



WILDWOOD *IN* WINTER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BIANCA D'ARC

Brotherhood of Blood ~ Wildwood

Wildwood in Winter

by

Bianca D'Arc

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She's kissed a lot of frogs in her day, but she has the feeling she's finally found a prince.

A simple first-contact mission goes horribly awry...

Arlo was just going up to Idaho for a quick visit to a possible new member of his extended Pack - a part-dryad who might be related to the Pack's Alpha female. What he finds is a woman who stirs his senses and challenges his perceptions on every level. He likes her. A lot. Maybe too much. What he doesn't like is the mage who comes calling, out for her blood.

Shared danger, shared adventure...

Running for their lives, Arlo learns that his new dryad friend is very powerful and incredibly ingenious. A woman after his own heart. His inner wolf wants to claim her and she seems amenable, but they have to deal with the people trying to kill them first.

Fate, it seems has ideas about her previously quiet life...

Pam is drawn to the handsome werewolf. She doesn't like the danger, but she wouldn't want to face it with anyone else by her side. Arlo inspires trust, and a lusty attraction like she's never felt before. Not only that, but he's the kind of guy she could easily fall in love with...if she dares.

DEDICATION

It's been about a year since my father died, and in that year, I've managed to bring to a close two outstanding story lines in my paranormal world. First, last summer, I wrote the *Trident Trilogy*, which solved the sea monster problem in *Grizzly Cove*. And now, with this set of four books, I am bringing an end to the story line started long ago with the dryad Leonora. I think Dad would be proud of the work I've done, even as I mourned his loss.

Not a day goes by that I don't think of him—and my mother—and miss them. I know they are around me, but it's still rather quiet here without them and I miss their counsel. I know they would be thrilled with my being able to continue to write the stories I love. They never read my work, but they supported my career change wholeheartedly, which meant the world to me.

This book, as all my work, is dedicated to them, but most especially to Dad, on the anniversary of his departure from this realm. I know many of you got to meet him at various conventions I brought him to after Mom died. She was scared to fly and he *loved* flying. But because he loved her, he didn't get to fly much when she was around. After she passed, I took him on my travels and he loved every minute of the adventures we had. He loved meeting the friendly people wherever we went and he loved getting out and going places.

So... To Dad. My first—and best—hero.

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PROLOGUE

Previously, in Wyoming...

“Where is she?” The Pack Alpha, Jason, stepped forward. He was facing Sally, the woman he had fallen in love with, his gaze speaking of his fear that the dryad, Leonora, had indeed died.

“She rests inside this willow until I can gather her granddaughters and bring her back,” Sally replied, her voice shaky.

“Then our Pack will guard her resting place.” Jason answered steadfast.

Arlo, one of the wolves watching all of this unfold from the perimeter, nodded internally. He’d taken an interest in the courtship between the Alpha wolf and the big city police detective, who would soon be the Alpha female of the Pack, if he wasn’t much mistaken.

“Good,” Sally replied. “Because I already sort of promised Leonora that you would.” Sally smiled a bit sheepishly.

Jason just took her in his arms and kissed her fiercely. In front of the toughest wolves in his Pack. That was a statement, if ever there was one. Arlo watched his fellows carefully to see what their response would be. He knew what he thought about the pairing, but he wasn’t sure what the others—particularly the single females—would think of accepting human Alpha female for the Pack, even if she was part-dryad.

Instead of growls of complaint, Arlo was satisfied to hear a chorus of joyful howls all around, painting the night with a symphony of sound. Approval. Arlo joined his voice to the others. The Pack had a new member, and their Alpha had a new mate. The Pack would be stronger now that its Alpha had chosen a strong female to be his partner in life and in leading the Pack. It was a happy moment for the entire Pack, and Arlo was glad to witness it, even if he remained stubbornly single.

When Jason let Sally up for air, he turned her in his arms to meet the gazes of the main fighting force in his Pack. Some

were in human form. Many were wolves. Quite a few of them were bloodstained, but for the most part, it wasn't their own blood. Sally's relief at seeing them alive and well was easy to read in the expression on her face.

"They all saw your power, sweetheart," Jason whispered loud enough for everyone to hear. "They accept you as their Alpha female." She looked into his eyes, seeming surprised by the idea. Jason looked suddenly uncertain, and Arlo shook his head. They were meant for each other, and it was clear to everyone but Jason that Sally was his already. But the Alpha went on in a tone that was more supplicant than sure. "If you'll accept me, that is."

"Accept you?" Sally seemed as dim as the Alpha did at that moment. At least to Arlo, who knew how this was going to end regardless of the Alpha pair's hesitancy.

"As your mate," Jason finally said it in plain enough language. "Your husband. For as many years as the Lady grants us. After all, wolves mate for life." Jason went down on one knee, and the few lingering howls stopped as the whole forest seemed to hold its breath. "Will you be mine, Sally?"

"Are you sure?" Sally asked. Arlo wanted to growl at her to just say yes already, but he waited along with the others to see how this would play out.

"Surer than I've ever been about anything. I love you, Sally," Jason assured Sally.

"Oh, Jason." Sally teared up. Reaching with one hand, she cupped Jason's cheek. He was so tall, even kneeling he was close to her eye level. "I love you too."

Relief flooded through Arlo, and the howls erupted around the forest again. Finally. They'd been dancing around each other long enough. It was finally time for celebration. Their enemies had been foiled for the time being, and the Pack would be stronger from this day forth. Arlo was happy with the results and hoped that more of his Packmates would be so blessed in the coming years. Finding a mate was a great thing, though he'd all but given up hope for himself after all these years of searching. Still, it was good to see his friends'

happiness. Wolves were Pack animals, and what was good for the individuals was also good for the Pack. That had to be enough for Arlo.

That, and doing his best to help solve problems and keep the Pack, and those who fought on the side of the Light, safe and secure. That was his mission in life now. It was a noble one, if a bit lonely at times.

The enemy was still out there, and Leonora was going to need help if she was to ever recover from the bullet wound that had nearly taken her life. Arlo would help with that in any way he could. Helping others and serving the Light was his job, and his honor.

All in all, it wasn't a bad life. He would have to be content with that.

CHAPTER ONE

Winter in Northern Idaho...

Pam heard the song of the forest, as she always did. There was snow on the ground, but that was nothing new this time of year. She lived in the wilds by choice, up in the tall timber of the forest north and east of Coeur d'Alene, that had once been logged almost beyond all recognition. These days, a lot of it was protected in various ways, and she made her home in one of the rare, unspoiled parts of the forest that had never been logged.

Not because of any physical impediment, though the slopes here were steep and logging was difficult, even with modern machinery, but because the place was protected...by magic. Somebody, long ago, had worked protective spells around a little piece of forest on the steep side of a mountain, and the homestead hidden within. It was Pamela's homestead now. She had inherited it from a friend who had done her best to teach Pam what little she knew of magic.

Her friend—an elderly lady named Sue, who had lived down the street from Pam when she'd made her home in Boise—had come from a magical family, or so she'd claimed. Sue knew a lot about the magical world but didn't have much power of her own, except that she had an occasional prophetic vision of the future.

The old lady had never had children, and her extended family had inherited the bulk of her estate, but Sue had left the cabin in the woods to Pam, much to Pam's surprise. The letter that had accompanied the bequest explained that Sue had received a vision about Pam living in that cabin and learning of her destiny there. Sue also claimed that Pam would find her true love there as well.

Pam had never done well in the city, and even though it was a bit lonely out here in the middle of the forest, she loved it. She sent a prayer up every day in thanks to Sue, who had made it possible for Pam to get out of the hustle and bustle of city life and find some peace. There weren't a lot of other

people around—none at all on her land—but there was plenty of wildlife, and the trees... The trees were amazing.

Pam had always had a way with growing things, and Sue had been able to tell her stories about all sorts of beings that supposedly shared the world of man. Shapeshifters, bloodletters, mages of every description. These were the tales Sue would share in the afternoons when Pam brought over a bakery box stuffed with goodies, and they shared a pot of tea.

Pam had always found Sue's house calming. Sue claimed that she had just enough magic to set wards around her personal space and tried to teach Pam to do the same, but with mixed results. Pam's magic wasn't really like anything Sue had ever seen, and she didn't know enough to teach things she didn't have personal experience with, unfortunately. But it was okay. Pam enjoyed the old lady's company, and Sue was a calming presence to be around.

Sue's family didn't have much to do with her. Sue claimed it was because her magic had always been negligible, and Pam didn't like what that said about Sue's family at all. So, when the bequest had come to her, Pam took it as a sign of friendship, even though some of Sue's family had raised their eyebrows at the gesture. Still, they had inherited quite a bit of money and other properties from Sue, so they didn't contest it.

Pam had sold the little house in Boise, moved north, and had never looked back. The forest up here sang to her from the moment she had arrived, and she had learned more about herself and her power in the few short years she had been up here than in all the years she had kicked around in cities, not ever feeling as if she really belonged.

Pam had been on her own ever since her father had died, shortly after moving to Idaho. Her mother had passed, tragically, when Pam was just a young teen, collapsing in the middle of a supermarket parking lot. She'd only been going to pick up a few groceries, but she'd never come back.

Stricken with grief, Pam's father had done the best he could, moving the two of them around a lot as he worked on different projects all over the country. He was a civil engineer,

and he went wherever the projects took him. His last work site had been just outside of Boise, and he'd moved them there before his accident.

He'd been nearly crushed to death in a stupid workplace accident when Pam was just starting college. He'd lingered for a few months, but the damage done to his body was just too much, and in the end, an infection took him away as well. From then on, Pam had been truly alone.

She was an only child, just barely an adult. She stayed in Boise because it was the easiest thing to do at the time. She had no real ties to any other place. No other family that she knew of. Her father and she had never lived in one place very long. They'd spent only a few months or, at most, a couple of years in each place, never really making lasting friendships, preferring to keep their circle small.

She'd often wondered, in later years, if it was because one or both of her folks had magic. She couldn't ask them now, of course. They had never spoken of it, and her power had only manifested after they were gone. Maybe one of them had been like her and had been waiting for her to display the talent before talking to her about it. She liked to believe that, though she wasn't sure.

Pam had finished college, though her heart wasn't really in it. Her elderly neighbor, Sue, had been there for her in a way Pam never had expected. Sue had simply arrived on Pam's doorstep the day after her father's funeral with a casserole dish, and Pam had invited her in. They'd sat in the kitchen and had tea while Sue listened to Pam, in her grief, and provided a steady shoulder to lean on.

Sue had become like a grandmother to Pam, and that summer, when Pam had tidied up Sue's back garden as a kindness, Sue had recognized Pam's abilities with plants and the earth as magic. That discovery had changed their relationship. Deepened it. Sue shared the secret of her own magic and the history of her family and her role in it.

Sue had opened up a whole new world of understanding for Pam, teaching her things about the magical world that she

had never known. They'd run a bunch of different experiments, trying to figure out what kind of talent Pam had, but Sue hadn't been able to nail it down.

Pam had finished college, and Sue had come to her graduation, cheering her on. Sue had never liked Brad, the boyfriend Pam had picked up her last year in college. They'd stayed together for a couple of years, and he'd really done a number on her self-esteem. When they'd finally broken up, Sue had been there to dry Pam's tears and listen to her tale of woe.

Then, that summer, Sue fell ill suddenly and passed away, leaving the house in the woods to Pam. Pam had grieved the loss of her dear friend, then followed Sue's final wish that Pam move into the house in the forest and find her destiny.

Pam had been living in the forest for a few years now and hadn't yet found that promised destiny. She'd sort of given up on it altogether, but she enjoyed the house and the solitude, for the most part, so she stayed.

Here in the forest, Pam had finally found peace within herself. She communed with the trees in a way that she still didn't fully understand and managed to live in harmony with the creatures that also lived among the trees. Even the predators. Somehow, she always knew when the dangerous ones were around, and she managed to avoid running into them unexpectedly.

Except for today. Much to Pam's surprise, as she walked through her forest, she came face to face with the biggest timber wolf she had ever seen. It just stood there, head alert, watching her.

"Oh, boy," Pam muttered, feeling her heart start beating faster as adrenaline rushed through her veins in the classic fight-or-flight scenario. "Nice wolfie." She kept her tone as calm as possible, though her heart rate had just skyrocketed into the panic zone.

She tried to think her way out of this situation. She could climb a tree. Wolves didn't climb. But that would leave her stuck in a tree for an indefinite period, and it was cold out.

She didn't see any other wolves around, though she believed wolves usually hunted in packs. Was this some kind of lone wolf? Was it hunting her? Or was this just some random meeting in the woods. And why hadn't the trees warned her? They always warned her about the big predators. Why not this one? Maybe this wolf was friendly or something? Maybe the trees didn't see it as a threat to her? If so, why not?

Those questions were probably better left until she was out of this situation. The wolf didn't look too hungry. In fact, it seemed well fed and rather calm. Maybe she could walk past it and get safely back to her cabin. She could hope the wolf just stayed where it was and didn't try to eat her as she sauntered past it.

Well, it was worth a try. If that didn't work, she could always climb a tree. If she wasn't too badly mauled by then to climb.

On that cheery thought, she began to move. Giving the wolf a wide berth, she sidled around, keeping as much distance between herself and the wolf as she could. It didn't move. It just sat there, watching her.

Until, that is, she got on its other side. She began to walk calmly toward her cabin, and the wolf got up and trotted quietly after her.

Shit! Why was it following her?

She tried to breathe slowly and keep calm, but it was definitely following her. It didn't seem to be gaining on her, just following at a steady distance.

It was acting more like somebody's pet poodle than a huge, wild wolf. It kept up with her without crowding her, but it was freaking her out! The wolf's golden-brown eyes were trained on her, but she didn't feel like it was menacing her.

When the cabin came into view, she breathed a sigh of relief. She was almost there. Now, if the beast would just let her get to her home without attacking. It didn't seem to be

behaving at all aggressively, so she might just make it. What would happen then, she wasn't sure.

If the forest couldn't be relied on any longer to warn her of danger, that was going to seriously curtail her outdoor activities. She didn't like the idea of that at all. But if the forest didn't think this wolf was dangerous enough to warn her about, then maybe it wasn't.

She couldn't think about that right now, though. She had to get to safety first. The house was in sight. Each step brought her nearer to her back porch and the door that led to her kitchen. To safety.

Pam kept one eye on the wolf and noted that it stayed behind her, walking at that same measured distance. It wasn't growling or anything, but it was definitely watching her. The intelligence in its eyes seemed almost uncanny.

A sudden thought occurred to her. Was this wolf—this unnaturally enormous wolf—a shapeshifter? Sue had told her stories about shifters and how they were usually larger in their shifted forms than the regular creatures of their species. Not that Pam was going to stop and try to have a conversation with this deadly beast at that exact moment, but it was something to ponder.

She stepped onto her porch and reached for the door. The wolf sat at the bottom of the steps and just watched her. Breathing deeply, she opened the door and then stepped inside and closed it behind her.

Sheesh! She needed to calm down. Adrenaline was still coursing through her system.

“If you're a shifter, that was really uncool, dude,” she said out loud into the silence of her kitchen.

Arlo heard the woman's words from inside and had to chuckle inwardly. He hadn't meant to intercept her like that. The wind had been blowing in the wrong direction, carrying her scent away from him. He'd just been doing a quick

reconnaissance run around her property to get the lay of the land before he decided how best to approach.

Intel said this woman—Pamela Auerbach—was one of the missing dryad descendants. It had been really hard to track her, but eventually, Sally's detective skills had come through, and she'd asked for help making contact since the cabin where Pamela lived had no phone service. Sally suspected Pamela had some kind of mobile phone—cellular or even satellite—but Sally had been unable to trace it. They'd had to send somebody to see her and make sure she was the right person.

