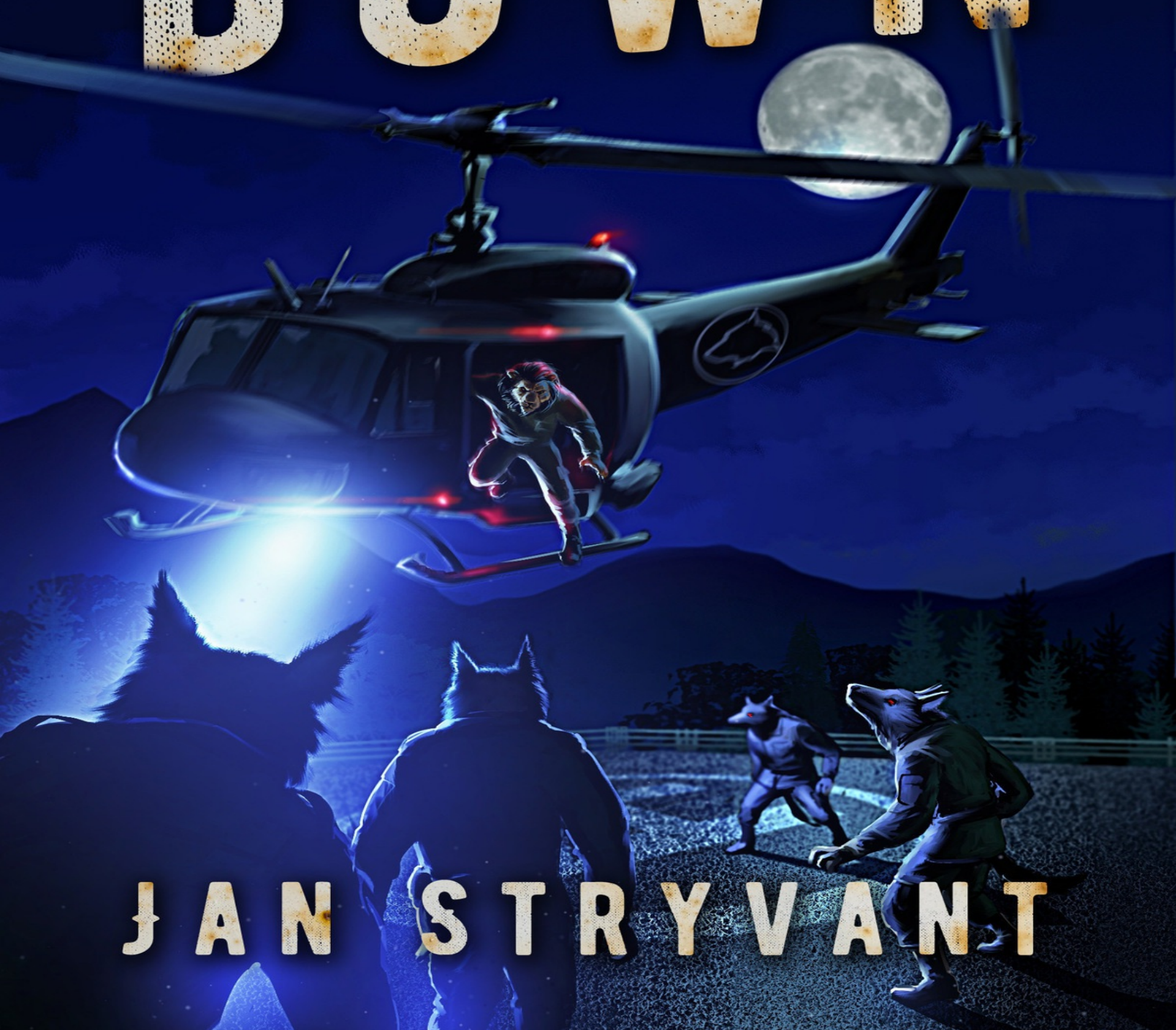


# HEAD DOWN



JAN STRYVANT

# **Head Down**

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Jan Stryvant Books:

The Valens Legacy

Black Friday      Book 1

Perfect Strangers      Book 2

Over Our Heads      Book 3

Head Down      Book 4

Shadow

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## Probing

The team approached the building from the northeast corner. There wasn't much in the way of surveillance that seemed apparent, and their earlier reconnaissance had led them to believe that it was unguarded.

Walking along, they appeared to be nothing more than just a few young men out for a night of drinking. The two couples coming from the opposite direction also didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary. There were still some cars going up and down the streets, while the shops along the road had been closed for a couple of hours now, there were still enough people on the street for them to blend in, and being early April, it was still cool enough for the jackets that they were wearing.

Just as the first group was passing the entrance to the alleyway leading to the back of the building, the sounds of a car spinning its tires, followed by a loud air horn, and then the sounds of two cars hitting each other disrupted the usual calm of the night.

All three of the young men immediately ducked into the alleyway, flattening against the wall as they pulled their jackets off, exposing the holsters and weapons underneath, worn over urban camouflage pattern hoodies. Dropping the jackets they pulled up the attached hoods to cover their heads. Now looking more like the irregular brown pattern of the concrete blocks the building was made of, they continued down the alleyway, staying pressed back against the wall as they moved, until they came to the flat metal door with the 'Do Not Block' and 'Not an Entrance' signs on it.

One of the young men slapped two pieces of what looked like silly-putty onto the door where the hinges most likely were, while a second put a third piece over where the lock would be.

The third young man ran wires with small caps on the ends to all three places then they all flattened back against the wall as the sounds of a loud argument could be heard coming from the scene of the 'accident'. Then the slamming of a door and then the starting of a loud, now unmuffled engine.

At the first sound of the engine the third man triggered the charges, all three wincing at the noise as one of them pulled out a flatbar and pried the door open.

All three were immediately met with a hail of gunfire as they charged inside the doorway, each falling to the ground as they took multiple hits, which were then followed up by both taser shots, and entangling nets as they

thrashed on the floor, their bodies trying to heal the gunshot wounds, as the electrical charges caused their muscles to spasm out of control.

Meanwhile, the two couples on the street had been watching the argument between the two drivers with amusement, when one got into his car and drove off rather noisily due to a ruined exhaust pipe they had started walking again.

Ignoring the sounds of the small explosion in the alley, they had continued on past the front doors of one of the shops with a 'for rent' sign on it.

As the muted sounds of gunfire suddenly filled the air however, they moved as one up to the door, one of the women quickly picking the lock, as the other woman and the two men drew weapons. Moving inside as soon as the door was opened, they closed and locked it behind them. Taking off their coats exposed AR-15's strapped to each of their backs, folded in half at the forward receiver pin to make them easier to hide.

Each of them took a rifle off the back of the other, unfolded the rifle, and set the rear pin. Putting a thirty-round magazine into the rifle, they each charged their weapons and took the safeties off.

The women then pulled night vision goggles out of their pocketbooks, along with several grenades that they distributed to the two men. Looking at a map on his smartphone, one of the men took the lead and started them through the empty business space, to a back door that led deeper into the building.

Stopping a moment the leader listened to the door. Hearing nothing he motioned the woman who had picked the first lock forward. Ten seconds later the door was unlocked, and she returned to the end of the line.

Moving through the darkened building carefully in a line, each with a hand on the back of the one in front of them, they started for the staircase that lead upstairs, still undetected. The lead man checked the staircase for any signs of alarms or traps, then signaling the 'all clear' he slowly started up it, leading with his weapon.

Just as he reached the top of the stairs, all hell broke loose. Two werewolves with suppressed submachine-guns opened fire from the far end of the hall, dropping the first man, and causing the three behind him to fall flat to the floor. The second man quickly pulled out one of the grenades and pulling the pin, he flung it down the hallway, where it went off with a loud pop.



Peeking up over the top of the stairway landing, he saw both of the werewolves were down. Checking his buddy, who was dead, he grabbed his two grenades and pulling the pin on one of them, he flung that down the hallway, just as a second pair of werewolves came out of a side door, catching them both with the grenade as well.

Gun forward he charged up the stairs now, any pretense at stealth having been long discarded, shooting at anything that moved as he charged for the next staircase, both women hot on his heels.

He died before he got to it, cut down by a werewolf with a knife that popped out of a side door.

The werewolf found himself suddenly facing two female werewolves, both armed with magical weapons, having dropped their AR-15's to hang from the straps. As he fell to the floor, contorting into a ball, the two female werewolves charged the stairs. The one in the back stumbled and fell as she was hit in the back with a dart of some kind, which caused her back muscles to seize and her legs to become unresponsive.

The last werewolf made it to the top of the stairs, only to run into the biggest damn werelion she'd ever seen in her life. Before she could even raise her weapon he just pointed at her and said, "Freeze."

She froze, rooted in place.

The lion pulled out a radio and spoke into it.

"Are the borders secure?"

"We're working on it," came the reply.

"How many have we caught?"

"Oak says you got them all."

"Exercise terminated. Bring the lights up, and check on everyone."

Sean waved a hand at the female werewolf, who suddenly unfroze.

"That wasn't very fair," Silver complained.

Sean laughed, "Like stacking two female werewolves behind the two 'human' attackers was?"

"We're supposed to cheat!" Silver grumped and turning went down the staircase to check on Cinnamon, the female werewolf who had been bringing up behind her.

"Yeah well, we aren't going to be playing fair on defense either. Still, that was a good job making it to the third floor. I'm impressed. I'm also a little pissed."

"At who?" Silver asked, worried as she bent over to pull the dart out of



Cinnamon's back. Her metabolism would probably eat up the toxin in fairly short order.

"Hunter and Sten. They swore up and down that no one would make it to the third floor."

"Blame Demon, that boy has a seriously warped and devious mind," Silver laughed.

Sean nodded and went down to the second floor, where the 'dead' werewolves were looking at their paint-covered fur, more than a little unhappy with that development. He took a moment to 'unlock' Hoffen, the werewolf who'd gotten hit with the 'cramps' spell and checked on Woz, the werewolf playing a human, who'd gotten knifed.

"How are the three on the ground floor?" Demon asked from the stairway, where he'd been 'killed.'

"They're good. Oak says they'll be in the debrief with the rest of us."

"Okay. See you there in five I guess."

"So, how'd the debrief go?" Jolene asked Sean, who was now back in his human form, as he entered their third floor room along with Roxy and Daelyn.

Daelyn laughed, "I think they were just a *tiny* little bit upset with Demon for breaking the rules."

"Really?"

Sean snorted, "Until I told them that breaking the rules was the first damn rule."

"Yeah," Roxy agreed nodding. "You'd have thought they would have realized that our enemies aren't going to be following any rules. Hunter now wants to lead the next exercise, with Demon running defense."

"Isn't Demon his second?" Jolene asked looking surprised.

"Not anymore," Sean chuckled. "I put him under Oak, he's now in charge of building defense. For all that he and Hunter seem to be really close, there seems to be a lot of one-upmanship going on between the two of them."

"Is that healthy?"

Sean shrugged, "Oak told me not to worry about it, said that their natural competitiveness will work to our benefit in getting everyone used to the new situation."

"Well if you say so," Jolene said with a shrug. "Which leads me to ask, what are our plans?"

"Hmm?" Sean asked dropping into a chair, leaning back and relaxing.

"Are we going to live here? Or somewhere else? This place is pretty open, and I don't think it's going to take that long for the local councils to figure out that a new pack of wolves has suddenly moved into a building downtown."

"Claudia from the eastern packs has let it be known that the Western Packs had a bit of a shuffle, and that a group has split off to go it on their own here in Reno, now that Michael has stepped down and they're looking for a new leader."

"Think they'll buy that?"

Sean shrugged, "Claudia said that like any human organization, things happen, and for lycans it's really not all that different."

"Why'd he step down, anyways?"

"Sean growled at him," Roxy laughed.

"Really?" Jolene asked, looking at Sean.

Sean sighed, "Let's just say that my lion and he had a few words."

*'And I'm still waiting for you to tell me what those words were,'* Sean said internally to his lion.

*'I just told him I didn't like his attitude,'* his lion said back, coyly.

*'Right, sure,'* Sean said back. *'For someone who is supposed to be a part of me, you sure don't act like it.'*

*'Really? How can you even say such a thing?'*

*'Because I'm a way better liar than you are. I'm not pushing, now, but....'*

Sean noticed his lion didn't respond to that. He'd have to sit down with Roxy at some point, in private, and ask about this behavior. He thought his lion was supposed to be him, yet here he was acting like somebody else.

"So you don't think they'll suspect we're here?" Jolene continued, not noticing Sean's momentary distraction.

"Eventually they will, and by then I hope we're past the worst of it and too well dug in for them to do anything about it," Sean said. "We are in a relatively populated area in the heart of the downtown now, so any kind of major attack is going to bring the kind of attention that the mages really don't want. For now, we'll do everything we can to not be seen around here, and yeah, we'll probably spend some time away from here, just to help throw off any suspicions."

"Does that mean going back to the bomb shelter?"

"I don't think so," Sean shook his head, "as far as anyone knows; only

Wilston and his two dead cronies knew where it was. They had the tracking device and followed it to where we were, but even with that, I'd rather not chance it."

"True, but we should do something to make sure that Wilston doesn't set up shop there, now that he's gotten away," Daelyn pointed out.

Sean nodded; it was a good point, "Well, I'm for bed, who's with me?"

"Tired already?" Roxy teased.

"Who said anything about sleep?" Sean replied with a wink.

The next morning after breakfast, Daelyn corralled Roxy and Jolene as Sean went upstairs to his desk to work.

"What's up, Dae?" Roxy asked.

"I think we should grab a bunch of our guys and go secure that bunker we were living in. Oak told me he cleaned out the bodies, and by now the smell of all the stuff that burnt up shouldn't be too bad."

"Worried that someone else might move into it?" Jolene asked.

"That and I think it's still a pretty safe place. Only one person knows where it is, and the extra space wouldn't hurt. That place could hold fifty, easily."

Roxy nodded in agreement, "We could talk to Oak about getting one or two of the beta teams set up there for now, and I could call up Sean's friend John and have him setup a bunch of security on the place like he did here.

"We're still the only ones that know about the emergency exit and where it comes out, so even if that Wilston guy comes back, an assault team or two could deal with him easily."

"You two seem to know what needs doing," Jolene said. "What do you need me for?"

"Magic," Daelyn said. "You can check to make sure no one else has messed with it."

"Besides," Roxy added with a smirk, "if we leave you here all alone, you'll probably go upstairs and spend the rest of the morning distracting Sean!"

"We *have* been doing a lot of that lately, haven't we?" Jolene giggled.

"Yes, we have," Daelyn agreed. "Now, let's go find Oak."

They found Oak down in his small office on the first floor going over security with Demon.

"What can I help you with?" Oak asked as they stepped inside.

"We want to go clean out the bunker and re-occupy it," Daelyn told him.

"So we need a work crew," Roxy added. "I've called up Sean's friend, John. He's going to meet us out there to set up security cameras and alarms for it."

Daelyn nodded, "We think you should put a team or two in there, to keep it secure and under our control. Wilston is the only one still alive who knows about it, right?"

Oak had to agree with that, "I doubt he told anyone when he got back, but even if he had, Roger and Charles are dead now, and they would have been the only ones who knew. Let me roust Granite's and Roy's teams. They haven't had much to do lately, they can go do the grunt work and help John set up.

"When it's done, I'll have them alternate watching the place, so there's always a team there."

"Sounds good! Have them meet us by the van over at Steve's place. We can all borrow a couple of cars and all drive down together."

"What about the shop's truck?" Oak asked.

Daelyn sighed, "I need to work on that still, and a truck isn't going to carry a team around. We're going to need to get another van."

"We can look at vans on the way back," Roxy said. "Oak, just have them meet us at Steve's, we'll worry about the rest later."

"Okay!"

"Ugh, this place still stinks," Roxy said as they came down into the bunker. Bringing up behind them were the twelve members of both Granite's and Roy's teams, along with a half dozen females from the shop as well. Roxy suspected that a few of those gals had their sights set on some of the men in the group.

Now that the rules about only alpha team members being able to have mates were no more, a lot of the women and men were starting to hook up. She'd have to talk to Sean at some point about increasing the number of women in the building. Right now it was a two to one ratio of men to women, and that would probably cause problems eventually.

"I think that's the mattress in our bedroom," Jolene said sniffing the air. "I wonder if it burned up, or just melted?"

"Burned I hope, if it's melted, we'll have to chisel it out," Daelyn groaned.

"What do you mean 'we,' Kemosabe?" Roxy laughed, and pointed to the wolves coming down the stairs and into the room, "That's *their* job. We're just here to supervise!"

Daelyn made an 'oh' with her mouth. "You're right, I forgot. Well, let's check the place out and see what shape it's all in, and what needs to be cleaned up."

"I'll start with the kitchen," Jolene said, "I've ruined enough of 'em, I know how to clean them up."

"I guess I'll go over the bedroom and the bathroom," Roxy said motioning over a couple of guys.

Daelyn nodded, "I'll check the machine room, hopefully we can clear out of here in a few hours and leave the rest to the guys here. Granite?"

"Yes, Ma'am?" the leader of one of the beta teams asked.

"Have someone find me when John gets here, I'll want to go over everything with him."

"Yes, Ma'am!"

## Pleasant Conversations

Arthur Troy set down his teacup and nodded, as always, the tea here was wonderful. The drive out was a little longer than Arthur preferred to make, but as a neutral location for a private meeting, it was a popular choice among the different councils. This was why he maintained a membership in this particular country club.

"So, Morgan," Arthur said looking across the table at the head of the local Council of Vestibulum, "what is it you wish to discuss?"

"I'd have thought that would have been obvious," Morgan said with a smile. "Sean Valens, obviously."

Arthur shrugged, "I don't see what there is to discuss."

"Oh, come on now, Arthur. That young man is going to upset the status quo! How can you say that there is nothing to discuss?"

Arthur picked up his teacup and smiled slightly, "You say that like it's a bad thing," and took another sip. This really was a good blend; he'd have to ask the maitre d' later about it. Perhaps they would tell him where they got it?

"How can it be *anything* but bad, Arthur? We've relied on our lycans for years! So have you for that matter! What do you think is going to happen to us, without them?"

Arthur shrugged; he'd already been having this discussion with the heads of the other Sapientia covens across the country. Many of them were as concerned as Morgan was, but Arthur was starting to see things just a little bit differently now, and interestingly enough, he wasn't the only one in Sapientia with those thoughts. All he needed was a bit of logical leverage, a nice simple and easy to understand argument.

"I don't know, Morgan. I kind of like the idea of not having to worry about the Council of Gradatim not having an army to send out to kill any of my members that they suddenly have a gripe with. I suspect I'll feel even better about it once the Council of Ascendance loses theirs as well."

Morgan sighed and leaned back in his chair, nodding slightly, "I can't say I disagree with you there. I'm only surprised that he didn't kill more of them over at the Gradatim compound."

"I'm not so sure he killed any of them," Arthur smiled.

"I heard that he killed quite a few," Morgan replied looking carefully at Arthur. "Are you saying that's not true?"

"Really now, Morgan! You know of Roger's love of purges, and Charles'

love of torture. Roger was dealing with a power struggle when suddenly he lost all of his support with the removal of his troops. Richard Sorother just took advantage of the situation, put himself in charge, and then used the most obvious excuse to direct the blame away from him."

"And you know this, *how*?" Morgan asked.

"I have my sources," Arthur set his cup back down. "With all of the problems I've had with Roger over the years, trust me when I say I have been keeping a *very* close eye on him. I just wish I'd been keeping a closer one on Harkins.

"And I must say I'm just a little surprised that you haven't been, Morgan," Arthur said looking Morgan in the eyes.

Morgan threw his hands up in the air, "I've only been the head of the council for four years now. My predecessor was a rather trusting old man."

"Yes, I know," Arthur agreed. Royce had been so trusting that he hadn't seen it coming when the newly arrived Morgan quickly rose up through the ranks and then engineered his ouster. Arthur still wondered if the stroke Royce had suffered had been coincidental, or engineered by Morgan as well. While the Vestibulum members didn't normally play the kind of hardball anymore that Gradatim or the Ascendants did, they weren't above the occasional knife slipped between the ribs.

"So, aren't you worried?" Morgan asked him.

"About what?"

"About losing your lycans to this kid? About having him come in and freeing them all?"

"Not really, no. I'll deal with it, if and when the time comes. While they are nice to have, we've always made sure not to depend on them. Unlike say, some of the other groups?"

Arthur smiled inwardly as Morgan bristled a little at that. The Vestibulum covens were known for keeping large numbers of lycans in thrall to their needs. It was how they had obtained their number one position after all.

"I was hoping to find some common ground here, Arthur. Perhaps even an ally. Once he finishes with Harkins and his people, you'll be the next on his list, I'm sure."

Arthur nodded slowly, and took another sip of his tea, considering that. From a logical rendering of the situation, it would make sense for Sean to come after him next. But Arthur was pretty sure that Sean wasn't looking at



this the same way as Morgan was. Sapientia had never gone after Sean; the sole encounter between them had been quiet, private, and personal.

This made Arthur think that either Sean would bypass Sapientia, or simply try to negotiate with him first, possibly even in person.

Also, quite honestly, Arthur was hoping to use all of this to his best advantage and move Sapientia back up to the position of the greatest power. If he sided with Morgan and Vestibulum, well he'd be locked into an inferior position, of that he was sure.

"Morgan, I will take your desires of an alliance to the other council members, and we will discuss it," Arthur said carefully, there was no reason to antagonize Morgan after all. "This is not something I can do on my own of course."

Not that Arthur had any intentions of doing any of that.

"Don't take too long," Morgan warned, "I don't think Sean is going to sit idly by and wait for us to have our meetings and reach a consensus."

"I'll be a bit more worried after he's dealt with Harkins," Arthur chuckled. "I doubt that will be over any time soon."

"Just don't take too long," Morgan said again and tossing a twenty on the table for his drink he stood up. "If we have to deal with this kid on our own, we will. But then we won't be sharing anything that we gain."

Arthur nodded, "I understand. Have a good day, Morgan."

Arthur took another sip of his tea and watched as Morgan left the room, heading for the front door, Morgan's two bodyguards getting up from where they had been sitting and following him. He was just about to get up himself, when the server came over and set a salad down in front of him, and a second one in front of the chair Morgan had just vacated.

"I didn't order any food?" Arthur said, to the waiter who just shrugged and then walked away.

"Oh, that's okay, Arthur, I did."

Looking up in surprise, Arthur saw Joseph Harrison; the gray haired head of the local Council of Eruditio, pull out the chair that Morgan had just vacated and sit down.

Harrison smiled, "I missed lunch and I really hate having these dreary talks over an empty stomach. So I ordered us both an early dinner. I hope you don't mind? I know you are particularly fond of the lamb here, so I ordered that."

Arthur blinked, "How do you know I like the lamb here?"

Harrison smiled, "Because, Arthur, I own the place. You see," Harrison said with a conspiratorial wink, "we learned a long time ago in our quest for knowledge that the best information isn't always written in our books."

"Huh," Arthur said with a nod, conceding the point. "And just why are you sharing this with me?" he asked and picking up his fork he started in on his salad. Joseph may have gotten the better of him, but he saw no reason to let good food go to waste.

"For almost two hundred years now, Vestibulum has ruled the roost. What have those years brought us?"

"Not very much," Arthur admitted.

"Exactly, stagnation. When Sapientia was first formed and took control of things over a thousand years ago, they cleaned up many of the problems and issues our ancestors faced. While not all of the solutions are good ones now, they were certainly good for their time."

"So you mean to oppose Vestibulum in this?"

Harrison smiled, "Honestly, Arthur, both of us already are. You see an opportunity to return your Council to the leadership role; I see an opportunity to end an injustice now, rather than waiting for it to blow up in *all* of our faces."

"So, you think the freeing of the lycans is inevitable?" Arthur asked looking at Joseph curiously.

"They outnumber us by what now, Arthur, six to one? And that number is growing. They have created their own rules, laws, and councils, though I understand they call theirs a 'fellowship' because they *really* dislike the word 'council,'" Harrison gave a little laugh, "not that I blame them.

"But getting back to the point, they're civilized now, they're organized, and in a few more generations they'll outnumber us ten to one. And what do you think will happen then?"

Arthur sighed, "Nothing good, I'm sure."

"No, nothing good at all," Joseph said shaking his head. "That's why we set all of our lycan servants free back when Bernard Valens started his crusade. We still employ lycans, but that's exactly what we do, *employ*. They can come or go as they please, we pay them, take care of them if they wish, why we even have a 401K plan!" Joseph added with a grin.

Arthur nodded slowly, "So, what's your pitch then?"

"I think it would be best for all of us if Sapientia reconsidered its views, and its rules on the keeping of lycans as slaves, don't you? You are the

heralds and keepers of all of our traditions. Great heed is paid by many to what you say and do."

"Yes, but then we would risk appearing weak," Arthur sighed. "We would be seen as doing it under threat from Sean."

"Ah, but Mr. Valens hasn't approached you yet. I on the other hand, *have*."

Arthur considered that, Eruditio had been campaigning to change the way lycans were treated for several years now.

"Still," Arthur said, "I'm not sure how my fellow council heads throughout the rest of the world would see it."

"And that's where I can help you," Joseph smiled, "hire an accountant, one preferably who knows about us, and investigate just what the costs of maintaining all of those slaves and servants are. I'll be more than happy to show you our books to compare it to."

Arthur stopped eating and stared at Joseph.

"You're telling me that it's cheaper to hire them, than to keep them as slaves."

Joseph nodded, still smiling. "Several of our historians had discovered this to be true about most slave owning operations in an era where labor is rather cheap. Part of our giving up our servants was to test this theory. We were all rather surprised."

"Now, *that* is an argument I can take to my peers," Arthur conceded pointing at Joseph with his fork.

"And you can follow that up with the argument that when Vestibulum loses their slaves, they'll become weakened, which will allow Sapiencia the opportunity to regain its position."

Arthur nodded and set his salad fork down on his now empty plate. He could see the server approaching with the main course.

"So, what's in it for Eruditio?" Arthur asked.

"First and foremost, survival," Joseph said, suddenly looking serious. "If we wait for a lycan uprising, even if Eruditio's members are spared - which I doubt many will be - we will all still be outed to the general public at large in the process."

"Secondly, we have always prided ourselves on our knowledge, wisdom, and ethics. We have come to realize of late that the keeping of slaves is not very ethical at all, nor is it very wise."

Arthur had to smile as he considered Joseph's words. Eruditio had always

been small, and never very interested in the kinds of games the others played. They had held onto their position all of these years solely because of the power that their knowledge gave them. Eruditio's wizards had a reputation for being very powerful when it came to a fight, and for being very patient about getting their revenge, even if it took decades. Part of why everyone was more than willing to grant them their neutrality.

"I concede your points, and I will want to see your books. Honestly," Arthur leaned back as the server cleared away the salad dishes and then set the main course in front of him. "Recent events have given me a lot of opportunity to reconsider my stand on certain things."

"She's your favorite niece, isn't she?" Joseph asked congenially as he picked up his fork.

"She's the only one that still sends me a birthday card every year," Arthur chuckled. "But putting that aside, she has always had this knack for picking a winner. As well as winning herself," Arthur added, thinking about how she'd dealt with her own magical problems. "Then of course there have been other enlightening moments as well, such as this dinner."

Joseph inclined his head in a small nod of acknowledgement.

"Now, let's not spoil your chef's hard work with talk of such weighty issues, agreed?"

Joseph smiled and nodded, "Agreed."

## Real Life Realities

Sean sighed and leaned back in his chair. What the hell had just happened to his life? He now had seventy-seven werewolves who lived in his building and all of whom answered directly to him. Then there were Sheila and Peg who were both werefoxes. Sheila definitely answered to him, for now, and Peg, well, he felt bad about it, but he'd all but bullied Peg into submission for now as well.

That wouldn't last of course, Peg was finally starting to come to terms with what had been done to her, and even had begun to accept it. Sean had no idea what he was going to do with her seeing as she could practice magic like him, and was a lot better trained in its use. Unlike Jolene, whose magic was vastly different from his, Peg's magic was the same type and style. She'd been trained in the classical manner of using magic and casting spells for years, where he'd just sort of 'winged it' from the beginning.

She'd been avoiding him; he suspected she'd been avoiding everyone other than Sheila who she really did seem to like. Sean hadn't been seeking her out either, considering how he'd just steamrolled over her requests to go back home. While he felt guilty about telling Sheila to bite Peg, he hadn't let that guilt stop him from taking responsibility for her. Now if he just knew what to *do* with her.

Not like he had any ideas about what he was going to do with the rest of them either! But at least they were all here willingly. If his lion hadn't been such a brat in dealing with Michael, Sean could have turned them all over to him. But now the Western Pack no longer had a leader, and even though it had been two weeks, they *still* hadn't picked a new alpha.

*'He needed to be replaced'* Sean's lion said suddenly. Sean had noticed his lion had been down right 'chatty' of late. He really needed to talk to Roxy.

*'Why did he need to be replaced?'* Sean grumbled. *'I've got his second showing up here at almost every day now asking for advice and telling me what's going on! I'm busy enough already!'*

*'I'm sure a new alpha will rise up soon enough.'*

*'That still doesn't tell me why he needed to be replaced.'*

*'He wouldn't submit.'*

"Well," Sean muttered under his breath, "aren't we a prissy little king."

Sean got the feeling his lion just sighed and shook his head. Yeah, he'd been annoyed at Michael's stringent behavior at the warehouse, but if he'd

known he was going to end up with so many headaches....

Sean sighed and shook his own head, but damned if his lion wasn't right. He needed to start building up, he needed these people, he needed everything that came with being the leader of a movement, and the leader of what would probably become a revolution, albeit an undercover, out of sight, and very secret one.

But still, who knew there'd be so much work involved? Oak was good with dealing with the other wolves and supervising them, because he knew them. But the paperwork? The bills? The legal stuff?

Yeah, Sean wasn't having much fun dealing with any of that, especially all of the stuff involved with buying a building, starting a business, and doing a payroll. He'd need to find somebody who he could trust and who knew what the hell they were doing and push as much of it off as possible on them.

Then there was the 'machine' as he had taken to thinking of it. He needed to design and build the machine that was going to help him churn out enchanted items. Primarily the 'Silver Tags' as well as the lycan collars, then once those were done, maybe a few other important items as well.

Everyone in the building had a collar now; those weren't too hard to make, especially with the help of Jolene and the girls. Making a few each night was pretty much routine now. He was still sending them off to Sawyer as well, and his bank account was slowly recovering. This morning he had twenty grand in it, apparently the price on them had crashed a bit faster than expected.

Looking over the last bill he had to sign, Sean tossed it in the 'out' box and picking up a pencil he pulled out his notes on the 'machine.' He was going to start small; he had a bunch of simple copper disks with a hole punched into them and a lion etched on one side. He'd cast his scrying protection spell onto one, and then made a bunch of duplicates for each of the wolves living here to protect them from the simple mind spells as well.

It had taken more energy to put the spell onto a copper round than it had to put it on the gold coins he'd previously used, twice as much in fact. So the bit about the more expensive the metal, the easier the spell, had been true. That had gotten him to wondering about changing the tags to gold and seeing how much that would lower the casting costs, but when he saw the current price of gold, that quickly put a stop to that idea.

"Whatcha' doin'?" Daelyn asked coming up behind him.

"Working on my machine," Sean told her. "What are you doing up here?"

I thought you were working on the truck we bought for the shop?"

"Oh, I finished that. Jolene and Roxy took a ride off to Sawyer's to check in. I thought I'd come up here and maybe *distract* you a little bit," Daelyn giggled.

Sean sat up and turned to look at Daelyn. She was wearing one of her work coveralls, and the zipper was *all* the way down, exposing all of that very lovely flesh underneath, as Daelyn didn't ever wear *anything* under those coveralls.

Dropping his pencil on the desk with a sigh, Sean slipped his hands inside her coveralls, enjoying the feeling of her bare flesh under his fingers.

"What was that sigh for?" Daelyn asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I don't think I've gotten the time to put ten minutes of work into that damn machine all week," Sean grumbled as he pulled her closer.

"Oh, well I could come back!" Daelyn teased and pulled back a little.

Sean slid his arms further around her and with a growl he pulled her back towards him, "A lion does not ignore his wives," he said and kissed her on the neck. He knew she really liked that, and she stopped trying to pull away immediately.

"Lions, gotta love 'em," Daelyn sighed happily as one of Sean's hands slid down to cup her ass and give it a squeeze.

Standing up, Sean picked her up and carried her over to the large bed against the wall. Laying her down on it as he peeled her out of the coverall, he simply started to trail his kisses down to her rather impressive bust. She might be shorter than Jolene, but her chest had to be at least as big as Jo's. For all of her muscles and strength, Daelyn was *built*. On the few occasions when they went out at night, Daelyn easily got as many looks as his other two wives.

"Ooo! That feels good," Daelyn sighed as Sean teased a nipple with his teeth. "For someone complaining about having their work interrupted, you sure seem pretty interested in fooling around!"

"I'm *always* interested in fooling around with you, Dae," Sean said and switching to the other nipple, he bit it lightly causing her to arch her back and sigh. "Now, let's get you out of the rest of this and see about getting down to business," Sean chuckled and started to kiss his way down towards her belly button as he pulled the coverall down along her body.

She raised her butt off the bed as he pulled it down past her rump, then he just pushed it down past her knees with one hand as he kissed his way



down to her sex.

Daelyn's hands immediately went to Sean's head, holding him in place. She didn't know why he was so enamored with oral sex, all that she knew was that she wasn't ever going to complain, considering how good he was at it!

Sean loved the way she smelled, the way she felt on his lips, his tongue, his fingers. The scent of her, the taste, everything that was her. Grabbing her ass with his hands he started off with little teasing kisses, taking his time, savoring the moment, letting her anticipate what was coming next. Then moving closer he started in with his tongue, to savor the deeper flavors, and to show her just how much he loved her, wanted her, by driving her to complete distraction.

Taking his time, Sean drove Daelyn to two noisy and obviously enjoyable orgasms. As she started to wind down from the second one, and began to kiss his way back up her now sweaty and gasping body, pausing once again to pay homage to her heavily heaving chest. She let him do that for as long as she could stand then reaching down she grabbed that convenient handle that all men have and started to tug him towards her sex.

"Somebody want something?" Sean laughed.

"Somebody wants her man, and she wants him *now!*" Daelyn all but growled back at him.

Smiling, Sean allowed her to guide him deep into her heat, giving a sigh of pleasure as he entered his wife's body once more, enjoying the way she moaned beneath him.

"Life is good," Daelyn moaned, grabbing his ass and sinking her fingernails into it.

"Sharing it with ones you love is even better," Sean whispered back, and putting her legs over his shoulders, one at a time, he began to work himself deep inside her, moving in time with her efforts as they both began their climb up that very long hill of ecstasy.

"I love you Dae," he whispered in her ear, and was rewarded as she crossed her ankles behind his neck and pulled his lips to hers, as she tried even harder to pull him deeper.

Sean lost all track of time as he worked his body against Daelyn's, reveling in the feelings of her being wrapped around him, as he moved in and out of her heat. Listening to her moan and whimper in pleasure beneath him, as he panted and groaned above. Driving harder and faster with each minute,

pleasing her, loving her, until that moment when they were both there, shivering and crying out their pleasure and their joy as they held each other close.

"Mmm, that was niiice, my love," Daelyn sighed contentedly.

"Does that mean you don't want round two?" Sean teased, still panting.

"Silly lion," Daelyn giggled and lightly swatted him on the head, "I *always* want round two. And three, And four...."

Sean nibbled on her ear lobe, and snickered as she squirmed under him.

"Round two it is!" he whispered and letting her legs off of his shoulders he rolled on to his side, pulling her with him, as he started to let his hands roam her body once more.

"Lazy lion," Roxy said coming into the room, "don't you ever get out of bed?"

"Oh, he's been anything but *lazy*," Daelyn laughed as Sean blew Roxy a raspberry from the bed where he was catching his breath.

"Sawyer wants more necklaces," Jolene said coming in and sitting down in one of the chairs, smiling at Sean.

"I'm not getting any work done today, am I?" Sean sighed.

"Oh, I wouldn't say *that*!" Roxy laughed.

"Actually," Jolene continued, "he wants you to start delivering them in bulk, like a hundred a week, instead of the dozen or so he's been getting. He said the price has bottomed out now at eight grand, so we might as well start flooding the market with them."

"So, as much as we want to play," Roxy laughed and grabbing Sean's arm started to drag him off the bed, "You need to work."

"But take a shower first," Jolene grinned getting a whiff of him.

"Yeah, definitely a shower," Roxy said while laughing.

"Shower," Sean agreed rolling to his feet and stretching.

"You can wait," Roxy said, stopping Daelyn.

"Why?" Daelyn asked giving Roxy a look.

"Because we all know how much our lion likes getting wet and slippery. You go in there with him, and it'll be at least another hour."

"Aww," Sean said and then snickered as Jolene smacked him on the butt.

"Go wash!" Jolene told him, pointing off towards the bathroom.

"I guess you do have a point," Daelyn sighed and sitting back down on the bed, she wrapped the blanket around her, "Just don't take too long!" she

called after Sean's departing back.

Six hours later, Sean set down his pencil and looked at what he'd done. He had a basic outline of the spell's flows, what should pass from each one to the next, and which spells he would need. He'd spent enough time over the last two weeks reviewing his father's notes, as well as the spell books he had on enchanting in his 'classroom' and making this thing was not going to be easy.

He'd need about a hundred magical batteries, to act as a buffer for the energies that would be involved. He'd need a device to drop the item being enchanted onto the 'machine' then a second one to remove it. Those devices would eventually be mechanical and he hoped fairly simple; he'd talk that over with Daelyn and let her or one of her friends build them.

The hard part was going to be the silver; they'd have to introduce it at a fixed rate. He'd talked to Daelyn about that already and she'd come up with this rather ingenious idea of using silver wire being fed from a spool. Then they could speed it up or slow it down as required. Sean liked that idea.

But the hardest part of all of this would be the spell that untarred his tarball into the item being enchanted. Putting that spell into an item, along with all of the other required spells to make this work would take months, six months. Or five months, two weeks, three days, six hours, if his math was correct.

Sean didn't really have that kind of time. So he'd come up with a different plan, and that was the one now in front of him.

It would be made from a simple gold plate. The item to be enchanted would be attached to a wooden pole that someone would set on the plate. When he signaled it was done, they'd pull it off and replace it immediately with another one. That would take a team of people working with the items of course, but that was something that could be done tomorrow, where a machine to load and remove items could take weeks to design and make.

The plate would be linked to a set of magical batteries by the simple expedient design of being set on top a carefully placed pyramidal stack of them.

And Sean would operate the hand crank on the spool of silver wire and monitor everything by keeping his hand on the plate. When the batteries were half-full, he'd use the power in them to unpack the tarball, and channel the returned energy right back into the batteries. The tag with the silver spell

would be attached to the plate, rather than him, so the energy would channel through it instead of him.

"I don't like it," Roxy said when he explained the design to everyone.

"I'm not a big fan of it either," Sean sighed, looking around the table at everyone else. "But I can make that plate in a couple weeks. It's just a power management program really."

"What about the batteries?" Jolene asked.

"I make the first one myself," Sean said. "Then I use the machine to make the rest."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Daelyn asked.

Sean shook his head, "I'm keeping the batteries small enough that the first one will be able to handle the energy return for making the next one. That's why I need a hundred of them."

"I still don't like it," Roxy grumbled, "if anything goes wrong, you could be fried again!"

"We don't have time for anything else," Sean told her. "This is about as simple and as safe as I can make it. Yes, I'd rather build the more involved machine, because then I don't have to be there to operate it. Once we've made enough tags to keep the heat off here, I'll start on that one."

"But right now, we're living on borrowed time. Sooner or later we'll be facing the big boys, and if we aren't ready to cut their lycan armies out from under them, we're in serious trouble," Sean said with a slight growl.

