

Garden Chase

by Xenphira Hollyvine

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Leaves rustled and branches snapped in the forest surrounding the Eastwell Mansion. Through canine eyes, sorcerer Xenphira Hollyvine tracked her target – now only a blur of muted lavender and corn silk. *This deer is overreacting*, she thought. *He's just going to get hurt.*

The vegetation began to thin as the two neared the edge of the forest, a hazy light emanating from the dim lanterns hung on the manor ahead. The anthropomorphic deer turned his head, eyes straining to locate his pursuer. He stumbled as his sleeve caught on a branch, but he quickly recovered, attempting to gain back his momentum. His breath was heavy, his body not used to this much physical exertion. He pushed through the last of the branches and emerged into the clearing – Eastwell's garden.

Rows of delicately tended crops, flowers, and decorative hedges lined the yard. Xenphira smelled the ripe tomatoes as she burst from the trees, running ever towards the fleeing cervine. The two veered around the edge of the garden and into the plain, grassy remainder of the backyard. Canine ears locked onto the sound of the deer panting. She held out her hand, pointing a finger towards him. *You don't need to run!* she thought, sending the message to the deer. Xenphira watched his head raise in surprise, but to her dismay he continued running. Sweat dripped down her thick, misty rose fur. She loosened her cloak and pulled the hood down – while she would normally keep the hood up to conceal her identity, she needed the cool night air more. She looked ahead and, realizing where the purple deer was running, called out.

"Watch out!" she yelled, thrusting her hand forward and casting a spell. She gasped, struggling to concentrate as she reshaped the ground to an elevated path where the deer was running. The yard had a sudden drop, and the deer would have fallen and injured himself had the sorcerer not built the long grassy pillar. The deer, however, remained panicked. He frantically looked left and right, eyeing any means of escape from the husky. He looked back once again and saw as the moonlight glinted off her cherry red eyes. He stepped – and that single step was all it took to lose footing and tumble off the path. He fell hard and fast towards the ground. Xenphira yelped, losing concentration on the terrain. The ground began to wobble, losing its new shape and returning down to its original position. Xen reached towards the deer and cast yet another spell, just before the cervine hit the ground, and slowed his descent. While this prevented more serious injury, the deer still fell into the ground by the side of the mansion with some force, lightly bruising him. He winced as a sharp rock produced a shallow cut on his arm. He drew a sharp breath when he saw the pink sorcerer hit the ground. He stood and took his chance to continue his escape.

Xenphira gasped for air; the fall had knocked the wind out of her. She growled lightly, frustrated. She stood and winced as something felt wrong with her leg. She ignored the feeling, though, and continued running after the deer. The dim light of the lanterns behind the mansion illuminated their surroundings less and less as the two moved towards the front of Eastwell. This was not a problem for her – canine eyes needed much less light to see at night. While the deer should have been able to see clearly as well, he likely wasn't paying enough attention. Xenphira noticed this as he approached a landscaping feature on the lawn, covered in rocks. "Prince Warren!" she warned.

The deer looked back in shock that the husky knew who he was. His attention was turned from his surroundings for just long enough to keep him from noticing the rocks, and he tripped into the display. Xenphira, wiping away sweat, slowed as she finally caught up and stood by the fallen prince. She kneeled down, offering a light smile to the deer to show she meant no harm. The deer met this gesture with a look of confusion and pain. His clothes, finer than what the commoners in town might wear but not quite princely attire, were dirtied and torn from the chase. His torso was mildly cut, a drop of blood staining the tattered fabric.

"Come on," Xenphira said. "Let's move into the light. I'm not here to hurt you, my prince. I'm here to *protect* you." She helped him rise, letting the deer lean on her as they hobbled over to the stairs at the front of the mansion, past several black vehicles parked in the driveway. The two took a seat, facing each other.

"I... I didn't know..." Warren started. "How was I supposed to know you weren't a danger to me?"

"I tried to tell you. Please excuse me for saying so, but... maybe you should have listened."

The deer scoffed. "I only knew that I was to have a protective detail starting sometime soon, but to protect me from what... or who... no one told me. So, when someone starts chasing me through the woods, what was I supposed to think?"

"What were you doing in the woods?" Xenphira retorted. "There's no way a prince should... have..." She trailed off, realizing she was scolding the *prince*. "I-I'm sorry, sir; it isn't my place to tell you where to be..."

Warren blinked. And then, he laughed. It caught Xenphira by surprise. "I couldn't stand being cooped up in there," he gestured to the mansion, "so I sneak out to the woods to go on walks pretty often."

Xen looked at the deer, who was smiling now. She saw his purple fur shining in the soft light from the lanterns above. She saw the now soft look in his eyes as they met hers. She blushed. "Still, I apologize for the trouble I caused." She once again noticed the cut on Warren's torso. "May I make it up to you? I can attempt to heal this and mend your clothing." Warren slowly nodded. Xen placed her paw on the deer's chest, closing her eyes and beginning to concentrate. Her concentration was broken quickly, though, as footsteps were heard from the driveway. The two froze, and looked towards the source.

A woman stood in the driveway next to a vehicle, fumbling for a key to unlock it. She paused, and turned to face the pair on the stairs with a concerned look. As she turned, the two realized that this was *the Queen*. Warren and Xen stared, Xen's paw still placed on Warren's chest. The Queen's look of concern was replaced with a smile as she waved. "Hi you two!" she chimed without worry. "Glad to see you found each other." With that, she found the right key and unlocked the vehicle, starting it and driving off. The pair remained on the stairs, both lightly blushing.

Xen refocused and healed the wound. Her head spun as she had cast quite a few spells in a short time. "J... just a moment, I can heal your clothing too..."

"Nonsense, look at you! You need rest. And... so do I." Warren helped Xenphira stand, the two leaning against each other. "...let's head inside, okay?"

The husky nodded, her blush not completely concealed by her cotton candy fur. The two limped up the stairs, through the door, and down the hall. The two quickly fell asleep before tending to their disheveled appearances, and, without consciously meaning to, held each other close throughout the night.