Jesse had asked Arlo to run the mission since he was familiar with dryad magic after having worked to guard several of the others that had been discovered so far. Arlo was Jesse Moore's right-hand man these days in the shifter mercenary company he ran, known as the Wraiths. Arlo had been taking on more responsibility since Jesse had found his mate and preferred to stay close to home these days. As a result, Arlo had stepped up to run most of the high-level ops this past year or two.

He hadn't brought a team with him on this quick sneak and peek. He hadn't thought it would be necessary. All he had to do was check out one lone woman living in the middle of the forest. How hard could it be?

Arlo had planned to do a little recon first. Then, depending on what he found, approach her in as non-threatening a way as possible. He had contemplated engineering an encounter in the nearby town when she made a grocery run. Failing that, he had decided to just knock politely on her door.

He had been working up to that, in fact, but had wanted to check things out a little more first. Instead, he had run headlong into her in the woods, scaring her silly. Though, he had to admit, she had handled the situation better than he might have expected. She didn't panic, though she had been quite obviously frightened. She had kept a level head and had walked calmly back to her place, which told him she was good in a crisis.

Then she had surprised him again by muttering about shifters once she was safely inside her house. That told him a few additional things. First, she wasn't rattled easily, which was a point in her favor, as far as he was concerned. He respected that. Second, she had more knowledge of the magical world than most of the other dryads who had been discovered so far. Quite a few of them had been raised as regular humans and hadn't known much of anything about magic or even the existence of shifters.

Arlo made a quick decision and shifted to his two-legged form. He was naked, but that couldn't be helped. His clothes were back where he had left his truck, down the mountain a ways.

"Sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to sneak up on you like that. I didn't know you were there," he said loud enough for her to hear him inside the house. He knew she hadn't moved from the doorway. He could see her through the little window in the door.

The door flew open, and she peered out. "You *are* a shifter?"

She looked right at him, her tone accusatory. She looked so angry. Arlo privately thought it was adorable.

"Guilty as charged, ma'am," he admitted, leaning against the railing that bordered the steps up to the porch.

He'd positioned himself to the side of the steps so as to appear as non-threatening as possible. She also couldn't see much more than his chest unless she walked farther out onto the porch, but she was staying by the door, for now.

"I don't believe it," she whispered, searching his eyes.

"I can shift back if it'll help you believe, but if you don't mind my asking, how do you know about my kind?"

She seemed to think about that for a moment before answering. "The lady who left me this house had a lot of knowledge, and she passed some of it on to me before she died. She told me about a lot of different things, but you're the first shifter I've ever met," she admitted. "Why are you here?"

“I came to find you. If you’re Pamela Auerbach, that is,” he explained.

“Call me Pam,” she told him, seeming to unbend a little bit.

“I’m Arlo. I was sent to make contact with you by my Alpha’s new mate and her sister-in-law. They are both descendants of a dryad, and they’ve been trying to trace their extended family. They believe you might be one of their cousins.”

“Dryads?” She sounded as if she was testing out the word, learning its flavor. “That’s like wood nymphs or something, right?”

“Earth elementals with power over growing things.” Arlo expanded on the concept as he nodded. “From what I’ve seen of the dryads we’ve found so far, each one seems to have slightly different abilities. Each seems better with different kinds of plants or trees, for example, but they all have it to some extent. I’ve heard more than one of them say that the trees actually speak to them.”

“Huh.” She leaned against the doorjamb and seemed to think about that idea. “So, why are you collecting dryads?”

“Part-dryads,” he corrected her. “The bloodline is very dilute, but you all trace your ancestry back to a single dryad named Leonora.” His shifter blood kept him warmer than most people, but there was snow on the ground, and his feet were getting cold. “Look, I can explain this in more detail, but it’s kind of cold out here. Do you mind if I go get my clothes and my vehicle, and come back in about twenty minutes?”

She straightened and peered down at him. “You’re naked,” she observed, then blushed. “Sorry. I’m not used to dealing with shifters. You look like a coffee man. I’ll make some coffee for you, and it’ll be ready by the time you get back.”

Arlo chuckled, even as he shifted back into his wolf form and trotted off. He still wasn’t sure what to make of this surprising woman, but he liked her already. She had spirit and was very decisive. Those were both qualities he appreciated.

He retraced his steps, making a quick swing past the remaining perimeter of her land that he hadn't yet checked, then headed back to his truck. He shifted and dressed quickly, finding himself eager to see Pam again. Just that quick interaction had made him want to get to know more about her. He had enjoyed their conversation, which wasn't something he could say about his interactions with most people. Arlo was quiet by nature and usually took a while to warm up to new folks, but that wasn't the case with this surprising part-dryad. He wanted to get to know her better.

Arlo drove up the dirt drive that was packed hard with snow and parked in front of Pam's house. It was a cozy little cabin that blended in well to its surroundings and had been hard to find. He liked that. It meant it was more protected than most places, which appealed to his security-conscious nature.

The front door opened as he stepped out of his truck. Pam was there, watching him closely. She wore a big fuzzy sweater, and her dark hair hung in luscious waves to her shoulders. She was gorgeous, he realized. He hadn't seen the full effect before, but she was absolutely stunning with that dark hair and her luminous skin that looked as if it had never been kissed by the sun. She had a definite Snow White thing going on that he found altogether too appealing.

He walked up to the wide front porch slowly, trying not to spook her again. He paused at the bottom of the steps and waited for her to speak.

"Coffee is almost ready," she said. "If you don't mind, I'd prefer to talk outside. There's a fallen log right under that pine over there." She gestured with her mug. Arlo knew the tree she meant. He'd taken stock of everything in the area before he'd ever gotten out of his truck.

"Right. I'll wait for you over there," he replied, willing to play by her rules on her turf. He didn't want to anger her. He just wanted to talk to her.

CHAPTER TWO

Arlo walked over and sat on the fallen log under the pine tree she had indicated. He had to brush a little snow off of it first, but the cold didn't really bother him. His shifter blood kept him warmer than most people, and his clothing was designed for this weather. There was no wind to speak of today, and the sun was shining. All in all, it was a beautiful day in the snowy wilderness.

Pam came back out of the little cabin a few minutes, carrying a mug in each hand. She made her way over to the fallen log, and Arlo rose politely to meet her. She held out one of the steaming mugs to him, and he smelled the rich scent of coffee. He waited for her to sit before he reclaimed his own seat. They were gazing out at the forest, sloping downward sharply below them.

"Tell me more about these dryads," Pam invited.

"As I said, very magical beings. Elemental powers, in fact. Even a small measure of that kind of magic makes someone much stronger than your average mage, though only in one particular area. In your case, the realm of growing things and the earth." He paused a moment to take a sip of his coffee. "This is delicious," he enthused. He was a man who appreciated a good brew.

She smiled faintly. "I buy the beans through mail order and have it delivered to the post office in town every few months. It's worth the extra effort. Really good coffee is the one thing I miss living up here, but now that I've found the right supplier, even that isn't a problem anymore."

"Maybe if I'm a *nice wolfie*, you'll give me the name of the company before I leave," he joked, harking back to what she'd said when she had first encountered him in wolf form.

She shook her head even as she grinned. "Sorry about that. I never really imagined you would turn out to be a shifter, and it took me a while to even think that might be the case. I've seen timber wolves up here before—from a distance—but you totally snuck up on me. Usually, the forest warns me about any

big predators that might be in the area, but it didn't say a word about you." She eyed him suspiciously.

"Ah-ha!" He grinned triumphantly. "You *do* talk to trees. You *are* the droid I was looking for."

The old movie reference made her giggle. "It's more that the trees talk to me. But they didn't warn me about you."

He shrugged. "Probably because they know I'm not a threat to you."

She regarded him for a moment, sipping from her own mug. He paused to drink more of the delicious coffee. He wasn't in any kind of a hurry to conclude this charming interlude. That thought should have given him pause, but he wasn't thinking about much of anything at the moment, except maybe for how good the coffee tasted in the brisk mountain air and how much he was enjoying the company of this surprising part-dryad female.

Slowly, a change came over her expression, her brows drawing together in a frown. She lowered her mug, her words coming hesitantly and with a hint of sorrow.

"I wish I could be certain of that, but things have been happening lately that make me question everything."

The change in her demeanor, as well as her words, had him instantly on alert. Something was troubling her, and that meant trouble for him as well. He wasn't sure when it had happened, but sometime during their brief encounter Arlo's inner wolf had decided to take Pamela under his protection.

Maybe it was because there was little doubt she was the woman he had been sent to find. Maybe it was because, despite her magical nature, she seemed a bit fragile. Or maybe it was because her femininity spoke to something deep inside of him that had not often been roused.

Whatever the reason, Arlo found himself both curious and a bit angry that anything would threaten Pam here, in her home territory. A person's living space should be sacred. And for a dryad, Arlo suspected, the forest around her home was

part of that living space. Just like it was for him, and his inner wolf.

“Tell me what’s been happening,” he suggested, as calmly as he could under the circumstances. “Has anyone been threatening you?”

She shook her head. “Not directly. And it’s nothing that obvious. It’s just...” She looked around at the nearby trees, seeming to cast about for the right words. “There’ve been trespassers. Nobody I’ve caught in the act, but I know they’ve been here. Watching. Waiting. I thought, at first, that it might be hunters or something. But the locals know where they’re allowed to go, and what’s out of bounds. I have all my boundaries posted as private property, and I’ve never had a problem like this before.” She shook her head and looked at him. “I know it sounds crazy, but there’s a feeling of...of magic in the air. And not the good kind.”

Arlo’s hackles rose, even in human form. This didn’t sound good.

Pam didn’t really understand why she was telling this stranger about the weird things that had been happening lately. She just got a good feeling about him. He hadn’t tried anything untoward. He’d apologized once he realized he had scared her in the woods, and since then, he’d been the perfect gentleman. His story about searching for dryads struck a chord in her soul. It was as if, on hearing the word, something had clicked into place. Some missing piece to a puzzle she hadn’t really been aware of trying to solve.

Something about him felt...right. She couldn’t explain it any better than that. It was instinct, for lack of a better word.

Even though she probably should have been suspicious considering his appearance right on the heels of the other intrusions, she couldn’t bring herself to think he might be one of the bad guys. Not that she knew for certain that there actually were bad guys. That, like everything else, was just a feeling.

“I should confess,” Arlo spoke quietly, “that I was running the perimeter of your land before deciding how best to approach you. I didn’t intend to stumble across you in the forest. I just wanted to get the lay of the land before making contact. I’m sorry if I trespassed.”

“Well, you did trespass, but I suppose if you had intended to stay in your wolf form, I wouldn’t have been any the wiser. That still doesn’t make it right, but I’m willing to overlook it, since you apologized so nicely.” She gave him a sidelong glance. “What are you, some kind of commando werewolf?”

That got a bigger laugh out of him than she had expected. He was nodding, even as his laughter wore down to chuckles.

“I was a Green Beret, but I retired. Now, you might call me a mercenary, though I don’t like the negative connotations of that word. However, the group I’m part of does hire out on occasion. Mostly, these days, we work for other shifter groups that are having problems with such things as *Venifucus* attacks, *Altor Custodis* infiltration, and even the occasional sea monster.”

She didn’t know whether he was joking or serious. Maybe a little of both, she decided.

“I’ve heard a little bit about those two groups you mentioned from the lady who left me this house, but I didn’t realize Green Berets helped fight sea monsters. Even retired ones.”

His smile was really engaging. It sort of changed his whole face. He went from rugged and intimidating to approachable and even handsome. She schooled her expression, trying not to let on how attractive she found him. Give this guy an inch, and he’d probably take a mile. She wasn’t going to go down that road again. Pam had been too easily charmed by a handsome rogue once before. With disastrous results.

“The sea monster was a special case. A couple of Navy SEALs needed some Army backup.” He shrugged, though the grin was still on his face.

“So, you’re part of some kind of shifter mercenary platoon?” She tried to get the conversation back on track. “Did someone hire you to find these part-dryads or whatever it is you think I am?”

“Actually, this is a family matter. The Alpha of the Wraiths and the Alpha of the Pack that we’re part of are both mated to part-dryads. They’ve been tasked with finding others like them. I was asked to make contact with you, since I’m familiar with dryad magic from helping them and the others they have already found.”

“The Wraiths? I’ve heard of them. They’re supposed to be some kind of elite combat unit that only fights on the side of Light.” Pam tried to remember everything Sue had said about the fabled military unit, but Sue hadn’t known that much. Just rumors. “So, you’re telling me that you’re one of them? One of the Wraiths?”

Arlo nodded. “I’m actually the second in command, after the Alpha. The major isn’t doing as much fieldwork these days. Not since he mated.”

“And his mate is one of the part-dryads you’ve found? Supposedly some kind of relative of mine?”

“I didn’t actually find Maria,” Arlo stated with a humble expression. “Though, I was on the team that made first contact with her. It was her cousin, Sally, who’s mated to the Pack Alpha and is a former police detective, who’s uncovered the leads on most of her kin. She does the research and tracks down the intel, then sends someone out into the field to make contact.” Arlo paused a moment then went on. “Honestly, Sally really wants to make contact herself, but she’s newly mated, and it’s hard for mates to be parted. It’s also especially hard for shifters to allow their mates to put themselves in any sort of danger. Not that finding lost family members is especially dangerous, but most of the ladies we’ve made contact with have had bad guys on their trail.”

“Which might actually be the case with me,” she extrapolated. Pam shook her head. “I’ve been safe up here for years, but all of a sudden, something’s in the wind. I don’t

think it's you, or I wouldn't be talking to you. There's something else going on out there, and I need to get to the bottom of it. This is my land. My forest. My friends. I need to protect them."

Arlo nodded. "After having dealt with a number of your kind the past few months, I can't say I'm surprised. If you'll allow it, I'd be happy to help. Reconnaissance is sort of my thing, both as a soldier and as a wolf. I'd be happy to do a little investigating and see what I can find out about your trespassers. If necessary, I can also call the team back in Wyoming. Satellite surveillance might be very helpful, even with all the tree cover."

"Wyoming? Is that where you're from?" She couldn't help her curiosity about this handsome stranger.

"That's where the Wraiths are based," he explained. "I was born to a Pack that ranged north of here but that Pack disbanded and my family is in Colorado now." His jaw tightened, and she sensed there was more to the story, but she didn't pry. She had her own secrets, and she had learned to respect other people's privacy about their pasts.

"Well, I'll take you up on your offer to do some reconnaissance. I've done all I know how to do, which is admittedly very little. I don't have much experience with this sort of thing. Until I moved here, I had always lived in cities. I don't know much about tracking in the woods, other than relying on the trees to tell me what they see, but that's not always reliable—as my encounter with you demonstrates."

"But I'm not a threat. Going by the other part-dryads I know, the trees warn them about threats. However, there have been a few cases where magic was used to conceal the presence of danger from everyone and everything, including the trees. In which case, they wouldn't be able to tell you anyway."

"I really don't like the sound of that," she admitted suppressing a shudder.

"Well, first things first. I've already done one quick loop around the perimeter, but if you can tell me any particular

spots I should investigate, I'll put my nose to the ground and see what I can find." He finished the last of his coffee and stood. Pam followed suit. He held out the empty mug, and she took it. "Thanks again for the coffee."

"You're welcome." He held her gaze as he released the mug into her possession.

She couldn't help but feel there was some kind of connection being made here. Something she didn't fully understand, at least, not yet. But there was something about him. Something that made her want to trust him. Her instincts were clamoring for her to allow him to help. She would show him the spot she had discovered earlier and see what he made of it. She would go that far, at least.

