bond. It's like you're speaking with your human form."

The bond, Gareth explained, feelings of pleasure overwhelming him for a moment as Jude stroked his coat. *The bond is getting stronger. It's so close to completing.*

It was. Jude felt it needed to be finished. Mating with Gareth was no longer scary to him, but something he wanted. It would end this insanity with Paavo, not that he would mate with Gareth to avoid his uncle. No, he wanted to be with the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack. He wanted to earn his place here. He wanted to do the mating part right, even if he couldn't say he loved Gareth at the right time.

"We just met and it's like I've been looking for you my entire life," Jude admitted, his voice low and rushed. "Except at the same time I never thought I would ever find anyone like you. Not for me. I was going to be ... alone. That was at least safer, if not ... if not very happy." He gave a weak smile. "But now ... now I'm not alone and I'm really fucking happy."

Another lick and wolf grin. *So why don't you want me to change so we can talk about this?*

"Because I want to do the other thing. You know ... the *beastality* thing." Jude cleared his throat. He was blushing like a fool, but he couldn't help himself. "And I cannot believe I am suggesting beastality, but I'm a werewolf."

Does it count as beastality if I'm also a man? Hmmm, I shall have to consider this. Gareth gave a happy yip that had Jude burying his face into the thick, silky fur around the Alpha's neck. *Jude, I want you to do this. I want you to do what pleases you. I want to please you.*

"I want you, Gareth. I want to feel your wolf form against my human one," Jude admitted. He was still embarrassed and unsure, but he was going to do this.

The Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack opened his front and back legs so that Jude could fully slip between them and Jude's cock was pressed firmly against Gareth's underbelly. His cock's hardness, which had flagged only a little as they spoke, surged back the moment that Jude felt fur against his cock and balls. Jude let out a slight gasp that dropped into a moan. He curled his arms around Gareth's powerful wolf's form.

Take what you need, my mate, Gareth's voice sounded like a rough whisper.

Jude pushed up against Gareth. His balls almost immediately became heavy and tight. When he brushed them against the soft coat, Jude let out little groans. It felt so good. The friction was very different against fur than skin.

Fur. God, I'm with a wolf. I want to cum with a wolf!

It was the thought that he was giving himself over to his arousal with a *wolf*, with Gareth's wolf, that had him dragging his fingernails along the wolf's spine. Precum wetted his cockhead again and he dragged it through the fur, staining Gareth's fur with his seed.

Gareth's front paws were over his shoulders and his top back one was on top of Jude's legs. He tightened them around Jude. His eyelids were hooded, showing only slits of topaz. His tongue bathed Jude's neck and lapped at the hollow of his throat as Jude thrust against him.

Jude had never been aroused so quickly. His hips jerked helpless against the wolf's form, needing something more, but he wasn't sure what. Then Gareth was moving and Jude moaned his dismay. He nosed Jude over onto his back and he stood astride Jude's aroused, panting form. Gareth could do whatever he wanted and Jude felt incapable of resisting.

Gareth was so beautiful. Majestic. His eyes seemed to burn through Jude. His cock waved as his hips continued to shift with Gareth looking at him. The wolf lowered his head and let its rough tongue lick each of Jude's

nipples until they stood up in attention in hard nubs. Those licks seemed to go directly to his cock and more precum gushed out and dribbled down the sides. Gareth licked lower. His belly. His hips. His inner thighs. Avoiding his cock. Jude made some inarticulate cries and found himself thrusting his hips into the air.

He has fangs. Sharp, sharp teeth. That's why he's not risking it.

But Jude found out he was wrong. Gareth lowered his head once more and that strong, tensile tongue snaked out and licked the very top of Jude's cock like it was an ice cream cone. Jude's body arched up as if attached to a live wire.

That tongue came down and lapped again. And again. Each time, Jude arched. His whole body was tingling. The wolf's tongue found his balls and licked them thoroughly until Jude was beating a tattoo against the bed with his heels. His hands reached up and fisted in the powerful shoulders of the wolf. Gareth's tongue bathed the entirety of Jude cock.

Jude couldn't hold back any longer. His balls were hot and tight to his body. His cock was like a jutting piece of steel. He needed release or he might explode. Gareth's hooded topaz eyes seemed to reflect this knowledge. He gave Jude's cockhead one last very, firm lick. There was this impossible zing of pleasure that streaked down from the tip of his cock to deep inside Jude's body. He arched for the last time.

Cum streamed out of him in three overwhelming waves. He felt his semen paint his belly and chest. A drop hit his chin. It was as if his body was trying to empty itself of every last bit of semen it could. He finally sank down, boneless, exhausted, still tingling with the aftershocks. And then Gareth began to clean him.

That tongue lapped up every bit of cum. Wherever that tongue went, pleasure coursed through Jude's body. He was trembling, shaking, begging Gareth to stop as the last drop was cleaned up. His body almost *hurt* from the pleasure.

The white wolf, Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack, curled beside him. One paw very definitely placed on the center of Jude's chest. Jude realized then as he stroked that paw with shaky hands that he had submitted to Gareth in this act without thought. There was no shame in it. No fear. He was utterly safe. He turned his head so that his face was buried in Gareth's fur. Gareth laid his head over Jude's protectively.

Rest, my Jude, my mate, I will keep watch. I will keep you safe.

Jude let sleep take him for the third time that day. But this time it wasn't out of that aching tiredness from shifting or magic use or stress. This time it was natural sleep. And he fell into dreams of running through the forest again, but this time with Gareth by his side.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE: TRUE PACK

Gareth and Jude ran through Fallowmere's woods, but not in the wolf forms, but their human ones. Jude gave Gareth a wide grin as he sped ahead of the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack. With amazing agility, Jude leaped over a fallen tree without breaking stride, landing lightly on the other side and continuing on at twice the pace.

Gareth dogged his mate's footsteps, head down, arms tight to his body as he pumped his arms and legs, until he was within touching distance of Jude's back. His mate looked over his shoulder at him and surprise had those red-brown eyes widening. That momentary glance over his shoulder had Jude missing a branch half obscured by last years dead leaves. Jude let out a sharp cry as his foot caught the submerged branch. He would have landed flat on his face, but Gareth grasped him by the waist and lifted him out of harm's way without breaking stride.

Gareth took pleasure in carrying Jude for several dozen feet while Jude caught his breath and realized that the Alpha was continuing to carry him after the danger was long past before he objected.

"Hey! We're racing here!" Jude gasped out.

Gareth grinned rather wolfishly. "I know and I think I won."

He tipped his head towards the entrance to the silver cells that rose up ahead of them. Jude struggled in his grip.

"Come on! Let me down so I can win!" Jude protested, his voice filled with laughter, but it was slightly forced now.

The silver cells were always a gloomy place even without any prisoners. Now they had Mack, Pierce and Clara waiting down below. Children and their former Alpha. That was something to be depressed about. But Gareth forced warmth into his voice and reluctantly released Jude. His mate race

ahead. Gareth loped behind him, rejoicing in his mate's long, healthy strides and beautiful body.

"You let me win!" Jude protested when they passed through the trees that marked the boundary of the silver cells' area.

"I didn't --"

"You weren't even trying at the end!" Jude pouted.

"Perhaps I just enjoy seeing your backside." Gareth gave Jude a pat.

"Don't you think I like looking at *yours*?" Jude burst into laughter.

"We shall just have to take turns winning then."

Gareth busied Jude's temple. Jude melted against him and they stood, leaning into one another for long moments. Gareth could feel the almost-bond throbbing happily. It was no longer so frantic after their lovemaking in Fallowmere. It had surprised Gareth - though very pleasantly - that Jude had been willing to experiment with wolf and human sex so soon. He had assumed Jude would be too weirded out by the concept or simply too unsure of what Gareth might think of his inclination to actually suggest such a thing. But Jude kept surprising him.

"We should get in," Jude said, breaking the silence and moving towards the heavy door.

Gareth gently grasped Jude's right wrist, causing the young man to stop and look back at him quizzically. "Are you sure?"

"About what?" Jude asked. "I mean there are so many things I could be unsure of. Which one are you worried about?"

Gareth flashed a smile that quickly died. "You've had quite the day, Jude. No one would blame you - and I would even *suggest* it - that you rest for

today and --”

“I can’t be settled knowing that the Rogues are locked up and ... in pain.” Jude crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s hard to have a good time knowing that. Not to mention with Paavo in the pack house ...”

Jude let that sentence hang. Gareth was in full agreement. It felt like there were so many loose ends out there that it was hard to concentrate on just welcoming Jude into the pack. Not to mention the issue of completing their bond.

Neither he nor Jude had mentioned completing the bond since finding out Paavo’s intention to claim Jude as a member of his pack. The logical way to nip that in the bud was for them to complete their mate bond right away.

Jude’s determination to stay with him and their earlier lovemaking indicated that Jude did want to stay with him. But did he want to mate right away?

And must everything be rushed? Must everything he encounters in this new life be in reaction to something else? Some threat? No, I don’t want that for our mate bond. I want him to choose it when he is ready.

“Have you had any thoughts about how to cure the Rogues?” Gareth asked, and he wondered if he were delaying them from going inside simply to stay away from Mack. His blood still buzzed with desire and contentment with Jude. He didn’t want to ruin that by seeing his former Alpha.

Jude shook his head. “I just want to look at them. Study them, you know? Maybe by doing that I’ll see something. I haven’t exactly had the chance to really check them out.”

“Yes, they were more interested in killing us before than standing still,” Gareth admitted.

“Do you not want to see Mack? I thought you wanted to go down there. That’s what gave me the idea of checking them out myself. But if you’d

rather go back to the house, I'm good with that." Jude took a step towards him and back towards Fallowmere.

"No, we should be here. I need to talk to Haggerty to see if Ajax was sniffing around earlier," Gareth said with a sigh. He'd seen no evidence of the second Beta for the Alpha of Alphas on their way here. Though they had been racing, his senses had been alert for a wrong scent. But it was windy today and Ajax would have been very careful coming to the silver cells.

The two of them went to the hefty door and unlocked it with a large key. He swung it wide and the stone stairway leading down into the depths of the earth was directly before them. Both of them looked down to the bottom, which was well lit with fluorescent lights. It was hardly a black pit or anything like it had been when it had first been created. Jude spanned one of his hands over the six-inch thick door and shook his head.

"You guys built this place to last."

"You have a taste of how powerful werewolves can be. We've gone up against Mack and the others, but ... that first night when Mack came after the pack ... I don't think this door would have stopped him." Gareth's shoulders bunched.

"We almost lost control of Pierce so I can only imagine how Mack must have been." Jude put a hand on his shoulder and massaged it until most of the tension bled away. "Another reason to be here now instead of back at the pack house."

"Yes, it is. If you can save them, Jude ..."

"I'm going to try. The thing is ..." Jude bit his lower lip. "My mother *must* have known how. And she's still alive. Somewhere. If she could just tell me how to do it ..." Jude shook his head again but this time as if to clear.

"Well, she hasn't shown up so far. Unlikely she'd do so now."

“Grandmother Sophia and Bronwyn, too, seemed to indicate that the more you start using your powers the more *visible* you’ll be to other magic users. Maybe your mother is waiting for this,” Gareth replied carefully.

Jude gave him a rueful smile. “So she can what? Protect me now? When I *least* need it? No, I don’t think she’ll return based on something happening to *me*. She likely has reasons of her own for staying away and for returning.”

Gareth stayed silent. He couldn’t say if Eira had loved her son. She’d left him. Maybe it was for the best of reasons. Maybe she had no chance to do something more than simply leaving him, with no memories and repressed magic, for the state to take care of. He wondered though if Jude wanted to see his mother *just* for the knowledge. But he saw no longing in Jude’s eyes for a parent. That part of Jude’s life where he had a mother and father had been cut off from him by his mother’s own magic. And the rest of his childhood - other than his time with Grandmother Sophia - had been marked by predators. His seeming lack of interest in her and Theis was likely *real*.

Gareth’s own parents had died long ago. His mother and father had both been rugged, cold individuals. The challenge of taming the land and grinding poverty had destroyed whatever dreams they’d had for themselves and for him. Nearly dying on that battlefield had saved him from a life that would have been short and brutal. Mack had given him the immortality that had allowed him to meet Jude.

“You okay?” Jude touched his cheek.

“Yes, I was just thinking how lucky I am to be alive to have met you now. My normal lifespan would have meant that I wouldn’t even have been alive when you were born,” he answered, lying about how his thoughts had swung in that directly.

Jude gave him a lopsided smile and tilted his head with affection. “Makes it seem more like fate when you put it that way.”

An overwhelming desire to *start* his life with Jude flowed over Gareth. He imagined lazy summer days by the river, dipping their feet in the icy rush of water and then diving into it, naked and gasping. Or lazing about on the balconies with tall glasses of crisp lemonade or perspiring beers. Or cookouts where after eating their fill of steak and corn on the cob they would end with gooey roasted marshmallows. He imagined licking liquid marshmallow off of Jude's lips. He imagined racing Jude through the woods in the fall as the leaves turned crimson and gold. He imagined them going to the nearby orchards to pick apples for pies and to make cider. He imagined in the winter having snowball fights then going inside to cuddle by roaring fires.

It was a wild desire, which would require him to kick Paavo out of Fallowmere and end the lives of three people who might or might not be able to be saved, but who had already earned death. But he knew that this second act would taint forever their relationship. So they had to go down the stairs and face the Rogues. They had to deal with Paavo and find some political way to make him leave. Sometimes Gareth wished he were a different kind of Alpha that simply did not care about making peace and friends, but wanted to rule by his teeth and claws. But if he were that type of Alpha, Jude would not be with him.

Gareth gestured for Jude to step inside the door. Jude slipped past him, leaving a lingering scent of citrus and warmth for him to follow. Gareth shut and locked the door after them. Jude was already a few steps down from him, but waiting to go any further until Gareth was by his side.

Gareth joined him and the two of them walked hand in hand down the stone steps.

At the bottom, there was another large door. This one was solid steel with a very small window with wired glass to look through. There was an electronic keylock. Gareth punched in the ten digit code. There was a buzz as the lock disengaged and the two of them walked inside.

The silver cells was a simple long corridor with cells on either side of a central hallway that went back about fifty feet. Haggerty was leaning against the far wall. He pushed off and walked towards them. Mack was in a cell midway down the hallway. Clara and Pierce were on the opposite side so that they could see him, with a cell between them. Nina had clearly felt that even Rogues needed to see their Alpha even if they couldn't be right next to him nor to each other. She'd been right.

Mack was seated, cross legged, in the center of his cell that contained a bunk, a toilet and a sink. His eyes were closed and his hands rested, palms up, on his knees. He looked to be meditating. Clara was perched on her bed, her gaze swinging between Mack and Pierce. She looked terribly small and young. Gareth hoped that Bronwyn could keep her parents from going crazy looking for her during her absence. Pierce was curled in the corner of his bunk. He was biting his lower lip and watching Mack between his bangs. Gareth realized he had *no idea* about Pierce's family. He hadn't been local to where they found him. Mack had picked him up elsewhere.

Maybe Mack killed his parents just like was going to kill the deputy.

Gareth's jaw tensed. This was so wrong. Mack had done unforgivable things. That they were so out of character for the man he'd known made him think - or hope - that this was the disease that was causing Mack to act in these ways. But what happened when Mack came back - *if* he came back - and remembered all he'd done? The Mack he'd known wouldn't be able to forgive himself for it all. Maybe only Pierce and Clara could truly be saved in the end.

Clara and Pierce both looked over at Jude and Gareth for a moment, Clara longer than Pierce, before they both turned back to their Alpha. Mack's eyes remained closed. There hadn't been this many prisoners in the silver cells in the entire time that Gareth had been with the Cold Moon Pack. It was strange and unnerving.

"Alpha, Jude, good to see you," Haggerty said, his voice characteristically low with a pleasant drawl. He'd been alive when the first gold rush had

struck the country and still had that western mystique to him. He stood in faded jeans, well broken-in cowboy boots, a tank top with a red and white checked button down shirt over it. Both shirts were tucked into his jeans and closed up with a large belt buckle he'd won in a competition.

"You, too, Haggerty." Gareth's eyes swept over the Rogues again. "How have things been?"

"Quiet, which normally suits me just fine," Haggerty answered. That "normally" indicated that he didn't like the quiet this time. Maybe he thought that things were too quiet.

Gareth nodded. "Any concerns?"

Haggerty stilled a little, meaning he had some, but wasn't sure he should say them to Gareth or within hearing distance of the Rogues. "None that can't wait," he finally answered.

"Any visitors outside?" Gareth asked.

"Not a one." Haggerty tilted his head towards Mack. "Any idea how long we will be having these *guests*?"

Haggerty thought that he was going to kill them. Probably wondered why Gareth had brought them *back* to Fallowmere and simply hadn't killed them in Forest Glenn in the first place. Maybe Haggerty worried that Gareth's love for Mack was causing him to be soft. Haggerty was too old when he'd been turned to have seen Mack as a father-figure. In some ways, Haggerty could have been Mack's father. But the old miner had spent most of his life alone before the first shift and finding a pack. That had left him quiet, thoughtful, and more of a loner. But he was loyal. Terribly loyal. Mack had betrayed them and Gareth knew that Haggerty would have no qualms about killing all three of the Rogues if Gareth asked. If Jude hadn't been there, Haggerty thought he might have offered.

“He wants to kill us,” Clara spoke up. “He didn’t say so, but I can tell.”

Haggerty slowly turned to regard her out of narrowed eyes, but he said nothing. Which meant that she was telling the truth.

“No one will harm you unless you try to escape or hurt someone else ... or I order it,” Gareth added the last, not reluctantly, but to make it clear that this was another one of the ways they could die.

Clara’s lips pressed into a tight line. She drew her knees against her chest and rested her chin on top of them. She went back to regarding only Mack. Neither Pierce nor Mack reacted to her words. Pierce didn’t even look over at them and Mack remained in a pose of utter peacefulness.

“Haggerty, why don’t you wait outside for a bit. Get some fresh air. Jude and I want to talk to Mack and the others,” Gareth suggested. He didn’t want to explain Jude’s potential ability of curing Rogues yet. That would come, but not while Paavo was here.

Haggerty gave a nod, but said, “I’ll be listening if you need anything.”

The old miner slowly swaggered down the hallway and out of the metal door leaving him and Jude with the Rogues. Jude hadn’t said anything during all of this. Instead, Jude was staring at Pierce with a frown on his face.

“What’s wrong?” Gareth asked.

“Pierce is slipping again,” Jude answered.

“I’m not. I’m fine,” Pierce responded though he did not look at them.

Jude turned to face Gareth. “He needs to be *with* Mack. I’d prefer the three of them together in a cell, though Clara is doing far better than Pierce is.”

“That would make things a mite cozy in here, Jude,” Mack finally spoke up and his eyes opened. He smoothly got to his feet and turned towards them.

“Unless you intend to let us come up to the big house. We’d be fine with that.”

“Don’t speak of Fallowmere, Mack,” Gareth responded coldly. The very idea of Mack coming to the pack house had Gareth wanting to shift into his wolf form and commit some violence against his former Alpha.

Mack held up his hands. “All right. Just making a suggestion.”

Jude walked over to Mack and stood just outside his cell. Gareth followed closely after. The bars were set close enough together that getting an arm through them was difficult. The prisoner would be burned by the silver in the bars, too, if they did so, but a Rogue often ignored pain to get to their intended victim.

“You’re fucking up, Mack,” Jude said simply.

Mack’s eyes widened. “Such a *fresh* mouth. You shouldn’t talk to an Alpha --”

“He can talk to you however he wants,” Gareth growled out. “As to the title “Alpha” you lost that.”

“They’re my pack.” Mack gestured to the two others. There was a touch of defensiveness in his tone. Gareth had hit a nerve. Maybe it was being back on Cold Moon Pack territory, which was causing him to remember what he’d betrayed and lost

“You’re not acting like it,” Jude was the one that answered.

“You’re suddenly an expert on this?” Mack arched an eyebrow.

“I can see the pack bonds between all three of you,” Jude responded without heat. “I can see how frayed they are and what they could be if you

strengthened them. Mack, you've got to treat Pierce like pack. *True pack.*"

"Alpha is treating me like true pack!" Pierce cried, but his voice sounded more desperate than angry.

Mack practically leaned against the bars and there was the faintest smell of burning fur. "How do you think I should do that exactly, Jude? You seem to have ideas."

Gareth was interested in seeing what Jude thought was proper Alpha behavior. Jude himself turned a lot of things about pack life on their head. Jude met Mack's gaze evenly. It wasn't a challenging stare, but it was one that looked deep into the soul. Mack's eyes flickered away.

"You had sex with him, didn't you?" Jude asked quietly.

Gareth heard a hiss from Pierce's cell. The young Rogue was up at the bars now, too. Clara made a disgusted sound. She was at that age where sex talk of any sort was gross.

"What if I did? It was for pleasure. It was nothing more." Mack shrugged casually, but there was something in that movement that wasn't casual at all.

Mack knows better than to think taking a young wolf to bed - a wolf as sensitive as Pierce is - means nothing.

"It clearly meant something more to Pierce." Jude tilted his head towards Pierce's cell.

"You don't know anything! Stop talking about things you know nothing about!" Pierce snarled.

"I can see a -- a red string between you," Jude said, his forehead furrowing with concentration as he tried to find the words to describe what he was

seeing. “And I *know* that’s love. Romantic love. It’s the thing that’s most strongly keeping Pierce together right now. The Alpha bond is weaker.”

“So you would have me *fuck* the boy in this cell to keep him sane?” Mack gave out a disbelieving laugh.

“There’s more ways to show love than *fucking*, Mack. Or have you forgotten tenderness?” Gareth interjected quietly and Mack flinched. “I can tell that Jude’s right that you took Pierce to bed. You *knew* that was a bad idea if you didn’t intend to pursue a relationship with him.”

“I’m fine! It was casual. It was -- was --”

“Whatever your Alpha says it was?” Gareth glanced back at the young, beautiful man with pity. “No, Pierce, it was far more than that. Both of you know it. Mack might want to deny it, but it doesn’t make it so.”

“I’m strong, Alpha! I can do this on my own until he heals us.” Pierce stood up tall and proud, which made it all the more painful.

“Mack, you have to fix this. You have to fully accept him.” Jude’s forehead furrowed.

“He’s not my *mate*! He’s just ... just ...” Mack’s voice fell away.

“He doesn’t have to be for you to care for him,” Gareth was the one to speak. “Or to have a relationship with him. You and I had something.”

Mack gave Gareth a surprised looked. “You’re comparing the two of you?”

“Pierce is a different type of wolf than me, but that doesn’t make him *lesser*. Not in *my* eyes, it doesn’t. And the old Mack would have thought the same thing,” Gareth reminded him.

“I’m *not* the old Mack,” Mack reminded them.

“The only way the cure is going to work is if you remember who you once were and embrace that,” Jude said. His forehead was smooth now, not furrowed. He seemed to have far more confidence as if something had just made sense to him about Rogueness. “You’ve brought yourself back somewhat towards what you were. But you’re going to have to go the rest of the way. Taking care of pack members is crucial to it.”

“That’s ridiculous. I don’t believe you,” Mack retorted, arms crossed tightly over his chest.

“You already *want* to help Pierce. I feel it coming off of you. Why won’t you *act* on it?” Jude asked. “You did back in Forest Glenn. You need to do it *now*.”

Mack’s mouth remained shut. He said nothing. He just radiated anger.

At that moment, Gareth heard the coming of three wolves through the forest up above and Haggerty’s soft, “Paavo, Ajax and Castor are approaching, Alpha. What do you want me to do?”

“Stay down here, Jude. I need to address something up above,” Gareth said, knowing Haggerty would hear him.

“Paavo is here,” Mack spat. His eyes were glittering with hatred and a bit of wild fear. He actually touched the bars for a moment before jerking his hands back. His palms were smoking. “He will kill us, Gareth. If he gets down here, he will kill me and my pack.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR: ROGUE INTERESTS

Jude went to the bottom of the stairs and waited there as Gareth took the flight up, two steps at a time, to meet the Alpha of Alphas and his Betas just outside the outer door. Jude stretched his hands across the small landing, placing his palms against the cool, stone walls. He had to hold onto something to *not* go after Gareth. He didn't want Gareth alone with Paavo and his thugs. Not that the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack couldn't handle the three of them, and he did have Haggerty up there as backup, too, but Jude just didn't trust Paavo to play fair.

The door at the top of the stairs opened and blinding sunlight streamed down for a moment. Then just as it was about to shut, Jude heard Gareth say, "Paavo, what brings you here?"

The door thudded closed and all the voices were cut off. There was a clunk as the lock engaged. A quiver went through Jude. Being locked in was never something he felt good about. Too much like the group homes where everything was locked, including the refrigerator. He purposefully drew in deep and calming breaths.

He stood there a moment longer, staring up at the closed door, before he spun around and went back into the cell block. All the Rogues were standing up, staring at him. He shut the door behind him and locked that one, too, trying not to let the atavistic unease override his mind. Would two doors and Gareth be enough to keep Paavo out?

"If they get down here, they will kill us," Mack repeated. He looked alert. His eyes were wide. His nostrils were flared. His hands spasmodically clenched and unclenched at his sides. Jude immediately worried about how Mack's emotional state was translating to Clara and Pierce. A glance at both of them did not ease Jude's mind. Clara had a hand clutching the front of her dress. Pierce was practically trembling. "You need to let us out if they get past the first door. We have to be able to defend ourselves."

"Gareth will handle it," Jude answered, making his voice calm and certain.

To make it seem like he was even *less* concerned about Paavo and lower the anxiety in the room, he grabbed a metal folding chair that was down at the end of the hallway and brought it over so that he could watch all of them. He'd told Gareth he wanted to study them, to see if anything stuck out at him, something that would help him heal them. Now he had his chance. He took in more calming breaths.

Everything is fine. Gareth will handle it. Everything is fine.

"Why does everybody want to kill us?" Clara asked, tugging on a lock of hair.

Jude gave her a hard stare, shocked that she didn't know why. Surely, she did! He remembered that slyness about her outside the sheriff's station.

But was that the Rogue in her and this the *real* her? Was the person split like that when they went Rogue? Some many things he didn't know. It was almost *dizzying* at how much he had to learn from pack politics to magic to this.

He decided to answer her plainly, "Because you kill humans and eat them."

She frowned. "But all werewolves do that!"

Jude turned that hard stare on Mack. "Let me guess, Mack here told you that? You want to tell her the truth now, Mack?"

Mack's mouth flashed a sneer for a moment. "The *truth* is that the strongest werewolves eat human flesh and then are cured of the cursed part of doing so."

"Gareth is stronger than you and he's *never* eaten a human being," Jude said tightly.

"Gareth's extraordinary. He's always been so. Imagine what he would be like if he went Rogue and you cured him. He could take out Paavo without

a second thought,” Mack pointed out. “You’d be safe.”

“I’m safe now,” Jude answered evenly. But the truth was that life had shown him time and time again that there really wasn’t anyplace truly safe. You had to fight for your safety no matter what. And the more you had the more you had to lose.

There was a dull thunk from the door up above and Jude’s shoulders tensed. Mack let out a nasty low laugh.

“I can see you feel real safe there, Jude,” Mack sneered.

“I’m as safe as I can be,” Jude amended with a shrug. The dull thunk was not repeated. He had imagined for a moment that it was Gareth being slammed against the door above by Paavo.

Gareth is fine. Everything is fine. You’re not locked in here with no place else to go. Even if they were to get down here, you could burn them and escape. Everything’s a-okay.

Jude reached out over their pack bond and sensed that though things were tense, Gareth was indeed handling things. He felt the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack reach back to him and caress him. Tension bled out of Jude and he stretched out his legs and his arms.

Gareth really is fine. Everything is fine.

“You’ve already got a powerful bond with Gareth and you two have yet to mate officially.”

Mack’s head was cocked to the side and he was looking at Jude with a critical eye. He’d sensed what had happened. He’d known the moment that Gareth and Jude had touched over the pack bonds. Were there any pack bonds left between Gareth and Mack? Was that how he knew what happened? Or was Jude just really damned obvious about how Gareth made calm and secure?

“That seems strange to you?” Jude regretted the moment he asked it. He didn’t care what *Mack* thought was strange.

“Just *unusual*, but you’re unusual all around as is Gareth so I shouldn’t be surprised,” Mack answered with something less than his normal acid. “I’m glad we decided to look into you ... for obvious reasons other than you being interesting.” Mack flashed him a sharp smile.

“What were you doing in Forest Glenn in the first place?” Jude asked.

Mack looked like he was going to clam up, but then he answered, “We were looking for a cure.”

“How did you know that would be in Forest Glenn? It’s not exactly a hip happening place.” *Though it did have two witches there*, Jude amended to himself silently thinking of Grandmother Sophia and Bronwyn. And then there was, of course, *him*, too, and Tessa. But he’d gone to Forest Glenn almost on a whim and Tessa had only come after he’d nearly been arrested for murder. The Rogues had been there long before they’d arrived.

“Our *fourth* member believed we would find something of interest there and we did. He’s often right about things like that,” Mack told him.

So the Fourth Rogue is a man. That’s new information.

“Who is the Fourth Rogue?” Jude asked. They’d asked this before without any success but he thought there was no harm in asking again.

“He doesn’t want to partake of your help so who am I to out him to you?” Mack crossed his arms over his chest though he was smiling as if not offended or worried by the question.

“I don’t understand though. You said that you were looking for a cure in Forest Glenn. He was looking, too. You found it in me. Why wouldn’t he want to come?” Jude narrowed his eyes.

This Fourth Rogue could be anyone. It wasn't likely someone that Jude knew. Yet he felt a nagging sense that he should be wary of this man and it wasn't just because the Fourth Rogue had attacked him either. Or maybe not *only* that. The attack had triggered Jude's first shift and caused his magic to manifest. Could the Fourth Rogue have *known* that would happen if he bit Jude? It was common knowledge that a bite would trigger the shift, but what about the magic?

"Maybe he didn't think he would like the accommodations." Mack gestured towards the silver bars.

"He got into the house at Forest Glenn. He was going to hurt Grandmother Sophia. Why?" Jude asked.

"Doesn't like witches," Mack answered with a sharp grin. But that grin faded as there was another dull thump from up above.

Clara made a low sound of distress in the back of her throat, rather like a whine. Pierce was standing very still and silent. His eyes were unblinking as he stared at the door to the cells. Jude didn't like that stillness.

"Mack, you need to calm your pack. Ease their fears. Calm them," Jude ordered.

"There's something to be afraid about, Jude. I can't make that disappear," Mack growled.

"You can make them feel better. I know that. Gareth does it for me all the time. You noticed that earlier," Jude snapped.

Jude expected Mack to object again or just simply not do it. He knew when Gareth reached out to him over the pack bonds that this *strengthened* the ties between them. It affirmed that Gareth was the leader and would take care of them all. Mack was trying *not* to have that connection with Pierce and Clara. Yet he *did* do it. Jude *felt* it and the lines that he saw between the

three of them changed *color* when he did so, becoming silver like starlight, cleaner somehow. Both Pierce and Clara calmed immediately, their shoulders slumping, the tension leaving them like water off of a duck's back.

That was not all Jude saw. He realized that there was a tangled black and red *bloody* color within each of the Rogues. It was like a cancerous ball with them. In Mack it was large, but caged off with the silver threads from the rest of him. In Clara, it was still small, but he could see that it was pulsing with strength and was growing. In Pierce ... nearly the whole of the young wolf was red.

That's the curse or whatever it is.

In Mack and Clara it felt like he might be able to simply *pull* it out of them. Cut the strings that were adhering it to their souls. But he had no idea what that would do. Maybe it would free them. Maybe it would kill them. Maybe that was the magic of the werewolf inside of them. He didn't know. He didn't know anything. Instinct would not be enough.

I need my mother, Jude thought and it wasn't with any longing for a mother, but for a *teacher*. Curing Rogues was something that couldn't be easy or every witch would be doing it to have his or her own personal protector. He couldn't just play with their lives.

But Pierce doesn't have a lot of time left, I don't think. I've got to figure something out soon or it will be too late for him.

Jude felt a strange sort of kinship with Pierce. Maybe it was that desperate love that he had for Mack. It hinted at a past that likely hadn't been filled with love and good times. He clung to Mack for safety and security, meaning he'd had none of that in the past. Jude didn't want his life to end that way, too.

"The Fourth Rogue isn't part of your pack, is he?" Jude asked.

Mack shook his head. “No, he was already a Rogue when I met him. Been one longer than me.”

“Why won’t you tell me his name *really*?” Jude asked. “People must know he’s gone Rogue. His pack is surely missing him. I’m sure we can figure it out anyways.”

“You seem as interested in him as he is in you,” Mack answered.

“He’s interested in me?” Jude’s eyes narrowed.

“Very much so. He pretended not to be, but I could tell. I could *smell* it on him.” Mack touched his nose.

“Smell *what* on him?” Jude’s voice went sharp. He imagined that Mack had smelled arousal or something like that on the Fourth Rogue. He’d been the subject of interest of plenty of would-be rapists and crazy people in his life. What was one more? But somehow this one bothered him. This life as a wolf was going to be *different* than his old life. Maybe he did believe he was safe with Gareth, safe in a bubble.

But Mack’s explanation defused his fears while adding more questions, “Not like that. I can see from the way your hackles are rising that you’ve had *enough* of that kind of attention.”

Jude bristled more though he tried to hide it. All his life it had seemed like certain men believed he was a *victim* in waiting and that wasn’t true. He stuck his chin out, feeling foolish as he did so. “He better *not* be interested in me that way.”

“Gareth wouldn’t like it.” Mack nodded.

“I wouldn’t like it,” Jude found himself growling, but he quickly drew in his anger. The only things in this place that could catch fire were the Rogues. He had to keep a hold of his temper.

Mack held his hands up as if in surrender and made a noise of amusement. "Pup has claws, I see."

"You saw it the other night in Forest Glenn," Jude reminded him, a rather sharp smile on his face now.

"I wasn't *trying* to kill you or Gareth that night," Mack retorted almost jovially, but there was a darkness in his blue eyes.

"Sure you weren't." Jude shook his head. "Look, why do you think this Fourth Rogue was interested in me and *not* sexually?"

"When he saw you that first time it was like someone had shot him in the heart with silver," it was Pierce who answered. He was looking at Mack, but then he slowly turned his head to look directly at Jude. "He never showed emotion before. He's cold. So cold."

"That's how he's stayed alive so long," Mack said with a thoughtful nod. "He keeps his emotions in check. Doesn't let himself be moved by them. Kills only for the meat. Doesn't let the pleasure of it overwhelm him."

Pleasure? Pleasure to kill people and eat them? Jude's stomach roiled at the thought.

He imagined a frightened man running through the woods. Sweat streaming down his face. Cheeks cut by brambles. Glancing over his shoulder at something coming after him. *Loping* after him. A cold chill ran through Jude. He didn't understand these Rogues. He couldn't imagine turning into someone like that. But he was sure that since Gareth had loved Mack that the man couldn't have been this way before.

"Is there anything he said or did that indicated *why* he felt whatever he felt about me?" More unease was crawling up Jude's spine. Why would this unknown Rogue have such an interest in him?

“I place quite a bit of value on loyalty. I won’t expose his secrets,” Mack answered coolly.

Jude’s hands fisted in his lap. Anger at the hypocrisy flooded him. “*You?* You put a lot of value on *loyalty*? After what you did to your own pack? How can you even say that?”

Mack stared back at him impassively with an unreadable expression on his face.