"How long will it take you to make a battery?" Daelyn asked, cutting off any further argument from Roxy.

"Another couple of weeks," Sean grumbled. "Batteries are easy to make, however it takes time to make them properly. Plus I'm making a pretty large one. I could do everything with only thirty batteries, but I want a larger safety margin than that. Especially as we're going to be production lining this stuff. Once we have it down, I want to make several tags at a time."

"Will that be safe?" Daelyn asked as Roxy just growled again.

"I won't know for sure until we've made a bunch of single items first," Sean said looking over at Roxy. "I'm not going to try multiples until I'm comfortable with making just one at a time."

Roxy stopped growling, but she still didn't look all that happy.

"When are you going to start making this device?" Jolene asked.

"As soon as I have a gold plate."

"How big does it need to be?" Daelyn asked.

"Ten inches in diameter, big enough to hold a collar, and it needs to be thick enough to not fall apart from being used."

"How pure does it need to be?"

"Eighteen karat should be enough."

"So eight ounces worth of pure gold," Daelyn did some quick mental math, "I'll need about eleven grand. I can have it for you tomorrow night. Sooner if someone already has one I can just buy off of them."

"That's good," Sean nodded. "So when's dinner?"

"You ate it an hour ago," Jolene said.

Sean blinked, "I did?"

"Where do you think that plate on your desk came from?"

Sean looked over at where he'd been sitting. Sure enough, there was a plate there with a fork and a knife.

"Wow, I really wasn't paying attention," he chuckled shaking his head. "So, when do we have a snack?"

"Careful you don't get fat!"

"Oh, I don't think any of you will ever let me get fat!" Sean grinned.

Just then Oak knocked on the doorframe and stuck his head in, "Sean?"

"Now what?" Sean sighed.

"Your friend Chad is here, and wants to talk to you."

Sean blinked, "Chad's here? Yeah, send him in!"

Sean stood up as Chad came into the room, limping slightly; Sean remembered that spring was always a bit rough on his knee.

"Chad, what's up? Nothing's wrong I hope?"

Chad smiled and took the seat Sean waved him to.

"I tried to call, but your phone wasn't answering."

Sean blushed, "Oh, yeah, I just found out the other day that there's enough silver in it, that when the silver shield goes off, it gets fried. I still haven't replaced it."

Chad nodded, "I can see where that might be a problem. Anyway, the reason I'm here, is well," Chad looked a little embarrassed. "I wanted to ask a favor."

Sean sat down, "Sure, anything. What do you need?"

"Well," Chad sighed, "it's about my knee. I talked to that healer you sent over and they said that because it's been healed this way for several years, there is really nothing that they can do."

Sean sighed and shook his head, "Sorry, I didn't know about that."

"Yes, well. I did some talking to some of your employees however, and I learned that there is actually another way."

"Oh?" Sean looked up surprised, "What?"

"Bite me," Chad told him.

"Bite you?"

Chad nodded, "If the knee is removed, after I become a shapeshifter, it will regenerate."

Sean looked at Roxy, who shrugged and then at Oak, who was still standing in the doorway.

"Oak?" he asked.

"It would have to be done just before he was bit," Oak said, looking a little uncomfortable. "The removing of the knee that is. The first generation of your body after being bit sets your overall body image. Anything that's missing, well as I understand it, it relies on your DNA more than what was originally there."

"You sure about that?" Sean asked.

Oak nodded, "Fairly sure. I called up Claudia and she had me talk to some of the wise men and women of her packs."

Sean turned to Chad, "And are *you* sure about this? This isn't something you can undo, Chad. Once this is done, it's permanent."

Chad gave an embarrassed shrug and a slight smile, "Yeah, well, I've noticed that you've done okay with it. It really didn't change you all that much, honestly."

Sean stared at him.

"I have three wives now, plus I'm running a revolution, and you say it 'hasn't changed me'?"

Chad gave a small nod, "Not really, no. Oh, you're more self confident now, a bit more aggressive about getting what you want. But you're really not acting all that different, you're just acting on the things you want to do, like you do during game night."

"Is your knee *that* bad?" Roxy asked.

Chad nodded, "Yeah, it is. And it's getting worse. My doctor wants me to go for more surgery."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh," Chad nodded, "So, how about it, Sean?"

*'You can't bite him,'* Sean's lion told him.

*'Why not?'*

*'He'll die. He's not meant to be a lion.'*

"I can't bite you," Sean sighed.

"What? Why not?" Chad said, looking a little angry.

"Because lions don't go around biting people," Sean told him.

"You were bit!"

"I was already dying, so was Sampson," Sean shook his head, "I'm sorry, but I just can't do it."

*'Tell Oak to bite him.'*

*'What?'*

*'Have Oak bite him, I think he'd make a good wolf.'*

"It's not like I'm asking for a lot here, Sean!"

"Actually," Sean sighed, "you're asking for more than you realize. However," Sean looked over at Oak, "how do you feel about becoming a wolf?"

"What?" Chad said looking a little shocked.

"I'd be honored to bite him," Oak said with a smile. "His plans for dealing with Gradatim were good ones. He'd make a good wolf."

Chad looked at Oak, and then looked back at Sean.

"Well, um," Chad looked a little embarrassed then, "that was actually my first choice. But they said they wouldn't do it without their alpha telling them to."

Sean nodded and stood up, "Well, let's go find a place to do this."

"What's wrong with here?"

"Your knee, remember?"

"So?"

"I don't want blood all over the room."

Chad paled a little but sighed, "I forgot about that. This is going to hurt, isn't it?"

Oak nodded, "The knee? Yeah. The bite? Not so much."

"Well, let's go down into that big shower room on the first floor," Roxy said getting up as well.

"I think I'll stay here," Jolene said.

"I think I will too," Daelyn agreed.

"What?" Roxy said looking at Daelyn, "I *know* you're not bothered by the sight of blood!"

"Only when it's coming out of my enemies," Daelyn grinned.



Chuckling, Sean led them all down to the first floor; there was a rather large shower room down there, two actually. Oak went off and came back with both Hunter and his mate Silver.

"This is going to be a little messy," Oak told Sean, "It's best if we're all in our hybrid forms, preferably naked. I asked the others to help out, because Chad is going to have to be held really still."

"How are you going to do this?" Chad asked, looking a little nervous.

"It's better that you don't know," Oak told him.

Chad just nodded and everyone got ready.

They ended up with Chad lying on the floor, on his side, his bad leg bent, and tied, to a board. Sean was lying across him, pinning him to the floor and blocking his view. Which was probably for the best, because once they had everything ready, Hunter pulled out a large axe, and with no warning at all, he chopped off Chad's knee, causing him to gasp loudly in sudden shock and pain.

Oak bit him almost immediately after that, and Chad passed out.

"Damn," Roxy said looking around as she slapped a large towel over Chad's leg. "That was a lot messier than I thought it would be."

"Humans bleed more than we do," Silver said.

"He didn't scream," Hunter noted, going over to one of the showerheads, and turning it on started to wash off the axe, as well as himself.

"Yeah," Silver agreed, "and he knew it was coming, too."

"Well, let's clean him up and bring him upstairs," Oak said. "We can start teaching him in the morning."

"Are we going to need a room for him?" Hunter asked.

Sean shook his head, "No. Once he's recovered and knows the basics he can go back home. I'll talk to Ryan about finding someone to introduce him to the others in the Western Pack."

"We're not keeping him?" Oak asked, looking surprised.

Sean snorted, "Ryan keeps whining at me that they need a new alpha," Sean motioned to Chad's unconscious body.

Hunter shook his head, "I don't think someone who's been bitten, especially someone who's *just* been bitten, is going to become an Alpha. At least not anytime soon."

"You're looking at the middleweight, light heavyweight, heavyweight, and super heavyweight judo champion for the state of Nevada, five years running in his own age group and the three above it, until he got shot in the

knee."

Hunter looked surprised. "He was competing above his class?"

"Yup."

"Why?"

"Because he likes winning."

Hunter looked at Silver who nodded and then at Oak who first shrugged and then with a grin nodded as well. "I think our leader has a point."

## §

Waking up, Sean got up onto all fours and stretched, yawning widely he shook his massive head, feeling his heavy mane shaking out as he did so. Looking around he realized he was outside!

"What the hell?" he mumbled looking around, he didn't recognize any of the area, even the trees and plants looked different. He was in the middle of a fairly large, and very green, clearing in a forest. There were other lions lying around, mostly lionesses, and there was a carcass of some kind of animal that he didn't recognize. Maybe because there wasn't all that much left.

But he definitely wasn't in Nevada! It was too green, too moist, and way too many trees. The sky was gray with a lot of clouds, and he couldn't see or hear a single sign of civilization.

"Where the hell am I?" he asked looking over at the other lions, some of whom were now looking in his direction.

"Don't worry, it's just a dream," another lion walking up to him said.

Sean recognized him immediately, in the way that dreams worked.

"You're my lion!" Sean said and looking at him, he padded around the other lion, "Wow, I'm pretty damn big!" Sean stopped then and looked around, "Where are we, anyway?"

"This is where it all began," his lion said to him.

"Where what all began?"

"Us, me, what you are now."

"Lions?" Sean asked, looking around confused. It looked just like a typical pride scene that he'd seen on a nature show a hundred times, well except that this wasn't Africa.

"Werelions," his other half corrected him. "All of the lions in this pride are lycanthropes, or shapeshifters if you prefer, though we only have one other shape, and that is the shape of a man."

"Where are we?" Sean asked, sitting down and looking around some

more.

"Someplace in central Europe. The more apropos question is *when* are we?"

Sean sighed, "It's bad enough I act that way towards other people, but do I have to act that way towards myself as well?"

"Apparently," his lion self chuckled.

"Okay, *when* are we?"

The other lion shrugged, "Beats me, we didn't have calendars. Best guess, is about a hundred thousand years ago."

"A hundred..." Sean stopped looking around and looked at his other self, his lion, "how do I even know this?"

"Think of it as a 'racial' memory. All werelions have it, we all know it."

"So, where are the other were-races? Are they around here too?"

His lion shook his head, his mane fluffing out a little with the motion, "There aren't any others."

"What?"

"We were the first, we are the first, this is where it all started, right here, in this clearing with this pride."

"Then where did the others come from?"

"They caught it from us, obviously."

"Where did we get it from?"

His lion shrugged, "We don't know. This is our earliest memory, this clearing and waking up in it after a successful hunt the night before."

"Is this why the others hold us to be special? Because we were first?"

"That's part of it, though they don't really remember it, beyond some of the myths and legends that they pass down."

"But we remember it?"

His lion nodded, "Just so."

"So does this mean I'm now going to learn how to do all that mystical shit that lions are supposed to be able to do?" Sean asked a little excitedly.

His lion laughed, "No."

"Awww," Sean sighed, "Then why are we here?" he asked, waving around at everything with a paw.

"That is a good question, isn't it?"

Sean groaned, "I hate riddles."

"It's not a riddle; it's something for you to think about. You're a lion now, Sean. There are things you need to learn about just what that means."

"Does this have to do with why I couldn't bite Chad?"

"A little. Go back to sleep, we'll talk again."

## Much to Do...

Sean groaned and opened his eyes. At least the ceiling looked the same as it had yesterday. Roxy, Jolene, and Daelyn were sprawled across the bed, sound asleep, a small pile of collars lay on the floor from where he'd been tossing them last night as he had made them. He'd complain about all the 'enchanted' they'd been doing lately, but he didn't feel like being a hypocrite.

Getting up, he grabbed his pants and stumbled off to the bathroom, to relieve his protesting bladder. After that he headed downstairs to the main dining room to get some breakfast. It wasn't until the third wolf-whistle from one of the female werewolves that he realized that his pants were still in his hand on not on his body.

It took him a full minute to realize that the reason he couldn't get them on was because he was in hybrid form and his pants were human sized. Growling he shifted and put them on, noticing at that point that the pants legs were both now rather well shredded from his foot claws.

Sean still didn't do mornings well.

Grumbling he went into the dining room and seeing Alex there, surprisingly, he went over and sat down next to him at the table.

"Dude, what happened to your pants?" Alex said, and looking Sean's shirtless body added, "And wow, you've gotten ripped!"

"I tried to put them on while I still had claws," Sean said and yawned, then looked around for someone serving breakfast, he'd gotten way too used to one of the girls always bringing him his food. Apparently Roxy had been sharing her knowledge of lions, not that Sean would ever complain about that of course.

"Could somebody bring me some food, please?" Sean grumbled, and then looked over at Alex. "What are you doing here so early? I thought the shop didn't open until nine-thirty?" Looking over at Alex, Sean noticed Demon was sitting on the other side of him.

"Morning, Demon," Sean said with a nod and yawned again.

"Morning, Boss," Demon said with a smile and Sean noticed that Alex was suddenly looking a little red in the face. He was about to ask Alex what was up when two of the female werewolves, Shia, and Clowey, suddenly set several plates full of food in front of him, along with a couple glasses of water.

"Ah food!" Sean smiled, and looked up at them, "Thanks, Shia,

Clowey!"

The girls both smiled and then quickly went back to work.

"You're going to eat all that?" Alex asked, a little surprised.

"Part of being a lion," Sean said, starting in on his breakfast with a will.

"With three wives," Demon added with a wink, "all that *activity* definitely causes an appetite, right?"

Sean glanced over at Demon, who was also going through a large plate of food, and snorted, "Yeah, right. What's your excuse?"

Alex coughed a little then, still looking a little red.

"So, how's the shop working out?" Sean asked, more to get someone else talking so he could concentrate on *eating* his breakfast. It wasn't just the sex; all that magic from the enchanting every night really took it out of him.

"Oh! Yeah, the shop!" Alex said happily. "The shop is going really well! Steve's been putting out the word on us, and because they're already used to seeing me around doing the detailing work at his shop, I think we're going to be signing up a couple of the local used car dealers for our service. I'm gonna start training a crew for that truck you bought as well, and...."

Sean barely paid half a mind to Alex talking about the business, nodding whenever it seemed appropriate. Apparently Alex was getting on well with the werewolves, which took a huge weight off of Sean's mind. He knew that they were all about the pack and your position in it. He'd been worried that as an 'outsider' Alex would be having a difficult time with teaching and leading them.

"I'm just glad they're listening to you, and following your instructions so well," Sean smiled as he finished up his food and starting looking around for someone to bring him some more.

"Oh, well, Demon's helped a lot with that," Alex said, and then looked a little embarrassed for some reason.

"Thanks, Demon," Sean said looking back over at the wolf for a moment.

"Oh, it's been a pleasure, trust me!" Demon chuckled.

"Oh! Look at the time!" Alex said standing up, "We really need to check on the shop before we open!"

"But I'm still eating!" Demon said motioning towards his plate.

"Now!" Alex said, lowering his voice.

Sean was impressed, Demon just sighed and rolling his eyes he got up and followed Alex from the room.

"Alex really has him toeing the line," Sean said to Shia as she put

another plate of food as well as another glass of water in front of him.

"Oh, you could say that!" Shia laughed.

Sean blinked, looked in the direction where Alex and Demon had left the room, and then back at Shia.

"I'm missing something, ain't I?"

"Oh, from what I hear from your wives, you're not missing anything!" Shia laughed again and walked off; leaving Sean wondering just what was going on.

"Whatever it is, no one's bitching at me, so it can wait," he muttered and went back to eating his breakfast.

"Sean."

Sean sighed and looked up; Sheila was standing there, wringing her hands and looking worried.

"What?" he said, trying not to show anything but a pleasant face. Sheila he'd learned was completely submissive when it came to him. With other men she was something of a temptress, and in the bedroom he'd discovered that she was completely wild, due to all of the 'training' she'd received back in the kennel she'd been raised in back in England, that apparently specialized in that kind of thing.

But when Sean was around, she became completely submissive to him. He wondered if it had something to do with the way the English seemed to venerate lions. They were in their heraldry pretty much everywhere.

"Yes, Sheila?" he prompted her again as she stood there looking guilty.

"It's Peggy, she's, well, she's having problems. Again"

"Now what?" Sean growled and locked his laptop. He'd been working on the websites, something he'd put off way too long. The gofundme page needed updates and examples of the work, the stickers had to be uploaded, his own facebook page needed updating with more stories about this 'epic quest' he was 'playing.'

Sean really needed to hire somebody else to do it.

"She's just sitting on the bed in our room, and she won't move."

"So?"

"She's been like that since yesterday!" Sheila said pulling at her fingers and looking at her feet.

"And?"

"And well, you both have a lot in common, and I was hoping that



maybe?" Sheila looked up at him, and he couldn't miss the pleading look in her eyes.

Sighing again, Sean stood up, "Fine, I'll go talk with her."

"Thank you, Sean." Sheila said and gave a little curtsy.

Smiling Sean ruffled her hair as he walked by her. Sheila's and Peg's room was on the top floor, along with his and the girls. The second floor was pretty much wolf territory, the ground floor being mostly open space, except for the detailing shop that took up about a quarter of it. He'd have to see about putting another business down there soon, maybe Steve would have some more ideas?

Walking into the room, sure enough, Peg was sitting on the bed, her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around them.

"What's wrong?" Sean asked, dropping down to sit next to her on the bed.

"I don't want to talk about it," Peg grumbled.

"Yeah, well, I don't either but Sheila is going to be really sad if I don't."

"Sheila," Peg sighed and looked up at him, guiltily.

"Nice to know I'm not the only one she has that effect on," Sean chuckled.

"You should see her with the wolves, she's got half of them wrapped around her little finger, the things she does with them!"

"Jealous?" Sean asked. He knew that Sheila had found her way into more than a few beds on the second floor. Considering what she'd been raised for, Sean hadn't been all that surprised by it. Not that the unmated female wolves were being at all chaste in their behavior either. Roxy had told him some time ago that lycans had a much more relaxed and open attitude towards sex.

"Hardly, I could show those wolves a thing or two."

"Then what's the problem?"

"You wouldn't understand," Peg said dropping her head back down onto her knees.

Sean sighed, "Try me."

"Why? No one else does!"

"Because we have two things in common," Sean grumbled, "We're both magic users, and we were both bit."

"She wants me to do things!"

"Who, Sheila?"

"No, my *beast* my *animal*. She wants me to do things!"

"Oh?" Sean raised an eyebrow, "What?"

"She wants me to go downstairs and play with those *animals*," Peg gasped and put her arms over her head.

"They're not animals, Peg," Sean sighed, rolling his eyes. He thought children were supposed to rebel against the teachings of their parents?

"They're people."

"They're animals. They just look human! They can turn into beasts, and they even act like animals when they're human!"

"You're an animal then as well," Sean pointed out. "You're one of them now."

"No I'm not!"

"Okay, you're a fox."

"Not if I don't change, I'm not! I don't want to go down there! I don't want to sleep with them!"

"Why?" Sean leaned in really close and whispered in her ear, "Afraid you might like it?"

"Arrgh!" Peg said and glared at him, and damn if she didn't cast a spell at him! "You're just like she is!"

"Did you just cast a spell at me?" Sean growled as he shifted to his full lion form and pinned her flat to the bed with a very large paw.

Peg's eyes got wide and he could actually smell her fear.

"You will shift now," Sean growled, "or I'm going to hurt you. Very, very, much."

"I, I...."

"Your problem is, you refuse to accept that which you are," Sean growled. "I bet you didn't have any problems sleeping with the wolf boys before you became one of us, did you?"

"I, I never!" Peg gasped.

"Oh?" Sean growled.

"well. maybe. just once," Peg said in a small voice while refusing to look at him.

"Shift. Now. Or *else*."

Suddenly there was a fox under his paw. Taking his paw off of her Sean sat back down.

"Damn, she's such an uptight bitch," the vixen grumbled, taking the time to start grooming her fur.

"She's been through a lot," Sean sighed.

"Oh, like I haven't been?" The vixen said, looking up at him. "She hasn't let me out in almost a week."

"That long?" Sean shook his massive head. That couldn't be healthy. "Don't let her back out until tomorrow."

"I wasn't planning on it," the vixen laughed. "Oh, you should hear her; she's really quite mad at the both of us now."

"I thought she was over all of this?" Sean grumbled, he had enough problems without trying to play psychologist.

"She called her sister yesterday."

Sean face-pawed. "I take it that it didn't go well?"

"No, her sister disowned her, called her a filthy animal, and told her to never call her again."

"Gee, what a nice family," Sean growled. "Her father was whipping both of them to death, to save his own skin, and her older sister turns on her just like that? Almost tempted to go bite her myself."

"Only almost?" the vixen laughed.

"I wouldn't want a bitch like that in the family; you *are* nice enough at least, once you get over yourself."

"You mean once I get over her."

"We're all one person, you know that."

"Sure we are," Peg, the vixen winked.

Sean sighed, "Don't make me feel sorry for her. I do understand what she's going through, now go play with the wolves or something."

"Sure you wouldn't like to stick around and play with me yourself?" vixen Peg teased as she suddenly rubbed down along his side.

Sean snorted, "I think that right now your other half could stand to be around people who understand loyalty and don't sell each other out over stupid shit."

"What a wonderful idea," Peg, the vixen said.

"She hates it, doesn't she?"

"And that's what makes it so wonderful! I'll talk to *you* later, big boy!"

Sean just sighed and went back up to his office.

"Sean,"

"What?" Sean sighed and looked up Roxy was standing there with a cell phone.

"Your lawyer needs to talk to you."

He held his hand out for the phone.

"He's not on this line; he's downstairs having his car detailed."

Sean sighed and getting up he went down to the shop.

"Nice place you got here," Anthony, Sean's lawyer said looking around.

"Well, I can't afford to have all these wolves sitting around on their butts all day," Sean grinned.

"Also, it's a great cover for people to come over here and meet you, or bring you stuff," Anthony agreed. "People get their cars detailed in Reno all the time."

"So, what brings you by?" Sean asked.

"We found your mother's car, or rather, Sampson's."

"What! Where was it?" Sean asked, excited.

"Sacramento International Airport. I had a friend tow it out of the lot so we could examine the parking ticket, to get an idea of when she left it there."

"And?"

"It was parked there early Saturday morning, March tenth, the day after you were attacked."

"Any idea where she went after that?"

Anthony shook his head, "It's a pretty big airport with flights everywhere. There's no telling at all."

Sean sighed, "Arrange with Steve to have it brought back here, he can store it in his shop with the motorcycle for now."

"Well, at least you know she got away," Anthony said.

"Oh," Sean blushed, "she left a message on my cell phone," he paused to think a moment, how many weeks ago was that now? "About a month ago. Sorry I didn't tell you. But I haven't heard from her since, nor have I been able to call her back."

Anthony nodded and smiled, "Well, I'm happy to hear she's okay, and don't worry about it. I'm your lawyer, not your family."

"Is there anything else I need to know about?"

"Detective Schumer stills wants to have a word with you, but nothing urgent. The investigation into what happened at your Mother's home and Sampson's home is still ongoing, but at this point arson has been ruled out."

Sean blinked, "How the hell did they rule that out?"

"Both homes had bottled gas, they're claiming now that coyotes or something chewed on the lines, which led to a gas leak. The first was sparked off by the thermostat in your mother's trailer, and Sampson's was then set off

by your mother's blowing up."

"Wow, that's pretty hard to believe!" Sean shook his head, "People are falling for that?"

"Apparently. I expect the insurance companies will settle up by the end of May."

"What about the fire in the house I was living in?"

"Oh, that was a power surge due to the freak electrical storm we had," Anthony smiled, "Seeing as there was a witness to the cause of the fire and the investigation backs him up, there's nothing to connect you to it at all. Sheer coincidence."

"Do they always wrap these things up so nicely?"

Anthony shrugged, "You have to remember, that not a lot of people know what you know. Yes, someone sent a wolf to chew through the gas lines. Then they probably used magic to spark it off. Magic doesn't leave much in the way of forensic evidence for modern methods."

Sean nodded, it made sense.

"Well, thanks for letting me know about the car."

"Sure, not a problem. I needed to get my car cleaned anyway. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Only if you know of someone I can turn all of my paperwork over to, along with the website work I have to do," Sean sighed. "Who knew that running a small business would require so much paperwork?"

Anthony nodded, "I'll ask around. I might know somebody."

"Thanks," Sean said and shaking hands with Anthony, he went back up to his office.

"Sean,"

Sean sighed and dropped his head.

"Now what?" he asked.

"There's a couple of wolves downstairs that want to join us," Oak told him, "I think you need to come down and see them."

"Why?" Sean sighed.

"Cause they've still got their silver pellets in them."

"Oh Shit!" Sean said and jumping out of his chair he scooped up two of the necklaces they'd made last night and bolted for the stairs. If there was one thing Sean was impressed by, that he'd gotten from his lion, it was his ability to run his ass off, while dodging people, cutting corners, and going

downstairs, full tilt, and all without falling flat on his face. Only Roxy did it better, but then she actually ran *up* along the walls as she did it.

"Put these on!" he said as he slid to a stop before a couple who looked to be in their early forties.

"What?" the man said as Sean tossed them the collars.

"Now!" Sean growled.

Both of their eyes got wide but they did as they were told and Sean pulled off his silver tag and putting the fingers of the woman around it, he clipped it to her collar. Oak was doing the same with the man.

"What does this..." the man started then gasped in pain, his body going rigid.

"It gets rid of silver," Sean said grabbing the woman by the shoulders so she wouldn't collapse. "Now, why are you here? Hell, *how* are you here?"

The woman was the first to recover, mainly because he put the tag on her before Oak had on the man.

"We heard about you from the boys in the shop when we brought our master's car in to be cleaned."

"Does he know where you are?" Sean asked.

"No, he just sent us out to do the shopping and get his car cleaned for tonight."

Sean turned to Oak, "Have someone drop the car off at the house. Make sure no one knows it was here."

"Why bring it back?" Oak asked.

"Because keeping it would be stealing and I don't want to get involved with grand theft auto."

"But isn't taking us stealing?" the woman asked.

Sean sighed and rolled his eyes, he was doing a lot of that lately he realized.

"You're people. Slavery is illegal. I'm setting you free. If you want to join my pack here or any of the other packs in the state, or even go back to working for your former master, that's up to you."

"Oh, fuck that!" she laughed, "No way I'm going back there, right Eddie?"

"Oh, definitely not Margie!" Eddie said with a grin, "Wow, free? Who'd a thunk it would ever happen to us?"

"I need that tag back," Sean said, pointing to his tag on Margie's neck. "You can keep the collar." Turning back to Oak, he continued, "Figure out

what to do with them, I need to get back to work."

Taking his tag back, Sean went upstairs to finish up on the spell details for the simpler machine that he'd been working on.

"Sean,"

"What!" he growled looking up.

"Geez, what's gotten into you?" Daelyn growled back at him.

Sean sighed, "Sorry, Hon. Been a long day."

"I got your plate done," Daelyn said and handed him a box.

"That quick?" Sean blinked.

"Quick? It's eight o'clock!"

Sean blinked and looked around. "Where's Rox, and Jo?"

"Downstairs getting you some dinner."

Sean looked at his notes. Gathering them up he put them in the box with the plate. Sure enough, it was gold, and it was ten inches in diameter. Nicely made too.

"We're going to the Sorceress Guild," he told Daelyn.

"Why?"

"Cause the only thing people want from me there is my body," Sean growled. "Plus they have a workshop I can borrow while I wait for your folks to finish mine."

"Aww, you just want to bang Roberta again," Daelyn laughed.

"Yeah, that too," Sean grinned. "Now, let's grab the other two, borrow a car, and get out of here before somebody asks me to take care of another problem for them."

"After dinner," Daelyn said, shaking a finger in front of his nose. "You're not the only one that's hungry."

"How do you know I'm hungry?"

"Because you're cranky when you're hungry."

"I'm not cranky!" Sean protested.

"Sure sounds like it from here!" Roxy called out as she and Jolene entered the room with dinner.

"Okay, food first. Then we're out of here for a while. Someone tell Oak he gets to deal with things until we get back."

## The Devil You Know

Harkins looked down the table at the senior leadership of the local Council of the Ascendance. There were now eleven people in the council's senior leadership coven, not counting him. The last several weeks had been brutal, a number of people had actually packed up and left Reno in the last few days, a result of the infighting that had been taking place, as three members of the old council had tried to usurp his position.

All three of them were now dead of course.

Harkins had been forced to flood the council seats with people whose loyalty was beyond reproach, so where there had traditionally been nine on the council, he'd replaced the four empty seats, one for Rosen and three for the now deceased challengers, with seven new members.

That left him with only four members from before the challenge to his leadership, three of whom he knew he could count on, or he wouldn't be here now. The fourth one, Roy Sticks, had refused to take sides. Roy didn't hide his dislike of Harkins, he never had. But he made it clear he would never challenge Harkins' leadership.

That also left him with only four experienced members on the council. The seven new members were less experienced than he would have preferred. Three of them barely qualified when it came to magical ability, but they all had that most important of qualities: Loyalty. To him.

Besides, it wasn't like he couldn't move some of them out for better choices after things settled down. Several of the less experienced had made it clear to him that they'd willingly stand aside if someone better came along.

"Gentlemen," Harkins said as he looked around the table at everyone, quietly waiting there on his pleasure. "With the recent unpleasantness now behind us, I'd like to return our attention to our most pressing problem, the capture of Sean Valens."

"I thought we wanted him dead?" Roy mumbled from his seat, the second one down on Harkins' right.

Harkins shook his head, "After due consideration, I've decided to return to our original goal of capturing him, draining him of all the magical knowledge we can get our hands on, and after that, we'll dispose of whatever's left."

"What about our previous problems?" Michael Seavers, the man seated across from Roy asked.



Harkins sighed heavily as he threw Rosen under the bus, not that he didn't deserve it.

"I think I erred when I assigned the capture of Sean to Rosen, I hate to admit it, because he was a close and faithful friend. If I hadn't sent him on that task, I have no doubts that he would have been able to survive the attack at our coven house, and would still be with us.

"So, with that in mind, I have decided to bring in some outside help."

"What?" Several of the council members, mostly the new ones, looked suitably upset.

"Now now," Harkins motioned with both hands, waving them down, "it's not like we haven't done business with this particular person before. The last time we hired him, the results were exactly what we desired. I have no doubts that he will perform satisfactorily this time as well."

"You're hiring the Hyena?" James Roth, who now sat directly on Harkins' right side, asked.

Harkins nodded, "Yes. He dealt with Bernard Valens for us, as we had requested, and arranged for the geas that the conclave put on Sean, and the oath from Mrs. Valens."

"Both of which have now been broken," Roy pointed out.

Harkins nodded, "Yes, and if Rosen hadn't failed in our first attempt, neither of those things would have mattered. That is however, now water under the bridge. We've all heard the rumors about Roger's demise and what happened over at Gradatim? I think it's safe to say that Sean's attention will soon turn to us, if it hasn't already."

"Any idea as to just *why* it hasn't turned to us yet?" Roy asked.

Harkins nodded, "Yes. He ended up with a lot of wolves after what happened at Roger's house, and there was some kind of falling out between him and the Alpha of the Western Packs. As we all know, the animals are not prone to cooperate with each other, unless there is a strong hand forcing them."

"So he's still consolidating his hold?" Roy asked.

"Apparently, yes."

"Well, then by all means, Samuel," Harkins tried not to flinch at the use of his first name, "I agree with your plan and I second the proposal. Anybody opposed?" Roy asked looking around the table in a manner that made it clear what Roy thought of anyone who did.

Harkins had to admit to being surprised by this strong show of support

by Roy of all people.

"No," Everyone said shaking their heads.

Harkins smiled, "Thank you, Roy, and thank you everyone. Now, on to other business, of which I daresay there is a lot we need to deal with.

"The first of which is the Sorceress Guild."

"What's up with them?" Dave Thompson asked.

"Yes, what is our concern with them?" Jerry Kinyon, who sat on Harkins' left asked as well.

"Simply put," Harkins said looking around the table, "we can't let what they did to Preston go unanswered."

"I thought we were just using him, and his people?"

Harkins nodded slightly, "To an extent, that was true, and of course now that he's gone we've lost both him and his people as a resource. But I think it sets a bad precedent for the future, if we're not seen as taking some sort of action in response to what was done to him."

"I don't know," Dave spoke up again, "his troubles with the gals over at the guild he caused himself. It wasn't because of anything that involved us."

"I think Samuel is right," Roy said, surprising Harkins once again. "If we aren't seen punishing those who go against our allies, regardless of the reason, we look weak. Hell, this might even win us back the support of Totis Viribus. I second Samuel's motion. Anyone opposed?"

The motion carried with unanimous support, just as the previous one had.

"Thank you, all," Harkins said smiling. "Now, let us discuss just what we're going to do, before moving on to our more mundane business."

Two hours later when the meeting broke up, Harkins motioned to Roy as they were leaving the meeting room, and led him away from the others where they could speak privately.

"You want to know why I took your side?" Roy said bluntly as soon as the others were out of earshot.

Harkins nodded, "Yes. Honestly, Roy, we've never gotten along, so I'm a bit puzzled by this turn of events."

Roy nodded, "Putting it bluntly, Samuel, we can't afford to look weak. Not with what happened to that bastard Roger and his group! I still can't believe Smith was stupid enough to try and push you out! None of these people seem to understand that if *you're* weak, we're *all* weak. Just because I

don't like you, doesn't mean I don't respect you.

"I've been doing a bit of investigating of my own, you see. I know that Morgan and his lot are just waiting for us to fail so he can sweep down and remove all of us that have stood against him. This is no time for us to be doing any infighting; it's time to pull together. That's why I stood with you today, to let everyone know that."

"Thank you, Roy, I appreciate the loyalty."

"It's not you I'm loyal to, Samuel."

Harkins chuckled, "And I appreciate that, as well as your honesty even more. You're right, troubled times lay ahead. Why don't you come over for dinner tomorrow night? I'm sure your grandchildren would love to see you."

"Don't mind if I do, Samuel. I'm sure my daughter will also be pleased."

Harkins laughed at that, Roy and his daughter hadn't seen eye to eye on anything since she'd married Harkins.

"I'll be sure to calm the waters first, Roy. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a phone call to make."

Roy nodded and walked off, leaving Harkins to head to his office. Opening the door and stepping inside, he nodded to the man sitting on the couch, smoking a cigar.

The man appeared to be older, probably in his late fifties or early sixties. He wore a long dark overcoat, and a black fedora hat, black silk trousers, black shoes, a very dark gray shirt with a black tie. He stood a few inches less than six feet, and didn't seem to be all that heavily built, but with the loose clothing he wore, you really couldn't tell.

Beyond that, Harkins didn't really know all that much about Hyena, he'd hired him the last time based on recommendations from the council leader in Chicago, who had connections with the gangs back there. Hyena worked for a group known only as 'The Outfit', which apparently had once been part of the Chicago mobs back in the heyday of prohibition and organized crime.

Now they were a much smaller and more expensive group that dealt solely in assassinations and other tricky jobs involving magic users or other supernatural beings.

"So, I take it they went for it?" Sal Woiseman, who was only known to most people simply as 'Hyena' asked.

Harkins nodded as he went over to sit behind his desk.

"There was never any doubt in my mind," Harkins smiled back at Sal. "Everyone knows what we stand to lose if we don't deal with this problem

now. We also understand what we may gain if we can get Sean to reveal his secrets to us."

"I'm still surprised that the kid took up magic, I thought the geas that the local conclave put on him was supposed to prevent that?"

Harkins shrugged, "We don't really know what happened. Not yet anyway, which makes it all the more important that we get our hands on him. That he suddenly was practicing magic at a master level shows that he must have been studying it for quite some time. I can only guess that the geas was broken long ago, by some third party, and we just didn't discover it until those gang members from Lithuania tried to grab him."

Harkins wasn't worried about Hyena discovering the truth behind his lie, none of the councils were apt to talk to each other about what happened in the last conclave meeting, much less so with an outsider.

"It is true that he's a lion-were now?"

"Yes, we suspect that his mother's friend bit him after the failed kidnapping attempt, as he was dying."

"I'm surprised by that," Sal mused.

"Why?" Harkins asked, curious.

"It's almost unheard of for lions to infect someone with their brand of lycanthropy."

Harkins gave a small shake of his head, "I honestly don't know anything about lions or their particular version of lycanthropy, nor do I really care.

"The myths and stories the lycans tell about each other are just that, myths and stories."

Sal laughed, "Not unlike the myths and stories told about mages perhaps?"

Harkins snorted, "There's a difference."

"And what would that difference be?" Sal asked with a raised eyebrow.

"We're the ones in power."

## Sorceress Guild

"Hi, Roberta," Sean said walking up to the gate in his hybrid form with Roxy, Jolene, and Daelyn following along.

"Sean! Where have you been hiding yourself? It's been what, two weeks?" Roberta said giving him a look that made it clear to him that she wasn't exactly happy.

"I'm sorry, I'll explain everything, I've been busy, could we please come in?"

"Wellll, I don't know. I mean you haven't even called!" Roberta said standing there, hands on her hips.

"I don't have your number! Just give me the damn collar already!" Sean grumbled, "If I didn't care, I wouldn't be here and you wouldn't be pregnant. I missed you. A lot. Now can I come in and spend time with you, *please*?"

"Hmmm," Roberta started, when Jolene interrupted.

"Roberta, you should know better than to tease lions, Sean's been stressed enough already this last week."

"Why's that?"

"Because I've got a hundred wolves now to take care of," Sean grumbled. "They all decided that they wanted to follow me, and honestly?" Sean spread his hands, "I need the help. But at least we have a nice place downtown with lots of rooms."

"Then why are you here, if you have a nice place downtown?"

"Because *you're* here! I love you too, you know." Sean growled, tail lashing in annoyance.

Roberta smiled and pulling the collar out from inside her robes she tossed it at him, "I just wanted to hear you say it. Several times. Maybe on your knees later too, just to be sure."

Sean grumbled but put the collar on and they all stepped inside as she opened the gate.

"You know he's just going to make you pay for it later," Roxy snickered to Roberta.

"That's half the fun," Roberta replied with a wink.

As soon as the gate close Sean smiled and turning to Roberta he grabbed her and pulled her close, bending down to kiss her.

He didn't stop until she started to push back against him several minutes later.

"Okay, Okay," she laughed, "I get it, you missed me. I missed you too," she admitted.

"Let's go back to your room and we can all get caught up."

"I'm supposed to be on duty, Sean."

"What, you don't get time off? You're a boss; get someone to fill in for you!"

"Well, I guess I can, it *has* been a while," Roberta said with a smirk.

"Joyce, call up Hanna and tell her she's on watch tonight with you."

"Yes, Roberta."

"Now, let's go to my room, and you can all tell me what's been keeping Sean here so busy."

"In the morning," Sean grinned.

"Why not now?"

"Because I have other things on my mind than talking right now, it has been two *weeks* after all."

Roberta laughed, "Surely you don't expect me to believe that they," Roberta waved to the other girls as they walked, "haven't been taking care of you?"

"Oh, they have," Sean agreed pulling Roberta up against him as they walked, "but you haven't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," Jolene chuckled, "that you're not going to be getting much sleep tonight."

"So," Sean said with a yawn as he finished explaining things to Roberta the next morning, "that's where things stand right now. And I was hoping to borrow one of your workrooms while I'm here to start work on my device."

Roberta nodded; they were all sitting around the table in her small kitchen. Roxy and Daelyn had actually volunteered to make breakfast and right now Jolene was talking with Roberta's daughter Sarah as she ate.

"I can tell you," Roberta said, "that Deanna is going to want some of those necklaces and tags for our lycans."

"Your lycans?" Sean raised an eyebrow.

Roberta nodded, "Not everyone here is just passing through. Some of them have made serious commitments with the sorceress that they live with. If things are going to get nasty around here, Deanna's going to want to get them protected."

Sean thought about that a moment, but he really couldn't see the harm in it.

"Sure, I can do that," he told her. "It's not like anyone here is being held against their will. That's all I want, is for lycans to be free to choose."

"Then I don't think there'll be any kind of problem. What do you need to do your work?"