"Let me just put these inside and get my coat, and I'll take you to a spot in the woods that bothers me. I've been trying to figure out exactly why but haven't had much luck," she admitted. "Maybe you'll have a better idea about why it's suddenly giving me trouble."

Arlo straightened, and she realized how much taller he was than her. Rather than intimidate her, she found it rather comforting. He was wide across the shoulders too. Big and brawny, muscular and sleek in a wolfen sort of way.

"That sounds like an excellent place to start, ma'am."

"Oh, please. My name is Pam. Not ma'am. Though, I do applaud your politeness. It just makes me feel about a hundred years old when somebody *ma'am's* me."

She walked briskly to the house and opened the door, leaning in to place the mugs inside and grab her coat, which had been right near the door. She shrugged into the coat and turned back toward him. He was smiling again. He had a really attractive smile.

"Take it from a guy who *is* over a hundred years old," he said, surprising her into silence, "you'd still be a knockout even if you were my age."

His words stopped her in her tracks. Sue had mentioned something about shifters living much longer than regular

people. All that magic had an effect. But she had never met any shifters before. Much less someone who claimed to be over the century mark.

Was it as impolite to talk about someone's age when they were a shifter as it was for a human? She didn't know what the etiquette was, and Sue had told her that there were certain topics one should never bring up in front of a shapeshifter. She remembered that asking about their animal was considered extremely rude. Did the same hold true for their age?

"I can see I've puzzled you," Arlo said, shaking his head as he approached. "Let me make it easier for you. I'm one hundred and seventeen, but that's considered like early middle-age for a shifter. Most of us live to about three hundred and fifty, if nothing else happens to shorten our lifespan. I don't mean like an illness or something. We generally don't fall prey to things like that. But we do get injured, and I've lost friends in combat. We don't always live peaceful lives."

"I'm sorry." She wasn't sure exactly what she was apologizing for, but it seemed the thing to do. "I know it's rude to pry."

"You didn't," he told her, his tone much lighter. "It would be rude to ask, but I volunteered the information. That's on me, not you. You've been remarkably discreet, as a matter of fact."

"The old lady who left me this cabin tried to teach me a thing or two," Pam admitted. "She said if I ever came across any shifters, I shouldn't ask any questions. I tried to learn everything I could from her before she passed. She was a great lady, even if her family didn't appreciate her gentle sort of magic." Pam felt a pang in her heart for the friend she had lost.

Arlo reached out and touched her shoulder, surprising her. "It's good to honor her memory."

Pam felt tears gather behind her eyes, and she blinked. This stranger—this shifter—seemed to understand her better than anyone she had known in recent years, and they'd only just met. Maybe there was something about carrying an animal spirit within your soul that made someone more sensitive to

the feelings of others. She didn't know, and she wouldn't ask. It was enough that he had reached out to offer comfort to a stranger. That told her a lot about him.

"Thanks," she whispered and felt him squeeze her shoulder lightly before he let go and stepped back. She missed his closeness but knew that way lay madness. She cleared her throat and began walking. "Let me show you the spot I was concerned about."

"Lead on, milady," he quipped, following along at her side. Was he ever going to use her name or was he going to continue using titles like *ma'am* and *milady* to tease her? She couldn't wait to find out.

A sudden thought occurred to her. If he had been born over a hundred years ago, he might have been around when titles such as *milady* were still in common usage. A time when there was still nobility roaming around, demanding that the regular folk use their hoity-toity titles. She was itching to ask more about his background, but she had already decided she wouldn't pry. She didn't need a pissed off werewolf in her backyard in addition to whatever else was going on in her woods.

The fact that she had so easily believed that he wasn't part of whatever it was should have troubled her, but those instincts were tugging at her common sense and telling her to trust this man.

She led him unerringly through her forest until she came to the trouble spot she had noted earlier. Something had happened here, but she couldn't figure out what. *Trespassers* was all she knew for certain, but they had been doing... something.

When she would have gone farther, Arlo's hand shot out, stopping her by the simple motion of touching her arm. She looked at him, an unspoken question in her expression.

"Stay here. I see what you mean about the area. Let me check for scent and tracks."

Trusting him to know his business, Pam held back, watching as he moved around the edges of the area she had found.

The snow was disturbed. She had noted it and edged as close as she could without trampling over the marks left by whoever had been there. She was glad she'd been so cautious earlier, now that she had a real tracker looking at the area.

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CHAPTER THREE

Arlo didn't like the look of this. Not at all. He stared at the arrangement of twigs and rocks in the snow and thought he recognized the pattern.

"If this is what I think it is," he told Pam as she hovered in the distance, looking worried, "we've got big trouble."

Pam frowned. "What do you think it is?"

"I'm not an expert, but it looks like an Elspian Ring. Very potent dark magic known to be used by the elite sorcerers among the *Venifucus*. Not every mage can handle this kind of power."

"You've seen this before?"

Arlo shook his head. "I was briefed on it. This particular brand of magic has made a resurgence in recent years as the *Venifucus* came back into the picture, though it is still somewhat rare, thank goodness. Still, we need to keep up with whatever we might encounter in the field as best we can. The High Priestess Bettina told us what to look for the last time she visited."

"High Priestess, huh?" Pam sounded impressed. "What did she say to do about this kind of thing?"

Arlo straightened from his crouch and pulled out his phone. "Call for help," he replied. "Or, at the very least, get a second opinion." He took a few photos of the ground. "At least there's service here. There are a lot of spots on your property that don't have cell service."

"I know," Pam replied, nodding. "I kind of like it that way."

Arlo shook his head and texted the photos to Bettina, cc'ing his commander with a short message about his circumstances.

Before he even put his phone away, it rang. Arlo answered it, one eyebrow raised. He was surprised by the quick response. It was Bettina.

“Hello?” Arlo answered. He’d never spoken with the High Priestess on the phone before, though she had given her number to all the officers within the Wraiths for just this kind of circumstance.

“Where are you?” the older woman asked without preamble.

“Northern Idaho,” he replied. “I was tasked to make contact with another of the part-dryads. She’s here with me. This was found on her land, and she asked me to take a look. Fair warning—there’s not a lot of cell coverage up here, so this call may drop out.”

“Understood. Put me on speaker, if you can,” Bettina ordered. Arlo did as he was told and held the phone up between himself and Pam. “When was it found?” Bettina asked, her musical voice coming out of the tiny speaker.

“I noticed it this morning when I was walking in the woods. The trees guided me to this spot. This wasn’t here yesterday, so it had to have been done overnight or very early this morning,” Pam replied.

“It’s good that you listen to the trees,” Bettina said, “but if this is that fresh, then you are in grave danger. It may already be too late to leave, but I would advise trying to make a run for it. I don’t think even the Wraiths could get to you quickly enough to help should the enemy make their move.”

“What are we up against, ma’am?” Arlo asked respectfully.

“At least one mage of extraordinary power. No one ranked below Adept level, as the humans reckon it, can cast an Elspian Ring, and that’s definitely what you have there. You must dismantle it very carefully. Your wolf will protect you from the backfire when you break the ring but be ready for the shockwave and stand back.”

Arlo motioned for Pam to walk a few yards distant, and he approved when she hid mostly behind a tree for protection. He followed Bettina’s instructions, reaching over from as far away as possible, using a stick to break the ring in a very specific

sequence. Even with the High Priestess's warning, he was almost bowled over by the magical shockwave as the power within that simple arrangement was released.

Arlo reported back to Bettina when it was done and she asked for a confirmation photo, just to be sure he'd dismantled it completely. When that was done, Bettina addressed Pam.

"Tell me, dryad, are you in tune with your power or just learning?"

"Uh... I'm somewhat new to the forest, but I've been learning a lot since moving up here," Pam replied, uncertain.

"Well, that's something, at least. Look, I really think you should leave there as quickly as possible. Come here, if you can. We're not far, as the crow flies. But, if you get stuck in a confrontation, make sure you're in your element, my new dryad friend. Arlo, you know what to do for your part, but do your best to protect her. I'm going to see if I can call in a favor and get you some help that might be able to arrive quickly, but I can't promise anything. I'd come myself, but things are happening here that I cannot leave at the moment. Do what you can to escape, but if you can't, stand your ground, and keep me updated. Go to the earth, dryad-child. The earth will protect you, and those under your care, as nothing else."

They headed back to the house as quickly as possible. When he would have moved toward the truck, she went for the door to her house.

"We don't really have time," he began, but looking around, he didn't see any imminent threats.

"There are things in there that I need if we're going places. I won't take long, and I won't take much."

"All right then. Fast as you can," he urged, standing guard by the door to the house, watching for any sign of trouble.

She was back faster than he expected with a forest-green backpack slung over her shoulder. She nodded at him and headed for the truck, cool as anything. Impressive.

He hopped into the driver's seat and hit the ignition, but nothing happened. He tried again then looked around. The

signs were subtler than he would have expected, but someone had been here. Someone had messed with the vehicle.

“Out of the truck,” he said in a low, urgent tone. “We’re not alone here. Be careful.”

“Make for the fallen log. That pine will protect us,” she told him, no fear in her voice.

He liked that idea. The fallen log was huge and would provide at least some cover. They might have disabled the truck magically, but the bad guys could also have conventional weapons. He had to consider all possibilities.

As they settled behind the fallen log, a man came into sight around the far corner of the house. He had graying dark hair and walked with a slight limp. He was of average height and had dusky skin and expensive taste in clothing. His loafers had to have cost a few hundred dollars, at least.

All of Arlo’s instincts told him this was an enemy, but so far, he had no clear proof that this man had done anything wrong. He just felt wrong to Arlo’s senses.

“Do you know him?” Arlo asked Pam in a low tone that didn’t carry.

She shook her head, and he thought he detected fear in her scent. She’d been so brave with him in wolf form, and ever since, she’d been terrific, but she was understandably shaken by the appearance of this man in the fancy clothing.

The stranger moved closer to the truck and looked around. Arlo watched his every move. He noted the moment the man noticed the additional footprints in the snow that led to and from the passenger side of the truck. They hadn’t been there before, and if the stranger was the same one who’d disabled the truck, he might just have noticed. The stranger walked closer to the vehicle, studying the ground for a moment before his head rose as he followed the path they’d just widened from the truck to the fallen tree. Damn.

The man started walking toward them. Arlo watched him approach, then decided a confrontation was in order. He needed to know who this guy was and what he really wanted.

Arlo figured he could guess, but he needed confirmation that this was, indeed, the enemy before he could act.

“That’s far enough,” Arlo called out. The man stopped in his tracks.

The stranger’s dark brows drew together in a frown for split-second, then he shook his head, and his expression changed to one of false goodwill. Arlo didn’t like this guy at all. Everything about him seemed false, from the tightly manicured curls on top of his head to his five-hundred-dollar shoes.

“I was led to believe the resident of this property was a woman, but I guess you’ll do. I’ve come to inquire about the land.” Even his voice held a cultured tone that struck Arlo as false. No way was this guy here to make an offer on the property.

“Then why did you disable my truck?” Arlo wasn’t going to play this man’s game.

“I did no such thing.”

False. Arlo’s inner wolf growled at the untruth ringing through the crisp winter air.

“Try again.” Arlo glanced at Pam and lowered his voice so that only she could hear his next words. “You’re not buying his act, are you?”

She shook her head vigorously, her eyes wide, her dark hair swinging to and fro. Thank goodness. She wasn’t being taken in by the man’s appearance and misleading words. Arlo nodded, his inner wolf satisfied that Pam was a sensible woman.

“Then you don’t mind if I continue to do the talking?” Again, she shook her head. “It’s better if he doesn’t know exactly where you are, so don’t talk unless you have to. At least, for right now. Stay out of sight.”

She was already hunkered down behind the fallen log. His words made her scrunch down a few inches more. He felt satisfaction running through him at the idea that she trusted him to handle this situation. He didn’t know what the man

intended, but it couldn't be anything good. Arlo's job, as he saw it, was to stall as long as he could and come up with a plan to keep Pam safe.

Right now, he had two choices. Either defeat the man standing in front of them and get back to the truck. If he went with that plan, he would also have to figure out what the stranger had done to disable the truck and get it going again before they could leave. The other choice was to flee into the wilderness.

This was Pam's land. She knew the area well. She was also an earth elemental, whether she realized the full extent of her powers or not. Taking his chances with a dryad in her home forest seemed like a better bet, at this point. First, though, he wanted to get the measure of this opponent. In all likelihood, the man was some kind of mage. If so, Arlo wanted to know what kind, and how strong. He had to get the other man to show his hand a bit. Knowledge was power, and any information about the enemy could prove helpful in defeating him.

"I merely wish to talk to the landowner," the man said, coming closer and peering around, looking for Arlo's exact location. That wasn't good. Arlo stood and moved away from Pam. He didn't want the man attacking and Pam getting caught in the crossfire.

"I don't own this place," Arlo said. "I'm just a visitor. Name's Arnie. Who are you?"

"Spencer," the man shot back as if talking to a servant. "Where is the owner?"

"Don't rightly know," Arlo said, hooking his thumbs in his pants pockets in an effort to look more the country bumpkin. "I just came up to visit, but the place is empty."

"Empty, you say?" Spencer looked around at the ground. "Yet there are two distinct sets of footprints. One much smaller than your own boots. I'm not completely unacquainted with hunting prey." His smile made Arlo's blood run cold.

“I’m not prey.” Arlo felt his wolf’s hackles rise beneath his own skin and couldn’t help the growl that sounded through his chest.

The man’s eyes fastened on Arlo and began gleaming with avarice. “Everyone is prey to the right hunter,” Spencer countered. “I came for the dryad, but you’ll do nicely until I can run her to ground,” the man said.

That did it. Arlo moved the man’s marker in his mind from *questionable presence* to *enemy*. If he’d had his squad here, the order would be *open green*. Engage at will with extreme prejudice.

But he didn’t have his squad. There was no cavalry—at least not anything he could really count on. The pseudo-promise of the High Priestess wasn’t anything solid. If they were going to get out of this alive, it was probably going to have to be up to them. Arlo included Pam in his accounting because he would never discount the dryad power. Not after getting to know a few of Pam’s distant relatives over the past few months. If she had even a bit of the power of her cousins, she could not be counted out of the action. In fact, she just might tip the balance in their favor, if she picked just the right time and right action against the enemy.

He wished he’d had time to formulate a series of plans and contingencies with Pam, but they’d just have to wing it and hope for the best. Arlo stepped closer to the thick trunk of the pine tree. Most magic slid off his wolf’s fur, even when he was in human form, but the tree would offer a little bit of cover should Spencer start lobbing mage bolts or something.

“I beg to differ,” Arlo said in a crisp voice. The longer he could keep this creep talking, the more time Arlo would have to study his enemy. “You won’t find me easy pickin’s.”

“What are you? A wolf?” Spencer asked speculatively, drawing magic to his hands in the form of an eerie red glowing ball. Damn. He did that all too easily for Arlo’s taste.

“Mind your manners, Spence,” Arlo tutted. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s impolite to ask a shifter about his other half?”

Spencer's face lit, and Arlo realized the man had been fishing for information that Arlo had just provided, but it didn't matter. Arlo had taken a calculated risk. Spencer had already sensed that Arlo was some kind of magical being. Confirming he was a shifter of some kind didn't give him that much of an edge in the coming fight. Spencer still didn't know what kind of shifter, and Arlo wasn't going to volunteer that information anytime soon. A guy had to keep some secrets.

Pam was appalled at the situation in which she found herself. She hadn't had visitors up here—ever. And now, she had two in one day. One who claimed he was here to help her. She believed he was. And this other guy. This man who called himself Spencer—was that a first name or a last name? Spencer had said, in just about so many words, that he'd come here to attack her. In her own home. In her safe place.