Jude continued, “Why did you attack your own pack? It wasn’t like you *had* to in order to avenge Eliza’s death. They were your *friends*. Your *family*. Why would you do what you did?”

“Sometimes you feel *funny*,” again, it wasn’t Mack to speak, but this time Clara. She was looking thoughtful, picking at the edge of her dress. “There were times when I wanted to hurt daddy, but it *wasn’t* me. And I would feel really bad about it later, but -- but I couldn’t stop feeling it sometimes. I would go into the woods then and stay away until the feeling passed.”

Jude studied Mack’s face. “Was it an accident?” Was there a twitch of a muscle in his jaw? “Did you come back, thinking you were okay, but then you weren’t?” Definite twitch then. He hadn’t meant to hurt them. That changed *everything*. “Did you know what you were doing when you --”

“Enough,” Mack’s voice was low and dangerous.

“If you never meant to hurt them, Mack ... don’t you realize what this would mean to Gareth and the others?”

“I did hurt them. I will hurt them again. That is unless you *cure* me. What are you doing about that, Jude? I can’t imagine that sitting on that pretty ass of yours down here is accomplishing much other than pissing people off.” Mack’s jaw was working.

Jude thought about telling Mack that he was observing them *magically* or whatever it was he was doing. He'd seen things that were interesting and, if he had any real knowledge, likely would have been meant something to him. But they didn't. He was just grasping at things in the dark. He opened his mouth to say *something*, maybe not exactly that, when there was a much larger *bang* on the door.

Jude reached out with his pack bonds for Gareth and he felt extreme tension on the verge of violence. He stood up from the chair so abruptly that it fell over, clattering loudly against the stone floor. Everyone flinched.

"Is there another way out of here?" Jude asked Mack.

"Are you going to let us out?" Clara looked at him pleadingly. Her knees were practically knocking together.

Mack's head had shot towards the door. Jude called to him again, "Mack! Is there another way out of here?"

"Why are you asking? There's a door right there you can go through." Mack pointed towards the front door to the prison.

"I can't be seen coming from here. That will interest Paavo too much in what's down here. In *who* is down here. It's got to seem like I was elsewhere in the woods. Come on, Mack, if anyone knows another way out of this prison, it's you," Jude urged.

Jude hoped that they hadn't built this prison with one way in and out. Though that may have made it more secure, it would have minimized options if something went wrong in the cells. He didn't see another door, but he hoped there was a secret passage or something. He had a feeling that there was from the way Mack was acting. Mack finally looked back at him.

"Let us out and I'll tell you," Mack said.

“I don’t have the keys to let you out, Mack,” Jude pointed out, showing them all his empty hands. Haggerty had taken the keys with him and there looked to be no second set.

Mack slammed his palm against the silver bars. There was an echoing sound a burst of burnt flesh stench to accompany it. “Damnit!”

“So you’re just going to leave us here?” Clara’s voice rose into a frightened whine.

“Mack, just tell me,” Jude insisted.

“You going to go up there and fight Paavo and his Betas? I’d like to see that,” Mack growled.

“No, I’m going to distract Paavo. I’ll be able to get him and his Betas away from here, but if I come *out* of the silver cells he’s going to still want to go down,” Jude explained.

“Why would the Alpha of Alphas be distracted by *you*?” Mack frowned. “You didn’t tell him about being able to cure Rogues, did you? Gareth wouldn’t have let you do something that stupid!”

“God, no! I’m his ... I’m his *nephew*,” Jude admitted and he felt a little conspicuous doing so. It was like admitting you were related to a famous person.

He was right. At least in regards to Mack who really knew who Paavo was. Clara and Pierce looked slightly bewildered. Mack rubbed his jaw and let out a soft huff of laughter.

“Well, I’ll be. Theis had a baby boy.”

“Did you know my father?” Jude found himself asking and, immediately, wished he could bite back the words. He really had to stop opening his mouth so easily around Mack.

But Mack shook his head. “Never had the pleasure. He was supposedly quite a bit different than Paavo. A romantic. Never wanted to be a part of pack politics. A free spirit, if you will, who liked to be in the forest by himself. Watch moonrises on top of snowy mountains and sunrises on deserted beaches.”

Jude considered having a father like that. He imagined what they would have done *together*. Would they have sat on those beaches, sand beneath their paws, as the sun rose, fiery and golden, in the west? Would they have danced on top of the snow, wind whipping their fur back? Maybe they *had* done those things and he simply couldn’t remember them. A wave of *longing* came over Jude for a moment. But these thoughts were driven away by another thump and another wave of anger over the pack bonds.

Jude stepped in front of Mack. “Mack, I really need to know the other way out of here if I’m going to stop whatever is happening up there from migrating down here.”

“You really think you can distract him?” Mack didn’t look convinced.

“Yeah, I’ve got something to trade with him,” Jude said. He wasn’t going to offer to join Paavo’s pack, but he could show an interest. Claim to show one anyways. He just needed to defuse things.

“Last cell on the right. Turn the furthest bar three times counter-clockwise,” Mack said with a sigh. “A door will open.”

Jude wondered if Gareth knew about this secret passage. He also wondered if Mack had intended on using it to get out at any point. He must be really scared to give this information to Jude.

“I’m not going to let them hurt you,” Jude said, looking at all three of the Rogues. “I’m going to cure you. I will find a way to cure you.”

Jude turned and loped to the last cell. He really hoped he could do even *half* of what he had promised.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE: SCENT

As Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack, Gareth's word was law on the pack's properties. Whatever he said, went. But the Alpha of Alphas had power over all the packs.

If we allow it. If we accept the Council. The Council abandoned the Cold Moon Pack in its time of need. Now it seeks to control the justice that is mine. And take my mate.

Gareth crossed his arms over his chest. His muscles flexed. His expression though was *mild*, not revealing the boiling, volcanic anger he felt at the presumptuousness and disrespect Paavo showed him. Haggerty stood slightly behind him to his left. The former miner was still stripped down to the essence of bone and muscle. He was strong and implacable in a way that those who hadn't faced the hardship he had. Gareth felt honored to have him at his back. Haggerty would not hesitate even against the Alpha of Alphas.

"The silver cells are not open to guests," Gareth repeated. How many times had he said this? He felt like he was on repeat.

Paavo continued to smile a wolfish smile that was not friendly. "What are you hiding from me in there, Gareth?"

Gareth responding smile was like a knife. "Internal order within the Cold Moon Pack is *private*. It is not the Alpha of Alpha's concern."

Paavo leaned closer to Gareth, invading his personal space. His smile had become strained. "If *Mack* is in your cells it *is* my business."

Haggerty made a ptooh sound as he spit into the grass.

Gareth's voice dropped down, "On the contrary, the Council made it quite clear that Mack is *Cold Moon* business solely. And then the Council abandoned us *entirely*."

“Abandoned you? We just allowed you time to clean up your own mess,” Paavo laughed. His laugh was brittle as glass hitting pavement. “But you didn’t. You allowed it to *grow*. He’s made more Rogues. He’s *spread* the curse. He’s opened us up to discovery.”

“If he’s in the silver cells then he really isn’t your problem,” Gareth replied.

“But only if he’s in there, Gareth. I would like to see if he is,” Paavo said.

He took a step forward so that there was only an inch between them. The heat of his body met Gareth’s. It felt like an inferno between them. Castor and Ajax were flanking Paavo, looming towards him, too. Haggerty stepped to Gareth’s side. His long-fingered hands, rough with holding a pickaxe during scorching days and frozen nights, curled halfway closed, ready to ball fully into fists.

“The silver cells are off limits to you, Paavo.” He used no honorifics. He practically spat the man’s name. “You must go back to the house.”

“Or what?”

“Or we will *make* you leave.”

Animal nightshine rolled across Paavo’s eyes. He lips writhed back from his teeth. They were strong, white, sharp teeth that were revealed. “I will -
_”

“Uncle!” Jude’s voice rose up, beautiful and unexpected, not from behind Gareth, out of the silver cells, but from the forest. Confusion flooded him, but he hid it.

Not that his confusion would have been seen. Paavo’s head had snapped towards Jude’s voice as if it was a high-pitched dog whistle meant only for him. The fact that Jude had called him “uncle” was also unexpected.

It's to distract him. Somehow Jude got out of the silver cells in order to come up here and distract him. Oh, Jude, my clever mate.

The tension immediately drained from Paavo. His smile was genuine and not the snarl it had been from before. He stepped fully towards Jude. The young wolf walked out from the treeline. He didn't look out of breath or even too bright-eyed. He seemed calm and a little *confused*.

Jude, you are doing this beautifully.

He felt a wave of warmth over their pack bond. Jude's gaze flickered between all of them.

"I was looking for you," Jude said to Paavo.

"And you found me." Paavo stepped within reaching distance of Jude.

Gareth slowly paced around so that he was at Jude's side, ready to strike at Paavo if he had to. Haggerty, too, moved on over. He'd picked up a piece of long grass and was chewing on it. He was acting casual, but completely ready to fight as he had been before. The Betas moved close, too, but Paavo held up a hand to keep them back when he saw Jude stiffen as they approached.

Still looking askance at the Betas, Jude said, "I -- I wanted to talk to you."

Paavo *brightened*. When he flashed his white teeth now they weren't sharp and long like a wolf's, but more like a Crest commercial. "I would like that."

"About my -- my dad and stuff. And our family," Jude stammered out. His eyes flickered to Paavo and then back to the Betas. "Alone."

Gareth started slightly, but felt Jude reach out to him and caress him mentally.

Follow us, but not too close that he'll know. I'll be fine, Jude sent. We've got to get him away from Mack and the others. He's going to kill them otherwise.

Understood.

“Alone?” Paavo’s eyebrows lifted and he shot a look at Gareth. “Just and me?”

“Yeah.” Jude stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth. “I thought we could take a walk in the forest. I want to explore all of Fallowmere so I know it like the back of my hand.”

Gareth wished fervently that he was taking Jude on this tour of discovery. There would be time enough later. He had to focus on handling the here and now as it was not how he wished it to be.

“And you don’t want Gareth with you when you learn your way around the Cold Moon Pack’s territory?” Paavo’s tone was light, but his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“I do. And I will. But he and I have all the time in the world to walk together while we don’t,” Jude answered with an airy wave of his hand.

“We ... *don’t*?” Paavo’s eyes narrowed more.

“I imagine you have duties back with your own pack and as the Alpha of Alphas. Surely, you can’t stay here forever,” Jude’s voice held just a note of hope that this was true.

Paavo smiled and offered his arm to Jude who reluctantly put his arm through it. Gareth’s teeth gritted. He *knew* how much his mate did not like to be touched by men. But Jude was *enduring* it for him, for Mack, for the Cold Moon Pack. He must be as strong and honorable.

“You will have to give me a chance to convince you to come with me and see our pack and its lands together,” Paavo said conspiratorially to Jude.

“Maybe I’ll visit ... with Gareth,” Jude answered him with a shaded look. “Let’s go walking.”

“Alpha,” Ajax, a big beefy black-haired man grumbled. His eyes were black as pitch, too. The only thing light about him was his skin, which was as white as glacier ice.

“This is my *nephew*, Ajax. He would never hurt me and I ...” Paavo’s gaze snapped to Gareth. “I would never hurt *you*. So everyone is going to be quite fine on this lovely stroll on this lovely day.”

Ajax and Castor bowed low to their Alpha. Paavo took hold of Jude more firmly and they both headed out into the forest. The Betas stared at Haggerty and Gareth with beady, narrowed eyes.

“Haggerty will accompany you back to Fallowmere,” Gareth said pleasantly.

“And what will *you* be doing?” Castor stuck his powerful chin forward. It was clear that he believed that Gareth was going to go after their Alpha and Jude, which he was.

“The Alpha’s business is none of *your* business,” Haggerty’s voice was a rough growl like rocks grinding together. He stepped towards them with legs that were long and lean and powerful. One kick from them could shatter bones.

The Betas shifted from foot to foot, as if they were restless wolves wanting to attack. Gareth tensed, but then consciously relaxed. If they attacked then he needed to be ready. Before a battle, he always became incredibly calm. It was in that moment that he became the Gray. He was mist and fog and moonlight. He was silence and deadliness. He killed in this silence. He was death itself.

The Betas were too secure in their strength to fear anyone. They were chosen because they were the *best*. They had no idea what it was to lose, but Gareth did. His father's fists and feet and mouth made him know what it was to lose and lose and lose. But then to pick oneself up again and again. They had never learned to fail and then *win*. But something passed between them in a look and they backed off.

"Take us back to the house," Ajax grunted.

"With pleasure, gentlemen. This way. See you around, Alpha," Haggerty said with a tip of his head to Gareth.

"Tell Nina what's happened and have a replacement sent to the cells," he said softly.

Haggerty nodded again and took off after the two retreating Betas. They didn't need Haggerty to lead them. He was just going to make sure that they went back to Fallowmere. Gareth waited until they were out of sight and then he turned and loped after Jude and Paavo. He ran parallel to them, out of sight, but through his connection to Jude over pack bonds, he could hear their conversation.

"... family is very important to me, Jude. You and I are the last of our line," Paavo was saying.

"And my dad. Theis is alive. I mean he ... he might be alive," Jude corrected. There had been a slight bit of heat in his words about Theis being alive. Gareth's heart hurt a little at this. Though Jude might *consciously* think he didn't need or care about Theis, somewhere inside of him there was a little boy who wanted his father.

"I hope he is, Jude, but from what I know of your father, he would *never* leave you alone to be brought up by strangers," Paavo answered.

Gareth caught sight of the two of them between two bushes. They were bathed in golden sunlight. Dust motes danced in the air as they ambled down one of the game trails. The copper in Jude's curls shone brightly in a sunbeam.

"You didn't seem too concerned about that," Jude said, and a touch of sullenness entered his tone.

Paavo's golden head lowered. "I am *ashamed* of how I behaved to Theis and you. So ashamed. I have had long years to think on it."

"I notice you don't put my mother into that statement."

They had paused by the river. Their words were mixed with the rushing water. If Gareth had only been using his werewolf senses he would have been hard pressed to hear them. But he wasn't. Over the pack bonds and their almost mate bond, the words were crystal clear.

"Your mother is not anyone you want to include in your family circle," Paavo sounded grim.

"Is this just witch prejudice or *actual* prejudice based on her?" he asked.

Paavo faced the stream. He picked up a handful of stones and started to throw them one by one into the rushing river. They plonked into the water, leaving the barest trace of ripples before that was wiped out by the rushing river. It wasn't until the fifth rock that he spoke. "I have lived a long time, Jude. I have known many witches. I was there when we broke free and I saw the atrocities."

Jude turned towards him, a look of concern on his lovely face. "What happened with the witches?"

"There are tales of werewolves' beginnings ... that the witches wanted servants that could protect them. Servants that were eternal, strong and vicious. Servants that were bound to obey. It is said that they took my

people - our people, the Norsemen - first, as they were known for their ferocity.” Paavo shook his hair back and he looked like the Norse warrior he was. “They weren’t the proud werewolves today, but more like ... true animals. They were run by their basest natures. Only the most powerful witches could truly control them. It is said ... no, it is *true* that our kind were known to ... to eat their own young.”

Jude’s expression was horrified. “Eat their kids?”

“Roast them on the fire in pits,” Paavo answered, which had Gareth’s stomach roiling. “These original werewolves weren’t ... weren’t the ideal soldiers. They couldn’t be trusted. They were unthinking, evil beasts.”

Gareth wanted to draw in a sharp breath, but he didn’t. Though he was far enough away to be safe for normal werewolves, even Alphas, Paavo was extraordinary. He would have to be. So he bit back the breathing. This was something new to him.

“So ... the witches changed us?” Jude asked.

“Yes. Spells made us, Jude. Terrible spells. They altered those. They didn’t make them *less* terrible, but *more*,” Paavo explained. He dusted his hands off against his pants.

“More? I don’t understand.” Jude’s forehead furrowed. There was this drawing back of his lips though as if he could *taste* the horror.

“To makes a man into a *beast* is *easy*. To make a man into a *controlled weapon* is far harder,” Paavo answered. He shook his head. “I don’t know all the details, but the spells caused us to be as ferocious, but more controllable. And that control allowed us to take control of ourselves.

Slowly, but surely, we were able to *wiggle* free and the strength they granted us we used against them. That’s the trouble about offensive spells, they come back upon the user. The curse they placed upon us we brought against them three-fold.”

Jude shook his head as if he could not believe it. “Eira -- Mom -- did this?”

“She was the architect, Jude.” Paavo paused as if to let that set in then added, “I wasn’t sure I believed the woman that Their was with was actually *the* Eira. She was the stuff of legends. Of nightmares. I only saw her once during the war. She was astride a black horse. The horse’s eyes were blazing red. There was smoke coming out of its nostrils like it was breathing brimstone. And she was the same. Her eyes were burning, too.” Paavo shook his head as if to clear it of that vision.

“Was it the same person that -- that was my mom?” Jude asked, aghast.

One of Jude’s hands was clutching the front of his shirt. Paavo reached out as if to comfort him, but Jude shrugged those hands off of him. Paavo’s hands hovered in the air between them as if he wasn’t sure what to do. Whether to be offended or not. Gareth ached to rush in and put himself between Jude and Paavo. But he had to hold back. Jude was strong. Jude knew he was safe. Paavo’s touch might be abhorrent, but he wasn’t in danger.

“I did not see her in person. The pictures he showed me ... I cannot tell you if it was the same Eira. The woman on the battlefield was a force of nature. The woman I saw in the photos ... she was lovely, but she seemed terribly human. Nothing at all like that dangerous creature, but ...” Paavo shook his head again. “Theis told me it was her. He saw she was misunderstood or that she had changed or a million other things. All I heard was *witch*. I knew what they had done to us. Made us *puppets*. Made us *monsters*. Made us *slaves*.”

“Why didn’t you take me and Theis away from her? Why didn’t you keep me at least?” Jude’s voice was filled with a kind of forlornness that hurt Gareth’s soul.

“I told you how I ashamed I was? Well, I believed you must be some kind of Trojan Horse. Some way for Eira to worm her way into the pack of the Alpha of Alphas.”

“I can see that actually.” Jude rested against a large boulder.

“I didn’t let myself look at you. Your small chubby hands and feet. Your big brown eyes. Your sweetness and now ... your strength.” Paavo reached for Jude, but Jude shied back. He dropped his hands. “Is it *me* that frightens you? Or was your life so dark --”

“It’s not you. Not exactly you,” Jude quickly said and Gareth sort of disliked that. But he was also glad that Jude didn’t loathe his uncle. That wasn’t something that he didn’t wish for Jude. The young man crossed his arms over his chest defensively. “Life has been ... hard. But that’s true for many people. I’m just ... I don’t like being touched. That’s all.”

Gareth knew that this was a very limited statement about how Jude really felt about male touch and why. Paavo looked like he guessed, too, that this wasn’t the whole story, but he just nodded and let the moment pass.

“I should have taken you in. I should have ...” Paavo curled his fingers against his palm as if he was imagining holding Jude was a baby against him. “My regret has no words large enough to encompass what I truly feel. I thought I saw a ghost when I saw you.”

“How did Theis and Eira meet?” Jude seemed intent to avoid a discussion about Paavo’s feelings about him.

“I do not know. My brother was inclined to wander. He enjoyed going into the unknown wastes.” Paavo smiled fondly.

“Are there places that humans haven’t found by now?” Jude sounded disbelieving.

“There are so many places, Jude, that humans have never even *dreamed* of before that are out there.” Paavo shook his head. “Theis found endless interest in these places.”

“And he found Eira in one of those places?”

“I imagine so. Or she found him.” Paavo shrugged.

Had she? And, if so, why? Could it have just been Romeo and Juliet of the witch and werewolf world? That would make sense with a *new* witch, but one as old and wily as Eira falling in love without understanding the consequences. Or maybe, more like, without there being *more* of a reason for it.

“Grandmother Sophia has said that I’m the only wolf-witch hybrid that she knows of. Am I the only one you know of?” Jude asked.

“I have never known them to breed with us. Not successfully anyways.”
Paavo stepped a little closer. “You are a *wonder*, Jude. Your powers ... they are just now manifesting, yes?”

Jude looked distracted. He was staring off into the distance as if something out there bothered him. Gareth looked, but he saw nothing. Just rows of trees and sunlight. “Yeah, it all started when ... when I shifted.”

Good, Jude, don’t tell him about the Rogues. Don’t tell him about Mack.

Casually, Paavo asked, “Did the Rogue Mack bite you?”

Gareth stiffened. The Alpha of Alphas was trying to get information out of Jude that he couldn’t get out of Gareth.

Jude’s gaze focused back in on the Alpha of Alphas. His eyes narrowed. “I can’t talk about Cold Moon Pack business.”

“So you *did* get bitten --”

“I didn’t say that, Paavo,” Jude answered stiffly. “Don’t ask me things you know that I cannot answer.”

“I’m your uncle --”

“And you should be more rather than *less* sensitive about the restrictions I’m under,” Jude retorted.

Again, Paavo lowered his head, but looked up at Jude through his lashes. “Perhaps I should. But you’re not a part of Gareth’s pack yet. You are, by *birth*, a part of *mine*.”

Gareth’s heart began to race.

Jude tossed his head back. “You rejected me. I’m not a part of your pack.”

That was an excellent argument. If Paavo had not rejected his brother’s request to take in Jude then Paavo would have a better argument to say that Jude was a part of his pack. But he had *specifically* rejected Jude.

“That was a mistake,” Paavo insisted.

“It’s irrelevant. You rejected me. I’m free to choose my own pack and I choose -- who is that?” Jude pointed in the direction of where he’d been looking before.

Gareth’s head snapped towards the place. It was a rise in the woods where the trees thinned out and the sunlight streamed down in full force. Gareth squinted. The light was so strong that it was hard to see. He was blinded by it. But then he thought he saw a figure standing there. Just for a second and it might have been a trick of the light if Jude hadn’t seen the person, too.

Paavo stepped halfway in front of Jude. He scanned the area with concern. He lightly grasped Jude’s arms and urged him back to Fallowmere.

“Come, Jude, I think we need to get back to the house,” Paavo said and, for once, Gareth completely agreed with him.

Gareth watched as Paavo and Jude head off back towards Fallowmere.

Gareth went towards the spot where the figure had been. He made the rise. There was no one there. No visual trace of them either.

But there was a scent.

Gareth wasn't sure what he expected to smell but he was surprised by it all the same. The scent was *not* that of a werewolf. And the scent was *not* that of a man.

But a woman.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX: MY MOTHER'S GARDEN

Jude slowly turned the pages of the photo album that Paavo had brought. He found a soft smile growing on his face as he studied the pictures of his father as a little kid, mugging for the camera, showing a gap-toothed grin.

There was one photograph where he was standing on a rocky outcropping above a crystal clear lake. He was pretending to fall back. He was reaching for the cameraman with an exaggerated look of fear on his face.

“Did he fall in?” Jude asked Paavo.

The Alpha of Alphas was sprawled out on a chaise lounge beside him on the porch. Paavo shaded his eyes from the sun and glanced at the photograph. A surprisingly boyish grin broke across his face.

“I *pushed* him,” Paavo admitted. “And he *pulled* me in after him. I was in a good suit.”

Jude laughed. “Well, you deserved it.”

“I did.” Paavo went back to sunning himself on the chaise.

Jude crossed his legs beneath him on the couch and turned another page.

Theis was older here. He looked about twenty-five, but he could have been any age really. Paavo had explained earlier that Theis had his first shift, and his body therefore froze in time, when he was that age. His fair, blond hair, almost white, hung down to his chin. His blue eyes were iceberg blue, but they weren’t cold. Jude could almost feel the kindness radiating out of him.

“I wish I could remember him,” Jude said suddenly. “I wish ...”

“Theis would have been a good father to you, Jude. He would have adored you. Taken you everywhere with him. He’d have slung you on his back and mountain-climbed. Swum with you in warm seas. Held your hand as you walked with him on forgotten paths,” Paavo spun the words out like lures on lines of silk.

What about my mother? What about Eira? To capture my father's heart she would have had to have been remarkable. What did she do with me?

For a moment, he imagined – or was it memory – himself as a little boy. He and a beautiful woman with auburn hair and red-brown eyes was kneeling in a vast garden. Her features were fine and aristocratic, but she was sturdily built. As she dug a hole with a trowel, her forearm muscles flex under her olive-toned skin. She turned towards him, holding out a delicate plant.

“Come, Jude, help me nurture another life in the garden,” her voice was musical and clear.

He immediately came to her, running on chubby legs and collapsing by her side. She had put the plant in his hands. The roots felt soft like fuzzy wings.

“Place it gently here.” She indicated the hole she had dug with the trowel.

“While plants can be very hardy, we must be gentle in all we do. We have so much power over them.”

He, oh, so gently placed the plant in the hole on fingers that looked so small to him. Then she helped him cover the roots with more soil. There was a sweet breeze and the plant swayed a little. He giggled and he felt the warm press of her lips on his temple.

“I love you, my Jude,” she whispered.

“I love you, too, Momma.”

Jude found his eyes welling up suddenly. But he quickly brushed a hand over his eyes. That was what Gareth called him: my Jude. And Gareth kissed him on the temple often. He was just conflating one person he loved with someone he *wanted* to have loved him.

Not a memory then. Has to be just a wish. But it's so vivid. I can even smell her perfume. Roses ...

“Theis is so romantic,” Paavo chuckled. “I’d find him staring up at the moon on a hill all alone. I would worry that he was sad or felt alienated. Why wasn’t he enjoying the moonlight with his pack? But more times than not, he turned towards me with this goofy smile on his face. Totally moonstruck. He’d then wax poetic about the night sky. He wasn’t unhappy or lonely at all. He was perfectly content.”

“I get that. I like being on my own, too. Used to travel everywhere on my own. Just me and my motorcycle,” Jude admitted.

“You like cycles?” Paavo had perked up at that.

“I do. Mine is back at Grandmother Sophia’s place. We didn’t have room to bring it and Gareth wanted me to ride with him. He said we’d go get it after ... well, after everything’s settled.” He realized almost too late that he had nearly revealed Mack and the other Rogues’ presence.

“After *what*?”

Of course, Paavo caught the near slip.

“After we left.” Jude quickly changed subjects, “Why did you bring these? I mean ... you didn’t know about me being here.”

Jude turned another page. This one showed a birthday party where his father must have been about fifteen. He was surrounded by grinning men and women. Jude guessed these were pack members. There was something wolfish in their eyes. Of course, there were no pictures of them in their wolf forms. But Jude could tell all the same.

He glanced over at Paavo, because his uncle had been silent for so long after his question. He wondered if the Alpha of Alphas had fallen asleep. It was gorgeous warm on the second floor wraparound porch, but there was a nice breeze and some of the trees’ branches stretched over them. His uncle though was not asleep. He was regarding Jude’s profile.

“You look so like him. Just your coloring is different. I cannot wait to see your wolf ... when you’re not trying to kill me,” Paavo whispered. He

almost brushed his fingers against Jude's jaw affectionately, but stopped. "I know. You don't like to be touched. But I'd never hurt you."

Jude regarded him quietly. "I'd like to believe that."

"But life has taught you otherwise?" Paavo's sky blue eyes darkened.

Jude met his look evenly. "Yeah, it has. So ... why do you have the album?"

"Because I like to remember the good things that life has given me. Theis is one of those things," he answered. "I'm haunted by what I did when I turned him and you away."

"So you carry around this album and look at it?" Jude clarified.

"Yes, exactly."

They looked at one another a moment and, in that moment, Jude believed him. It didn't mean that Paavo wasn't an arrogant jerk. He'd been awful to Gareth. He still thought that Jude was his as if Jude were an *object*. He was high-handed and rude. But he did love Theis. And he wanted to love Jude.

"Where is Gareth, I wonder? I expected him to be surgically attached to your side," Paavo remarked. "And where are our drinks? Didn't that little Brandon offer to go get them ages ago?"

"Gareth is speaking with Gina. And about the drinks ... you *could* go get them yourself, your majesty," Jude muttered. Paavo's words squashing some of the warmth he had been starting to feel.

"I could ... but I am awfully comfortable right here. Aren't you?" Paavo flashed him an almost endearing smile. That smile though turned into a frown. "How – how do you know where Gareth is? You didn't speak to anyone, but Brandon, and he didn't know."

"Over the pack bond," Jude answered with a shrug. Though it was telepathy and he would have considered that crazy a couple of days ago, he figured to Paavo it must be old hat.

But the Alpha of Alphas stiffened. “You – you can already *communicate* with Gareth over the pack bond.”

“And I bet once the mate bond’s completed it’ll be even better.” Jude turned in his seat to face the Paavo. “You’re surprised.”

Paavo tried to hide it. “No, just ... curious.”

“No, you’re *totally* surprised.” Jude gave out a soft huff of breath. “Of course, you are. Because it shows that I’m meant to be with Gareth and the Cold Moon Pack.”

“I want you to come home with me,” Paavo said.

“I *am* home,” Jude responded.

“How do you know until you see the fjords? The mountains? The streams? The vast fields of flowers?” Paavo challenged.

“Home isn’t a place. It’s the people you care about,” Jude said and it was a revelation for him. Home had always been Grandmother Sophia’s, wherever she was, wherever she’d be. And now it was wherever Gareth and the Cold Moon Pack

“How do you know I couldn’t be one of those people?” Paavo’s face was open, so easy to turn that open look to one of hurt.

“I met you this morning,” Jude muttered and went back to the album. “And you’ve been sort of a jerk. Remember? I nearly burned you for it.”

Paavo actually started to laugh. “Oh, Jude, I imagine if you had *really* wanted to kill me you would have. You were holding back. You wanted to scare me. You wanted to put your paw down.”

“My – my *paw*?” Jude found himself cracking a smile.

“Yes, your paw. You come from a powerful line of Alphas. It would have been something I would have done in my youth,” Paavo chuckled.

“Well, just like when my father pulled you into the pond you earned it this time, too,” Jude remarked.

At that moment, he felt Gareth’s presence at the French doors. The Alpha shouldered opened the door as he was carrying tray with a pitcher of lemonade and four glasses. He smiled at Jude and while there was the usual joy to see him, there was something bothering him, but he was hiding it from Paavo.

“Gareth!” he cried out loud.

Over their bond, he asked, *Gareth? What’s wrong?*

I will explain. But just ... I do not wish you to leave the house without me. Understood?

Yeah, okay.

Alarm raced through Jude. He remembered the half seen figure in the woods. Gareth had gone to see who that was. Whatever he had found had disturbed him. There was the softest sound from the woods and Jude’s eyes were drawn to half a dozen large wolves disappearing into the sea of green.

Jude’s mind immediately put things together. Gareth must have gone to Gina to send out some of the pack to patrol the property.

So who was on the hill? Someone that’s made Gareth worried?

“Where have you been, Gareth?” Paavo asked. He had now closed his eyes and looked like he could fall asleep.

“Pack business,” Gareth answered curtly then with far more warmth said, “My Jude. How I missed you.”

“It has hardly been an hour since you last saw him,” Paavo remarked without cracking an eyelid.

“Then it’s been an hour too long,” Gareth said.

The Alpha then kissed Jude's temple before putting down the tray on the table beside the photo album. He looked curiously at it and smiled.

"Family photos?" he asked.

"Yeah. These are of my dad when he was a kid and stuff," Jude explained.

Gareth's eyes scanned over them and he smiled. "You do look a lot like him."

"I don't know. I guess." But Jude felt *pleased*, but he quickly tamped that feeling down. He didn't need a flesh and blood family. His father was likely dead or had abandoned him. He didn't know what to think about his mother. He closed the photo album and slid it towards Paavo. "Thanks for letting me see this."

"You may keep that. I have other copies," Paavo answered.

Jude didn't reach for it back. He felt for a moment like it might cause him more trouble than it was worth.

But it might make me remember something more.

His mind flashed back on his imagining of his mother. It had seemed so very real.

"Thanks," Jude said, though he kept his voice neutral rather than truly thankful. He moved the album off the table and onto the seat of a chair that wasn't being used. Gareth began to pour out lemonade for the three of them. "Is that *real* lemonade?"

"Fresh squeezed," Gareth answered with a bob of his head.

"God, how can you not love this place?" Jude wondered out loud as he took a large swallow of lemonade. It was just the right amount of tart and sweet. He downed half the glass. With a grin, Gareth filled it up for him again.

"Werewolves live on their stomachs. Need to have excellent chefs on staff to keep everyone happy," Paavo answered. He had unerringly taken his

glass from the table without opening his eyes. “The Cold Moon Pack is very lucky.”

“In that way as well as many others,” Gareth remarked dryly. He took his own glass and sat down on the rattan couch beside Jude, putting an arm around his shoulders. Jude leaned into Gareth’s body. It was warm and strong. He’d been alone so long and thought he wanted to be that way forever. But now, he could feel what he’d missed.

“And you’re inclined to keep that pack safe. So why did you send out the scouts? Normal precautions?” Paavo asked.

Jude’s eyebrows rose. He’d thought the Alpha of Alphas had his eyes closed when the wolves had gone out. But, evidently, he had figured out everything.

“We have a new wolf.” Gareth squeezed Jude’s shoulders. “The pack is, of course, protective of him.”

Paavo grunted. “I suppose that could account for it. But I do not believe you.”

“That’s not really my problem,” Gareth replied neutrally and took another sip of lemonade.

“Who is the fourth glass for?” Paavo asked and, again, Jude was surprised as he swore the Alpha of Alphas had not opened his eyes.

“For me, young man,” Grandmother Sophia said as she, too, came out of the house onto the porch.

“I believe I may be older than you.” He had opened one eyelid this time to regard her. She humphed. Despite his words though, he stood and offered her the chaise with a bow. “Please, won’t you sit down. I think that though a fourth glass was brought ... I am, in fact, a *third* wheel to this conversation.”

Gareth didn't object, just sipped his lemonade. With Sophia seated, he gave them another bow then reached forward as if to ruffle Jude's hair. But he stopped himself again.

"So like Theis. I used to always do that to him when we parted," Paavo explained.

"Yeah, and I bet he hated it, too." Jude's lips curled up though into what could have been called a smile.

"That's what brothers do. Rough house and tease." Paavo gave a small yet genuine smile and then disappeared inside with his lemonade glass.

They all waited a few moments. Werewolf hearing was very acute.

"I thought I would have to argue with him to get him to leave. Though ... perhaps he should know," Gareth murmured as he stared at the French doors through which Paavo had disappeared.

"Know what?" Jude was intent on finding out about it now. "I know you went to check out where I thought I saw someone in the woods today. Was it – was it the Fourth Rogue?"

That was the most likely possibility. After all, despite the Fourth Rogue claiming that he didn't want to be cured, he probably didn't want to be *caged*. But once Jude figured out how to help the others, Jude was certain he'd show up. Likely, he was watching the place.

"The Fourth Rogue is a man according to Mack," Gareth said and he searched their faces.

"That was a male werewolf that attacked Jude. I could tell that much," Sophia confirmed.

"Yeah, I think so, too," Jude said. The wolf did seem *male* to him.

"Then the person on the property was *not* them. It was a woman," he said. He added the next slowly, "And I think ... it was a witch."

Silence fell between all three of them for a moment. Jude saw Grandmother Sophia lower her head and bit her lower lip. Jude knew she was thinking: *it's begun*. The witches were on the hunt for him. Already drawn to his budding power, guessing somehow that he had the powers his mother did, and wanting to kill him or capture him.

"I've sent out extra scouts and alerted the entire pack," Gareth continued.