"One minute," Sean got up and went and found his pants, then got the list that was folded up in his pants pocket. Enchanting did take a few tools, and there were actually quite a few items that surprisingly made it easier. Some of them were common, like kosher salt, charcoal, and various crystals. Others were less so, like the gold the plate was made from, other metals, and some semiprecious stones. He'd brought the more expensive items with him.

"Here's the list," Sean said and passed it over to her.

Roberta looked it over briefly, "I'll talk to Karen, the woman in charge of the workshops. Most of this looks pretty common, but I'm not really an enchanter, and other than you, there aren't any high level enchanters here."

"Really? Where do you get your items from?"

"We buy them, mostly from out of state, but there's Gus Hampton who lives up near Incline Village. He's not cheap, but he'll make us stuff if we pay for it."

Sean nodded, "Well, once I get this all done, maybe I can help you all out with a few things."

Roberta smiled, "Deanna will love you, if you do that."

"Well, I might as well get started, let me get my things, and we can go talk to Karen and then I can get to work."

"Are you going to need us to get anything for you, Hon?" Roxy asked.

Sean shook his head, "This is pretty much a one-man job. There really isn't anything any of you can help me with. For the most part I'm just going to be studying and casting all day."

"It takes that much time?"

"When you're new at it like me?" Sean nodded. "At least if I screw up, I can just wipe the plate clean, miss-enchanting usually doesn't destroy the item."

Roxy nodded, "Okay, we'll see you later then."

Sean gathered up his things and then went and saw Karen, she did have the things he needed and he'd be using the same workroom as last time. The workrooms didn't see a lot of use at the guild, so Sean would be undisturbed.

Setting everything down on the workbench, he gave Roberta a hug and a kiss, and then sitting down he opened up his stats program and took a look at things.

His physical stats hadn't changed in the last two weeks, he wasn't really surprised at that, it did seem like his body had finally stopped growing and adapting to his lion abilities.

His mental stats also had started to level off, though he still had two points left, which he just plugged straight into memory. If he understood what he had read properly, his wisdom would continue to increase with age, maybe his intelligence as well. But unless he ran into something seriously different in his life, he shouldn't expect to see too many changes there. You had to be learning new things to improve, and after all the new things he'd just learned, Sean wasn't looking for any more challenges for at least a while.

His magical stats however, those were still changing. With all the enchanting he'd been doing for the last two weeks, making collars, wands, defensive amulets, and anti-scrying amulets, his ability had gone up considerably. Once again he was able to raise his mana level several times, but the price cost was doubling each level now, so he was starting to hit a wall on that. He put most of the remaining points into willpower, figuring that with all of the concentrating and focusing he was going to be doing the next few weeks, that he'd need it.

That left him with spells.

Again, all of the studying and enchanting he'd been doing, well maybe not the unpacking of the tarballs, that *was* kind of cheating. But the rest of it had increased the amount of 'points' he could spend on learning the new spells. Sean had been reading and re-reading so much of this stuff, all he really needed to do now was spend those 'points' to anchor the concepts and the spells that came with them in his mind.

He ignored any combat spells, or protection spells. He concentrated completely on the enchanting spells. Once he had things well underway on the gold plate, he'd spend a little time enchanting a bunch of protection spells on some items for him. The girls all had several nicely enchanted rings now, which would protect them from a multitude of spells. He just needed to make some for himself. So far everything he'd been enchanting either for defense or offense had gone either to the girls or to the wolves back at their base. He'd have to make a few things for Roberta too, come to think about it.

Exiting his stats program, Sean turned towards his notes and opening up



his father's book, he went to work.

"Okay, so where to, girls?" Roxy asked as they drove off from the guild.

"I need to stop in to check on some of the production orders," Daelyn said from the driver's seat. "But that really shouldn't take more than twenty or thirty minutes."

Roxy nodded, "You, Jo?"

Jolene smiled, "I know of this really nice spa in Carson City, and as long as we're going to be there anyways..." she trailed off with a smile.

"A spa?" Roxy blinked, "Why do you want to go to a Spa?"

"Oh, come on, Rox!" Jolene grinned, "When was the last time we had a day to ourselves? One where we didn't have to deal with Sawyer, or talk to other people about what's going on? Where we weren't helping Oak and the wolves for Sean as they got settled in? Where we weren't dealing with dwarven contractors and production contracts?"

Daelyn laughed, "She's got a point, Rox. We've been running around busting our asses as much as Sean has, so he can stay focused."

"Welllll," Roxy sighed, "Maybe. But I feel a little guilty taking the day off when we left him back there working."

Daelyn snorted, "This from the woman who busts her ass harder than any of us, making sure that Sean and the rest of us are taken care of. You've earned a little time off, Rox."

"She's right," Jolene agreed, "besides which, even Sean would tell you to take a break, and you know it."

Roxy sighed, "Okay, okay, the spa it is."

"And maybe a little shopping afterwards?" Jolene teased.

"Well, promise to stop by a gun store, and I'm there!" Roxy replied with a laugh.

When Roxy got back to the guild, the first thing she did was go down to the workshop to check on Sean, who was curled up on the floor in his full lion form, sound asleep.

"Ahem!" Roxy cleared her throat.

Sean opened an eye and looked at her, "Hi," he said and then sitting up slowly he yawned widely, then stretched, as he slowly stood up on all fours.

"When's dinner?"

"Now I think. I thought I'd find you hard at work, and here I find you

sleeping like a lazy lion!" Roxy giggled.

"After being up all night, when I finished for the day, I figured I'd take a nap."

"And whose fault is that?" Roxy asked and hummed, at him.

"Well it can't be mine," Sean said and grinned at her while tilting his head to the side. "It's never the lion's fault."

"Un-huh, sure. Well come on and follow me to the dining room or mess hall or whatever they call it here."

Sean nodded and padding over, he fell into step beside her, "Oh, Hon, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Hmmm?"

"My lion still talks to me."

Roxy shrugged, "My cheetah does too sometimes, mostly it's about things my human mind misses but my animal mind picks up."

Sean shook his massive head, "No, I mean like he's a different person. Sometimes we still talk like when I first got him, but it's different now."

"Different, how?"

"Well, it's like he wakes up sometimes and decides I need to know something, like when he told me not to bite Chad but suggested Oak do it. It wasn't something I just 'knew,' I had to be told."

Roxy shrugged, "Considering that everyone talks about how lions won't change just anyone, I don't see that as being all that strange."

"I don't know what he said to Michael in that meeting," Sean sighed. "He told me I fell asleep and that's why I don't remember any of what he said."

Roxy stopped, causing him to stop as well, and looked down at him. "Have you asked him?"

"He keeps avoiding the details and I've been afraid to push it, actually," Sean confessed. "I need him too much to piss him off."

"Why would that piss him off?" Roxy asked, a little concerned now.

"Because if he refuses to tell me, I'm going to have one hell of an argument with myself, and I don't think it'll end well, regardless of the outcome. I don't want to lose my hybrid form because I'm all pissy at my other half."

"You remember how it felt mentally when you first willingly shifted to your lion form, that night when we were sneaking back home?"

Sean nodded, "Yeah, I felt like I was in the back seat."

"I want you to try and hop back into that 'back seat' again, Sean."

"Why?"

"I want to talk to your lion."

Sean blinked; he could feel his lion quite readily. For all that they were fairly well integrated now, in this form Sean knew that his lion side was the dominant side; it was his lion that was really in charge now. Slipping back, as it were, Sean pulled his conscious will away from what he was doing, leaving his lion fully in charge.

"Yes?" Sean's lion asked, looking up at Roxy.

Roxy dropped down to her knees, putting her eyes on a level with his.

"What is going on with the two of you, that Sean is afraid you won't tell him the truth?"

"I never said I wouldn't tell him what happened."

"But he's afraid you will, why is that?"

"I can't say."

"Can not? Or will not?" Roxy asked slowly.

Sean's lion blinked, and then smiled, "You are a sharp one, Hon, aren't you?"

Roxy smiled back, "How do you think I snagged you?"

"I seem to recall Sean doing a bunch of snagging in your room that first night."

"And you seem to forget that I tracked him down and dragged him back there. Now, Sean may still be new to this, but I'm not. You're mine now, and I'm yours. I want answers."

"Oh? And if I don't give you any?"

"If you think having one bitchy wife giving you the cold shoulder is bad, wait until all four of them are doing it," Roxy said, still smiling sweetly.

"We're mates now, you have an obligation, and the simple fact that we're even having this conversation tells me that something is quite wrong."

Sean's lion sighed, "Nothing is wrong, this is normal."

"How is this normal?"

"It's just another way that lions are different."

"Oh, joy," Roxy snorted. "Then please enlighten your mate as well as your human side. Before he has a nervous breakdown, and you don't get laid tonight."

"Oh, bringing out the big guns?"

"Just wait till I start crying," Roxy warned, "lion or not, trust me when I say you don't want to go there."

"Okay, okay! No need to be so cruel," Sean's lion snorted, "I'll tell Sean eventually, when we've been together longer. There's a number of reasons why there aren't all that many of us. The change did more to Sean than just create a beast's mind within his 'self.'"

Sean's lion paused a moment, "I don't know how to best put this, because right now, anything I say to you, I say to him. So I'll just say it like this: If I expose all that I am to Sean now, before he's fully ready to deal with it, it would hurt him."

"Hurt him, how?"

"I might end up the dominant psyche in his mind, instead of him being the dominant one."

"How is that possible? You're him, and he's you!"

"I can't say anymore."

Sean would have shaken his head, if it had been his to shake at that point.

*'You're hiding something from me, aren't you?'*

*'Yes.'*

Sean could feel the regret in that answer.

*'But you're going to tell me, eventually, right?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'And just when will that be?'*

*'When the time is right. I trust you, do you trust me?'*

*'What are you trusting me with?'* Sean asked, confused. As far as he knew, he wasn't the one hiding anything.

*'I'm trusting you to do what needs to be done. I have the power to force myself on you, but I trust in the forces that brought us together and I trust in you.'*

Sean capitulated, *'I trust you.'* He did trust his lion, and as long as he would find out just what was going on, he'd just have to put his faith in him as well.

*'Thank you,'* his lion sent.

"What's going on in there?" Roxy asked.

"We were having a conversation," Sean's lion told her. "He's okay with waiting."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this," Roxy sighed, standing back up.

"We are all, still finding our way in all of this," Sean's lion sighed, then shook his head as he realized that Sean wasn't pushing to take back the

'driver's seat'.

"What?" Roxy asked looking down at him.

*'As long as we're in this together,' Sean told him with a mental smile, 'I think it's only fair you get to spend some time with the wives.'*

*'But I spend just as much time with them as you do.'*

*'Seeing is not doing. Tonight, you're doing.'*

Sean's lion chuckled, "Sean wants *me* to spend the evening with all of you, with him in the 'back seat' for a change."

Roxy shrugged, "Works for me, I love ya' both. Don't know how the others are gonna react to you being a lion for the whole evening."

"Then maybe they need to get used to it?"

Roxy laughed, "Sean said that, didn't he?"

"Actually, we both did."

Roxy watched Sean with interest as they walked back to the dining area. Sean didn't switch back to his hybrid form, instead just staying in his full lion form. Interestingly enough, Roberta was perfectly fine with it and no one else in the guild really seemed to care either, though Roxy did notice Sean getting a few appraising looks from some of the other women in the room.

Of course, they all had to help 'feed' Sean, seeing as he really couldn't use any silverware, and the idea of him sticking his face into the food on his plate to eat, seemed to be a messy proposition at best.

When they got back to Roberta's apartment however, is when things got interesting. Sarah mobbed him almost immediately, showing no fear at all, which made it clear to her that Sampson had also spent time here in his full lion form. But that wasn't the most interesting thing that went on, as far as Roxy was concerned.

It was Sean, or rather, Sean's lion.

That minor in psychology that Roxy had been pursuing as part of her major in game design clued her into it almost immediately. Sean's lion wasn't Sean.

Oh, they all had their differences between themselves and their beast, which was understood. But Roxy was used to seeing that. Sean had been full lion around her enough since the beginning that she saw the process first hand as he had 'integrated' into 'one' person. Usually when he went full lion now, the differences between lion Sean and human or hybrid Sean weren't all that great.

Now they were. Oh, she didn't think any of the others were really noticing, but it was there. Lion Sean was a lot more playful than usual, and a lot more engaging in conversations. Talking in beast form was a pain; usually you shifted if you were going to do a lot of it.

"Penny for your thoughts," lion Sean asked her later, as the others were getting ready for bed.

"You're more different than you should be."

Sean's head ducked in a nod, causing his mane to shake.

"When does Sean get to come back out?" Roxy asked, just a little worried.

"When he stops refusing to," lion Sean said with a grin. "He's been coaching me a little; it has been a long time since I've been left to my own devices in a family setting. It's so much more enjoyable than I'd remembered."

"Remembered? You shouldn't...."

Sean held up a paw, "I've said too much, and Sean wants me to tell you to 'leave it, we can talk about it later.'"

Roxy sighed and nodded, it could wait.

## §

Sean opened his eyes, he was in his lion form, but that didn't surprise him, seeing as he'd gone to sleep that way. Looking around however, he saw that he was back in that clearing again, the one from his dream about the past.

Getting up and stretching, he looked around. Things were different, there was snow on the ground, the clearing looked, *older* somehow. The pride wasn't there either. Just another lion, which was sitting next to him, waiting.

His other half, his other side, *his* lion.

Only, only he really wasn't.

"You're not really me, are you?" Sean asked, looking at him.

"Walk with me," the other lion said to him, standing up on all fours and padding off slowly.

Sean didn't hesitate, and padded over to walk along side the other lion.

"Where are we going?" Sean asked as they walked together into the woods.

"The others have all left, going off to seek their own place in the world. We'd discovered that we can create others like us, but not quite like us. Our children, they have the same gifts, the same abilities, but those animals we

bite, that survive our fights?

"They become were-creatures, like us. But they are wild, feral. They have to be reined in, captured, dominated, enslaved, trained. They don't really have the ability to become more than they are and what they are now is barely much more than an animal that can take human form.

"They are all beast with no reason."

Sean watched as they came to a small 'village,' if you could even call it that. There were a handful of crudely built huts, grouped around what looked to be a small fire pit that had someone tending to it.

"We had been dealing with invaders to our lands, invaders that understood the use of spears and fire, and other things. Things which could hurt us, and maybe even kill us, unlike the other animals over whom we reigned supreme."

As Sean watched, a pack of wolves, being urged on by a lion crept up on the village.

"It was during these raids that we discovered that our charges could do the one thing we could not."

The wolves and the lion broke from the cover and attacked the village, it was vicious and it was savage, the wolves turning into humans, but acting as wild as they would have as wolves. Sean had to look away; it was more than he could bear to watch. But when he looked back, after things had calmed down, he saw that all the men of the village were dead, only the females were left alive.

"Our lycans could bite humans, and infect them with our condition, whereas any human we had ever bit ourselves, died." The lion continued. "The humans who were thus turned, they were more than just a wild animal, they had reason. They knew language, they could speak, they could think for themselves, and they could be ruled."

As Sean watched, the survivors were all gathered in one area, while the attackers celebrated their victory, several engaging in the kinds of things that victors had been known to do for thousands of years. When they finally settled down to sleep, the one standing guard shifted into the form of a lion, which then went around and killed all of the original wolves and removed them from the village.

"And so," the lion said, "we disposed of the first generation, who were only ruled by strength and fear, and bred the next one."

Sean turned and looked at the lion, "That's pretty damn cold."

He nodded, "Perhaps. But survival is without mercy. We were young, we only knew that the strong survive and do as they please while the weak die and fill your belly. Modern Man and the Neanderthal still roamed the land together, competing for survival during this time.

"I've often wondered if we were the deciding factor in man's evolution. We couldn't infect the Neanderthals, so we killed them off. They were competing with our 'children' after all."

"Your children?" Sean asked, surprised.

"We discovered that not only were these second generation lycans more intelligent, we discovered we could breed with them as well," the lion told him. "So, being lions, we did."

"You're not me, are you?" Sean asked, repeating his earlier question.

"Yes, and no," the lion said turning towards him. "You have your beast, like any other lyan, but you also have me," the other lion turned and gestured with his head towards the lion in the village. More time had passed; the lion-were was living with the surviving women, all of whom were either with child, or nursing babies.

"That's you?" Sean asked.

The lion nodded, "Yes, that's me. The others did the same, and over the centuries that followed we roamed the world, settling where we pleased and repeating the scene below, creating more and different breeds of lycanthropes as we did."

"So if I were to bite an animal, I could infect it?" Sean asked slowly.

The other lion shook his head, "That ability died out when our original bodies died as well. Whatever it was that changed us, that allowed us to change others, was stable in them," the lion nodded towards the village, and Sean could see it had changed again, now there were wolves, people, and even hybrids, existing alongside in a larger and nicer village.

"All of the lycans that exist are descended from one of us. I was partial to wolves," the lion chuckled, "and even foxes. So most of the wolves here, in Reno, are descended from me, and yes Sheila as well. So while all lycans will feel a connection to you, those that are actually descended from me, will feel it much more strongly."

"So, what happened with Michael?"

"Michael had pulled away from his beast; he was trying to be a man. As the leader of the pack he had allowed himself to be swayed more by human things than is good for one of my children's nature. So I took his wolf away



for a while, and sent him away to contemplate his sins. If he realizes the errors of his way, the way of forsaking that which is most basic to his being, he will live."

"And if he doesn't?"

"He will die," the lion said.

"Harsh."

The other lion shrugged, "Life is harsh, Sean. Look at what you're now dealing with, what *we're* now dealing with. Our creating the lycan race was based in harsh methods, you've seen what I did, the others did the same. It was us deciding that we were gods and acting accordingly.

"We took no responsibility for our children. We bore them, and then we moved on to find another place to create some more. Biology at it's most basic, we survived and we bred. It wasn't until many tens of thousands of years later until we learned the folly of our ways."

"And you paid your price?" Sean replied, because wasn't that the way those stories always went?

The other lion laughed, "No! We existed long before the concept of morals entered the world. But we did see that our posterity, our children, was doomed to extinction if we didn't act to change what we had done.

"So we, being who we are, fixed things, but that's another story for another time."

Sean nodded; there was a lot to think about there.

"I have one more question."

"Yes?"

"What is your name?"

The other lion laughed, "I've had so many names that I've forgotten most of them."

"Yeah, but what do I call you?"

"Call me Sean, or people are going to start thinking you're crazier than they already do when they catch you talking to yourself," the other lion said with a smile.

"But you said you're not me?" Sean said confused.

"I said I both am and am not, you. We're still integrating, the two of us."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," Sean admitted.

"And that's why I've waited until now to tell you about me. There once was a time when I would have just crushed your psyche and taken over, and made you me. I've learned however that doing so is a mistake, and no, not

because I have any ethics or morals.

"It's wrong because I *need* you; my children *need* you, *you*, they need Sean. Not me. You're the one that's going to solve this current problem, I'm here to guide you, support you, and yes," the other lion laughed, "do that 'mystical shit' you keep referring to."

Sean released the breath he'd been holding and sighed, "Well, that's a relief. Finding out I have someone else living in my head isn't exactly comforting."

"I know and that's why I've been waiting to tell you this. If it hadn't been for yours and Rox's concerns for your sanity, I would have waited longer.

"Good night, Sean."

"Wait! What about that whole extinction thing?"

"That's a lesson for another night. Go to sleep."

Sean grumbled, but he went to sleep.

## Hyena Days

When Sal had left Harkins' company, he'd gone back to his hotel room and immediately started a search on Sean Valens using his computer. Unlike a lot of the other people in the supernatural world, Sal had made a point of keeping up with technology. The only reason he hadn't done it before now was simply that he didn't do anything on a job until he'd been contracted.

It was more challenging to find out what lies they told him after agreeing to his terms, than before.

It didn't take him long to find Sean Valens' facebook page, and reading it he had to smile. Sean's page was being updated regularly with updates on the 'game' that Sean was playing. A game that was all too close to the reality that Sal knew Sean was now facing, only the one he was talking about was in a medieval world as part of a tabletop game.

Then there was the 'gofundme' page that Sean had set up to 'raise money' to try and bring his 'epic fantasy' to life as a printed book. Sal snorted, this kid wasn't stupid, he was raising money right under the mages noses, and they didn't even know it.

From the amount of supporters Sean was starting to get, however, it appeared that the lycan community in general was starting to figure out that something was going on.

But that also meant that if Sal just went around asking questions about Sean, it would probably get back to him, and considering that the kid was now both a magic user *and* a lion, the last thing Sal wanted him to know was that someone was gunning for him.

Sal stopped and briefly considered the situation. Twelve years ago he'd popped the kid's father, for what he realized later was far too little money, considering the fallout that the affair had generated. Here it was twelve years later and now he was going after the son.

A lot of promises and several solemn oaths had been made that day twelve years ago, and apparently someone hadn't been keeping theirs. The only question was who? Sal worried about people's oaths, in his line of work they were sometimes worth more than cash.

He'd have to go make the rounds of the local newspapers, see if there were any weak links among the police forces. He needed to get an idea of what just had been going on, and just what people knew about Sean. Unlike his father, he wasn't going to be easy to find, the kid was obviously in hiding,

and again, unlike his father, the kid wasn't afraid to kill.

Fortunately he had a few contacts living here, friends and friends of friends as it were. He'd reach out to one of them tonight, and see if they could set him on the right path.

Sal walked into the bar and looked around; the place looked like a sixties bordello, pure retro, only in the case of this place, Sal suspected it was more a case of the owner just being too cheap to remodel.

"Hey," Sal said to the bartender as he walked up to him, "Is Tony 'C' here?"

"Mister 'C'?" the bartender asked looking Sal over, "Why?"

"Tell him Sal from Chicago wants to buy him a drink."

"Why would he want a free drink?" the bartender asked, confused. "He owns the place!"

"Just tell him, wise guy," Sal sighed.

The bartender shrugged and went over to the house phone and picked it up.

Ten minutes later, Sal was sitting in a corner booth with Tony, sipping a cocktail.

"So, what brings you here?" Tony asked.

"Work," Sal told him.

"Not me or anybody I know, I hope?" Tony asked.

Sal shook his head, "Nah, looking for a kid. Apparently he's angered some people and they want to get their hands on him."

"Doesn't sound healthy for the kid," Tony chuckled.

"Nah, it won't be, I'm sure."

"Ain't it a bit of over kill having you come out here to deal with some small problem?"

Sal shook his head, "This kid ain't a small problem. He's going to be one tough nugget. He's already gone to ground and he's got resources. If I start asking the wrong people about him, he's going to hear about it, and I don't want him to see me coming. They want him alive."

Tony nodded, "So, what do you need from me?"

"Any cops I can bribe for information? Same for reporters, any coven members who don't keep their mouth's shut about coven business. Maybe even some lycan staff members who like to wag their tongues?"

"Yeah, I can get you a list of all those. The rumor mill is pretty strong

here in Reno, and lately there's been some unrest with the local lycans from what I've been hearing."

"Oh? What's got them riled?"

"Eh, who knows? Somebody is always pissed about something, ain't that always the way of it, Sal?"

Sal laughed, "I wouldn't be working so much if it wasn't."

"So, got a name on this target?"

Sal nodded, "Sean Valens."

"What?" Tony said looking shocked, "What the hell did he do?"

Sal started a bit, looking at Tony in surprise. "You know the kid?"

"Yeah, he worked for me like five years ago as a busboy. Hardworking kid, always asking for more work or overtime. Broke as fuck, real hard luck case. No father and no money, just him and his mom living in an old singlewide. What the hell did he do? I can't picture him as the kind to cause problems for anybody, always kept his head down and stayed out of trouble."

"Any idea where I can find him?"

"I'm sure I still have his home address and phone number. Come on up to the office and I'll give it to ya, along with those other names." Tony got up, "So, what he'd do?"

"Magic user politics," Sal sighed.

"Sean? Magic user?" Tony laughed, "That kid was completely blind to the supernatural, didn't know a thing about it. Sure you got the right kid?"

"How blind is blind?" Sal asked following Tony.

"Totally. Anything magical that happened? Kid couldn't see it. Had a couple of the fey in here once, some fairies from up north, kid couldn't even see them."

"Well, that's interesting. Five years ago?"

"About that," Tony nodded and leading him into the office he logged into his desktop and gave Sal his address, then wrote down a list of names, with contact information, for Sal's other needs.

"You know, Sal," Tony said. "He was a nice kid. Kinda sad to hear that he got himself mixed up in something bad."

"It always is," Sal agreed, and saying goodbye to Tony he went out to his rental car and entering the address into the car's navigation system he drove out to Sean's house.

Fifteen minutes later he was looking at two burned out trailer shells in what was definitely one of the poorest trailer parks in town.

"Can I help you?" asked an old lady, coming up to him as he stood there looking at the ruins.

"How long ago did this happen?" Sal asked her.

"Oh, it must be six weeks ago now," she told him.

"And they still haven't cleared this out?"

"Well, the police were investigating it as arson up until a week ago. Turns out it was just a problem with some dogs chewing on the gas lines or something," she shook her head, "Those coyotes are getting to be more of a problem every year."

"Oh," Sal nodded; apparently someone had already tried to get this kid a couple of times now. "Was anybody hurt?"

"Oh, no. No one was living in either house, though," the lady sighed and shook her head, "Sampson, the man who lived in that one was found murdered over near Sparks, and Louise, poor Sean's mother has been missing as well."

"What about Sean?" Sal prompted.

"Well, I haven't seen him since the fire. He was here with his fiancée a few days before, but I know he was busy with college and all. I think he'd been hoping to move back here, but I guess he's just living at school."

She looked up at Sal, "Are you a friend of his?"

Sal shook his head no, "Actually I was hoping to talk to Sampson," Sal lied to her. "I had no idea that he had been killed. Thanks for your time, Mrs.?"

"Brently, Mrs. Brently. And you are?"

"Miles," Sal lied, "Miles Davis."

"Oh! Like the trumpet player?"

Sal rolled his eyes, just his luck he'd find a jazz fan in a place like this, "Yeah, I guess. Well thank you Mrs. Brently, I need to go," and with that Sal extracted himself and returned to his car. Harkins hadn't told him about this, but then Sal was starting to suspect that Harkins hadn't told him a lot of things.

## Guild Workshop

Sean was rather pleased with himself; he'd laid down all of the base spells on the plate, now that it was prepared for enchanting. With that finished, he'd 'locked' everything into place, so the spells wouldn't degrade between now and when he got to work on it again.

He probably could have used that power to do even more work on the plate and just left things to sit on their own, if his calculations were correct, it would let him finish in nine days, rather than fourteen. But all of the books warned against that, because the spells would start to unravel on their own after only nine or ten hours. So if you missed the next day, or were even late, all of your work would be lost.

Sean thought that in the first few days of enchanting, that was probably a risk normally worth taking. But this was his first major project, so he wanted to be sure he was doing the sealing spell properly.

"How's it going?" Daelyn asked, coming into the room with a box.

"It's going great!" Sean said and stretched. He really needed to go out and run for a while tonight. All of this sitting down and spell casting was definitely giving him a lot of pent up energy.

"What's in the box?" he asked.

"Oh, that wire crank assemble you wanted," Daelyn smiled, "I improved it."

"Improved it? How?" Sean asked a little worried.

"I got rid of the crank and put a low-speed, high-torque motor on it with a foot switch."

"A foot switch?"

Daelyn nodded, "Yeah, this way it leaves your hands free. You can control the speed; even put it in reverse if you need to."

"Huh, that does sound pretty sweet." He smiled, "Thanks, Hon."

"No problem. Still trying to figure out a better way to move items onto the plate and off of it than just using a couple of sticks," Daelyn wrinkled her nose at the thought of that. "I was thinking maybe a wooden wheel with the items clipped to it, like you see them do with orders at a diner. But I want a better feed mechanism than just people putting them on and taking them off."

"Why?" Sean was curious as to why she felt so strongly about that.

"Because if somebody screws up, you're the one who's gonna get hurt, that's why. And then Rox is gonna blame me for not doing it right in the first

place."

Sean sighed, "Oh, she won't do that, Dae."

"Sure she will! Have you seen her do those puppy dog eyes of hers? I didn't think cats knew how! Then she makes her upper lip tremble and you feel like you just murdered somebody's kitten!"

Sean couldn't help himself, he started laughing.

"It's not fair that she can manipulate us all so easily! Cats are evil, I tell you!"

"Hey! I'm a cat!" Sean reminded her, between laughs.

"And your point is?" Daelyn asked. "She knows she probably can't win on strength against me, so she just cheats," she grumbled.

"I almost feel sorry for Jo," Sean snickered, "you're both way stronger than she is."

"Jo just bribes you with backrubs and massages and such." Daelyn looked around and lowered her voice, "She can damn near make Rox roll over and beg."

"And I'll get you to that point one of these days as well, Dae dear," Jolene said coming into the room.

Daelyn turned a rather bright red at that.

"Where's Rox?" Sean asked.

"Watching Sarah for Roberta. Ready for dinner?"

Sean nodded, "Yeah, let's go." Standing up, he put the plate back in its box for now, and followed the girls out of the room.

"Roll over and beg, indeed" Sean snickered.

Jolene laughed, "Like you don't, Dear? I got you trained weeks ago!"

Sean harrumphed with a smile, "I only do sit up and beg, and you know it!"

"Well, then I guess it's time for a new trick, right Dae?"

It was late out, and Sean was running through the fields to the east of the guild, enjoying it immensely as he and his lion just let go and ran. Roxy was of course running circles around him half the time, but he really didn't care.

It just felt good to be outside and running free across the ground. He hadn't been out running as a lion in weeks, honestly, he was surprised that his lion hadn't been bugging him about it. He felt a few sheepish thoughts from that side of his psyche; apparently he wasn't the only one who'd been caught up in everything that was going on.



"What was that?" Roxy growled pivoting to face back towards the grounds that the guild was on.

"What was what?" Sean asked and spinning around he looked back towards the grounds as well.

"I thought I heard something!" Roxy said and then just like that, she was off like a flash.

Sighing, Sean took off after her. He'd never catch up with her, but the whole point of being out here was to stretch out his muscles and get some exercise.

When he got back to the compound, the first thing he noticed was that the gates had been rammed by a truck, and were now open.

The second was the guy Roxy was disemboweling.

Swearing Sean slowed down to get an idea of just what was going on. He could see a skirmish line of men with semi-automatic rifles were moving forward into the compound. From the way one of the lycan defenders started screaming when they were shot, Sean realized immediately that they were using silver bullets.

Swearing he charged towards the middle of the skirmish line, coming up on the men from behind. Someone must have heard something or seen him, as the man he was running for started to turn around, but Sean got to him first and ripping the man's head off with a swipe from his left paw, Sean turned to his right and attacked the next man in the skirmish line, batting the man with his massive paws twice, ripping him open from chin to groin. The man went limp then and Sean ran over the body, letting his hind claws do some extra damage as he opened his mouth wide and then closed his jaws on the side of the next man, driving his fangs deep into the man and through the body armor he was wearing, as Sean shook him like a rag doll.

It was then that Sean realized that the men he was attacking were all lycans, werewolves, and that unless he did truly massive amounts of damage to them, they'd regenerate, eventually. Putting a paw on the body of the man he had his jaws in, he pinned him to the ground and ripped out a huge piece of his body, entrails and all.

Dropping the dead body, Sean could feel that he was being shot now and his silver shield had already soaked up enough power to start growing and solidifying. Sean moved on to attack the next man in line, who brought the gun around to try and shoot Sean in the mouth as Sean roared loudly at him.

Bringing the gun around however brought the silver in the magazine into

the expanding shield, which converted them all instantly. With so much excess power the shield was now starting to deflect bullets.

It also was heating up, as well as causing the silver in the magazines on the man's belt to heat up as they were converted, enough so they started cooking off and setting the attacker on fire as Sean ripped the his head off.

By this point, the rest of the skirmish line in front of Sean had started to flee, running from their obvious deaths. Unfortunately for them, Roxy was coming at them from the other direction, now in her hybrid form and covered in blood that was quite obviously not her own. Somehow she'd gotten her hands on one of the rifles, and keeping her hands off the magazine, so she wouldn't change the silver bullets there, she was laying waste to all of the attackers around her with her well developed shooting skills.

Sean killed one more with an attack from the rear, then spinning around he went after the ones that were shooting him from behind, causing them to immediately scatter in all directions.

That was when the mages attacked.

They started off first with sleep and paralyzation spells, which of course had no effect on Sean, but he could feel them coming in as he called up his monitor program and shifted into hybrid form now himself, and then called up his offensive spell frame.

Charging the mages, Sean sent a lightning bolt at the one in front, who dodged to the side, only to let the guy behind him take the hit. Claws out, Sean waded into the midst of them, casting lighting bolts between slashes with his hands and stomping or kicking whoever was within his reach, killing two of them immediately.

As soon as they broke and ran for the gates, Sean turned towards the living quarters, where he saw the first body of somebody that he knew. Joyce was lying on the ground with several bullet wounds, dead.

Growling loudly, Sean ran into the building and started immediately for Roberta's room, and the girls.

When he got there, the door had already been broken down and there were two dead werewolves on the ground, both with their heads caved in. Looking up he saw Daelyn, with a bloody bandage on her left arm, holding the recently repaired Maxwell in her right.

"Is everyone okay?" Sean growled.

"I got these two, but there may be more in the building," Daelyn told him.

"Roberta, Sarah, and Jolene are in the bedroom."

"Yell if you need anything," Sean growled and then went back outside into the hallway, as Roxy came running up.

"You're wounded," Roxy said, panting.

"So are you," Sean growled.

"Most of them are retreating."

"Let's clear the living quarters, then the rest of the ground."

Roxy nodded and they started going door to door. It took them fifteen minutes to clear the building, the attackers they found by then were dead, but they came across several dead lycans, shot with silver bullets, and a couple of dead sorceresses, either killed by magic, physical violence, or by bullets as well.

By the time they got out onto the rest of the grounds, none of the attackers were left, only the dead remained behind.

"Gather up the bodies," Sean growled to Roxy, "let's see if we can figure out who was behind this."

Two hours later, they had all of the bodies of the attackers lined up on one side of the first courtyard. Thirty-six dead, ten of which Sean had killed, the five on the skirmish line, then the five mages who had been unfortunate enough to attract Sean's attention. Roxy had killed the one magic user by the gate, and another nine of the skirmishers. Daelyn had accounted for the two that had attacked Roberta's room, apparently Roberta and Jolene had been casting spells from the living room window, so those two had been sent up to stop them.

The remaining fourteen dead had been killed by various sorceresses who had only been able to do so because their lycans partners had stood between them and the men trying to shoot them.

Out of all of the dead, only the magic users that Sean and Roxy had killed had been human. All of the rest had been lycans.

"How many died?" Sean asked Deanna in a soft voice, as she came out to inspect the dead bodies.

"Eight of my sorceresses, twenty-three of our own lycans," Deanna told him, her features hard as she looked over the line of dead bodies.

"I'm sorry," Sean sighed, "this is all my fault."

"As much as I would like to find fault with you for what happened tonight, I don't think that I can. These are from the Ascendants; they are

taking revenge on what we did to the Totis leader."

"How do you know?" Sean asked, surprised.

"We captured two of their mages," Deanna said. "I questioned them quite thoroughly. I will have someone bring their bodies out to add to these, so they can all be disposed of together."

Deanna sighed and looked at him, "We are at war now with the Council of the Ascendance. Yes, your bringing Preston here for us to deal with played a part in that. However your presence here also played a part. We would not have survived tonight if you and yours had not been here. Their use of silver against us, and their willingness to sacrifice their lycans was as unexpected as their attack."

"Why were they so willing to sacrifice them?" Sean asked looking at their bodies.

"Because they believe that you are going to free them, so they figure they might as well start using them up before then," Deanna said, shaking her head.

"That's evil!"

Deanna nodded, "The Council of the Ascendance has always been known for their lack of morals or compassion."

"Especially where lycans are concerned," Roxy growled.

"Now that they know you are here," Deanna said, "I'm afraid that they'll be back. It might be best for you to leave; I need to meet with the others. We need to discuss our options."

"I have a better idea," Sean growled.

"And what would that be?"

"Rox, get Daelyn and meet me in the workroom. I'll meet you there after I get that box out of the van."

"Oh no, you're not doing that again!" Roxy growled.

"Roxy," Sean said turning to look her in the eye, "I love you more than anything, but we are doing this, and *you* are helping. *I* have a responsibility to all of the lycans who died here today, and *we* are going to do what we can to keep this from happening again."

"I'm not going to...."

"Rox," Sean said lowering the pitch of his voice. "I'm not asking you, I'm *telling* you."

Roxy looked at him then turning on her heel she stomped off in search of Daelyn.

"Fucking lions!" she swore.

"What are you going to do?" Deanna asked, looking concerned.

"I'm going to make as many silver tags as I can before I either pass out from exhaustion or drop dead," Sean told her. "Excuse me please."

Once again Sean was sitting in a chair in his hybrid form, without any clothing on, or anything flammable within ten feet of him. He had his enchantment program open and his monitor program open. Only this time, instead of having Daelyn lowering a rod of silver on a string, he had a spool full of silver hanging up above his head with a foot pedal under his right foot to control how fast it fed him silver.

On his right side was a table with rows of silver tags on it. On his left side was a table with stacks of lycan collars. The girls would push the tables after he enchanted each group of tags to bring more into his reach. While they were doing that he'd move to the collars, which were stacked in piles of five, to burn off the excess energy.

Taking a moment to turn off the tag's encryption program, he made the same two changes as the last time, and then took another moment to check just where everything was laid out, reaching around himself with his hands to be sure it was all within reach.

"You haven't started, have you?" Roberta asked, coming into the room in a rush.

"No," Sean said looking up at her, "what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, but I thought you might want this," Roberta came over to him and Sean could see she was carrying a ten-inch tall metal owl that looked to be fairly heavy.

"What's that?" Sean asked.

"A battery," Roberta grinned. "I swiped it out of the gate mechanism that protects us against blast spells."

"Won't that be missed?" Roxy asked.

"Have you seen the gates?" Roberta snorted, "I told them we needed something heavier, but no one thought someone would ram a big ass truck through them."

Sean took the owl from her and checked it with his program. Sure enough, it was a battery alright, and it was more than four times the size of the ones he'd been planning on making.

"At least it's not silver," Sean said and after he tarred a copy of it he put

it on the floor and put his left foot on it.

"This is not going to be easy," he grumbled. "Stand back, it's liable to get hot in here."

Taking one last look around, he blew a kiss to Roxy, who was still scowling at him, then pushing his foot down, he started to feed the silver into his shield.

This time, he didn't try to get ahead of himself and make too many, doing just one at a time, then dumping the extra energy into the battery when it came back. When the battery was half-full, he stopped feeding himself silver, and used the energy in the battery to make the next two tags, then went back to using silver to power the reaction.

When all the tags within reach had been enchanted, Sean switched over to the lycan collars while Roxy pushed the table forward.

Switching to the collars threw him off for a moment, they required a lot less energy. Fortunately having them in stacks of five helped, but after doing the single enchanting on the tags he wasn't all that comfortable with multiples, especially as it had gotten him in so much trouble last time.

Switching back to the tags, after the next batch was within reach, Sean unpacked the spell into each of them once more, before running out of tags within reach on the table again.

Three more times they moved the table, and then suddenly he was out of tags to enchant. Going back to the collars he did all of the ones he could reach. He ran out of silver before he ran out of collars, surprisingly. He enchanted another six stacks, just using what was in the battery at that point.

Then he just dropped everything and looked around the room. Roxy was *still* glaring at him, Daelyn was watching him carefully, Jolene and Roberta were both sitting in chairs, leaning against the wall and sound asleep.

"Done?" Roxy growled.

"Two things," Sean sighed, as he set the program in the tag back to normal and turned the encryption back on.

"What?"

"A hug and a kiss," he smiled crookedly at her. "And why is everything moving?"

Daelyn looked at Roxy as Sean keeled over and started snoring.