How dare he?

Outrage filled her, and she started to think about what she could do to help. If the man got closer to her favorite pine, she could ask the tree to detain him. It was a species of pine that had supple branches, and the tree itself had an adventurous and kind spirit. It was a fierce protector and had stood watch over the front of her home ever since it was built. This pine had liked Sue and had been overjoyed—like the rest of the forest—when Pam had come to live here after Sue's passing. The pine would help. As would the other trees.

If Spencer got close enough, she could pour energy into the pine so it could wrap him in its branches and hold him for a good long time. It would take some doing to get out of the tree's prickly embrace. Enough time for Pam and Arlo to make good their escape. Or so she hoped.

Pam tried to get Arlo's attention while he spoke to Spencer, but Arlo seemed lost in thought. Pam picked up a pinecone and tossed it at Arlo's leg, below the level of the fallen log, where Spencer couldn't see. Arlo didn't jump, but he did look over at her, casual as could be, as if he was just looking around.

She pointed to Spencer then made a motion with her hands sort of waving him closer. Then she pointed to the tree and hugged herself. She hoped Arlo understood what she was trying to act out. Pantomiming action plans always looked easier in the movies. Then again, Pam had never been in this kind of situation before.

“I haven’t drained a shifter in a long time,” Spencer said as he walked a pace closer to where Pam wanted him. “This should be fun.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Spence.” Arlo backed away from the pine tree, making room. Bless him. He’d figured out what she’d meant. “Tougher men than you have tried to get me, but none have even come close. You’re out of your league.”

“Really?” Spencer launched the magical orb he’d been forming at Arlo, and he ducked behind the fallen log. The magic was absorbed by the long-dead tree and dissipated, but the log was in splinters in that one section where the ball of energy had hit. *Holy crap!*

The red orb had hit like a missile and exploded the dead tree as if it were a little bomb. If she hadn’t seen it with her own eyes Pam wouldn’t have believed it though Sue had told her about combat magics. Sue had claimed that her family put a great deal of energy into teaching combat magic to everyone in the clan who had the least bit of ability. Sue had had none. All of her magic had been of a more quiescent variety. As a result, her family hadn’t thought much of her, or her powers, and had mostly left her alone. Which was just the way Sue wanted it.

As Pam watched, Spencer began to form another red ball of energy between his palms. She looked around for a way to get to safety without being seen.

“I doubt that very much,” Spencer taunted Arlo. “Give up now, and I won’t draw out your death any longer than I have to. Continue to resist, and I’ll make you suffer extra.”

Spencer lobbed another energy ball with similar results to the first one. Pam scuttled away, using a nearby bush to hide

her movements. Arlo was still a little too close to the pine tree, but he was drawing Spencer into position like a pro.

Pam watched as closely as she could from behind cover, placing her hands on the ground so she could feel the flow of the earth beneath her palms. She'd never tried to catch someone before with the help of a tree, but the tree itself was communicating with her about where to best place her power. The tree was a sentinel pine, it told her. It had long ago taken up this guard position in front of the house, hoping for a chance to shield not only the people who lived there and had pledged to protect the forest, but the rest of the trees in the area.

This pine was one of the oldest in the area. It was the progenitor of many others, scattered throughout the nearby woodlands. They would all help her, it promised, as would the other trees each with their different capabilities. The forest knew her for a friend. The first true friend it'd had in a very long time. This wildwood liked her even more than it had liked the mages who had first built the cabin.

Pam was flattered by the communication—the most she'd ever had in one go from any tree—but she was trying to focus on Spencer and the threat he represented. He moved closer, forming another red orb of energy between his palms. He was way too close to Arlo. Pam couldn't let Spencer release that magical hand grenade so close to Arlo. She had to do something!

CHAPTER FOUR

The sentinel pine signaled its readiness to Pam. She had to trust that it knew what it was doing, better than she. Pam released the energy she had gathered through the earth and into the roots of the pine, accelerating the growth of several key branches that reached downward.

The twiggy end of two branches wrapped around Spencer's wrists, pulling them apart so that the magical hand grenade dissipated harmlessly. The branches rebounded, wrenching Spencer's arms apart and above his head with shoulder-popping urgency. Pam winced as Spencer screamed. She wasn't sure if it was in pain or anger. Probably a bit of both.

But the sentinel pine wasn't done. More branches reached out with the help of her channeled energy and wrapped around the man, binding him tight, in midair. The tree would probably lose those branches as the mage fought free, but it knew that already. The pine was happy, even with the coming loss. It was fulfilling its purpose. It had stood these many years, just waiting for a chance to help in the fight against evil.

If there had been any doubt in Pam's mind before now, the rush of communication from the sentinel pine erased it. She had learned to trust the forest. The wildwood knew more about good and evil than she could ever comprehend. It liked and trusted Arlo. By contrast, it had seen Spencer as an enemy from the moment he entered the forest.

Pam took an extra few seconds to be certain that Spencer was fully immobilized before she lifted her hands from the ground. Arlo was signaling to her behind his back, motioning for her to get moving. To get away from Spencer.

Although the trapped man had to know that Pam was somewhere in the vicinity because nobody else could affect the trees the way she could. At least, nobody she'd ever heard of—or that Sue had ever told her about. So, he had to know she was nearby but that didn't mean she wanted him to see her. The less he knew about her, the better.

Pam tried to keep out of his line of sight as she scrambled into the forest. The truck was dead. They were trapped on the mountain. But she thought she knew a few places they could try to hide. Arlo still had his phone. There wasn't much coverage on the mountain but maybe they could find a place where he could call for help. Now that they were definitely under attack, maybe they could get somebody up here to give them a hand sooner, rather than later.

At the very least, they had to stay ahead of this guy Spencer. It was clear he didn't have any good intentions where they were concerned. He might've come here looking for her, but now that Arlo was involved, it was clear that Spencer would attack him as well.

Spencer had spoken of death. Frankly, that had shocked Pam. But Arlo hadn't blinked an eye. She'd have to ask him, when they had a chance, about what Spencer had said. Something about *draining*. Had he really intended to drain the magic out of Arlo, killing him in the process?

Sue hadn't really spoken of such things. The old woman would shudder and change the subject whenever the conversation wandered into those sorts of areas. Pam hadn't pursued it. She hadn't had that much contact with magic in her life. Not until she'd met Sue and learned more about her own abilities. Moving here, into the wildwood, had awakened something deep within. Pam had been more in touch with her internal magic since she'd come here than at any time in her life to date.

And now, it looked like some nut job was after her because of it. And poor Arlo was caught in the crossfire. She felt kind of guilty about that, but also relieved. If he hadn't been here, she probably would've been dead by now. Like Sue, Pam didn't really go in for violence. She wasn't sure, if push came to shove, that she could use her magic in a combative way.

Sue had been so against it. She had railed against her family's emphasis on combat magic many times in Pam's presence. Pam supposed she had gotten her dislike of such things directly from Sue. But when faced with someone trying to kill them, Pam found her indignation rising up and making

her want to fight back. Maybe she wasn't that much like Sue, after all. Maybe Pam wasn't the pacifist she'd always believed.

Pam made her way into the trees and slid partly down the steep slope. She was making a clear path through the snow, which couldn't be helped at the moment. They'd have to get to bare rock, and a lot of it, to hide their tracks. She knew just the place, but it was a little dangerous. These mountains had very steep sides that had made logging in the area notoriously dangerous in the old days. Part of the reason this particular bit of land hadn't been logged was because it was even trickier than most of the land around here.

The only problem with the bare rock was the lack of trees to hide them, but if they managed to get across a substantial portion of it before Spencer could break free and come after them, they might just pull this off. They could go back into the forest and be well hidden by the trees. Pam thought about how she might even be able to coax some of the trees into brushing away their footsteps. She wondered if Arlo could turn into a wolf and hide his tracks that way. Just one more four-legged creature among many others on the side of this mountain. Then again, Spencer already knew that Arlo was a shifter. Going into his wolf form would only confirm what kind, which was something Pam had the impression that Arlo wanted to hide.

For now, they just had to get away to someplace where they could talk openly without fear of Spencer overhearing. The forest would likely tell her when Spencer broke free. She just had to concentrate on putting as much distance between them and pursuit as possible while they had the freedom to do so.

Pam wasn't really sure how she was keeping it all together despite the amazing occurrences of the day. Usually, her days were very quiet. She'd walk around the woods, talk to the trees, maybe cook something for herself and then busy herself with the little tasks of everyday living in the cabin until it was time to go to sleep. Some days, she practiced what little she knew of magic. Some days, she experimented, trying to learn

how to expand her abilities through trial and error as Sue had recommended. Some days, she felt lonely and tried really hard not to let it get to her. On those days, she spent more time in the wildwood. Being out among the trees, in nature, seemed to help.

She'd been having one of those down days earlier—feeling very lonely and sad. That's why she'd been out walking. And now, she was literally running for her life. With company. She certainly didn't feel lonely now. What she felt was more akin to terror. Somebody was trying to kill her!

Pam had never had to even contemplate that sort of thing before. If she hadn't been so preoccupied trying to find safety, she just might've curled up in a ball and cried.

No. She wasn't that kind of woman. She refused to be that kind of woman. Oh, she might cry now and again. Who didn't? But she wouldn't give in. She wouldn't give up. She was alive, and she was going to stay that way. If anybody died out here, it wasn't going to be her, and it wasn't going to be Arlo, if she could help it. He had been a staunch ally to this point, and he didn't deserve any of the trouble that had come down on her head so unexpectedly.

If anyone was going to die—or at the very least, be incapacitated—it was going to be Spencer. How dare he come here, to her forest, and try to harm her? That would not be tolerated.

“Hold up,” Arlo said quietly. She paused and turned to him. “I think we're far enough away, and he's going to be tied up for a while, right?” At her nod, he went on. “We need to make a plan.”

“I figured we could go for the rocks. There's no snow on that face, and if we go there, he'll have a harder time picking up our trail,” she told him.

Arlo grinned and nodded. “I like the way you think,” he complimented her. “How far?”

“Just the other side of that rise.” She pointed out the land feature not too far away. “It's steep, and the wind scours the

snow away as soon as it falls. We won't leave prints there, and we have several choices of where to come off the stone. I was thinking we head for the deepest part of the forest. I might be able to get some of the lower-limbed trees to brush our footsteps clear in that part of the forest."

"Even better. All right. You lead the way. I'll take rear guard." He motioned for her to go ahead, and she began walking again.

She was moving just a tad slower than before, a little less frantic and more deliberate, which she thought was a good move. Her headlong flight had made her sloppier and less careful. The last thing she wanted to do was slip and fall and possibly get hurt. She needed all her wits about her if they were going to get out of this mess.

They reached the rise, and she looked at the stony surface of the land just over it. The slope was steep, but it had no snow on it. Not even ice clung to the rocks. There were several areas of sleek flat rock that was almost vertical, but there were enough footholds and handholds to make it not impossible to traverse. She waited for Arlo to catch up. He was only a few paces behind her, and she felt his presence at her shoulder in short order.

"The easiest path is downslope for a bit, then we climb and come out over there. See the dark patch of forest just up there?" She gestured vaguely upward across the expanse of rock.

"I see it. Good plan." He turned to meet her gaze. "Can the trees tell you if our friend has escaped his bonds yet?"

"They can, and he hasn't. He's awfully angry, and he's doing some damage to the sentinel pine, but the tree was willing to give up those limbs, if necessary, in order to cover our retreat." She shook her head in wonder at the kindness of that tree. "I'm going to have to do something special for that pine when we get out of this."

"I like that attitude. *When*, not *if*," Arlo said approvingly. "Let's make for the thick part of the forest and see what we can do about setting up a defensive position before nightfall."

Fatigue washed over her, but the adrenaline still running through her veins negated it for the most part. Still, it would be good to find a place to rest. She had a few ideas about that, but first, they'd have to find a spot that was as safe as they could manage. She would likely defer to Arlo's judgment on that, considering he had experience as a soldier that she didn't have.

From what she'd read about Green Berets, they were skilled in all sorts of things that would likely include camping, outdoor endurance, and finding the right *defensive position*, as he'd called it. Plus, he was a werewolf. That had to make him even more expert on wilderness survival. Her instincts, as well as the forest, were telling her that she was safe with him. She felt a protectiveness emanating from him that seemed part of his natural aura. He was the kind of man who helped others not for profit or selfish motives, but because it was the right thing to do. She wasn't sure why she was so positive about that, but she was, and she'd learned to trust her intuition over the past few years.

Sue had been a big proponent of intuition. She'd guided Pam through the initial stages of discovering what she could do. Even though Sue hadn't known exactly what kind of magic Pam had, she'd been able to do that much. The old woman had been Sue's guide and teacher, as well as her friend, and Pam missed her every single day. Sue had become the grandmother Pam had never had, and she'd loved the old woman dearly.

She could just imagine what Sue would say about Pam's werewolf companion. A widow, Sue had often remarked on handsome young men, pushing Pam to start dating again, but Pam had resisted. Brad, the self-serving narcissist, had done a number on Pam's heart, as well as her mind. He'd made her doubt herself so badly that it had taken years for her to realize that he'd been manipulating her from the very start of their relationship.

Only now, from the perspective of years, did Pam clearly see what a rat Brad had been. He'd tampered not only with her emotions, but with her self-confidence. His little biting remarks had made her doubt herself as a woman, and after he'd left her, she'd shied away from getting near any other

man. She'd had to heal first and get her head back on straight. Sue had helped, though she'd also prodded Pam to date again. Much too soon, in Pam's opinion. They'd laughed together at Sue's rather frank evaluations of the guys they saw from day to day. Sue had wanted Pam to date the cute young delivery driver who brought packages to their houses, but Pam had demurred. The guy was at least five years younger than her, and that just felt weird.

Of course, if Arlo was to be believed, she would have the opposite problem with him. She'd never considered how weird it might feel to date a guy who was a good seventy years older than her. *Yikes*. How would that even work? Did werewolves even date humans? She assumed they must. After all, he claimed that at least two women like herself had mated with the leaders of his group. *Pack*, he'd called it. Both the Wraith group and the larger Pack of which they were a part.

And why was she thinking about dating Arlo anyway? It was true he was handsome as sin with those whiskey colored eyes, and buff in a way that defied description. She'd already seen him naked, and he was HOT with a capital H. O. T.

He was decisive and masculine in a way that didn't feel threatening. Quite the contrary. She felt unaccountably safe with him. Instinct again. Her instincts were screaming at her to trust the man already. She mentally waved her inner voice down. That's exactly what she was doing. Trusting him and hoping she was reading him right.

She didn't think she was wrong about him. Everything he'd done to this point proved he was worthy of her trust. She just hoped the trend would continue. Otherwise, she'd be in even bigger trouble than that jerk, Spencer, had brought.

They scrambled across the rocks, and she noticed how Arlo positioned himself a little below and to the side of her. He was in perfect position should she misstep. He could catch her, but what about him? Who was going to catch him?

Then again, based on the way he moved, he was probably a lot more nimble than she was. His wolf genetics probably

gave him some advantage over plain old human genes when it came to navigating rough terrain.

Why did she find that sexy? And why did she find his careful positioning even more endearing?

The man was dangerous to her in ways she couldn't even really catalog at the moment. He made her want to trust not only her safety to him, but...her heart.

Oh, boy. Where had that thought come from? She'd only just met the guy.

Maybe she'd been alone way too long. Maybe any decent guy would have affected her this way because she was ripe for the picking, as Sue had said more than once.