Grandmother Sophia rose. "That won't be enough. Forgive me for doubting your wolves, Gareth, but a witch powerful enough to find Jude now will be able to hide herself from your scouts. We need more substantial protection for Jude than that. I'm almost inclined to ask Bronwyn to come. That would help."

She made as if to leave and start performing spells right then and there.

"Grandmother Sophia, wait," Gareth called out to her and reached for her arm. "Wait. There's a more obvious person for it to be."

At first, Jude couldn't think who he meant, but then, even before understanding crossed Grandmother Sophia's face and she sank back down on her chair, Jude figure it out.

"My mom?" He meant to say "Eira" but he said "mom" so naturally. He should have been glad that he hadn't said "momma" like in the imagining.

But no one noticed.

"What witch would know about Jude, what witch would be more powerful than her?" Gareth asked.

Grandmother Sophia looked rather dumbstruck and *afraid* that Eira could be there. Gareth just looked at her grimly. He was clearly letting her recover before he launched into whatever he wanted to talk about.

"Grandmother Sophia, I need to know all you know about Eira. I need to know ... if you think she is a threat to Jude," Gareth finally said.

“Oh, yes, yes, of course, you need information.” Her hands fluttered for a moment up from her lap, but then lowered. “I’ve never met her, Gareth. But I’ll tell you all I know.”

“I appreciate that,” he said. “And I believe that bringing Bronwyn here to help would be a good idea. But I just want to talk first. I want to understand who I may be facing.”

Grandmother Sophia gave a low, mirthless laugh. “Oh, Gareth, Eira is more *myth* than *witch*. To hear tell it, she had the power over all of the elements. Normally, we are especially gifted in one. Air, Earth, Fire or Water. But Eira was gifted in all of them. More than gifted. It was said that the very planet would *sing* for her. She understood magic like we naturally breathe. She created your kind, Gareth. Think of the *power* and *intellect* to do that. It’s like being God.”

Gareth let out a soft breath. “Grandmother Sophia, if even *half* of what you just said is true, how can we even hope to defend against her?”

Her expression was bleak. “We can’t.”

Jude blinked. He was stunned by what Eira was supposed to be able to do. His mind flashed back onto that vision he’d have of his mother in the garden.

Her garden. Where she nurtured life.

He remembered the rows of plants and then the orchard and then the building that were half hidden in the trees. The buildings were part of his mother’s garden. The buildings where strange, monstrous howls rose from.

“Jude?!” Gareth gasped his name.

Jude had, unconsciously, bolted up from the sofa. He felt almost dizzy and sagged back down. Gareth helped him down. His lemonade glass was pressed to his lips and the sweet-tart liquid went into his mouth and he drank it. He felt better after doing so. He took the glass from Gareth’s hands and almost nursed on it.

“I’m okay,” he mumbled.

Gareth brushed a hand across the Jude’s forehead. “You’re still weak. Too much today. I should never –”

“No, Gareth. It’s not that. It’s not your fault.” He turned to Grandmother Sophia and asked, “Was – was Eira thought to have a – a garden?”

“Yes, she was. It was a garden where she not only grew plants to use in potions and spells, but it was said to be a place where she could truly *create*,” Grandmother Sophia answered him. “Why?”

It wasn’t my imagination. I think that was a real memory earlier. I think the garden is a real place.

He met her gaze. “I – I remember her. I remember my mother.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN: THE RUN

Nina knocked on the French doors to the balcony and stuck her head out.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Alpha.”

Her head dipped towards where Jude was sleeping between Gareth’s legs with his cheek resting against the Alpha’s massive chest. They were out on the chaise lounge where, just a few hours earlier, they’d talked of Eira.

Jude had told him and Grandmother Sophia all that he could remember of his mother. Jude’s description of the garden with its strange buildings where howls had issued had Gareth’s shoulders tensing. But after telling them about it, Jude had seemed drained and just wanted to sleep. He’d collapsed on Gareth who promptly enfolded Jude in his arms.

Grandmother Sophia had given her sleeping boy a kiss on the temple and Gareth a pat on the shoulder.

“I will contact Bronwyn and ask her to come here. With your permission, of course,” she’d said.

“Do it. We need far more information and protection,” Gareth had agreed.

She’d patted his shoulder once more and gone inside. Nina was the first one to come out since she’d left.

“It’s fine, Nina. What is it?” Gareth cast his voice low.

And it was. He and Jude had dozed as the summer sun had slid lower and lower on the horizon. He’d heard and seen the pack moving below to create yet another feast. The scent of woodsmoke from the barbeque that Haggerty would, undoubtedly, be tending was also comforting. The sounds and sense of his pack all around him made him feel all was right with the world.

Nina came over and kneeled beside the chaise. “The pack is wondering ... well, since I haven’t spread around the fact that a strange woman invaded the pack’s lands ... whether we could do the Run tonight. To honor Jude’s joining the pack.”

The Run was usually the *first* pack activity that a new wolf was introduced to.

Gareth blinked. “I’d ... forgotten.”

Nina smiled. “It’s been a long time since we’ve welcomed a new wolf.”

He rubbed the top of his nose. “I shouldn’t be forgetting these things, Nina. He’s my *mate* and my first wolf.”

“That’s why you have a Beta, Gareth.” She grinned. “To remind you of things. But I can completely understand why you would have forgotten. A lot has happened since you met Jude. A lot has happened just *today*.”

“It has.” He shook his head. “But that doesn’t make me feel *better*, Nina. I keep thinking about what Jude’s experience with the pack *should* have been compared to what it’s been.”

“Gareth, none of us came into this life easily. Name *one* werewolf that did.”

She smiled at him when he said nothing. She was right. “Jude will get every wonderful experience with the pack. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but, in time, he *will*. Besides.” She looked down at the sleeping young man on his chest. “He looks pretty happy to me exactly where he is.”

“That is mutual.” He couldn’t help but smile, too, as he gazed down at Jude. He curled one lock of Jude’s hair around his right pointer finger. His hair was so soft just like his fur.

“And I am so happy to see you like this, Alpha.” He could see happy tears in her eyes.

“You were the one to tell me that I needed a mate. I can honestly say that I didn’t believe you, because I couldn’t have pictured Jude and this -- this *joy*.” Gareth rolled his lips to hold back the emotions he felt - such keen happiness and joy that it almost *hurt* - from overwhelming him. He didn’t want to wake the cause of that feeling.

She just nodded and brushed a hand over her eyes. “It couldn’t have happened to a more deserving person.”

“I don’t know about that. You’re more worthy than me.”

She chuckled. “I very well may be. But there Molly goes snatching up that intelligent, beautiful Tessa before I even had a chance to lay eyes upon her.”

“It was a surprise in some ways. Molly’s always been so ... singular. But the moment she saw Tessa something clicked,” Gareth said as he thought back on the budding romance between Molly and Jude’s sister.

“That’s how it always seems to work.” Nina sighed then shook her head as if to clear it. “About the Run, I haven’t told the pack yes or no, but I could easily --”

“What’s a Run?” Jude asked, head still resting against Gareth’s chest.

Gareth laughed. “You were supposed to be *sleeping*.”

“I was, but I sensed that you were about to say ‘no’ to something fun,” Jude answered him. He stretched luxuriously over Gareth’s body. “So what’s this Run?”

Nina was the one to explain, “In the center of the lake is a small island. There is an unlit bonfire there. We all gather in front of Fallowmere and transform into our wolves. We then run around the lake to the other side, followed by swimming out onto the island. The first wolf to reach the island and light the bonfire wins.”

Gareth could feel Jude's eyebrows lifting. "*Wolves lighting fires?*"

"There are lit torches that you have to grasp in your teeth," she said with a flash of those human teeth.

"So the *run* is followed by a *swim*?" Jude qualified.

"We should introduce a biking portion, but wolves have trouble reaching the pedals." Gareth suppressed a grin.

Jude thumped his chest playfully and Gareth pretend groaned.

"What does the winner get?" Jude asked.

"Bragging rights. It's really a pack pride moment. To see all of us transformed and running as one," Nina explained. "Afterwards, we have a huge feast. Not a surprise as *werewolves* are walking stomachs as you are beginning to know."

"I think that sounds great. We should do it," Jude voted.

Gareth thought about saying it wasn't wise to have the Run with Eira wandering potentially about. But everything that Grandmother Sophia had said about Eira told him that it wouldn't matter whether they were huddled in Fallowmere or doing the Run. She could destroy them.

"If you do this, Jude, I want you to stay near me," Gareth said.

Jude lifted himself up on his elbows with a lift of his lips as he said, "Hey, I want to *win*."

"I won't slow you down," Gareth chuckled.

"Okay, so long as you promise." Jude grinned happily.

Nina got up from her crouch. “I’ll go tell everyone. The Run starts at full nightfall. I give that about fifteen minutes or so. The two of you need to get down there and stripped if you want to win.”

“We’re in it to win it,” Jude assured her.

With a final wave, Nina went inside. Gareth heard her voice in the air and over the pack bonds. She was calling all to prepare for the Run. His heartbeat increased as he felt the swell of excitement from the pack. The pack bonds were flooded with yips of joy and there were raucous howls echoing throughout Fallowmere. He saw Jude tilting his head to the side as he listened and a slow smile crossing his face.

“They’re so psyched.” Jude beamed. He leaned up and kissed Gareth.
“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

“What are you thanking me for? Though I will accept the kisses.” Gareth grinned into yet another kiss.

“For not letting fear ruin this.”

“I’m glad, too.”

They kissed one final time. Jude’s lips were not soft and yielding underneath him. His mate devoured *him* instead. Pushing him down against the back of the chaise lounge, framing his face, and diving into him with tongue and teeth and lips. Finally, after both of them were restless, Jude drew up and looked down at him.

“This is great, you know? Everything about being with you and being here is just awesome. I want you to *know* that,” Jude told him with all due solemnity.

“I’m glad.”

Jude smiled at him lopsidedly. “You’re still thinking that you’re not giving me the best experience. But you *are*. I promise.”

Oh, my Jude, I fear you are comparing this to the rest of your life ... which has so disappointed you and has been so much less than you deserved.

“I can see you don’t believe me.” Jude laughed softly.

“I only want to give you the best. But I am not fully in control --”

“Of the world? No, you are not. But everything you can control is *perfect*.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re way too hard on yourself. You really are. I’m going to have to do something about that.” Jude rested their foreheads together for a moment.

“Maybe if I cut *your* pancakes it will help things.”

“Maybe. We’ll try that tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds good.”

They grinned at each other. Jude then clambered off Gareth’s body. Gareth groaned as that warm weight was lost. Jude reached down and grasped both of his hands and tugged the Alpha out of the chaise. He got up and stretched his arms over his head. His spine popped softly a few times.

“Though you’re a wolf, you’re reminding me of a big cat right now.”

“*Never*.”

Gareth put an arm around Jude’s shoulders while Jude put an around his waist. They walked inside together and made their way downstairs and then back outside to the area where the morning feast had been held. While there had been a bonfire lit earlier in the day, an even bigger one, unlit, was

about twenty feet away from the house. The unlit bonfire was surrounded by every member of the pack as was Paavo and his two Betas.

“Alpha! Jude!” Were cries from all the wolves present.

Grins were on every face. Eyes were bright. Mouths were open with constant hoots and howls. There was an energy, an almost friskiness, that filled every werewolf there that was infectious.

Gareth leaned down to say in Jude’s nearest ear, “Are you going to be all right stripping in front of everyone?”

There was just the *slightest* hesitation before Jude answered, “Got to get used to it someday, right?”

“You’re safe here, Jude. No one would hurt you here,” Gareth assured him. He didn’t have any hesitation in saying that. He knew that he would have said the same when Mack was in charge, too. But things truly were safe here. The pack members had gone through fire together and Paavo truly ruled his Betas. Though the Alpha of Alphas might be selfish and overbearing, he wouldn’t harm Jude.

As if thinking of him called him there, Paavo appeared before him and Jude. He stood a foot taller even than Jacob, who was letting Brandon climb on him like a jungle gym and laughing his classic deep belly laugh.

“Gareth, I hope you will allow me and my Betas to join you in the Run.” Paavo was grinning so widely that his head seemed to threaten to split open. Gareth could see the high that the Alpha of Alphas was on, drawing from the excitement of the pack while also enjoying having his nephew close to him.

“Of course, Paavo. You and your Betas are more than welcome,” Gareth answered magnanimously.

“I hope this will be the first Run of many that we have together, Jude,” Paavo enthused.

“I hope so, too.” Jude actually smiled genuinely.

Paavo was about to say more, but Nina had climbed on top of the nearest picnic table and was holding up a burning torch. Everyone went almost silent. There were still murmurs through the crowd as the excitement could not be completely controlled.

“Wolves of the Cold Moon Pack and our welcome guests!” Nina shouted, her rich voice rising above even the crowd’s murmuring. “We come together tonight to do a Run!”

There was a swell of roars and applause. She patted the air with her free hand as if to pat down the excitement.

“We are having this Run to honor our newest wolf. JUDE!” Nina pointed towards Jude, who blushed and lowered his head. But his mate did look up through his eyelashes at everyone as they thumped his back and patted his shoulders.

Gareth hadn’t yet officially announced that Jude was his mate, though a rumor was circulating around the pack about it. He saw the knowledge in the shining eyes that were turned towards them both. Jude joining the pack was momentous. This Run was to honor Jude individually. When they announced their joining, that would not only be for the two of them but for the pack itself. It would change the pack immensely.

“Now, just to repeat the rules. Once I light this bonfire here, all of you will be allowed to strip and shift. You must run along the outside of the lake to the point where Molly and Jude’s sister Tessa are waiting. Look there!”

She pointed directly across the water and there appeared a lit torch that waved back and forth. She waved her torch. “Once you reach Molly and Tessa, you are to swim to the island. See Raj waving his torch there? He’s

right by the final bonfire” Indeed, there was another figure that was waving a torch at them. “The first wolf to light the bonfire there will win!”

There was a huge roar from the pack. Hands pumped into the air, which crackled with excitement.

“All right! Are you ready?” Nina asked the crowd.

“YES!” the pack roared back.

Nina lifted the torch as high in the air as she could. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on the torch.

“Then let’s GO!”

She tossed the lit torch into the center of the unlit bonfire, which immediately burst into flames with a *whumping* sound. Then there was the sound of rending cloth as every wolf simply pulled off their clothes. Jude though pulled his shirt over his head and shimmied out of his shorts while Gareth simply *ripped* his own off. Werewolves were hard on clothes so Gareth had given up trying to have nice things. He had tons of identical t-shirts, shorts and jeans. He often got secondhand clothes so that he would get to experience soft t-shirts and faded denim without having to pay the earth for them, only to rip them apart in a shift.

A sea of mist appeared around Fallowmere as every werewolf shifted into their wolf forms. It became a sea of fur as wolves of every size, shape and color were suddenly streaming away from the house and down to the beach.

Gareth didn’t have to look to know that Jude was beside him. His mate ran shoulder to shoulder with him. When he did glance over, Jude was looking at him, tongue lolling out and eyes smiling. For a moment, the pack streamed past them as they just relished the joy of running together without any reason. Not fear. Not a hunt. Simply for the joy of running. But as he saw Paavo and the Betas beating all but twins, he knew that they had to sharpen their focus.

We need to be faster, Jude, or Paavo and his pack will beat us, he sent over the pack bonds.

Can't have that! This is a Cold Moon Pack Run! Jude crowed.

Jude looked ahead of them. Seeing his uncle pulling away with his two Betas flanking him, Jude put his head down and picked up the pack. Gareth did the same. He and Jude were soon well ahead of most of the pack and nipping at the heels of Paavo and the Betas.

Paavo was a massive silver-blue wolf with startling iceberg blue eyes. Both of his Betas shared a dark coat, almost black or the deepest of browns.

They were a handsome triad. They ran easily. Paavo being almost a half a wolf larger than his Betas and a quarter larger than Gareth even. But bulk normally didn't equal speed though it did give simple length of stride.

Paavo was counting on that. But Jude, though much smaller, was fleet of foot and Gareth was amazed at how fast his mate was.

Jude tucked his ears back and lowered his head and simply *zoomed* past the Betas until he was neck and neck with Paavo. The Alpha of Alphas turned his head and Gareth saw his surprise - and then pleasure - at Jude matching him. His tail slashed through the air happily. But if Jude thought that Paavo would let him win out of family feeling, he was soon wrong. Paavo quickened *his* pace, which meant that Jude's much shorter legs had to go *four* times as fast to just keep up.

Gareth put more speed in his own step as he muscled past the Betas who tried to block him with their large bodies. But with a spurt more steam, he sliced between them before they could completely close the gap. Now the three of them were neck in neck with the Betas having fallen back, because they simply couldn't keep up that speed.

All three of them took the hard 90 degree turn onto the large pier that jutted out on the lake where Tessa and Molly stood. Gareth saw Molly point to Jude and say something in Tessa's ear. From the way her expression

changed to one of happiness and her cheering for her brother suddenly increased, he guessed that Molly had pointed out that Jude was one of the front runners.

“GO, JUDE, GO!” Tessa laughed and clapped. She jumped up and down as all three of them leaped into the water.

The water was still warm from being baked in the sun all day. But it was still colder than the warm night air and Gareth gave out a wolfish gasp as his hot body hit the water. He went under, but then quickly surfaced and started doggy paddling towards the island that - in his human form - would have been an easy fifty meter swim. But in wolf form it was a lot harder.

Gareth quickly located Jude as his mate burst through the surface of the water. He saw that Jude, similarly, was shocked by the water's temperature difference. But he didn't suffer any cramps as he doggy paddled, too, towards the island. Paavo was having a harder time in the water. He was bigger and all muscle. He, likely, wasn't as used to the heat. Gareth could have pulled ahead of both of them, but he wanted to make sure that Jude made it to shore. He was quick on his mate's heels though as soon as Jude climbed out of the water. Jude couldn't quite control the wolfish need to shake his fur before he was racing towards the already lit torches that were sunk into the sandy shore.

Raj was clapping and jumping up and down by the torches, shouting his support. It was Jude first then Gareth followed by Paavo onto the island's beach. Jude tried to grasp the nearest torch in his jaws, but his torch tipped over and nearly went out. His mate tried to pull it up, but his jaws were just too small. Gareth jumped over to his mate and grasped a torch in his own large jaws.

Jude, here! Take this one! GO!

Jude turned around towards him, paws dancing on the sand. Gareth tossed the torch into the air and Jude caught it in his jaws. He then raced towards

the huge unlit bonfire with it. Paavo was a length behind him while Gareth stood back and just watched.

His mate threw his torch on the bonfire. It flew end over end until it touched the kindling and the dry wood went up with a matching *whump* to the bonfire that began it all.

YES! YOU DID IT, JUDE! Gareth found himself laughing and dancing in his wolf form, too.

Jude looked rather stunned - and winded - that he'd done it, that he'd won. He was panting and walked on slightly unsteady legs to Gareth. The Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack and Jude pressed cold noses together. Gareth licked his mate's fur between his ears.

Paavo had held back, but when they broke apart he came up and stood close. Close enough for Jude to lick him, too, if he wanted. Jude, tentatively leaned forward and nuzzled Paavo's neck. Paavo's eyes half shut and he pressed the side of his head against Jude's. Gareth felt a wave of happiness at this. Jude was learning to trust. He just hoped that Paavo was worthy of it.

Paavo's Betas and the rest of the Cold Moon Pack all swam onto the island then. Soon the island was *covered* with fur. The wolves all greeted one another. There were piles of wolves as they jumped on one another. It was a seething mass of wolves dancing around one another. Gareth could not have loved it more. Jude pressed tight against him with Paavo on his other side, protecting him from being jostled, as Jude was slightly overwhelmed with it all. Paavo and Gareth's gazes met over Jude's back and the Alpha of Alphas tipped his head slightly to acknowledge that they both - whatever issues they had with each other - were there to protect Jude.

That was when Gareth caught sight of a lone wolf standing at the edge of the forest, watching them frolic. Gareth did not recognize this wolf and his lips drew back from his teeth in an almost growl. Jude heard it and must have felt his discomfort.

Gareth, what is it? Oh! Jude stiffened and, almost like a pointer dog, suddenly jerked towards the lone wolf. *That's -- that's the Fourth Rogue!*

Before Gareth could respond, Paavo's large head swung over towards where they were looking. He went stiff, too. His blue eyes widened in absolute shock. And though his bond with Gareth was a thin, tenuous one as Alpha of Alphas, Gareth *heard* him shout, THEIS!

The Fourth Rogue was Jude's father.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT: THE FOURTH ROGUE

Paavo leapt over the surging wolves that surrounded them and headed towards the water. Jude followed after him with Gareth right by his side.

All Jude's exhaustion from the Run was forgotten as he saw the Fourth Rogue standing, proud and tall, just at the edge of the woods.

Paavo said that it's Theis! My father!

Jude's imaginings of the man that Paavo had spoken of flashed through his mind. He couldn't quite balance the romantic, nature lover that Paavo had described with the Fourth Rogue that had bitten him and tried to kill Grandmother Sophia like in the fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood. His father was a Rogue as well. Dangerous and unpredictable. Perhaps murderous towards Jude still. Mack was nearly unrecognizable to Gareth and the other members of the Cold Moon Pack. Becoming a Rogue had changed him into a different person. Clearly, that was likely the same with his father.

How did my father become a Rogue in the first place? Does that mean that Eira is dead despite what Grandmother Sophia said of her power? Eira created werewolves. She knows how to cure Rogues, I'm sure of it! So why would she let her lover be a Rogue like this? It doesn't make any sense!

Paavo jumped into the water. His Betas struggled to follow after him, but the Alpha of Alphas sent a command that, once more, Jude heard, telling them to hold and not follow him. He didn't want to spook Theis. The Betas whined but remained on the island, hackles raised and pacing, but not following.

At that moment, Jude saw Molly, who was still on the pier, whip around and go into a crouch. She sensed the Rogue, too. Even at this distance, Jude thought he heard her growl. She herded Tessa back towards the edge of the pier, nearest the water and away from the Fourth Rogue.

Gareth called to her, *Molly don't attack. Track him, but keep well away!*

Jude felt a mental nod from Molly. She didn't even bother to remove her dress before shifting. Just a brief word to Tessa, urging his sister to stay on the pier, and, in a puff of smoke, Molly's human form was gone and her wolf was there, before taking off into the forest.

Jude felt the rest of the pack realize that their territory had been invaded. Howls rose up on all sides of him. Snarls and growls joined the howls. Jude felt a shiver of excitement and fear go through him. The pack wanted to *hunt*. He wanted to hunt with. He realized then how easy it would be to go into a pack mindset, where the individual will didn't matter, where all that mattered was the pack and the hunt and the blood. But his father would be their prey. Jude wrenched himself out of that dangerous thinking and shook his head as if to clear it.

He might have only hurt me and tried to harm Grandmother Sophia because he's a Rogue. But if I can cure him, he'll become the werewolf that Paavo described. He'll be ... my dad.

The pack as a whole turned towards the water, hackles raise, and teeth revealed from drawn back lips. Furry bodies tensed. Jude felt the pack was like one animal now. Ready to charge forward and deal death to anyone who didn't belong. Jude turned to face Gareth. They were on the sandy beach of the island now, front paws in the water, and the whole pack was surging behind them.

Gareth, don't have the pack go after him! I don't want him killed! Jude cried, even though he wasn't sure if even Gareth could stop the singular beast that the pack had become.

But he underestimated the Alpha. Gareth let out a howl that was louder than any of the others and the pack went utterly still and silent. They turned as one to look at their Alpha. Their heads were lowered so that their muzzles practically touched the ground.

Cold Moon Pack! This is your Alpha! You will obey me! Gareth commanded and Jude felt the urge to roll over onto his belly and proffer his throat. Some pack members actually did this and whimpered piteously.

Stay back. Jude and I will handle the intruder. Protect our guests and our home.

There was a murmured assent from the pack like a wave of “yes, Alpha”.

Jude felt the tension drain from him. He and Gareth then headed into the water. Paavo was already halfway across the lake. The water was an icy blast against Jude’s fur. As he began to swim doggy-style again, his father’s wolf wheeled and disappeared into the forest. It was as if Theis had waited until Jude was coming after him to move. But now that he had moved, it was as if the forest had swallowed him up completely.

We’re going to lose him! Jude cried.

In the middle of the lake, Jude shifted into human form. He sputtered for a moment but then quickly began to stroke powerfully to shore, outpacing Gareth and passing Paavo who stayed in their wolf forms. He was able to get to his feet and start running far sooner than the other wolves.

It was then he realized that he could see auras around everything. Every stone had a different colored aura depending on the type from pale gray to bright pink. The water glowed hot blue like a lake of phosphorus. Each tree was a slightly different shade of green. He could how old they were simply from a glance.

And his father’s paw prints glowed *red*.

Jude could see those paw prints curving into the darkness, traveling a circuitous path deep into the woods.

I can see his path! Jude sent to Gareth.

What do you mean? His scent? Gareth asked.

No, his footprints! They're glowing! Follow me!

He flew after after his father. It didn't even feel like his feet touched the needle-strewn forest floor as he ran. There was no pain as there usually was from running barefoot. Jude also felt supremely confident as he moved. He wasn't worried about tripping over branches or bashing into a stray tree.

His body was completely under his control. He was able to dodge and spring at the slightest need.

Paavo and Gareth flanked him as the three of them raced into the forest. His father was amazingly fast. The red glow of his paw prints stretched ahead of him seemingly endlessly without sight of the wolf who was making them. Yet Jude did not tire as he ran through the night-shrouded trees. He actually sped up, finding greater strength when he least expected it. His arms and legs pumped like pistons. His breathing was effortless. He leaped over fallen trees and brush as if he was weightless. And, finally, he saw the wolf. The Fourth Rogue. His father.

There's a ravine coming up! He'll be trapped, Gareth sent to him over their bond.

Jude lowered his head and ran *faster*. He saw the Fourth Rogue rear back as he found the edge of the ravine. The Fourth Rogue's paws seemed to dance as he gauged the distance to the other side. But there was no chance that even a mighty werewolf leap would get him there. His father spun around to face them. Jude skidded to a halt a few feet away. He wasn't even winded. His body tingled as if eager to run more and then to fight.

But he didn't want to fight his father. Theis was sick. He needed healing, not bruising.

"There's nowhere to go," Jude told him. "We're not going to hurt you. Just stay where you are and listen to what we have to say."

He'd thought in the darkness of Grandmother Sophia's house that his father's coat was as black as coal. But it wasn't. The color shifted like clouds over the moon, ever changing.

Magic. He's sheathed in powerful magic.

Jude took that moment to truly study his father. Theis was big. Not as big as Paavo or Gareth, but he was larger than Jude. Theis' head came up to his chest. He was beautiful and powerful and, yet, Jude could feel the *wrongness* running through him, marring that beauty.

Rogue. But different though than Mack and the others. I'm not quite sure how he's different, but this feels ... more unnatural than they do. How can that make any sense?

Magic rippled out from Theis and Jude could see it like he had the auras for everything else. The magic was a dull yellowy red in color. For brief moments, that yellowy red would *thin* and he would be able to see a clear beautiful silvery-white glow that came from the heart of Theis.

If I could remove the yellowy red then he would be cured. But how? How can I do that? If only I could see it done then I might understand!

Behind him Gareth and Paavo shifted into human form. Gareth stepped slightly in front of Jude, huge and protective. Paavo barged ahead so that there he was between Theis and them. His father did not shift into human form though, but continued to regard them as a wolf.

"Little brother," Paavo's voice vibrated with emotion. The Alpha of Alphas dropped down on one knee and extended a hand towards the wolf. Theis' lips writhed back from his teeth with a low growl.

"I don't think he likes you very much right now," Jude said.

"You should let Jude speak with him," Gareth advised.

But Paavo ignored them. "Theis, I'm so sorry. So very sorry. Shift and we can talk."

“He is a Rogue, Theis,” Gareth said softly. “He will not listen to you. Not even if you command him as his Alpha.”

But Paavo was intent on what he was doing and would brook no argument. Look, Theis.” He pointed back at Jude. “Your *son* is here. We can all speak. We can *protect* him together now. I was wrong not to help you in the past. I’ve regretted it every single moment since. Can you forgive me? We’re family.”

“Paavo, he *attacked* Jude,” Gareth explained. “His bite triggered Jude’s first shift.”

“Of course he did!” Paavo cast an angry look over his shoulder at Gareth. “That is how it is done in our pack. A father or mother bites their children to trigger the --”

“Not like this,” Jude interrupted. “He wanted to kill me. He was definitely going to hurt Grandmother Sophia. That’s not the man that you described to me. He’s a Rogue. He’s sick and not himself.”

Witch, a guttural voice whispered in Jude’s head.

Jude stepped around Paavo so that he could see Theis. “Did you just speak?”

Paavo’s eyes widened. “You heard him say ‘witch’, too? Yet you are not part of our pack yet.”

Jude didn’t want to argue that he never would be as he was meant for the Cold Moon Pack. He merely nodded to Paavo then he spoke to his father, “Grandmother Sophia isn’t evil. She took care of me. She might be a witch, but she’s not bad. You love -- *loved?* - Eira and she’s a witch.”

Theis’ jewel-like eyes narrowed at Jude as words hissed between them, *All witches untrustworthy. Traitors! Betrayers!*

Jude jerked back as if hit. His father's words were like barbs. They stung. Had his father wanted to harm him because he was a witch? He decided to ask.

"Even me? I'm a witch, too. Or part witch," Jude pointed out. The wound - though completely healed from his father's bite *ached* suddenly. He remembered the terror and rage he felt as the Fourth Rogue had attacked him. "Did you want to kill me, Father?"

A thin whine came from Theis, but then the sound was cut off as if his father didn't want him to know the thought caused him pain. Jude's heart thudded in his chest.

"Shift, Theis. You can tell him that you didn't mean to hurt him. He's your *son* and I know how much you love him," Paavo pleaded. "Tell him in your own words. You can explain. We can make you well again."

Those jewel-like eyes blinked, softening somehow for a moment, but he did not shift. The magical wrongness - almost like a cloak that obscured Theis' true nature - *roiled* as if fighting against that softening. Those teeth were shown again in the darkness. White and razor sharp. Jude could almost imagine them slicing through the skin of his throat.

"Do you know of a way to cure a Rogue?" Gareth's voice was low. He didn't sound angry, not yet. But he was on the cusp of it. Paavo had demanded that he kill Mack and the others after all. If there was a cure then was it being used only for some and not others?

"No, but I have heard there is a way," Paavo whispered.

"You've *heard* of a way to help Rogues yet you *demand*ed I kill Mack?" Now there was definitely anger in Gareth's voice. "If there's a way to cure them then *no Rogue* should be destroyed while we find it."

Jude touched his forearm to calm Gareth even though he agreed with the Alpha's anger.

Paavo shot Gareth a look of anger mixed with pain. "He's my brother! Your mate's father! How can you speak of killing him?"

"And Mack was my Alpha, my friend, and a father to me and many in the pack," Gareth pointed out. "I have no desire to hurt Theis. But you cannot have it both ways, Paavo. If we try to save Theis, we try to save everyone. No exceptions."

If Paavo agreed then the Rogues would be safe in the silver cells. Jude's shoulders tensed as he waited on Paavo's answer.

The Alpha of Alphas let out a snarl, but said, "Fine! I agree to your terms. So you *do* have Mack in the silver cells. Just as I thought!"

Gareth did not say anything. What was there to say? And now that Paavo had agreed to sparing all Rogues it didn't matter any longer.

"Theis was running with Mack and his pack," Jude said. "He wouldn't turn himself in though."

"Turn himself in? Of course not. He doesn't want to die. I am shocked that Mack would agree to such a thing." Paavo's forehead furrowed.

Jude and Gareth exchanged a look. They had to tell Paavo about his potential ability.

"Mack didn't surrender himself to us to die," Jude said and licked his lips.

"We think ... we think I can cure them. That my magic is special in some way. Theis though didn't want to be imprisoned while I found a way to make the magic work right."

"But he couldn't quite stay away," Gareth muttered, staring at the Rogue uneasily. He might have been thinking of the fact that Theis would be hunting humans around the Cold Moon Pack's territory, causing them problems with the local populace in addition to harming the innocent.

“Cure him now then, Jude!” Paavo’s eyes were shining with hope. His desire for his brother to be brought back to him was so raw that it hurt to see.

“I haven’t figured it out yet.” Jude met his father’s gaze. He took in a breath and lowered himself down so that he and his father were eye to eye. “F-father.” It felt so strange saying that. Theis’ head tilted to the side though in acknowledgment. “I can see -- see what’s wrong with you.” Jude reached and actually touched the yellowy-red aura that was so wrong. He hissed and jerked his hand back as the magic wanted to wrap around his fingers like a sticky web. A sticky web that *burned*. “I can see the curse or whatever it is that’s making him a Rogue. If I could just figure out how to remove it.”

“Surely, Eira would know how.” Gareth was fully frowning now. “Why would she let her lover be turned Rogue or, even if it was some kind of accident, then why not cure him if she’s able?”

“Maybe the witch just abandoned him!” Paavo snarled. “Maybe she cursed him because he tried to stop one of her plans. Maybe a plan to harm Jude. My brother would give his life for his son.”

At the mention of Eira’s name, Theis growled and his hackles rose up. *Not safe. You are not safe. Can’t save you. Want to, but can’t. She follows.*

“Father, shift and tell us about Eira,” Jude pleaded. “You don’t have to go into the cells. We’ll you go. But you’ve got to talk to us. You’ve got to tell us about --”

There was a snap of a twig as loud as a gunshot to Jude’s werewolf sensitive ears. The three of them spun around towards the sound. It wasn’t Molly or the Betas or another pack member. There was a smell on the wind, familiar and yet not to Jude. He squinted his eyes and thought he saw a slender figure between two trees. At that same moment, Jude knew that

his father was going to make a break for it. He twisted back around just as Theis leaped into the ravine.

“FATHER, NO!” Jude screamed.

He lunged towards his father’s furry form, but Theis was just out of his reach. Theis landed on all four paws on the ravine’s steeply sloping sides. He slid down a few feet, paws spreading wider and wider until he was flat on his stomach and then tumbling end over end. The ravine went down over seventy feet into the darkness below. Jude could see a thin ribbon of silvery water at the bottom. Jude quickly lost sight of his father’s form in the darkness. Gareth stopped him from falling down after him by grabbing Jude around the middle and wrenching him back from the edge.

The two of them fell back. Jude landed heavily on top of Gareth. He was still sobbing and calling out for his father as Gareth somehow managed to get them both back up to their feet again. Gareth was growling low as his gaze snapped from the ravine to the space where they saw the woman.

“Was that Eira?” Paavo asked.

“I don’t know. I have to find her,” Gareth snarled.

“No, my dad! He could be down there with a broken neck!” Jude cried. He didn’t know why but he was sure that the woman wasn’t his mother. He would have *known* her. But he didn’t know this woman stalking his father. He was sure that she was following after Theis.

“He’s right! Where is the way down, Gareth?” Paavo demanded.

With a final desperate look at where the woman had been, Gareth shook himself and said, “Follow me. This way.”

He leaped forward and in mid air became a wolf again. Paavo and Jude followed suit. It was so easy to go now from two feet to four paws. Jude didn’t care that he would be exhausted later. They had to get to his father.

The way to get to the ravine was a long one though they ran almost all out. The sides of the ravine slowly became less steep and more gradual. At the first point where it was safe to run down them, Gareth pivoted and did so, leaving them back the way they had come. Jude stuck his nose up into the air and sought out his father's marred scent. He finally caught a whiff of it and let out a soft howl.