"If you forgive him, I promise never to hold you down and shave you bald again."

Roxy looked at Daelyn a bit askance. "Just when did you ever do that?"

"In about five minutes from now if you don't let it go," Daelyn smiled and held up a pair of electric shears, turning them on.

Roxy looked at Daelyn, and then back at Sean, who was completely out of it.

"Let's pack all this up first," Roxy sighed. "I think he did about five hundred tags."

"Four hundred and seventeen," Daelyn said. "He made it through an entire box, plus three hundred and ten collars."

Roxy shook her head again looking at him, "He's such a dick sometimes."

"Oh come off it, you love it when he tells you what to do," Daelyn laughed, and then laughed even louder as Roxy's facial fur bushed out in a blush as she started quickly stacking the tags back in their box.

## Alliances

"What's this?" Deanna asked as Roberta handed her a very heavy box.

"Eighty of those 'lycan collars' along with eighty of the tag device that protects lycans from silver. This is what Sean's been making in the workshop all night and all morning."

"Where is he?" Deanna said, looking at Roberta who was only being accompanied by Jolene.

"He's asleep."

"More like passed out," Jolene added. "It's a lot of work to do that much enchanting, even with the special methods he's developed. I don't think he's going to be waking up anytime soon, either."

"Are you sure he'll be okay with you giving me this?" Deanna asked, looking at Jolene.

Jolene smiled, "We're his wives, we get to do whatever we want with his stuff. One of the perks."

"You mean you're his wife," Roberta said. "I'm not."

"Keep thinking that," Jolene laughed and winked at Roberta.

"You're sure about this?" Deanna asked, before Roberta could respond to Jolene's jibe.

Jolene nodded, "It's the whole reason he made them. If the Ascendants come back now, your lycan boyfriends and helpers will be able to give them one hell of a surprise."

Setting the box down on her desk, Deanna stepped forward and gave Jolene a hug.

"Thank you! And make sure to thank Sean for me when he awakens." Turning to Roberta she gave her a hug too, "I expect you to do the same," Deanna smiled.

"What, trying to get rid of me?" Roberta laughed.

"With this many collars and tags," Deanna motioned towards the box, "we'll have more than enough to protect everybody. Do you want any of the left over ones back?"

Jolene shook her head, "You'll probably need them eventually."

"What are your plans now?"

"Now would probably be a good time for us to leave," Jolene sighed, "They know Sean's here, and a large part of our strategy has always been to not stay anywhere once they know of us being there."



"Are you sure? With these tags of yours, we can easily stand against the Ascendants now."

"But it will draw others as well if he remains here, Deanna," Roberta sighed. "As much as I want him to stay, Jolene and the others have a point. They're not even waiting for him to wake up; they've already carried him out to their van."

"Well, I won't ask where you're going, but you're always welcome here, no matter what."

"Thanks, Deanna," Jolene smiled and gave her a hug, then turning she left the room.

"You know, Roberta," Deanna said as Roberta turned to follow Jolene. "Sooner or later that boy is going to make you his."

Roberta sighed and patted her belly, "He already has, Mother, he already has."

"You saw him, where?" Sal said into the phone.

"At the Sorceress Guild compound, out by Hidden Valley," Harkins said.

"When?"

"Last night, when we attacked them."

"You attacked the sorceresses?" Sal was surprised by that. He would have thought that they'd be getting ready for an attack like the one Gradatim had suffered.

"We have some unfinished business with them. Unfortunately Valens was there, and it didn't go as well as we had planned. But now that we know where he is...." Harkins trailed off.

Sal sighed, "He isn't there now. You should have called me sooner."

"What do you mean he isn't there now?"

"This kid keeps moving. Every time he's been found so far, he'd moved off to someplace new. He's not taking any chances."

"He'd abandon the sorceresses just like that?" Harkins said, surprised.

"It's not his fight. You didn't attack because he was there, and if he stays there I'm sure the other councils will go after him as well."

"No, his being there simply draws fire. His best bet is to move on."

"Damn," Harkins swore, "I didn't consider that. I guess I better call off tonight's attack."

"That would be your call," Sal said. "Well, I need to get back to looking for him, at least I know of another place he isn't. Goodbye." and he hung up

the phone.

Sal shook his head and sighed. If only Harkins had bothered to call him last night, he could have staked out the place and maybe gotten an eyeball on the kid when he moved and tracked him to wherever he went next.

It had taken him a couple of days, but Sal had managed to figure out who a couple of Sean's high school friends were after finding a copy of his high school yearbook online and doing a few searches. The biggest problem he had with that however was three years after high school, what was the likelihood that they were still friends? Or that he was going to visit his friends while in the middle of what was obviously now a war.

The more Sal learned, the more he realized that the folks over at the Council of Ascendance had reason to fear Sean. He'd put a serious smack down on the Council of Gradatim, and several members of their leadership were now dead or missing, along with *all* of their lycans.

The only thing Sal couldn't understand is why Sean went after them, before going after the Ascendants, who had given him a lot more to be angry about. From what he'd been starting to pick up from some of the other coven members that Tony had turned him on to, Sean had even helped the gals over at the Sorceress Guild put the smack down on one of Harkins' biggest allies.

Which no doubt had been what inspired last night's attack.

Without much in the way of clues to Sean's present location, Sal had driven by the homes of Sean's friends, one of which was obviously now unoccupied in a rather nice part of town, another one appeared to no longer have the young man he was looking for living at it. The third one's house he couldn't even find.

But two of them he found had business connections and today he was going to stop by the first. Steven Bryson apparently worked at his family's automotive shop. Sal had the address and as he drove by the place, he was impressed by the size of the operation. Combined with the rather nice house he'd seen, apparently the Bryson's did okay.

That made Sal wonder why Sean, who apparently was dirt poor, was friends with a rich kid? That didn't make a lot of sense to Sal, but maybe things were different now from when he had grown up. Back then rich kids most definitely did not hang around with any poor kids.

Parking the car on the street he walked over to the shop. The place had a fairly large front showroom with a large counter and a number of racks with items for sale on them, with the usual display of tires on the back wall. Going

inside he walked up to the counter, maybe if he played his cards right, he could get a tour of the place.

"Can I help you, Sir?" the gal behind the counter asked him.

"Yes, do you have a rates schedule I can look at?"

She handed him a flyer, "Is this for an insurance claim? Or will you be paying for it?"

"I'll be paying," he said and she pointed to the bottom of the second page as he opened the flyer to look inside.

"Our rates are there, but for anything beyond a standard tune-up or maintenance, you'll have to bring the vehicle in for an estimate. Our work is all based on standard hourly rates, but estimates are of course, free."

Someone walked behind Sal as she was talking, and he smelled it almost instantly, wolf.

Glancing over his shoulder he noticed a young man heading into the back, and he reeked of wolf. Whether he was a wolf, or had been in the company of one, it didn't matter. If there were wolves around here and he started asking questions about Sean, word would get back to him that a hyena was looking for him. That would destroy any chance of setting up any kind of ambush to take the kid alive.

Then again, maybe that was why this Bryson kid had been interested in Sean? Maybe the kid was a wolf; maybe the whole family was wolves. Sal knew that there were at least two large packs that called the area home. A lot of the free wolves had come out west to run in the high sierras where there weren't many people living and settled here. He didn't doubt that by now, more than a few of them had become quite successful.

So it just might be that the local packs knew what Sean's father had been up to, and had taken an interest in Sean, just in case Sean decided on following in his father's footsteps.

Sal's eyes narrowed a little as he pursued that thought a moment, it would even explain just how the geas was removed and how Sean was able to pursue his magical studies.

"Sir?" the woman behind the counter asked.

"Oh! Sorry," Sal apologized. "Thanks for your time, I need to get going." Turning around he put the flyer in his pocket and headed for the exit. If the local wolf packs were involved, that would mean Sean had a lot more help than Harkins realized. Staying at the Sorceress Guild even made sense, they'd been loosely allied with the lycans for centuries now.

Hell, even he'd be welcome there.

Heading back to his car, Sal decided that he needed to find out just how large and how powerful the local wolf clans were. This would definitely complicate his plans.

## Take Me Down

Sean yawned and stretched and looked up at the ceiling. Then blinked, this wasn't Roberta's room. Looking down in the dim light, Roxy was sprawled across his chest sound asleep. So she'd forgiven him apparently.

Sitting up slowly he eased her off of him as she grumbled in her sleep. Jolene and Daelyn were both together on his left side, surprisingly. So moving off to the right he sat up and started to wonder where the bathroom was when he realized just exactly where they were.

They were back in the bunker!

Sniffing the air, he could still smell a few faint burnt smells from the stuff that had been destroyed when they'd evacuated the last time. He could also smell cleaning products, and several wolves that he recognized faintly.

Standing up slowly, he left the bedroom, they were in one next to the one they'd used last time, and he quickly made his way to the bathroom. After relieving himself, Sean shifted back to his human form and decided to deal with the next most pressing thing on his mind: Food.

Sean recognized Stu, from what had been beta team three, sitting at the table and watching a flat panel display as he entered the kitchen.

"I see you're up," Stu said giving him a nod.

"Is there any food in the fridge, and what am I doing here?" Sean said, keeping his priorities straight.

"The fridge is packed, the microwave over there works, and your wives agreed that staying at the guild was too inviting a target, now that people had seen you there."

Sean nodded as he opened the fridge and started pulling out food and stacking it on the table. Grabbing something to drink he sat down and just started stuffing lunchmeats and cheese into his mouth. He'd see about nuking something more substantial, once the initial edge was off.

"What are you doing?" Sean asked Stu between bites.

"We've got a pretty extensive perimeter detection system set up here now. Hidden cameras on all the approaches, pressure sensors, thermal sensors, microphones. You name it. Daelyn had John come down here with us and wire the place last week."

"Dae?" Sean blinked.

Stu nodded, but his attention was on the flat panel display as he typed something on the keypad set up under it. "She had us clean the place out,

wanted it prepped for any more lycans that might show up."

"What day is today?" Sean asked looking around. There still wasn't a clock in the room, and someone had taken his watch off, along with the rest of his clothes. Now that he was no longer starving, Sean was starting to realize that he was buck-naked.

"Monday, Five forty-three in the morning."

"Ugh, there you are," Roxy said stumbling into the room still half-asleep. Sean looked at her and smiled, Roxy didn't do mornings much better than he did, and other than a pair of panties, she wasn't wearing any clothes either.

Sean was impressed that Stu only glanced up once, and then went back to looking at his panel.

"I got hungry," Sean said between bites, pulling Roxy over to sit on his lap as he continued to eat.

"Apparently," she sighed and leaned into him. "Cold."

"Yeah, you're naked."

"I got panties on, I'm not naked," She mumbled.

"Eat," Sean chuckled and handed her a cold hotdog.

"Hey, this isn't cooked!"

"Yeah, I didn't want to wait."

Getting back to her feet Roxy went over to the refrigerator. "Well as long as I'm up, I might as well cook you something."

"Does this mean I'm forgiven?" Sean asked.

"It was that or have that demented dwarf shave me," Roxy snorted. "Dae can be downright evil when she wants to be."

"Look who's talking!" Sean laughed.

"Yeah, well. I come by it naturally. I think she's self-taught."

Sean grinned at that, "So, did you give any tags to Deanna's people?"

Roxy nodded as she pulled some food out and went over to the stove.

"Yeah, we gave them eighty. We also sent ninety over to Oak and the shop; to make sure everyone was covered there plus another eight for the people here."

"How many does that leave us here?"

"Two hundred and thirty tags, two hundred and one collars." Roxy turned to him and blushed, "I sent nine tags and nine collars to my dad by courier yesterday, I hope you don't mind."

Sean smiled and shook his head, "Nah, family comes first. So how many of those things did I make?"

"You made all of the tags in the box, that was four hundred and seventeen, and three hundred and ten of the collars," Roxy stopped and pointed the spatula she was using at him, "you were working for over eight hours straight after being up all day and passed out from the stress and the strain and the lack of sleep. I'm not going to get on your case about it,"

"Un-huh," Sean grinned.

"But you need to stop letting your impulsiveness and your anger run away with you," Roxy finished and went back to cooking.

Sean looked at Roxy as she stood there cooking, in only her panties. He loved the way her ass looked, and in those panties it seemed even more alluring. He smiled as he remembered all the times her butt in those track shorts she used to wear around campus had led to some rather impure fantasies back in his bedroom.

And now? Now he had the real thing right there, and that beat any fantasy he'd ever had, hands down, because that gorgeous ass of hers was attached to an equally sexy, smart, and loving woman.

Standing up Sean walked over to Roxy and putting his arms around her, he leaned into her.

"Somebody's excited," Roxy snickered as Sean's erection poked at her butt.

"Well I'm not starving anymore, well at least not for food," Sean whispered and started to kiss down the side of her neck.

"Sean!" Roxy giggled, tilting her head to the side for him, "We have an audience!"

"Stu, is that panel portable?" Sean growled.

"Already leaving, Sir!" Stu said and left the room.

"Now, where were we?" Sean asked and sliding a hand down, relieved Roxy of her panties.

Spreading her legs, Roxy turned off the stove and moved the pan out of the way.

"I think a horny lion was about to spend a little time pleasing his equally horny little cheetah," Roxy purred.

Sliding a hand down to tease at Roxy's sex, Sean was rather surprised to find out that she really was as horny as she claimed.

"Hmm, you weren't kidding, were you," Sean said, nuzzling her from behind and planting little love bites along her shoulder.

"Like I told your lion, I dragged you back to my room for a reason,"

Roxy giggled and started rubbing her butt up and down along his erection.

"You just want me for my body," Sean chuckled.

"And your money, and your children," Roxy agreed bending over a bit more to reach down between her spread legs and guide him into her body.

"What about this?" Sean growled and drove his hips forward suddenly.

"Oh yes!" Roxy groaned, bracing her hands against the wall over the stove, "Definitely that! Lots of that!"

Grabbing her hips with his hands, Sean started to give her just that. Roxy was definitely a very physical and athletic lover, and she started bucking back against him almost immediately. Letting go of her hips he slid his hands up higher and bending forward until his chest pressed into her back, he slid his arms around her body, then crossing his arms, to hold her tight, he moved his hands up to capture her bouncing breasts as he continued to pummel her from behind with his body.

Roxy arched her back further bringing her body a little close to the still warm grill, enjoying the heat of it radiating up against her belly, as her mate took her hard from behind. She could hear him growling softly in her ears as his arms wrapped around her, imprisoning her before him, as his body pressed down into hers.

When his hands grabbed her breasts and started to kneed and massage them, she went off like a firecracker under him, her body bucking back against his, as she moaned her need for him.

But he was unrelenting and continued his assault, his fingers finding her nipples and pinching them, hard, taking her breath away as she pressed harder against the wall, her head hanging down between her arms as she tried to catch her breath. Her mate's demanding motions driving the breath from her, as he held on tighter, and his actions began to take on a more demanding and frenzied behavior.

"Babies, huh?" Sean grunted in her ear and then tipping his head down he bit the side of her neck where it joined her body and growling he hit his peak, emptying himself into her body.

Roxy's head came up as he seized her neck in a mating bite, his words echoing through her head, causing her to go off again. Pushing back hard against him, she felt the heat of him pouring into her as she cried out loudly.

Sean held onto Roxy with all of his strength, surprised at just how loud she'd cried out as she'd hit her peak, her body grinding back against his as she moaned and panted rather loudly.



When he finally wound down, he noticed she was purring very softly, only one hand bracing her against the wall, as the other rubbed her belly slowly.

Licking at the teeth marks he'd left on her neck he thought about that a moment, maybe she hadn't been kidding when she'd complained to him about getting Roberta pregnant first?

"You really do want my children, don't you?" Sean whispered in her ear, and was immediately taken by how red her face turned, as well as how tightly she clamped down on him.

Pulling her tighter against him, as she tried to move away he gave her neck a nip, stilling her.

"Yes," Roxy admitted in a soft voice, embarrassed, "I do."

*'Tell her you want them too, you idiot!'* his lion suddenly spoke up, shocking the hell out of him.

"I'm sorry," Roxy said in a very small voice.

Sean let his hand slide down her body, and started to stroke her belly.

"I'd like that too," Sean admitted and sent a mental raspberry to his lion. Like he'd ever say no to Roxy.

Suddenly he found himself being kissed rather enthusiastically as Roxy had spun around in the blink of an eye, he would have complained about the pain of being dislodged so quickly and violently if it wasn't for the look in her eyes as she wrapped her arms and legs around him and held him tightly.

"I love you, Sean Valens."

"I love you too, Roxy Valens," Sean smiled.

## Fellowship Meeting

Bill rapped his knuckles on the table and looked around as everyone settled down quickly.

"Ryan, you still haven't found a new alpha?" Bill asked, surprised. It was going on three weeks now.

Ryan shook his head, "No one expected Michael to step down, we're still working things out. It hasn't exactly been pretty either."

"Why don't you just take over?"

"Oh no, I don't want that mess!" Ryan said putting his hands up, "I didn't even want this job, but Michael didn't give me much of a choice."

"So, why are we here today?" Boris the tiger clans head asked.

"Is this about the attack on the sorceresses by Harkins' people?" Jorge the wereboar head asked.

"No, but has everyone heard about that?" Bill asked looking around the table. A couple of heads shook 'no.'

"Basically they launched a full out attack. Had their lycans using silver weapons. It would have been a slaughter if Sean and my daughter hadn't been there, seeing as they're both immune now."

"The key point," Roger, the old cougar spoke up, "is that they were suiciding their own lycans, effectively. Throwing away a lot of them in the attack."

Bill rapped his knuckles on the table again, to stop the conversations around the table that immediately started up.

"Look, we all know that the Ascendants are assholes and vicious bastards to boot," Bill sighed. "I think our time to get fully involved in all of this isn't all that far away, especially as I got this delivered to me this morning."

Unbuttoning his shirt, Bill reached inside and grabbing the metal tag that his daughter had sent him, he pulled it off the lycan collar he was wearing and dropped it on the table with a dull metallic chiming noise for all to see.

"Is that?" Claudia asked, leaning forward a little bit to look at it.

"Yes, that's it," Bill nodded.

"Does it work?"

"Yes, it works," Bill said and looked around the table; they all had that look on their face that gamblers got in the casinos when the thousand to one shot came in.

Then they cheered.

Picking up the tag, Bill stuck it back on his collar and gave them a minute to celebrate before calling them to attention again.

"So he's making them now?" Clyde, one of the horse lycan family heads asked.

"Yes and no," Bill told them. "The letter my daughter enclosed told me that full production would be a while yet, but in response to what happened at the guild, Sean put his health on the line and turned out several hundred."

"Several hundred? How?" Jorge asked. "How can anyone turn out several hundred items in a day or two?"

Bill shrugged, "I didn't ask. She told me two other things in the letter. The first is that you have to have a collar for these to work. The second is that they have one hundred of them that they're willing to sell to us, *with* collars. For a price."

"They're selling them?" Jeffery, the head of all the bears in the state said looking a little upset.

"I suspect that they have expenses," Bill said staring at Jeffery, "and you don't have to buy them if you don't want them. When you consider what these things do, along with the necklaces, they could ask any price they want. We should be happy that they're asking for so little."

"What's 'so little?'" Claudia prompted.

"Two million dollars."

There were several outraged comments of 'how dare they!' and 'That's too much!' Bill gave them another minute to wind down.

"I'll pay it," Claudia said.

"Hell, I'll pay it too!" Roger said, "That's only twenty grand a piece! Any one of us could resell one of those for a half-million dollars, easily! And you all know it!" He growled, looking around the room.

"Remember when I asked for a list of people you had to have protected?" Bill asked and looked around the table as they all nodded.

"Well I want it tonight, by six. With reasons why. I'll then decide how many each of you gets, and I'll expect you to pay accordingly. If you're not willing to pay," Bill looked at Jeffery who didn't look very happy right now at all. "Then don't send me anything. He's selling us a tag and a collar for that price, and you know that collars alone have been selling for eight to ten grand now."

"Can you tell us how they work?" Claudia asked.

"I haven't a clue," Bill said and shook his head. "It's still metal, it's just

no longer silver. Roxy warned me that if it comes in contact with too much, the shield effect moves off your skin and heats up. A lot. Enough to set things on fire."

"That doesn't sound too bad."

"As long as you don't go touching any silver, no. I picked up a one-ounce bar this morning. Let's just say that the effect was educational."

"I want at least twenty," Ted from the leopard clans spoke up suddenly. "I'll pay triple."

"Why?" Bill asked.

"Why do you think? That acrobatic troop down on the strip has over a dozen of my people in it. With this, I can get them out of there, and hopefully nobody gets hurt in the process."

"I want twenty as well," Claudia spoke up next.

"Reason?" Bill asked.

"Because I have an eighteen member strike team, with two helicopters, that I can deliver in fifteen minutes or less, anywhere in the Reno area. You sell me those and I'll send them to anyone on the fellowship who calls for help."

"Someone has been planning for this, no?" Boris laughed.

"From the moment I heard it was possible," Claudia nodded.

Bill nodded as well, he wasn't surprised. Claudia *always* thought ahead.

"Okay, meeting dismissed. Ted, we need to talk, I think I might just be able to help you pull it off without any violence. Everyone else, by six!"

Sawyer looked up from his desk as one of his helpers escorted Sean and Jolene in from the back entrance.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite rabble-rouser!" Sawyer said with a smile.

"Hello to you too," Sean nodded and set the bag he was carrying on the table. "Jolene said you need more of these to sell?"

Sawyer nodded, "Yeah, the bottom fell out a little faster than I expected. Still, eight grand ain't too bad. How many are in the bag?"

"Sixty, think that will keep you busy for now?"

"It'll work, for now. I'll probably have them all sold by Wednesday."

Sean nodded and reaching into his pocket he pulled out twenty of the tags and dropped those onto Sawyer's desk next.

"What about these?"

"Holy!" Sawyer bent down to look at the metal tags and then back up at

Sean, "Are those?"

Sean smiled, "Yup."

"Marx!" Sawyer yelled, "Get yer butt in here!" Sawyer looked at Sean, "How many more am I gonna get?"

"The supply is kinda limited right now," Sean admitted, "but I'm working on it."

Marx stepped into the room then, "What boss?"

"Put this on," Sawyer said and picking up a tag he handed it to Marx.

Marx looked at it, "How do I?"

"Just touch it to the collar," Sean told him.

Marx did so and Sean heard the faint 'click.'

"How does it work?" Sawyer asked.

"It forms a shield along the surface of your skin. If silver touches the shield, it turns into rhodium. Too much and the shield will heat up and expand."

"So it just works by turning the silver into something else?" Sawyer looked impressed.

"Yup."

"What's the range?"

Sean took a moment to explain how the shield worked.

"Interesting," Sawyer said and pulled out a small coin. "Here, Marx, take this, touch it to your skin."

Marx did and they all watched as the silver changed shades.

"It's not silver anymore, Boss."

Sawyer laughed, "Oh, we're gonna make a fortune!" he said, rubbing his hands together.

"Boss, what'd I tell you about not ripping off family?"

"Who's gonna rip them off?" Sawyer laughed. "I'll just put them up for bid until the supply increases. You didn't complain about the necklaces, did you?"

Marx shrugged, "You didn't go crazy on those."

"And I won't on these either, now get back to work."

Marx shrugged and reached up to pull off the tag.

"No, leave that on," Sawyer told him, "things are gonna get crazy around here, you keep it. Just don't go touching any of the silver on me!"

Marx nodded, "Thanks, Boss!" and left the room.

"I'm shocked, Sawyer!" Jolene chuckled, "You gave something away for

free!"

"Eh, go stick your finger up your ass, Jo. As soon as these hit the market, people are gonna start acting nuttier than they already are. I'm gonna have to sell them through a cut out, or this place is gonna be mobbed."

"Not to mention the attention you'll get from the mages."

"Exactly," Sawyer nodded. "So, is there anything else you need before I throw you out of my office? You just gave me a whole hell of a lot of work to do."

"What's the word on the Ascendants?" Jolene asked.

"They're hunkering down for a fight. They figure Sean here is going to come after them for what they did to the gal's guild."

"What about their lycans?" Sean asked.

"No idea. I thought they'd try selling them off, so at least they wouldn't lose so much money when you went in there, but they weren't taking any offers."

"You tried to buy them?" Sean growled.

"And I was gonna take the money out of your profits too," Sawyer laughed, "cause who do you think I was gonna give 'em too?"

Sean blinked, "Really?"

"Of course! Buying things is always safer than fighting for them," Sawyer winked, "Unless of course you can *steal* them!"

Jolene snorted, but Sean noticed she was grinning, "Anything else going on?"

"The Vesti's appear to be digging in and gearing up. I think they expect to be next."

"What about Sapientia?"

Sawyer stopped a moment, "You know, they've been acting a little funny lately."

"Funny?" Sean perked up, "How?"

"They're not digging in or building any extra defenses, they're not even looking for you. In fact they've been doing business as usual and I think they're having a dinner party this Friday night."

"Well, that's different," Sean said thinking about it.

"You know, that's another curious thing that's going on, come to think about it," Sawyer said, rubbing his chin.

"What?"

"The Vesti's are the only ones looking for you now, the Ascendants have

stopped."

"Well maybe they're just waiting for Sean to hit them?" Jolene asked.

"Nah, this isn't recent. They stopped over a week ago. It's like they're not even interested."

"Well that *is* curious."

"So, when are you going to hit the Ascendants? I need to get my bet in with the pool."

Jolene sighed, "People are betting on this?"

"Just us goblins, well, some gnomes are placing some pretty big bets too I hear."

"I don't know, we're still planning," Sean told him. "Speaking of which, you wouldn't happen to have the plans to the buildings on their compound, would you?"

"Well, maybe if you could do your old pal a favor, I got two am on Thursday night!"

Sean sighed and Jolene just rolled her eyes as she grabbed Sean's arm and steered him out of the office.

"I'll see what we can do, but if you don't send us the plans for the place, I can guarantee you that we *won't* be doing it Thursday night!" Jolene told him.

"Later, Sawyer," Sean waved over his shoulder and let himself be pushed out of the room.

"Now what?" Jolene asked Sean as they walked back to the van. Roxy and Daelyn were keeping watch, just in case anyone showed up.

"I need to talk to Chad. Sawyer's right, we need to launch that attack and soon, so we need to get Chad onboard and have him start drawing up the plans for the attack. Plus," Sean smiled, "I just want to see how he's doing after the change."

Jolene nodded, "Sounds good."

## Crossing Paths

Sal pulled up outside the shop, it was a small gaming store stuck in the middle of a busy interchange over in Sparks. From what he'd been able to figure out, they sold everything from video games, to those stupid card games that the kids were all thrilled with these days.

The place wasn't that old, from what he was able to learn, it had only been open for two years now. However from the number of kids in the place, apparently business was brisk.

Stepping inside, Sal looked around; he should have come earlier, before school had let out. All the kids in the place with their snacks really messed up all the scents in the place. Most of them were sitting around a couple of tables off to the side and playing one of those card games, though a few seemed to be doing something with small figurines.

Sal shrugged, it wasn't like he cared. Off to the right, there was a second showroom, and walking into that he was surprised to see racks and racks of video games. Old video games, some of which he remembered from back when games were new and everyone was interested in them, including him.

"Can I help you, Sir?" a young man asked looking at him.

"No, just browsing," Sal said looking around the room. "Is there really that big of a demand for these old games?"

The young man smiled, "Lots of folks in their forties and fifties seem to buy them. Chad, my boss, even takes in old consoles and sends them out to be fixed and resells them."

"Sounds like quite the entrepreneur," Sal said.

"Oh yeah, he knows games unlike anybody I've ever met! You ask him about any game out there, and he can tell you all about it. Kids come in here all the time and try to stump him."

"Oh? Where is he?"

"He's the guy behind the counter over there with the blonde hair. You gonna try and stump him on a game?"

Sal snorted, "I was never that big on games really. Well, other than the old card games."

"Oh, like Mille Bornes?"

"People still play that?" Sal said, making conversation as he watched Chad from the corner of his eye. For a guy who played games, Sal noticed he seemed to be pretty fit.



"Oh, sure." the kid turned towards the counter, "Chad! Do we have any copies of Mille Bornes?"

Chad glanced up, looking at Sal, "English, French, or both?"

"Both," Sal said impulsively.

"One left. Let me go get it," and with that Chad walked into the back.

"Thank you," Sal said to the kid and walked back towards the counter. Looking over his shoulder he saw the kid leave the room, so ducking behind the counter, Sal slipped into the back.

"Sir, the back room is off limits to customers," Chad said, turning to face him with a box in his hand.

Sal stopped, back here away from everyone else, he could smell it clearly, Chad was a wolf! And from the way Chad's nostrils flared, it was obvious that Chad knew that Sal was a lycan as well.

"I'm sorry," Sal said, lowering his voice, "I didn't want to talk in front of the humans."

"Talk about *what*?" Chad asked, eyes narrowing.

"I'm looking for your friend Sean. There's been a lot of rumors going around that he's got something to sell. Something for people like us."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Chad said, looking Sal right in the eye. "I haven't seen Sean since he started college. I've been way too busy with the shop and he's been too busy with school. Hell, he hasn't called me on the phone in over a year now."

Sal had seen some smooth liars in his time, and if Chad was lying to him, he was definitely up there with the best.

"You sure?" Sal asked.

"The only thing I'm sure of right now is, that if you don't turn around and get back on the other side of the counter, is that I'm going to pick you up and put you there."

Sal laughed, "Oh come on, I know you're a wolf and all that, but I'm still a lot...."

Sal had put his hands up as Chad had taken two quick steps towards him, grabbed his hand and then started bending and moving it with incredible speed, and for all that he tried to struggle against it, the next thing Sal knew was that he was being frog-marched out of the back room, around the counter, and over to the front door.

He tried several tricks that he'd learned over the years to try and free himself, but Chad changed his grip each time and applied a counter move that

not only stopped him cold, but actually *hurt*.

"I don't know what your problem is with Sean, or wolves," Chad whispered in his ear. "But this is not the place for it. I got kids in here you moron, and some of their parents are some pretty powerful folk. Now you get out, and stay out!"

And with that Sal found himself being pushed out of a side fire door, which closed behind him with a very solid sounding 'click.'

Shaking his arms in his sleeves to resetttle his jacket, Sal thought about going back in there for a moment and having a few words with Chad about his treatment. But there *were* kids in there, and that was definitely off limits. Also he really wasn't being paid to get into fights with any of the local wolves.

Still though, how many of Sean's friends *were* wolves? For that matter, how many free wolves were there in Reno? Tony had told him last night that most of the wolves had their businesses outside of the city proper, as they didn't like running into mages. But there were a few who lived in town, and apparently even a small unaligned pack was living somewhere downtown.

Sal was starting to regret taking on the contract, if he wasn't careful, he'd have one or both of the big local packs on his heels after he dealt with Sean. He started to wonder if that was the real reason that Harkins had brought him in? So he could blame what happened on an outsider and not face the wrath of the locals?

Things had definitely changed since he'd been here last. Getting into his car he decided maybe it was time to go see the guy who was selling Sean's merchandise, maybe that goblin would know. The great thing about goblins was that they all had a price, even if that price was not to kill them.

"We're here," Roxy said as Daelyn pulled the van into a spot that a car had just pulled out of.

"Great," Sean said and sliding the back door open he stepped out into the sunlight as the others got out of the van.

"Pretty nice shop," Roxy said looking at it. "He did this all on his own?"

"Yup."

"Where'd he get the money?" Daelyn asked.

"Counting cards. Chad's a wicked sharp gambler."

"I'm surprised he isn't on the poker circuit then."

"Eh, he quoted Eastwood at me when I suggested that."

"Eastwood?" Roxy asked.

"A man's got to know his limits," Sean chuckled. "Come on, let's go inside."

Walking up to the door, Sean held it open and let the girls precede him inside, following Jolene who he gave a pat on the butt to as she slinked by.

"Sean!" Chad called from the back of the shop and waved him over.

"What, no hello for us?" Roxy pouted as they headed towards the back. Sean couldn't help but notice all the teenagers giving the girls the eye, until they stepped through to the second room and out of sight.

"Sorry girls. You didn't see a guy in black clothes with a black fedora on outside, did you?"

"No, why?" Roxy said.

"I just threw him out of the shop; he was asking questions about Sean."

"Any idea who he was?" Sean asked.

"Was he a mage?" Jolene asked.

Chad shook his head, "He was a lycan, but I haven't been one long enough to know what kind. Definitely not a wolf or a cat. Beyond that," Chad spread his hands, "no idea."

"What'd he want?" Sean asked.

"He wanted to know where you were, and when I told him I hadn't seen you since you started college, he tried pressing me saying that there were rumors going around that you had something to sell.

"He had followed me into the stockroom, and he wouldn't leave when I told him to go, so I got him in a come-along and marched him out of the store. I think he was a bit surprised by that. I don't think he figured I could do it."

"Oh, that reminds me," Sean said, and reaching into his pocket he pulled out a tag and handed it to Chad.

"Is this what he was talking about?" Chad asked, looking at the tag as he turned it over in his hands.

Sean nodded, "Probably. Just click it to your collar. It'll stay on then."

"So, you making these things now?"

"Only in limited batches," Roxy grumbled.

"Ah, well I can tell when a subject needs to be changed. So what brings you here?"

Sean lowered his voice, "We need to start planning our assault on those Ascendant clowns."

"Well I don't close up for another two hours, if you want I can give you the keys to my place and you can go wait for me there."

"What about Kathy?"

"Umm," Chad sighed, "we broke up."

"What? How come?"

"She's not a wolf," Chad sighed. "I talked to Minnie and Silver to get their input, and they both agreed she'd probably freak if I told her, that she was definitely not wolf material."

"Wow, sorry to hear that."

Chad shrugged, "She also came home smelling of another guy, I mean I'd heard a few rumors and had some suspicions and was trying to work through it, but with my heightened senses? Yeah, it was obvious. I confronted her on it and well," Chad shrugged. "She left."

"Wow, now I feel even worse," Sean sighed. "How's your wolf doing?"

Chad brightened up then and smiled, "Actually, he's doing really well. We've been going out every night and running all over the west hills. I've even started looking for a new place to rent up there."

"How's the training going?"

Chad snorted, "What's to train? Oak answered all of my questions in the car when he brought me home after biting me. The guys from the pack who've been coming down to 'teach me' about being a wolf have started to get annoying lately. The last two ended up face down in the dirt while I gave them a little lecture about polite behavior."

Roxy snickered, "You didn't!"

Chad grinned, looking just a little embarrassed, "Hey, what can I say? If you're gonna play dominance games with me, you're gonna lose."

"Every time," Sean snickered.

"Yup," Chad grinned, "I mean, I understand that I'm the new guy and all, but still, I've got my limits."

"What's your wolf say?" Roxy asked.

"My wolf wants me to go up there into the mountains and kick some major ass," Chad snorted. "After last night, I'm not so sure I disagree with him anymore."

"What happened last night?" Sean asked.

"Oh, a couple of hours after teaching someone a lesson, some random wolf caught up with me while we were out running. Seems I 'disrespected' his friend or something."

Sean snorted, "What did you do to him?"

"I was gentle! Honest!" Chad said with a large grin on his face.

"I'm afraid to hear what gentle is when a werewolf is involved," Daelyn snickered.

"Well, I can tell you all about it later, if you want to know," Chad laughed. Getting out his keys he took one of the keys off the ring and handed it to Sean.

"I gotta get back to work. You may want to get some food; I think my fridge is empty."

Sean took the key and nodded, "Later then."

"He's going to be the new alpha, isn't he?" Jolene asked as they got back into the van outside.

"As soon as he realizes he's in the running," Sean chuckled. "I just think with the recent breakup he's been a little distracted."

"So," Daelyn asked, "In and Out, or Wendy's?"

Sal looked at the front of the shop as he parked his car, Sawyer's Antiquities was the faded painted sign on the heavy metal door. The windows were small and up high, the walls were gray concrete and abutted up against the other companies on either side. The place looked about as disreputable as he'd expected, being squirreled away in the back of an industrial park.

Tony had told him all about Sawyer, the goblin that ran the place. He'd set up shop here in Reno a few years back after being run out of Vegas by the law down there. Details about that were 'kind of hazy,' Tony had said, and a few phone calls that Sal made to some connected people down there hadn't provided any extra information.

While he may have only been here four or five years, Sawyer was now reputed to be one of the best sources of information in Reno, as well as the best paying fence for all things magical and stolen. Then there were the rumors about the lycan collars that were flooding the local market. Sal still hadn't seen any of them, but he'd heard the rumors all the way back in Chicago, and the biggest source of those collars was supposedly a fence in Reno by the name Sawyer.

Getting out of his car, Sal walked over to the door. This was definitely his last lead, if he didn't get anything out of this; he was going to have to resort to the kind of methods that he preferred to avoid. Hopefully he'd be able to pry something out of the goblin, he was selling the kid's collars and he

had to pay him. So there had to be some connection there.

Walking in through the front door, the first thing Sal noticed was the massive guard sitting by the door. The second was that the guard wasn't human, but actually a wereboar, a pretty tough looking one to boot. Sawyer obviously took his security rather seriously.

The shop itself looked like a hundred other pawnshops that Sal had the pleasure or displeasure of visiting over the last forty years. As he made his way slowly to the back, down one of the aisles between the typical stacks of overpriced merchandise on display, he saw a goblin sitting behind the high counter there.

"Whadda' want?" Sawyer asked.

"Are you Sawyer?" Sal replied, looking him over carefully. Sal had met and done business with a lot of goblins over the years, his profession kind of dictated it. Sawyer was definitely on the taller end of the scale, and as goblins go he wasn't all that ugly.

"My name's on the door, isn't it?"

"I'm looking for information."

"Ain't we all?" Sawyer said. "The answer is, no."

Sal raised his eyebrows, "I haven't even asked yet."

"I ain't stupid, whoever you are. There's only two reasons someone I've never seen before walks into my store these days. The first I'm out of, the second I don't know the answer to."

Sal pulled out a roll of bills and peeling off four one-hundred dollar bills, he set them on the counter.

"Humor me then."

"I'm not a comedian, but I'll give it my best shot. It's your money," Sawyer told him, but Sal noted that he didn't reach for the bills.

"What are you out of?"

"Lycan necklaces, which you being a lycan, is without a doubt the only reason why you're here."

Sal looked at him surprised, "How did you know?"

"What? You think I don't know what walks into my shop? The word's out now that I had 'em. Everyone keeps showing up."

"When do you think you'll be getting more?" Sal asked calmly.

Sawyer shrugged, "Don't know. They come in the mail, *and* before you get any bright ideas, not to this address or by my mailman. So leave the poor guy alone, he's been scared enough already and I'm tired of having to go

down to the post office to pick up my mail."

"And just how are you paying for them, then?"

"Why would I tell you that?" Sawyer laughed.

Sal placed four more bills on top of the pile.

"You want me to tell you my trade secrets, for a measly eight hundred dollars?" Sawyer snorted, "Your bosses are cheap."

Grumbling, Sal held up his bankroll and waved it back and forth slightly. He noticed Sawyer's eyes got just a little larger.

"Before you go laying that down I'll tell you right now, I pay by a bank transfer to a numbered account, so I have no idea where the kid is."

"Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?" Sal growled.

"Because I wanted to see if you were serious and because this is *my* shop. Why are you looking for him, anyway?"

"That's *my* business," Sal said. "Think you can put me in touch?"

"Seeing as just about every mages council, coven, and lycan fellowship has somebody watching this place and me so they can get their hands on the kid?" Sawyer snorted, "Hardly. With the number of collars that went on the market lately, everybody has a reason to 'want to talk' with the kid. Hell, some of those people might even wish him well. Just like you do, right?" Sawyer finished looking Sal over slowly.

"What about the silver thing?" Sal asked, figuring that as long as he was here, he might as well take a few shots.

Sawyer's eyes narrowed, "What silver thing?"

"So you've heard about it?"