Or, maybe, it was him. Arlo. A man unique in her experience, who flipped her switch and powered up her long-dormant libido like nobody else. *Damn.* Talk about inconvenient timing. She wanted to get to know him better and maybe spend some time with him, but being on the run for her very life seemed to preclude long talks about their hopes and dreams.

She was being ridiculous. Pam shook her head as she made her way over the rocks. Looking up, she realized they were almost to their departure point. She angled a bit more upward and into the tree line, hoping this little scramble would be enough to stifle any pursuit.

It was darker under the trees, but they didn't stop moving until they were well concealed. Arlo looked at their backtrail, and there wasn't as much snow here due to a combination of the wind that scoured the rocks and a short way into the tree line and the dense tree cover. Pam had picked a good place for them to emerge from the rocky slope. He looked around for a likely position in which they could take cover and catch a bit of rest. The sun was making its descent, and they had to get comfortable before dark fell in earnest. Arlo could see well enough in the dark, but he wasn't sure Pam had the ability.

He'd have to ask her. Regardless, they had to take a break soon. They'd been trekking steadily for the past few hours.

Pam stopped in her tracks a moment later. "Spencer just got free," she reported. The trees had, undoubtedly, just passed on the news.

"Can you tell what he's doing now?" Arlo asked quietly.

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CHAPTER FIVE

He wasn't sure if Spencer would cast another Elspian Ring to conceal his presence as he had the last time he'd trespassed. If so, they might be out of luck as far as recon from the trees went.

"He's really mad. He hurt the sentinel pine badly." Her face crumpled, but she went on. "He stormed around, screaming about *this not being over* for a while, but then, he got in his car and took off. The trees down the road followed his progress and reported back. He's off my property and headed for town." Pam looked up at Arlo, and his breath caught in his chest. She was gorgeous. Even afraid and on the run, there was something almost...regal about her.

"That's really handy," Arlo said, impressed. "Is there a way that you can ask the trees to alert you if somebody else comes down that road or if Spencer returns?"

She seemed to think about it for a moment then nodded. "I can ask them to relay anything they see for a short amount of time. It will require me to funnel a little bit of my own energy into it, which I can't keep up for an indefinite period, but it is doable. Especially in light of the current threat level. It's well worth the expenditure of a little bit of my energy for the potential of an early warning. Of course, if Spencer or anybody like him uses whatever magic he used in the past to hide his presence, I'm not sure it would work. The thing is, anywhere the trees are continuous, I can ask for a message to be forwarded. If the bad guys don't raise the shield, or whatever it is, before they hit the trees, I'll at least know that something was headed this way. Even if they work their magic to hide themselves after the fact and disappear." Pam shook her head. "I should have asked the adjacent forest to do this before. They could have passed a message, even without my energetic input. I only had to ask them, but I never thought of it."

"It's likely the threat was never this high before," Arlo allowed. "Has anybody ever come here looking for you in the past?"

“Not a soul. The local people in the town knew when Sue died. They were surprised when she left the place to me. I guess they expected someone from her family to inherit. But I go down into town about once a month to get supplies and my mail, and they’ve been very nice. Nobody visits, though. This place is way too isolated for casual drop-ins.”

“How’s your night vision?” Arlo needed to know a little bit more about her abilities.

“Better than most people’s, from what I’ve observed. The forest gives off its own light. As long as I’m in the woods, I can see in the dark. It doesn’t work so well in a city, where everything is dead or made of plastic. Living things give off light to my vision.”

“That’s really helpful. I think we ought to set up camp for the night. Unless you have a different idea, this looks like a good place. What do you think?”

Pam nodded right away. “This is the densest part of the forest, so I think it’s a good place to hunker down for the night. I can coax the trees to shelter us. Would that spot over there work?” She pointed to a small cluster of trees that were backed by a huge boulder in a relatively flat spot.

“It’s perfect.” Arlo approved of her site selection. They’d have the boulder at their back and the trees all around. That was about as good as they were going to get tonight.

“Great. I’ll start shaping the shelter.” Pam moved off toward the spot she had chosen and began moving among the little group of trees, touching them here and there.

Arlo kept watch, but he also couldn’t help glancing at what Pam was doing. He’d seen dryads work before, but never like this. Pam was interweaving supple young branches of living trees, coaxing them to grow abnormally long to create a sort of domed shelter. Like an igloo but made out of tree branches. Or maybe a tent would be a more accurate description. As she worked, more and more branches became involved until it looked like the walls were pretty solid and wouldn’t let much wind through. He looked forward to seeing what it looked like

on the inside, but before he could do that, he had to set up a few things outside that would help with their comfort.

Arlo went to work, keeping one eye on his surroundings, just in case Spencer hadn't been alone. He sniffed out a source of fresh water trickling down the side of the mountain. His wolf senses told him it was safe enough to drink. That was one important thing he could cross off his list. He also located a scrubby area with waist-high bushes that could work for an outhouse on the other side of the shelter from the stream. It wouldn't do to contaminate their water source.

Of course, they were only going to be here one night. That's if his plans worked out the way he hoped they would. He had kept trying his cell phone on and off all day, with no luck. Arlo had checked every half hour, but so far, he had not been able to get a call out. He'd keep trying as they moved along tomorrow, just in case, but for the time being, they were on their own. He couldn't count on the potential help that the High Priestess had said she might be able to call in. There were too many *ifs* in that proposal.

When Arlo returned to the spot where Pam had been building their shelter, he was amazed by how well it blended into the landscape. She had coaxed other branches to grow in front of the ones she had woven together, to camouflage the entire structure. If he hadn't known it was there, he probably would've walked right past it without noticing anything amiss.

Pam was standing about ten feet back from the structure, contemplating it like an artist looking at a canvas. Arlo walked up beside her.

"That's pretty amazing," he told her.

She turned her head to look at him. "Is it hidden enough?"

Arlo nodded. "Camouflaged like a pro. How do we get in?"

"Oh, I left the entrance around the back, by the boulder. I figured that was the safest place." She led him around the right side of the structure, pointing out an area screened by what had to be new growth of a pine tree that was very close to the

boulder. “It’s just through here.” She lifted one limb and stepped over another then turned sideways and disappeared.

Arlo followed, making the same motions she had used. She was smaller than him, but he still fit through and emerged into an amazing construction.

Arlo took a look around. Pam watched him, eager to hear what he thought of her construction skills. She was proud of her efforts. This was the first time she’d undertaken such a big project, and she thought it had turned out rather well.

She caught sight of a dark stain on the fabric covering his shoulder and went closer. She reached out to touch the fabric lightly, and her fingers came away wet. Arlo had felt her light touch and turned to face her.

“You’re bleeding,” she said, accusation in her tone. How could he have not noticed? He must have noticed! So, how could he have not done anything about it or at least told her that he was hurt?

Men.

“Oh. Yeah.” He turned his head to try to look over his own shoulder then shrugged. “I think I got hit with a splinter when Spencer was blasting that log.”

“You’d better let me look at it,” she told him, already shrugging out of her backpack.

Pam had managed to stuff a few useful items into her bag before bugging out of her house earlier, including a small first-aid kit. She also had snacks and the fresh loaf of bread she’d just baked that she hadn’t wanted to leave behind in case she didn’t get back to her place for a few days. She thanked her lucky stars she’d done that now. They would at least have something decent to eat tonight, she thought, even as her stomach growled.

First things first, though. She had to get a look at that wound. They couldn’t afford infection setting in when they had to live wild and probably move fast once the sun came up again.

“Take your shirt off,” she told him briskly. He was watching her with an amused expression that made her want to shake her head.

“I do believe I like the sound of that,” he murmured, holding her gaze. His eyes smoldered. There was no other word for the sultry look he gave her as he shrugged out of his open flannel shirt then tugged the hem of his T-shirt out of his waistband.

Damn. Is it getting hot in here?

Pam tried to scowl at him. Were all men such teases? Or just the ones she’d had to deal with in her life?

“Let me see your shoulder.” She tried for a professional tone, but when he stripped off his T-shirt with slow deliberation, her breath caught. Never had she seen a more perfectly sculpted male body outside a museum.

Lord have mercy! This man was built like a Greek statue. His muscles were sleek and tight, his abs rock-hard and rippling with his movements. And he wasn’t even flexing. He was just that ripped.

Of course, his alter ego was a wolf. She’d seen that wolf, and he’d been sleek under all the fur. Muscular and strong, just like his human half. She hadn’t really gotten to appreciate his magnificent chest when she’d seen him outside her back door. She’d been so overwhelmed by meeting her first shifter, she hadn’t really been able to process everything she’d seen.

She remembered it now, though. The light arrow of hair pointing to something that had looked...impressive...even in the snowy cold of outdoors. Perhaps that was even more impressive.

Focus, Pam. He still had his pants on this time. Black cargo pants with lots of pockets. Utilitarian. Worn in. Not sexy at all. Right?

He turned his back to her, and she got a look at the bright red patch on his shoulder and the inch-long splinter of wood still in the wound.

“Oh, my. Don’t you feel that?” she asked, appalled at the idea that he’d been walking around like that all day.

“Feel what?” He moved his shoulder around a bit and winced. “It hurts, but it should heal up fine.”

“Can’t do that with a chunk of wood still in the wound,” she told him, moving closer.

“Wood? Seriously?” He tried to see over his shoulder again. A useless gesture given the splinter’s location. “No wonder it still hurts.” He met her gaze, his expression hopeful. “Would you mind getting it out of there? It’ll heal up easy, but not with a foreign object in there.”

She moved right up next to him and kept her eyes on the task at hand. She would not notice how strong and broad his shoulders were. Nope. That wouldn’t help her keep her head in this situation.

She would also not think about how long it had been since she’d felt any kind of pleasure from being with a man. She’d enjoyed sex with Brad, despite his being a cretin otherwise. She hadn’t been with anyone since him, and she’d been over him for years. Her body was telling her, in no uncertain terms, that it was time to get back on that horse. Or man, as the case may be.

Nope. She refused to think about that. Not when she had to touch that broad shoulder. Not when she was so near to Arlo that she could smell his uniquely appealing scent.

Damn. He really turned her on. And that was totally uncalled for in the present situation. She had to get herself under control.

“Hold still,” she told him, taking the little tweezer out of her first aid kit and going to work.

The splinter came out easily enough. She examined the wound closely to make sure she’d gotten every last bit. It looked like a chunk of the tree had hit him, and a few pieces had abraded his skin. Only that one piece, though, had taken up residence in his flesh. Thank goodness. It could’ve been a lot worse.

Pam used an antiseptic wipe to clean up around the wound and as she worked, she was amazed to see Arlo's flesh knitting together at a rapid speed.

"Is that normal for you?" she asked.

"Is what normal?" he asked absentmindedly as he tried straightening out his T-shirt with his free hand.

"Your wound is healing right before my eyes. I've never seen anything like it."

"Oh, yeah. It's usually not quite that fast, but I guess the splinter was the only thing holding back the healing, so it's going a bit faster than normal. Thanks." He moved away and tugged his T-shirt back on. Then he turned to look at her. "Now, we need to feed you. Your tummy is growling at me like a hungry pup." His smile was charming and defused any embarrassment she might have felt.

"I've got that covered," she told him, reaching for her backpack. "I grabbed a few things before I left the house."

Pam pulled out the fresh loaf of bread that she'd wrapped in a kitchen towel, followed by a hunk of Swiss cheese she'd had in the fridge. It was cold enough outside that she hadn't had to worry about it going bad during their flight.

"It's a feast," Arlo remarked with pleased surprise. "And here, I was going to give you one of my energy bars." He fished out two foil-wrapped bars from one of the cargo pockets on the side of his pants.

"Save that for dessert," she quipped. "There's plenty of this to share. How does a cheese sandwich sound?"

"Just about perfect," he told her.

He put his flannel shirt back on over the T-shirt but left it unbuttoned. It was cold out, but warmer inside their shelter. Still, it was definitely chilly. He didn't seem to feel the effects of the dropping temperature like a normal person, though. Maybe it was another gift of his wolf half.

They sat on the ground and made a little table out of her backpack. She hadn't packed a knife, but Arlo had a wicked-

looking blade with serrations on one side. It cut through the bread and cheese with ease, and he made two big sandwiches—one for each of them.

There was silence in their twiggy dome while they both ate. They hadn't stopped to eat once that day, and it had been a long, grueling flight from Spencer. Pam was starving, and the sandwich helped fill the hollow cavern that was her stomach.

“Oh, that hit the spot,” Pam said as she finished the last bite of her sandwich. Her stomach had stopped growling.

Arlo had gone out after he finished his sandwich in about four big bites and come back with plastic baggies full of water. She'd had a few extra resealable sandwich bags in her backpack along with the food. They were always handy for something, so she usually had at least one or two in her bag anyway. In this case, Arlo had been able to fill them with clean water he'd found and brought back enough for both of them. A plastic baggie for each.

She used a bit of the water to wash down her sandwich. Arlo told her about the nearby bushes he'd designated as their temporary bathroom, and she fully intended to do a little landscaping around those bushes before she used them. Still, he had everything well organized and laid out for their night on the mountain. All the comforts of home, really, except for the knowledge that daylight might bring a crazed mage down on them again.

“Dessert,” Arlo said, handing her one of the energy bars he'd had in his pocket.

“Thanks.”

Pam opened it carefully, knowing she probably wouldn't eat the whole thing and wanting to save a bit for tomorrow. Breakfast was going to be bread and cheese again, and they might have enough for lunch as well, but after that, they were going to be out of food unless he had an endless supply of those energy bars. She had a small stash of snacks elsewhere on the mountain, but she wasn't sure if they'd be able to get to it.

Pam ate a couple of bites of the nut and fruit bar and tucked the rest away inside one of her spare plastic baggies. She knew Arlo was watching her, so she smiled, trying to make the best of things.

“I’m going to save the rest for tomorrow,” she told him. She had to work to keep her positive attitude. Otherwise, she might just break down and cry.

There hadn’t been time to cry before, when they’d been fleeing for their lives, but now, in the quiet of the forest night... If she wasn’t careful, she’d start bawling.

It was the stress of the situation, she knew. She didn’t handle stress well these days. Being isolated up here was calming, but it had also made it harder for her to deal with change and unexpected occurrences.

Today had been one hell of an unexpected occurrence. A series of them, hitting her, one after another. She’d handled it well, for the most part, but now that she had a moment to breathe, she was feeling a bit overwhelmed.

CHAPTER SIX

“Delayed reaction,” Arlo said out of the blue.

“What?” She looked up to meet his gaze. She read compassion and understanding in his dark eyes.

“Today has been a doozy, and you’re probably experiencing delayed reaction to the strains of the day. It’s okay,” he told her. “As a soldier, I’ve experienced the same thing from time to time. Still do, on occasion, but it gets easier as time goes on.”

“If you say so,” she replied, mumbling a bit as she repacked her backpack. She had one more trick up her sleeve, and she pulled it out of the front zippered pocket of the bag. “We can share this.” She tossed the little silver box to him, and he caught it reflexively.

Arlo whistled low between his teeth. “A space blanket. Damn, girl. If you pulled a trombone out of that bag next, I wouldn’t be surprised. Were you a Scout or something?”

“As a matter of fact, I was a Scout for a few years, but they didn’t really teach wilderness survival. Nothing that stuck with me, anyway. I just bought a few things in case of emergencies when I moved here, and I’ve kept them in this backpack. The baggies. A few rubber bands. First-aid kit. And the blanket. I packed the food because I had just baked the bread and didn’t want it to go to waste if I didn’t get back to the house in a few days.”

“You’re amazing.” His words hung in the air between them until she started to feel uncomfortable.