Jude raced ahead of the two larger werewolves as the scent grew stronger and stronger. He skidded to a halt, dead branches and leaves spraying up around his paws as he found where his father had come to land at the bottom of the ravine. He sniffed a damp, dark patch on one leaf and jerked back with a whine. It was blood!

He's injured! Jude whined low.

It will be all right. Werewolves are hardy beings, Jude. There is not enough blood here to indicate a serious injury, but it will slow him down so, hopefully, we can catch him, Gareth said. *Come on!*

The three of them continued at a punishing pace until Jude thought that his lungs were filled with acid and his legs were wobbling beneath him. But all that effort was for nothing. The trail they were following ended at a small logging road. Theis, evidently, had a car and he'd shifted, gotten inside and driven away. Jude collapsed on a pile of leaves by the side of the road, shaking with exhaustion. Gareth immediately curled around him.

He's gone! Jude cried mournfully.

If he can drive a car, Jude, that means he's all right, Gareth pointed out. *And I think ... no, I am sure, he will be back.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE: PROOF

The next day ...

Gareth walked down the sun dappled driveway of Fallowmere towards the gate that connected to the two-lane highway. He'd come alone as he'd left Jude asleep in their bed. The young man had shifted from man to wolf to man so many times the night before that he was dead to the world as his body tried to recuperate. Plus he had insisted on staying up for the festivities, such as they were.

After Theis and the unknown witch had appeared on their lands the night before, no one had felt secure enough to truly let go and party. Yet another thing that Jude didn't get to experience. Gareth tried not to be bitter about that. Jacob and Raj though had determinedly tried to loosen everyone up with jokes and beer. They'd even done the traditional "christening" of Jude by pouring icy water from a cooler over his head and then chasing him into the lake.

His mate had given as good as he'd gotten, dragging Raj into the water with him and pouncing on Jacob. Somehow sausages had found their way down Raj's shirt as well causing the fastidious Indian werewolf to squeal and threaten dry cleaning fees. Molly had laughed so hard that she had collapsed on the ground, taking Tessa with her. Both women had remained cuddled on the ground together by the fire, whispering and giggling.

Gareth had never thought to see Molly *giggle*. Tessa seemed to bring out the girl in his Point.

Grandmother Sophia had ensconced herself by the fire in a large chair with a blanket over her knees. Brandon had insisted she tell story after story.

She knew some great ones about werewolves and witches. She spoke of times when vast forests spread everywhere the eye could see, of endless moonlit nights, of spells and potions, of love and death. Brandon was lost in all of them as were many of the pack. Gareth had wondered if some of the stories weren't *stories* at all, but were *true*. He'd determined to ask her later.

In the end, everyone had *tried* to be joyous. They had talked and laughed around the fire. Eaten and drunk their fill. But there was a sense of *siege* about Fallowmere. Many times he caught pack members staring off into the trees, *looking* for movement where there should be none. There were heads cocked to hear any approaching sounds that weren't normal to the forest. Noses were lifted into the air to sniff the night and find what did not belong. Gareth, too, did this. Trying to catch the scent of the witch from earlier in the day. But there was nothing.

Yet he didn't believe the forest was free of enemies.

Neither did Haggerty. The old miner sauntered up to him and said, "We're being hunted, Alpha."

"Yes, yes, we are, Haggerty," Gareth agreed.

"I think I'll be doing a sweep myself tonight and then stay at the silver cells." The old miner moved his ubiquitous toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other without taking it out. "What we don't need is to be overcome by enemies from the *outside* or the *inside*."

"Sounds like a good plan, Haggerty." Gareth slapped his shoulder. "I'm sorry you're missing the fun though."

The muted fun, but fun it is.

Haggerty looked over at Jude - this was when the sausages *mysteriously* made it into Raj's shirt - and grinned. "I think there will be plenty of fun times to come with that pup. He's put the life back into our pack ... and into *you*, I think, Alpha."

Gareth couldn't hide the smile and duck of his head. "I see that the pack grapevine is in good working order."

“There have been *some* rumors that Jude is *more* than a new member.” The old miner flashed a grin.

“They haven’t come from *me*, Alpha.” Nina came up behind him, placing a hand on Gareth’s brawny shoulder. “You just have the absolutely *worst* poker face. Whenever you see Jude your love just *shines* like the sun.”

Haggerty’s eyes widened. Maybe he had thought that Gareth was just besotted with the new pack member, but hadn’t realized Jude was his *mate*. But now the light dawned. “So, it’s true then ... Jude is your --”

Nina clapped a hand over Haggerty’s mouth. “Gareth wants Jude to have a full welcome as a *member* of the pack before any *other* things are discussed.”

The old miner’s bushy eyebrows raised and lowered expressively. She removed her hand and he just nodded. But there was a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Well, I’ll be.” That grin grew wider and he shook his head. “Another *good* thing to look forward to after we sort this mess.”

“We will get this sorted,” Gareth said.

“I’ve no doubt, Alpha.” Haggerty patted his arm and disappeared into the darkness.

“You know, I heard that he shifted the first time in the middle of the desert after a gun battle,” Nina murmured as she stared at the space where Haggerty had gone.

“I’d heard it was at the bottom of a mine shaft,” Gareth murmured.

“He’s a living legend.” Nina smiled. She quickly sobered though. “I wanted to give you an update on security.”

“Go ahead.”

“I have six wolves patrolling the perimeter. Two wolves are at the silver cells. Cassiday is monitoring all cameras over the property. I swear that boy lives on sugar and caffeine. I don’t think he’ll sleep for a week,” she reported.

“That’s good. Tomorrow, Bronwyn will be arriving,” he told her.

Nina’s eyebrows lifted. “Another witch?”

“Takes magic to fight magic. Eira has gotten through our defenses as if they simply were not there. She hides her scent somehow. It is as if she is appearing and disappearing from the same spot,” he struggled to explain.

Nina crossed her arms over her chest. “If she really is as powerful as Grandmother Sophia describes her, why doesn’t she just come and get her son?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she’s ... waiting on something,” Gareth answered.

Gareth wished he knew. It was hard - near impossible - to defend against someone when you didn’t know their motives. Was Eira coming for her son? Was she stalking her ex-lover? Was she simply playing with them? Or was there something else in the mix that they simply didn’t know about?

Gareth tried to reassure himself that he was *doing* something about the danger to Jude and his pack. Bronwyn was coming. In fact, that was who he was going to greet and usher into the pack lands right now. Between her and Grandmother Sophia they would formulate a plan to at least track Eira if she came onto pack lands.

As he continued to walk down the path, he tried to calm his swirling mind by remembering just that morning with Jude. Gareth had slid out from under the warm, clinging body. Jude had whined piteously when Gareth

got up. The Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack had *almost* stayed just where he was because of that sound. But only he and he alone could do this task.

He'd pressed kisses to Jude's temple and murmured his love into Jude's ears until his mate had stopped with the sad little noises and slipped back into deep sleep. Jude would *hate* to know he revealed his neediness for love and affection in his sleep. His mate was still determined not to show any weakness.

He thinks wanting to be with others, wanting to be cuddled and safe, is weakness. It is not.

Keeping Jude safe was what Gareth *needed* to do. His Alpha nature was urging him to go to war. To lash out at the enemy or enemies that surrounded them. He had to take back control. That was the only way to keep Jude safe. But his own pack lands were being subverted and it seemed like there were as many enemies within as without. How did Theis get onto his property without him knowing? How did Eira - if it was Eira - thwart him as well? Anger and alarm was prickling his skin all the time. His normal calm was being tested.

He walked past a curve in the drive and saw Bronwyn's car, a nondescript Toyota Avalon, a steely gray color, waiting patiently just beyond the gates. He heard the click of the door unlocking and the witch who had been his friend for long years emerged. Her red hair looked like copper wire and her green eyes sparkled like emeralds. She no longer wore the disguise of the sheriff, but her own face. She was smiling at him openly, but he thought he saw signs of strain on her lovely face.

"Sorry you have to come all the way out here rather than simply being able to buzz me in," she said as she shut the door behind her. "Or maybe, I shouldn't be sorry, as that means you have pretty strong protections against witches on your property. Makes my job and Sophia's a bit easier. Though if we really are fighting against Eira ... well, nothing is really easy, is it?"

He nodded in response as he pressed the button to open the gate on the pylon to the right. Bronwyn had to be officially welcomed onto the pack's property by him for her magic to work at full power. That was why he was there in person rather than just allowing her to drive on in. As Alpha, he would have to grant her permission to enter without any restrictions.

"I'm glad you've come. How is your deputy? Is he worried about Clara?" Gareth could not imagine the deputy being anything but frantic about his daughter going missing, but Bronwyn seemed to have great control over the man.

"He believes she's at summer camp," Bronwyn explained. "It's much easier than having him not notice that she's gone. He thinks she's in swimming races, having camp outs, eating s'mores ..."

"I wish she was. I wish ... wish things were different," Gareth answered and his voice was tight. Seeing a young wolf ruined like she had been was a travesty. That it was Mack who had caused this made it even harder to swallow.

"Maybe she will be." Bronwyn studied his face carefully. There was an eagerness there. He imagined that as a witch, any new power or spell was fascinating for her, especially one as powerful as curing a Rogue. "Has Jude had any revelations?"

"I think he has in a way though he will tell you that he's been able to do *nothing*." His mate was so hard on himself. "But he was able to stop Pierce from slipping fully into madness."

She nodded. He thought he saw a trace of disappointment on her face. Realizing he had caught that look, she laughed. "Don't think I'm criticizing Jude in any way! It's quite ridiculous for anyone to think he could solve this in a day or a week or a month or even a few *decades*. I was just *hopeful* due to his heritage that ... that a miracle might happen."

The thought of decades had not worried Gareth in the past. Werewolves are immortal after all absent a violent death. But he could not keep Mack, Clara and Pierce in the silver cells for even a tenth of that time. They would all surely slip into full madness well before a year was out.

“Now you looked more alarmed than me!” she laughed.

“Do you really think it could take *decades*?”

She shrugged, but her eyes showed she wasn't so sanguine about waiting that long either. “I don't know. But I'm hoping that Jude is a natural at it. Some witches believe that it wasn't spellcraft that allowed Eira to create the werewolves in the first place, but an innate gift that can only be replicated with her blood. Half of Jude comes from her. So if it's in her blood then it's in his.”

Gareth frowned. He thought of how “Do any witches think that they can gain that power from consuming Eira's blood?”

“Some do.” She nodded then added with a wry smile. “But that would mean getting close enough to Eira without getting killed to do it and then having her allow you to take it. The likelihood of that happening is, well, ridiculously low.” She shrugged again.

“What about Jude's blood? Would other witches think the same about him?”

“Yes, but it wouldn't be as efficacious. And, then again, you'd have Eira coming after you for hurting her son,” she said.

“Assuming she's still alive. Assuming she cares for him at all.”

“Eira is alive, but if she's here ... I don't know. But I do know that Jude is *hers*. It doesn't really matter if she cares a whit for him or not. Going after him is the same as going after her. It's disrespectful and she will not tolerate

it,” Bronwyn said. “But I rather think she does care about him. She allowed him to be conceived and hasn’t killed him after all.”

Those were two very valid points though they were harsh. Gareth knew that simply being a parent didn’t mean that one was kind or good to their children. His father was evidence of that. But outright murdering them was hard to take.

“But why has she stayed away from him then?” he asked.

“Perhaps to keep him safe. Perhaps she never really wanted to raise him. She gave him life. Maybe that’s enough for her in the mothering department.” Bronwyn looked almost sour for a moment as she added, “She’s not like other people. She doesn’t really think like us.”

“Did Grandmother Sophia tell you about the incident last night during the Run?” he asked her as he stepped to the very edge of the property line.

She bobbed her head. Her red hair flashing like blood under the sun. “I admit that I don’t understand how Theis could have become a Rogue. Eira could easily cure him. Why would she leave him like that?”

“Unless they weren’t together any longer,” Gareth pointed out. “He seemed quite ... *negative* in his feelings towards all witches.”

“I admit though that I would think Eira would simply *kill* a lover who was no longer of use to her.” Bronwyn shrugged. “Why let him continue on? He’s *just* a werewolf after all.”

There was something so cold-blooded in her tone and her words that he raised his head and looked at her in surprise. She saw his look and colored, one of her hands raising to her mouth.

“Not that I think that, Gareth! I’m just saying what I believe that *Eira* would think,” she quickly assured him.

“Of course,” he answered though he felt a little unnerved. But he shook it off. Perhaps Bronwyn did have some prejudicial feelings towards werewolves. That wouldn’t be unusual. But she had shown him that she was his friend, whatever remnants of prejudice still existed in her mind.

Am I not prejudiced against witches? For many, it is easier to distrust them than to treat them as individuals with some trustworthy and others not.

“Maybe Eira still loves Theis and hopes he comes around,” Gareth said suddenly as he realized he had ruled out the idea - perhaps, *wrongfully* - that Eira would be the one to fall out of love first - if she ever felt it at all.

Bronwyn stepped over so that she was opposite him just beyond the boundary. She was half a foot shorter than he was so he had to tilt his head down to look at her. The dark circles under her eyes and other signs of strain were more obvious from that angle. He frowned.

“Are you all right, Bronwyn? I hope that this request to help us against Eira is not too much of a call upon our friendship,” he asked.

But she shook her head quickly. “No, not at all. Eira is really *every* witches’ problem. We must fight her wherever she is.”

His eyebrows rose. “Is every witch against her?”

Her green eyes rose to his. “Every witch wants her power. So every witch is against her.”

“Grandmother Sophia does not want it. Nor does Jude. Do you?” he questioned.

“I have many feelings about Eira. Perhaps those would be better discussed at Fallowmere, perhaps over a glass of iced tea?” She indicated with her head towards his home that was hidden by the trees.

He hesitated. He had learned to trust his instincts, even when - or perhaps *especially* when - he had no discernible basis for the concern otherwise.

But they had asked Bronwyn here as an ally. She had given him no reason to distrust her over all these years. They needed her help. Why was he hesitant about letting her in?

“Gareth? Is something wrong?” Her gaze had sharpened.

“No, I just am unnerved by all the intrusions onto the property. Makes me want to keep it shut down, but you are most welcome,” he assured her. “As the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack, I welcome you, Bronwyn onto our lands as a pack friend with all the rights and privileges thereto.”

“I, Bronwyn, accept the position of pack friend with all the duties and responsibilities thereto,” she answered formally.

“Then, enter our lands and be at peace.” He stepped to the side and gestured for her to enter the pack lands.

She smiled and stepped across the boundary. There was a low thrum that filled Gareth’s ears as she entered. The light seemed to *bend* and the world *twisted*. As soon as she was fully past the boundary, everything sprang back to what it should be. Bronwyn looked back at where the invisible ward was.

“This ward is simply created by the pack claiming an area?” she asked.

He nodded. “Well, it’s not *quite* that simple. The Alpha must have a clear idea of the lands he or she controls. Deeds help. And then we have a big party to consecrate the land as our. The wards appear after that.”

She shook her head in wonder. “You truly are beings of magic. What would take countless spells and power to create this for a witch, just happens naturally for you.”

“Eira created us,” he said as if that was an explanation and perhaps it was. Creating wards around pack lands was just a *part* of being a werewolf. Their ability to speak over pack bonds was also magical. It was also how the Alpha had control, in part, over his or her pack. “We don’t control magic. It is ... a part of us.”

“Yes.” Bronwyn was turning around in a circle, her face bathed in the sunlight that streamed through breaks in the canopy. Suddenly, she jerked to a halt. Like a pointer dog that had found a scent, her head thrust forward. Her nostrils flared.

“What is it?” Gareth sniffed the air and he smelled flowers and green growing things. He sniffed again and there was the faintest scent of cinnamon. He bared his teeth.

“This way.”

She started to run into the woods. He followed after her, but soon outpaced the witch. The scent of cinnamon was growing stronger. The air seemed suffused with *something*. It was green and gold and beautiful. It was then he saw the fallen tree with three white flowers laid upon it. They were fresh and wet with dew. The scent emanated from there. He skidded to a halt about five feet away from it. His skin *prickled*.

“What is this?” he asked her.

Bronwyn was out of breath and leaned over with her hands on the tops of her thighs, breathing heavily for a moment. “It’s -- It’s proof.”

“Of what?” He stared at the dark bark and the pure white flowers. It was beautiful. Simple. Elegant. It *shouldn’t* have resonated with such power.

“It’s the marker for a portal.” She straightened. Her expression was a mixture of excited and fearful. “This kind of magic could only have been accomplished by one person. Eira. She is already here.”

CHAPTER FORTY: BEAUTIFUL MAIDEN OR ANCIENT CRONE?

Eira's hand felt cool in Jude's as they wandered through her garden. He looked up at her in adoration. She towered above him as he was just a child. How old? He didn't know? Was he remembering or dreaming her? The sun was behind her head and he couldn't see her face for a moment. But he caught sight of an edge of a smile.

"Sometimes dreams and reality are the same, Jude," she murmured.

Rose bushes, heavy with blooms, bobbed around them like sleepy children. Grass, sweet and bright green, swished under their feet. Both of them were barefoot and Jude could feel the cool earth beneath his soles. The buzzing of bees filled the air. He saw one, huge and lazy, hovering over a flower. It landed almost drunkenly on center as it bathed itself in pollen. His mother was humming as well and that tune joined the music of the bees and swept Jude into a state of profound peace.

His mother stopped at the edge of the garden. There was rich, turned earth there, ready to be planted. Eira released his hand and indicated that he should sit down on the ground. He realized then that she was carrying a wicker basket in her other hand. She set it down between them and sank onto her knees gracefully. Her sundress – a pale, blue with white flowers along the seams – flowed over her thighs as she settled on the ground. The scent of her – a flowery minty scent that was enhanced by the very real flowers in her garden – curled around him. It was the scent of safety and home.

Jude looked eagerly at the closed lid of the basket. He wanted to know what was inside. His mother's basket always held interesting things. *Magical things*. That held his attention even though they were at the very edge of the cultivated portion of his mother's garden. Just a few feet away was the tree line of the deep, dark forest.

It was a forest out of a fairy tale. It was always dark in the woods as opposed to the garden that was awash with golden sunlight. There were

paths that led from the garden into the woods. Jude knew that some of those paths led to buildings where howls came from when the moon was high and bone white in the sky. He kept his gaze on the basket, not the woods, not the paths. He did not search the trees for movement. He stared solely at the basket. His mother's hands opened the lid and exposed what was inside.

He leaned forward and let out a little breath. Inside were white trays filled with what looked like jewels. Rubies, emeralds, and diamonds. He reached in, but paused, with his fingers just above the jewels. He looked up into his mother's face to see if it was all right to touch this precious treasure. His mother smiled at him again. Her auburn hair shimmered in the light. She tilted her head towards the basket, indicating that he could touch to his heart's content.

Jude picked up one of the rubies. As soon as he touched it, he knew it wasn't a gemstone. It was something else. The "ruby" was warm and it gave slightly when he squeezed it. He brought it up to his eyes and looked deeply inside. There was a spark of light in the very center of it.

"That is a part of me," his mother said quietly. "That spark you see is *life*. *My life*. Look all around you."

She gestured to the garden with one sweep of her arm. Jude compared the ruby to the red of the roses, the green of the emerald to the grass, and the diamond to the white poppies.

"It's all you, Momma?" he asked. He imagined that every one of those flowers had come from a seed like the one he held, the seed with a spark, a spark of his mother's life. Maybe that was why these flowers were more brilliant and lived eternally. They never shed their blooms. They never withered. They never died.

"Yes, my love. And not just these and not just in flowers. I share my life with *others*, too," she explained.

Jude frowned. "Do you mean ... *people*?"

She nodded and Jude could not help but look towards the woods where the buildings were, the buildings that housed the things that howled. Could those be people? The people his mother had given some part of herself to? The woods were still dark and deep. His slender shoulders twitched.

She touched his arm, gaining his attention. Her brown eyes seemed to glow with fire. “Out there.” She pointed into the woods. “In the places you fear, things have begun to *twist*.”

Twist. Yes, that was a good way to describe it. Unlike the garden where things weren’t exactly neat and tidy, they were *clean* in a way that the forest was not. It was as if the garden represented all that was good and bright in his mother. The forest was her mystery, her darkness, things he did not understand and wasn’t sure he wanted to.

“Why are they twisting?” he asked her finally.

She wasn’t angered by the question. She never got angry when he asked about things. It was when he wanted to hide that she didn’t like it. She nodded as if he was doing what she’d *hoped* he would. What she’d *wanted* him to do all along.

Her lips pressed together tightly and an angry spark lit up in her burning gaze. “Because someone is trying to build their own garden. But all they sow are seeds of chaos. It is forcing me to prune.”

Jude closed his hand protectively around the seed in his hand. He felt it pulsing against his palm. She suddenly looked back down at him and the fire in her eyes was gone. She was smiling at him again. Looking like his mother and not the stranger any longer. She patted his closed hand.

“Don’t worry, little wolf, I’m not going to prune you or any of your plants,” she assured him. Her gaze went distant. “I made that decision and I will keep it.”

“My plants?”

She nodded, focusing on him again. “This section of the garden is yours.”

“Mine?” he repeated again. He blinked, not quite believing it. Mother was so protective and possessive of her garden yet here she was offering to let him have a small part of it.

“You can grow anything you want here.” She gestured to the seeds in the basket.

“Can I grow one of each?”

She laughed indulgently at his eagerness. “You can! But you’ve got space for far more than just one of each kind. You can even create your own seeds to plant. And when you need more space we’ll add on.”

He frowned then. One cloud in his blue sky. “But the forest ...”

Every other direction in the garden was filled already. The only direction that his garden could grow was towards with the forest. Her hand tightened over his clenched one.

“That forest is your home. *Will be your home.* You will be master of it like I am mistress here.” Her fingers spread wide and it looked like they became the trees. “So do not be afraid of it. *Embrace it.*”

He didn’t quite know what she meant. The whole forest would be his? What good would that do him? He didn’t want it. The forest was scary. But it *did* beckon to him. Even though his skin twitched when he looked at it and sweat spiked over his forehead when he dreamed of it, he still was *fascinated* by it. Yet he still thought of it as his mother’s secret place. It could never be his. He wanted to stay in the sunlight in her garden anyways. He pulled out more of the glittering gem-like seeds.

“Now,” she said, “you start planting here. I just have to go for a little while, but I’ll be back to help you.”

Alarm again spiked through him. He never went this close to the forest without her, let alone *stayed* by it. But she patted his hand and smiled as she reached into the basket and pulled out a pair of wicked looking shears.

“I told you, little wolf, I need to prune. But I’ll be back.”

With one last pat of her hand, she rose up with the shears. That light was in her eyes again, making her look like someone else. He watched her as she took one of the meandering paths that led deep into the woods. He caught sight of her dress between the tree trunks. But then she disappeared.

Jude swallowed and clutched at his handful of seeds. He almost wanted to follow her. The garden was not as pleasant and welcoming without her there. The dark woods were still as dark, but she was in there. He wanted to be with her. Beyond all things. He would go to the darkest places to find her.

And then a voice whispered to him, *I’m in the woods, little wolf. Come find me.*

Jude rocketed awake. Sweat bathed his brow. His breathing was coming hard and fast. He didn’t know where he was for a moment, but then he recognized Gareth’s bedroom. *His bedroom*, too. Sunlight streamed through the trees that seemed to hug Fallowmere. The woods embraced the house and the wolves inside.

The woods. The forest. It’s mine now. Or it will be.

The dream or memory or whatever it was still hung heavy in the air around him. He swore he could smell his mother’s perfume, roses and mint, on his skin. The cool cotton sheets were soaked with his sweat. He was glad that Gareth was not there. The Alpha would be worrying about him. But it had just been a nightmare, hadn’t it? He touched his mate’s pillow and reconsidered that.

He always wanted Gareth near him. He felt a niggling fear that wanting Gareth so much wasn’t wise. What if the Alpha went away? What if Gareth decided he didn’t want the complication of a werewolf-witch hybrid? But he pushed those fears down. He knew Gareth wouldn’t do that based upon the man’s character. But if he really wanted to keep the Alpha with him,

forever, he should insist on the completion of their bond as quickly as possible.

But should he – the man who swore he loved nothing more than being alone – bind himself to someone out of fear?

It should be out of love. Gareth's handsome face, smiling and ducking his head, popped into Jude's mind. Heat bloomed between his legs and his heart hammered. He desperately wanted Gareth then. *It is out of love.*

But then he thought of Eira. He'd loved her, too. Maybe he still did. But that didn't mean he could trust her. What did it all mean?

He threw off the sheets and swung his legs off of the bed onto the cool, smooth wood floor. He would go find Gareth. His Alpha would settle his mind after this terrible dream. Maybe he could even convince Gareth to cut up his food. What had been so bizarre when they'd first met, now was loving. He wanted to feel that love from Gareth right then.

I'm in the woods, little wolf. Come find me, the voice whispered again.

He stiffened. Had he really heard that? Or was it just a remnant of the dream? More cold sweat dotted his body.

Come find me, the whisper was drawn out. *I'm in the woods ...*

Not a part of the dream. In his head. Like Gareth was in his head through the pack bond and the unfinished mate bond. He had a bond with Eira. And she was calling him.

He knew that he should tell someone about this, but he found himself blindly reaching for his jeans and pulling them on without reaching out to his Alpha. He grabbed one of Gareth's t-shirts and drew that over his head. It hung loosely on his slimmer frame. The shirt smelled of Gareth, too, so that calmed him. He breathed in. He should call Gareth. He should -

Little wolf ...

Little –

Mother? He asked.

Silence and then, *Come find me. I'm in the woods.*

He was moving to the door of the bedroom suite before she'd finished responding. He knew he really should tell someone about this, but he wasn't going to. He justified it by telling himself that he didn't want to put anyone in danger. But that wasn't it. He *wanted* to see Eira on his own. If he called to Gareth or even friends like Jacob or Molly, he chanced escalating things before he had a chance to speak to her. She might be able to kill him easily if Grandmother Sophia was to be believed so what did it matter if he went alone or not?

He stuffed his feet into his shoes and took the stairs two at a time down to the first floor and then outside. He heard his name being called by Paavo, but didn't stop. He called over his shoulder that he had to go. And then he was heading into the woods.

Where are you? He called to her.

She didn't answer exactly, but he *felt* his feet directed to the left. He passed by the fire pit from the night before. His werewolf senses picked up the charcoal and the remainder of sausages that had fallen to their "deaths" into the center of the fire. He passed through the line of trees and almost immediately was consumed by the woods. Civilization seemed to fall away in moments. And it wasn't just his surroundings that changed.

The moment that Jude was out of sight of Fallowmere, his wolfish instincts fully kicked in. He loped easily through the needle-strewn forest without breathlessness or tiredness. His body felt good as he vaulted over downed trees and jumped from rock to slippery rock over a stream. He could locate where an animal was just by sound. He could hear the quick heartbeat of a rabbit taking cover or the flicker of a deer's ears as it raised its head from nibbling on a bush as he passed by. The scents of the forest flowed around

him, too, from the raw earthy smell of rotting wood to the hot, coppery smell of blood to the green, growing gush of plants.

But none of these things distracted him from his goal. Whenever he felt uncertain where to go, he felt a tug as if there was a line attached to his chest and his mother was pulling on it. She led him deeper and deeper into the woods, away from the main house and all the pack. He knew what he was doing was incredibly foolish. But he kept on anyways. He had to see her. He had to know ...

What? What do I want to know? I want to know how to cure the Rogues. That's it. That's all. There won't be any sweet reunion with her.

But his quickening heart rate at the thought of seeing her betrayed her true feelings. In some ways, Gareth was making him hope again. Making him want again. The lack of memories he'd had before the accident hadn't truly bothered him before. He hadn't wanted to remember a good family life. It was better to not know what one had lost. Or, at least, that was what he told himself. But here he was, running to his mother.

He came to a halt though when he realized he was at the end of the pack lands. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he *felt* it, almost like there was a keen, green line. Where she'd taken him was to the edge of the river. Fast, rushing water - looking like liquid silver in the sunlight – streamed past him. The other side was about thirty-feet away. No one was there. He turned around slowly, scanning the trees, but saw no one. Frowning, he turned back to the river.

“MOTHER!” he called, the word echoing in the still air. “I’m here! I’ve come! Where are you?”

There was no answer. The sense of being tugged was still there, but lesser.

“I’m not leaving pack lands. You won’t lure me any further. You come *here*. You talk to me *here*,” he said, certain that she could hear him, that she *was* listening.

Yet there was no answer and no woman appeared on the opposite side of the river where he assumed she was. The noises – other than the rush of the river – from the animals and insects suddenly dropped away.

“You here,” Jude whispered.

His eyes flickered towards any movement, but it was always leaves gusting across the ground or branches bobbing in the wind. No woman with auburn hair and deep brown eyes coming to him in a flowing blue sundress. He dug his fingernails into his palms.

“I know you’re here. Show yourself!” his tone held more bravado than he felt.

It was then that he heard a stirring in the water. He glanced down and thought he saw something just beneath the silvery surface. He got down on his haunches and peered into the water. Was it just a fish? No, it was bigger than that. His eyes narrowed.

A hand shot out of the water and grasped the front of his shirt. It pulled him in. The water was icy and the shock had him gasping, nearly taking in a lungful of water in the process. His wolf wanted to panic. It didn’t like to be in the cold water like this. It wanted out, on the land, where it could fight. Here, all they could do was *flail*.

The tug on his front was literal one now. He felt the long fingernails in his shirt as the thing dragged him faster than the current could down the river. He swiped one hand forward and found a forearm. He tried to pull away, but he just caused the grip to grow stronger and the being holding him to rise to the surface.

Horror froze him. It was a woman – not Eira – a *crone*, really, with blue-gray skin, scales and oversized bug-like eyes. A long, forked tongue whipped out and slid along the side of his face. *Tasting him*. He shouted out in shock and disgust. But then she was swimming again, towing him easily down a right branch farther away from pack lands.

Gareth! Gareth! I'm in trouble! He sent over the pack bond with his Alpha.

He only got a garbled reply back as if in an area with bad reception and then the connection seemed to cut out altogether. He knew that this was his mother's doing and he cursed himself for leaving without bringing anyone with him or telling anyone what was happening.

But the crone wasn't going to drag him down and drown him in the river.

He was clearly right to think that Eira simply wanted to speak to him as the crone easily swam over to the bank and threw him out of the water and onto the muddy ground. He landed on his feet in a crouch, fingers stretched out like claws, ready to attack the crone. But she had already retreated back into the watery depths, unconcerned with him.

"She's a water hag, my son. Very dangerous, but I have control of her," his mother said from behind him.

He spun around to find a figure swathed in a gray cloak sitting on a fallen log about ten feet away. Her face was totally obscured by her hood and he, immediately, mourned not seeing it. In his dream – or memory, he was almost sure that's what it was now – she'd been so beautiful, but more than that, *interesting* looking. He wanted to see her. He had to see her.

"Why did you send a water hag to get me?" he demanded to know as he pulled off one shoe and poured water out of it.

She chuckled. More like wheezed. "Well, you wouldn't come and I couldn't go to you. Not that easily, in any event. Not right now."

"But you were on the pack lands last night," he accused her as he emptied the other shoe of a gallon of river water.

"Was I?" He felt her looking at him.

"You were." He stared at her. But all he could see was the gray folds of her hood.

“You seem very sure.” She shrugged her shoulders and then made a slightly pained sound as if the simple movement was agonizing.

“Weren’t you?” His voice had lost some of its conviction and, if he was honest, he had, too.

She raised a hand to her shoulder and the cloak fell back revealing an age spotted hand. He gasped and moved to her. He was on his knees, holding her bony wrist with one hand while gently pulling the hood of the cloak back with the other. This was foolish. This was insane. He should back away. But he had to see her. He had to know.

The face that looked back at him was Eira’s. The bone structure was the same. But the features ... the face was wizened. So old it seemed impossible that she should still be alive at all. Those brown eyes were now rheumy instead of clear. Her skin, that had been all peaches and cream in the garden, was now a grayish color. Her once thick auburn hair was white and thin, showing the skin of her skull through it in places.

“Mother! What happened?” he gasped.

She could not have aged like this in the time it had been since he’d seen her as a child.

“It’s what *didn’t* happen, little wolf.” She drew the hood back over her face with one shaking hand.

“What didn’t happen?” he asked.

There was no hesitation before she answered him, “I did not kill you.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE: RIGHT MAGIC, WRONG MAGIC

Gareth looked down at the almost delicate altar. This was Eira's magic? It didn't ooze malignancy. It didn't give off cold or a foul odor. Quite the opposite. The flowers were sweet smelling. The ground around the altar looked *healthy* and *rich*.

Gareth looked over at Bronwyn. Her gaze was flickering all over the place. She seemed wired. Her fingers twitched at her sides and he thought she was murmuring under her breath. Perhaps she was saying spells to ward off Eira. Strangely, he did not feel frightened about this altar. It soothed him in some way. But Bronwyn's behavior was causing the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

"When you say this is a marker for a portal, do you mean some kind of physical tunnel into the pack lands?" he kept his voice low and soothing.

"No, no, magical. It can open and shut at her will. This altar will allow her to come and go without too great of strain." Bronwyn's fingers now rubbed against the fronts of her thighs. "We need to get Jude. We need to have him very, very near."

Gareth froze. The way she was speaking was as if Jude was a *shield* against Eira for them rather than them keeping Jude safe from her. His gaze slipped down to the altar again. This wasn't magic *breaching* the pack lands. It was a part of it somehow.

What am I thinking here? I do not know magic. But ... werewolves are magic, in a way. We are Eira's magic.

Bronwyn was suddenly grasping his arm. "Gareth, we should get to Jude. With this." She pointed towards the altar. "She can come here at any moment. She could come for Jude. We should - we should --"

The scent that abruptly rose off of her was terribly familiar. He pulled away from her abruptly. If he had been in his wolf form, his fur would have stood

on end. This was the scent of the witch he had seen the other day on pack lands. This wasn't Eira's scent. It was Bronwyn's.

"Bronwyn, did you come here directly from Forest Glenn today?" he asked her.

She stared at him and blinked rapidly. "W-what? Have you not heard what I'm saying? Eira is here. Could be here right this instant."

"Were you here yesterday?" he asked her as he found himself taking half a step back.

"Why are you suddenly afraid of *me*, Gareth? I'm your *friend*." Her eyes looked into his beseechingly.

"Just answer the question, Bronwyn!"

She straightened, her eyebrows rising into her hairline. "No, Gareth, I was *not* here yesterday. I was in Forest Glenn. Why are you asking?"

The smell was unmistakable. It was her. She had been there the day before. What did this mean? Why was she not admitting this was so? Why would she breach the pack lands without his permission and skulk about?

Something was very wrong here. He opened his mouth to ask her again about her whereabouts when Paavo came jogging up to them. Both of their heads jerked towards the sound.

"Paavo," he said, almost grateful for the Alpha of Alpha's presence. His two Betas were flanking him as well. The three werewolves were impressive and gave him even more confidence. "What are you doing here?"

Paavo slowed then stopped a few feet away with his Betas, shifting from foot to foot, ever alert. Paavo was wearing a pair of sand-colored light pants and a white v-necked t-shirt that clung to his heavily muscled form. He appeared like the picture of strength and health.

“Looking for Jude,” he said. His gaze went to the altar. “What is that? It’s beautiful.”

Gareth stiffened at the mention of Jude. He didn’t want Jude discussed with Bronwyn. But Paavo had been back at Fallowmere. He would know where Jude was.