"I've heard the rumors. But then some of those rumors go way way back. Back to before I moved here."

"What if I told you they're not rumors?"

"Then maybe you and I could do a little business," Sawyer replied cautiously. "How many you got, and how much do you want?"

"I ain't looking to sell," Sal growled, "I'm looking to *buy*! And I got money, lots of money. I need one for my job and I ain't no choirboy."

"No kiddin'?" Sawyer muttered in feigned disbelief.

"So how much and when can I get one?"

"If there were any for sale, I suspect that they'd go to an auction, that is assuming of course that this thing you're talking about even exists."

"Alright, fine. So just where would I find this auction?"

"I don't know. Yet," Sawyer told him.

Sal pulled his bankroll out and peeled off eight one-hundred dollar bills. Finally! Some progress.

Sawyer looked at the bills and put a business card on the counter and slid it towards Sal, and took the pile of money in return.

"There's a website on there, you know what a website is, right?" Sawyer asked.

Sal snarled at him, "I'm not a mage; I keep up with the tech."

"Good, nice to know you're living in the present with the rest of us. Check the site, I've been told that's the place for lycans looking for certain things."

Sal picked up the card and giving it a quick glance to see that there was in fact a website printed on it, he stuck it in his pocket.

"This better not be a trick," Sal warned, more out of habit than anything else.

"Hey, I'm a respectable businessman," Sawyer protested. "Just ask my customers."

"Sure you are," Sal grunted and turning he headed for the exit and nodding to the guard by the door he went outside and back to his car. He'd check the website and see what it had to say, and even enter a bid or two.

After all, if these things really were for sale, he figured they'd be priceless once everyone realized that the guy making them wasn't going to be making anymore.

"Who was that guy, Boss?" Marx asked, coming over to the counter after he'd seen the car drive off on one of the hidden monitors by his station.

"High priced hitman out of chi-town. Calls himself 'Hyena,'" Sawyer grumbled. "Can't say I'm crazy about having the likes of him in my shop. I guess the rumors are really starting to spread out there if they're starting to attract the likes of him."

"He is a hyena, Boss."

"Yeah, I sort of figured that one out myself, mister brain surgeon. Course a guy like him can probably afford a half mil for one of those tags, right? Too bad a certain someone won't let me raise the prices."

Marx looked back at the door.

"Hitman you say?"

"Yup."

"Raise the price, Boss. Like you said, he can afford it."



## There's a New Sheriff in Town

"Damn," Chad said walking into the house, "what a day. First that guy in the shop, then some wolf I've never seen before wants to slug it out in the freaking parking lot! He even put a dent in the fender of my car! Now I'm gonna have to get Steve to fix it."

"He put a dent in your car?" Roxy asked, surprised, "With what?"

"His face," Chad growled, "which I introduced it to five times until he stopped struggling and gave up. What the hell is wrong with these people?"

"They're looking for a new alpha," Sean said and held up a bag of food, "Here, we saved you a dozen bacon double cheeseburgers!"

"Oh man, you're a lifesaver," Chad said and tossing his workbag on the couch he came over and sat down at the table. "I've been starving ever since Oak bit me."

"Infected," Roxy corrected him, "they call it 'infected.'"

"Whatever," Chad said and started to scarf down a burger immediately. For a moment Sean didn't think he was even going to take the wrapper off.

"It's all the changes in your body," Sean told him. "Notice you lost that spare tire you were getting? It settles down some after a couple of weeks."

"Well, that's good to know. I was starting to wonder how these guys stay fed."

"So, Sawyer sent us the plans for their compound, the lycan kennels, and their main estate house. I haven't called up my father-in-law...."

"Which one?" Chad snickered.

Sean rolled his eyes, "Rox's dad. Dae's an orphan, and Jo..." Sean looked at Jolene.

"My father and I have issues," Jolene said, "we don't talk. And before you ask, I don't talk with my mother or any of the rest of them."

"What about your uncle? You seemed okay with him," Sean observed.

Jolene smiled a little bit, "Uncle Arthur's okay. We get along."

"You're straying off the point here, Sean," Chad said.

"Right," Sean grinned. "I figure we'll work out a plan, and then I'll call up the one father-in-law that I can talk to, as well as Dae's uncle Samis, and we'll go over it with them, like we did last time."

"Sounds good to me, let me finish a few more of these...."

The doorbell rang then, "Damn, not *another* one!" Chad growled and getting up he stalked over to the door.

"What?" he asked pulling it open.

"I'm here to challenge you!" whoever was at the door said.

"Fine, go around to the back, I really don't feel like putting a show on for the neighbors, again."

"You can't tell me what to do!"

"Oh? I *can't*?" Chad said with that tone of voice that Sean hadn't heard in years.

"Someone, is about to get an ass-whipping," Sean whispered.

As they watched, Chad reached out and yanked someone in through the open doorway. The guy looked fairly large, he definitely had a few inches on Chad, who spun him around, tripped him up then simply pile-driven him into the tile floor. All of them winced at the sound of the guy's head hitting the ground.

"At least I don't have to worry about crippling them!" Chad said with a savage grin and then hauling the now dazed guy to his feet he marched the guy to the back door and opening it with one hand while he held the guy up with the other, he then tossed him out into the backyard.

"Don't go bleeding on anything important!" Chad called out after him, "This place is a rental!"

"He's going to want a rematch, you know," Roxy said as Chad came back over and sat down to eat another burger.

"Well he isn't getting one. Who the hell taught these guys how to fight? I mean really, that was even more pathetic than the last one."

Sure enough, two minutes later the guy was at the back door,

"I demand a rematch! I wasn't ready!"

"And you'll never be ready!" Chad said, "Now, go around front and direct anyone else who comes over to go in the backyard and tell them to wait until I finish my dinner!"

"Who do you think you are!"

"The guy who kicked your ass in two seconds, now do as I say and if you're lucky I'll teach you how to actually fight!" Chad growled.

Sean looked at the guy at the back door, he didn't look at all happy.

"Dude," Sean chuckled, "he gets testy when he's hungry. Really, be happy that he didn't rip your arm off. Now go do as he says."

Muttering darkly the guy stomped away from the door.

They were going over the plans Sawyer had sent them a half-hour later

when someone knocked on the front door again.

"Dammit, can't these guys take orders?" Chad grumbled and getting up he went over to the front door.

"What part of 'go around back and wait your turn' can't you understand?" Chad said.

"I'm not some cub!" came the growled reply.

"No, of course not!" Chad said conversationally, "A cub would have a little respect when he showed up at someone else's home and would understand that maybe he doesn't want to be made a fool out of in the middle of my front lawn where the entire world can watch!"

Sean and the girls heard a growled, "I'll make you pay for your disrespect."

"And the rest of you, backyard too!"

Shutting the door, Chad sighed. "This shit isn't going away, is it?"

"Nope," Sean grinned.

"And just why the hell are you grinning? Are you behind this?"

"Nope, well, other than making you a wolf I'm not."

"Oak made me a wolf."

"Because I told him to," Sean pointed out.

Chad nodded, "Point," he said looking thoughtful for a moment. "Didn't you say that they were looking for a new alpha earlier?"

"Yup."

"What happened to the old one?"

"I fired him."

Chad snorted, "You fired him? How the hell does that work."

"Sorry, that's between me and whoever takes his place," Sean grinned.

"Ass," Chad said, grinning back. "You're loving every minute of this crap, admit it."

"Hey," Sean said spreading his hands, "you're the one who wanted to become a wolf. I'm just sitting here and watching the natural consequences of your becoming one unfold."

"Riiiiiiight," Chad chuckled and shook his head, "well, now that I know what game I'm playing, it's time to go outside and cheat outrageously."

Turning, Chad went out the backdoor, it was getting dark out, but fortunately that didn't really matter to any of them.

Sean and the gals all got up and went over to the door to watch.

"Okay! Just which one of you fine gentlemen is the biggest and the

baddest here?"

One of them stepped forward.

"Ah fine! We have a volunteer. Sean, on three?"

"One-two-three!" Sean said immediately and Chad just threw himself at the guy.

Sean wasn't really that experienced at judo, oh sure, Chad had shown him the basics, Chad had shown all of his friends that much. Because Chad loved showing everyone just how good he was at it. Not that Sean could blame him; Chad's mom had been dumping Chad and his brother off at the dojo a couple of times a week since he was like seven, so she could have some peace and quiet.

Still, Sean was impressed. This guy seemed to have a little understanding of just what was going on and actually managed to last a good twenty seconds before Chad had him tied up, his arm bent back and twisted in a way that was obviously very painful, while Chad stood over the guy, who was now on the ground on his back, with Chad's foot on the guy's neck.

"So, yield?" Chad said with a smile, "Or do I rip your arm off and beat you to death with it?"

"I yield," came a very pained reply.

Smiling, Chad released the grip and helped the man up. "So," Chad asked looking around, "Just *who* is in charge of the pack right now?"

"Ryan," several of them said.

"Ah, wasn't he Michael's second?"

They all nodded. "Fine. Would one of you be so kind as to call him on your cellphone for me, and tell him to get his ass down here," Chad's voice dropped then and he growled, "*now!* I've had enough of this crap, I'm taking over."

"But you haven't even been a wolf for a week yet!" one of them said.

"Yes, so just imagine how much nastier I'll be by then!" Chad said cheerily. "Send him inside when he gets here.

"Come on, Sean, let's get back to planning that attack."

Sean noticed several of the wolves' eyes get wide.

"Attack?" One of them said.

"If you're nice, I might even let you join me," Chad threw back over his shoulder as Sean followed him inside.

"Ah, I love it when a plan comes together," Sean chuckled.

"And just how many years have you been waiting to use that line on

me?" Chad snickered.

"Too many!"

Twenty minutes later, Ryan showed up, out of breath and not looking exactly happy to be there.

"What's so important that I had to get here 'immediately?'" Ryan asked looking at Sean rather annoyed.

Sean pointed to Chad.

"Ah, Ryan," Chad said standing up, "I'm taking over."

"What?"

"I'm the new Alpha of the Western Packs. Sean told me you were looking for someone to take the position, and guess what? I'm just pissed off enough from all the people coming by my house over the last few days to play dominance games, that I've decided to help you out."

Ryan looked at Chad, who was smiling and looking very polite and congenial, in a most disconcerting way. He then looked at Sean.

"Don't look at me," Sean said grinning, "this is a wolf thing, not a lion thing."

"You can't just say you're taking over," Ryan protested, looking at Chad.

"I just did," Chad pointed out in his most helpful voice. "Now if you like, I can take you out into the backyard and kick your ass around it a few times, or you could just bow to the inevitable and save time."

Ryan took a step back, blinking.

"He does that to people," Sean said to Roxy, Daelyn, and Jolene who were all watching with interest.

"What, what do I tell the others?"

"Ah yes, the others. You call up all of the important folks in the pack and you tell them to get their asses down here, now, tonight, so they can meet their new alpha. This way if any of them has a problem, I can beat it out of them now, and we can all just move on as one big happy family."

"But, but I can't do that!"

Sean noticed that Ryan had that deer in the headlights look that people got when Chad started to steamroll them.

"Ryan," Chad lowered his voice.

"Yes?"

"That wasn't a request. That was an order. You're my second, you follow my orders. Got that?"

"Err, yes, Chad. I'll go call them. Now." and Ryan walked quickly out of the room, obviously wanting to be somewhere else right now.

Chad looked around the room and sighed. "You guys can stay the night if you want. I don't think we're going to be getting much more planning done, not if I'm gonna be cracking the whip all night."

"Oh! This is gonna be interesting!" Roxy chuckled, "Mind if we watch?"

Chad motioned towards the couch, "Be my guests!" Chad paused and pondered a moment, "Maybe I should send some of those guys in the backyard out to get more food. Wouldn't want to be a bad host, would I?"

Sean and the girls got comfortable on the couch and watched as Chad corralled a couple of the wolves out back, gave them a shopping list and some cash and sent them off to get some snacks and drinks. Fifteen minutes later, people started to show up.

"Wow," Jolene whispered, "It's like one of those old mafia crime movies where everyone shows up to kiss the ring of the new Don."

Roxy snorted, "Yeah, wolves are like that. But when you consider the size of some of the packs, they have to be."

"Just how big is the Western Pack?"

Roxy shrugged, "Couple thousand, easy. Over half the lycans around Reno are wolves, and the Western Pack and the Eastern Pack control nearly everyone that isn't a slave to the mages."

"Oops, looks like someone isn't getting along," Daelyn said.

They all watched as Chad literally dragged one of the people out the back door.

Five minutes later Chad brought them back inside, with his arm around them, talking to them quietly as they just nodded and said 'yes' while looking very dazed with a fair bit of grass stains and dirt rubbed across their face.

"Well, I think we know who won *that* match-up," Roxy snickered.

"They all look kind of shell-shocked," Sean agreed, as Chad let go of the now very subdued looking man and went to shake hands and greet the ones that had shown up while he was outside having a 'discussion.'

"That's cause their last alpha wasn't really a very strong one," Roxy whispered back so only they would hear it. "Chad's going through them like the proverbial shit through a goose. And all of their inner wolves are in shock as they finally see what a real alpha looks like."

*'Is that why you pushed him out?'* Sean asked his lion.

*'Michael didn't understand that he is about the pack, that the pack is not*

*about him. He was ignoring his wolf, becoming all too human, like I told you.'*

*'Chad can be pretty self-centered you know,' Sean warned.*

*'So can I,' his lion chuckled. 'But I've seen enough of him, to know that he will value those under him and not just take them as his due.'*

*'And here I thought it was just because he was dissing us.'*

*'Well yeah, that too!' his lion sent with a snicker.*

Sean started awake when he heard Chad calling his name.

"Hmmm? What?" he asked untangling himself from the girls who'd all fallen asleep on the couch as well.

"It's after midnight, why don't you all go hit the guest room? Ryan tells me there's still a few people coming I need to see."

Sean nodded and shaking the girls awake he stood up and yawned.

"Any problems then?" Sean asked.

"Oh, lots," Chad sighed, "but while I didn't cause them, I guess I own 'em now. Eh, I'll deal with it." Sean watched as Chad looked around at the wolves in the room. There were still quite a few there.

"Such as?"

"Oh, it's a wolf thing, you wouldn't understand," Chad said with a wink.

"Ass," Sean chuckled and gathering up the girls, they all went off to bed.

## See a Man About a Dog

"What time did you get to bed?" Sean asked Chad as he met him in the kitchen. Daelyn was already up, making breakfast. He'd left Roxy and Jolene in the shower.

"I didn't," Chad said, looking at his watch. "And I need to get going here pretty quickly to open up the shop."

"So much for making plans," Sean grumbled.

"Don't worry; I'll work on them while I'm there. I got most of the basics from you already, anyway. We can get together tonight and go over everything."

Sean nodded, "So, how'd it go last night?"

"Good, it went good. Organizationally, they're a mess. Rules wise, a lot of people have been sliding on a number of things. The biggest complaint I got last night was a lack of discipline. Michael wasn't much for backing up his lieutenants or even his captains all that much.

"I had a long talk with Claudia last night, I told her it was for the sake of 'uniformity' but really I just wanted a sense of what worked."

"How'd she react to being woken up in the middle of the night?"

Chad snorted, "She was waiting for my call. I think she knew about my power play before most of the pack did."

"So she's got spies in your organization?"

"Power abhors a vacuum, you know that!" Chad smirked, "I bet if I hadn't moved when I did, she probably would have moved to roll us all up into her group by the weekend."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"We're having lunch," Chad grinned, "at my shop."

"Brutal!" Sean laughed.

"Hey, I'm gonna order a couple of six foot subs from the sub-shop down the street," Chad grinned even wider, "and a whole case of soda!"

"I don't know her well enough to know what she'll think of that," Sean admitted.

"Oh, I'm sure she'll get the point. This is a *casual* business meeting; we're supposed to be allies so I'm making it clear I'm cutting right past all the political dancing and getting down to brass tacks. The Western Packs are a mess, and she knows it.

"By the by, how many of those tags do you have now?"



"Um, Two hundred and eighteen tags, one hundred and fifty collars."

"Don't forget we promised the fellowship a hundred," Daelyn said as she came over and put two plates of food on the table, one for Sean, and one for herself.

"I'll take sixty tags and fifty collars," Chad said.

Sean looked at him, "You know I'm not just giving those away, right?"

"Un-huh," Chad grinned, "And I also know I'm doing you a huge favor by taking over the Western Pack, which you are going to be notorious for asking favors from."

"Notorious?" Sean asked raising an eyebrow as he started to eat.

"Well yeah, of course! I'm one of your best friends after all, a point which I'll make clear when I give Claudia ten tags," Chad made a little dismissal gesture with his right hand, "for free, 'think nothing of it Claudia, me and Sean go way back.'"

Sean choked on his eggs for a moment, "Damn, that's cruel!"

"Yup," Chad nodded, "and if you got it flaunt it. Besides, not only will it nail down my position as the alpha, but it'll make it clear that when you ask me for favors, that I'm not doing it for money or power, but because you're my *friend*."

"And that'll work?"

"Hell yeah it'll work," Roxy said walking into the kitchen, wearing two towels and nothing else. "You're a lion, Hon. In fact right now you're *the* lion. I'm surprised my dad hasn't asked you to take over running the fellowship already. You already made it clear that no one gets to challenge you when you tossed Michael out."

Sean took a minute to appreciate the view; she had one towel wrapped around her hips in that way that he could never get to stay on, and the other hanging around her neck, so the ends came down over her chest to just barely keep her 'decent.'

"Yeah, I've been meaning to ask you about that," Chad said as Roxy sat down on Sean's lap and started to eat his breakfast, after giving him a kiss. "What exactly *is* the deal with lions? I've picked up on the way they treat you and refer to you."

"Enough to take advantage of it, I've noticed," Sean chuckled and went back to eating, before Roxy cleaned his plate on him.

"Well, of course! Gotta press those advantages."

"Well," Sean said leaning back in his seat and letting Roxy eat his

breakfast, "lions were the first of the were-folk. They're the oldest of the old. They even predate a few of the fairies and other supernatural folk. Legend is that they were there at the beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

"*Everything*," Sean said soberly. "We're the lawgivers, the final arbiters, and supposedly we can do all sorts of mystical crap."

"Is that why you wouldn't bite me?" Chad asked, curious.

"Most people bit by lions die, Chad." Sean said with a sigh. "Sampson knew, when he bit me, that there was a chance that he was killing me."

*'Oh no, he knew you'd be fine. We'd been trying to get him to bite you for years.'*

*'Thanks, and Chad doesn't need to know that.'*

"Why?"

"Mystical shit," Sean grinned.

Chad rolled his eyes, "I need to go, can I have those tags?"

Sean nodded and getting up, he let Roxy have his seat and went to the guest room to get the tags and the collars.

After Chad had left he returned to the kitchen, Roxy had lost the top towel and was cooking now, as Jolene, who was also topless, sat at the table.

"Sean, dear," Jolene started off, "I've been thinking."

"Uh-oh!" Sean grinned, "She used 'Sean' and 'dear'! I'm in trouble now, aren't I?"

Roxy and Daelyn snickered as Jolene just gave him a long-suffering look and sighed.

"I was thinking about what Sawyer said last night, and well, this morning I made a few phone calls to some old friends."

"Said about what?"

"About what Sapientia is doing."

"They're not doing anything," Sean said going over to look over Roxy's shoulder and see if any of the food was ready yet.

"Exactly, they're not doing anything. Why do you think that is?"

"They expect Sean to lose?" Daelyn piped up.

Jolene shook her head, "My uncle isn't that stupid."

"So they expect him to win? Then why aren't they preparing like the others?"

Sean looked back at Jolene suddenly getting an idea, "Because you cannot lose if you throw the race?"

Jolene nodded, "I think he's already decided to give up."

"Why would he do that?"

"That's a good question, isn't it?" Jolene agreed. "Why don't we go ask him?"

Sean thought about that a moment, Sapiientia was the oldest of all the councils, they'd been first after all, and a *lot* of the laws that governed the magical community had been created by them. Winning them over, *without* violence, would go a long way to establishing the legitimacy of what he was trying to do.

Sean's stomach growled then.

"After breakfast," he smiled, "after breakfast."

Arthur Troy was sitting at the desk in his office, going over the numbers that his accountants had provided him, along with the estimates of what they thought maintaining a small army of lycans was costing them.

"Damned if Joseph didn't have a point," he mumbled.

"Sir?" Franks, the replacement for Charles asked from where he was sitting across the room.

"Just going over the estimates from our accountants, it would seem that the good Mr. Harrison had a valid point. I had no idea that our costs over the last two decades had climbed this much. Makes me wonder where else we're losing money?"

"Is keeping lycans really that expensive, Sir?"

"It's not all that expensive, but there are a great many costs associated with it, that I really hadn't considered. As I understand it, in the old days, if you wanted lycan servants, you pretty much had to breed your own. But now?" Arthur snorted, "If Mr. Harrison's numbers are correct, and I have learned to respect his research, there are a lot more of them than there are of us."

"While we may be paying less than what passes for a minimum wage nowadays, we're paying that for a lot of them, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."

"Then why do we still have them? Sir?"

Arthur shook his head and sighed, "That's the problem, isn't it? We have them because the others all have them. But we haven't launched an attack on another council in over seventy years now! We should have at the very least cut back by half, the old days of the council wars are in the past. I fear we

*have* become too set in our ways."

"Still, Boss," James spoke up from where he was doing something on his computer. Web searches is what Arthur presumed, "Vestibulum maintains a fairly large army, along with the Council of Ascendance."

"Yes," Arthur said with a nod, "but if the enterprising Mr. Valens has his way, that isn't going to last."

"He really is only one man, Boss."

"So was Norman Borlaug," Arthur chuckled.

"Who?"

"Look it up," Arthur waved as James' computer, "also, Sean is a lion, and if you haven't noticed, the other lycans all seem to hold lions in a certain amount of reverence."

"But that's just cause they're rare, Boss."

"Yes, and in a world where everything else is plentiful, that which is rare should always raise one's suspicions."

Arthur looked up as his secretary knocked on the doorframe.

"Arthur?"

"Yes, Danielle?"

"A messenger just left this for you," and she held up an envelope.

"Who is it from?"

"Your niece, Jolene."

"Well well, by all means, let's see it," Arthur said and held out his hand as she walked across his office to hand it to him.

Opening the envelop Arthur looked over the short message; it was an invitation for him to join her and Sean for lunch, at one.

"Interesting, looks like we've been invited to lunch. James, have Dean bring the car around."

"Think it's a trap, Boss?"

"Mr. Valens does not strike me as the kind of man who would spring a trap over lunch, especially not in a casino with lots of cameras and witnesses. No, I've been waiting for this; I suspect that the young Mr. Valens is seeking to negotiate."

"Why would he want to do that, Boss?"

"Because why fight for what you can get for free? Come, let's go see what he has to say," and standing up, Arthur grabbed his suit jacket and headed for the door.

When Arthur arrived at the restaurant, the server immediately led him and the two men he'd brought with him over to a table in the back.

"Uncle Troy," Jolene said and standing up she gave him a hug. "Uncle, this is my husband, Sean Valens. Sean, this is my uncle, Arthur Troy."

Sean had stood when Jolene did, and shook hands with Arthur, then they all sat down.

"Husband?" Arthur asked her, "Really? How did that happen?"

"Unexpectedly," Jolene said with a smile, "But on the bright side you can warn all of the women in the covens that they don't have to worry about me trying to steal their men anymore."

"Well, as long as you're happy with it, Jo."

"Very, actually."

"Speaking of wives, where are the other two?"

Sean spoke up, "Making sure that we're not disturbed. I wanted this to be a private meeting."

"You're expecting trouble?" Arthur asked, surprised.

"Harkins knows he's next on my list," Sean shrugged, "I'm sure Vestibulum would still like to get their hands on me, for all that I've been leaving them alone. Then there are all those lycans from out of town who want one of these," Sean tossed one of the tags on the table.

"What's that?" Arthur asked, looking at the grayish looking, dog-tag piece of metal sitting on the table.

"The reason why your guard's silver bullets won't affect me."

"Hmm," Arthur said and picked up the piece of metal, examining it. There was quite a bit of enchanting on it, what it did however, he couldn't tell. "So the rumors are true then? You finished your father's work?"

Sean chuckled, "Actually, I'm just *starting* my father's work. As for the enchantments on that tag, my father finished it before he was murdered."

Arthur set the tag down, "I'm sorry about that, it was from before my time leading the council. I don't know who paid for that, I only know that it wasn't Sapientia."

"I heard it was a man named, hyena, or Woiseman?"

Arthur gave a small shrug, "I have no idea who it was, only the council heads and their right-hand man from back then know who it was. But I have my suspicions. However they are only that, suspicions. Now, to business, why have you asked to meet with me?"

"I want you to release all of your lycans from bondage of course," Sean

smiled.

"Or?" Arthur asked.

"Oh, I don't think we're at the point of threats yet, I was hoping to keep this a friendly conversation."

"I seem to recall our last conversation ended with a threat, as well as you pointing a rather large gun at me," Arthur said with a smile.

"Well, in all fairness, you *had* just cast two spells on me, in succession."

Arthur sighed, "Yes, I was trying to show off and it bit me but good. But still, what motivation do you offer for me to free my lycans?"

"Other than pointing to that tag and what it means? Nobody wants a war, least of all those of us who are going to be fighting it."

"Yes, but those tags are obviously a complex piece of enchanting, I could tell that much just by holding it. It takes what, six months? More? To make one, so for you to make enough for me to worry about," Arthur shrugged, "it's not just me you need to convince, Sean, it's the rest of my council, and the other Sapientia councils."

Sean leaned back in his seat, "You know, that wasn't an argument I was expecting. But maybe this will convince you?"

Picking up his backpack from the floor, Sean unzipped it and pulled out the bag he'd been keeping the tags in. Setting the pack back down on the floor, he poured the contents of the bag out on the table.

Arthur's eyes widened in surprise as a huge pile of tags flowed out of the bag.

"Go ahead," Sean smiled, "Pick one up."

Arthur reached over and grabbed one. It was definitely enchanted. Dropping it, he picked up another at random. It too was enchanted.

"I must say, I'm impressed. How long did these take you to make?"

"Not very," Sean smiled.

Arthur looked at his niece, "Jolene?"

"His father was a magical genius, Arthur, and his father would be proud of him. He made them, I saw it. We've already given away hundreds."

"Hundreds?" Arthur asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Soon it will be thousands," Sean told him.

Arthur nodded slowly and pondered the situation, he didn't think Sean was bluffing and he didn't believe that his niece was lying.

"I have to ask," Arthur said, indulging his curiosity, "what's in it for you?"

"Other than freeing the lycan races from slavery?"

"Yes, that. I know you weren't born a lycan; two months ago you were as human as I was. Yet you have engaged on what is best described as a crusade, even though you are a young man who has only just now learned the truth of the world."

"Because I'm a lion," Sean told him.

"I don't understand," Arthur admitted, "and that's what bothers me. I like to understand things. I like to know why I'm doing something, and why others do what they do. Just what does being a lion have to do with your crusade?"

*'I got this,'* Sean's lion said, so Sean let him speak.

"Because we are the rulers of the lycan races. We created them, we watch over them. For many centuries, the association was beneficial for us. However over time, many warped it, and turned what had been voluntary into coerced. Others then took that power and abused it. Bernard Valens, my sire, was a gifted man who was presented with a problem by a friend that he solved for us.

"I am now here to take the solution to that problem and implement it."

Arthur noticed that Sean's voice and mannerism had changed, slightly, while answering his question.

"You make it sound like you were there," Arthur pointed out.

"Lions have long memories," Sean said taking back over, "you might even say we have 'racial' memories."

Arthur nodded slowly, that would be most curious indeed. He really should go consult with Joseph about that.

"Well, you've answered my question; I guess I should be honest with you as well." Arthur smiled, "Joseph Harrison from the council of Eruditio had actually presented a very strong case based on money, of all things, for us to change our ways.

"He made a very good point you know, so we've been taking it under consideration. However, there is one concession that *I* want, that Sapientia wants, if we free our lycans. If we do as Eruditio does and hire them to work for us, the same as we would hire anyone."

"I'm not so sure I can guarantee any agreements," Sean said.

"Lions are the lawgivers, the rulers, you said so yourself. For centuries we have used our lycans first to protect us from those who sought to enslave mages, then in our fights against each other. If we give up our armies, we will

put ourselves in a position of weakness until the time comes that all of the lycan armies of the many councils have been disbanded."

"So what are you asking for? To be last?" Sean sighed, that wasn't going to happen if he could help it.

"Actually, I was thinking more of a defensive agreement. If we should be attacked by one of the other councils, using their lycans, that you'd come to our defense."

"You're worried about the Vesti's, aren't you?"

Arthur gave a little side nod with his head, "They came to us looking for an alliance against you. I put them off, as I don't care much for their philosophy. Honestly, I think we at the council of Sapientia have become a little hidebound ourselves. Something I'm now trying to remedy.

"Turbulent times are ahead for us all, I must do what I can to protect my own, just as you do for yours."

*'Can I agree to this?'*

*'Yes, as long as it is understood that it will only be against enslaved lycan attackers.'*

"As long as you understand that it will only be against enslaved lycan attackers," Sean said, repeating his lion's words. "Then yes, I will tell them to do it."

"Then I do believe we have a deal," Arthur said, sticking out his hand.

Sean reached across and shook it.

"I need to go and talk to the other members of the council, but I suspect we'll start freeing them tomorrow."

"I'll send over some of my people tomorrow then, we'll remove their silver pellets and give them a place to stay."

"What if they don't want to leave?"

"Then they can stay. But we're still going to talk to all of them, and remove any and all restraints."

"Fair enough," Arthur said and stood up.

"Oh, Jo," he said looking at his niece.

"Yes, Arthur?"

He winked at her, "Good catch! I honestly think your mother will be proud."

Jolene sighed, "Really?" she said sarcastically.

"Once I explain it to her." Arthur turned to his bodyguards, "Let's go boys. I've got a meeting to call."



"What next?" Jolene asked Sean after her uncle had left the restaurant.

"Let's go home and check in with Oak, I want to see if my workshop is done yet. We can catch up with Chad later tonight."

## Back Home

Sean looked around his workshop in the basement; it was clean and well laid out, pretty much a duplicate of the workshop over at the guild, as that was the only one he'd had to go by when going over the design with Daelyn's cousin.

It only took up a quarter of the basement, and the tunnel that Steve had suggested them building to his place, had in fact been built, its entrance not far from entrance to Sean's workshop. Steve had actually hired on several of the pack to function as watchmen and security for his place, and they used the tunnel regularly now

This was yet another business Sean had to do the paperwork on, and do all of the other stuff for. He really needed to find some sort of office assistant to help him with that. Unfortunately none of the wolves in the pack knew anything about bookkeeping.

Getting down to work, it took Sean an hour to set everything up the way he wanted it, putting all of the stuff that he'd need for his work away.

That done, he set up the golden plate and prepped that for more enchanting work, getting his notes out and tacking them to the board behind the table he was working at. Then he spent some time examining the plate to make sure that his enchantments hadn't unraveled in the three days that had passed since he'd last looked at it.

Thankfully the spell he'd put on it to hold things in place was still holding, but he wasn't sure how much longer it would last. He'd have to renew it soon if he didn't want to lose his first day's work.

Checking his watch, he had a few hours of free time yet, before they were going to head over to Chad's house and discuss the attack on the Ascendants, so getting out a few things to make it easier, he started on renewing the locking spell.

Peggy came in while he was working, but she just took a seat and watched, not interrupting him as he worked.

"Hi, Peg," Sean said when he finished, turning towards her. "Do you need something?"

Peg shook her head, "I just was curious as to what you were doing down here. I really didn't know you were an enchanter until Oak passed out those silver shields to everyone."

"Where did you think the collar you got came from?" Sean asked her as

he started to put his things away.

Peg blushed, "I'm sorry; I was still too wrapped up in my own problems when Sheila gave it to me to notice. What's the plate supposed to do?"

"It's going to make it easier for me to make those tags, and probably some other things as well."

"You made a bunch of those shields in a couple of days, and you're telling me there's an even easier way?" Peg looked at him in surprise.

"Easier on me," Sean chuckled. "Eventually I just want to build a machine to churn them out, but that'll take months, and I just don't have that kind of time right now."

"How are you making them so fast?" Peg asked. "I may not know much about enchanting, but I know enough to know that these shields should take months to make!"

"Family secret," Sean said with a smile.

"No wonder they're all afraid of you," Peg said and smiled back at him, "you're their worst nightmare: A lycan who knows magic better than they do!"

"Thanks," Sean said taking a closer look at Peg. When she smiled, she really did look happy, for perhaps the first time since he'd seen her. She really was a very attractive young woman, and she was definitely dressed today to show off those looks. Her vixen must have finally gotten her to relax; he wondered which of the wolves upstairs she was dressing up for?

"You look a lot happier today," Sean told her, "it's so nice to finally see you smile."

Peg blushed again, "You like my smile?"

Sean nodded, "You're very pretty when you smile. I admit that I've been worried about you, you lost so much, so fast, I know it couldn't have been easy."

Peg gave a little sigh and nodded, "Yeah, but that's in the past now. I know I'm not the only one here who's had it rough, I could have died back there, and you saved me. I'm very grateful, Sean, thank you."

Sean tried not to blush, "Actually Sheila is the one who saved you," Sean pointed out.

"And I've thanked her too," Peg grinned, "but she told me that she would never have bitten me, if you hadn't told her to. And even if someone had the magic to save me, I'd have been terribly scarred from that second whip," Peg shivered and Sean went over to her and took her hand.

"It's in the past now," he reminded her.

Peg nodded and smiled, "And because I don't have any scars from it, it's been a lot easier to let it go."

"Well, you are a fox now," Sean pointed out.

"Why, Sean, was that a compliment on my looks?" Peg teased, standing up and doing a little twirl for him.

Sean felt his face go red, because yeah, Peg was a fox in the looks department alright. Especially with the way she was dressed right now, and with that red hair of hers, that soft and slender build of hers, she even looked every part the vixen.

"Yes, you're very beautiful," Sean admitted, "but I was commenting on your now being one of us, a lycan."

"A lycan who can use magic," Peg corrected him. "I did a little experimenting yesterday, and I discovered that I've got a lot more power now. I'd heard the rumors, but I had no idea that they were true."

Sean nodded, "They are, but you have to be careful. That same power is what you use to shift forms now, as well as what your body uses to regenerate injuries. If you use up all of your magic, you won't be able to shift until it refreshes."

"That doesn't sound too bad," Peg said.

"If you're injured, it can be very bad," Sean sighed.

Peg looked at him concerned, "Why?"

"Your body will start to use your life force to heal itself, it'll start eating itself effectively, and you'll die."

"What? How does that even happen?"

Sean shook his head, "I don't know, yet. If you normally take too much damage, you stop healing. But if you've used up all of your energy because of magic? It's like some sort of line is crossed and everything goes crazy."

"Wow! Thanks for warning me!" Peg said and putting her arms around him, she hugged him rather tight and kissed him.

Blinking in surprise, Sean hugged her back, but he didn't return the kiss.

"Can I come down here and watch you work?" Peg asked, smiling up at him.

"Umm, sure," Sean nodded. "I don't mind."

"Thanks!" She said and gave him another hug, then releasing him, she walked out the door and Sean couldn't help but watch her strut in those snug pants as she left the workshop. He guessed that she really had come to terms

with what had happened to her.

"Was that Peg?" Jolene asked, coming down into the workshop as Sean was just getting ready to leave.

Sean nodded, "Yeah, she came down and wanted to talk a little."

"She looked pretty happy," Jolene grinned, "what'd you do to her?"

Sean sighed and rolled his eyes, "Nothing. But you're right, she was happy. I think she's finally put what happened to her, behind her, and is moving on with her life.

"I also wonder if her vixen going and hanging out with the wolves for a day helped."

Jolene snickered, "Yeah, they'd be all over her like white on rice. I know Sheila has been taking full advantage of the two to one male ratio."

"Well, she was trained to do that sort of thing," Sean sighed.

"That may be, but she really does seem to love her work!"

"Not unlike a certain tantric witch I know?" Sean teased.

"Hey, when you got it, flaunt it!" Jolene laughed, "And I definitely got it."

"You most certainly do," Sean agreed pulling her over and giving her a kiss.

"We need to go upstairs, Rox and Dae are waiting in the van, we need to go to Chad's," Jolene reminded him.

Sean grumbled, he had both of his hands full of that nice round butt of hers.

"There's always tonight, Hon," she reminded him.

"Okay, okay," Sean sighed and releasing her butt he took her hand and they went upstairs, and joined the others in the van.

"Was starting to worry about you two," Roxy teased.

Sean eyed the back of the van, "Well you know...."

"We'll be there in a few minutes, Sean," Daelyn warned.

"Aww...."

"What's got you going?" Roxy teased.

"Peg paid him a visit, I think she got his motor running," Jolene said.

"Lining up another one?"

Sean shook his head, "I suspect she's been checking out the wolves, at least that was her vixen's intentions last I talked to her."

"I'm surprised he hasn't grabbed Sheila," Daelyn said from the driver's seat.

"She's a nice girl," Sean sighed, "but all of her skills revolve around sex and not much else."

"So?"

"I'm not that shallow."

"That's true, you do go pretty deep!" Daelyn snickered as Sean just groaned and facepalmed.

"Annnd we're here!" Roxy called out as the van stopped.

"Thanks, I don't know how much more of that I could take," Sean grumbled.

"Oh you love it, and you know you do," Jolene laughed.

"I'm just a simple boy who grew up in a simple home is all," Sean sighed.

"Yup," Roxy agreed, "with three wives and a hell of a guilty conscience."

"Four," Jolene said, "don't go forgetting Roberta now!"

"Oh! Right! His baby mamma!" Roxy laughed, "How could I forget poor Roberta!"

Turning a bright red, Sean opened the door and got out of the van.

Laughing the Roxy, Jolene, and Daelyn got out of the van behind him and they all walked up to Chad's house and knocking on the door they were shown in by a rather attractive young woman.

"Ah, Sean, Rox, Jo, and Dae! Glad to see you could make it," Chad waved from the dining room table, on which he had what looked like a couple of maps spread.

"Who's your friend?" Roxy asked.

"Oh, sorry!" Chad blushed, "Rox, Jo, Dae, Sean, this is Maxine, or Max for short."

Sean and the others shook hands with Max and exchanged greetings.

"So," Sean asked coming over to the table, "where'd she come from?"

"Oh, Claudia gave her to me," Chad said and winked. "She's a gift, sort of a reward for taking over the Western Pack."

"My mother did not give me to you as a *gift*!" Max sighed and smacked Chad on the butt as she walked by him and into the kitchen.

"Claudia's her mom?" Roxy asked, looking into the kitchen where Max was checking on something in the oven.

"Yup," Chad said, "She's here to help me with learning all of the rules and the laws governing the packs. Truth is," Chad looked towards the kitchen

and raised his voice just a little as he grinned, "Max just couldn't keep her eyes off of me, so her mother felt sorry for her and sent her home with me."

"Actually," Max raised her voice from the kitchen, "he was pining after me so much after we met that my mom was afraid he'd wither away and die if I didn't go home with him!"

"I was simply being gracious to Claudia for bringing such a nice peace offering," Chad countered.

"Oh? And whose idea was it that I should help teach you about pack customs?" Max replied laughing as she came back into the room.

"And who agreed so quickly that your mom choked on her drink?" Chad grinned.

"Somebody needs to keep you out of trouble," Max said and sidled up next to Chad who put an arm around her. Sean was rather surprised by just how comfortable they seemed with each other.

"When's the wedding?" Roxy asked.

"We're waiting to see if we don't kill each other first," Chad chuckled.

"My mom's been pushing me to find a nice guy to settle down with for a while now," Max admitted, "and when we hit it off, well, I think she was a bit surprised at how fast things progressed."

"And here I thought you were going to tell me it was a 'wolf thing'," Daelyn said.