Did he mean that the way it sounded? And was that look on his face more than just friendly admiration? Why was she feeling a wobble in her tummy? Was he as attracted to her as she was to him?

She blinked, tucked her head downward, and moved away. A change of subject was clearly in order. She stood, looking around the dome. It was about ten feet wide and roughly seven feet high in the center. There was plenty of room and the tight weave of the branches protected them from most of the wind.

Already, it was warmer inside the dome than outside. Still, it was going to get really cold tonight. They would need that space blanket, for sure.

But what were they going to lay on? The ground here was hard, though there was a covering of pine needles that looked a little too prickly to be comfortable. Pam thought about it for a while and coaxed a lower limb of one of the softer trees—a cedar, she thought—to grow out a little bit near one wall, to form a soft pallet for them over the ground. When she was done, she stood back to inspect her work. Arlo came over to stand beside her.

“What do you think?” she asked, unwilling to look at him as she pondered their bed.

“I think it’s ingenious,” he told her. “Between that and the space blanket, you should be toasty warm.”

“We,” she said firmly. “I don’t want you to freeze either.”

Arlo chuckled. “You’re forgetting I’m a wolf. I’ll be okay.”

“You mean, you’re going to change into your wolf form and sleep that way?” she asked, not really sure what she thought of that idea.

“It’s a possibility,” he replied casually. “Or I could stay human. Either way has its advantages. I’d be a bit warmer in my fur and less susceptible to magic, but I’d have a harder time communicating with you, and there are some things I need hands to do. For example,” he reached downward to his ankle and lifted his pant leg to expose a holster, complete with a small handgun in dull black. “Do you know how to shoot?” Pam shook her head, and he made a tsking sound. “I don’t have time or spare ammo to teach you now—not to mention the noise it would make—but when we get out of this situation, I’m going to teach you. Living way up here on your own, you should have some basic skills and a firearm of some kind in case of emergency. Magic doesn’t solve every problem. And sometimes, mundane answers like a bullet placed exactly where you want it can be the answer to a magical problem.”

She thought about that and had to cede his point. He knew a lot more about both guns and magic than she did. If he thought it was important to learn how to shoot, she'd consider it. First, though, they had to get through this alive. She wasn't sure how they were going to outrun Spencer and get to safety. Maybe Arlo had a plan, but she was way too tired to consider it any further now. Night was falling in earnest, and it was probably time to get some sleep so they could be up with the sun tomorrow to continue their mad dash away from danger.

Arlo opened the tiny rectangle that was the thin silver space blanket and began unfolding it. It was larger than she'd expected. Arlo sat down on the cypress bed she'd made and motioned her over.

"Come here, Pam. You're shivering." His voice was low and intimate and could not be denied.

Mutely, she sat next to him and allowed him to wrap the silver plastic around them both. His arms came around her from behind, and he lowered them both to the ground, spooning her under the thin silver shroud.

"You're like a furnace," she said, too tired to censor her thoughts. He was warm, and she snuggled back against him. She was definitely feeling the chill now that they'd stopped moving and the night was growing colder.

She felt his low chuckle against her back. "It's a gift of my wolf metabolism. Timber wolves were born to this kind of climate. I'm comfortable here in either form."

"That is so cool." She was so tired, but she liked talking to him in the quiet of the forest night. It had been so long since she'd had someone to talk to in the night. So long since she'd had any company at all. She wanted to treasure this moment out of time, despite the dangerous situation.

"That pine tree in your front yard. The one you called the sentinel pine. What you did with Spencer. Was that why you wanted me to sit over there to talk when I first arrived?"

Pam thought she heard wry amusement in his tone, as well as curiosity. She was too tired to demur, so she gave him the

truth.

“I’m cautious by nature,” she told him. “That pine is special. Its branches are more supple than other species, and it planted itself there—in front of the cabin—many, many years ago as a watcher. A warder. A protector in the most basic sense. I don’t think anybody in Sue’s family realized it, really. It wasn’t until I showed up that the pine really awakened and hinted at all it could do to help keep the place safe. It was very happy to help, even though it suffered damage as a result. I’ll have to see what I can do to repair it when things are safe again.”

“I never realized trees could be like that. You speak of them as if they are people with hopes and desires. The other dryads I’ve met never really said anything like that in my presence.”

“Would you tell me about them?” She was starting to feel sleepy and warm in his arms and under the shiny plastic that reflected their own heat back at them.

“I met Sally first. She was visiting an old college friend of hers in Wyoming when she ran across the Pack Alpha, Jason. They hit it off, and it was pretty clear they were mates. She used to be a big city police detective, but she always had a way with plants and gardens. She made a night-blooming garden as a gift for her friend. It’s really pretty.” He spoke in soft tones that lulled her into a cozy state. She could listen to the deep rumble of his voice for hours. “Then I met Maria. She’s a veterinarian who deals mostly with exotic and wild animals. She was running a sanctuary. When we first encountered her, she had already disabled two men who had broken into her house to try to capture her. We got there a bit late, but she had the situation well in hand. My friend and Alpha of the Wraiths, Jesse, mated her, and she moved to Wyoming. We teasingly call her our den mother.”

“Both of them sound kind of formidable,” Pam observed. “A detective and a vet. They’re both very accomplished.”

“Then there’s Cece. She lives on a mountaintop, sort of like you. Her parents died, and she lived there all alone for

years until Deke Morrow went to search for something on her land, and they met. I know Deke from my Army days, and now, they're mated too. Then, a short time ago, Sally finally started getting more solid leads on others in the family. Den, a cougar shifter friend of mine, went to make contact with Sally's sister, Sunny. She was a ballerina, but she'd had a bad car wreck and couldn't dance anymore. They're mated now. And my most recent interaction with a dryad was in Nebraska, when Crystal heard the trees crying out for help, and she stopped her car to see what she could do. She stumbled onto an estate owned by a very powerful guy named Marco and helped him solve a mystery. They called on my unit for help, so we hightailed it down there to lend a hand. Crystal worked in the hospitality field. I think she was the manager of a resort. Nice woman. Very gifted with trees and vines. She's mated to Marco now."

"They all got married?" Pam asked, finding it an effort to keep her eyes open.

"Yes, oddly enough. We've located five part-dryads so far. Six, if we count you. I think they're looking for one more to do a big spell," Arlo murmured.

"A spell? I'm not much of a witch. I don't do spells," she protested weakly, her words slurring a bit as her eyes closed.

"From what I've been told, they're going to have help with casting the spell. What they need is enough dryad magic in one place to power it."

That made her wake up enough to ask a question. "What are they trying to do?"

"Save the life of Leonora, the full dryad from which you all descend. She was shot with a silver bullet and was put into a willow tree to preserve her life until enough of her descendants could be located. Her blood is very dilute in your generation, so it needs a number of you to generate enough dryad magic to help her. At least, that's what I've been told."

Pam closed her eyes again. The goal was a good one. Saving a life was always a good goal.

Before she knew it, she was asleep. Nestled snug and warm in the big bad wolf's arms.

Arlo really liked the feel of Pam in his arms. She fit there as if she had been born to snuggle against him. She had been shivering with cold, but together, they created enough heat to keep them both warm. He wondered what it would be like if they ever got skin to skin.

Pushing that thought aside as she fell asleep, he started to think about how surprising this day had been. Both in good ways and in bad ways. He realized this was part of the already-established pattern. It seemed the minute they got a lead on the location of one of the lost dryads, so did the enemy. Almost every one of them had to run for their lives not long after being contacted.

If Arlo didn't know better, he would be concerned about a leak from their Pack. After all, it was Sally, the new Alpha female of the overall Pack, who had been tracking down leads. Her investigative skills as a former police detective gave her access to all kinds of information, and she had made this search a top priority. Yet, somehow, the minute she got a lead and someone was dispatched to check it out, the dryad in question came under fire.

Pack didn't betray Pack. It was unfathomable. But what other explanation was there? He seriously didn't think anyone would be able to bug the Pack house or Sally and Jason's home or offices. People weren't just allowed to casually drop by any of the places where Sally would be doing her work. Likewise, the computers were all protected. The Wraiths had a specialist—more than one, in fact—who set up, maintained, and ran regular checks to make sure their computing systems were clean. Operational security was paramount to their success, and their survival, so they didn't skimp. It seemed highly improbable that all their computer experts had missed something that important.

But what else could it be? How was the enemy finding out about these women? They were going to have to figure this

out. If Arlo survived, he would have a long conversation with Jesse and Jason. The ladies might only need one more dryad after Arlo brought Pam in to do their spell, but if someone was selling information about Sally's research—or their communications were compromised—then that hole had to be plugged, one way or another.

If someone was betraying them, Pack law would have to be upheld. Arlo hoped it wasn't betrayal, but merely some kind of incompetence. That would be more palatable, though he didn't really believe any of the tech guys would have let something slip by them. If they had, other operations would've been affected, but they hadn't been. Only the dryads had been chased down by the enemy. That was entirely too suspicious.

It made him want to growl, but he couldn't. He didn't want to wake up Sleeping Beauty. Or maybe Snow White was a better fairytale. It fit Pam. With her pale skin and dark hair, she had that vibe going on. She was gorgeous, of course, with her big blue eyes and midnight hair.

She had also surprised the hell out of him today. He liked the fact that she had been wary, even of him. He hadn't caught on to the fact that wanting to talk outside by that very special pine tree had been her way of protecting herself. She had been taking precautions, even though he didn't realize it at the time. But when he saw what she could do—or rather what she could do with that pine tree—he'd been heartily impressed. She'd wrapped up that Spencer guy so well that he hadn't escaped for hours and hours.

Without that head start, they would've been in a much worse position than they were right now. Granted, they weren't in a great situation at the moment, but he'd been in worse places. He would get them out of this. One way or another. Plus, she had a lot of tricks up her sleeve. The food, the space blanket, her amazing skill with the trees and creating a durable, protective shelter. All of this delighted him. She wasn't a helpless female. Not by a longshot.

Pam was a capable, amazing woman with exceptional foresight. He wondered if maybe she had a small talent for seeing the future but dismissed that idea. As far as he knew,

that wasn't something dryads could tap into. Maybe it was that scouting background she had mentioned. Whatever had made her pack that knapsack of goodies had been a really good instinct.

Arlo figured it was safe enough to grab a couple hours of sleep. He was used to combat naps when he was on a mission, and he would wake fully at the first sign of trouble. Holding Pam in his arms, he allowed himself to drift off.

Pam woke deep in the night, warm and cozy. It took her a moment to figure out where she was and why she was nestled in a man's warm embrace. She hadn't had that happen often in her life and not at all for the past several years. Her few lovers hadn't really been snugglers, but Arlo was different, it seemed...and not just in that way.

She'd never met a shifter of any kind before. As a wolf, he'd been both intimidating and stunning. Huge too. For a crazed moment, she'd felt the urge to run her fingers through his fur to see if it was as soft as it looked—before she realized he was a shapeshifter. Something about his wolf form was beautiful. His wolf eyes had looked into her soul, and she only realized now, after some sleep, that his eyes were the same no matter what form he wore.

Intelligent. Observant. Even inviting. The color of aged whiskey or precious amber. She liked the way he treated her, as a partner on this crazy flight for their lives, not just a tag-along. Pam was so thankful she'd followed the instinct that had told her to grab that backpack and stuff things in it. Everything she'd packed had come in pretty handy so far, and she'd really liked the approval and astonishment she'd seen on Arlo's handsome face at each new item she pulled out of her bag.

She liked being seen as practical and a useful person to have around. Brad had made her feel useless so often that it was a novel experience to have a man compliment her resourcefulness. She liked the way Arlo didn't spare his praise, yet only gave it when appropriate. He wasn't coddling her and

giving her a trophy just for showing up. Throwing a bone to the pathetic female. No, Arlo made her feel like he was simply giving praise where it was due, and that he was being truthful.

That felt really, really good. Pam's still-sensitive emotions drank in his candid responses to her, and she felt her heart heal a little more with each word he spoke. And the looks he gave her when he thought she wasn't looking... And a couple of times when she had been... They were hot enough to melt steel.

He looked at her as if he wanted to eat her up. Or, at the very least, lick her all over. In the best, most sinful way possible.

One thing was for certain. Arlo had inadvertently kicked her long-dormant libido into high gear. Every step the man took was sexy. He walked with the wolf's grace and a predator's natural stalk. Yeah... Sexy. There was no other word for him.

And here she was, with his arms wrapped around her. At any other time, she'd turn around in his embrace and lay a kiss on his lips that would leave him in no doubt about what she wanted to do with him next. But they were on the run. The fact that she was hot for him shouldn't even be crossing her mind. What was she thinking?

Arlo. She was thinking about Arlo, and that led her mind down paths that were both seductive and scary. She'd only just met the man—the werewolf—and already she felt compelled to be with him. Like, really *be* with him. Skin to skin, body to body, heart to heart.

She had to be crazy. Maybe the danger they'd faced earlier had scrambled her brain. Wasn't there some theory about how facing death made people want to have sex and reaffirm life? Yeah. Maybe that was it.

Or maybe it was just that Arlo was the sexiest man she'd ever seen, and he was holding her in his arms as if she was precious to him. That was probably just her imagination working overtime, but it didn't really matter. That's how it felt, and her body was all about feeling right now.

She wanted to be held, and Arlo was doing just that, making her feel safe and warm when the night was cold and there was a dangerous mage on their trail. Somehow, she didn't feel the threat as deeply when she was with Arlo like this. As if he could keep all the bad things in the world at bay. As if he could keep her safe.

Why did she trust him so much? It didn't seem right that she should feel so strongly about his trustworthiness in so short a time, but the same instinct that had prompted her to bring that backpack full of goodies was prodding her again. It was telling her that Arlo was important to her future in some way. He was already instrumental in helping her survive the initial encounter with Spencer. She believed he would be able to get them both to safety...somehow.

"Are you all right?" Arlo's voice murmured behind her. She felt the low rumble in his chest against her back.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you,” Pam mumbled, her face heating as if he could somehow divine what she’d been thinking.

“It’s all right. I sleep light when I’m in the field. You’ve been laying there stewing about something. If you want to talk, I’m here.”

Her heart melted. Arlo was such a good man. Now he was offering to listen to her scrambled thoughts? Brad had never wanted to know what she was thinking. It had felt like Brad hadn’t even wanted to contemplate that she might have thoughts or feelings that he couldn’t control.

She couldn’t help herself. She scooted around so she could face him. She could see well in the dark and knew he could too, even if his inner wolf saw things a little differently than she did. She looked deep into his eyes.

“I know we’ve only just met, but I get the sense that you’re a really decent man.” He seemed ready to shrug off her words, but she went on. “No, wait. I want to tell you this. I don’t really understand why, but I guess I’ve been alone up here too long without anybody to talk to. The reason I jumped at the chance to move here when Sue left this place to me is because of my last breakup. He...” When it came down to it, she still had a hard time talking about Brad, but she knew she needed to lay his ghost to rest, and this was a golden opportunity to do so. “He wasn’t a good man. He didn’t care much for what I had to say. He belittled me and played mind games that made me doubt myself in so many ways...”

She couldn’t continue, but she didn’t have to. She read understanding and a trace of anger in Arlo’s gaze. A healthy response. One that made her feel better. As if she’d just put the final nail in the coffin of her last serious relationship. Catharsis achieved.

Arlo raised one hand to her cheek, cupping it gently. “I’m glad you told me. And if you ever make the mistake of telling me that dirtwad’s name, I will personally beat the crap out of

him on your behalf. He didn't deserve you, Pam. And you deserve so much better than that."

Her heart, already a puddle on the floor of her psyche, began to reconstruct into something new and viable. She was right about him. She knew it. He really was a good, honest, decent man.