“What do you mean you are looking for Jude?” Gareth asked. He reached out for Jude mentally, but he received a garbled mess. It was like the rushing of a river, as if Jude were underwater.

“Yes, I saw him go into the woods and assumed he came to you. I lost his scent ...” At this, Paavo’s forehead furrowed. “I don’t know how he could hide it from me. I thought perhaps his witchcraft --”

“No! Not *his*! He wouldn’t know how to hide his scent without training. Gareth, she’s here! She might have him!” She gasped.

“Who? Who has Jude?” Paavo’s right hand curled into a fist as he growled.

Gareth closed his eyes and sent out a signal to the pack. He sent them an image of Jude and that of a question mark. One by one, his pack sent back images of where they had last seen his mate. Like Paavo, the latest image showed him heading towards the edge of pack lands. Towards the river.

His eyelids snapped open. Surely, Jude would not leave pack lands. He was not so foolish as to do that. His mate was very protective of himself, but he was also brave and would want to protect everyone against Eira, too. He might have gone off on his own to meet with his mother. Bargain with her. Figure out a way to safety. Except it wasn’t safe. He remembered the sense of Jude being underwater and shivered. Had Jude gone into the water? He had to get his mate.

“I know where he last was,” Gareth told Paavo and Bronwyn. “Paavo take Bronwyn back to Fallowmere.”

“What? No! I will go with you to see to Jude’s safety,” the Alpha of Alpha’s proclaimed. “My Betas will take her.”

“I’m going with you. We have to get to Jude. If he’s with Eira then you *need* me,” she protested.

Gareth truly didn’t want her near Jude. Something was wrong here and it wasn’t altogether Eira.

“No, Bronwyn. I need you back at the pack house. I need you to protect the pack against Eira,” he said.

She made some noise of dissent, but the Betas were suddenly at either side of her, looking big and menacing. She gave both of them the side-eye and let out a laugh.

“Gareth, you brought me here to protect Jude. Let me do that!” she cried. That scent of desperation wafted off of her and his skin crawled.

Gareth had to say nothing. Paavo wasn’t moved by the words of a witch. “Betas, take her back to the pack house. Gareth and I will go after Jude.”

The Betas immediately moved closer in on her and she was forced step by step towards the house. When they were out of earshot of Bronwyn, at least, Paavo looked at him and lifted an eyebrow.

“Did you not bring her here? Why do you suddenly not trust her?” Paavo asked.

“She was here yesterday. She lied about it. *This* is supposedly some of Eira’s magic.” He pointed down to the delicate altar that Paavo had called “beautiful”.

The Alpha of Alphas looked down at it again and frowned. “Hardly seems the sort of thing an evil witch goddess would use to breach our lands.”

“My lands, Paavo,” Gareth reminded gently.

Paavo merely shrugged. “My point stands.”

“I don’t know anything about magic, but the way this ... *consistent* with pack magic makes me think that Eira wouldn’t have to *breach* anything. Not really. Come on. We have to find Jude.”

He immediately started to run. He kept reaching out to Jude. Though he felt no fear or hurt, he couldn’t connect clearly to his mate. It was as if he was trying to shout to Jude through a roaring waterfall. His voice echoed back at him. He thought he might hear Jude’s response, but it was just a babble of sound, no words could be made out.

“Why would Bronwyn betray you? My understanding is that you saved her from the other witches when her plan to unite them failed,” Paavo asked, not the least bit breathless as they ran flat out.

He answered with equal ease, “I don’t know. I could be wrong.”

“But you don’t think so.”

“No, I don’t think so,” he agreed.

He thought back on Bronwyn’s extreme disappointment with the other witches for not agreeing to form a council. He had been impressed by her lack of anger at their attack on her. She had laughed when he had told her about his regard.

“Gareth, it wasn’t *personal* that they rejected my proposal *and* me. I should have known better,” she had explained. “Witches get respect because of their *strength*.”

“It is the same with werewolves,” he had agreed. “At least for the most part. There are some packs that keep Alphas because they are good leaders, in general, but most equate fighting ability with good leadership, in truth.”

She had smiled. “Witches and werewolves are more alike than I thought. Perhaps that makes sense since Eira has shaped us both.” She’d run a hand through her long red hair. “I should have waited until I was more powerful. But building power takes time. Time that the witches don’t have.”

He had never understood what she meant by that. The witches were not in immediate danger. But now he wondered if she meant that *she* didn't have enough time to build the power she needed to lead them. Though Eira had figured out immortality, most witches could only *extend* their lives for a few hundred years. In order for Bronwyn to truly take over the witches, she might not have enough time to gather the power necessary to get them to her side. At least, not the natural way.

But some witches believe they can gain power by drinking Eira's blood. That they can specifically gain the power to control werewolves and cure Rogues through it. If Bronwyn had that power over the werewolves, she would have more than enough to conquer the witches. Could this be the truth of it after all?

They arrived at the river. Gareth drew in a deep breath. He saw Paavo's nostrils flare as well. Jude's scent was there, but faint. It stopped at the water's edge. He hadn't doubled back towards Fallowmere, Gareth was sure of it. Jude had gone into the water. A trickle of fear went down his spine like a cold finger. Gareth studied the opposite bank with his keen werewolf vision. There was no sign that Jude had scrambled out anywhere on the other side that he could see.

"He went into the water," Gareth said. His voice was surprisingly calm. He had to be calm. Icy. Dispassionate. Detached. To save Jude he had to be the hunter. He had to be Gareth the Gray.

Paavo nudged his shoulder with his arm. "Let's follow the water's current. I see no signs that he emerged from the water on this side or that."

The two of them loped along the river's bank. Their eyes scanned the ground for signs of someone emerging from the water. They came to a fork and it was *there* that they saw something in the water. Something was hanging out just below the water's surface. Like a rock. For one, terrible moment, Gareth imagined Jude's body weighted down on the bottom somehow and that it was him that was causing the river's course to alter slightly.

Without saying anything, Gareth dove into the water. He heard Paavo shout his name, but he didn't respond or even turn his head. It was a clean slicing dive. He went deep. His belly nearly brushed the river's bottom. Underneath the rushing, silvery surface, the water was slightly more transparent. The water was moving fast enough that the bottom was being churned up. It caused a haze of silt to streak through the water. Gareth's nose was no use in the water, but his sense of direction wasn't lost. He headed unerringly towards where the disturbance in the water was.

He found himself thinking, *Do not be Jude. Please do not be Jude. I'll do anything for it not to be Jude.*

He told himself that he would *know* if it were Jude. He, himself, would be struck dead if his mate were gone. Even without completing the bond, he was sure he would die. At that moment, the silty haze cleared and he saw what was there.

It was not Jude.

He, immediately, started to backpedal wildly. But his flailings were nothing against the river's power. He was washed towards the blue-green woman - no, *thing*. Her skin was the color of long dead and bloated corpses. She had scales running along her spine and over her buttocks with stripes along the backs of her thighs. Her feet and hands were all tipped with long multi-jointed claws. Black claws that he imagined were poisoned.

Her head jerked towards him in the water and he saw she had huge bug-like eyes, triangular, serrated teeth and strands of foul sea-weed like hair that fluttered in the river's current. Though she had no lips - it was a woman, her pendulous breasts told him that, at least - he saw her *smile* as she caught sight of him. It was a hungry, feral smile. And, unlike him, she moved easily through the water, cutting through the liquid, directly towards him, those black-tipped claws reaching out for him.

She swiped at him. He reared away from her, but the water was pushing her towards him. The current was her friend. He felt a burning pain, four lines of it, across his chest. Blood joined the haze of dirt in the water. He looked

down and saw four slashes through his t-shirt and four corresponding wounds bleeding.

The creature opened her mouth. A long, snaking tongue slithered out between triangular teeth and fluttered through the bloodied water. Her eyes - yellow irises with dark black pupils - grew wider as she tasted him.

She sliced through the water with her other hand. He caught her wrist this time, not trusting that the water would allow him to dodge her. The wounds were both burning and numb that she had already caused. Definitely some kind of poison. He hoped that his werewolf strength would defeat it and it wouldn't spread. She went to slash at him with the hand that was freed. He caught that wrist, too. But then she lunged forward, her teeth snapping just an inch from his face.

He fought to keep her away from him. They spun around and around in a circle, pushed farther along the river's length. His lungs began to burn. He knew that he needed to get above the water to get air. But the creature did not seem to have any such need. Her strength grew while his weakened. He let out a stream of bubbles. He thought of a million ways to release her and then stroke to the surface. But every "solution" he had would give her multiple chances to strike at him or even fasten those terrible fangs on his neck. If her claws were poisoned, he was betting her bite was, too, and perhaps more powerful as well.

Black spots were beginning to appear in his vision, signaling that he had simply no more time to stay below, when a figure came up behind the creature and a powerful arm wound around her neck. He released her wrists and clawed for the surface. He broke through the silvery top and drew in a deep, ragged breath. Then he dove back down again. His rescuer was Paavo.

The Alpha of Alphas had the creature around the throat and forehead. He was putting a sleeper hold on the creature. She was ripping at him with her claws. Blood stained the water red all around them. Gareth swam powerfully towards them. She saw him coming but she was too busy with Paavo to attack him, too.

He slammed his hands against the curiously fragile-looking ribcage once, twice, three times before it *broke*. It crumpled inwards and blue ooze starting coming out of the water. The creature still struggled but slower and slower and slower. Finally, her head lolled to the side. One last powerful squeeze by Paavo and the Alpha of Alphas released her. She flowed down along with the river's current, disappearing in the haze.

Gareth gestured for the two of them to head up to the surface. Paavo nodded, but his nod was *sloppy*. That was when Gareth saw how ripped up the Alpha of Alphas' forearms were. They were *shredded*. He could only imagine how much pain he must be in. More than that, the amount of poison would be horrendous. Gareth swam towards him, tucked an arm around his back and helped him towards the surface and to the bank. He dragged Paavo onto the sand, out of the water. Paavo was unconscious and slumped on the bank, face first.

"Gareth?! Paavo?!" Jude's concerned voice was a complete shock to hear.

Gareth lifted his head up and saw his mate on his knees before an ancient woman. She was so wrinkled that her features were fairly *consumed* by age. Seeing his look, she twitched her hood up to cover her features. Though there were many things going through his mind at that moment, he thought it odd that she would be vain any longer since she must have looked like this for quite some time.

"What's wrong? What's happened? How did you get here?" Jude was on his feet and racing towards them only to get down on his haunches by Paavo's side.

"It appears they met our water hag friend," the ancient woman said with a dry cough.

"Oh, my God, his arms!" Jude cried. "And your chest! Mother, can you help? You have to help!"

Mother ... EIRA?!

Gareth's head snapped towards the ancient woman on the tree stump.

"I can only stop the poison's work for now. I'm not at ... full strength. Besides, it will take potion-craft to fully cure them both. I don't have the ingredients here either. Or ... they could go Rogue and cure it that way, but I don't seen any handy humans around to bite."

"Mother! They are *not* going Rogue," Jude said with a shake of his head.

"Oh, but then I can show you how to cure them from that easily. No potion-craft required," she tutted. She was using a staff to rise to her feet.

"We have plenty of Rogues for you to work upon. Including, my father," Jude pointed out coolly. Yet he did not seem to be angry with her exactly. More exasperated and ... almost fond.

Gareth jumped to him and placed himself between her and then. She might look old and decrepit, but that didn't mean anything.

His lips writhed back from his teeth and he snarled at her, "Keep back!"

"Gareth, what are you doing? She's going to help!" Jude grasped his shoulder and tried to draw him away from her.

"That's Eira, Jude!" he cried.

"I know," Jude answered.

"You can't trust her!" Gareth shouted. He didn't trust Bronwyn, but that didn't mean he trusted Eira. Not even if her magic seemed *right*. It could all be a trick, a trap, and he wouldn't risk Jude.

"In a way, you are quite right," Eira answered. Her voice, though ragged and creaking, held an almost musical note to it. "I am dangerous. To Jude especially."

"Why to me, especially?" Jude asked even as he kept a firm hold on Gareth.

“Because I created you to solve a problem I’ve been having,” she answered. She had stopped a few feet from them. She was leaning on her staff as if she had not a care in the world. She didn’t seem afraid at all of him even though he towered over her by almost a foot and outweighed her by, at least, 100 pounds.

“What problem would that be?” Jude asked, though somehow, from his tone, Gareth thought his mate might already know.

She gestured to her withered form. “*Age. Mortality.* You see, I had discovered a way to add years to my life, centuries, millennia in the end, but it was time consuming and more and more ... *material* had to be used to keep up my youth.”

“By *material*, you mean ... *children*,” Jude did not ask. He *stated*.

She nodded. “I wish I could tell you that I used *evil* children or children that *would be* evil, but no, the gift of foresight is one I do not have. I used those that were offered to me and those that were at hand.”

Jude’s shoulders hunched as she said these things. But he did not stop looking at her with something akin to horror and *love*.

“I told you how I share my life with many things and *people*.” She gestured towards the werewolves. “I am not altogether sure that the werewolves would survive without me. My most precious creations.”

“You are not extending your life for *us*,” Gareth muttered.

“No, you are quite right. I am doing it for *myself*. Of course, it is for *myself*. I have so much I wish to continue doing on this plane and I want more *time* to do it. So I must steal it from others,” she explained with a wave of her bony hand. The skin was so thin over the bones that he could practically see them through it. “Then I came up with a singular yet very *simple* idea. I should steal the life of a truly immortal creature. One of *my* creatures. A werewolf. That was more satisfactory. The results lasted longer, but were not permanent. I studied more. Experimented more --”

“The huts,” Jude interrupted her. “The huts in the woods with the werewolves. You were experimenting upon *them*.”

She nodded. “I was. But what I found was that while they were my creations, they were not close enough to *me* to do the trick. And then I had the brilliant idea of mating with a werewolf. A powerful werewolf. And the result of that pairing would be a child half-witch and half-wolf. This child would be my ultimate *solution*.”

“To steal my life,” Jude’s voice was soft. Gareth wanted to rip her apart. She would never touch Jude. But then his mate was adding, “But you didn’t steal my life. You let me go.”

She nodded and let out a sigh as if sad about what she was about to say, “I grew fond of you. I grew to ... *care*. And, I realized, that I couldn’t *do* what I needed to do. Not even to stop me from *this*. I had to find another way.”

“Why should we trust that’s true?!” Gareth shook his head in disgust. “You could be here right now to steal Jude’s life!”

“I would have already done so, dear son-in-law. Can I call you that yet? I know you haven’t completed the mating bond, but you will,” she said with amusement tinting her voice. There was almost a girlish lilt to it for a moment.

“Did -- did Dad find out about what you intended to do to me? Is that why you turned him Rogue?” Jude asked.

She shook her head. “Your father *did* discover it and he tried, rather bravely, but pathetically, to hide you from me. It did not work, of course, but I could not come to you in any case, because of *other* considerations. But I did not turn him Rogue. I would not have bothered. I would simply have killed him if he were truly a threat to my plans. But he wasn’t ... and I have a soft spot for him still.”

She put a hand over her heart. Gareth swallowed thickly. She was and wasn’t what he had thought. She was so dangerous. She was evil. Yet, he

sensed she was telling the *truth* about Jude. She didn't intend to steal his life. She *loved* him.

"Then why are you here now?" Gareth asked. "If not for Jude, then why --"

"I'm here for *her*." Eira tilted her head back towards the opposite side of the river.

Gareth jerked his head towards that direction. He saw Bronwyn there, flanked by the two Betas. His nostrils flared. The Betas were now *Rogues* and were under Bronwyn's control.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO: PRUNING

Jude rose to his feet slowly. The Betas were *frothing* at the mouths. In seconds, they shifted into their wolf forms. But they were *different* than they had been before. They were huge hulking beasts, the sort of beasts that werewolves could only be without their human sides. Bronwyn had stripped them of their humanity somehow. The *wrongness* that radiated out from them was far worse than what he'd seen in Mack and the others. This was a *version* of Rogue-ness that was so *twisted* that he almost couldn't bear to look upon it without revulsion.

Twisted. Things are twisting.

His eyes flickered to Eira and she smiled with a small nod of her head. His mother had been warning him about Bronwyn all along. She was the one doing the twisting. She was the one that needed pruning.

"Bronwyn, what are you doing?" Gareth asked.

The Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack was standing as well, right by Jude's side. Paavo was still on the ground, groaning softly. Poisoned and unable to fight or defend himself.

"I'm sorry to have brought you all into this, Gareth," Bronwyn said. The water before her suddenly iced over and she and the werewolves walked across it. Her demeanor was, at once, determined and tense as a wire. Her hands flexed at her sides. He saw light dance between her fingers.

Magic.

"No, you are not," Eira gave out a dry laugh. "If you were you wouldn't have put that tattoo on his chest."

Gareth raised a hand to his covered chest and put it over where the center of the tattoo was. Jude had forgotten that Bronwyn had put that there. Made it with magic. Sealed it onto Gareth's body.

“What does the tattoo do?” Jude asked. Fear mixed with anger flooded his system. Bronwyn was *not* going to hurt his mate.

“Through Gareth, she seeks to have dominion over all the packs,” Eira explained. “Unlike turning them into Rogues, one at a time, through Gareth, the Cold Moon Pack will all fall and then ... then the others packs, too.”

“But I am not Alpha of Alphas!” Gareth had gripped the front of his shirt now and Jude could feel his desire to scrub the ink off of his skin. But that was impossible.

“Not yet, but you will be. She sees what others are just starting to,” Eira answered. “You are the one that will eventually lead the werewolves.”

“I do not want that. I just want to keep Jude safe,” Gareth grunted. One of his hands went to touch Jude, but then he was moving *away*.

He doesn't trust himself. He doesn't know what the tattoo might make him do. He wants to keep away from me just in case.

“You may not, but it is your destiny,” Bronwyn was the one who spoke now. Her green eyes glittered with an almost manic light. “Gareth, together we can make *real* change. Imagine, a werewolf Council where packs are not left to fend for themselves! You could make it *just* again!”

“How would he be doing that, exactly?” Jude’s voice dipped low.

“Wouldn’t you be controlling him like you are the Betas? Don’t you want the werewolves as mindless beasts? There would be no Council. There would be only *you*!”

Bronwyn had reached their side of the river. Jude wished they were on pack lands desperately at that moment and cursed Eira. They would have more power there. Here, it was neutral. Here, they were even. The Betas

snapped at the air. Drool dripped down onto the ground in a seemingly everlasting stream.

“Not if I don’t have to,” she said with a reluctant shake of her head. She was looking into Gareth’s eyes. “Remember when we talked of the world we wanted after you rescued me? That’s the world I am offering you now.”

Gareth’s topaz eyes were narrowed. His fingers flexed and released at his sides. “I can now only think with *regret* that I saved you. You have betrayed me, Bronwyn. My kindness was replaced by ... *this*.” He touched his chest again.

“Don’t be fooled what you’re seeing here.” Bronwyn gestured down to the Betas. “I can turn them back.”

“Can you? You were not able to cure Theis,” Eira murmured.

“I will!”

“So you *hope*.” Eira did not seem afraid, but more watchful. Jude wondered if in her weakened condition she could take out Bronwyn.

Maybe with all our help, she could.

Jude spared a glance at Paavo. The Alpha of Alphas was still seemingly unconscious. But maybe he was just feigning. He wasn’t groaning any longer but lying perhaps suspiciously still.

But if she can turn the Betas so easily, what about Paavo? What about ... Gareth?

Jude shook that thought out of his mind. Gareth was too strong for her to take him over. He was an Alpha. He was meant to be the Alpha of Alphas. But the tattoo - that beautiful and beguiling tattoo - was made of *magic*. Bronwyn’s magic. Who knew what it could do to him?

Unless I can take control of it from her. We have the pack bond and the beginnings of the mate bond. Plus, I'm Eira's son. Magic flows within me.

He tentatively reached out to Gareth with his magic. Like before, he could feel their snapping mate bond. He knew he could not complete it simply by willing it to happen. He felt that it would need a ceremony to settle into place, but he didn't shy away from touching it this time. It strained towards him and he caught the end of it. It almost felt like he had mentally taken one handle of a jump rope. Then he reached for the tattoo itself. It seemed like an alien cord running through his Mate.

Gareth shot him an uneasy glance. Even before the Alpha of the Cold Moon pack said anything, Jude knew that he was worried about them being so close with the tattoo's unknown power.

Jude, you can't be near me! We don't know what hold she has over me!

She can't take you from me, Jude found himself saying. Strangely, he saw his mother's garden in his mind. He saw his part of the garden, but now it flowed into the dark woods. *She cannot take what is mine.*

Gareth crooked an eyebrow. *You're certain of this? I can see you are.*

I will destroy her if she tries to take you, Jude answered.

Gareth's nascent amusement died. *I want you no where near her, Jude.*

That's not for you to say.

I'm your Alpha, Gareth reminded him with a furrowed brow.

You're my Mate, Jude corrected. *We work together. As a team.*

"Theis ... *left* before I could perfect my spell. It seems he did not overly trust witches after he found out your intentions for the son he adores. But I

will have full control once I have what I need from *you*,” Bronwyn responded and her gaze hungrily roved over Eira’s wizened form.

“You think you can take what you need from me?” Eira let out another dry cackle.

“You’ve waited too long to regenerate, Eira. You are using all of your power to just keep that husk of a body going. You have far less time than I thought. To think I raced here, fearing that you ... well, I was *wrong*. I clearly overestimated you!” Bronwyn let out a lilt of laughter when Eira did not say anything. “Did you come all this way to beg protection from your son? The son you meant to drain all along and solve your mortality problem once and for all? Or perhaps you sought protection from Gareth or Paavo? The werewolves you used to enslave?”

“Sounds like you want to enslave us now,” Jude pointed out.

“Only if there is no other choice! But there will always be a way!”

Bronwyn looked desperately at Gareth. “We can forge a new future for witches and werewolves together. We can establish a just and ordered system. We can put in *rules*.”

“We already have rules,” Gareth answered her simply. “The Council has its own concerns. I only care about my own pack. In my own pack, there is justice and order.”

Speaking of the pack, I don’t see them, Jude said, as he scanned the forest.

No, I am having them stand back. She might be able to do to them what she is doing to the Betas. The less wolves involved the better, Gareth explained. *Nina is chomping at the bit. She thinks I’m wrong about this.*

No, I think you’re right. I don’t want anyone else near Bronwyn.

“How did those rules work when Mack lost control, Gareth? He’d been just and good, but one taste of human flesh and all of that was *gone*. But I can

offer you a solution to that problem, too.” Bronwyn’s hands clenched into fists in front of her. “Once I have Eira’s blood, not only will I be powerful enough to create a witches’ Council, but I will be able to grant all of werewolf kind a cure for Rogue-ism.”

“We will be able to accomplish that without you. Jude will figure out how,” Gareth reminded her.

Jude was still feeling over the tattoo on Gareth’s form. It was *warm*. Like a living thing beneath Gareth’s skin, it seemed to have it’s own temperature and to *shift* whenever he tried to grasp hold of it. Gareth’s right hand trembled when he did that and Jude feared he was hurting the Alpha of Alphas.

That’s me touching you. Not Bronwyn, Jude told him.

When you touch me, it feels like the wolf wants to rise up. A small trickle of sweat ran down Gareth’s temple. *I do not feel in control.*

Damn. Okay, I won’t touch it. But she ... she might! I don’t know how to block her!

“It may take decades or even centuries for him to figure it out. He would need so much training to even get to a point where creating such a spell would even be possible for him!” Bronwyn objected.

Jude swallowed. Was she right? His gaze slid to Eira. *I’d know immediately if my mother would teach me. But will she?*

“Eira could teach me,” Jude found himself saying.

“She would never do that,” Bronwyn laughed shrilly at the very idea. “Share her secrets with anyone? Especially the child she only made to devour?”

“You’re so certain that she means me harm yet you’re the only one turning wolves into Rogues and using magic against us,” Jude pointed out. “My mother has not harmed me at all.”

“Not yet,” Bronwyn scoffed.

“You said she waited too long to drain someone. I would have been a pretty easy target all these years. She found me easily when she wanted to. Doesn’t sound like a woman intent on harming me,” Jude stated flatly.

“Whatever her original intention was regarding me ... she’s changed her mind.”

“Your father doesn’t think so. He’s been keeping her away from you,” Bronwyn stated.

“You think *Theis* could stop me from taking what I wanted from my boy?” Eira tilted her head to the side. “Well, I know he was a *handful* for you - letting him escape and all that after you botched your little spell - but I assure you that he is not for me. Even in my *reduced* state.”

“Jude,” Bronwyn said with quiet conviction. “She made you to kill you. She seduced Theis. She got pregnant. She carried you for nine months. She gave birth to you. And all that time, she meant to *kill* you. Do you *really* think she just changed her mind?”

“She said --”

“Or maybe she simply *can’t* do what she intended with you. Maybe she can’t drain you so she had to let you be? Which is more likely: the change of heart of a creature that has murdered countless children or simply that something else stopped her plan?” Bronwyn asked.

Jude’s gaze slid to Eira. His mother’s eyes couldn’t be seen as the hood covered them. Her mouth was in a tight line. But he didn’t know what that meant.

But then Eira spoke, “If *only* I couldn’t drain him, Bronwyn. It would be such a *relief* to be barred from doing so and not have it be my *will* holding me back.”

“Why haven’t you just -- just drained another kid?” Jude couldn’t believe he was asking that. But it made sense.

“It won’t work,” she answered with a shrug of her shoulder. “I *have* tried.”

Jude closed his eyes. He didn’t want to know what that meant exactly.

“You see what a monster she is?” Bronwyn shook her head. “She must be stopped. And we can do it, Gareth and Jude. Together. Help me take her down and we can establish a new world order. One that is based on --”

“Killing my mother?” Jude found himself breathing.

“She isn’t worthy of the title, Jude. Don’t you agree with me, Sophia?” Bronwyn called over her shoulder without turning around.

Grandmother Sophia and Tessa seemed to simply appear at the edge of the river. Jude’s eyes widened.

Under her breath, Eira said with amusement, “I see that even after letting her gifts go fallow that Sophia has hardly lost a step.”

“You know her?” Jude asked, surprised.

“Of course. Everyone knew Sophia in her prime. She didn’t realize who I was, but I knew her well,” Eira answered.

Grandmother Sophia had a hold of Tessa’s arm. His sister looked fierce while his grandmother’s nut brown face was set in a deep frown.

“What are you doing, Bronwyn? What bad magic is this?” Grandmother Sophia asked.

“I’m doing what you all asked me to do: protect Jude from Eira,” Bronwyn answered almost airily.

“Come now, Bronwyn, you were here to take Jude’s blood so that you would be strong enough against me. Another desperate act by a desperate witch,” Eira mocked. “You judge me so harshly for the things I do, but you would be so much worse.”

“Is that true, Bronwyn? Would you have taken that path and hurt my Jude?” Grandmother Sophia sounded so sad.

“She was!” Tessa said, angry causing her words to buzz like a hornet’s. “It’s clear that she’s willing to take on Eira’s mantle and then some. You need to get away from my brother, release those wolves and give yourself up, Bronwyn! Or you will face *consequences*.”

There was something in Tessa’s voice. These low frequencies that seemed to *pluck*. And just like the deputy had responded, for a moment, Bronwyn seemed to *hesitate*. She blinked rapidly and shook her head as if to clear it.

Eira let out a low laugh. “My dear, when you want to start training your gift, do let me know. I’ll be happy to help you. We haven’t had a *Talker* in centuries.”

Grandmother Sophia’s sharp dark eyes swept over to Eira. “My daughter will have *nothing* to do with your foul teachings.”

“They aren’t *foul*, Sophia. They’re *natural*. You’ve stepped out of the game, thinking that it would somehow *end* without you there to play. But it doesn’t,” Eira chided.

“I didn’t want to be a part of that *game* any longer,” Grandmother Sophia said stiffly.

“Oh, but it just goes on and on without you getting to at least take some bad pieces off the board! How many Bronwyns are there out there, do you suppose? So many. So very many. How many Sophias have stepped back and let them have their way? Which is better?”

Grandmother Sophia did not answer, but Jude could tell from her expression that she was *worried* that Eira was speaking the *truth*.

“Jude, Gareth, you need to tell me now if you’re with me or with *her*.” Bronwyn tipped her head towards Eira. Her face was sweaty and it was clear from her eyes that she knew she had to act now. “What I am offering you is a chance to make this world into something *right*.”

“We are with *ourselves*. If you release the Betas, we can talk, but not before then,” Gareth answered her firmly.

With almost sadness in her eyes, Bronwyn nodded and said, “Then I have no choice.”

Bronwyn raised her magic covered hands and started to chant. Jude *felt* Gareth’s tattoo begin to shift beneath his skin, to *flail*. The Alpha of the Cold Moon pack let out a scream of agony that traveled up Jude’s spine.

Jude reached for the tattoo but it was so *hot* that it seemed to burn his soul. Their mate bond that he had been mentally holding was *wrenched* out of his other hand. Gareth fell down to his knees, his hands ripping at the front of his t-shirt. The shirt shredded to reveal the tattoo on Gareth’s chest. It glowed like magma under the Alpha of the Cold Moon pack’s skin. Jude flew to Gareth’s side even as his mate tried to push him away.

“Noooo, Juuude! Gggget awayyyyyyy! I cannnn feeeellllll the wooolfffff!” Gareth screamed, his syllables dragged out as his teeth shifted from human to canine in a moment.

Jude reached down and pressed his hands against the flaming tattoo. Smoke and the scent of burning flesh - *his* burning flesh - rose up for a moment. The pain was indescribable, but he was able to hold onto the magic of the

tattoo and fight it. Gareth stopped in his near shifting. Instead, he was lying there, panting and blinking, fighting alongside Jude to keep his own mind, his sanity. The *wrongness* swirled around him though, beat at him, through the tattoo woven in his skin.

“Mother! Help me!” Jude cried as his hands kept burning and Gareth started thrashing again.

“I cannot. I have no power, Jude. The forest is your garden. You must stop this,” Eira answered. “Remember, what I’ve always told you. *Prune*.”

“You will not do this!” Grandmother Sophia shouted and there was a burst of light from her hands that hit Bronwyn’s back.

Bronwyn shrieked and ordered the Betas, “Take her down!”

The ice bridge formed once more and the Betas were scrambling across it towards his sister and Sophia. Jude tried to reach for the magic within him to stop the Betas, but the moment he did that, Gareth let out a howl. The tattoo was trying to transform him again, to make him into Bronwyn’s ultimate Rogue. Her plaything. And through him, she would have all the wolves in the end.

Jude let out a howl of rage and pain and fear.

If he let go of the tattoo for even a moment, he would lose Gareth forever and the werewolves would be enslaved once more. But if he did not stop the Rogues, Grandmother Sophia and Tessa would be ripped to pieces. It was an impossible choice.

“This is your garden, Jude,” his mother repeated. She was holding onto her staff with both hands now. She was gray and swaying and he realized she was about to collapse.

Focusing on her words, Jude tried to connect with the land, with the forest itself. He could *feel* it half respond to him, but then Bronwyn’s flow of

power into the tattoo was greater and he saw that his fingers were blackening. She was burning right through him. The pain was eating at his mind as well. He couldn't concentrate. If only he had a moment ... a moment to concentrate ... a moment to grasp hold of the forest ...

Gareth's tortured topaz eyes looked up into his. "Don't let me become hers, Jude. Kill me if it comes to that. Kill me to save the others. I won't be like Mack. I won't."

I'll never let you go. You're mine, Gareth. I'm yours. I love you.

There was the sound of growling on the other side of the river. Jude looked up through the agony and saw Molly, in her wolf form, slam into the side of one of the Betas that was snapping its jaws at Tessa. She was following closed by Jacob and Raj's wolf forms. They were circling the other Beta that was trying to get to Grandmother Sophia. For her part, Sophia was sending balls of fire at the Betas. But this couldn't be kept up forever.

None of them could. Bronwyn's power surged again into the tattoo. Jude saw Molly shaking her burly head as if she heard strange music in her ears.

What's affecting Gareth is affecting them already! Jude realized with horror. They'll all turn. They'll all become Rogues. They'll kill the ones they love! Grandmother Sophia! Tessa! I have to -- to stop this!

His hands looked to be just skeletal fingers now, all the flesh burned away.

Bronwyn's face was red and dripping with sweat, but she kept up the chant and the tattoo surged against his burned hands.

"Jude, Jude ... Jude, love you," Gareth breathed and the strain on his face as he held onto himself hurt Jude more than anything else. "Love you forever. But don't let me become a monster. Please."

I need help. I need ...

At that moment, a huge wolf jumped onto Bronwyn. There was a scream as she was slammed into the ground and this wolf began to worry at her throat.

Father!

It was Theis. Jude felt a wave of renewed strength at seeing his father.

More than that. His father had distracted Bronwyn from her spell. He realized that the tattoo was no longer glowing or moving. His hands though were still a mess. The pain was beyond, just beyond anything. Jude should have been unconscious or dead. But he wasn't. He was still here. Gareth, thankfully, lay dazed on his back.

"Jude, this is your garden. You must *prune*," his mother's words were just a whisper. She had collapsed on the ground, seemingly a pile of sticks covered in a robe around staff.

Jude's vision was going in and out. He was seeing things. The ground seemed to glow a vibrant green. He imagined it was a cool pool that would heal his ravaged hands. That was insane. He knew it was insane. Yet he found himself plunging his hands into this green pool up to his elbows.

The moment he did it, he felt the forest in his *every* cell. He could feel it stretching out for hundreds of miles. He could feel it even under the cities and towns and asphalt of highways. He could feel the strength of ancient timber and new leaf. He could feel it in the quickening of a hare's heart and the leap of a stag. He felt it in the wolves in the forest. The whole of the Cold Moon Pack howled as they felt him, too, and came running for the river. He felt the power of the forest in him and with him and through him. There was endless power here. In his forest. In his garden. This was the place he could *create*. This was the place he could *destroy*.

At that moment, there was a yip of a wolf in pain and his father's wolf form went flying through the air, his back impacting a tree trunk, before he slid to the ground, unconscious, or perhaps dead. Bronwyn got to her feet. Blood was streaming down her neck from a gaping wound in her throat, but that wound was closing up with frightening alacrity. She stumbled towards Eira. Arms outstretched. Fingers like claws.

“I will have your blood, you bitch!” Bronwyn gasped as she fell down to her knees beside his mother and fumbled for a knife at her belt, ready to plunge it into his mother’s nearly skeletal body.

Jude could see where Bronwyn’s power came from. It came from the earth. Tiny shoots attached her to it. He saw her connect one of those shoots to Eira as she was about to drain his mother’s power into her. He couldn’t cut that one, but he could *prune* the others. Just as her arms arced overhead, just as the blade flashed in the air, just as it was about to come crashing down ... Jude cut those connections between her and his forest.

She froze. Her face went oddly lax as if she’d had a stroke. The blade stayed up in the air as did her arms for a moment, but then it dropped from nerveless fingers. Bronwyn collapsed on her side. Jude saw her open her mouth and whisper something, even as her eyes kept staring sightlessly upwards.

And then there was silence.

He didn’t know how long this went on. But, finally, a hand was suddenly covering one of his. It was Gareth’s hand. His own hands weren’t deep in green pools, but simply touching the ground. They were not burnt any longer. They were whole. Gareth was looking into his face.

“Jude? Jude, can you hear me?” his mate asked.

He nodded, unable to speak. Gareth touched his cheek.

“You stopped it. You stopped Bronwyn,” Gareth told him. “You saved everyone.”