"More of a gaming thing, actually," Chad said. "We're in the same guild in an online game. I just never expressed an interest in her because I was seeing someone."

"And I knew he wasn't a wolf, so I didn't either," Max finished.

Sean blinked, "You're *that* Max?"

Max looked at Sean, curious.

"He's Sean two-fifty-six," Chad told her.

Max's eyes got wide, "Really! Wow! I had no idea!"

"Sean two-fifty-six?" Roxy asked.

"There are a *lot* of guys named Sean in the game," Sean told her.

"Small world."

"Yup," Chad nodded, "now, let's go over the plans. As I understand it your first goal is still to free all the lycans, right?"

Sean nodded, "Part of me still wants to go after Harkins for all of the shit he's pulled on me, as well as what he's been doing to the lycans there, but I figure right now that can wait until later."

"My first goal is the lycans who are still under his control. We know that they're expecting us, and I'm sure Harkins has figured out some way to force them to fight us."

"Well, I'll go visit Sawyer tomorrow," Chad said. "Jo, if you want to join us, you're more than welcome. We'll see what intel he has for us, and what we can do to get more."

"Now, let me show you what I've got so far, what I think we'll need, and you can tell me what you've got for us." Chad said. "Then, we can have dinner and start making some phone calls."

"Sounds good," Sean agreed.

Sal looked through the website that he'd gotten from Sawyer. There had been a large 'Come back soon' banner on the page last night. This morning there'd been a registration screen and not much else.

Registering had been a bit of a pain, they actually wanted either your banking information, or a high limit credit card. There was definitely a lot of 'all sales are final' verbiage on the page as well as more than a few legal threats for winning bidders who didn't pay.

Sal got through all of that quickly, he had a black Amex card after all, so he wasn't too worried about any kind of credit limits. When he finally got past that part, he was given another link on the site, along with a password. Going there and logging in, he saw that there was a clock counting down, and seven tags up for bid.

Seven! Sal couldn't believe it! He'd bought enchanted items before; he was familiar with the costs and the production issues. He'd put hundred thousand dollar bids on two of them immediately, with half-million dollar maximums on both.

He read up on the information about the product, it didn't go into too much detail as to how it worked, but there was enough that Sal knew it worked the same as the amulet he'd gotten twelve years ago. But there was a difference with these; you needed a lycan collar to go with it. The collar was part of the package you were buying, but Sal found that curious.

Of course the amulet he'd gotten had only been necessary on two different occasions in his life. Neither of those had involved all that much silver, but it had set his clothes on fire the second time, so he'd learned that the amulet had limits. Maybe the kid had figured out a way to deal with that?

Just then his phone rang.



"Sal here," he answered.

"Rob Walters, from the Journal," the voice on the other end of the line said, "I came across something in our financial section I thought you might find interesting."

"What'll it cost me?" Sal grumbled.

"Five grand."

"If I think it's good," Sal told the man. He was one of the contacts Tony had given him. A little pricey, but very reliable, Tony had told him.

"A Mr. Sean Valens bought a building in Sparks just recently. Is that good?"

Sal sat up and grabbed a pen, "You got a deal, what's the address?"

Sal wrote down the address and almost swore out loud, it was just a short way down the block from the auto shop that the Bryce's owned!

He made arrangements to meet the guy and give him the cash. After that, he'd go cruise by the building and see about setting up some sort of watch. It was late now, after ten, so he couldn't stop or he'd stand out. But tomorrow, tomorrow he'd see about setting up some sort of surveillance.

## Wednesday

Sean was in his workshop, while Chad, Max, and Jolene went in search of intel so Chad could finish up the plan, Roxy was talking with her father about getting help from the other lycans, not that they needed all that much at this point, and Daelyn had gone off to talk to her uncle Samis for the same reason.

So Sean had figured he'd come down here and work on his machine for a while. The assault was planned for late tonight, sometime after midnight, when everyone was most likely to be in their beds and asleep. Sean wasn't thrilled with the 'party' they'd crashed last time, even though it had all worked out for the best.

He was just starting to prep the first set of spells to put on the plate when Peg showed up carrying a large box.

"Hi, Peg. What's up?" Sean asked.

"Oak asked me to bring this down. Said you'd ordered it?"

"What is it?" Sean asked, coming over.

"I don't know, but it's pretty damn heavy," Peg said and set it down on the floor.

When she set the box down Sean noticed that she was wearing a t-shirt that was almost see-thru, and a pair of tight jeans that encased her nice tight butt like a second skin, running all the way down to the three-inch heels she was wearing.

Peg was definitely dressing to impress somebody, Sean almost felt bad for her getting waylaid by Oak to do delivery duty in those heels, when she obviously had her sights set on somebody.

"Thanks!" Sean said and coming over he kneeled down and opened the box. Inside were twelve ten-inch tall metal slugs that were vaguely owl-shaped. The entire box had to weigh close to two-hundred and fifty pounds, and Peg had carried it down here by herself. Even for a fox lycan, that was a lot of weight! Maybe he'd have a word with Oak later on.

"What are those?" Peg asked, bending over and giving Sean a rather nice view down her t-shirt. Peg was definitely put together very well, Sean noticed, and then looked up at her face. She was smiling at him.

"They're for making batteries."

"Batteries? The magical kind?" She asked.

Sean nodded, "Yeah, I got my hands on a big one like this earlier, so I

could copy it, but I'm going to need to borrow it again, before I can make the copies."

"Why?" Peg asked, curious.

"Um," Sean sighed, wondering how much to tell her.

"Family secret?" Peg asked grinning. Sean noticed she hadn't changed her position, giving him a nice unobstructed view of that very nice chest of hers. Then again, he hadn't moved either.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"So you need the object here to copy it?"

Sean shook his head, "No, I need the battery here because I need someplace to dump any excess magical energy so I don't fry myself."

Peg cocked her head to the side and looked at him puzzled. "Why don't you just dump it to ground?"

"What?" Sean asked, staring at her and totally forgetting the tempting display of her breasts.

"Dump it to ground. Don't you have a grounding rod in here somewhere?"

"A what?" Sean asked

"A grounding rod."

"What the hell is a grounding rod?"

Now it was Peg's turn to look confused. "Didn't anyone teach you about grounding?"

Sean shook his head, "No one taught me anything. Everything I know I either learned from books or figured out on my own."

Peg's eyes got really wide and all she could think about was that he was self-taught? And he was this powerful?

"Okay," Peg said, "a grounding rod is just that, it's a rod, usually made of one of the better metals, though copper, gold, or silver work best, just like with electricity, driven into the ground. Say about six feet deep. You dump any excess magical energy into it, and the earth just sucks it up."

"You can ground magic to earth?" Sean said dumbfounded.

Peg nodded, "Of course you can. You won't get it back of course, but the ground is full of magic, where do you think the ley-lines get it from?"

"I had no idea," Sean said, shaking his head. Standing up he went over to the phone and picking it up, he dialed Oak's office.

"Oak speaking."

"It's Sean. I need a six foot long heavy copper rod, a sledge hammer, and

I guess something to cut a hole in the floor down here so I can drive it through."

"Sure thing, Boss. I'll get right on it."

"Thanks for sending Peg down with the stuff."

"Eh, she volunteered, so I let her handle it."

"Oh. Thanks," Sean hung up and turned slowly to look at Peg who was looking at the metal pieces.

"So, just how does this work, anyways?" she asked.

"The enchanting?"

Peg nodded, "I don't really have any talent for it, no one in my family ever did. But I've watched people do it on simple stuff. Takes them hours just to do a simple trinket."

"Well, when Oak sends someone down here with a copper rod and a sledgehammer so I can drive it into the ground, I'll show you." Sean looked around the room a moment and had a thought.

"Can I just use the pipes in the room?" Sean asked and motioned towards the ceiling.

"If you're desperate you could, but I wouldn't recommend it," Peg told him, "magical energy can be pretty unpredictable. It won't always take the shortest path to ground and you could end up zapping someone."

Sean nodded and watched her, there were only two reasons he could think of for why she would have wanted to carry that heavy load all of the way down here. Only one of those required her getting dressed up like that.

"Where do you get the energy from? I mean, I know we have more now that we're lycans, but making something like this," she fingered the tag on her collar, "has to take way more than we have."

"You're right, it does," Sean said coming over and standing next to her, smiling down at her. For the first time he noticed that she only came up to his nose, and that she smelled really good.

Peg looked up at him and blushed, smiling a little shyly.

"Thanks for telling me about the grounding rod," Sean said and put his hands on her shoulders, "Is that something they taught you?"

Peg nodded, "We had all sorts of magical training. I'm surprised Jolene didn't teach you about it."

"Jo's a tantric witch; her magic is a lot different than ours."

"Oh," Peg said and put her hands on his chest, "well I'd be more than happy to show you *everything*," she winked.

"I think I'd like that," Sean said and was just about to bend down to kiss her when someone knocked on the door, then opened it and came inside.

"Dammit," Peg swore softly.

"Hold that thought," Sean grinned then turned to the guy who'd entered the room. It was one of his werewolves, they were carrying a long copper pipe, a sledgehammer and behind him was another one of his werewolves with a large drill.

"Hey, Boss, Oak says you need a hole drilled in the floor?"

Sean looked around and pointed to a spot next to where he would be setting up his chair the next time he had to make stuff.

The guy with the drill quickly went over and started in on the spot. It didn't take them all that long to get through the concrete, apparently it wasn't all that thick. Sean found it interesting that the guys were checking out Peg, who looked incredibly hot in the tight jeans and thin t-shirt, and that each time they did, she moved a little closer to him.

After about the fifth time she was leaning into him just a little bit where her hip touched his, and when they looked at her that time, and then looked at him he just smiled and gave his head a little shake.

They didn't look at her again.

When the hole was finished, Sean took the pipe and dismissed them, and using the hammer it didn't take him all that long to drive it down until only a foot of it was sticking up through the floor.

"How much energy do you think I can dump through that?" Sean asked.

"I'd expect quite a lot," Peg said.

Sean looked at it and nodded, "Help me set this up," he told her and moving a table over to where the seat was he put one of the owl like slugs on it, then he had Peg lay out a bunch of collars on one side, while he moved Daelyn's silver spool device over by the chair and plugged it in.

"That's a lot of tags and collars," Peg said looking at the boxes stacked against the wall.

"Yup," Sean agreed.

"What are you doing?" Peg asked him, as he then started to strip naked.

"I don't want to set my clothes on fire," Sean told her. "The last few times I did this, I was in hybrid form, but I might as well see how it works in human."

Sean noticed she was eyeing him over rather closely as he dropped his clothing on one of the tables out of range of the work. He had to smile, only a

month ago he'd be feeling rather self-conscious stripping nude in front of a lovely woman. Now he was used to it.

"Here's how it works," he told her, "I'm going to use the energy generated by the shield changing the silver, which I will then use to run the spell to enchant the owl there into a battery.

"The problem is, at some point I'll get a bunch of energy back. I'll bleed some of it off into making those collars there, after I make them, then I'll put what comes back from that into the grounding rod. If that works, everything is fine. If not, I'll use it on that other group of collars.

"Now don't get too close, I don't want to set you on fire."

Peg nodded and watched.

Sean made one last check of everything, then calling up his monitor program; he turned the encryption off on the silver tag, made the two changes to the program, and pressed the foot switch.

As the magical energy quickly built he put one hand on the metal owl and tripped the tar program and untarred the owl archive into the metal owl and it quickly changed as the program ran.

Sean wasn't sure about the power requirements of making one of the larger batteries, but he figured it was somewhere between three thousand and four thousand watts. Because there wouldn't be a change in metal, he would get about a third of that back. He'd feed a little more of his own power and use it to make two necklaces, then take the rebound from that and dump it into the grounding bar. He figured that would be a good test.

Sure enough the returning energy from the owl battery was almost enough to make two necklaces. Adding his own power caused that to work just fine, and when he got the rebound from that, he fed it into the grounding rod and was surprised at how quickly the extra energy dissipated.

"Wow, it worked!" Sean said looking down at the rod.

"I can't believe you did that!" Peg said.

"Huh?" Sean looked up at Peg and she came over and picked up the battery, which now looked exactly like the one back at the guild.

"You made this! I saw it! It took you like twenty seconds!"

"Hand me another one, I want to try and dump a bit more energy through the rod," Sean told her.

Peg quickly grabbed another one and set it on the table.

Sean hit the switch, fed more power through his tag and untarred the owl archive a second time.

This time when the rebounded energy came, he just dumped it all into the grounding rod. Again, there wasn't any problems at all.

"Awesome! Now I have something I can use if anything goes wrong!" Sean smiled and setting his tag back to normal function, he turned the encryption back on and stood up.

"You're a genius!" Peg said, walking up to him and hugging him.

Sean smiled down at her, "Thanks for telling me about the grounding rod."

"Isn't this where we left off last time?" Peg asked, blushing a little.

"Almost, this time I'm naked," Sean grinned and bending down he kissed her while putting his arms around her and pulling her body against his. He had to admit, she felt good against him, and he bet she'd feel even better when he got her out of those clothes.

Breaking the kiss he grabbed the bottom of her t-shirt and pulled it up over her head and then tossed it to the side. She really had lovely breasts, and he appreciated the view all the more, now that there was nothing in the way. Kissing her again he started to work his way down her neck, then going lower until he worked his way down between her breasts. Grabbing her by the waist, he hoisted her up and set on the edge of one of the tables, and then started to kiss, lick, and nibble at her firm chest, attacking first one nipple, then the other, while using a hand to massage the other one.

Peg was breathing rather heavily by now, running her fingers through his hair and watching him with heavy lidded eyes. When Sean started to work his way down her flat stomach, she just gasped and held on tight to his hair. Sean could smell her excitement, so pushing her farther back on the table he unzipped her jeans, then rolling them down over her hips he peeled her out of the tight pants, turning them inside out as he slowly pulled them down off of her legs. She had lost the heels at some point, so the pants came off of her feet easily.

Climbing up on to the table between Peg's spread legs, Sean was a little surprised when she took his hand and urged him up to cover her, reaching down with her other hand to guide him into her.

"Make me yours, Sean," she whispered in his ear as he moved to enter her.

"Is that what you want?" he whispered back and nibbled at her left earlobe.

"Yes!" Peg panted, "I want the best, I want you, no one else, please,

make me yours!"

"Good, because that's exactly what I'm going to do," Sean replied and moving his mouth to hers, he entered her fully. He was shocked at how ready she was, clearly she wanted him, and was more than ready for him to take her. He didn't know why, and right now, he didn't care. She wanted to be his, and he found he wanted her too.

Questions could wait.

Driving himself into her, he started in on a nice easy rhythm as her legs wrapped around his hips and she ground her body up against him. Bracing his arms, so as not to press heavily down on her they kissed slowly, and passionately as they moved against each other, as Sean worked his way in and out of her body. She may have been a couple of years younger than his other loves, but she was by no means inexperienced he quickly found.

Dropping his weight to his elbows, he curled his arms under her, to hold her as he made love to her. Rubbing the side of his face against hers, nibbling and licking at her ear and enjoying the wonderful response that elicited from her. It wasn't long until he felt that familiar pressure coming from his own loins, and from the sounds Peg was making as she laid beneath him, eyes closed and gasping, he didn't think she would be much longer at this point either.

When she finally squeezed down on him tightly and hit her pleasure, Sean could hold back no more himself, and he emptied himself deep inside her, while she moaned and shivered beneath him on the table.

They cuddled then for a little while and enjoyed the afterglow, as Sean let his hands slowly explore her body, her face, all of her, as he tried to commit all of her to his memory. She was his, the way her own hands had started their own explorations had confirmed it. She was smiling contentedly, looking the most beautiful that he'd seen her look since he'd brought her back here, to his home.

"So, why me?" Sean asked, curious.

"I could ask you the same," Peg giggled.

"Because I wanted you, and you wanted me," Sean said with a smile.

"It's easy when you're a lion, loving beautiful and smart women is just one of our better skills. But I'm curious as to why you chose me. I haven't exactly been nice to you."

Peg kissed his chest, "Actually, you've been very nice to me. You did what you could to help, and you did it for no reason other than I needed it.



But as to why you?" Peg drew a finger down his chest, Sean really was very well built she had noticed.

"The wolves, they don't really understand me. Yes, my vixen did convince me to unwind and try and find solace in the arms of one, and I quickly realized I wasn't going to find it there. Same for the second one I tried.

"Then, I thought about you, and when you came back here yesterday, and I came down here to spend time watching you, I just knew. You were a magic user, like me, you understood what it's like to become changed, and," Peg giggled, "you're a big sexy brute of a man and a lion. I remember what you looked like when you came into the room, when you killed Roger." Peg shivered then, "Tough, big, dangerous, strong! I've seen your wives, not a one of them doesn't smile when you walk into the room.

"I wanted that, Sean, and I wanted *you*. I want the biggest toughest guy around. I want the guy who isn't above trying to help some stupid young girl who's crying about dumb things. I want a man who makes me smile just by walking into the room. And now that I've actually had sex with you?" Peg sighed happily. "Damn, that was good."

"What about your vixen?" Sean asked, running a hand down her back and enjoying the feeling of her sweat slicked skin under his fingers.

"She's been pushing me to go after you since the moment the thought first crossed my mind," Peg admitted with a soft chuckle. "She's also pretty hot for you."

Sean nodded and sitting up he gathered her up into his arms, and shifting into his hybrid form he got to his feet.

"What're you doing?" Peg asked.

"Taking you upstairs to our bedroom, where it's a little more comfortable," Sean purred.

"But I'm naked!" Peg gasped.

"Yup, and everyone is about to learn just who you belong to now," Sean chuckled.

"Lions," Peg sighed, but Sean could see she was smiling.

"Yeah, I've been hearing that a lot lately," he agreed with a grin.

## Preparations

"Thanks for loaning us the helicopter, Mom!" Max said over the headset as they flew over Reno.

"Yes, thanks, we really appreciate it," Chad said, looking out the side of the helicopter, while taking pictures with his camera.

"What are you looking for, anyway?" Claudia asked.

"Whatever we can see," Chad said. "According to what Sean and the others told me, Harkins lost a lot of people during the assault on the guild a few nights ago. Well, if he's worried about being attacked at any moment, I'd expect to see all of his forces on alert and deployed on his property."

"You know he can just mask what you see with magic," Claudia pointed out.

"That's why I'm here," Jolene said over the headset as she looked out the window as well. Only she had a paper and pencil, and she was making detailed notes on what she was seeing and where.

"I'm going to compare what I see, with the pictures Chad is taking. The plans we have are nice, but they lack landmarks."

"Ah," Claudia nodded.

"Don't circle," Chad told the pilot, "I don't want them to get suspicious. Keep flying west. We'll make a second pass in a few minutes on our way back."

"Roger," the pilot said and flew them on out of sight.

"You know, these helicopters you've got, they're really giving me ideas," Chad said sitting back up and turning to look at Claudia.

"What kind of ideas?" Claudia asked.

"They're going to be expecting a ground attack, so when we launch ours, I'm sure they'll quickly deployed to counter us. Once they're all in position to repulse us, an airborne assault would definitely take them by surprise."

"These things aren't exactly quiet, or stealthy, you know," Claudia replied.

Chad laughed, "How much you want to bet that I can get the Sorceress Guild to come down and cast some high-powered silence spells on them? Hell, I'd bet they'd be willing to even come along and maintain the spells if necessary, after what Harkins' goons did to them last weekend."

Claudia dipped her head towards him, conceding the point.

"So, just how much damage are you planning on doing?" Claudia asked

instead.

"As much as we have to, and not a bit more," Chad told her, "Sean told me that the only goal of this is to get the lycans out. He's worried that Harkins might try killing them all when we show up, that he might have some kind of 'dead man's switch' scenario set up. Honestly, I'm worried about that as well, because if there is one, we'll have to launch an attack to take that out first. If we find out that there isn't something set up, then we'll just make a feint against the main building. While that's going on, the real forces will be neutralizing the lycans and getting the silver out of them, then hauling them off."

"Either way, that doesn't sound easy."

Chad nodded, "It won't be, but we're going to kidnap a few today, pump their brains, then maybe send them back to let the others know what's going on. Then we'll spend tonight and tomorrow practicing, and hit them Thursday night."

"Sounds ambitious," Claudia warned him.

Chad nodded, "I've already told Sean to expect casualties. Harkins' people are merciless and complete bastards. But if we wait too long, we risk having Harkins spend even more of his lycans' lives on whatever other targets he decided to pursue.

"Honestly, I'm surprised he hasn't just killed them all off already out of spite to piss off Sean."

"He can't," Claudia told him.

"Why can't he?"

"Because Vestibulum is just itching for the chance to go in there and wipe him out."

"Huh, I didn't realize that they were bad guys too," Chad replied.

"Not many do," Claudia sighed in response.

"Well, let's make our second pass and go back and land. I still want to check in with Sawyer today, and see if he has anything new for us."

"Okay."

Sal looked out of the window of the delivery van that he'd 'borrowed.' He'd made a couple of passes on the place, and it hadn't taken him long to notice the security cameras that had been set up on the place. Someone had taken the time and money to do a first-rate job and Sal didn't doubt that there were probably people with guns inside who were equally first-rate.

The strike on the Gradatim compound had shown everyone willing to pay attention that the kid wasn't afraid to use force, and while no one else seemed to be thinking about the wolves that had all disappeared from the Gradatim compound, Sal was willing to bet that they were all living in that building now.

Walking down the street past the place yesterday, his nose had easily confirmed it.

So his problem was simple: not to hang out around the place enough that someone started to wonder about the guy in the overcoat and the fedora who's suddenly become a fixture in the area.

So he'd procured this van and set up the back to be comfortable for a little while, on the next street over and out of sight of the building. Earlier this morning he'd taken the time to set up two cameras of his own to watch the building. Both were far enough away so as to not easily be discovered, but of high enough quality for him to get an idea of who was coming and going from the place.

Sitting down with his laptop, he opened up two different windows to watch the feeds from the cameras while eating his lunch. He needed to start thinking about his next step, once he'd found for sure where the kid was. Harkins still wanted him alive, and had offered him a bonus for just that. But if he couldn't get the kid alive, then Harkins definitely wanted him dead.

Sal was tempted just to go for the kill option and the hell with the bonus, the more he was starting to learn from the people he'd been talking to around town, the more he was starting to think that grabbing this kid wasn't going to be easy.

But Sal prided himself on his abilities, and the idea of bringing the kid in alive definitely presented a challenge. The kind of challenge that had not only kept Sal still interested in this business for so many years, but which had given him the kind of money that allowed him to live the kind of lifestyle that he enjoyed.

He'd thought about putting a camera or two on Sawyer's place as well, but there were already too many people keeping an eye on that place, and the last thing Sal wanted to do was tip off any of the others in town that he was here. He was sure that several of the council heads he'd dealt with last time were still in charge, so the last thing he wanted to do was have them spreading word around that the 'Hyena' was back in town.

Taking another bite of his sandwich he watched as another car pulled

into the garage where they had the detailing shop. Nice cover that, they could move people and stuff in and out without anyone being the wiser. If Sal had better connections in this town, he'd have someone run all the license plates, to see if he could learn anything. But he didn't really have the time for that now, he was sure the kid was going to hit Harkins' place soon, and if he didn't take him down before that, then Harkins probably wasn't going to be around to pay him.

"Yo, Sawyer! What have you got for us?" Chad asked as they walked into Sawyer's shop.

"With all the people I got out there watching my place; you just had to walk in the front door?" Sawyer said.

Chad grinned, "The problem with you, Sawyer, is that you have such little faith in the human race."

"That's because I'm not a fool!" Sawyer replied hotly, "Besides which, you're not a human now! You're just another one of those wolves we get running around here chasing their tails all the time!"

"Before you say something that you'll regret," Chad laughed, "if you were to take the time to look outside, you'd see that Reno's finest are currently conducting a sweep of the industrial park, looking for vagrants, druggies, and anyone else who doesn't belong here. All of your watchers, and I do mean *all*, are currently occupied with other concerns."

"How'd you manage that?" Sawyer blinked, looking surprised. He didn't bother to go check, Chad was looking way too smug to be making it up, and he probably already had a couple of insults lined up if Sawyer didn't just take him at his word.

"What, you think I'm not above calling my friend up and asking if he could tell his father-in-law that I need a little favor?"

"But he's not the sheriff here."

"No, but he is still on that terrorism task force, and they apparently needed a good training drill. Rumor has it that there's going to be a really *big* training drill going off any night now." Chad smiled, "Of course I could just re-schedule that drill if you don't have any interesting news for me, that I might enjoy hearing."

"You'd use your own friendships so crudely?" Sawyer laughed.

Jolene snorted, "This from the man who'd use his own mother to make a buck."

"Now, now, strumpet, there's *nothing* crude about making money!"

"Strumpet?" Chad laughed.

"Anything worse and he's afraid Sean'll rip his arms off. You should have heard the things he *used* to say to me!" Jolene grinned.

"Well as much as I'd like to enjoy that stroll down memory lane," Sawyer grumbled, "I really don't have a lot to tell you. Sapientia is still carrying on like they haven't a care in the world, but the rumor going around now is that they're cutting costs big time and just letting a lot of their lycans go."

"Yeah, we know about that one," Chad nodded.

"And you didn't see fit to share it with me?" Sawyer growled, glaring at him.

Chad smiled, "I'm telling you now, ain't I? Seems that someone talked them into doing a cost benefit analysis, and they realized that some traditions are just too expensive to hold onto."

"What, your friend Sean threatened to make them pay?" Sawyer said, sarcastically.

"Actually," Jolene butted in, "Joseph Harrison showed Arthur his finances. It's kind of hard to be the council of 'wisdom' while pissing away large sums of money," she grinned.

Sawyer snorted, "Well at least somebody knows what's important."

"As for the Vesti's, they're up to something, they've been pretty quiet suddenly, they've pulled all their people in. I don't know if they're worried about the Ascendants pulling something on them, like they did on the Guild, or if they're worrying about your boyfriend there, Jolene."

"And the Ascendants?"

"Rumor has it that they're starting to stress over all this 'constant readiness' that they've been under since the weekend." Sawyer snorted, "It's only been three days and already they're whining."

"What about the people they lost at the Guild?" Chad asked. "Has that affected them at all?"

"Well, they weren't anyone important as far as I can tell, so I don't think so."

"How are the tags selling?" Jolene asked.

"Oh, I just got the auction running last night. We got some big shot from Chicago out here yesterday who wanted one, apparently word got out on the auction. So I had to get my web designer make some changes to the

program."

"Why's that?"

"Cause we're gonna take him for every dollar we can squeeze out of him!" Sawyer laughed.

"Hey, Marx," Jolene called, "I thought you were going to rein him in on those?"

"Not that guy," Marx said from over by the front door, "that guy is going to pay."

"Why's that?" Max asked.

"He's a mobster. Makes his living off of other people's misery. Guy's like that, Sawyer can take them for every cent they've got, far as I care."

"Well if it's okay with Marx, I'm not gonna complain," Jolene said to Max. "He's like the closest thing Sawyer has to a conscience."

"That's pretty rich, coming from you, Jolene!" Sawyer laughed.

Jolene shook her head, "I don't think I'll ever get used to that."

"Used to what?" Max asked.

"Him calling me by name instead of calling me a slut all the time," Jolene smirked.

"Yeah, well, I'm too attached to my arms to go pissing off your boyfriend," Sawyer grumbled. "Besides, the kid's making me rich, and I got *lots* of respect for anybody who makes me that kind of money!"

## Cat and Mouse

Sean stretched and yawned, then leaned back against his chair. He'd spent hours today working on the 'machine,' though why at this point he really wasn't sure. Now that he knew how to dump excess energy into the ground, making tags and collars had just become a whole lot safer. With Peg's help and under Roxy's watchful eye he'd made fifty of each this morning, then dismissed them to go deal with any prep-work for tonight that needed to be done.

Sean wanted to improve the armor and protection on all of his people, as well as any that would be regularly helping him. But rather than build stuff the long 'usual' way, he had set the girls to seeing what they could beg, borrow, or buy, so that he could then just study it and make a tarball of the spells involved, and put them on something more suitable. Other than the firewall spell which had the side effect of blocking any attacks that went after the mind or its control over the body, he hadn't come up with anything all that earthshaking.

He needed to work on that.

Thankfully, Peg had seemed to fit right in with the girls. Roxy liked her because she was a lycan like her, and as Peg was both new to it, and younger, being only nineteen, Roxy had latched onto her like a younger sister. Well, almost a younger sister, Sean snorted thinking about last night.

Jolene and Peg had connected on their both being magic users and surprisingly Peg was a lot more receptive to the idea of helping Jolene recharge her powers than Daelyn was. In fact Peg was a lot more receptive to a number of things that Jolene was already doing with Roxy.

Apparently, though looking back now Sean had to admit it should have been obvious, Sheila and Peg had been sleeping together long before Sheila had infected Peg. That was why Sheila had wanted him to save her, while not full-blown lovers; they'd definitely been just more than 'friends with benefits.'

Even Daelyn had a soft spot for Peg, because she understood the issues of being a social pariah, from when she'd become both an orphan and 'freak' from growing up to be taller than was considered acceptable for a dwarven woman.

So it was settling down to just be one now slightly larger, but still happy, family.

Though Roxy and Jolene *had* teased him quite a bit over dinner last night



and then breakfast this morning about allowing him yet *another* wife. They'd both then rather loudly speculated on what he should be looking for in a fifth, or maybe that was sixth now?

Finishing up the locking spells on the gold plate, Sean really needed to go stretch his legs a bit. Getting up and heading upstairs he went and grabbed his coat and hat.

"Where are you going?" Peg asked, looking up from the laptop where she'd been working on his webpage. Apparently Peg had a bit of a flair for writing and he'd shown her how to do his facebook page updates and turned her loose on a wysiwyg webpage program to work on their website.

"I need to go for a walk, wanna come? Maybe we can sneak down to the park and let our animals out to run for a bit."

"Oh, that sounds good!" Peg said and jumping up she grabbed her own coat and followed Sean back down into the basement.

"Why are we going down here?" Peg asked.

"I don't like using our front door," Sean admitted, "sooner or later someone's going to be watching it. So we'll just take the tunnel over to Steve's place and sneak out the back. That way, if anyone is watching the building, they won't see me."

"You think someone's watching the building for us?"

Sean shrugged, "Oak and Demon have been keeping tabs on the area, and nothing has shown up yet. But sooner or later, I'm thinking someone will."

"So better safe than sorry?"

Sean nodded and led her down the tunnel.

The tunnel itself was rather well made, for all that it had been built in about a week. Obviously dwarves knew their jobs when it came to building one. It had a smooth and level floor, was dry inside, and had low power LED lighting that was tinted red so it wouldn't mess with your night vision. It was actually wide enough for two people to easily walk side by side.

So pulling Peg up against him and putting an arm around her, he did just that.

"Is somebody needy?" Peg teased, putting her arm around him and leaning against him. She had noticed Sean wasn't shy about his feelings, and neither were the other girls.

"I just like my women knowing how I feel about them," Sean chuckled.

"Mmm, hmm."

"Any complaints?" Sean asked.

"I'll let you know if I think of one," Peg grinned. While she had to admit that this whole situation was kind of strange, Sean's feelings were pretty clear, and her 'sister wives' or other 'members of the pride' as Roxy had put it, all seemed to be fairly happy with the situation, and each other as well. All she knew was that last night had worked for her, and Roxy, Jolene, and Daelyn had treated her a lot better than her own sister ever had.

The tunnel ended underneath a small concrete addition that had been build on the back of Steve's shop, there was a staircase that came up into it, and a locked security door that led outside, keeping it separate from the shop, so no one could accidentally end up inside the tunnel.

Going out the door they both zipped up their coats, it was already after sunset, and it was definitely going to be a cold and breezy one tonight.

Putting his arm back around Peg and nodding to the security guard, they cut through the back of the property coming out onto the street that ran behind the shop.

"I don't know about going for a run," Peg said as they walked past a van parked on the side of the road. "Feels a bit cold for that tonight."

"Yeah, you may be right, maybe just a trip to the burger place and back."

"Is that all you ever do is eat?" Peg teased.

"Us lions are good at three things, eating, sleeping, and actually I don't seem to get to sleep all that much these days," Sean laughed as Peg leaned into him.

"Just be happy that we let you eat," Peg giggled.

Sean hugged her a little closer, Peg had definitely come to terms with her life and become a lot happier in the last few days.

Just then the wind shifted, and an unfamiliar scent blew by.

Sal was sitting in the back of the van, debating how late he was going to stay here tonight. The temperature had dropped quite a bit in the last hour and it was going to be a cold one. He could just as easily watch the feeds from back in the warmth of his hotel room, though honestly, he didn't really expect to see anyone out on a cold night like tonight. A couple of vans had left the building earlier and hadn't come back yet. If anything Sean was probably in one of those.

Looking up he heard a couple talking as they walked by the van, bundled up against the cold and leaning into each other. Sal almost had to smile at

that, remembering some enjoyable strolls with girlfriends back when he was a young man....

Where had they come from? This was mostly an industrial area and while people did cut through to go to one of the casinos near by, on a cold night like tonight, who'd want to make that kind of a walk?

Sal didn't check the cameras he had set up on the van very often, they were only there for his own protection as this wasn't the street that the kid's building was on. Opening up the window with the van's rear camera, he ran it in reverse at ten times speed and watched as they popped out of an alleyway between two shops.

Letting it run forward he waited until they were almost up to the van and pausing it, he swore!

It was Sean Valens. Somehow the kid was getting in and out of the building without being seen. But there he was, and right now Sal wasn't going to look a gift horse like this in the mouth. Checking his gear quickly, he opened the back door of the van carefully, and then slipping out the back he closed it as quietly as he could.

Peeking around the side he could see them about fifty yards away, they weren't exactly walking fast. Quickly ducking over to the other side of the street, where he'd be less obvious, Sal started to trail them, moving up a little closer. This street was nice and empty, no traffic, no open business for at least another thousand yards. He started looking for the best place to plan his ambush; he had a couple of high-powered wands that he could use to paralyze and crippled the both of them. He wasn't too worried about the girl, as long as she was out of commission long enough for him to grab the kid and go, that was fine.

He'd have to use the big guns on the kid though. He wanted him restrained long enough to get a needle into him with a couple of those elephant tranquilizers he'd used in the past with rather marked success. Then he'd tie the kid up tight enough that he couldn't shift.

Then it was simply deliver the package, get paid, and go home.

Sal shivered a bit in the cold.

Well, maybe not home, maybe Florida for a few weeks.

Sean felt his lion sit up and take note.

'What?' Sean asked.

'Hyena.'

*'Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?'* Sean asked.

*'I've never been a fan of them. Remember Chad said a lycan came in looking for you, that he couldn't identify?'*

*'Shit,'* Sean swore to himself as another thought crossed his mind.

*'Exactly,'* his lion agreed reading Sean's mind.

"What's wrong?" Peg asked as she felt Sean stiffen against her as they walked.

"There's a hyena around here."

"So?"

"The hitman they hired to kill my father was a hyena," Sean growled.

Peg shivered and readied a couple of defensive spells, just in case.

"What are we going to do?" She asked him.

"I don't want you to have any part in this," Sean whispered as they walked.

"I'm your *wife* now, Sean," Peg growled. She'd just gotten him, she wasn't about to lose him!

"This is between me and him, and I don't want to have to worry about him hurting you," Sean said.

"Sean..." Peg started.

Sean gave her a squeeze and lowered his voice, "Hon, you don't get to argue with me about this, *understand?*"

Peg shivered, and it wasn't from the cold or with fear, she felt it, her *vixen* felt it. Sean, *her* Sean, was *pissed*, and her lion was about to open up a world of hurt on somebody, and maybe, just maybe, it would be best not to be around while he was doing it.

Though honestly, the idea of watching did excite her just a little bit.

Just as long as it was from a nice safe distance.

"What, what do you want me to do?" Peg asked.

"Exactly what I tell you to do," Sean said, "then once he and I are both away from here, go back home and tell them I may be a little late to the meeting tonight, but the attack is still on."

Peg nodded.

Sean called up his monitor program and his own defensive framework spells as well, then shifted Peg over to the other side of him, keeping himself between her and where he suspected the attack would come from as they continued to walk along.

"When he attacks," Sean whispered, "Run in the opposite direction he

comes from; keep me between you and him as long as you can, then duck out of sight between the buildings. I don't want him getting a clear shot at you."

"Are you sure?" Peg asked. While she liked the idea of running away, face-to-face confrontations had never been her forte; she didn't like the idea of abandoning her mate. She would have laughed at that thought, if things weren't so dire, she'd finally found someone that she'd actually take a risk for. Imagine that.

Sal had finally realized that there weren't any places better than just here and now. The street was empty and it wasn't going to get any emptier. Moving in closer he could hear them talking about getting some food, then suddenly the kid's head came up and he gave the girl a shove.

Sal had two wands out; he fired the first one, a 'cramper' as people called it, at the kid, watching with satisfaction as he called out for his friend to run and then fell to the pavement, curling up into a twitching ball.

The girl was fast, and Sal took a shot at her with the second wand, a paralyzation wand, just as she turned and dodged between two buildings. She made some kind of noise as she disappeared from sight.

Just to be safe, he shot the kid with the paralyzation spell as well, that wand had several charges in it, unlike the cramper which was now spent and would take weeks to recharge.

Running up to the kid, Sal looked around to make sure no one had seen anything. No one was around, no one was yelling, and he couldn't even hear the sound of that gal running away. Either she was far away now, or she was locked up for the next fifteen minutes. Sal didn't really care which. Pulling out the case with the hypodermics in it, he pulled out the first one and reaching down with his hand he grabbed the kid's jacket up by the neck and pulled it down a bit.

The kid's eyes were looking up at him, and Sal hesitated for a moment, he couldn't recall ever seeing someone's eyes being open after being hit with the muscle-cramping spell in the past.

"Woise-man?" Sean croaked at him, shocking the hell out of him.

"Sorry, Kid..." Sal's voice was suddenly cut off as Sean's foot lashed out and kicked him hard in the stomach, knocking him back into the street! How was the kid still moving? He'd used that very same wand a dozen times before, the spell lasted ten minutes! No one had ever before come out of it that fast before!

Sal switched mental gears and let go of the hypodermic case before he'd even hit the ground. No way was he bringing this kid in alive, he was gonna have to kill him.

Sean had seen it when the spell hit, it was the same muscle-cramping spell he'd learned from when the Gradatim guards had shot him with it. The very one he'd loaded into the wands his own wolves now used. Apparently, it was a very popular spell for subduing people. Sean had really been expecting something a bit more lethal.

Pushing Peg off to run, he simply collapsed on the ground and curled up, like he'd see those whom the spell effected do. The second spell, the paralyze attack, also had no effect on him, being absorbed by his firewall spell as well. Sean figured if Woise man went after Peg, he'd used a few spells on him, but instead Woise man had stopped and pulled out a needle. Sean didn't know what was in it, but he doubted it was any good.

"Woise man?" He asked, just to make sure he had the right guy.

As soon as Woise man, or 'Hyena' responded, Sean kicked him in the chest, hard! So he wouldn't get stuck with whatever that needle was.

Sal watched the kid spring to his feet as he himself rolled to his own feet. Getting up quickly he reached into his coat to grab his pistol. The four-fifty-four Casull he carried would drop damn near anything, as he had it loaded with highly magical silver bullets, it was without a doubt the deadliest thing you could shoot a lycan with. Though he doubted in this case the silver would have any effect.

But each bullet had enough spells on it to cost Sal a cool two grand apiece. With that much silver, an enchanter could lay down a lot of spells, and Sal had paid for a dozen of them.

"My name is *Sean* Valens," Sean growled at Sal, as he stuck a hand in his coat, "you killed my father." and then almost as an afterthought, Sean smiled nastily and added, "Prepare to die."

"Hate to spoil your plans there kid," Sal said and drawing the pistol he fired two quick shots. No fancy headshots, not when your life was on the line. He aimed right for the center of mass, and watched as Sean grunted, as he was hit. Obviously the silver wasn't having an affect, but none of the spells were going off as either!