"Thanks," she whispered, meaning so much more than that single word could convey, but he seemed to understand.

"Anytime," he replied, just as softly, giving her a lopsided grin.

She couldn't help herself. She leaned in and kissed him on the lips.

He seemed surprised by her move, but only for a moment. Arlo snuggled his arms around her, pulling her close as their mouths met in a firestorm that started out smoldering and then blazed hotter and hotter as the kiss deepened.

She had kissed a lot of frogs in her day, but she got the feeling she had finally found a prince. Arlo teased and tantalized, waiting for her to catch up, for her senses to ignite. Though to be honest, she didn't have far to go after the scandalous thoughts she'd been thinking for the past twenty minutes. Her imagination had been primed already, and all it took was the most basic touch of his lips and tongue to make the fantasy a reality.

She didn't know how long the kiss lasted. All she knew was that her head was spinning when he finally lifted his lips away from hers. She tried to follow, but he pulled back, out of her reach.

"This is quick," he told her, his breath coming fast in a way that told her that he'd been as affected as she was by their first kiss. That helped alleviate any embarrassment she might've felt.

"I know," she conceded. "It's just..." She shook her head just once and tried again. "I feel like I know you already. It's the weirdest thing, but you just... You click, somehow."

A wary look came into his eyes. “I know you don’t know a lot about shifters,” he said, confusing her with what seemed like a change of subject. “The thing is, when we find someone who *clicks*, as you put it, it can get really serious, really fast.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “How serious?” She was almost afraid of his answer.

“Lifetime serious,” he told her in a low rumble that reminded her of his wolf half.

She remembered hearing somewhere that wolves mated for life. She wondered if that applied to his human half as well. She wouldn’t ask. Not now. Possibly, not ever. It would be too embarrassing, not to mention the prohibition she’d been taught by Sue about not asking shifters probing questions.

“Oh.”

She didn’t seem capable of forming a coherent sentence to respond to his statement. He had stunned her, she wasn’t afraid to admit in the privacy of her own mind. Was he worried about getting too close to her, or the opposite? That she would somehow not take this as seriously as he did. She wasn’t sure why he had stopped them where he had, but he had just given her a lot to think about.

Confusing as all heck, but still a lot to consider. Did she even want a serious relationship? She really wasn’t sure. Brad had done a number on her, and she still wasn’t completely healed from that experience. She felt certain that she could handle a fling with someone like Arlo, but anything serious—or even permanent, as he had hinted—seemed to send up red flags within her.

She had thought she was going to marry Brad and be with him for the rest of her life. She had put a lot of energy into that relationship and had been so utterly wrong that she couldn’t trust her own judgment anymore. At least about human men. Something about Arlo, whether it was his magic or his animal side, spoke to the awakening magic within herself. There was a deeper level of awareness that she had never had with anyone else. It allowed her to know his character in a way that she had never been able to discern with Brad, or anybody else.

She wasn't completely sure she should trust it, but so far, he had proven a good companion. He had stood on the right side of the battle between good and evil. That said a lot, as far as she was concerned. He hadn't fled, leaving her behind. He had barely known her, and yet, he had helped her escape. He had helped her fight back. He had just helped her. Period.

Nobody had done anything like that for her in a long time, if ever. She'd never been in mortal danger before, to her knowledge, of course, but he had shown a depth of character she had never before encountered in a man. Then again, he wasn't just a man. He had that wildness inside him. That magnificent giant wolf shared his soul in a way she just barely understood. That created a new dimension—and a whole lot of magic.

The fact that he had stopped at just a kiss—frustrating as it was—spoke volumes about his character. He could have pressed his advantage. She wouldn't have stopped him. In fact, she had done all she could to encourage him, but he had called a halt before they got in too deep. That spoke of trustworthiness to her. Fidelity to higher ideals, and the strength of will to hold to them.

If his intent had been to turn her away, he was only drawing her deeper. She didn't think it was a game to him. Not like this sort of thing had been to Brad. Not that Brad had ever stopped short of getting anything he wanted from her. But Brad had used every situation to his own advantage. She had only realized it fully later. Hindsight, she knew for a fact, was both twenty/twenty and very painful sometimes.

As a result of those awful life lessons, she had tried to become a little more aware of people's motivations. She didn't think Arlo was pulling anything in this situation. He didn't seem like the game-playing type. No, he was a straight shooter who told it like it was. She didn't sense any sort of deceitfulness from him. Perhaps it was his wolf side that made him more cut and dried and less devious than her previous experiences with men.

She rolled over to her previous position and closed her eyes. She was tired. Tired from walking so far. Tired from

being so scared all day. And tired of just thinking too much. There would be time enough later to consider all these confusing emotional conundrums. The night was dark, the forest was quiet, and she was warm under the reflective silver blanket with the warm wolfman beside her.

She fell asleep again on that thought, a little smile on her lips.

When dawn broke, Arlo was already awake. Pam sat up and began folding the silver blanket. “What’s the plan for today? Do we have one yet?”

“I was hoping you might be able to tell when, and if, Spencer returns.” Arlo gave her a questioning look.

She seemed to listen for a moment then shook her head. “Nothing so far that I can pick up.”

“Okay then. Before I came out to meet you yesterday, I studied several maps of the area. If we continue westward, we can trek over to bear territory. There’s a small bear Clan that lives a few miles that way. We could ask them for help.”

“When you say bears, you mean like shapeshifting bears, right?” She looked adorably skeptical, and he had to smile.

“Yes, ma’am. Bear shifters. They don’t run in big Packs like us wolves, but usually a strong Alpha will hold his extended family together in a Clan. There’s one of those a few miles that way.” He pointed westward. “If we can get to them, they’ll help us. Bears are among the most magical of shifters, so even if we’re followed, they would be helpful to have on our side.”

“I like the sound of that,” she admitted.

They went about the simple tasks involved in packing up their things and getting ready for the day. They each visited the bushes designated as a latrine and washed up as best they could with the cold mountain water.

As they were about to leave their hidden campsite, Arlo stood for a moment outside, marveling once more about how

little could be seen of the construction from outside. It really was an amazing work of camouflage.

“What is it?” Pam asked coming up beside him.

“Nothing. Just admiring your work,” he replied, turning to her. She was so beautiful in the morning light it was all he could do to keep himself from pulling her into his arms.

“I decided to just leave it. Eventually, if I don’t do anything, the forest will reclaim it, but maybe in the meantime, some of the creatures might enjoy using it.”

“That’s a really good idea. And if you ever end up in a tight situation like this again, you have a place you know you can hide.” He didn’t want to think about her being in danger again, but it was always good to have options.

They began walking as the sun came up over the mountains, warming the air. If they were going to get to bear territory, they had quite a ways to go. Arlo had considered whether it would be safe to go back to Pam’s cabin but nixed the idea as too risky.

About an hour after they’d started walking, Pam suddenly went rigid. Arlo stopped in his tracks, looking around for any sign of threat.

“Spencer’s coming back,” Pam said after a moment, her voice ragged. “The trees along the road are passing word that his car is driving in.”

“Just his car alone? Does he have anyone with him?”

Pam shook her head. “They only speak of the single car, but I don’t know how many people are inside.”

Arlo thought through the possibilities. “Well, he came alone yesterday. He might be that arrogant that he thinks he can take us both on all by himself. Some mages are stupid like that. They discount shifters, thinking we’re just stupid animals.”

“Animals aren’t stupid just because they can’t speak English.” Pam sounded outraged at the idea, and Arlo had to smile.

“I tend to agree with you, although I have met some pretty dumb shifters in my time. Just like our human counterparts, we have smart and stupid among our number too.” He could be nothing other than scrupulously honest with Pam, he discovered.

“The ones we’re going to meet... I hope you picked some of the smart ones,” she quipped.

Pleased and a little startled by her humor in this situation, Arlo smiled at her. “Definitely on the smarter end of the spectrum. I know at least one member of the Clan really well. A guy named Cooper that I served with in the Army. He got hurt pretty bad and came home to heal. We text every now and again so I know he’s okay and that he’s living with his extended family, but I haven’t seen him in a few years. Still, he was one of the best soldiers I ever knew, and that’s saying a lot.”

“So, not just bear shifters, but now a military bear shifter. You do realize that this is all pretty new to me, right?” She kept up the conversation even as they covered ground heading westward. “I mean, Sue told me a lot of stories about these sorts of things, but honestly, I didn’t know whether to take everything she said with a grain of salt or not. You’re the first shifter I’ve ever met.”

He was going to answer when he noticed the look on her face as she stopped walking.

“What?” She had that look that he now recognized as her listening to the trees speak to her.

“He didn’t take the turn off that leads to my cabin. He’s on the road farther down the mountain. He’s doing something else. Wait.” She turned so that she was facing downslope. There was a road down there, he knew, from his study of the maps before he’d come here. “He stopped his car right down there.” She pointed in a straight line from their position.

Arlo felt a shiver run down his spine. He looked up the slope and realized there was a lot of snow, along with loose rock and boulders up there. Maybe Spencer’s goal had changed from wanting to capture Pam to wanting to kill her—

and Arlo—for humiliating him yesterday. Arlo looked around. They needed to find cover fast. And he needed to warn her about what he suspected.

“I think he’s going to blast the snow and rocks above us,” Arlo told her flat out. She went even paler than her normal complexion, if that was possible, for just a moment. Then she rallied.

“What can we do?” It wasn’t a plaintive question, it was more an exploratory query, as if she was looking for data so that she could make a decent plan. Arlo’s inner wolf wanted to growl in approval.

Pam tamped down her initial feelings of panic at Arlo’s revelation. Panic wouldn’t help anything. She had to think. Surely, there was something they could do to protect themselves against whatever Spencer had in mind.

“We’re totally exposed here,” Arlo told her. “We need to find some kind of cover.”

Suddenly, the High Priestess’s words came back to her about going to the earth. Had the old woman known about the mine?

“I know a place,” Pam said, taking Arlo’s hand. She needed the contact just now. “We’re close enough now. Follow me.”

She hurried as fast as she could over the rough terrain, but they were still quite a ways from the entrance to the old mine when Spencer started firing. He wasn’t using conventional weapons. Not that she could tell. But she did feel the shock wave of magic as it rolled past her, aimed toward the top of the mountain. A moment later, a small avalanche of snow and shards rock were flying everywhere as a few of the smaller boulders started making their way down the hill they were on.

She wanted to scream, but there wasn’t time. She kept running, gripping Arlo’s hand as a shower of small rocks rolled past just behind them. Larger rocks followed, and then a few boulders as well. It was just pure luck that Spencer had

been aiming a bit to the right of their position. She felt another wave of magic rush past them, and then, more rocks and snow were coming down at them, even closer. She ran as fast as she could over the terrain. The forest wasn't as dense here, and the rocks had a better shot at hitting them. But not for long. They were almost there now.

Pam clung to Arlo's hand as they ran together for safety. She liked that he wasn't asking for particulars. She didn't have the breath to give them to him anyway, at this point. He seemed to just be trusting her, which made her feel...odd. In a good way. As if he thought she was competent, which was something Brad had never made her feel. Quite the opposite, in fact.

A third wave of magical energy whooshed past them, but it was going to be okay. She saw the dilapidated entrance to the abandoned mine just a few yards away. When she would've run straight for it, Arlo pulled her back, his hand tightening on hers and preventing her from moving forward. Good thing, too, as the largest boulder yet came rolling down the hill right in front of her. If not for Arlo, she would've been flattened. She squeezed his hand and looked up at him.

"Thanks." She couldn't say any more than that right now. She figured he understood. He had just saved her life, and she wouldn't soon forget that.

They ran on as soon as the boulder cleared the area, and Pam dove straight into the mine entrance. She had been here before. She had explored the mine many, many times since moving here. She liked it. She liked being underground. And right now, it was the safest place to be.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Arlo followed her inside, but when she would have gone deeper into the mine, he held her back. She looked at him quizzically.

“It might not be safe to go too far in,” he said. “All the magic Spencer keeps throwing at the mountain could collapse the passages.”

“Oh.” She tried to find the words to explain to him how she knew she could keep them safe underground. “That’s not a problem. I explore these shafts all the time. I don’t know how it works, but I can always tell if someplace isn’t safe. And if the earth starts to give way, I can stop it. Maybe I’m part mole shifter,” she joked.

But Arlo just shook his head. “My apologies. I keep forgetting you’re an earth elemental. I suppose there’s nobody better to be underground with than someone who knows the earth inside and out. Lead on, milady.”

She liked the sound of that. Earth elemental. He had said that before, but she hadn’t really thought about it too much. She had been focused on the trees and the forest, but she really did have an affinity for the mine and the earth. She felt at home down here. Safe.

Especially with Arlo accompanying her. She wondered if he’d liked the mine as much as she did. She thought she remembered something about wolves making dens underground, but she could be totally wrong on that. She’d have to figure out a way to ask him without being insulting. But that could wait until they got out of this mess.

“How is your night vision down here?” Arlo asked as they slowed from a walk to a stroll.

“Not as good as up top, which is why I left a few flashlights around the place,” she revealed. “In fact, there are some right up here.” She reached upward to a small ledge where she’d left two flashlights, handing him one.

“Why two?” he asked as she turned on her light and could see him much better.

“They were cheap enough. I bought them in bulk off the internet. I figured it would be better to leave a spare in case the first one’s batteries go dead.”

“Good plan.”

“I stored a box of batteries down here too. Just in case. But they’re in the main chamber, just ahead.”

They kept walking until they came out into a large chamber a good way into the mountain. It was a central area, and several shafts opened out from there. It was a good place to stop and rest and take stock.

“What kind of mine was this?” Arlo asked, clearly curious as he leaned against a boulder and looked around at the gleaming walls.

“Mostly gold, from what I understand. Although, I’ve heard there was a lot of silver found in other parts of Idaho back in the 1800s.”

Arlo shrugged his shoulders in such a way that he reminded her of his wolf. If he’d been in his wolf form, she’d bet he would’ve been shaking out his fur to let it settle. Then she remembered that silver was poisonous to shifters and some Others. At least, according to Sue.

“Her family didn’t know it, but this mine was the source of Sue’s initial wealth. She found a lot of gold here that the old timers had left behind. She said there might still be a bit left in here somewhere if I looked hard enough for it. I haven’t really been looking, to be honest. Having the house and being caretaker of these lands are riches enough for me,” she told him, then shrugged. “Of course, if I did find some gold down here, I’m sure I could find a use for it.” She chuckled, and he followed suit.

“I don’t suppose you can find out what’s going on outside from here, can you?” Arlo asked.

Pam thought about it for a moment, then put her hand to the nearest wall and closed her eyes. She couldn’t hear the trees here, but she could sense what was happening through the ground, since that’s what Spencer had been attacking. She

tilted her head and waited. Sure enough, she felt the echoes of another wave of magic being absorbed deep into the rock above them. The ground was taking in the energy, though of course, a surface layer of the rock and snow was being blasted off the side of the mountain to rain down below.

“He’s still going at it,” Pam reported, opening her eyes. “It’s not really harming the mountain. The ground is absorbing the extra energy, and his magic missiles are coming less frequently. I think he might be getting tired. Sue told me even the most powerful mages can’t operate for long without taking time to recharge.”

“True enough, in my experience,” Arlo agreed. “But we can’t count on him leaving again. I think it would be best if we stay down here for now. Are there other exits from the mine?”

“Several,” she told him. “We can head west and come out farther down the mountain. It’s a relatively easy walk. I’ve done it more than once, and it took only a few hours.”

“That sounds like a good idea. How far west will it take us?”