Jude looked over at the other side of the river. Grandmother Sophia and Tessa were surrounded by the wolves of the Cold Moon Pack. The two Betas were trapped on the ground, growling and snapping, but subdued. They were still Rogues. Doing whatever he had done to Bronwyn -

pruning her - hadn't turned them back to normal. His gaze then snapped to where his father had been sent flying. His father had transformed back into his human form. He was breathing, but he, too, was still a Rogue. The wrongness flowed around him like thick molasses.

Jude looked back at his mother. A pile of bones. That seemed to be all that was left of her. Bronwyn was still and silent and seemingly dead, too. But that did not seem like a victory. Whatever else he had wanted from her, hoped to feel for her or from her, with Eira gone and Bronwyn gone, the ability to cure the Rogues might be forever out of reach.

Not only that The magic he'd been able to tap into seemed just as out of his reach right now, too. It was gone as quick as it had come. There and gone. And he had no idea how to get it back again.

"You did it, Jude," Gareth repeated. "You saved us."

"No, I ..." Jude could not take any credit for doing this little act of pruning. An act that was maybe too late.

"Jude, you ..." Gareth's voice died as a growling, low and terrible that skated along Jude's spine like a razorblade, filled the air.

Both he and Gareth's gazes snapped to where Paavo had been lying, unconscious, poisoned by the hag's claws, but Paavo was getting up now. He had transformed into his wolf form. And Jude then realized what those last whispered words of Bronwyn's had been ... a final parting gift from her.

The Alpha of Alphas had been turned into a Rogue.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE: ALPHA OF ALPHAS

Gareth shifted from man to wolf. His bones and flesh transformed in less than half a second. And he *leaped* at Paavo. There was no hesitation or uncertainty or angst. This wasn't about him taking the place of the Alpha of Alphas. This was protecting his mate. For Paavo had lunged towards Jude.

Gareth's slammed his left shoulder into Paavo's right one, causing the Alpha of Alphas to lose his footing. Both of them crashed down onto the ground with Gareth on top of Paavo. The Alpha of Alphas snarled and snapped at Gareth's throat. He felt the whisper of those sharp teeth tug at his fur, but Gareth reared back out of biting range. But he kept astride the big wolf, his own paws digging painfully into Paavo's sides and stomach.

Jude, get to the other side of the river! Gareth ordered.

He could see his mate, still on his knees by Eira's bones and Bronwyn's body. Those brown eyes were *huge*. Grief, fear and anger played within them.

Not leaving you! Jude frantically shook his head. *My magic ... it's gone or something. I can't even shift!*

The magic that Jude had wielded so easily and powerfully before surged around him - Gareth could feel it - but it was as if Jude were on a boat in the ocean and the ocean were his magic. He wasn't controlling it. It was just roiling all around him and he was helpless in its embrace.

It will come back. I can sense it all around you, my mate! Gareth cried and he felt the ocean of Jude's magic subside a little in its ferocity. *Get yourself to safety. I'll be fine!*

He didn't actually know if he would be fine. Paavo had been strong before he was a Rogue. Now he was beyond that.

I'm not leaving you! Jude shouted. His mate wanted to shift so badly to join him in the fight, but he ordered Jude to stay put.

No, Jude! This has to be me and me alone! Stay away!

“Paavo, if you can hear me, STOP!” Jude screamed at his uncle.

But there was not even the slightest flicker of recognition in Paavo's eyes or lessening in his attack against Gareth. He was a mad wolf, far worse than Mack and the other Rogues. There was simply *no* humanity there any longer. Gareth shuddered. This was what Bronwyn had intended for him and all the wolves.

I don't want to kill you, Paavo, but I will if I must, Gareth thought.

Paavo craned his neck in such a way that he fastened his jaws around Gareth's right front leg. Gareth let out a yip of pain as that powerful jaw clenched. He only freed himself was raking his other front leg's claws across Paavo's snout, leaving four red gouges that immediately started to bleed. Paavo released him and he had to jump back, out of range. His right front leg *burned* where Paavo had bitten him as if the bite was *poisoned*.

“Uncle, please stop!” Jude screamed again.

Gareth wished that this *could* stop. He didn't want to hurt Paavo, but the moment he had released the Alpha of Alphas, the massive wolf had dashed towards Jude. Bronwyn hadn't only cursed Paavo into become a Rogue, it seemed she had put a target on Jude's head. Paavo had been compelled to kill his own nephew. Gareth lunged towards Paavo, jaws snapping, to draw his attention. Paavo narrowed those blue eyes at him and realized if he was getting to Jude it had to be *through* Gareth.

That's right. You have to deal with me, Gareth thought and bared his teeth in challenge. *I know that you don't want to hurt Jude, Paavo. I know you would be urging me to snap your neck. I won't let you harm the nephew you love.*

Paavo was then flying through the air at him in one mighty leap. Gareth rolled out of the way as Paavo landed violently on the ground. Dirt, grass and stones flew up around him with the force of that landing. Gareth pounced on his back. Paavo bucked him off and Gareth went flying through the air, end over end. He landed heavily on his left shoulder and all the air was expelled from his lungs. He lay there, stunned, for half a second. It was half a second too long.

Paavo was on top of him. Madness was in the Alpha of Alphas' eyes. His teeth writhed back from his sharp, white teeth and then he was diving towards Gareth's throat. Gareth wiggled and dislodged the Alpha of Alphas, but only partially. He had a hold of Gareth's shoulder and sunk those terrible teeth into his. Gareth gasped as the pain hit him like icy water on sun heated skin. He reached up and ripped at Paavo's nearest ear, rending it to tatters. Paavo's surprised snarl and jerk back gave him enough room to get out from under the Alpha of Alpha's heavy bulk.

His shoulder and front leg were *on fire*. So much pain, but Gareth pushed it down. He was used to compartmentalizing the agony of being hurt. Dealing with his father and the horrors of war had taught him that. He took a step forward though and his leg gave out beneath him.

No!

His weakness though was not a red flag to the Alpha of Alphas. Paavo had once more lost interest in him and started stalking towards Jude and Gareth was on the opposite side, away from his mate. Jude straightened. Gareth could see Jude swallow. But then Jude was lowering his head and clenching his fists. The magic around him *surged*. Paavo paused and shifted from paw to paw as if he sensed it too.

"Yeah, you just come here. In a moment, I can ..." Jude began but then the magic flowed away from him, ebbing away like the tide. "Damnit."

Jude, run! Get out of there!

Gareth forced himself to his feet. He pushed down the pain and weakness. He drew on strength he didn't even know he had. He would save his mate.

At that same moment, Nina, Molly, Raj and Jacob emerged from the water in human form and raced across the bank towards Jude. The four of them flowed into their wolf forms again as they ran. They formed a line between Jude and Paavo.

"Help Gareth!" he cried.

But the four wolves remained like statues, *not* attacking Paavo, simply stopping him from reaching Jude.

Why aren't they helping you? Jude cried.

Because the chain of leadership must be clear, Jude, Gareth answered as he staggered forward. Paavo must be defeated by one wolf otherwise there will be no legitimate Alpha of Alphas. The packs will go to war over it. He may never recover his mind, Jude, and there must be a successor.

He felt understanding flash through his mate's mind.

Goddamned pack rules. You don't even want to be Alpha of Alphas! Jude cried. *And I don't want to lose you!*

I do not. But I must keep you safe ... and the rest of the packs. That weight settled on him. He knew it was true. Any other type of victory here would plunge the werewolves into chaos. So he had to succeed.

Jude hung his head but then said with a fierce loyalty and love, *I know you can take him out, Gareth. I know you are meant to be a leader. You can beat him. I know you can. Do whatever you have to do. Even if it's ... it's killing him.*

I do not want to kill him, Jude.

Better that then if he kills you instead. Do what you have to do.

A Rogue would not stop attacking even when grievously wounded. He'd seen that with the Betas. It had taken his whole pack to subdue them. But even with their bodies bleeding and broken bones they still growled and snapped. The best way to take out an opponent like Paavo was quick and deadly, especially in his wounded state. Go for the throat and hang the hell on. But that would kill the Alpha of Alphas. So he would have to break the big wolf down so that he simply couldn't keep fighting even if he wanted to.

I'll do what I can to spare him, Jude, Gareth sent.

He let out a challenging growl at Paavo. The Alpha of Alphas spun around to face him, teeth bared. He'd thought Gareth was down and out.

Not quite. Not ever.

He and Paavo began circling one another, eyes locked on each other, feinting and snarling. Paavo was dripping copious amounts of saliva onto the ground. It pooled on the sandy dirt. Gareth stayed away from the puddles of that stuff as it seemed far more *acidic* than any normal spit. His shoulder and front leg felt like acid had been poured over them.

One leg for another, Gareth thought as he made his first move to break down Paavo.

Paavo was bigger than him, but he was faster and nimbler, even injured. He darted forward, head down, body low to the ground, and jaws open. He didn't go for Paavo's front legs, but instead the left hind leg. As Paavo curled his body, trying to bite Gareth, Gareth clamped down on his back leg and used all the power of his jaws to *snap* the bone. He felt it break between his teeth. Paavo let out a howl that was almost a human shriek of pain. Paavo's head which had been nearly against Gareth's side flew

backwards with the agony of the bite. Gareth did not hold on, but instead, he swiftly released Paavo and dashed well out of his reach.

He spun around once he had enough distance between them. Paavo was holding the injured leg up against his body, standing on only three paws, mewling in agony. Gareth could taste the Alpha of Alphas' blood in his mouth. His killing instincts wanted to overwhelm him then, send him dashing in again to bite, but he thought that Paavo's whining was now overdone. The initial break was terrible, but he knew that the Alpha of Alphas had survived worse injuries and he was a Rogue now.

He was right to be suspicious. In the midst of his whining, Paavo suddenly lunged towards him with full power. He aimed his large body at Gareth's wounded right leg. Gareth jumped out of the way, but his leg still took some of the brunt of that blow. Pain radiated up his leg and throughout his body, taking his breath away for a moment. Blinking black spots out of his eyes, he didn't realize that Paavo was upon him again until Jude shouted.

“GARETH, BEHIND YOU!”

Gareth felt the rush of wind as the Alpha of Alphas leaped on top of him.

Gareth rolled so that he was on his back and opened his jaws. Paavo's bulk landed on him, but Gareth aimed his jaws so that he immediately had a hold of Paavo's left foreleg. He wasted no time in viciously biting down and jerking that leg in such a way that it, too, broke. Paavo wailed and bit the air but then that mouth was leaning to bite Gareth's throat. With all of his strength and the momentum from snapping the leg, Gareth rolled them until *he* was the one on top.

Paavo's teeth still grazed his throat. Gareth could feel his hot breath through his fur. But he slammed the side of his head into Paavo's, knocking the Alpha of Alphas' head back, giving him what he wanted, which was access to the other front leg. He bit down on that one, breaking it, too, with an audible *snap!*

The howl that Paavo gave was soul-shattering. Gareth felt deafened by it, but he didn't let it stop him. His prey was now completely unable to move and in agony. But Paavo was *still* fighting. So Gareth did the one thing he could do. He fastened his jaws around Paavo's throat and *bit* down. Not hard enough to rip out the Alpha of Alphas' throat, but enough to make him *notice*.

Yield! Gareth sent that thought out not to his pack, but through a connection he hadn't realized was there. He could see it now though. It was the Alpha of Alphas' connection to all the wolves.

Right now that connection was centered on Paavo. He could see it stretching in a spider web both to himself and every wolf there. He saw thin, silver threads traveling off into far flung distances. This web had blackened nearest Paavo and the strands were frayed from whatever Bronwyn had done to him. That corruption would spread until cut off.

Yield or I will kill you, Paavo! Damnit, you are beaten!

Paavo though still fought. Gareth tightened his jaws around the Alpha of Alphas' throat. But that did nothing.

If you have to kill him ... do it, Gareth. I understand, Jude sent him, but he felt his mate's grief at losing an uncle he was only starting to come to know.

And then Gareth knew what to do. He shouldn't speak to Paavo as a rival or as Alpha of Alphas or even an equal Alpha. He needed to speak to him like he might a member of his pack that had lost his way.

With all the force of his will, Gareth said simply, *Stop*.

Paavo froze. His struggles ceased. He went limp beneath Gareth's form. He was following the order of his Alpha.

I am your Alpha. You will obey me, Gareth sent again in that implacable way. *You will yield. Now.*

The spider web that connected Paavo to all of the werewolves *snapped* and moved as one to Gareth. For an overwhelming moment, Gareth could *feel* every single werewolf in existence. He could see through every wolf's eyes and hear through their ears. He was in the forest, by the ocean, in the desert, running through snow, climbing mountains. He was everywhere they were. He was with them all.

Then all began to howl as one. His pack. All the packs. Every, single wolf howled.

There was a new Alpha of Alphas.

And it was him.

Jude scrambled past the four wolves that were blocking him from his mate. They'd all just stopped howling, even him. His connection to his wolf was fully back again, but he didn't transform. He wanted to continue to be human at that point. He needed the control of being human.

His gaze skated over the bones that had been his mother and the empty husk that had been Bronwyn. He winced, but did not allow himself to feel the grief that he surely would later. He had to salvage what he could *now*.

Paavo was once more unconscious on the ground. His paws hanging at odd, painful-looking angles. Gareth was still on top of him, looking rather dazed. There was blood all around his muzzle. His shoulder and right forelimb were still bleeding, sluggishly now and starting to heal, but the wounds were terrible to behold. Jude wished he could take the pain and the wounds for his mate. He tenderly threw his arms around Gareth and buried his face in Gareth's fur, sending all his love over their pack bond and reaching for the mate bond that seemed to reach back for him. He realized that the alien tattoo no longer felt alien. Instead it glowed steadily with quiet, solid magic, assisting Gareth with all of the packs.

“Gareth, Gareth, Gareth,” he murmured his mate’s name over and over again. He sounded like he was praying or sobbing or maybe a little of both. He rubbed his face in that soft fur. He only pulled back when he felt Gareth licking his arm. He gazed into his mate’s beautiful wolf face. “Hello, Alpha.”

Jude.

Gareth licked his cheek. While there was *clearly* exhaustion there, Jude saw victory and something else. Something like *rightness* as if things had just *clicked* into place for his mate.

And they have. He’s been meant for this. Bronwyn was right about that, if nothing else.

Are you all right? I mean I can see you’re not, but is there anything I can do? Jude asked.

No, my beloved, I will heal. I need to stay in my wolf form though for that to go as quickly as I need it, too. Gareth’s gaze grew distant. *We are going to have a lot of visitors. Very soon.*

They’ll all come - all the wolves - to see you? It made sense. His mate was now in charge of every werewolf in existence. They would all come to pay homage to their Alpha.

Yes, they will.

And you’ll be able to change things, won’t you? For the better, Jude realized.

With your help, yes, Gareth agreed.

Jude wrapped his arms around Gareth again and just held him for long moments. A hand landed on his shoulder. It was Nina. He looked up into

her kind eyes. She had transformed as had the others into the human forms again.

“Are you all right, Jude?” she asked, her gaze flickering over him. He sensed that very little ever got past her.

“I’m fine.” He scratched Gareth behind the ears, which had his mate’s eyelids sliding shut.

“And Alpha is --”

“He’s good. Just tired and needing to heal. He’ll shift back in a bit,” Jude assured her.

She nodded, though her gaze took in her Alpha’s wounds. She would make sure they were healing, he guessed. She then straightened and said, “We need to get all the Rogues to the silver cells and secure them.”

“Oh, man, we’re going to have to carry them, aren’t we?” Raj groaned. There was a cut over his right eye and some scrapes on his ribs. It was clear he had fought hard against the Rogues.

Molly elbowed him lightly on the side of the uninjured ribs, which had him then sending her a playful scowl. She was battered, too, but smiling. Her gaze kept slipping across the river to Tessa, but she would not leave her Alpha or her friends.

“Keep up your griping and we’ll have you do all the carrying,” Jacob rumbled good naturedly and mussed Raj’s hair, which had the Indian werewolf saying ‘hey, cut it out!’ and frantically fixing his locks. Jacob chortled. He, too, had wounds over his massive body, but wasn’t showing the pain that they must be causing him.

“You won’t have to carry them. Not all of the way anyways,” Grandmother Sophia called. “Magic will take care of that.”

She and Tessa were walking *on top* of the water over to their side of the bank. Gareth urged him to go to them.

I am fine, Jude. Go. I cannot leave Paavo in case he wakes and thinks to make more mischief. Your family is frantic for you.

All right. If you need me --

You'll know. Gareth licked his hand.

Yes, Alpha of Alphas. Jude gave him a cheeky smile that somehow hurt his face to make.

Gareth somehow managed to have his wolf roll his eyes in response. Then he settled back down to watch Paavo. Nina and Molly with Raj and Jacob's help had picked up Theis' unconscious body and were carrying it down to the bank. Jude's stomach clenched. His father was still a Rogue. His mother was dead.

My family ...

He felt like he might tumble into a black pit of despair for a moment. But then he reminded himself that Tessa and Grandmother Sophia were his family, too, as was all the Cold Moon Pack. He was not alone. He would never be alone again. He jumped up and ran to his grandmother and sister as soon as they made it across the river. Both of them wrapped their arms around him.

"Are you okay?" he asked them.

"We're fine, Jude. We're good," Tessa assured him as she stroked his back and hair.

"Oh, my Jude, you were so *brave*. You were so *good*," Grandmother Sophia praised him.

“Was I? I -- I stopped Bronwyn, but ...” His throat was tight. He had killed a woman. He had failed to save his mother. His father was a Rogue. Paavo and the Betas were Rogues. So were Mack and his pack. He felt like he had done nothing, but cut off one woman from magic. Was that brave or good?

“How did you do that, Jude? How did you just *stop* her?” Tessa asked as the three of them drew back from their hug, though they kept their arms around one another.

“I ...” He looked into Grandmother Sophia’s eyes, sensing that *she*, above everyone other than Eira, would understand what he was about to say. “I *pruned*.”

Grandmother Sophia’s wise nut brown face went expressionless for a moment and then she nodded. “Yes, a garden must sometimes be ... *pruned*.”

Tessa’s gaze flickered between the two of them. “What *do* you mean?”

“Jude has one of Eira’s most *powerful* gifts, my darling girl,” Grandmother Sophia explained. “He can cut off a witch’s access to magic. Eira’s ... *garden* is the place where our magic springs from. Jude has access to a part of that.” She studied his face. “Perhaps *all* of it.”

He wasn’t sure. He could *walk* in his mother’s garden, but she had only ceded the forest to him. They were part of a whole though. She could be in the forest. He could be in the garden. They were together, mixed, inseparable.

Where did your soul go, Mother? Are you in your garden now? Restored to youth and beauty and no pain?

Tessa’s eyes widened. “And that killed her?”

“She’s not dead. But her mind is gone,” Grandmother Sophia said and Jude’s heart lurched a little.

Bronwyn had to be stopped. He had stopped her. He wasn’t sure which was worse though: killing Bronwyn outright or destroying her mind?

Where was her spirit? Was it trapped in that body? Unable to access any of its conscious functions? Would she just starve to death if they didn’t hook her up to machines?

Tessa was looking over his shoulder, frowning.

“Does her mind being gone mean she can’t move?” Tessa asked.

“Yes, she has no will to move,” Grandmother Sophia said. “Her body is empty of all abilities to think.”

“Then she couldn’t have just *walked* away, right?” Tessa asked sharply.

Jude’s head snapped around towards where he had left Eira’s bones and Bronwyn’s body. *Both* were gone. He dashed over to the spot with Grandmother Sophia and Tessa on his heels. The wolves looked at them concernedly. Gareth’s ears flickered and his head lifted.

Jude, what is it?

Eira and Bronwyn are gone! There aren’t any tracks showing where they went or what happened!

Jude scanned the ground carefully, but there were no footprints or *paw prints* to indicate how the two witches’ bodies had left this place. It was as if they had simply *vanished*.

Jude looked out into the woods and called softly, *Mother? Mother, are you there?*

There was no answering voice, but he thought he heard soft laughter on the wind. His *mother's* laughter. And he wondered: would he see Eira again?

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR: EXTRAORDINARY

Jude and Gareth waited at the top of the stairs to the silver cells as Nina, Jacob, Raj and Molly carried down Paavo, Theis and the Rogue Betas.

They held hands, fingers laced together, as they solemnly watched the wolves disappear into the darkness below. Jude felt his heart beating heavily in his throat and he tried to swallow the sensation away. His father and his uncle might be lost forever.

Gareth rubbed a tender circle with his thumb on the back of Jude's hand.

The new Alpha of Alphas looked serene - and mostly *was* serene – but, it was clear, that he felt Jude's pain that four more would join the three Rogues already in custody.

"We have to tell them the truth," Jude said suddenly. His voice sounded creaky as if he hadn't used it in a long time. He'd been holding this thought in since the encounter with his mother and Bronwyn. Maybe that was why it sounded so *old*.

"All we know is that it *might* take you a long time to discover how to undo the Rogue curse. But you could discover it tomorrow or the next day," Gareth argued logically and without heat. "We never made them a promise how quickly it would happen, only that you would *try*."

"But it's *more* likely that it won't be tomorrow or the next day. It could be *years*. Hell, it could be *decades* or even *centuries* or maybe *never*!" Jude bit down on his lower lip to stop the frustration he felt from blasting out of him like magma out of a volcano. "The answer may have died with Eira. If only there had been *some* way to save her or even *extend* her life just for a little bit!"

His feelings about Eira were mixed. The loss of her felt like a blow to his stomach. He was remembering their time together more and more. The memories that had been lost were returning and, in all of them, he had loved her. And she had loved him. He thought though of her plans for him and the desire she'd still had – even until the end – to take his life to extend her only

If only I wasn't still an option for her. If only ... that would have given her more peace. In the end, she didn't harm me. In the end, she let herself turn to dust instead of betray me.

"She might not have told you how to free them," Gareth answered softly.
"Witches hold their secrets close to their chests."

"She would have! Bronwyn didn't understand our relationship! Maybe Bronwyn wouldn't have shared her knowledge with her child, but Eira gave me a part of her garden to grow things in. She gave me the power I used to stop Bronwyn," Jude explained. He didn't know if that made any sense whatsoever to Gareth. He only partially understood it himself. But he *knew* it was a big deal and would have even bigger consequences when he started learning magic in the future.

If I learn it.

"There's a selfless reason she might not have told you." Gareth stroked the back of his hand again, that soothing, calming figure eight. The infinity symbol.

"Because ... because I would be in danger knowing," Jude guessed.

Gareth nodded. "If you could do this, and it became known, you might never be safe."

"You would protect me." Jude had no doubt about that.

Gareth smiled faintly. "Yes, Jude, I would give my life for yours. I would come back from the dead for you to give it countless times."

"That is ... incredibly dark, but also incredibly romantic, you know? I would do the same for you, too," Jude added.

Gareth squeezed his hand. "I know. But I cannot help but be a little grateful if you *never* have the gift to cure the Rogue curse. After seeing what lengths Bronwyn would go to in order to obtain that gift – and she was *good*, at one

point, I'm sure of that – I fear what others less good to begin with would do. I wouldn't want for you an existence where you are always hiding. Where you cannot be yourself. Where you're constantly hunted." Gareth shook his head. "I would not want that for you."

"But you know that means that Mack and all the others will stay Rogues, don't you? They'll lose themselves completely over time," Jude reminded him unnecessarily, but he needed to be sure he understood what Gareth was saying to him.

"They'll have to be put down when that time comes," Gareth agreed, nodding slightly, as he stared down the dark staircase.

Jude's heart thudded heavily in his chest. "I know you don't want that. You'd be the one to do it. Mack and Pierce and Clara. Paavo and – and my d-dad."

Gareth let out a shuddering breath, but then turned to him. His topaz eyes were so kind that Jude's throat went tight. Gareth understood everything he was saying and he felt every ounce of pain Jude did. He would feel it not just for himself, but for Jude, too. He'd carry it for both of them.

"If it keeps you *safe* –"

"No!" Jude cried. Softer, he repeated, "No, that's not how you live life. Safety is an *illusion*. You've got to be *strong* enough to meet the challenges life throws at you. If I'm going to be the mate of the Alpha of Alphas, I have to be brave. I have to be strong. I have to be *extraordinary*."

Gareth's eyes filled with pride and tears. "What are you saying, Jude?"

"I'm not going to hide from my magic and what I can do. I need a teacher. I need ... to become as strong as my parents in magic and in my wolf," Jude told him. "And that starts today. Right now."

"All right." Gareth swiped a hand over his eyes, nodded and smiled. "Tell me how we begin."

Jude brought Gareth's hand up to his lips. "We tell the Rogues what's going on. We tell them that I'm going to find a way to fix what's happened to them and what Bronwyn did. I will find a way. But ... it might take time. Time some of them might not have. And they have to make up their minds if they want to be imprisoned or ..."

Or? What's the other alternative? Having them run free and attack humans? Potentially expose us all to humanity?

"I don't know what the alternative is. Maybe Grandmother Sophia has an idea," Jude suggested.

"Perhaps she does. But you're right that we should speak to them. Mack will understand what's happening anyways when he sees Paavo." Gareth sighed.

"I wonder what he'll think of you being Alpha of Alphas." Jude grinned. His grin died though as he realized, "Paavo going Rogue now, clearly shows Mack was wrong about all the Council being Rogues already. His whole belief system will be tipped on its axis."

Gareth though was looking thoughtful as if something was bothering him.

"What is it?" Jude asked, squeezing his hand slightly.

"I can sense all the wolves now as Alpha of Alphas," Gareth responded to him slowly, gaze still distant. "Including the Council members."

"And? Some of them feel Rogue-like to you?"

Gareth nodded and Jude's eyes widened.

"Not sick like Theis or Paavo. Not losing their humanity like Mack, Pierce or Clara either though," he explained. "But there's something ... *off* about them. I cannot tell what it is. Almost like a *remnant* of being a Rogue."

"A *remnant*? So maybe they were Rogues, but Eira cured them at some point?" Jude guessed.

“Could be. Perhaps when you meet them you will understand what I mean. Maybe it will even help you in figuring out a cure,” Gareth suggested.

Jude nodded, feeling more invigorated than he had just moments before.

“Okay. Let’s ... let’s do this thing. Let’s go talk to everyone.”

Gareth laced their fingers together again and the two of them walked down the stairs towards the heavy steel door at the bottom. Jude was rather surprised that Nina and the others hadn’t come back up from the cells.

Gareth thought so, too, as he said, “It’s awfully quiet. I don’t feel any distress, but –”

Haggerty opened the door for them right then. It was unexpected and the sinewy wolf looked slightly dazed and a little awed. “She’s waiting for you.”

A prickle of unease and then *excitement* suddenly burned through Jude. *She*. There was only one person that could mean.

She’s not dead! Mother, are you there? Jude called.

Hello, Jude. Come on in, Eira responded with a delighted, almost girlish laugh.

“What’s going on?” Gareth looked alarmed. His eyes were huge and his nostrils flared.

“It’s *her*. She’s here. She’s not dead. Gareth, my mother isn’t dead!” Jude found himself grinning like a loon.

He pulled the Alpha of Alphas into the silver cells. The Rogues were locked away behind the silver bars. Theis and Paavo were still unconscious. The Rogue Betas were still in their wolf forms, but no longer snarling. They were whimpering, ears flattened, tails down. Mack, Pierce and Clara were all standing up, almost at rigid attention in their cells. Nina, Raj, Jacob and Molly were in the hallway, nude as the day they were born, all having

shifted multiple times between their wolf and human forms. Everyone was staring at the woman with red hair and green eyes at the end of the room.

“Bronwyn!” Gareth growled, but then he sniffed the air and shook his head, the anger clearing, while confusion filled his eyes instead. “You aren’t ... Jude, you said this is your *mother*? This is Eira? But it’s *Bronwyn’s* –”

“Bronwyn’s body! Yes, at least, she could offer *something* of use,” Eira smiled brightly.

Jude pushed his way gently past the others so that he and Gareth were standing in front of his mother. He reached one hand towards her, but didn’t quite touch her.

“I thought you were dead,” he said simply.

She grimaced. “I’m sorry about that. But I didn’t really want to give away what I was going to do. I wasn’t even sure it was going to work. For all I knew, I would really *be* dead. I had to use the very last dregs of my power to make the transfer after all.”

“You’re possessing Bronwyn’s body?” Jude’s eyebrows rose.

“She wasn’t using it any longer, Jude. You saw to that.” Eira let out a slight chuckle. She extended her arms and looked down at her “new” body. “It isn’t *perfect*, but it will do.”

“Did you know all along you were going to do this?” Gareth asked, topaz eyes narrowing.

She shook her head. “I didn’t really think she would come close enough.

This is the *old* way I used to lengthen my life, but I’ve only done it during the height of my powers, because the soul inside the witch’s body normally is strong. But Bronwyn, of course, was gone.”

“You can’t just cut witches off from their powers like I can, can you?” Jude cocked his head to the side.

Those laughing green eyes rose to his. “Maybe I can and maybe I can’t.”

Jude shook his head. “No straight answer?”

“Jude, would it give you pleasure to know you were the only one to be able to do this?”

Jude grew still. “No, I ... I don’t think it would.”

She nodded before turning to Gareth, not saying more on that subject, leaving him wondering if he *was* the only one capable of this. “I know you were worried about Jude being hunted down for the ability to cure Rogues. Believe me when I tell you that this gift Jude has to cut off witches from their magic is *far* more valuable and *dangerous*.”

Gareth’s hands fisted at his sides. “Do they know what Jude can do?”

“The other witches? No, and they won’t. At least not for some time. Because, you see, not only am I using this body for myself, but also for Jude,” she explained. “I’m going to pretend to be dear Bronwyn for a time, I think. That way no one will really know what happened here.”

Jude let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “That – that sounds like a good thing.”

She beamed again. “It is! At least, until you can defend *yourself*. I heard what you said up there. Do you still want to be *extraordinary*, Jude? As a wolf *and* a witch?”

He looked deeply into those green eyes and knew that he was telling her more with his answer than perhaps he knew. But he said without hesitation, “Yes, I want to learn to control my magic.”

She nodded. “You will be a *force* to be reckoned with.”

“You make that sound ...” Jude broke off, not sure what he meant to say. Or rather, he *was* certain, but it would be a difficult thing to say.

Eira said it for him though, “Like you’ll *need* to be? And not only against the witches out there, but against ... *me*?”

Jude frowned. “I wouldn’t hurt you.”

She gave him a pained smile. “I love you, too, Jude.”

He felt a flash of pained happiness go through him. He sensed that loving Eira was something that was not always going to be easy. She confirmed that by what she said next.

She gestured down at the body she possessed. “This isn’t a real solution for me. It taxes my powers. It’s not permanent. And you ... you will *always* have with your wolf side what I do not: immortality.”

“What are you saying?” Gareth immediately looked grimly at her as if he were going to attack. “That you’ll *still* go after him to extend your own life?”

“I don’t want to. I sincerely don’t. I love Jude. He’s my son and I couldn’t be prouder of him,” she said, yet her words comforted no one.

“But?” It was Nina who asked that. It was the first word she’d said.

“But I’m not a good person. I’m so *not* a good person,” she repeated with emphasis.

“But you love Jude,” Raj protested.

“I do,” she agreed.

“You resisted hurting him when he was a child,” Molly added.

“Indeed! I’m quite proud of *myself* for that, but then again, Jude hadn’t matured into his powers yet so ... it wouldn’t have been as efficacious to drain him then,” she answered with a press of lips at the end, admitting that it wasn’t *completely* altruism that had stayed her hand.

“You could have solved your problem today by taking Jude,” Jacob growled, his meaty arms over his chest.

“I could have,” she stated with a nod.

“So why are you acting like you’ll still hurt me? You haven’t when things were far more dire!” Jude cried.

“Because she knows herself,” it was Mack who spoke. His voice sounded almost hoarse and a ripple of self-loathing crossed his face.

“Yes.” She nodded and gave him a small smile. “And so do you now. Or you will very soon.”

Mack drew back farther into his cage. Pierce gave a warning growl, which Jude had to give him credit for. Everyone in that room was scared of Eira on *some* level. Clara stood, white as a sheet, trembling in the very center of her cell.

“So you want me to become powerful to defeat you should you ever ... give into your worst nature?” Jude guessed.

She touched his cheek, once, briefly and though the smile was on Bronwyn’s lips in Bronwyn’s face, all he saw was his mother. It was the only answer he was going to receive.

“About the Rogues,” Jude began, “I want to be able to cure them.”

She nodded. “Yes, of course, you do, but it is not a spell that you can simply learn off the bat. It will takes years of study and practice to do it safely.” His dismay rose up inside of him like a phoenix, but she raised a hand as if to stave it off. “But, fear not, I am going to do it for you. You will watch me. You will remember and you will learn. But you need far more training to do anything of this sort yet on your own.”

“You’re going to cure us?” Clara’s voice firmed slightly from ghostly at the beginning to slightly high and breathy at the end.

“Yes, my dear, but there is a *price*,” she said, still smiling even as her voice seemed to dip into the arctic zone.

“What is it? I’ll pay it for Mack,” Pierce offered.

Jude hurt hearing the sheer love in that voice. Mack’s head jerked towards Pierce and he looked suddenly haggard and shocked.

“No, Pierce, don’t say that. Don’t offer that. She’ll take you up on it! I don’t want you to do *anything* for me!” Mack cried.

“But why? You’re my Alpha! I love –”

“Stop! Don’t!” Mack looked half crazed. He grabbed the silver bars so he could be nearer to Pierce. His flesh smoked, but he didn’t let go even as everyone told him to stop, that he was hurting himself. Yet it didn’t matter.

“I don’t want *anything* more from you. Never again.”

Pierce jerked back as if struck. He shook his head in denial. “I *know* you love me. I *know* you do!”

“Then the best I can do for you is to cut you off.” Mack let go of the bars and turned to Eira, completely ignoring Pierce, even as the boy called plaintively to him.

Jude and Gareth shared a stricken look. Gareth merely shook his head and looked down at his feet.

“You are the only one who *chose* to be this way,” Eira addressed Mack. “So you are the only one who gets to choose whether to come back.”

Jude expected Mack to say that of course, he wanted to come back. He had allowed himself to be captured and taken here with every intent of being cured. But now that it had come down to it, it appeared that Mack was uncertain of what he wanted. He stared, hollow-eyed, at her. She nodded as if some unspoken communication was passed between them.

“You understand that once you are cured, you will hate what you’ve done, you will *hate* yourself most of all,” she said.

Mack said nothing in response.

“But to free these other two, I *must* free you. Beyond all odds, you managed to create a pack, and the pack bonds will be forever tainted if I allow you to remain as you are or fall deeper into darkness,” Eira said.

“Then do it,” Mack’s voice was hoarse and low. “Cure me ... to free the others.”

She nodded in agreement. Jude held his breath as he felt the magic swell in the room. For one moment, behind her instead of the blank concrete wall, he saw her garden. He saw the two of them wandering through it. He saw her bend down and pluck a withered limb from an otherwise flourishing bush. The vision ended at that moment and Mack let out a howl so loud and pained that Jude curled forward and covered his ears. Gareth curled over him protectively. Pierce and Clara let out yips. The others shuddered. Mack collapsed on the ground, unconscious.

More magic swelled and both Clara and Pierce let out howls, too, not as terrible as Mack’s, but ones that had their backs arching almost in parabolas. They, too, fell to the ground, unconscious, but somehow ... peaceful. Mack, in contrast, looked like he was in the middle of a terrible nightmare that he could not wake up from.