Sean grunted as the two bullets slammed into him. From the surge of power from his shield, he knew the bullets had to have been silver.

Considering the size and the impact, they must have had a *lot* of silver in them! Sean channeled the extra power into a quick healing spell from his defensive framework.

"Silver doesn't work on me, or hadn't you figured that out yet?"

"How the hell are you even still standing! There's enough magic on those bullets to kill a gorgon! I know!"

Sean growled and counted his blessings, that when the bullets had transmuted the spells on them had been broken. He didn't doubt that a hitman who specialized in magical beings had gotten his bullets enchanted as he claimed. He was just happy that he didn't know that anything which changed the object, destroyed the enchantments.

Kicking off his shoes so he could use his foot claws, Sean shifted into his hybrid form and started walking towards Sal.

"I suggest you *run*!" Sean roared.

Sal swore and took three more shots as fast as he could pull the trigger, emptying the revolver. Then turning on his heel, he ran as the lion's roar echoed off the buildings. This wasn't just a kid out for vengeance. This was a fucking monster!

His first thought was to run for the van. There were a few things in there that might help him, but that would mean stopping to get inside of it. Having seen the size of the kid after he'd shifted, Sal wasn't sure that was a good idea. He'd seen a lion-were or two over the years, but he sure as hell didn't recall any of them being as big as this one.

Something hit him in the back then, and Sal went down, feeling his bones break as he got hit with what felt like a wall. Survival kicked in, and Sal shifted into his own hybrid form. He only lost his shoes and split his shirt, Sal always picked his clothing carefully in case of emergencies, but shifting while healing caused him to cry out in pain as he rolled over and noticed what he'd been hit with.

Thankfully it wasn't the lion ready to finish him off. No, it was a dumpster. The fucking lion had picked up and thrown a dumpster at him hard enough to knock him down and break his spine!

Getting back to his feet, Sal dug his claws in and he *ran*. He didn't know how fast lions could run, but he didn't think one could run as fast as he was.

"Run you coward! Run!" Sal heard growled behind him, and then stumbled as he got hit in the back with a rock the size of a small boulder! Sal started weaving back and forth after that to try and make it a little harder for

him to be hit by the things the lion was grabbing off the side of the road as he ran along after him.

Turning onto one of the building properties, Sal vaulted over the fence and landed in among a bunch of old trucks and construction gear. Some of it was still good; some of it was obviously being saved for parts. And there were piles of scrap metal and even racks with girders on them scattered about.

Dodging around a couple of old enclosed trailers used for storage, Sal stopped and leaned back against a wall, mouth open wide so as not to give away his location by breathing too hard as he patted down his pockets. He'd lost the gun the first time he went down, but it wasn't the only weapon he had on him. He had half a dozen more wands, though one of those was another 'cramper' so he discounted using it.

The sleep spell wand, he figured that was worth a try, then it was on to the fireballs, ice shards, flamethrower, and if all of that didn't work, the big one, the one that cost him half a million dollars and would only ever work once: greater disintegration.

Just then an I-beam erupted through the wall only inches from where Sal's head was, and swearing under his breath, Sal was immediately off and running around the trucks looking for a good spot to ambush the lion as it came looking for him. His father had warned him years ago about hunting lions; he'd warned his son that they always ended up hunting you instead. Sal was starting to think he should have listened.

Ducking down behind an earthmover, Sal looked around, carefully. Where the hell was that damn lion?

Just then he felt some dirt falling down on to him, and looking up, there on top of the machine was that damn lion! Whipping out the first wand he fired it off and then grabbing the second one he fired that off as well.

Sean snorted and just ignored the sleep spell, the fireball however was a different matter, but Sean had spent more than a few hours learning methods for deflecting physical spells, most wizards did, and for Sean it was beyond easy. He just sent the fireball straight up into the air and gave it a little extra boost so when it blew up, it was high enough in the air not to hurt anybody.

"Oh look, they're celebrating your death already," Sean growled looking down at Sal, and then stepping off the top of the vehicle Sean landed next to him. Sal reached for another wand to shoot at Sean, but Sean grabbed his arm before he could pull it out, and then with an angry snarl Sean turned his body



as he pulled on Sal's arm, apparently trying to rip it from his body.

Sal cried out in shock as he felt his shoulder dislocate, the bone yanked from the socket, as his entire body was suddenly yanked from off his feet and thrown across the stockyard with such force that when he hit the cinderblock wall on the other side, he went right through it.

"You're not getting away that easily!" Sean roared angrily and started off after Sal again.

Sal shook his head to try and clear it; he'd gone through the wall headfirst and cracked his skull, which was still healing, leaving him dazed. His shoulder also burned with pain as it healed, his fingers numb as the nerves regenerated. Scrambling to his hands and knees he started to crawl off into the darker shadows in the building. He was in some sort of stockroom; there were large spools of what looked like cables and chains set around the place, with heavy rods and other tools he didn't recognize.

"Screw this!" Sal muttered and pulled out the disintegration wand. Yeah, he'd lose the commission because there probably wouldn't be enough of the lion to prove that he'd killed him, but Sal was a lot more invested in his own personal survival at this point. This Sean wasn't a kid, he was a lion with magical protections that also knew magic and knew it pretty damn well.

Sal suddenly recalled all the old stories, the old myths and the legends. Lions were the lawgivers, the kings, the first among the lycans, and the first of the lycans. The ones that all bowed down to, the ones that on the good days you hoped smiled upon you, and the ones that on the bad days you hoped ignored you.

The old gods of the lycans.

"You're not the god of me!" Sal growled.

"Oh, but I *am*!" Sean whispered in his ear and then grabbing him by the back of his coat, Sean hoisted him up and threw him across the room and into a stack of cable spools heavy enough that they didn't even move when Sal crashed into them hard enough to break bones.

Sal blinked and shook his head again. He hadn't lost his hold on the wand and raising his arm up, he winced at the pain. It was broken and healing a lot slower than normal, because a lot of his bones had been broken that time.

"Wands don't work on me; I thought you realized that by now?"

Sal waved the wand over to where the voice had come from. But there was nothing that he could see there, in the darkness.

"But I guess you could *try*," came the voice again, softer, closer, and to his left.

Crying out in pain as he spun to the side, Sal again was faced with nothing as his bones continued to knit, and the cuts on his body slowly sealed up.

"Oh look! Up here!" the voice came again, and looking up Sal saw a dark shape come flying towards him. Diving down onto the ground, Sal felt the breeze of something large flying over his head, and then heard the loud 'crash' as whatever it was slammed into the stack of spools where he'd just been standing.

Looking down the aisle he saw it, the shape of a man, a large man, standing there! Pointing the wand at it, he triggered it and watched as the man, the wall behind him, and everything round him suddenly turned to dust and just flew off into the air.

"I got you, you bastard!" Sal laughed.

"Oh no, I *had* a father, until *you* took him away. That's why I'm going to *kill* you, Mr. Woiseman, I presume?"

Sal's eyes got wide as a strong hand grabbed him by the back of the neck and picked him up, another hand slashing down and breaking his right arm, causing his fingers to go limp and drop the wand. Not that it would ever work again.

"Such a waste of a good jacket, too, Sean growled and picking the hyena up, he slammed him into the wall face first. Putting his hand inside the hyena's coat, Sean searched him quickly, ripping off and throwing aside every magical item that he found. Damn he had a lot!

Then he found the necklace, the moment Sean's fingers closed on it, he knew what it was! A silver tag, but without a lycan necklace attached. It was on a heavy chain, the 'tag' being made of gold and in the shape of an animal's head. When Sean checked it, it even had his father's encryption program running on it!

Sean recalled then that the tag he had was his father's *second* attempt, this damn hyena had not only *killed* his father, but he'd *stolen* the first example of his father's genius!

Letting go of Sal; Sean ripped the necklace off, over his head as Sal dropped to his knees.

"You bastard!" Sean growled. "You not only killed him, but you stole this! His greatest achievement! The thing that is going to free all of the lycans

from the tyranny of the mages! The greatest thing he ever did and you soiled it with your filthy murdering paws!"

Sal turned then and punched the kid in stomach, just as hard as he could, almost breaking the bones in his hands from the attempt. Then he hit him again with his other hand, and yet again.

The lion just ignored it, barely grunting. Twenty years ago, Sal was sure he could have beaten this lion, but that was twenty years ago, he was in his sixties now, he was old, too old and obviously too weak.

How did you know my name?" Sal asked, panting. Damn this kid was tough; he'd tried everything he knew.

Sean's voice was a rough growl, "Roger told me, before I killed him. But he didn't know who hired you, so I'm asking you now: who hired you?"

"Hired me for what, you?" Sal asked motioning weakly to Sean.

"To kill my FATHER!" Sean roared and lunging forward he grabbed Sal by the neck again and drove him back into the wall. Sal felt the claws come out, and sink about an inch into his neck. Sal suddenly realized that Sean was going to kill him and he really didn't want to die, old man or not. Well, he had one last card to play and if he didn't play it now, he never would.

"I didn't steal that amulet from your father," Sal replied.

"What! What do you mean you didn't steal it?" Sean snarled, moving his head closer to Sal, noses almost touching now. Sal couldn't help but look into those eyes, in the dimness of the room, with the surrounding black of the lion's mane; those eyes seemed to glow, floating in a sea of darkness. They were all he could see. Sal wondered if they'd be the last thing he ever saw?"

"He gave it to me."

"LIAR!" Sean roared right into his face.

For the first time tonight, Sal actually found himself getting angry.

"I don't lie!" He growled back, "Your father gave it to me. Freely! I didn't steal it! I'm not a thief!"

"You stole his life!" Sean growled softly.

"Yes, I killed him. But we had a deal!"

Sal watched as Sean blinked a moment, the hatred in those glowing eyes seemed to lessen, though the grip on his neck was still like iron.

"Talk!" Sean commanded him.

"I cornered him in his lab. He'd seen me coming and had sent everyone out, evacuated the building. When I got to him, he told me he had a deal for me...."

Sal remembered it well as he recounted the events of that meeting to Sean. Bernard Valens had not been at all what he'd been expecting.

\*       \*

"So, you're the one they've sent to kill me," Bernard said looking him over calmly. "Before you do, I have a deal I'd like to make with you."

Sal snorted, they always tried to make a deal, if he gave them a chance that is.

"I'm not going to let you live, old man," Sal growled.

Bernard laughed at him, "What would be the point of a deal for my life? They'd simply send another. No, I'm not here to deal for my life. I wish to deal for the life of my wife and my son."

Sal stopped, "They want me to kill them, after I kill you."

"I thought the mobs had a rule about women and children?"

"We used to, but that was years ago. Now," Sal sighed, "now it's become harder to stick to the old ways"

"What if I were to make it worth your while?" Bernard asked him, "What if I were to offer you something that no one else in the world could offer you? What then? Would you swear to honor that old rule? Tell those that hired you that you will not kill my wife and child? And that if they should try, you will kill them instead?"

Sal laughed, "What could you possibly offer me, old man? There is nothing you have that I can't buy with the money they promised me!"

"Immunity to silver," Bernard said.

"What! Such a thing isn't possible!"

Bernard smiled at him, "Why do you think they want me dead? If I can prove to you, that I can do this for you, will you swear to me what I have asked?"

Sal didn't even think twice, immunity to silver! He'd be untouchable from this day forward! No one would ever have control over him again! Never would he have to fear the one thing that all lycans did!

"Yes! I swear that if you can give me immunity to silver, I will tell them that I will kill any who attempt to kill your wife or child, that I will honor the old rules on women and children."

Bernard held out an amulet, it was a golden wolf's head on a necklace, "Here, put this on."

Sal took the amulet and looked at it, "This isn't any kind of trick, is it?"

Bernard shook his head, "No, I'm dealing honestly and truthfully with you. You've agreed to what I want, breaking that deal would be foolish now. As I said, I know that even if I were to escape you, they'd simply hire another. The secret of that amulet is one that they can not bear to have known, so I would advise you not to let anyone know you have it, or they'll be after *you* next."

Sal nodded and put on the necklace.

Bernard picked up a small coin from off the top of his desk; Sal recognized it immediately as an old mercury head silver dime.

"Here, take this."

Sal took it and noticed that as soon as his fingers touched it, the coin got warm and the color of it changed slightly.

"Sonnovabitch," Sal swore and looked up at Bernard, who was smiling.

"No one believed I could do it, *no one*. But I did it. Now, I've honored my end of the bargain."

Sal nodded, he always kept his word, always. "I'll honor mine."

\*       \*

Sal had made sure to kill him quickly and painlessly. He'd then gone before the entire conclave to tell them what Bernard had asked him to.

"Then why the geas? Why the oath by my mother?" Sean growled, giving Sal a shake.

"They were worried about you, about your mother, seeking revenge," Sal told him, and then added, "I was worried as well. Your father was very concerned about you and her living on. I make my way in this world by living off the revenge of others; I have seen what it does to a man."

Sean growled, but stopped as he thought about that.

*'Your father made a deal.'*

*'I'm aware of that,'* Sean replied angrily.

*'You should honor it.'*

*'You're asking a lot of me,'* Sean warned.

*'That's only because you're capable of giving it.'*

"When did you break the geas?" Sal asked him, interrupting Sean's internal conversation.

"Why do you want to know?" Sean asked.

"They told me that they moved against you, when they realized that you had learned magic. But they have no idea of when you broke free of their

geas."

Sean growled, "The geas was removed by my second wife, *after* I'd been attacked several times, before I even fully understood what was going on."

"You didn't break faith first then?" Sal asked considering the implications of that, and of what he'd promised Sean's father twelve long years ago. Sal had given his word, if someone else had broken theirs, first....

Sean snorted, "Harkins and the Ascendants broke faith first, ask any of the other councils, they all know the truth now. I didn't know about any of this! Magic, lycans, the *real* reason my father was killed," Sean growled as he mentioned his father, "I was blissfully ignorant, another stupid kid without a fucking clue." Sean could feel his eyes burning as he held back tears, "They took it all, and then they came back and took it again! They just couldn't leave us alone!"

Sal growled deep in his chest, he didn't like being lied to by a client, but he liked it less when the client who had lied to him had also broken his sworn oath.

"They lied to me."

"They lie to everybody," Sean said hotly. "I take it Harkins hired you then?"

"Yes, both times," Sal admitted. "And with his attacks on you, breaking the sworn oath he made to me, the one I duly swore to uphold, I have no choice now but to kill him."

"Assuming that I don't kill you myself!" Sean said, growling again, "There is the small matter of my father's death!"

"Your father's death was a foregone conclusion before I ever met him, Sean. You know that. I however took his deal and have kept it. If you want a piece of me, fine. So be it. However, I have an obligation to *your* father to fulfill. You will let me go, so I can honor it!"

'*He's right,*' Sean's lion said.

"Dammit!" Sean swore angrily. "What about your contract on me?"

"I do not take contracts from those who break their sworn oaths to me," Sal told him, and then fell to the floor as Sean released his grip.

"Stay!" Sean said and cast paralysis on Sal.

"What are you doing?" Sal said, looking at him surprised.

"Getting a head start. I guess this is yours," Sean said and placed the amulet back around Sal's neck.

Turning away, Sean trotted off, heading back to where the others were

gathering for the attack. He had no idea how long that spell would hold Hyena there, and they still had a lot to do, if they were going to attack tonight.

## Before the Storm

"Ah, Sean, good of you to join us," Chad said as Sean came into the room. Sean was still in his hybrid form, there was no way he was going to run across Sparks in freezing weather without a shirt or a jacket. No doubt the police had gotten more than a few strange phone calls tonight as Sean hadn't given a damn as to whether or not anybody had seen him.

"What happened to you?"

"I ran into the man who killed my father," Sean growled and sat down at the open chair at the foot of the table.

Chad winced, "Ouch, that doesn't sound good, is he dead?"

Sean shook his head and growled, "I had to let him go."

"Why?"

"Personal reasons," Sean said and gave Chad a look that made it clear he didn't want to talk about it.

"Okay," Chad said and turned back to the other members of the fellowship who were all looking at Sean with looks of intense curiosity.

Looking at the other members of the fellowship, Sean growled angrily, "My father made a deal with him. He's held to his end of the bargain so I have to honor my family's side."

"What kind of a deal?" Ted, from the leopard families asked.

"None of your business. The topic is closed," Sean said hotly while staring down everyone at the table.

"Right," Chad rapped on the table with his knuckles gaining everyone's attention, they were all too happy to look away from Sean at this point.

"All of you wanted to know the plan for tonight's operation, seeing as all of you have made some level of contribution to it.

"The goal of the plan is simple: remove all of the lycans at the Ascendant's compound and free them.

"The execution however is going to be anything but. They know we're coming and they're ready for us. Our only advantages are first: they've been waiting for us to attack for two weeks now, so they're starting to get fatigued. There's only so long you can wait for something before it starts to wear you down.

"Second, we get to choose the time of our attack. We picked tonight because the weather forecast is to be freezing, which will keep most of the mages indoors. We picked the lateness of the hour because most people will



be in bed and a lot of those still up will be tired.

"Third, we're going in overwhelming force. From the wolves we were able to waylay and question today, the opposing lycan forces break down to a force of eighty-three wolves, fifty of which are trained combatants, the remaining thirty-three are untrained, but have all been put under arms. There are an additional twenty-six females, and twelve children being kept under lockdown in the kennels."

"What about their house staff?" Roger, the head of the cougar clans asked.

"Those that were wolves were added to the defending forces or put in the kennels. Those that weren't were either farmed out to the homes of whoever wanted them or," Chad grimaced, "they were eliminated."

There were a few dark comments muttered at that point.

"So what are we going to do about the ones that have been farmed out?" Roger asked.

"I have three teams that are going to start going house to house when we launch our attack on the main compound. After we finish our attack on the main compound I've detailed which groups will then go after the other member's homes."

"How many homes is that?"

Chad grimaced again, "A lot, over twenty. Our only advantage is that a lot of those homes have only one or two mages living in them, so we believe they'll be easy to overwhelm quickly, either by stealth or just a blitzkrieg style assault."

"What about those which are not?" Boris of the tiger clans asked.

Sean spoke up, "There are going to be losses tonight. I'm sorry, but there are. I agreed to this plan, I take responsibility for it."

"Now move on," Sean sighed and motioned to Chad.

Sean listened with half a mind, going over in his head everything that Sal had just told him as Chad went over the plan with the others.

It was simpler than Chad wanted to go with, but the troops were all irregulars, only about a hundred of them had actually been trained for combat, and that was Claudia's eighteen, Sean's thirty, and fifty of Samis' dwarves. The rest, of which there were another two hundred, were all either a little experienced, or totally inexperienced.

Ninety of the most inexperienced fighters would attack those three first points that Chad had identified. As these points were fairly obvious points of

attack, they were all well defended. Once the defenders at those points were well engaged, the remainder of the forces, not including Claudia's eighteen, would attack two different locations away from the first three. Chad believed that with all of the defenders lured away to the first three spots, the other forces would be able to quickly force entry under cover of the first attacks and come up behind the engaged defenders and quickly overwhelm them.

As for Claudia's helicopters, they had learned that there was in fact a 'kill switch' that had been set up by Harkins and his people, so that if it looked like they were going to lose control of their lycans, a single mage could activate a device in the main manor that would activate all of the pellets at once, as well as set off several massive 'silver bombs' in key locations across the property. Especially in the kennels, where the females and older children that were still alive were being kept to help guarantee obedience.

So instead of being used to open up a second front in the attack, the helicopters would swoop in and drop Claudia's eighteen fighters, plus Sean, on the roof of the main building ten minutes before the first attack began. Jolene would be in one maintaining silence spells on it, while Sean did the same for the other. Sean and the rest would then make their way inside, as stealthily as possible, working their way down to where the mages who held that 'kill switch' were, and immobilize them before they had the chance to set it off and kill all their lycans once they realized that the fight was lost.

Sean watched as Chad fielded questions, though not a lot were asked. Sean hadn't even wanted to brief them, but those here had contributed people and Roxy's dad had told him they had a right to know, as it was their people's lives on the line.

Bill himself was off on a little side-project, that Sean had been told not to worry about. Seeing as Sean already had a lot to worry about, he didn't.

"Okay, that's all of it!" Chad said clapping his hands together, "Now we all need to get going to get to our starting points, so all of this can come off on time."

"One last question," Boris asked.

"Yes?"

"What about the neighbors? I know the compound is out of town a short way, but I would think that this will be a very loud undertaking?"

"That's why we plan to be gone before anyone realizes just what's going on," Chad told him. "Other than that, we're working on something, but I can't discuss it."

"Boss?"

"Yes, James?" Arthur asked looking up from the book he was reading, he'd gone over the same page six times now. The previous one had taken him eight tries to digest. Something was bothering him tonight, but he'd be damned if he could put a name to it.

"There's a Sheriff Channing at the front door, he says he needs to talk to you."

Arthur raised an eyebrow, "He did now, did he?"

"Yes, and he was most insistent."

Arthur looked at the clock on the wall, it was a few minutes before ten pm, this obviously wasn't a social call.

"Very well," Arthur sighed and getting up from his chair he set the book down and headed for the front door.

"Oh, James?"

"Yes, Boss."

"Get the rest of the council on the line. I don't think the good Sheriff is here for polite conversation."

"Sure thing, Boss."

Going down the stairs, Arthur saw that Sheriff Channing was indeed there, Frank was keeping an eye on him.

"Sheriff Channing," Arthur said, coming up to him and shaking hands, "At last we meet in person. To what do I owe this honor?"

"I am here to invoke the tradition of silence," Bill said.

"The tradition of silence?" Arthur said, surprised.

"The Council of Sapientia is the bearer of the traditions, and your council has held that it has the power of those traditions over all of us. I hereby petition you, here, now, for five of your members to conduct the involved spells and magicks so that none of the mundanes become aware of what is about to transpire."

"But the tradition normally only applies to mages," Arthur said, considering it.

"Sean, my son-in-law, your niece Jolene, and Peg Wilston, are all magic users and they all request it. Arthur, you've entered your council into an alliance with the fellowship of lycans. We've agreed to help you with your defense, and honestly, none of us wishes to expose anymore than we have to, to the mundanes of the world.

"So we could really use your help tonight."

Arthur took a deep breath and sighed. "I can't fault your logic, and if anyone complains, I can say that three magic users, one of which is still a member of my household, requested it."

Arthur turned to Frank, "Go upstairs and tell James to make sure that the other council members are here within the hour."

Bill interrupted, "I can have a car pick them up and bring them here, if necessary."

Arthur nodded, "Frank, find out from James if they'd rather not drive, so I can have the good Sheriff send someone over to get them. Then come back down here and let me know who needs to be picked up."

"Yes sir," Franks said and quickly ran up the stairs.

"So, now that we're alone," Arthur smiled, "Sean's attacking the Ascendants tonight?"

Bill shook his head, smiling, "You know I'm not at liberty to answer that question, Arthur."

Arthur chuckled, "Oh, of course. But I have to commend young Sean for taking this action. It is always harder to accuse people of being upstarts and revolutionaries when they stick to the traditions, right?"

"That and it's a lot easier not to have to explain all the noise," Bill agreed.

"Well, let's see who we get, and I'll pick four to accompany me."

Bill looked at Arthur in surprise, "You're going?"

"When I was a young man, I took it into my head to sail around the world. Oh, not on a fancy sailboat or anything as pretentious. I signed up as an able-bodied seaman on a number of small cargo ships; I guess what my parents would have called 'tramp steamers.'

"I remember when we sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, there was this feeling in the air, as if things were about to change in a very fundamental way. One of the old salts told me that we were about to experience a 'sea change.' A very apt expression that.

"Well, Bill, I am feeling that tonight, and it's not a comfortable thing to feel at my age. I think it just might be for the best if I'm there tonight, should anything unexpected take place."

"I didn't think the tradition allowed you to get involved?"

"It doesn't, and I won't," Arthur said. "However, I still think it best that I go. Now let me find a pair of warm clothes to change into and a heavy jacket. You can invite your men inside out of the cold while we wait for everyone to

arrive."

Sean looked out the open door of the 'huey' helicopter that they were flying in. He'd cheated on the silence spell, as he'd found something a lot cheaper and easier, and taught it to Jolene before they left. Rather than try and abate all that noise, and it was a lot, he'd simply created a reflector that directed all the sound straight up.

He wasn't pleased about the moon being up, because that made it almost as bright as daylight to all of those with night vision, but the pilots said it would make it a lot easier if they didn't have to use lights when it came time to land on the roof. Besides, who looks up?

Sean shook his head and sighed. There were all pretty heavily armed, Sean had created a large number of wands with cramping spells on them and high level sleep spells, everyone had tasers and high-powered cattle prods, zip ties, pepper spray, and ball gags.

Jolene had made a joke about having a real fun party with all of that stuff and the looks Sean had gotten from all of the wolves after that had actually made him blush.

They started to drop down quickly and Sean grabbed the handhold with his left hand tightly and stepped out onto the skid. Two months ago, the idea of doing that would have terrified him. Now he knew his grip was strong enough, and his balance good enough, that he had nothing to fear.

Funny how much his life had changed.

They leveled off and Sean could see the house right in front of them, the pilot flared coming within inches of the roof and Sean just stepped off as the other nine piled out to either side in less than a second, and then the helicopter was gone and they all spread out and fell prone to make room for the second helicopter as it dropped off the rest of Claudia's wolves.

They all hugged the roof for a moment, listening for any sounds of alarm, but heard nothing.

"Okay," Jon, the werewolf in charge said in a hushed voice, "everyone move off to your assigned entry points. Entry in one minute from my mark." Jon paused a moment as everyone checked their mission timers, which were really just cheap smart phones with a couple of specialty apps on them.

"Mark!"

Breaking up into three groups, they all hurried off to their assigned spots as they all shifted. Sean was with Jon and his team; they'd be entering on the

third floor of the building, through a number of skylights and dormer type windows. Most of the third floor was storage and for servants. It was expected to be vacant tonight.

Sean checked the window for any magic, and as they expected, he didn't find any. One of the other wolves quickly defeated the lock on the window then, and opening it, they all quietly slipped in.

They spent the next two minutes carefully checking the floor to be sure it was clear.

"Alpha-three, contact," Sean heard over his radio. Turning and looking at the door next to the one that Jon was checking, Sean saw that the team member had a wand out and was using it.

"Alpha-three, they're asleep," came the call as Sean quickly padded over and looked into the room. There were four young women; actually, two of them looked more like girls. They were all sleeping on beds, and each one had a collar on with a metal chain leading to a heavy looking paddock set in the floor by the bed.

"This doesn't look good," Sean grunted and stepping into the room he checked each of the girls. The collars on each of them were magical, so Sean just drained each of them causing them to unlock, as Alpha-three followed behind him, first gagging and then zip-tying each of the girl's arms and legs.

Sean paused a moment to look at them, none of them were lycans, he knew that as soon as he had touched them, they were all very lovely with dark skin and long straight hair, which on two of them appeared to be a dark blonde, red on the third, the fourth one's hair was white. Sean noticed the ear on one of them as Rich, Alpha-three, rolled her over to adjust her gag, they were slightly pointed.

'Dark elves,' his lion told him.

'Those exist?'

*'Not normally in this world. The only pathways to their lands lie in northern Europe. The Norse dealt with them, called them the Dökkálfar.'*

Sean shook the one with white hair awake. Her eyes came open quickly and were a rather surprising red color, or at least her irises were. She looked at him and her whole body twitched as she tried to move, and then she scowled as she realized she'd been restrained.

"We're here to free the lycans," Sean told her, "we can either leave you here...."

She started to shake her head 'no' rather vigorously.

"Or take you with us?"

She nodded then.

"Fine, with us it is. If I cut you loose, will you stay quiet, calm the others, and do as your told?"

She nodded again.

"Understand, that if you give us away or cause us problems, I'll kill you."

Sean noticed her eyes narrowed just a little bit, but she nodded again.

Sean used a claw to cut the zip ties, and then undid the gag.

"Wake your friends up, calm them, tell them what I told you. Then wait here until one of us tells you what to do, okay?"

"Okay," she said in a voice that Sean could only describe as melodious.

"What do you think they were going to do with them?" Richard asked as Sean left the room to catch up with Jon.

"Considering they're all naked, I don't think it's all that hard to guess," Sean growled. "Get someone in here to keep an eye on them and tell them what to do. We can sort them out when this is over."

Rich nodded and called over one of the guys from Charlie group who'd been designated for survivor pickup.

"What are they?" Jon asked softly as they all prepped to go down to the third floor. Sean checked his mission clock; they were three minutes behind schedule now.

"Our replacements I guess. Dark elves."

"Huh, I've heard stories about them; I think they don't do well in sun." Jon keyed his radio, "Alpha-one, all groups, step two."

Forming a human chain, like Sean had seen in all those action movies, they moved down the stairs, each with a hand on the shoulder of the man in front of them, a wand in their other hand. Odd numbered men had cramping wands; the even numbered ones had sleeping wands.

Sleeping would be tried first, and then the more serious attacks if that didn't work.

The second floor of the building was rather opulent, Sean noted. It reminded him of some of the better casinos that he'd worked in as a busboy and general maintenance worker. The floor had a fairly new and thick carpet, there were tables set to the side of each doorway leading off of the hall, and there were fine pieces of artwork decorating the walls.

According to their sources, these were all bedrooms on this level, for those members who had no place of their own to live in, or who were

assigned to work as guards in the compound. The door to the master's suite, which Sean figured was Harkins', was at the center of the hallway, there were two less doors on that side, giving a clue to just how large that set of rooms was.

They quickly broke up into three man teams, and starting at opposite ends of the hallway, one man would open the door, while the other two used their wands on whoever was inside. With twenty-two doors, it would take about five minutes to clear them all.

Looking over the shoulders of the first team, Sean noted that there were two men in the room, both of who never even woke up as they got zapped with the sleep spell, and then quickly gagged and trussed up with zip ties by the three man crew.

"Step it up!" Jon growled, "We're running behind! Switch to two man teams! My men, on me!"

They were just starting on the third round of six doors, as Jon started to prep his team to go downstairs to the ground floor, when Sean's mission timer vibrated once. Swearing Sean turned and raced for Harkins' door as within seconds the sounds of the first assault started and an alarm went off in the building.

Kicking in the door, Sean led with the cramper wand. The room he entered was obviously a living room; there were two doors on the right side leading out of it, and one on the left. Guessing left, Sean ran over to the door and kicking that one in as well he shot the person on the bed as they started to sit up. It was only when the wand went off that he realized it was a woman, and Sean suddenly got shot in the side by a man who had been standing behind the door as Sean had entered the room.

Sean turned on him and was shot three more times before he grabbed the man's hand and crushed it around the pistol, which held up rather well. Looking up into the pained eyes of the man holding the gun, Sean recognized him as one of the members of the Council of Ascendance's senior coven, however it wasn't Harkins.

Spinning the man around, Sean knocked him to the ground, was surprised when the cramper wand didn't work on him. So Sean kicked him between the legs, hitting him in the balls, and then while the man curled up in even more pain, Sean relieved him of the rings, amulet, and earrings he was wearing. He even had magical bracelets on both of his arms, and Sean got those too, then he gagged, zip-tied, and slept him just to be safe.



Pulling the blankets off the bed he noticed that the woman there was nude, rather attractive, and glaring at him.

"You here willingly, or are you here as a slave?" Sean growled freeing her of the effects of the crammer spell so she could reply to him as he started to search the room for traces of Harkins.

"That's my husband you killed!" she gasped back at him.

"He's not dead," Sean growled back. "Where is Harkins? I thought he lived here?"

"Harkins hasn't lived here since he married Teresa Sticks. She didn't want to raise her kids in this place."

Sean swore loudly as he started going through the drawers by the bed, he could hear fighting outside now, there were guns firing and even a couple of explosions.

"Where does he live?" Sean asked as he found one of the magical devices that could be used to kill all of the lycans.

"Like I'm going to tell you!"

"Okay, fine." Draining the device of it's magic Sean walked over to where her husband lay on the floor, "I'll kill your husband, let's see if that changes your mind," Sean raised his foot to crush his skull.

"Wait!" she cried and quickly rattled off an address that wasn't too far from here.

"Nice to see that you care," Sean smiled.

"We're not animals, like you!"

"No, you're worse," Sean said, and after sleeping her with a spell he returned to the hallway. Stepping out of the room he could see that there were bodies everywhere. Most of them were mages, and they were being gagged and hog-tied.

Several of them were wolves. Sean went to check them, one was dead, two were wounded seriously, but Sean was able to heal them enough for their own bodies to take over. Three more were under the effects of spells, which Sean quickly dispelled.

Looking around he saw that there were only five wolves trussing up the downed mages and helping the wounded.

"Where's Jon and his team?" Sean asked.

"Down on the first floor!" one of the team members who doubled as a medic told him.

"Damn. Get everyone up, get those girls down here, send everyone who

can fight downstairs. Harkins isn't here, we need to get moving."

"Is he downstairs?"

"No, he's not *here*. He doesn't live here anymore!"

"Shit! I hope he doesn't have one of those kill switches!"

"Yeah, me too," Sean growled and ran down to the end of the hallway and started down the stairs. There was one of them on the first floor and he was sure Jon and his team would need all of the help that they could get.

## Friend of the Devil

Harkins woke up when the alarm on the nightstand started to beep. Silencing it with his hand he sat up quickly and looked around the bedroom. His wife stirred briefly in her sleep, but otherwise everything was quiet. None of the house alarms had gone off and it was still quiet outside.

"Damn idiots probably tripped the alarm for the garbage man again," Harkins swore. Still, it was best that he got up and checked in with the people back at the compound. Just because they'd made mistakes three times this last week that was no excuse for him to slack off.

Getting out of bed, he stuck his feet in his slippers and picking up his robe he put it on and wrapping it around him, he tied the belt and walked out of his bedroom, carefully closing the door behind him, so as not to wake up his wife.

The doors to both of the girl's bedrooms were closed, he debated checking in on them a moment, but decided instead he could check on them after he checked in with Hodges at the compound.

Walking down the hallway, he left the bedrooms behind and walking past the living room and then the kitchen, he came to his office. Opening the door, he walked over to his desk, not bothering with the room lights. Last thing he wanted to do was ruin his night vision and then be tripping over kid's toys and other stuff all the way back to bed.

The light on the alarm on his desk was blinking. Picking up the phone, he was surprised to find that the line was dead. Searching his pockets, he realized he'd left his cell phone back on the nightstand.

Grumbling he picked up the magical communicator that sat on his desk. He hated these things, since the advent of the telephone nobody had bothered to do a thing to improve them. The sound quality they had was like a sixties child's phonograph, and they needed to be recharged constantly after use. Rumor was someone in Eruditio had been working on an improved version, but then the cell phone came out and killed it dead.

Harkins snorted, they all relied too much on modern conveniences and not enough on their own powers. Just another sign of weakness in the modern world.

Turning the device on, he spoke into it. "Hodges! What's going on over there! Don't tell me that they alerted on the garbage man again!"

Harkins counted to ten, as he waited for a reply. When nothing came he

spoke the name of the man who was supposed to be on watch.

"Kenneth! What's going on over there?"

"Sir! We're under attack! They're everywhere! I've already lost most of my men! We're being overwhelmed! They're everywhere!"

"Trigger the damn kill switch! Now!" Harkins yelled. Not only would that kill off his own lycans, leaving that damn Valens kid with a hollow victory, but it would set off silver bombs and some other very nasty devices all over the property. Harkins doubted that all of Valens' animals had that damn protection trinket yet, his own people figured that something that powerful had to take months to make. And Valens hadn't had months, at best he'd only had maybe one of them.

"I can't get to it, Sir! They drove us out of the control room! Hodges is gone, I can't reach him!"

Swearing, Harkins dropped the device and grabbing the draw of his desk he yanked it open.

"Having a bad night, are we?" a voice growled softly in the room.

Harkins' head came up, and he cast a light spell almost without thinking about it. Sitting in a chair in what had been a dark corner, was Hyena. He was still dressed in a long dark overcoat and the black fedora hat, thought both currently looked a lot worse for wear, as well a set of black trousers. However the shirt he was wearing was without a tie and appeared to have blood stains on it.

As Harkins watched, Hyena pulled out a cigar and biting off the end of it, which he spit on the floor, he lit it and started to puff on it.

"I didn't say you could smoke in here!" Harkins said and then looked back down into the drawer of his desk for the remote magical trigger for all of the lycan traps and kill spells they'd laid down back at the compound.

"You didn't say a lot of things," Sal said as he put the lighter back in his pocket.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harkins said and started opening the other drawers, looking for that damn remote.

"I finally caught up with the Valens' kid," Sal said, conversationally.

"Then where the hell is he?" Harkins grumbled, and started looking over his desk, "is that why they're attacking now? Because you killed him?"

"Look at me when I'm talking to you," Sal growled.

Harkins looked up and snorted, "I've got bigger things to worry about right now than you."

"Oh yeah, I heard. That Valens' kid. He's a mean son-of-a-bitch. I wonder how many of your people he'll leave alive when all of this is done."

Harkins' eyes got wide then.

"You let him LIVE!" Harkins yelled, glaring at him.

Sal laughed, "No, he let *me* live."

"Fuck!" Harkins swore and looked in the desk drawer again, that damn remote had to be somewhere.

"Stop wasting your time, I've got it in my pocket," Sal chuckled.

"What! I need that! I need to stop them!"

"You ain't stopping shit," Sal growled, "you lied."

"*I* lied? So *what*! You're a paid killer, that's it! I give you money and tell you who to kill, and you kill them! Is that so hard to understand! I don't owe you the truth, I don't owe you anything! Especially not money, if you couldn't kill one fucking little wet behind the ears *twerp*!"

"You broke your oath to me," Sal growled. "Twelve years ago, all of you, all five council leaders swore an oath, to *me*. You all swore to leave the kid and his mother alone."

"I told you, we didn't break it, those gang members did! Valens was already learning magic!" Harkins started glancing around his desk for a wand, he was suddenly aware that he was alone in a room with a man who killed people like him for a living.

"The kid told me otherwise. So I checked, and guess what? He told me the truth. You broke your oath to me. An oath you swore on your *life*." Sal growled and stood up.

"And now it's time to collect."

Harkins swore and cast a sleep spell. Nothing. Paralyzation. Still nothing. Reaching down deep he threw out his strongest spell, a force spike that picked up Hyena, threw him into the wall with enough force to destroy all of the plaster, shattering half of the man's bones and pinning him to the wall with a large spike through his gut.

Collapsing into the chair, Harkins caught his breath. He was spent, that spell had taken everything that he had to cast.

"You sure talked a tough game," Harkins said with a snort, "but if you can't take on a kid, you sure as hell shouldn't have tried taking on a grown man. Yeah, I lied. So what? The powerful always lie to the weak. It's our right."

Getting up, still a little shaky on his feet, Harkins walked over to the

dead body pinned to the wall. Hyena had said he had the remote, so the sooner Harkins got it, and triggered it, the sooner this farce could end.

He was just starting to reach into Hyena's pocket when suddenly a hand grabbed him by the neck! Looking up he saw Hyena smiling at him.

"You should have known better than to try and kill a man like me," Hyena growled and started to squeeze Harkins' neck. As Harkins watched, Hyena transformed in front of his eyes!

He was a lycan!

"Oh, I see you finally figured it out," Sal laughed, and then gripping tightly, he crushed Harkins' neck, and then dropped the dying man to the floor. Looking down at the spike sticking through his body, Sal grimaced. Getting off of that was going to hurt.

## Inside the Storm

Chad looked around at the two assembled groups as they prepared to move out and attack. Rather than try and breach the walls, they'd simply brought a bunch of ladders that they'd bought that afternoon from one of those large box stores.

"Why ladders?" Daelyn asked, looking at them.

"Because they're quiet," Chad grinned. "The last thing we want to do is give anyone a warning that we're coming by blowing holes in the wall.

"Dwarves are not very fond of heights," she pointed out.