Eira walked past the three of them and went over to Theis’ cage. She looked in upon his unconscious, beautiful form. He’d already healed from where Bronwyn had thrown him against the tree. Like Mack, though, he looked to be having a none too pleasant dream. Eira reached in to touch him, but her hand remained a few inches above his skin and did not lower.

“How I loved you though I doubt you would ever believe that,” she murmured. “His, Paavo and these Betas’ conditions are different than the others, Jude. Pay attention. Bronwyn’s spell twisted things in ways that were unnatural.”

“Being a Rogue is unnatural,” Gareth grunted.

“Not really. Your perfect balance between wolf and man is truly a construct of magic. Before I perfected you, the problem was that you would fall into your full animal nature - you Rogue nature - all too easily. Your humanity really was only skin deep,” she told him. “Having you keep it despite the call of the wild was what was the difficult part of the spell I created.”

She murmured some words and again, Jude saw the garden. This time he saw the sun streaming through the large oak tree’s branches in the corner of the garden. A mixture of darkness and light. Their handsome face smoothed out into genuine sleep. No longer did he look pained or driven.

She repeated this same procedure with the Betas. They immediately returned to their human forms, piled on top of one another like puppies in sleep. Finally, she went to Paavo’s cell.

“He will be unhappy when he is cured and sees what he has lost,” she said without looking at Gareth.

“Will he try to take it back?” Jude asked.

“He will try,” she said. “But he will not succeed and *that* can lead to even greater bitterness and desperation.”

Jude put an arm protectively around Gareth’s broad shoulders.

“I did not want to be Alpha of Alphas,” Gareth said.

“But you cannot give it back. It is *yours*. It was always meant to be yours, Gareth,” she answered quietly. “Do you still wish me to free Paavo knowing that he may well become your greatest enemy in the future?”

Jude’s heart quivered in his chest. He knew though what Gareth would want Paavo cured so he did not object even though a part of him wanted to cry out to her to leave Paavo an animal, to not save him.

Gareth nodded and said, “Yes, free him.”

Again, the magic surged and Jude saw her garden. He saw how sunlight splashed down onto flowers that had been too long in the shade and were dying. Paavo was no longer unconscious due to injury or illness. He was simply sleeping deeply like the rest. Eira turned towards them.

“Did you learn something, Jude?” she asked.

He nodded. “I don’t know how to do it, but I ... I understand more now.”

She smiled. “I knew you would. But you have a long way to go.”

“Will you be my teacher?” He felt suddenly like she was going to disappear on him again and he desperately wanted to give her a reason to stay.

A knowing look crossed her face. “You are not ready for me yet. I think Sophia should be your first mistress. Then ... then perhaps after you have exhausted her knowledge and many others you can come to me. And we will see.”

Jude swallowed a sudden lump in his throat. “You’re leaving me then?”

For a moment, he saw shock on his mother’s face. She quickly smoothed it away. “I – just for – for a time. But I *always* am watching you.”

He embraced her. She was stiff at first in his arms, but then she softened and allowed herself to hug him fiercely back.

He whispered into the crook of her neck, “You’re not used to being wanted when people know who you are and what you’ve done.”

“No, because most people have more *sense* than you do,” she answered with a slight, pained laugh.

“You are my *mother*. You will *always* be loved by me,” he told her.

She allowed the embrace to go on for a moment longer, but then she was a few paces from him even though he had not felt her retreat. Haggerty opened the door for her just as he had for them. He looked a little less dazed

now and a little more alert. She straightened and brushed her hands down her front.

“We will see each other soon. You will have enough to occupy you until then,” she told him. “A mating ceremony and Gareth accepting the praise of all and sundry.”

Gareth put his arms around Jude. “Not just me.”

“No, not just you. But I will say my adieus for now. Just for now.”

She seemed to fade into the darkness of the stairs. Jude was sure that she hadn’t actually walked up them. She was gone. For now. Though she still watched. He turned to look at Gareth and the others. They all appeared a bit shellshocked. Nina blinked rapidly and shook her head as if to clear it.

“I feel like my brain was replaced by cotton there for a bit,” Raj said as he tapped his temple a few times.

“She had control of us,” Nina guessed with a slightly angry and fearful look in her eyes.

Molly stared at the stairs. “We need to know how to protect ourselves and Jude from her.”

“She’s not going to hurt me,” Jude protested.

“She’s all but said she will try,” Jacob reminded him.

“Only if she – she doesn’t remember the better part of her nature,” Jude argued.

“You don’t know how small a part of her that may be,” Haggerty said softly. “You may be the only thing that matters to her outside herself, pup.”

Jude lowered his head. Gareth, who had not added anything about Eira, gently kissed his temple. That said more than enough.

“I want to open the cells and sit with my dad. Is that okay?” Jude asked Gareth. “I want me to be the first thing he sees when he wakes up. And I want the others to be able to walk out of here.”

“What are we going to do about Mack, Gareth?” Nina asked. “We can’t just let him go unpunished.”

“And what about Clara and Pierce?” Raj asked, scratching the back of his neck. “It wasn’t really their fault what they did when they were Rogues. Mack made them into that. Are they going to join the Cold Moon Pack?”

“Or will they be still joined to Mack?” Molly asked.

“There will be time to decide that when they all awaken,” Gareth answered. His gaze was on his former Alpha. “If Mack is himself again, I don’t think we’ll have to punish him. He will be doing that himself. As to the others ... they are more than free to join us if they wish to.”

Everyone nodded.

Haggerty opened the door to Theis’ cell first before moving on to all the others. Jude immediately sat down by his father’s side. He was pleased when his father curled around him protectively. Jude slowly ran his fingers through his father’s blond hair.

“I’m going to sit with Mack,” Gareth said quietly. “Will you be all right here?”

“Of course.”

Jude nodded. In the end, it would be Gareth’s decision what to do about the man that had raised him like a father, but betrayed like his worst enemy.

Except his worst enemy isn’t awake yet.

Jude cast a single glance at Paavo and hoped that Eira was wrong about him. He and Gareth kissed softly. When they parted, Jude could still feel

Gareth with him, their almost mate bond was nearly completed. It was just waiting for them to make it formal.

That's what I want to do next, he realized. I want to become Gareth's official mate.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE: TONIGHT IS THE NIGHT

Tonight was the night.

Jude and Gareth were going to complete their mate bond.

Jude's palms began to sweat just thinking about it. That wasn't his only physical reaction either. Heat built between his thighs, too. But his stomach tumbled with a mixture of excitement and unease as he had to remind himself that he and Gareth would make love for the first time in *everyone's* presence, during a ceremony with a bonfire blazing and the stars wheeling overhead. It wouldn't just be Grandma Sophia, Tessa and the Cold Moon Pack either – though that would have been enough to make him nervous – but all the werewolves from any pack that came. Now that Gareth was Alpha of Alphas, the concept of *pack* was far expanded.

Gareth had held Jude's hands in his as he explained, "I want to celebrate you joining the pack, our mating and my new position *separately*, but –"

"I want us bonded like *now*, Gareth," Jude had interrupted him. He put a hand to his chest. "I feel the bond inside of me and I'm *tired* of it being incomplete. I want to be with you fully body and soul. Even if that means we engage in a little exhibitionism."

Gareth smiled. "I feel the same way though I do want us to have some *privacy*. We deserve time to just be *alone*."

"I agree, but ... but duties first, right? We'll have time for just each other coming up," Jude said.

"My mate." Gareth cupped his face and caressed his cheeks with his thumbs. "Thank you for understanding our duties. But I promise you that we shall have time together just you and I."

Though Gareth had only become Alpha of Alphas two days before, every werewolf on the planet had known of the transfer of power. And they were

streaming in from all over the globe. Jude just had to turn his head to see the line of cars that was making its way up Fallowmere's drive.

The cars were being parked in far glades just so that there was enough room for them all. Fallowmere itself was full to bursting and some werewolves were having to camp in the woods, which none seemed to mind. The whole of the property now seemed like a campground with the amount of people here. Jude could see and smell campfires all over the woods. He was a little *twitchy* about all the new people, but Gareth's steady presence in his mind was keeping him calm.

"Don't be nervous. It's not for hours yet," his father said.

Jude turned to face Theis. The two of them were seated on two chaise lounges on the porch, forced into being "lazy" with iced tea and snacks while almost everyone else was running around to set up for the night's festivities. Jude had tried to help, but he was shooed away. And he wasn't supposed to be with Gareth until that evening, because one of the werewolf rules – rather like a bride and groom seeing each other on the wedding day was that they were to be apart until they literally came together – so he and his father were on enforced relaxation.

"How do you know that I'm thinking about – about *that*?" Jude demanded, his cheeks coloring.

"What else would you be thinking about that would cause the twin scents of arousal and fear to emanate off of you?"

Jude slumped down into the lounge and stuffed another piece of chili lime jerky into his mouth and chewed. It was delicious. Haggerty made it and Izzy informed him that it was usually gone before the end of the day.

"So you and Theis need to snag some, especially with all these wolves around," she'd said as she shooed him out of the kitchen where he'd been trying to help wash dishes.

"Tonight will be wonderful. You won't even know we're there, except in the sense that –"

“That you’ll all be staring at me and Gareth while we make love?” Jude pointed out.

Theis grinned. “Except that you will feel our *love* for both of you. Then it will be just you and Gareth. A war could break out and you won’t notice.”

“Is that how it was ... forget it,” Jude had been about to ask if that was how it had been for him and Eira. But she wasn’t a werewolf, so not his mate, and his father now hated her.

“How it was with Eira? Yes, but our love was nothing compared to yours,” Theis said. His tone was mild. He tried to hide his feelings from Jude, because he knew that Jude still cared for the witch. Though Jude was certain his father thought him delusional for doing so. But Theis never said a word against his love of her. “That is why I am certain that you will forget everyone and everything else.”

“Why does it have to happen in front of everyone?” Jude grouched. “Why can’t I just grab Gareth and take him against the side of the house or something?”

His father – who reminded him more of a surfer than a werewolf with his shoulder length blond hair, golden skin and laid back attitude – tossed his head back as he laughed. “I would pay to see that.”

“That’s the whole point that you *don’t* see it. That *no one* sees it.” He devoured another piece of the delicious jerky. Feeling guilty, he offered Theis the last piece.

His father ripped it in half and gave him back half. Jude grinned at him and immediately bit into it.

“It is an ancient rite, Jude. It signals to all the other wolves that you and Gareth are *claimed* by each other and are a *unit*. This is especially true now that Gareth is the Alpha of Alphas,” Theis said.

Jude’s gaze flickered over to his father. “Are you ... are you okay with ... with *everything*?”

Theis turned to him with a concerned look. “Yes, Jude. I am *glad* of Gareth leading us now. It is as I said to Paavo: it was time for someone new. Gareth is the perfect choice for our leader in this brave new world.”

Two days before, only a few hours after Paavo, Theis and the rest had awoken from their induced slumber to recover from being Rogues, Paavo had turned from remorseful and grateful to angry and bitter. He’d stormed out of the silver cells and confronted Gareth at the top of the stairs.

“You *stole* my position, Gareth,” Paavo had hissed as he’d stuck one of his fingers against Gareth’s chest.

“No, he didn’t!” Jude had cried. He was helping Theis stand upright as his father was still weak or otherwise he would have jumped between his uncle and his mate.

Mack, who was standing a small distance away, looked ready to intercede as well, which was surprising, because since he’d awoken he’d said not a word. Not to Gareth. Not to Jude. Not to any of the Cold Moon Pack who looked at him stonily. Not even to Pierce or Clara who called out to him.

Though both looked sick and anguished, they *still* thought of Mack as their Alpha. He, though, had curled into a ball and rocked. But now, he appeared up to attacking Paavo on Gareth’s behalf. Pierce and Clara drew close to him, ready to help as well.

And he wasn’t the only one. Nina stood at his side with her face full of thunder. Raj and Jacob now flanked Gareth and Nina. Molly and Tessa were loping towards them from the house, clearly having sensed the Rogues were up and moving.

“It is all right, Jude. I can handle this,” Gareth told him gently. He turned back to Paavo, no aggression in him at all, in fact, he looked sad and a little weary. “Paavo, you need to rest and recover. We can talk about all of this —”

“Talk?! Talk about how you used the fact that I was incapacitated by the hag and then that *bitch*, Bronwyn to attack me and usurp my role as Alpha

of Alphas?!” Paavo scoffed.

“Brother, there is no rule that says an Alpha must be in perfect health to be challenged,” Theis pointed out. He straightened up and released Jude after a fatherly squeeze.

“I demand a rematch!” Paavo shouted.

Gareth looked at Paavo out of steady topaz eyes. “You may challenge me, but the rules are clear that you can only do so after a *year*.”

“Those rules only apply when there’s no interference! And *witches* interfered!” Paavo spat the words out. His face was an ugly puce color and spittle flecked his lips. Jude wondered if he was really himself again or something of the Rogue was still in him.

“He would have beaten you witches or no witches,” Nina challenged, moving towards Paavo aggressively, but Gareth blocked her and she backed down. “We all could see it when you went after Jude in our living room that he was capable of besting you. The only *interference* was that you went Rogue and were going to kill people. He *had* to act. He beat you when you were *stronger* than you ever could have been otherwise.”

Paavo’s two Betas – who still flanked their Alpha – growled at her. “Do not speak to the Alpha!”

“I am the Alpha of Alpha’s Beta, I can speak to *whomever* I want!” her voice was cool even though her eyes blazed with anger.

Gareth sent out a calming through to the group and all – even Paavo – relaxed slightly. “I understand your feelings, Paavo. This was *not* what I wanted. But it has happened and it cannot be undone.”

Paavo let out a bark of bitter laughter. “You truly expect anyone to believe that you became Alpha of Alphas out of the *goodness of your heart*?”

“I had no intention of challenging you,” Gareth made clear. “I wished to focus on the Cold Moon Pack –”

“That’s what this is all about! You’ve never forgiven me for simply enforcing our rules that each pack deals with its own Rogue problems!” Paavo snarled.

Mack’s head lowered. Pierce touched him gently, but he did not respond. Clara swallowed hard.

“No, I haven’t,” Gareth answered, his voice calm. “You were wrong to do as you did. And if there is *one* thing that I am glad to be Alpha of Alphas for is to eliminate that particular injustice.” Gareth sliced a hand through the air. “From now on, Rogues are *everyone*’s problem. No pack is going to be left on its own to cope and they will not be ostracized either.”

“See! This is proof that he held malice for me in his heart!” Paavo shouted, somehow both triumphant and sad.

“Brother, stop!” Theis begged. “You are –”

“Not myself?” Paavo mocked.

But Theis shook his blond hair. “No, unfortunately, this is *you*. When you have lost. When you have failed. You do not take it well. Your strength and intelligence has made it so that you rarely have had to experience loss, but now you must.”

“How dare you –”

“No! You need to listen! For once!” Theis interrupted and went toe to toe with his brother. His blue eyes shone with conviction. “Gareth stopped your from *killing* our people. What would you have had him do? Let you slaughter the wolves? Let you kill my son, your nephew? Feast on human flesh and reveal our existence to the world?”

Paavo said nothing in response. His adam’s apple moved up and down the column of his throat as he swallowed hard. Jude wanted to cheer. Unlike everyone else, Theis seemed to be getting through to Paavo.

Theis' voice softened and he put his hands lightly on Paavo's shoulders. "Gareth did what he had to do. What *you* would have wanted him to do. You would know this if you were thinking clearly now."

"What else would I want if I was thinking *clearly* now? Show Gareth *gratitude*?" Paavo sneered, but his voice was calmer.

"Yes," Theis answered and when Paavo started to make some objection, he quickly added, "Accept that he beat you with *grace*. Accept our rules.

Honor what he did. Support *him* and the *position*. And if, in a year, you wish to challenge him ... do so then. Again, with grace. Or ... perhaps you will see that it is a *good* thing for Gareth to be Alpha of Alphas and you will be content to advise."

"What?" The word was a soft explosion from Paavo's lips.

Jude blinked. What was his father suggesting? That Gareth *should* be Alpha of Alphas for the long term? Was he choosing Gareth over Paavo for that role?

"You have been a wonderful Alpha of Alphas, brother," Theis said quietly and with conviction. He squeezed his brother's shoulders. "But it's time for a change. Another perspective. A wolf of the new world should lead us. At least, for a time."

Paavo brushed Theis' hands off of him and stepped away. "You, too, hold poison in your heart towards me because I did not take Jude in when you came to me! You wish me to suffer!"

Jude's shoulders bunched. Tessa linked her fingers through his. She and Molly had come up to the group silently. She was staring at Paavo with undisguised dislike.

"Being Alpha of the biggest pack in the world is *suffering*? Asking that you honor the rules that keep order in our world is *suffering*?" Theis shook his head. There was such sadness written on his handsome features. "Those are *not* the ideals that our parents taught us or that *you* have upheld as Alpha of Alphas."

“Gareth is a tool of *witches*! He is without honor!” Paavo snarled. His gaze zeroed in on Gareth at that moment. “In a year’s time, I will be at your door, dog. And you will know my wrath.”

And with that, Paavo and his Betas transformed into wolves and raced away. Jude could feel them heading towards the edge of Cold Moon Pack territory, but he noticed that, unlike before, when he had been searching for Eira the *line* of the territory was blurred, because now Gareth’s power extended far beyond these lands.

“I’m sorry,” Theis said after his brother disappeared. His shoulders slumped. “I’m so sorry. He is ...”

“Bitter.” Tessa’s hand tightened around Jude’s. She had watched this whole exchange with a pinched mouth. “And dangerous. I think fighting is an insane way to determine who should be your leader in any case. Paavo is case in point of that.”

Molly curled her arm around her waist. “It is our way. The belief is that those gifted with great strength will also be possessed of great wisdom to rule all the packs. Gareth has this combination.”

Tessa looked over at Gareth. “You definitely are the right choice, but Paavo is bad news. I have a feeling he’ll do anything to get back what he’s lost.”

Jude agreed with her. Eira had offered not to cure him, but that would have been wrong. Yet Jude’s growing warm feelings towards his uncle had nearly vanished. Paavo had barely *looked* at him since being cured. The happy, boisterous man was gone, replaced by the bitter desperate creature. He tried not to mourn him.

He looked over at his father now. Theis’ expression was happy and relaxed. All he had been through for *year* being a Rogue, fighting Bronwyn’s control, and desperately trying to protect Jude from Eira ... and *himself*. His father had feared that he would bite Jude and turn him Rogue, too. That was why he had stayed away. The desire to turn his own flesh had

almost been overpowering. He'd confessed all this just last night, begging forgiveness even though there was nothing to be forgiven.

"You are going to stay with us, aren't you?" Jude asked suddenly.

His father turned his head again with that look of surprise. "Of course, Jude. I will never leave you. Not ... not again."

Jude swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. "Good. Good. That's what I want. I just thought ... you might want to go back to your pack."

"It's not my pack any longer, Jude," his father answered. "My pack is ... you."

"And the Cold Moon Pack, too," Jude assured him.

"That will be up to you and Gareth. There's never been a Rogue who has returned to himself. We are in new territory," Theis responded.

"Yeah, we are, but there's no question that you're welcome. You know that, right?" He stared at his father hard.

Theis tenderly touched Jude's hair. Jude had no urge to flinch away from him. "No matter what ... I will be by your side."

When his father leaned in and kissed his forehead, Jude's eyes closed and he leaned against his father. They broke apart and went back to looking out at the forest. There was far more movement than usual out there. The visiting werewolves were gliding between the trees with natural predatory grace. The scent of wood smoke flowed through the air pleasantly. Under other circumstances, Jude would have been relaxed and happy, but he was already thinking of what was to come that night.

"Jude?" Grandmother Sophia's voice rose up from behind them. The elderly witch came through the French doors. She was carrying a little wooden box in one hand. "There you are! I am glad to see you relaxing."

“He’s not relaxed, Grandmother Sophia,” Theis chuckled even as he rose. He grabbed their empty glasses and said, “Let me go refill these. Would you like some?”

He asked the last to the elderly witch. She nodded. “Make mine extra sweet, just like you.”

Theis actually ducked his head and blushed, before heading inside.

“He sensed you had something you wanted to talk to me about alone?” Jude guessed even as Grandmother Sophia settled herself in one of the chaise lounges.

She let out a chuckle. “Your witch instincts are right on!” She pushed the box towards him. On the top was a fleur de lis. “This is for you.”

“What’s in it?” he asked as he drew the two inch by two inch box towards him.

“Open it up and see.”

He cracked the box open and saw an amulet inside. It was gold with many intertwining infinity symbols and was on a delicate gold chain. “It’s beautiful.”

“This was given to me by my first teacher,” she said. “It helped me focus by following the lines of the amulet.”

Jude allowed his gaze to slightly unfocus as he followed the unending lines. At first, it seemed like a pointless exercise, but then he sensed *power* streaming up from the ground, reaching towards him. He started as soon as he felt it and lost touch with it.

“I had it! But now ...”

She put a hand over his. “Don’t force it, Jude. It will come. You’re definitely a natural.”

“Yeah, it’s in my blood.” He frowned a little. “Do you think Eira can stay good?”

Her eyebrows rose. “I think that a being like Eira may be *beyond* our ideas of good and evil. She comes from a different time.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He ran his fingers over the amulet. “I just meant ...”

“She loves you as much as she is capable of, Jude. Though I wish it were more clear cut,” Grandmother Sophia said.

“You mean you wish she was either fully my mother or fully my enemy?”

“Again, those witch instincts have kicked right in.” She wagged a finger playfully at him.

“Me, too, except for the enemy part. I want her to love me. I mean ... she *does* love me. I know it,” he murmured. He looked back down at the amulet. “Thank you for this. But shouldn’t you give it to Tessa?”

“I have something else for Tessa. Do you think I would give you something and forget your sister?” She looked at him archly, but there was a smile wreathing her lips.

“Absolutely not. You’re so right. Besides ... Tessa would be so mad if you did.” He laughed and hugged her before placing the amulet around his neck.

At that moment, as if speaking about her summoned her, Tessa and Molly came towards them hand in hand. His sister was beaming. He’d never seen her so happy. The two of them came over to the railing.

“We are going to the lake and thought that you might want to come, Jude.” Tessa’s eyes were shining with mischief.

“I wouldn’t mind a dip. Maybe Theis would like to go. I’ll ask him before I grab a suit,” he got out before Tessa was giggling like a mad woman.

Molly rolled her eyes. “What?”

“A *swimsuit*, Jude? Don’t you think you should be beyond those things? After all, tonight is the night.” Tessa waggled her eyebrows at him.

He mock scowled at her. “I’m sure there’s some werewolf rule where *sisters* of the Alpha’s mate have to get naked, too, and *dance*.”

“Oh, no, I –”

“There is,” Molly cut her off firmly.

Tessa’s eyebrows rose into her hairline. “What are you talking about, Molly? I’m not a werewolf!”

“It’s a *rule*. You, too, will be naked, this evening. Naked and *dancing*,” Molly answered her safely. “Isn’t that right, Grandmother Sophia?”

Grandmother Sophia said with solemnity, “Regardless of werewolf rules, my dear, *witches* most certainly celebrate as the Goddess made us.”

“You’re all putting me on.” Tessa’s gaze flickered from one of them to the other, but all of them remained serious.

Until Jude started snickering.

Then everyone lost it.

“You all are so mean!” But Tessa was laughing as she said it.

Molly leaned in and whispered in her ear, “I assure you that *you* will be naked and dancing tonight with me. Rules or no.”

Tessa blushed and looked at her out of hooded eyes. “We shall see.” She then grasped Jude’s hand and tugged him, urging him to come off the porch and follow them. “Let’s go skinny dipping!”

“All right, all right, but Theis –”

“I’ll tell him where you are, my Jude. Go and enjoy yourself,” Grandmother Sophia said with a wave.

He easily vaulted over the balcony railing. He put an arm around both of their shoulders and they headed towards the lake. But even as he tried to stay in the moment with the two of them, he kept thinking: *Tonight is the night. Tonight is the night that Gareth becomes my mate officially.*

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX: MIGHT OF RIGHT

Gareth meditated in the same clearing where he'd had his first vision of Jude. A new vision was appearing before him.

He and Jude were running through the forest in wolf form. He could feel the coolness of the damp earth beneath his paws. He heard the sounds of their breathing as they flew between trees and over fallen stumps. The scent of green growing things perfumed the air. He turned and looked at Jude, admiring the way his muscles moved so fluidly and finding it inexplicably adorable how his ears flickered as they ran.

They suddenly burst through a treeline and exited the forest unexpectedly. Gareth was blinded by the sunlight that streamed down upon them. Gareth skidded to a halt, but he heard that Jude kept running forward. He let out a yip to catch Jude's attention. He blinked rapidly and his eyesight cleared.

He was in a garden. There were neat rows of flowers. A profusion of vegetable plants. Blooms tumbled over one another. Bees, as large as his human thumbs, buzzed around lazily in the warm, summer air. Even the grass beneath his paws felt *vibrant*. Everywhere he looked was *life*.

He looked for Jude.

And he found him.

Jude was standing beside Eira. She was gently petting Jude's head and his mate's eyelids were closed in pleasure. She smiled at Gareth and gestured for him to come closer. Gareth hesitated. No matter that Eira had helped them, he still did not altogether trust her. But Jude was beside her and he would not leave his mate. So he slowly crept over.

Eira let out a soft laugh at his tentative approach. "Oh, Gareth, if you could only see yourself! A big beautiful wolf *creeping*, head down, eyes hooded

with suspicion! It is beneath the Alpha of Alphas to be so! Come now. Fluff that tail and lift your head.”

Gareth gave her a *look* of derision, but he did straighten up. Jude’s eyes opened and his tongue was hanging out as he smiled at Gareth even as his mother scratched behind his ears.

What are you doing here, Eira? Gareth asked, knowing in the vision somehow that she could hear him.

“I will not be present for your mating ceremony this evening, but I wanted to say congratulations,” she told him lightly.

Is that all?

The skin around her eyes crinkled in amusement. She made a sweeping gesture with one hand and the garden vanished behind her and there was blackness. Within this blackness, images of people appeared. There were those he did not recognize: a woman with long black hair and green eyes who was smiling, but the smile was like a gash across her face, a man with a dark beard and bald head with hard blue eyes, another woman with hair so blond it was almost white with a catlike smirk on her face. The images went on and on, but he knew he would remember them. He wasn’t surprised when Paavo and the Betas. Finally, she waved her hand again and the garden returned.

I recognized Paavo and the Betas, but who were the rest of those people? Gareth shifted his weight from paw to paw with anxiety.

“They are those who will oppose you and those that will come after Jude,” she explained.

He let out a low growl. *They will not harm Jude!*

His mate whined and moved towards him, but Eira put a hand on Jude’s head.

“They will *try*. Like Paavo. Some you might be able to move to your side, but others will always be dangerous to you. And as you and Jude grow in power, more will join this list,” she told him.

You indicated this before. Why show me this now? Not that I am ungrateful to have faces, he said.

“Because you may see some of those faces tonight,” she told him.

He growled again.

“And because you will need as many allies as you can find,” she continued.

Gareth immediately thought of Mack. Ever since his former Alpha had been cured of the Rogue curse, he had been skittish. He had kept himself apart. There were few in the Cold Moon Pack that cared. Most wanted him gone. Most acted like he already was. Gareth hadn’t been able to go to him. His feelings of betrayal, hurt and anger were too great.

Eira regarded him quietly, her fingers flexing around the fur on Jude’s back.

You think I should seek out Mack?

“The strength he gained as a Rogue is still with him. What made him a good leader and fighter has not gone away. He did what no other could do: he formed a pack while Rogue,” she reminded him.

Gareth turned in an angry circle and snapped the sweet scented air. *He betrayed us! He killed those who called him father! No one trusts him! I do not trust him!*

“Trust? Who said anything about trust? I did not.” Eira shook her head and her long red hair shimmered in the summer heat. “You are Alpha of Alphas now, Gareth, you must think *differently*.”

You mean that a good man cannot be king, Gareth translated. He shook his head. His fur fluffed. *That is not the only way to be a leader.*

“It is not, you are right, but it is the *best* way to insure survival,” she responded mildly. Her fingers stroked Jude’s fur again.

And you want to make sure that Jude is safe? He guessed.

She smiled. “I didn’t think I would ever have any *maternal* feelings, let alone protective instincts for him, but I do. Though some may question if that is only so no one else takes what’s *mine*.”

Jude is his own, Gareth reminded her sternly.

That had another burst of rather girlish laughter erupting from her. “Oh, Gareth, you are so *noble*! I can see why Jude loves you so much. You’re like one of those ancient knights!”

Your son is noble, too. He is my mate. My equal. My balance, Gareth said.

“Yes, that *is* interesting, isn’t it? Some may look at *you* askance and wonder why the child of Eira and yourself are bonded,” she reminded him.

They can say what they like. They already do. Gareth shook himself. *It matters not.*

“You are so certain of yourself, but yes, that would be what you would say and think,” she answered. “But, still, it would be good to have more powerful beings in your corner when those who think differently than you appear.”

Again, we become back to Mack. At that moment, Gareth heard the soft snap of a twig in the back of the woods. His head swung towards the sound. He saw the tan wolf with the blue eyes, looking out at him solely. *Mack!*

Allies are better than enemies always ...

He went to look back at Eira and Jude again, but they were gone. The garden was gone. The forest was gone. All he could see was the backs of his eyelids. He opened them and could see nothing at first, but a blur of gold and green. His vision slowly came back as he blinked.

The cool forest air circulated around his bare chest. He took in a deep breath and the scent of pine filled his nostrils. The sun is warm on his back and shoulders. He is not in danger. Yet his heart rate is still elevated though and he *knows* he is not alone. But it is not his Beta Nina who is with him.

Mack.

Slowly, Gareth turned his head to one part of the forest to his left. Between two tree trunks was the tan wolf with blue eyes. Mack started to withdraw into the green vastness, but Gareth lifted a hand towards him. And with a silent mental command, ordered Mack to come forward. The tan wolf slunk out of the woods and stopped a few feet from Gareth.

“You’ve stayed in your wolf form too long, Mack. It’s time to shift back and talk,” Gareth said.

Mack lowered his head and gave a little shake.

“You think there’s nothing to say? You’re wrong.” Gareth sighed and ran a hand through his loose hair. He pulled out a hair tie and bound it back.

“You know that I need ... allies.”

Mack’s head lifted. Those blue eyes studied his face minutely.

“That’s why you’ve been watching me. You’ve been guarding me,” Gareth realized.

Mack’s head lowered again, but he peered up at Gareth almost shyly.

Gareth suddenly ached to pull Mack against him. He could remember how

close they had been. It would have been nothing to end up in a pile of wolves with Mack and wake up with his former Alpha curled on one side of him and Eliza on the other, like parents. Loving him. A favorite son. Adored by them.

“Why did you do it? Why didn’t you come to me when they hurt her?” he found himself asking. He’d never had the chance to before.

Mack lowered himself down, head between his paws, and his gaze averted from Gareth.

“I *loved* you. I thought you saw me as your *son*,” he continued, the words pouring out of him before his mind had a chance to keep up, “but you didn’t. You just ... *killed* those humans. That I can understand. That I can ... I would have done it, too. But -- but you went after *us*. Why?”

With Mack in his wolf form, he would *not* get the answers to any of these questions. Mack was practically flattened against the ground with shame. Gareth got up to his feet swiftly and Mack made a move to scramble away from him. But Gareth would not let him run. He grabbed the scruff of Mack’s neck and held him firm. Mack doesn’t fight against him after an initial yip. Gareth was the Alpha of Alphas after all.

“I order you to shift goddamnit, Mack. You *will* talk to me!” Gareth demanded.

When he released the former Alpha, Mack immediately shifted into his human form. His handsome, chiseled features looked tired. He shifted from foot to foot. His gaze was on the ground, not looking at Gareth in the eye.

“What do you want me to say, Alpha? There is no excuse I could give, no explanation I could tell you, that would make it right,” Mack’s voice was hoarse as he had not used it in some time.

Gareth put his hands on his hips and started to pace. “What am I to do with you?”

“Send me away. Better yet ... kill me,” Mack answered. His tone was remorseful, resigned.

Gareth let out a bark of bitter laughter. “No! Neither of those is an answer! You made two wolves in your time as a Rogue, Clara and Pierce. Both of them would suffer if you were to leave, let alone die.”

“It would be better for them if I was not here. They could bond fully with you,” Mack argued.

“Don’t lie! Not to me! But certainly not to yourself!” Gareth’s pacing stopped. He turned and looked at his former Alpha. Still handsome and strong. Still with the possibility for goodness. “Pierce pines for you.” He cast a glance towards the forest, certain that Pierce was nearby, and he sensed the boy. “Clara is so young. She is having a difficult time already explaining all this to her father. You would leave her alone in this when it was *you* who began it?”

Deputy Reynolds was actually here for the mating ceremony. Brandon and Izzie had taken Clara under their protective wings. They were leading her father around Fallowmere rather like he was a lost puppy. Learning that his daughter was a werewolf had knocked him off his head for a little while. It had been determined that he would not be told about her role in the deaths that he had been investigating. Gareth thought he might know anyways.

There were shadows in his eyes whenever he spoke about the “wolves” who had killed the citizens of the town he was sworn to protect. Killings that had stopped since his daughter had left town.

Mack winced at every word he said. “You would heal them, Gareth. You already have done much on that score.”

Gareth grasped Mack’s biceps and shook his former Alpha. “You have to take responsibility! You have to stop with this feeling sorry for yourself!

What you did wrong is unable to be undone, all that you can do is fix the future!”

Mack looked wretched. He tried to turn away from Gareth, but Gareth wouldn’t let him go.

“How can I be *anything* to those two when I -- I *corrupted* them?” Mack cried. “I took Pierce to bed! He’s still a child!”

“No, he isn’t. He is an adult. A young one, but an adult,” Gareth insisted. “Even in this age, he is old enough to know what he wants. And he wants *you*. Do you want him?”

Mack made a wounded sound. “He is so lovely. And, sometimes, in a certain light he looks like Eliza.”

“He’s *not* Eliza, Mack. No one ever will be. He’s *Pierce*,” Gareth pointed out to him.

“I know,” Mack’s voice was hollow. “Gareth ... even if I wanted to come back, I could not. The hatred towards me is severe. And *rightfully* so.”

Gareth let out a sharp breath between his teeth. That *was* true. The reason he hadn’t reached out to Mack before his vision with Eira was because he couldn’t imagine the pain and stress he would put on the Cold Moon Pack if he tried to enforce Mack’s inclusion.

“It’s impossible, Gareth. I cannot come back,” Mack sounded forlorn but also *certain*.

“Jude is ... very special,” Gareth said. His throat closed up as he said it. “It is not just my position now that draws attention to him, but his very nature as Eira’s son.”

Mack nodded. His expression grew thoughtful instead of wretched. “I know. He will one day be capable of so much. Right now Eira uses her

ability to create us and cure us as a weapon. But Jude is *one* of us. Once he finds out how to cure us ... things will change. She might not even like it.”

Gareth had to agree with that. Even though he so wanted Jude to have a loving mother, the note of possession in her voice even in the vision was unmistakeable. As Jude matured in his powers, Gareth imagined that Eira’s possessiveness would only grow and maybe her jealousy of what he could do, too. And what if Eira couldn’t find another way to continue on in her quest for immortality? Would she eventually become Jude’s enemy?

“You are right. More than right. I fear for him ... and you. Becoming Alpha of Alphas is ... well, you are very young. And you are of the new world,” Mack said, and Gareth felt the old Mack - the one that was wise and strategic - was speaking to him.

“Surely, that is not still an issue. It’s not like America is that *new*.” Gareth had released Mack’s biceps and now had his arms crossed over his chest.

Mack raised an elegant eyebrow in response. “For werewolves, it is *very* new, especially compared to the old world. We are considered *children* to the European packs and infants compared to those in Africa and the Middle East.”

“I did not want this position,” Gareth replied stonily. It was what he had said to Paavo over and over again.

“But it is yours. Not wanting it only makes you seem *weak*, Gareth. You must accept that you *won* and figure out what you are going to do with the power that is rightfully yours,” Mack pointed out.

“Not everyone thinks it is *rightfully* mine.” Gareth grimaced. Paavo’s words about his acting dishonorably still echoed in his ears. The former of Alpha of Alphas had insisted that Gareth had taken advantage of him being sick and cursed.

Mack touched his shoulder briefly and quickly withdrew it as if he was contaminated. Gareth had stiffened as well. But he missed that fatherly touch after it was gone. It opened up a yawning chasm in his chest, something he thought he had gotten past, but having Mack here, advising him once more made him realize that he had never gotten past it at all.

“All that our laws say is that you are to defeat the Alpha. Injury or illness or madness are actually reasons *to* challenge and replace him or her. You had to do what you did. Paavo was actually *stronger* as a Rogue than he had been before, yet you defeated him,” Mack pointed out. “You won fair and square, Gareth. As an objective observer, I can tell you this.”

“Objective?” That word hurt Gareth more than all.

Mack gave him a small smile. “The only way ... no, the *best* way, has always been for me to tell you the truth.”

Hearing that had Gareth’s chest tightening again. It was something the old Mack would say. Gareth swallowed hard.

Mack continued, “The packs *need* you as a leader, Gareth. Paavo’s family and pack has too long guided us. Things have remained static even as the world has changed around us. You are the person who can lead us to the future. So you need to remain strong. You need to accept that this position is *yours*, whether you want it or not.”

“I didn’t want to be Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack either, Mack. But I do love it. I do not love how I got it,” he murmured.

Mack’s head lowered again. “Sometimes destiny is thrust upon us. You were always meant to lead. Eliza and I were worried that you would never reach your potential in the Cold Moon Pack because you would never challenge me.”

“No one should have had to, Mack.”

Mack swallowed. Gareth could see his adam's apple rising and falling.
"Well ... what's done is done."

"My point in bringing all of this up is ... that I need allies," Gareth admitted. "With my new position and Jude's growing powers, we'll have enemies that I can't protect against all on my own."

Mack grunted. "I think Jude would tell you that you are not facing them *alone* right now. That he is by your side and your equal."

"He is and *more*. There will come a time when his powers will far outstrip mine, but he is still young and learning. I need to give him the safety and space to do that," Gareth agreed.

"So you want my help?" Mack clarified.

Gareth nodded slowly. "I could use your advise."

"Then I must truly remain in the shadows, Gareth. It is better if people continue to think that there is a breach between us," Mack said.

Gareth's heart clenched. Was this simply an excuse by Mack to stay away from the pack? Or was it the truth? He reflected on what Mack was saying and he found it ... *wise*.

"All right. So we behave as if we are still enemies. What of Clara and Pierce?" Gareth asked.

"They stay with you." No hesitation.

"Pierce --"

"What I must do to keep you, Jude, him and Clara safe ... is dangerous. He cannot be with me. He must learn the true way of the wolf. He can only learn that with you. You must convince him of this," Mack said.

Almost as if being summoned, Pierce burst out of the woods. “No!”

He had changed out of his wolf form and ran naked towards them. Gareth had felt him approaching and he was sure that Mack had, too. Mack had wanted him to hear this. Mack’s jaw flexed as Pierce raced to him and fell to his knees.

“You can’t leave me behind! I won’t stay! I’ll follow you!” Pierce cried.

“So you would burden me?” Mack did not look at him as he said this.

Pierce paled and Gareth’s heart ached for the young man. But he knew that nothing he said would give Pierce comfort. It would only anger him.

“I would serve you in any way you wanted or needed,” Pierce protested. His arms curled around Mack’s bare thighs without any shame.

“What I *need* is for you to be *safe*,” Mack’s voice was hoarse again. This time with emotion. “And this can only be assured if you stay with Gareth.”

“I don’t want Gareth! I want you!” A tear-stained face stared up at Mack’s.

“Gareth has claimed you are an *adult*. But what you sound like is a *child*. This is childish talk. I need you to be strong and adult,” Mack said.

“I could do it if it were only for a short time, but you intend *never* to come back to the pack,” Pierce pointed out. “You intend to leave me forever. How can I be okay with this?”

Mack finally looked at down at him. One of his hands raised and lowered onto the top of Pierce’s head. “You can find a *true* Alpha. One that is *worthy* of you.”

“You are the only one for me,” Pierce breathed.

Mack's eyelids closed and he shook. His hand tightened on Pierce's head. He was silent for long moments. Then he leaned down and kissed Pierce's forehead with such tenderness that Gareth's chest went tight again.

Mack murmured into Pierce's hair, "The only way I can be worthy of you ... is to *leave* you.'

Before Pierce or Gareth could respond, Mack had leaped forward, transforming in mid-leap into his wolf and racing off into the woods, soon out of sight. Pierce's arms were still outstretched towards where Mack had been. His eyes were bleak.

"He's left me," Pierce whispered.

He collapsed forward, but before he hit the ground, Gareth enveloped him in his arms. He held the young wolf tenderly to his chest and he sent every ounce of his Alpha healing nature to Pierce. It was a near thing. He felt Pierce toppling towards despair, but at the last moment, somehow, he kept hold of the young wolf. Pierce clung to him hopelessly.

"Listen to me, Pierce," Gareth said into the young wolf's hair, "Mack *loves* you, but he must redeem himself. Right now, he cannot be what you need. He must do this alone. But you are loved. By him. By me. By the Cold Moon Pack. You belong."

Pierce still sobbed, but he didn't thrust Gareth away. He continued to hold on and Gareth knew that this was the first step. His own heart ached about Mack. But he knew his former Alpha was doing what was best. He would still be Gareth's ally, even if he was away.

As Gareth held and rocked Pierce, he determined that Clara, Mack and Theis would be welcomed into his pack that night after he and Jude completed their mating ceremony. His would be a rule of inclusiveness and forgiveness. That would be his goal. Tonight was the night when things were made *right*.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN: SUBMISSION

Gareth's gaze swept over the glade where he and Jude would mate. He stood in the center of it before a fur covered mattress. In the old days, there wouldn't have been a mattress, but just a pit lined with tree limbs and covered with furs. The modern invention though of the air mattress had long ago replaced that more "natural" bed. Gareth was glad of it. He wanted Jude to be pillowed on fur and silk and air when they made love. A sharp stick in one's lower back did more to ruin the mood than anything else.

He felt a wave of pride that the Cold Moon Pack and their visitors would see the beauty and strength of his mate, not to mention the beauty and strength of their love. The werewolves all sat in a circle around him, many rows deep. Werewolves seemed to stretch into the forest as far as the eye could see. There had not been this many werewolves on Cold Pack land in ... well, *ever*. This caused another wave of pride to move through Gareth. As Alpha of Alphas, his pack would now be at the center of the werewolf universe. No longer outcasts, but *leaders*.

Every third person held a torch so though night had long fallen, the glade and forest were bathed in a golden glow. Torches were also lining the path between the glade and Fallowmere, where Jude was at that moment with his father and Grandmother Sophia. Theis and Sophia would both act as Jude's parents. Jude had asked the elderly woman to do the honors.

"I know that Eira is my birth mother, but you ... you've been as much a mother to me as anyone ever could be," Jude had said.

Tears filling her eyes, Grandmother Sophia had cupped Jude's face and said simply, "I'm honored, my Jude, for you are the son of my heart."

Theis and Grandmother Sophia would walk with Jude down the path to the glade. Then Gareth would make the offer to mate. Jude would accept. It was a simple ceremony in some ways, but like all things magical, it was profound, too.

I am glad he will not see how many people are to watch us until the time is nearly upon us. He might be nervous.

Jude was no exhibitionist. In contrast, Gareth had bedded many of the people here during their celebrations. Making love in the forest under the moon was a favorite pastime of his. Origies - piles of werewolves in and out of the shift - were common. Yet despite his sharing of Jude's beauty and their lovemaking with all present tonight, this act was, in fact, *possessive*. It stated in no uncertain terms that Jude was his and he was Jude's. They were now a *unit*.

Yet it was definitely not an easy thing to do for someone who was *shy*.

To help with that, Nina had made sure that the friendliest faces were nearest the bed. Molly and Tessa sat cross-legged next to one another, their hands clasped. Tessa's face glowed in the torchlight. Her eyes were wide as she looked around the glade. She gave Gareth a smile that was a little too bright. He imagined that seeing her brother make love was not something she had ever considered doing before, but she was excited nonetheless, probably for the romantic aspect of it.

Molly stroked the back of her hand with her thumb, keeping Tessa grounded and calm. His Point nodded respectfully at him when she caught his gaze. Though of few words, Molly had come to him before sitting down for the ceremony. She'd bowed, gracefully gone to a knee, then risen back up again to hug him.

"My Alpha, I will protect you and your mate with my last breath," she'd whispered.

He'd been too touched to do anything, but hug her tightly back.

Beside Molly was Raj. He had put on a tuxedo for the event. He was grinning and ribbing Jacob who was clothed in his usual jeans and a tank

top that strained across his muscular chest. They were a *new* pair of jeans and tank top so that was a big deal for Jacob.

Both men had spoken to him before the ceremony, too. They were an odd couple, but they *fit*.

“This is the start of big things, Alpha,” Raj had said, rocking back and forth on his feet.

“We’re going to do everything we can to make sure things run smoothly, Alpha,” Jacob added.

“I can never thank you both enough. Your friendship with Jude from the very beginning made him feel he had a place with us and he hasn’t felt that in a very long time,” Gareth told the two of them. “And you did me both proud how you fought with honor and courage against ... against those who would have exposed us to the world.”

He couldn’t call Mack, Pierce, Clara or Theis enemies or Rogues any longer. Each of them was a part of his larger pack now. Clara sat between her father and Pierce in the second row of werewolves. Her father was still getting used to the idea that she was a werewolf. Brandon was explaining what was going to take place that night. Clara covered her mouth with one hand and giggled while her father reddened and wondered if this was *really* something his daughter had to see.

Izzy reached over and touched his hand. “Just think of it this way, you won’t have to have that uncomfortable discussion about sex. She’ll learn all about it from the pack. We’re all in this *together*.”

The deputy gave her a weak smile. Clearly, he wasn’t sure if he believed that was a *good* thing. But he was willing to try.

Pierce’s head was lowered, his hair had fallen over his eyes and obscured most of his face so that Gareth couldn’t see his expression. From the curled in shoulders and the way he was picking at his shoelace, Gareth doubted it

was a happy one. He was still in mourning over Mack. Haggerty put a gentle hand on his shoulders and must have said something funny, because Pierce actually raised his head and smiled.

Gareth had been surprised that Haggerty and Pierce got on so well. But since Haggerty had been Pierce's jailer, apparently, he and the boy had talked a lot. After Mack's leaving, it was Haggerty who had taken Pierce under his wing and kept him from drowning in grief. Gareth was relieved that, for tonight at least, he did not have to worry about Pierce.

"I am so getting laid tonight!" Raj said, his voice lit with laughter, drawing Gareth's eyes away from the former Rogue. "The mating between Gareth and Jude is *totally* going to get everyone in the mood for some loving of their own!"

"Are you sure you're dressed right for loving?" Jacob rumbled, tilting his head towards Raj's pristine, elegant tux.

Raj frowned and looked down at his clothes. "What do you mean? This is *Armani* and perfectly tailored to my frame -- hey! Why are you laughing?"

Jacob was practically red faced and rolling as soon as Raj opened his mouth. His beard couldn't hide the grin that spread from ear to ear.

"I think he meant you look too good to get dirty," Molly remarked dryly.

"You're pretty as a picture, Raj. Don't let these two tease you out of dressing nicely," Tessa said with a bright smile.

She wore a sleeveless black dress that clung to her curves with a pair of stunning Manolo Blahnik. Though she'd taken them off as soon as she'd sat down. Now they were beside her rather than on her feet. High heels and the forest did not mix well. Molly had on a dress, too, but it was just one of her babydoll dresses in a pale blue. It, too, though was *new*. She didn't bother with shoes tonight, not even her customary ballet flats.

Raj looked alarmed. “You don’t *really* think people will avoid me because I’m dressed *nicely*, do you? I admit that most werewolves are into more *rustic* garb, but *really* this is the mating of the Alpha of Alphas and the son of Eira. It’s a pretty big deal!”

Jacob swung an arm around Raj’s shoulders. “Don’t worry. I’ll get you nice and *dirty* well before the end of the night so no one will be afraid of mussing you, Raj.”

Raj narrowed his eyes at Jacob. “Get me dirty, Jacob, and *you* might just find yourself in the lake.”

Jacob’s eyes twinkled with mirth. “You’re *on*.”

Gareth smiled. His lovemaking with Jude would inspire many tonight to find love in their own ways. None though would be as perfect as their union, he was sure of that.

Nina put a hand on his bare arm. He only wore a fur-lined cloak, as would Jude, and was fully naked underneath. “Don’t be nervous, my Alpha.”

“Do I seem nervous?” he asked with a smile.

She wagged one hand, indicating that he did seem a little nervous. “You, who did not believe in mates, is now at his own mating. I would say that’s a pretty big change in your life. Reason enough to be excited, if not nervous.”

“You knew that I was going to find someone all along, didn’t you?” He remembered that day of the vision when she had challenged him about needing a mate. She’d been right and he’d been wrong. His determination to stay alone hadn’t last two seconds with Jude though, if he were honest with himself.

“Maybe I have a little witch blood in me, too.” She grinned. “A Beta that sees the future would be a useful thing, though really your vision told you

exactly what was going to happen.”

“I cannot believe how blessed I am. Back when all of this started, I never thought ... well, I never thought we could all be this happy again,” he admitted.

His eyes once more swept over the huge crowd of happy wolves. Eira had told him that there were enemies here tonight. He didn't doubt that, but the vast majority were friends or wanted to be so. He would open his hand to them. Those that chose not to take that hand, he would deal with. It wasn't just for the Cold Moon Pack or stability of werewolf kind, it was for *Jude*. He would make a safe place for his mate.

Nina straightened and shifted from foot to foot. “They're coming! It's starting.”

She leaned over and kissed Gareth's cheek then took her place of honor behind him and slightly to the side. Gareth's keen werewolf vision fixed on the three figures walking down the path from Fallowmere. His mate was coming. The bond would soon be complete.

At that moment, the few faint streaky clouds that had been covering the moon blew away and the entirety of the glade was bathed in a silvery light.

Beautiful green sparks of light started coming up from the ground and drifting through the air like spring and summer *captured* in light form.

There were delighted gasps as the werewolves touched the floating sparks. The sparks did not burn, but simply *popped* and left a burst of warmth and the scent of living things in their wake.

Gareth smiled broadly. The forest was Jude's garden. His mate was pure magic.

The warm summer breeze slipped between the flaps of the fur cloak that Jude wore and curled around his naked limbs as he, Theis and Grandmother

Sophia walked slowly down the path to the glade where he was to mate with Gareth. If he hadn't been completely nude under the cloak, he would have been too hot. As it was, he was just warm enough. The breezes were almost *sensual* as they caressed his skin. His cock was already erect and leaking from their touch.

He'd thought he would have been afraid, if not at least *anxious*, about making love with Gareth in front of the Cold Moon Pack and everybody else. He thought he would be dead set against *submitting*. But he wasn't. He was *excited* actually and, though he did feel a little shy, he was surprised at how *eager* he was for everyone to see that Gareth was *his*. Making love in front of all of them would prove that beyond any doubt. Dominance and submission were a dance where partners switched often. If anything, Gareth served *him* more than he served Gareth. He would have to even that out, to make sure that he was giving the Alpha of Alphas all the love and devotion he could give.

The bond trembled in his chest, but not painfully. It knew that it would be completed soon. His magic, which had seemed so out of his reach in the past few days, returned in a rush as soon as he had set foot on the path. The green sparks that were coming up from the ground would give energy and happiness to all of the werewolves. He saw Grandmother Sophia reach out and touch one. The spark danced in her hand before bursting and leaving a clean scent in its wake. She let out a delighted laugh.

"I've seen this before," Theis said, his voice hushed as he, too, touched one of the sparks. The green point of light twirled on the tip of his father's finger before vanishing. "In Eira's garden."

Jude stiffened a little as he knew his father had little love for his mother now, feeling completely betrayed and used by her actions and intentions towards Jude himself. Jude worried that his father didn't like the things in him - like magic - that came from her, but Theis' expression was more awed than anything else.

“This is *life* magic, Jude,” Grandmother Sophia said with awe in her voice, too. “I can feel all the *possibilities* that this magic will bring to this forest and all the people exposed to it tonight. You’re granting us all such a *gift*.”

“I just want people to be happy and healthy,” Jude admitted with a shrug that nearly opened his cloak wide.

“You’re doing more than that.” Grandmother Sophia watched the swirling sparks that fluttered through the air on unseen currents. She held his hand more firmly. “Oh, Jude, it has been a long time since I’ve seen hope in magic, but you and Gareth make this old woman proud.”

Jude leaned over and kissed her cheek, which had her chuckling some more with happy wonder on her face. He looked over at his father then. Theis’ expression was a little sad.

“Father, everything okay?” Jude asked, rubbing the back of their clasped hands with his thumb.

“Yes, Jude, of course, it is. I was just ... I am so happy for you and Gareth. *This* is how things should be between lovers, between *mates*,” the last word was said so softly.

Jude knew now was not the time to ask Theis if Eira had been his mate, *was still* his mate, despite the breach between them. Eira had created the werewolves, had chosen Theis to make a child, could she not have bound them in some way? He hoped she had not. He hoped that his father would be free to find his own happiness. He leaned his head on his father’s shoulder for a moment. Theis turned his head and kissed the top of Jude’s.

“You aren’t nervous, are you? You mustn’t be. Trust me. All here will be stunned by your beauty and jealous as *hell* of Gareth.” His father had already assured him of this many times. But probably bore saying a few more. Jude’s stomach was starting to flip.

“I just don’t want to let Gareth down. I love him so much. But I haven’t ... *been* with anyone like this since ... well, I never have actually. Submitting isn’t easy for me,” Jude said. No sex he’d had before tonight could compare in any way with being with Gareth. Not even the kind he’d had *consensually*. That was simply a taking, not a giving between two people.

His gaze slid over to his mate, now a mere ten feet away. Gareth was clad in a full length fur cloak as well. His was white, matching his wolf’s color. Jude’s was a reddish brown matching his as well. He couldn’t help the smile that crossed his lips at seeing *his* Alpha, the Alpha of the Cold Moon pack, the Alpha of Alphas. In that moment, he forgot about everyone else. Even though he smiled and nodded at Nina, his sister, Molly, Raj, Jacob, Haggerty, Clara and Pierce, his eyes were truly focused on Gareth.

The three of them stopped just outside of the circle. It was here that Gareth would ask Jude to join him in leading the pack, in sharing their lives together. Jude was shocked to find tears of *joy* running down his face before a word was said.

Gareth stepped forward until he was directly in front of Jude. Nina moved with him, her head bowed low and her hands clasped in front of her.

Grandmother Sophia and Theis kept hold of Jude’s hands. They would only let them go when Jude accepted Gareth’s proposal to mate. Jude’s stomach fluttered crazily now. But through his blurred vision, he focused on Gareth and his mouth hurt from smiling so widely.

“Jude,” Gareth said and at his words there was a *pause* not only in the low speaking of the werewolves all around them, but also in the forest’s sounds. It was as if everyone and everything was holding their collective breaths to hear what the Alpha of the Cold Moon Pack was going to say. “My *one*. My *only*. My *mate*.”

Jude found himself closing his eyes at that last word. The unfulfilled bond quivered harder inside of him. He opened his eyes against, blinking away those tears that simply wouldn’t stop.

Gareth continued, "I have been waiting for you from before time. And I wish to be by your side until time ceases to be. Would you have me as *your* mate? Would you help me lead the packs? Would you be my *heart*?"

Words seemed impossible at that moment. He let go of his father and Grandmother Sophia's hands at the same time. They stepped back and joined the circle of werewolves. Nina retreated back a few steps so that he and Gareth stood alone. Jude cupped Gareth's face.

"I would ... would give *anything* to have you be my mate," Jude whispered. "I would do anything for *you*."

And he leaned in and kissed Gareth fully on the lips.

Gareth's hands slipped under Jude's cloak and lifted him into his arms. Jude's legs wound around Gareth's trim waist. The Alpha - *his* Alpha - carried him into the circle of werewolves. The clear area where the path had been was then filled in with werewolves. The circle was complete. The werewolves let out howls and yips of joy. The sounds filled the air like fireworks. Jude smiled into the kiss. He dug his fingers into Gareth's thick hair and held on as they kissed more and more.

The bond shivered in Jude's chest, *straining* for the answering one in Gareth's. It knew that it would soon no longer be a line reaching into the darkness for its other half, but a *circle* between the two of them.

Gareth lowered Jude onto the fur strewn bed. The cloak that had covered Jude's body, was held together with a single red ruby broach around his neck. Gareth undid it and the robe was cast aside. He squirmed his naked body against the soft furs.

Gareth stood above him, his hands at the broach of his white cloak now, gazing down upon Jude with this look of *love* and *devotion*. If there had been any doubts about what they were going to do, they vanished at that instant. He wanted to submit to Gareth. He remembered the shared dream

they'd had before they had met. Gareth tenderly put a hand on the center of Jude's chest. Jude leaned back, offering his throat. Gareth kissed him.

And then another change in his magic came about.

The green sparks turned red and gold, the colors of love. Another gasp came from the assembled crowd then there was joyous cries and a babble of voices as every one of them exclaimed the beauty of it all. Gareth's mouth opened in an 'O' of wonder as he gazed at the sparks that flowed through the crowd of werewolves and circled them, dancing in the air.

"Jude," Gareth murmured as he gazed down once more upon Jude with that *look*.

Jude wanted to bottle that look. He wanted to memorize it. He wanted it seared into his very bones. Because that look was *healing* him. Fear utterly dropped away. The memories of being hurt faded until they were not even old photographs in his mind. They simply had no place here. No place with Gareth and him and their friends and family. Here all was safe and love and rightness.

Jude reached up and caught hold of the edge of the white cloak that Gareth still wore. "Make love to me, Gareth. Let's complete the mate bond."

His mate merely nodded. The broach was undone and the white fur cloak fell from Gareth's incredibly broad shoulders to puddle at his feet. Jude's heart did this pirouette in his chest as he caught sight of Gareth's magnificent nude body and that exquisite cock that jutted out from a nest of dark curls. The head of it was wet and inviting.

Jude sat up and, without hesitation, took the head of Gareth's cock in his mouth. His own cock throbbed as the earthy taste of his mate's cum coated his tongue. Over the pack bonds, he could feel the other werewolves' desire being stoked. They approved of his generosity and spirit in making the first move with their beloved Alpha.

Gareth's hands were on his shoulders then, his fingers digging into Jude's flesh, as desire mounted in *him*, too. "Jude, your *mouth* is a dream, but I need to be in another part of you."

Jude reluctantly pulled off though he allowed one hand to drift over that incredibly length of velvety flesh before laying back on the furs once more. "I just had to take a taste. I'm so *hungry* for you."

He heard the werewolves mutter their increased approval. Gareth's topaz eyes were almost completely black already from desire. Jude could see the *wolf* inside of him, wanting to mount and rut, but the *man* held it at bay.

Gareth's hands went to Jude's slender ankles and he pushed them up so that they were pressed against Jude's chest. He rolled Jude farther back so that his ass was in the air and his shoulders were against the mattress. Gareth's strength always amazed him. It did so more now.

"What are you doing?" Jude got out just as Gareth leaned down and licked all the way along his crevice.

Jude's head lolled back in pleasure. Gareth slipped one knee beneath his lower back to keep his ass exposed while using just one hand to keep his legs pressed against his chest. With his other hand he parted Jude's ass cheeks to give him greater access to that tight, pink swirl of muscle.

Gareth's tongue was so *hot* against that most intimate part of himself. Jude shivered as every nerve ending there seemed to come *alive* as Gareth licked and bit and rasped his teeth against the sensitive spot. His hips kept wanting to lift up, to get *more* of Gareth's mouth. Gareth obliged him by spreading his anus open more and *pushing* his agile, hot tongue inside. The moment that Gareth's tongue popped through the tight ring of muscle into his silken insides, Jude let out gasp. He bit down on his lower lip, but suddenly one of Gareth's hands was teasing his lip out from his teeth.

"Don't hold back, my mate. I want to hear your pleasure," Gareth's voice was deep and almost guttural. His topaz eyes burned with magic.

Jude reached up and brushed his fingers down Gareth's cheek. "You, too. Do what you want with me, Gareth. Don't hold back. I'm not made of glass. I won't break." He heard calls from the crowd of approval and urging them to let loose and go wild. Jude grinned up at Gareth in response. "We've got a cheering section."

Gareth turned his head and kissed Jude's inner thighs, which had him trembling with pleasure. "We do. Let's make them *howl*."

Gareth then was dropping back down to lick and kiss and *suck* his anus. Jude's hands scrabbled into the furs until he could grip hold of enough of them to stop himself from going *insane* with the pleasure of it. His anus pulsed open and closed as Gareth's tongue lapped and flickered and dove inside of him.

Jude's head tossed from side to side as it felt like he was *afire*. His cock bobbed helplessly up and down as he desperately tried to shift his hips up and up and up into that teasing, gorgeous mouth. No one had ever done this for him. No one had ever *cared* for him. Not like this. And he had never cared about any of his lovers either to give some much instead of take.

He heard the snick of a tube of lubricant being opened and moaned as the tip of it was placed firmly against his opening. He felt the cool gel spurt inside of him. And then Gareth's fingers were at his entrance again. Jude's mouth opened and he let out a shuddering breath as that first finger *sank* inside of him all the way up to the knuckle. Gareth had already stretched him well with just his *tongue*.

That finger moved inside of him as if exploring every inch. Jude cried out and tossed his head to the side as Gareth found his prostate. The "evil" Alpha proceeded to rub that spot repeatedly until Jude was practically screaming and almost swallowing his tongue.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tessa biting her fist as if to keep in cries of pleasure herself at the sight of him so enraptured. Molly's eyes were huge and her lips were parted. Their arousal spiked inside of him and

he was practically *thrashing*. His cock was just this hot bar that threatened to *explode*. He did not know whether he could take much more of this and he needed *some* control for what he and Gareth had planned for their mating, something that took tradition and *added* to it.

A second finger joined the first and the magic in Jude just about exploded. The sparks that had been coming up in gentle amounts suddenly were *streaming* up into the air until they outnumbered the stars and blocked out the entirety of the darkness in the night sky. Only the moon was left free so that its silvery light streamed down upon him and Gareth as if a benediction.

“Jude, you are amazing. My *mate*. Oh, my *mate*,” Gareth breathed as those sparks caressed his muscular arms and broad chest.

Then all words were lost between them again as Gareth thrust a *third* finger inside of Jude and pulled them apart as he drew them out again. In and out and in and out. More lubricant to slick the way. Gareth’s cock was huge and it would fill Jude to the breaking point even with him perfectly relaxed. But he didn’t care if there was pain. He didn’t think he would feel it. The pleasure was almost agonizing in itself. It overwhelmed him, sank into his very soul. He scrabbled at Gareth’s shoulders.

“In me, now!” Jude demanded. He was *ordering* his Alpha and Gareth *obeyed*, not because he was weak, but because he was *strong*.

Gareth lowered Jude’s legs and brought them around his waist. Jude dug his heels into Gareth’s lower back. He wanted his mate to slide all the way inside of him to the hilt without stopping. He got what he wished.

The plump head of Gareth’s cock was against his opening and almost immediately it was pushing inside of him, popping through the still tight muscle, and delving deep into the tender tissues of his back channel. Jude’s mouth opened in a silent cry of pleased-pain. Gareth was so *big*. Jude had never been with someone this large before and he was totally *owned* by Gareth’s cock.

It speared through to the very heart of him. It seemed to go deeper than that before Gareth's balls snugly pressed against Jude's ass. There was a moment of *stillness*. The sparks trembled in the night sky. The moon beamed down. Jude *breathed* around the hugeness of Gareth's cock. His eyes fixed on his mate's.

And in that moment, when they looked at one another, every raw emotion there for the other to see, the mate bond *completed*. Jude knew then that they wouldn't have needed to make love for this to happen. It was the *openness* that their lovemaking had wrought between them that had allowed them both to *reach* and *touch* and *connect*. And *fix* in place the circle of their love and devotion.

Together forever was a term that now made complete sense in a way that Jude had never understood before. No longer would he be the outsider, the loner, the one that did not belong. He belonged now. He belonged to Gareth and beyond his mate, he felt the entirety of the Cold Moon pack reach and embrace him, and even beyond them, he felt all werewolves answer his joining. He thought he even felt Paavo reach back to him for just a moment before that was lost in the brilliancy of light and life as all the sparks *burst* all around them and showered everyone with their energy.

Gareth and Jude smiled at one another. They no longer needed any words to know what the other needed. This moment was sealed between them. Jude knew he was crying again. One lone tear trailed down the side of his face. Gareth reached down and brushed it away.

Jude pressed his heels more firmly against Gareth's back and the Alpha of Alphas began to *move*. Gareth slid out and thrust in, claiming Jude's body as much as he already had his *soul*, with that beautiful cock. He twisted his hips and changed the angle of his thrusts so that he made sure to hit Jude's prostate with every movement.

Jude had to squeeze the base of his cock to stop from cumming. He wanted this pleasure to go on. He *needed* to last, because of the *plan*. Gareth's

hands were on his hips, guiding Jude's body so that he could love it even more thoroughly. Jude met his gaze again and Gareth gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Jude reached for Gareth's neck and wound his arms around it while Gareth's hands left his thighs and slid around his back. Then Gareth was moving them both on the bed. He repositioned them so that *he* was lying down while *Jude* was astride him. There was a murmur from the crowd.

While Jude had happily submitted to Gareth - on his back, ass in the air, begging to be plundered - now Gareth was giving Jude the reins of dominance. Jude would be the one in control. He was going to ride his mate into their orgasm. At first, the werewolves had been surprised, but then Jude felt his closest friends in the pack approving of it. They understood what was happening here. Jude was a leader, too, and Gareth served him as much as he served Gareth.

Sweat coated both of their bodies. Gareth glistened beneath him. His face was flushed with desire and heat. Jude was glad to give his mate a break. Well, *sort of* a break.

Jude began to *roll* his hips forward and back. Gareth's eyelids slid shut to half mast. He couldn't even see the thin ring of topaz around the pupils any longer. Jude's reached down with one hand and *plucked* Gareth's nipples until they were stiff red peaks. Gareth grunted and his hips stabbed upwards causing Jude to squeeze his hand tightly around his cock. He'd nearly come.

He gave Gareth a *look* that might have frozen another man's blood, but not his mate's. Gareth chuckled. Jude started to bounce up and down on his cock, *clenching* his back channel when he was all the way down. Gareth's lips parted and his tongue snaked out to lick them, making them wet and redder. Jude leaned down and kissed him *hard*. He ground his ass down on Gareth's front.

"I'm going to ... Jude ..." Gareth groaned.

“Yes, mate? What are you going to do? Are you going to *cum*?” Jude whispered against his lips. “Are you sure? Are you certain?” With every question, he squeezed his ass tightly around that thick, heavy shaft, which *plumped* inside of him. “What if I’m not ready for you to?”

“Then ... Gods, Jude! I won’t! I’ll do anything for you!”

They kissed again. Ragged teeth and tongue and lips. Jude loved the taste of Gareth. It was like breathing in the outdoors. Jude raked his fingers down Gareth’s arms. He was completely out of control and in control at the same time. There was no *fear* though. He could be vulnerable and open and show every need and desire he had to this wonderful man and he would always be safe and cherished and *loved*.”

“Yes, Jude,” Gareth whispered. “Always.”

“And for you ... I am *yours*. Always.”

Jude kissed him again, tenderly this time, all his bitterness of the past having bled out of him at some point. He lifted and lowered his hips like a piston. He moaned into Gareth’s mouths. He allowed himself to go *wild*.

Gareth’s hands were running down his back, sliding over his spine, and then cupping his ass, helping him keep up the punishing pace.

Jude slammed himself down and held onto Gareth with all his might as his arousal crested. His cock pulsed between their two bellies. His seed spilled between them. He found himself running his hands through his own seed and smearing it all over Gareth’s chest and neck and chin. He wanted *his* scent to mix with his mate’s.

Gareth’s cock seemed to grow even larger before he, too, came. Jude could *feel* Gareth’s seed inside of him, painting his insides, soaking into his very cells. He kept grinding down though and clenching, because he wanted every single drop of that semen in him. He wanted Gareth wrung dry.

His mate's face screwed up into an expression of almost agony, but it was all pleasure as he emptied himself completely into Jude's body. Jude was trembling so badly as all of his muscles were just giving out, but he held himself up long enough to see Gareth's face *relax* as the last wave of his orgasm went through him. Then he collapsed against that beautiful chest. Gareth's arms slipped around him, cradling him there.

Mate, Gareth murmured in his mind and it was like the howls of the wolves.

Jude realized that he *was* hearing the wolves howl. Every single one had tilted their heads back and let loose the most gorgeous sounds of happiness. The Alpha of Alphas and Eira's son were *mated*.

Jude and Gareth shared a bottle of champagne, passing it between them, as they watched the moon up above them. They still were lying in the fur strewn bed, though both were now clean and cool. Nina had brought wet towels and large buckets of water to wash them both. She'd thought of everything.

One of Gareth's hands lazily ran up and down his shoulder as Jude pressed his left ear against Gareth's chest, listening to his heart beat. He couldn't also help but hear the many couplings that were going on around them.

Raj's tuxedo had *not* daunted plenty of suitors from coming to woo him. Jacob though *had* put leaves in Raj's hair.

Molly and Tessa, eyes locked on one another, had held hands and gone off into the woods, away from all others to have their own private time.

Haggerty had tried to interest Pierce in some of the pretty male werewolves, but Pierce had gone with Grandmother Sophia, Clara, Brandon, the deputy and Izzie back to Fallowmere. He wasn't ready to be with anyone else but Mack yet. Maybe he never would be. Jude hoped that wasn't the case. Now that he had found his mate and completed the bond, he knew what he had been missing all that time when he held himself apart.

“What are you thinking?” Gareth asked as he pressed a kiss to Jude’s temple.

“You don’t need me to say it out loud. You already know,” Jude teased him and reached for the bottle to take a swig of the liquid that was like *stars*.

Gareth gave a slight snort. “You’re thinking that you’re so glad not to be alone anymore.”

“Yes, I am,” Jude agreed.

“And you’re thinking that you never could imagine such happiness before.”

“I couldn’t.”

“And, finally, you are thinking that no matter what happens next, so long as we are together, everything will be just fine.”

Jude felt Gareth smiling against his hair. He smiled, too. “I am, because it will be.”

In his mind, he felt his mother. She was smiling. She was laughing, but not unkindly. She was glad - so glad - for him. And she sent the following thought, *The forest is your garden, Jude. I know that you will tend it well.*

The End



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