Chad shook his head, "Now you tell me. Oh well, too late to change things."

"We'll manage," Samis spoke up. "It's only a ten-foot wall."

Chad checked his watch, "Okay everyone, let's go!"

Chad watched as Roxy and Daelyn got in the two trucks with the dwarves, and headed off to their attack point. They were going to be taking the kennels, and freeing those inside. A lot of the dwarves were effectively sapper and engineers. Chad figured they had the best chance of getting inside and disarming any traps.

Heading towards the other trucks he grabbed Max by the harness, pulling her back.

"Where are you going?" He asked her.

"I'm going with the first squad!" She growled.

Chad shook his head, "No, I've told you already, you're going with me."

"But I'm an experienced fighter! What, you don't like your girlfriend leading the charge? Afraid I'll make you look bad?"

Chad sighed, he liked Max, a lot. It wasn't that she was good looking; even now in her hybrid form she really was rather attractive. It was because she was pretty fearless, and she really did know all of the political ins and outs of the wolf packs.

"No, I'm afraid *I'll* make me look bad. I've never been in combat before Max, I *told* you that. Yeah, it sucks that you can't go out there and lead the charge and show everyone just what a bad ass you are.

"But you need to focus on what's more important here!"

Max growled at him, "And just what could be more important than that?"

"Making sure an inexperienced guy like me doesn't do anything stupid while showing me how it's done!" Chad growled right back at her. "Just

because I know how to plan these battles it doesn't mean I've ever been in one! I need someone I know I can trust and guess what? That's *you*."

Chad had the distinct pleasure of seeing Max suddenly look rather embarrassed. He had to admit, he enjoyed the view, she didn't embarrass easy and they'd been keeping score on how many times they each score on one another.

"Umm, sorry." Max sighed, "I hadn't realized."

"Well I don't exactly go broadcasting it to everyone. Last time I couldn't go cause I wasn't a wolf and had a bum leg. Now I sure as hell want to go, just like you do. Now, get in the truck and let's get going."

Hopping up into the truck it was a short two minutes to get into position, and as Chad had suspected, the lycan guards who were supposed to be watching this section of the wall were all off fighting the main attack.

Jumping out of the truck he grabbed a ladder with Max and they ran through the brush and slamming it up against the wall, they both quickly scrambled up it, Chad following Max and enjoying the view, up until the moment they jumped down on the other side of the wall.

Taking cover behind a building, Chad waited with Max as the rest of their force came over the wall and got ready for their next move.

"You had a bum leg?" Max asked, while they waited.

"Long story, I'll tell you later," Chad said keeping an eye on everyone as they got in position, "but that was one of the reasons I got Sean to have someone infect me. Going from being athletic to being a cripple sucked."

"Only one of the reasons?" Max teased.

Chad looked at her, and grinned, "Werewolves are cool."

Max laughed, "Well, duh! Course we are."

Chad clicked this radio, "Delta, go!"

Max grinned and took off around the wall, with Chad hot on her heels, as the rest of his small company charged as well. This was the hard part, their first goal was to capture a small group of eight or so defenders by overwhelming them with sheer numbers.

Then they'd remove their silver, and go after the next group.

Sean and a lot of the wolves had told him that once they were no longer worried about the kill pellets embedded in their bodies, that the captured wolves would side with them. Chad wasn't so optimistic. There were hostages involved, so he doubted any of them were going to switch sides that easily.

Which was why he'd sent all of the dwarves to take the bunker. That was



just as an important objective as gaining control of the remotes they were all worried about. Maybe even more so. It took almost a minute to die from silver poisoning. It only took about five seconds to put a collar and a tag on someone and stop it.

The first group they hit from behind didn't even know what was happening to them, until they'd been knocked to the ground.

But that was the only surprise that Chad's men got, because those being taken down made enough noise that the others all heard them.

"Damn! They're using silver bullets!" Max yelled as she got hit, her shield becoming active.

"Get down!" Chad yelled and grabbing her he yanked her down to the ground. "What the hell did you think they were going to be using? Marshmallows? What's wrong with you?"

"But we can't be hurt by silver now!" Max protested.

"Yeah, well obviously they don't know that. Now stop drawing fire and let's see how Greg and the others are doing."

"You were worried, weren't you?" Max asked with a grin as they made their way over to where Greg, one of his squad leaders, and this men, were putting silver tags on the wolves they'd just captured.

"Of course I was worried about you!" Chad grinned, "Who else is gonna make my dinner if you get killed?"

"Ass!" Max snarled and smacked him on the ass.

"Yes," Chad agreed, "that's my ass." He stopped by Greg, who was sitting on a wolf.

"How's it going with him?" Chad asked.

"Not good, Sir. He's not surrendering!"

Chad snorted, "Yeah, I can see that. Hog-tie them all. Set someone to make sure they don't get free." Chad looked down at the wolf on the ground who was snarling at him.

"Don't worry," Chad told him, "we've got people getting the hostages out."

Chad did a quick head count, they'd gotten six.

"Not a bad haul, now, let's get some more!"

Grabbing Max, he went to see about organizing a flanking maneuver to cut off a few more of the enemy to neutralize them.

"This is gonna be easy!" Max said.

Chad snorted, "They're not stupid. We'll be lucky to get three next time."

Roxy wanted to growl and she and Daelyn came up to the guard post for the kennel. Apparently the guards inside had already triggered the defenses, which were a series of metal riot gates over all of the windows and entrances.

"Wait here," Roxy told Daelyn.

"What are you going to..." Daelyn stopped talking as Roxy was already gone.

"Damn, she's fast," Samis said.

"Well yeah, she's a cheetah, she sort of defines *fast*," Daelyn grumbled.

Roxy raced towards the guardhouse wall, spinning around just before she hit it, and slamming into it back first. It hurt like hell, she'd probably been doing close to forty when she hit it. But she'd heal.

She just hoped that all of the noise outside covered for the sound of her body hitting the concrete. Pulling out one of the wands that her Sean had given her, she inched her way towards the corner, keeping flat against the wall. Once she acted she'd have to be quick, but then again, she *was* quick.

Spinning around the corner, she took ten steps away from the guardhouse, and then turning around she charged the door as hard as she could, and dropping a shoulder she slammed into the door with her body. She may not weigh more than a hundred and forty in her hybrid form, but a hundred and forty pounds at fifty miles an hour was a force that no simple metal door was ever going to stand up to!

Swearing loudly in pain as she crashed through the door, as she felt the bones in her left shoulder all breaking along with the door, she pointed the wand at one of the men inside and triggered it. Letting go of the wand, she spun around then and backhanded the other guard in the face with enough force to knock him off of his feet and into the wall, which he slid down, rather nicely, leaving a little bit of a blood trail as he did.

"Get your asses in here!" Roxy yelled and staggering over to a chair, she collapsed into it as she held her very broken left arm still with her right one. The grating of the bones was particularly nasty.

"Are you done showing off?" Daelyn said, grinning as she came into the guardhouse with her uncle right behind her.

"You may be stronger, Dae, but I'm *faster*!" Roxy said with a grin.

"How long until you can move again?"

"I can move now, it's just not going to be any fun for another couple of minutes. I think I pulverized all the bones in my shoulder."

Daelyn shuddered, "Rox, you definitely won this round." Turning to her

uncle Samis who was examining the control board she asked him, "Do you think you can raise those riot gates from here?"

Samis shook his head, "There's an interlock and I'm afraid to mess with it. We know there's traps inside and I don't want to risk triggering them. Let me get Horis and Garth to check the gates and see if they're trapped as well."

Roxy watched as Samis ran out of the open door. She could see the dwarves had taken up defensive positions around the entryway to the building.

"Who the hell names their kid 'Horis?'" she asked Daelyn.

Daelyn snickered, "We used to call him 'Horse Face' in school."

"What, is he ugly?"

Daelyn laughed and shook her head, "No, he's probably one of the most good looking men in the hill. It drove his mom crazy! Oh how she hated all of his friends."

"Your people are weird, you know that, right Dae?"

"Stubborn as hell too. Horis could have changed his name when he became a man, as his coming of age ceremony. Instead he showed up wearing a horse head hat." Daelyn shook her head and snickered, "I think his mother had a heart attack."

Samis came back in, "The riot gates are booby trapped alright.

"Can they disarm them?" Daelyn asked.

Samis nodded, "Already working on it. But you better call Chad and let him know. It's gonna be at least five minutes. It's tricky stuff and some of it's magical."

Roxy grunted and got to her feet, "I'll go help with the defenses, Dae. You can call it in and keep an eye on things."

Daelyn nodded as both Samis and Roxy left the guardhouse and started to check what was going on outside. A few of the defenders had noticed what was going on, but thankfully none of them were attacking, yet.

"Delta one, Kennel calling."

"What's going on, Kennel?" Daelyn heard Chad's voice ask.

"The doors are trapped, we're working it, but it's going to take a while."

"Understood, I'll keep the heat off. Delta one clear."

"So now what," Max asked Chad. He'd been right, they'd only gotten three in their next attack.

"We divide into two groups, and take the heat off the primary force, so

they can get in here and bulwark our numbers. Until we get that kennel situation cleared, it's going to be a simple war of attrition."

Max swore, "Well, I hope your friend Sean can stop them from pressing the button in there."

"You and me both, Hon." Chad sighed.

Max blinked, "Did you just call me 'Hon?'" she asked with a grin.

"Umm," Chad could feel the fur on his face bushing out in embarrassment. His first werewolf blush.

"Ha! Got ya!" Max laughed.

"Shush, quit distracting me, we got a fight to win," Chad sighed shaking his head.

Sean staggered out of the main building. He'd used up a fair deal of his own magic, and all of the wands he had brought were spent. Same for most of the ones the other wolves had brought as well.

The fighting in the main building had been rather tough, they'd lost another team member to a rather nasty spell, but they'd gotten their hands on the last of the kill switches. However, the defenders outside didn't know that, they still believed that they were in danger of dying, horribly, any minute.

Sean looked around; there were dead and dying everywhere. The attackers were trying as hard as they could to not use lethal force, and the defenders were using it and damn near nothing else. Sean was hearing reports over the radio now, about a quarter of the defenders had been taken down and purged of silver, but they'd still had to be immobilized, because they were fearing for their loved ones, who were being held in the bunker that Daelyn was still in the process of breaking into, with the rest of the dwarves.

"Shit," Sean swore and calling up his offense framework, he shot out a dozen paralyzation spells, but there were still dozens more, and now he was starting to draw fire!

*'You know, I could really use some of that mystical shit right now!'*

*'Yeah, no shit,' his lion sighed. 'I got this, shift...'*

Sean hadn't even waited, the moment he heard his lion agree, he'd shifted.

Sean roared, loudly. So loudly that every pair of eyes in the compound glanced his way, and every defender with a gun turned to aim at the rather large lion that was suddenly standing out in the open.

"My children!" Sean's lion yelled in a voice that carried far beyond

anything natural. "Stop fighting! NOW!" and he roared again.

Sean blinked as he found himself in control again. He was panting, hard, and surprisingly everyone had set down their weapons.

*Everyone.*

"The traps have been disabled!" Sean called out. "Now, let my people remove the silver from your bodies! Make sure we get everyone! Then we must leave!

"Now do as I say!" Sean roared and then plopped down on his ass to sit there and catch his breath.

*'Damn, that was impressive!'*

Sean got the distinct impression that his lion was either asleep, or just too spent to talk. Whatever, he'd sort it out later. Right now, he needed to go check on everyone, and see to it that people were following his orders.

Sean tried to get up on all fours and found that he was barely able to continue sitting upright without falling over.

"On second thought, I think I'll just sit here and supervise," he sighed.

With the fighting stopped, it took Chad and the other leaders only five minutes to get all of the defenders purged of their silver. It took another five to break open the bunker and get those inside out, as the helicopters came in to haul away Claudia's team.

As soon as Sean was able to shift, he grabbed one of the van's along with Roxy, Daelyn and Hunter's team and took off for the address that Harkins lived at.

"Where are we going in such a rush?" Roxy asked.

"Harkins' house."

"He doesn't live at the compound?" she said, surprised.

"Apparently his wife didn't like it there."

"What's the rush?" Daelyn asked, "We got everybody."

"Harkins is the one who paid to have my father killed, and is the one that started all of this."

"So?"

"So I'm going to kill him," Sean growled.

"Hon," Roxy said, "right now I don't think you could kill a fly, you're completely wore out."

"I have to get to him before that hyena does."

"What?"

"Woiseman, the hitman. The guy who killed my father. I cornered him and we had a little talk. He had an agreement with my father. My dad knew his days were numbered, no matter what he did. So he got Woiseman to promise not to let them kill me or mom, and in return he gave Woiseman his prototype silver protection device.

"Harkins was one of the people who swore the oath. So now Woiseman is going to kill him for breaking his word, as he'd promised my father."

"Is that why you didn't kill him?" Daelyn asked.

Sean growled, "Yes. He had a deal with my dad, and he lived up to it, and he wasn't done with it."

"So why not let him kill Harkins?"

"Because I want to be sure he's dead," Sean grumbled.

Pulling up in front of the house, Sean got out of the van and headed for the front door. Surprisingly, when he got there, it was unlocked.

Stepping inside, he could smell it: blood. Following the scent he stepped into the office. Lying on the floor was Harkins, quite dead. Pinned to the wall, and panting heavily, was Woiseman.

"Care to help a guy down?" Sal grunted.

"Damn, that looks painful," Roxy said.

"You got that right, it is."

"Why haven't you pulled yourself off?"

"Rough night," Sal grumbled, and then looked at Sean. "So, Kid, either kill me or help me. But don't just stand there. Sooner or later the family is gonna wake up."

Sean growled and raised a hand to kill the man who had killed his father.

"Sean," Roxy said, taking his arm and pushing it back down, "no."

"Why not?" Sean said turning to look at her, the pain and hurt visible in his eyes. "He murdered my father! He took my dad away from me!"

Sean sniffed and felt the tears start to run down his face. "This is the man who hurt me! Hurt my mom! Took away my family! He ruined my life!"

"Sean, the man who did that is dead on the floor. You said it yourself; your father knew his days were numbered. He made the best deal he could for you, he died on his own terms. Yeah, that hyena may be a murderous piece of shit," Roxy growled and shot Woiseman a look, "but you're not."

Sean lowered his head slowly and gave Roxy a hug, trying not to sob as she lead him out of the room.

"Cut him down, Dae. And try not to get any blood on you," Roxy said as

she left with Sean.

Daelyn looked at him and growled, "Sean's dad was a friend of the family. After I get you down off of there, I'll give you a twenty-minute head start. After that, every dwarf in Reno is going to be on your ass."

Sal sighed, "I get it, truly, I do. I'm a bad man and I'm not welcome anymore. Now, can you get this thing out of me?"

"Of course," Daelyn smiled and grabbing his coat she pulled him off the spike with a hard yank, causing Sal to almost scream in pain as he slid off it.

"Gee, thanks," he growled.

"Think nothing of it!" Daelyn laughed, and then headed out the door to catch up with the others, as Hunter and his group freed the lycan servants in the house.

"I think maybe I should just go to Florida and stay there," Sal grumbled and limped off after them. At least his car wasn't all that far away.

Arthur watched as the last of the vehicles left, taking all of the attackers, the freed lycans, their wounded, and their dead, with them.

"How many died?" Arthur asked Bill, who was talking on a radio to someone in the attacking force.

"Eight of our people, and over a dozen of the defending lycans," Bill sighed.

"And the Ascendants living there?"

Bill shrugged, "As far as I can tell, none of them. There were a couple who got hurt bad and are going to need medical assistance, but the dwarves have made it clear and Sean agreed, that if we started killing people, we'd be no better than them."

"Plus it would enrage the other councils?" Arthur suggested.

Bill nodded. "If they see it as just losing their slaves, maybe they won't fight as hard. It's not like their lives are on the line."

"Well, let's give it a few minutes to settle down, then I'll drop the spell and break the circle," Arthur told him. He and the four other senior mages he'd brought with him had cast a circle of silence around the entire estate, so that nothing that happened inside could be heard outside. It was a spell that most houses knew, but one which Sapientia specialized in. The purpose of it was simple: when a house raided another house, the mundanes had to be kept unawares of the battle going on. If it had been daytime, Arthur could have even added an illusion to the spell, to keep unwanted eyes out.

"Are those your people coming back?" Arthur asked as five large vans pulled into the compound and people piled out, armed with what looked like rifles from here.

Bill shook his head, "No, I have no idea who those people are."

As they watched, the new arrivals all ran into the buildings and as Arthur and Bill were on the inside of the sound shield, they could hear the muted sounds of gunshots from inside the buildings.

"They're killing everyone," Arthur said surprised.

"Can you do anything?" Bill asked.

"If I do anything, it'll drop the circle, and as I said before, I can not get involved."

"But this isn't our fight!" Bill protested.

"I don't know that," Arthur sighed.

Looking down at the center of the compound, Bill saw one man directing things. Grabbing his binoculars, he looked down to get a better look at the man.

"Shit," Bill swore and handed his binoculars to Arthur, who looked as well.

"Morgan," Arthur sighed, "I should have known."

"Known what?" Bill asked.

"Morgan hates the Ascendants with an almost religious fervor. With their defenses gone, I'm not surprised he moved in to finish them off. He's probably been waiting for Sean to attack for weeks now."

"And this way he can claim we did it!" Bill growled.

"I can't drop the circle, until they're done," Arthur sighed, shaking his head. "None of us can risk the exposure."

"But you will tell people what you saw?"

Arthur nodded, "When the time is right, or when you ask. They didn't request us after all, so they have no right to expect *my* silence."



## Fellowship Meeting, Friday

"So," Sean said looking around the room at all of the faces, "the Vesti's came in and wiped out everyone we'd gone to all of that trouble to leave alive. Further, they went to the houses of all of the senior council members and killed everyone there, man, woman, child, lycans, everyone, and then just took the lycan bodies away to make it look like they'd been freed.

"In fact, the only places where they weren't able to kill the council members were when our people got there first, and were able to run them off."

Sean was seated at the foot of the table, he'd made it clear to Bill, his father-in-law, that he didn't want to run the meetings or be in charge of the Fellowship. However he'd made it equally clear that when push came to shove, he expected to get his way.

Yeah, he was being a bitch about it, but right now, he didn't care. Maybe it was his lion starting to rub off on him? Sean didn't know. It could just as easily be that right now he was just really tired of all this shit. If he hadn't promised the dwarves not to start a war, he'd be leading everyone on an immediate attack to do just that to the Vestibulum after the crap they just pulled.

"Does this mean we're at war with the Vestibulum then?" Jeffery, the head of the bear clan asked.

Sean sighed and nodded, "Yup. They just committed mass murder and are trying to hang the crime on us. Thankfully we have witnesses to prove otherwise, but we haven't brought them forward just yet."

"Is that wise?" Jeffery asked.

Sean grinned at him, "It's the course we're pursuing at this time. If you wish to suggest something different, please write it up and submit it to me after the meeting."

Jeffery grumbled and pulling out a piece of paper he actually started writing on it. Of all the people there, Jeffery actually worked for the state government and had a love of forms and paperwork that Sean just couldn't understand.

"What about the dark elves?" Boris asked.

"What of them?"

"What were they doing there?"

"Best I can figure out is that the nice folks over at the Ascendants missed

their lycan sex toys and servants so much that they decided to pursue other options. The girls have told us that they were sold off as slaves after their family lost in some sort of power struggle in the sidhe, or wherever the hell it is that they come from."

"What are you going to do? Send them back?"

Sean shook his head, "They can't go back. They're effectively exiled right now. That may change someday, but for now, they're stuck here." Sean held up a hand, "Just to be clear, I have no idea what we're going to do with them, I've left it up to them to decide."

Ted laughed, "They could make a mint as a lounge act in Vegas. I've heard their voices. If they want to, send them to me and I'll get them set up right."

"I'll be sure to mention that to them," Sean said with a nod.

"What about our dead," Jorge, the representative of the Nevada boar clans asked.

Sean sighed heavily. "There really isn't anything I can do for their families beyond thanking them and giving them a bunch of extra tags and collars to sell or give away as they wish. I've thanked them all, personally," Sean remembered doing that this morning before the meeting. That had sucked beyond anything he'd ever had to deal with before, "and I've let them know that if they ever need help, to ask me.

"I've especially thanked Claudia," Sean motioned to her and she nodded back, "for the use of her strike team. Chad is also setting up a couple of strike teams," Sean nodded to Chad, who nodded in return.

"I think the time has come for all of you to start considering such measures. I'm starting to think that the Vesti's are going to be by far our most dangerous and nasty opponents."

"Maybe we should seek to compromise?" Jeffery asked.

Clyde, from one of the horse clans shook his head, "When you compromise with evil, evil wins. Jeff, I know you're the cautious type, I honestly can't blame you. But this is where we are. Our ancestors came out west to get away from this very thing, which has followed us here. It's time to make a stand and put an end to this, once and for all."

Sean smiled, he'd have to find the time to talk with Clyde at some point, he was a pretty solid guy.

"Okay," Sean said, "I've got nothing else for you all right now, and I have a lot of things to deal with, among which is trying to make all of those

tags you're asking me for. So I'll leave you all to continue on with your usual business."

And with that, Sean nodded to everyone and left the room. They could bitch about him after he was gone, he was sure Bill or Chad would fill him in later.

"How'd it go?" Peg asked as he joined the others back 'home.'

"Quickly," Sean smiled, "it went very quickly. Apparently they remember what happened with Michael, so they don't argue to my face." He turned to Roxy and Daelyn.

"What's the story on the wolves we freed? How many want to stay with us?"

"All of them," Roxy sighed. "At least Chad isn't complaining about it."

"Well, he's got enough troubles as it is right now. Do we have space for that many?"

"I'm sending forty of them to the bunker," Daelyn told him. "I've even worked out a deal with my uncle to get a bunch of them jobs."

"Really? Wow!" Sean smiled, "Doing what?"

"Delivery drivers. He hates pulling his workers off the line to go deliver product. Most of it's only part time, but it'll still give them something to do as they settle in to their new lives."

"Thanks, Hon!" Sean smiled, and then turned to Jolene. "What's the story on our elven friends?"

"Well, the younger two, who actually are twins, are still scared spitless," Jolene sighed. "They're not even eighteen yet. Cali, the redhead, is a little older and a lot more grateful, though I think she's still suffering from culture shock as well as the shock of going from a slave, to being free in an alien culture as well as a foreign land."

"And the oldest one?"

"Deidre. She's about a hundred years old, near as I can guess."

"What?" Sean's eyes widened in surprise.

"Elves are long lived, Hon. I thought you knew that?"

"Still, knowing it and seeing it are two different things."

Jolene shrugged, "She's an adult by their standards, where the other three are not. So they look to her for guidance right now, and she's asked how long are they welcome to stay, and what can she do to show her gratitude?"

"Is that a come-on?" Sean sighed.

Jolene laughed, "Very much. She's worried about being put out on the street and knows that she and the other three wouldn't last ten minutes on their own right now."

"Well, they can stay here, or in the bunker I guess, their choice."

"Don't put them in the bunker," Daelyn warned.

"Why not?" Sean asked.

"Dwarves and dark elves have a history, and it's not a good one. Being as we both tend to live underground, there have been some conflicts over the millennia. Now while I don't think anyone in my hometown has ever even seen a dark elf, some dwarves can be pretty superstitious. I would say that for now, it's probably better to keep them away, far away."

Sean nodded, "Jo, tell them they're welcome to stay *here* as long as they want, and sexual favors are not required."

"What, not gonna try for another wife?" Jo teased.

"I don't think I want to date a woman who's eighty years older than me," Sean grinned, "Plus I'm still breaking in Peg!" He laughed and leaning over gave Peg, who was blushing, a hug.

"So what's next on the schedule?" Roxy asked. "When are we taking on Vestibulum?"

Sean shook his head, "I honestly don't know. I need to spend a few days working on my machine downstairs, as well as cranking out a lot more collars and tags. We definitely need a cash influx. Further, some of the items I picked up off of that guy were pretty interesting, so I want to see about improving things for all of us.

"The Vesti's are at least three times the size that Harkins' group was, and have a lot more lycans. Also after that little stunt they pulled, we know that they're a lot more cold blooded than we thought."

Jolene nodded, "True, but once the truth comes out about what they did, I think they'll find themselves a lot more isolated than they are now."

Sean shrugged, "All I can say is, I hope so."

## Dream a Little Dream

Sean looked around as he opened his eyes, he knew he was dreaming, but this time they weren't in the clearing. They were on the side of a mountain somewhere, with a view that stretched out for miles.

And there were lions everywhere below him. Thousands of them, sitting there, waiting, watching.

Turning around and looking up the mountain there was just the lion that was *his* lion.

"Where are we?" Sean asked.

"The meeting of the gods," his lion said with a smirk, "yes, we were all rather full of ourselves back then."

"You all had a meeting?"

His lion nodded, "Every lion that was still alive, that was descended from those of us in the clearing, we all made our way here, to talk, to discuss certain realities that we'd begun to notice."

"What reality? What had you noticed?"

"That I was dying."

Sean looked at him confused, "We all die eventually, why would that cause such an issue?"

"Remember what I showed you in the second dream? The village?"

Sean nodded.

"That was many years after the first dream. How many, I don't know, because when we first became aware, we weren't all that intelligent. But I suspect it was at least a hundred years, maybe more, it's possible that it was hundreds, maybe even a thousand."

"Wait, lions don't live that long, how could that be?"

"Yes, exactly, how could that be? As we got older, we got wiser, smarter, our intelligence grew. There was a time when I was the king of a small kingdom, and the other lions and I played games of conquest and war, pitting our lycan armies against one another. Then we all grew bored of that game and moved on to other things. By that time I suspect I was over ten thousand years old."

"Ten thousand years?" Sean looked at him in shock.

"We couldn't die, Sean. Not those of us in the original clearing. We didn't age, and it was almost impossible, if not impossible, to kill one of us. Our offspring, our direct offspring that came only from mating with one

another, who were pure lions like us, they were the same, and so were their children.

"We were everywhere in the world. But one day, we noticed that we could no longer reproduce, and that the youngest generation was not as strong as the oldest. They were growing old, and dying. So the word went out, that there would be a gathering of all of us, in a hundred years, on this remote mountainside, where I and my brothers and sisters had taken to meeting every thousand years, to talk."

Sean shook his head, "I find this a little hard to believe! How old were you?"

Sean's lion laughed, "The fact that I'm in your head should be enough to convince you, but at this point I suspect I was somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty thousand years old."

"But, but how?"

"Who knows?" he shrugged, "We had no idea what created us, or why. But we could tell, I could tell, that we were starting to slow down, to grow old, that our time had come, and we would not rule the world for much longer.

"So we gathered here all of us for one last time, to try and understand that which was happening to us. We had thought ourselves immortal, we had thought ourselves gods, and we were now all learning that even gods have an end, and ours was upon us.

"So we discussed and we debated. We talked about the good we had done and the bad, we wondered what would become of our children without us to guide them, and realized at that point that we really hadn't been very good stewards of the lycans we had created.

"We resolved to set forth in our remaining days and do right by those children of ours, whom we had first created, and then used as pawns in our own games of pride and power, before just abandoning them to their own devices. Honestly, it's a miracle that they didn't all die out after all we had done to them.

"We gave them laws, we gave them traditions, and we gave them a purpose. By then modern man, while still primitive, outnumbered our children greatly and we could make no more. Modern man was also a lot more determined and was now possessed of his own tricks, namely magic.

"So we entered into a partnership with the magic users, who were not common and were often enslaved or killed by those who sought to use them

for their own purposes: the lycans would protect them and their families, they would in turn raise and train lycans, civilize them."

"And then what?" Sean asked.

"Then we died," his lion answered. "All of us, we started to fall quickly. In a space of two weeks, all but a hundred of us were gone. Only the very youngest were left. But then a most curious thing happened."

"Yes?" Sean prompted.

"Those hundred were able to have children once more, and those children were us, reincarnated. With the passage of time, and our cycling through being alive again and again, we learned how to exist in those times when we're 'dead' and we learned how to talk to each other as well.

"What it comes down to, is that when you are bit by a lion, if you are judged worthy of a lion's soul, one of us inhabits you, and you become a lion. If one of us does not, you die. Also, a child cannot be born, if there is not a soul ready to be reborn. The number of lion souls that can be alive at any time, is tied to the number of lycans that exist. During our height, when we lived as kings and fought our wars of pride, there were many more lycans in the world than there are even today.

"In our foolishness we destroyed ourselves by cutting their numbers through both our wars and our neglect. This resolved us even further to be better stewards of our children, for if they all die, we will all die as well.

"And of course, just as we abused our children as we became prideful and full of ourselves, so too have the mages that we once entrusted them too. We put up with centuries of abuse by the mages because we really had no choice. We encouraged many lycans to live free, as they became smarter and more civilized and could do so without consequence. Now we seek to end the agreement that put so many of our people in bondage and consequently has held our numbers in check.

"And that is why you are here."

"Why me?" Sean asked.

"Because you are your father's son. Your father was a good man, Sean. When Sampson asked him one day to help with our problem, and explained to him our need, he did so without a second thought. Your father lost everything because of us. We knew that you would pick up his fight, when the time came for you to learn about it."

"Did you really try to get Sampson to bite me?"

His lion chuckled, "Yeah, but he said you deserved the chance to become

a young man before I came along. He didn't want me overwhelming you."

Sean nodded and thought about that.

"Just how did you get everyone to stop fighting, anyway?"

"Remember how I told you that we all have a connection to our children?"

Sean nodded, "Yes."

"All of the wolves that fled to this country after the great purge in Europe are my descendants."

"All?" Sean said, surprised.

"I like wolves, a lot," his lion chuckled, "they form family groups not all that different than a lion's pride. I was the one in the family who didn't want everyone to drift away, that's why I stayed in Europe long after everyone else was gone. I was the oldest, had been the leader of the pride." Sean's lion sighed, "I guess you could say I was compensating. But that's why there are more wolves than any other lycan out there."

"So, you *really* like wolves?" Sean chuckled.

"Maybe you could add a few to the pride? Just to make an old lion happy?" his lion teased.

"I'm going back to sleep," Sean said. "Before this conversation gets me in trouble."



## Saturday Morning

Waking up, Sean looked at the clock, it wasn't six yet, but for some reason he couldn't sleep. Actually, there were a lot of reasons that he couldn't sleep, it seemed every time he dealt with one, a bigger one rose up to replace it.

Carefully untangling himself from the girls, he got out of bed and walking out of the bedroom he could hear sounds coming up from downstairs as he stepped out of their room.

He really didn't want to talk to anyone, so grabbing his phone and a jacket; he went up onto the roof.

He'd been up there maybe five minutes when the door opened up and Jolene stepped out.

"Here, spread this out," she said and threw a sleeping bag at him.

Catching it, he did so. It was a fairly large one, surprisingly.

Jolene handed him a pillow, then she surprised him by dropping the robe she was wearing, and shivering as she winked at him, she slipped into the sleeping bag.

"Burr, it's cold!" she said looking up at him.

"It's like forty degrees out, of course it's freezing!" He laughed, grinning down at her.

"That was a hint, Sean. Now get naked and get in here with me."

Sean wasn't wearing all that much, so it only took him a moment to lose the pants and his jacket.

"My, aren't we the demanding one," he said, smiling at her.

"Hey, you made me your wife, that means I get to make all the demands that I want!"

Sean cocked an eyebrow at her, "Oh? And just what demands are that?"

"On your back, and I'll show you!" Jolene said with a saucy grin.

Doing as he was told, he was both pleased and surprised as Jolene disappeared down into the sleeping bag and started to use her rather talented hands and mouth on him. Jolene was as fascinated with oral sex as he was, and as she'd taught him everything he now knew about it, she was incredibly good at it.

She had Sean reduced to nothing more than gasps, and loud moans of pleasure in fairly short order. She didn't stop until he'd satisfied both her ego and her hunger, as well as his own lustful desires, and then climbing up his

body, she'd fitted him inside before his erection could flag, and started up again, riding him with a very lustful expression on her face.

Grabbing her hips and working in time against her motions, Sean just looked into her eyes and enjoyed himself. He could feel Jolene was feeding on his magic, and it didn't take him long to find out just what she was doing with it, as the air around them started to warm up.

"So you're having sex, so you can warm up the air around us, so you can have sex?" Sean laughed, panting.

"Can you think of a better reason?" She moaned back at him.

Sean had to admit, he couldn't.

Jolene, being Jolene, it didn't take her long to have her first orgasm, or her second, or all of the ones after that, which he didn't even bother to count. He knew that sometimes Jolene missed her former wanton and lascivious lifestyle, and having just plain old hardcore lustful sex out in the open on the roof of their building must have really been hitting the spot for her.

By the time she began slowing down, he was more than ready to go again, so rolling over on top of her, Sean just let her have it, hard and fast, getting just as loud as she was, until with two very loud cries of passion and lust, they both came together.

"Hmmm," she sighed, cuddling happily against him, "I think I'll keep you."

"And here I was worried you might not love me anymore," Sean teased and then yelped as she bit his nipple.

"Don't even joke about that," she warned him with a little growl of her own.

Sighing, he hugged her and kissed the top of her head. "I love you very much, Jolene Valens. And you are never ever getting away."

"That's more like it," she said, cuddling up and almost immediately falling asleep looking happy and content.

Putting his arm around her, he laid back in the sleeping bag just enjoying the feeling of Jolene curled up under his arm and just stared up at the sky and started to think about things. Things like what he needed to do next, and what he needed to do differently, as well as just how the hell had he gotten to this place in life?

The more he thought about it however, the more it all just came back to his biggest problem, the one that was looming not on the horizon, but right in front of his face: The Council of Vestibulum.

They were big, they were powerful, and they apparently had a plan of just how to deal with him and his little revolution. He still was having trouble wrapping his head around just what they'd done to the Ascendants. Best as he could figure it out, they'd killed over two hundred people Thursday night, and they'd done it all in cold blood.

They hadn't spared anybody, except for in the few cases where they'd been blocked by Sean's people, and that had been just plain luck.

Then there were the wolves. His wolves. He'd added another one hundred and thirty-two from his attack on the Ascendants. Those were the ones they'd rescued from the compound, as well as those they'd gotten from the raids on the members homes. Of those, seventy of them were trained fighters, and all of them had marketable skills.

With all the cooks and servants he'd picked up, he figured he might as well open up a restaurant. Daelyn had teased him about opening up a strip club, considering the number of rather attractive women they now had, but he told her flat out he feared even suggesting such a thing would get him killed, and that she probably shouldn't even be joking about it. Too many of the lycan females had been abused by the Ascendants, and the last thing he wanted to do was to be anything like them at all.

Interestingly enough, the Sapientia wolves had all rented a couple of houses within easy driving distance of the compound. About half had been let go, the other half could either live there, or elsewhere. Sean had heard that for now, those that could live there were, but they were all very busily exploring their options and Chad was moving aggressively to add them to his pack.

His phone started to vibrate then; he'd brought it up here, in case anyone needed him, as he really hadn't told anybody just where he was going.

Picking it up, he answered it. He might as well find out what this new problem was.

"Hello, it's Sean,"

"Sean! Finally!"

Sean bolted upright.

"Mom!"

"Yes, my son! It's me, your mom! I've been so worried about you! Where are you? Are you okay? I've heard some rumors, but, well, I'm not in the US right now, so I don't know how much of what I'm hearing is true."

Sean sighed and smiled, "I'm okay, Mom. Well, as okay as I can be, I guess. Yeah, a lot's happened, and not all of it good."

"Where are you? Are you still in Reno? Did Sampson get to you?"

"Sampson's dead, Mom," Sean said with a painful sigh.

"Oh *no*! What happened?"

"He saved me, when the Ascendants tried to kidnap me."

"You, you know about them?"

"I know about it all now, Mom. I was badly injured and Sampson was dying, he'd been shot with silver and well, Sampson bit me. I'm a lion now, Mom."

"Oh, Sean, I'm sorry," he heard his mother gasp. "We, I, well...."

"Mom! It's alright, Mom. I'm fine with it. It was the right thing to do."

"Are you sure, Sean?"

"Actually, Mom. Yeah. I kinda like being a lion. Oh, I got the geas removed, so I can practice magic now too, just like dad."

Sean heard his mother gasp, "You remember your father?"

"Yeah, I remember everything now, Mom. Jolene helped me get that all straightened out."

"Jolene? Who's Jolene?"

Sean looked down at Jolene who was smiling up at him.

"She's my second wife, Mom. You'd like her."

"Second wife? Sean! What have you been doing!"

"Being a lion, obviously!" Sean laughed.

"I think I better come home!" he heard his mother chuckle, "Obviously you're not in too much trouble!"

"I don't know, Mom, I'm not so sure how safe it's going to be around here. A lot has happened, and we're pretty much at war with the Vestibulum."

"What? And just how did that happen?" his mother demanded.

"Well, maybe I should start at the beginning...."

Sean spent the next ten minutes bringing his mother up to speed on everything that had happened. When he finished, it was quiet for a moment.

"You still there, Mom?"

"I'm still here. I want to say I'm proud of you for continuing your Father's work. You have no idea how much this would mean to him. How proud of you he would be"

"Thanks, Mom." Sean said, feeling his eyes tear up a little.

"I'm definitely coming back home."

"Mom, I don't think it's safe," he told her again.

"I'm going to bring some family along. I think you might appreciate their

help."

"Family?" Sean asked, surprised.

"I'm in Ireland, Sean."

"I didn't know you were Irish, Mom."

"I'm only half Irish, Sean."

"Oh?"

"I'm also half faerie."

Sean stared at the space in front of him in shock.

"You still there, Sean?" his mother asked as Sean sat there and tried to digest that.

"Yeah, Mom. I'm here."

"I'll call you when I get there. It'll be a few days."

"Okay, if you can't find me, go by Steve's shop. He'll know where I am."

"Okay, Hon. Take care of yourself, your mother loves you, always."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Bye."

Sean hung up the phone.

"Why do you look so shell-shocked?" Jolene asked. "I thought you'd be happy to hear from your mother?"

"My mom just told me that she's half faerie."

"Oh?" Jolene looked surprised.

"And she's bringing her family back with her."

"Oh!" Jolene said, looking a little worried now as well.

**End Book Four**

## Afterword and Recommendations

Hi! I'd like to thank you for reading the latest entry in the Sean Valens series: 'Head Down' I hope you enjoyed it, and if you did I would greatly appreciate it if you would rate and review it on Amazon. We do get rewarded by Amazon, when we get four and five star reviews, and of course, the more we get, the more we get rewarded.

What is that reward you ask? Simple: Amazon will show my book to people who they think will enjoy it, like you did.

So please! I'd appreciate it very much if you gave me a good review.

If you find any typo's or 'wrong words' please feel free to email what and where they were to me. Typo's *always* make it through, no matter how many people I have checking things.

**A Book Recommendation:** This time around I want to recommend the book of another writer I know that I happened to have liked a lot: 'Super Sales on Super Heroes', by William D. Arand.

<https://www.amazon.com/Super-Sales-Heroes-William-Arand-ebook/dp/B072HQB1B6/>

If you haven't read it, check it out, you'll probably like it. If you have read it, I believe the sequel is due out any day now (if not already by the time this book is published).

**Future Books:** If you'd like to read more about the continuing trials of Sean, as he continues to deal with the legacy of his father, and fulfill his father's dream (with the help of course of Roxy, Jolene, Daelyn, and Peg), please buy the next book in the series when it comes out!

**Book five:** *should* be out before Christmas. Because of the stuff that crept into book four that was supposed to be in five (hence the extra fifteen thousand words), the originally planned arc may end in book five, which means book six may be the start of the second arc.

**My Amazon Author's webpage:**

<https://www.amazon.com/Jan-Stryvant/e/B06ZY7L62L/>

**Occasional announcements at:**

<https://stryvant.blogspot.com/>

**Jan Stryvant website at:**

<http://www.vanstry.net/stryvant/>