“Not far as the crow flies,” she told him. “Sorry. We’ll still be on my land, just a bit farther west and down the slope. But maybe by then, Spencer will give up and go away.”

She didn’t think he would, but it couldn’t hurt to think positive.

“We haven’t eaten yet,” Arlo pointed out. “Let’s do that. We need to keep our energy up.”

He had a point. She was never hungry right after waking up, but her stomach liked the idea of having a little something in it before they went any farther. The walk underground would be a bit easier than the trek over the side of the mountain, but it would still burn calories. They needed to stay as strong as possible with Spencer on their trail.

“This cavern has a few amenities,” Pam told him as they walked a little farther into the larger area. She pointed her flashlight toward the far wall. “The old timers used this as a bivouac, I think, and Sue put a few bits and pieces in a couple

of the larger caverns for her own comfort as she worked down here. She wasn't a hardcore miner or anything, but in her youth, she did swing a pick around a bit. Those are some of her tools."

The flashlight glinted off a few picks and shovels lined up against the far wall, then moved to illuminate an old metal table with a newer nylon camp chair beside it. There was a red and white cooler next to it.

"Is there anything in the cooler?" Arlo asked.

"I stocked it with bottled water a couple of weeks ago, as a matter of fact. I liked the idea of digging around down here on rainy days and seeing if I could find any gold nuggets or even garnets. Garnets are often found alongside gold, and I like them, even if they're not worth much," she admitted.

She wouldn't tell him the full extent of her discoveries just yet, she decided. She wanted to be certain he liked her for herself, not for the riches she had discovered. She'd never had to worry about anything like that before, but she would have to get used to it. Sue had given her financial security as well as a home when she'd left this place to Pam. It was a gift she would never forget and one she thanked Sue's spirit for every single day.

"All the comforts of home," Arlo commented with a grin she could hear in his tone.

He started forward, opening the cooler and taking a look inside as she snapped on the LED camping lantern she'd left in the space a few weeks ago. It used very little power, so the batteries would last a good long time.

"You packed soft drinks and some canned food too." He grinned up at her, and her breath caught at the way his eyes danced in the faint light of the lantern. "You're pretty amazing, Pam, if I haven't said that before. A woman after my own heart."

She read true admiration in his gaze, not just flattery. He liked what she had done in making this place into a little getaway, which was what it had been for her. She let her mind

wander for a brief moment to contemplate what it would be like if she really could capture his heart. Did she want it?

More and more, she was coming to think, she probably did. At least for a while. Arlo was the first man to stir her senses in a very long time. Brad had really messed with her head, and after she'd finally gotten rid of him, she hadn't wanted to get involved with anyone, even on a casual basis.

Arlo, though... She could more than imagine what it would be like to be intimate with him. She had loved being held in his arms last night, and she'd really enjoyed kissing him. She wanted more. It was crazy to even be thinking about that sort of thing considering the situation they were in, but she couldn't help herself. Arlo was just too appealing. Too masculine. Too darn nice.

She shook herself mentally and got back to the matter at hand. They had to stay hidden from Spencer's attacks. The mine was a good place to do that, considering nobody really knew about it. She'd taken the precaution of doing her best to camouflage the old entrances to the mine all over the mountain. She had carefully encouraged bushes and trees to overgrow the entrances, so that it would be very hard for anyone who didn't know the mine was there to find a way in. Even if they did, nobody else knew the layout of the shafts like she did.

After first entering the old mine, she had discovered she loved being inside the earth and had spent more than a few days exploring and setting this place up to her tastes. She wasn't finished yet but had plans to bring in even more comfort items a few at a time, but she had most of the essentials covered at this point. She hadn't even told Arlo about the composting camping toilet she'd set up in one of the smaller side tunnels yet.

Arlo patted the camp chair, and she went over to sit with him as he set the table with a bottle of water for each of them and what remained of the fruit and nut bars he'd had in one of the pockets of his cargo pants. Pam took out the other half of the one he'd given her last night from her backpack and put it down on her side of the table while he closed the cooler and

moved it closer to the table so he could use it as a seat. She also took out what was left of the bread and cheese. It was cheese sandwiches with the bars for dessert, just like the night before. With the lantern filling the cavern with soft light, the place was almost cozy.

After they finished the last of the bread and cheese, she nibbled on her nut bar and drank the water. She'd put an entire case of water in the cooler a couple of weeks ago, so there was plenty for both of them as long as they didn't have to stay down here more than a few days.

"You know, I've been thinking," Arlo began as he chomped on his own bar. "All the magic Spencer is tossing around out there is bound to attract the attention of the bear Clan. I can't see how they wouldn't notice since their territory borders your land."

"You think they'll come investigate?" Pam asked.

Arlo nodded. "I think they'll be both curious and concerned about what the hell is going on up here. Spencer isn't exactly hiding his presence. Even if he could somehow disguise the magic, the rockslides are bound to be noticed. Bears are naturally curious, and since they are your nearest neighbors, they're going to want to make sure whatever is going on over here won't spread to their territory and become a problem for them."

"Makes sense. So, what do we do? Just lay low in the mine for today and hope the bear shifters show up?" Pam could see a couple of issues with that. "How would we know they were around if we're down here? And how would we meet up with them?"

"Good questions," Arlo nodded in approval. "I think we should spend the day underground, where we can regroup and maybe catch a bit more rest. Are your muscles sore today after all the hiking we did yesterday?"

She had to admit, he was right. She had awoken with quite a few unaccustomed aches and pains. She'd stretched her legs out as best she could, but her feet still hurt a bit, and her muscles were ouchy when she moved the wrong way.

Pam nodded, feeling a bit embarrassed. “I’m not exactly an athlete, though I do try to stay in shape. Still, I’m definitely not used to hiking all day. My body is telling me to rest, but my mind keeps wanting me to either run or duke it out with Spencer, even if I’m not sure what to do to stop him.”

“Fight or flight,” Arlo confirmed, nodding. “That’s a good response, believe it or not. It tells me your instincts are working just fine.”

She found she really enjoyed the note of approval in his words. Pam demurred and took Arlo on a tour of the amenities. She showed him the small side tunnel she’d set aside as a bathroom and took him to a few of the pretty spots in the network of tunnels and caverns. They returned to the main cavern and had lunch, finishing the last of the bread and cheese, then rested for a bit. She was more fatigued than she realized and found herself dozing in the chair.

Arlo looked on indulgently when Pam fell asleep. They’d had a long day yesterday and, frankly, not a very restful night. She deserved a bit more downtime if they were going to be facing Spencer again.

He found himself contemplating the tunnels and caverns she had shown him, amazed by what Pam had done with the old abandoned mine. She had made it almost homey, but the most important part was that she had prepared for many different contingencies. She may not realize it, but she was what the humans might call a bit of a prepper.

Arlo had noted her cache of batteries, flashlights, and camping equipment. He also noticed that she had spent some time refurbishing the old tools lined up along the wall. They had been polished, oiled, and sharpened, where needed. Ready for use. She had definitely spruced up the place, adding her own touches, such as the brightly colored nylon camping chair and the big red cooler.

Every time he turned around, this woman was impressing him all over again. She was smart, resourceful, gorgeous, and

highly magical. Everything about her appealed to him...and his inner wolf.

That way could lay madness, he well knew. He could easily give Pam his heart, and she might not feel the same. She wasn't a shifter. He didn't know how her kind mated. Oh, he'd seen her relatives end up mated to a few shifters, and even an ancient bloodletter, but he didn't know for certain the depth of the attachment. Those other couples seemed happy enough, but were they truly mated the way he'd always dreamed of being mated—soul to soul—to the woman of his dreams?

He'd thought they were true matings when he'd seen them happen. He'd even celebrated when his friends had mated with dryads, but now that he was faced with the possibility himself, what did he really know about how mating worked with a non-shifter woman? He wished now that he'd taken the time to talk more with Jesse and Jason about their relationships with Maria and Sally.

Of course, he couldn't have known that he'd need such information. Still, he cursed himself for wasting the opportunity to gather the intel. He could have really used some guidance. Of course, even with the information about how his friends had captured the hearts and loyalty of their dryad mates, each of those women were individuals, with different backgrounds. So maybe the same things wouldn't necessarily apply to his situation with Pam.

She had told him she'd had a bad relationship. He got the feeling that she wasn't quite over the trauma of it yet, and she might not be ready to commit the way his wolf would need her to commit if they were to become mates. It would destroy him if he mated with a woman who didn't feel the same strong bond he felt. He just wasn't sure Pam was capable of giving her heart as deeply as he needed.

His inner wolf was skittish, unsure for the first time since he'd been a pup. Both sides of his soul felt drawn to Pam, but he sensed a reticence in her that made his wolf side want to whine in complaint. They didn't have time for this. They were essentially under attack, though well-hidden for now. Still, they had a big problem waiting for them outside the safe haven

of the mine, but all he could seem to think about was his potential romantic problems.

Arlo had never had this much of a problem focusing on the mission at hand. Dammit. He should be working on a solution to the Spencer problem rather than agonizing and soul-searching over Pam. If he got them both out of this alive, he could worry about making her his then.

And there it was. He wasn't really all that torn. He wanted her. He wanted her to want him just as much. He just needed to figure out how to make that happen.

His wolf settled within his skin. They would figure it out, but first, they needed to deal with the enemy who was waiting just outside for them. They had this single day to come up with a plan, because beyond this day, they would start to run out of food. They had enough for lunch and dinner, and maybe a sketchy breakfast tomorrow, but that was it. Tomorrow afternoon, at the latest, they'd have to find a way to deal with Spencer once and for all.

Arlo made himself comfortable on the ground near Pam's chair and closed his eyes. He might as well steal a quick forty winks himself. He doubted very much whether Spencer could find them in the mine, if he even knew it existed. They were safe enough for now, and Arlo was a light sleeper.

They woke a few hours later, though it was impossible to tell time in the cave. Without the sun to mark its passage, it was really anybody's guess what time it was. Of course, they both had watches. Arlo checked his and discovered they'd slept for three solid hours, at least, and it was well past lunch time. Closer to dinner, in fact.

Pam got up, stretched out the new kinks in her muscles and then put her hands to the nearest wall. She closed her eyes, and Arlo realized she was listening to the earth. When she opened her eyes again, she looked at him.

CHAPTER NINE

“He’s stopped lobbing magic blasts at the mountain,” Pam reported. “He had to or the road would have become blocked by boulders so that he couldn’t drive away. Where he and his car were parked, there’s nothing, so he had to have had some way of steering the boulders away from himself, but on either side, there’s quite a bit of debris. He left before he couldn’t get his car out anymore. Actually, there’s more of a blockage just forward of where he was parked, so it looks like he was directing the rockslides ahead of his car, not behind, but some got through anyway, to make the road behind him harder to navigate.”

“He left?” Arlo asked.

“Looks like it,” she said, her eyes still closed. “I can sort of trace the vibrations of the car’s tires on the earth.” Her eyes flashed open. “He stopped at my house, and now, he’s on foot, roaming the woods. I can’t track him this way. He’s probably blocking me somehow. I got the sense that he stopped and did something, and then, it’s blank.”

“He’s using magic to cloud his path,” Arlo frowned. “That’s okay. I don’t think he can find us down here.” He looked around at the various side tunnels. “And it’s a maze. Even if he found a way in, he’d have to wander around a long time before he found us. I think we’re safe enough if we stay here then try to make progress toward the bear Clan’s territory later today or tonight. We can both see in the dark, and I doubt Spencer has that skill, or he’d have stayed up here last night, looking for us.”

“You have a point,” Pam allowed. “I can’t say I like the idea of just sitting around waiting, but your plan does make sense.” She stood and, without explanation, went into a side tunnel.

She had taken her small flashlight with her, and Arlo could see the faint light of it moving down the tunnel until it was out of sight. He suspected she wouldn’t go far, and she knew these tunnels much better than he did. If she was going to be long,

she would've said something. Still, his inner wolf paced around inside his skin, wondering what she was up to.

The wolf liked to play games, but the situation was a little too tense to really enjoy guessing what she was doing. So, Arlo watched the tunnel for any sign of movement. Before too long, he was rewarded with a faint glimmer of light as she started back down the tunnel toward the main chamber.

When she reappeared with a large plastic bag gripped in one hand, he moved to help her, but she waved him away. She took the plastic bag to one side of the cavern, near where the table and chair were, and opened it. Much to his surprise, it was full of old blankets, which she began to unfold and shake out before placing them on the floor.

“When my father died, I found it hard to part with a lot of my parents’ things,” Pam revealed as she worked. “I eventually had to throw out a lot of stuff, but I kept the best of what was left. This quilt,” she held it up to him for inspection, then kept moving, “was on their bed when I was a little girl. My grandmother made it for my mother as part of her trousseau.” Pam paused, staring off into the distance with a faint smile on her face. “An old-fashioned word for an old-fashioned woman. My grandmother made a lot of things, and I’ve tried to keep the ones I still have safe. I stored a few things down here both for safekeeping, and because I thought maybe they would come in useful at some point. As you said, it would be very hard for someone to find their way in here, so it’s really the best place I know to keep my family treasures. They’re not worth much to anyone but me, but to me, they’re priceless.”

Arlo noted the way she was stroking the faded cotton fabric of the quilt as tears glistened behind her eyes. He wanted to go over to her but hesitated. She seemed to want to talk, and the best thing he could do now was listen.

He realized she had been alone up here for a long time. She probably hadn’t had anyone to talk to for just as long. His inner wolf didn’t understand that. The wolf needed its Pack. He wasn’t a loner. He wouldn’t do well if he was forced to live

alone for some odd reason. He sensed that maybe Pam was like that too, even if she wasn't a wolf.

"I think that's a great idea," he told her quietly, hoping she would open up more to him. "But why not keep some of these things in your house?"

She turned to look at him, meeting his gaze in the dim light. "Oh, I do have some things at the house, but this..." She looked back down at the quilt. "Whenever I see this, it reminds me of the old days and how happy we were as a family. I know those memories should make me feel good, but they also make me really sad for everything that was lost when my parents died. I look at this, and I remember how great they were and how much they loved each other, and me, and then, I remember that those times will never come again. Sometimes, it's just a little too much. So, I put it here to keep it safe, and hopefully, someday, it won't remind me of how much I miss them."

At that point, he couldn't hold back any longer. Arlo went to her and gently took the quilt from her hands, placing it carefully on the nearby table where it would be safe. Then he put his arms around her shoulders, giving her a hug that he hoped would show her without words how much he understood and wanted her to not be so sad. It hurt him to know she was still grieving her parents.

He held her close, and she rested her head against his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess all the stress of the past day has brought my emotions to the top of my mind. I can normally keep this under control a lot better."

He rocked her in his arms gently. "It's okay. This has been a traumatic experience, and it's not unusual for other unresolved emotions to come up, now that we have a few minutes to breathe. You still miss your parents. That's not unusual in a wolf Pack. We love deeply, and family is everything to us. I understand loss."

She looked up at him. "You've lost loved ones too? Your parents?"

He nodded, his lips tightening into a grim line as he shook his head. “No, my folks are still alive, but my sister died young, and it broke all our hearts. That’s the reason I joined the Army, to try to make a difference and keep terrorists from killing any other innocents.”

“What happened?” she asked him, the tears in her eyes receding as compassion came to the fore.

“She was in college, and there was a terrorist incident. It was a long time ago, but essentially, a student group was radicalized by foreign agitators, and they took a whole classroom hostage. My sister tried to fight back, but even though she was a shifter, her greater strength and faster reflexes couldn’t do much against a dozen terrorists armed with assault weapons and grenades. She died trying to protect the other students. She was a hero, and I know she went out with honor and dignity, but she’s still gone, and it hurts even now. We were close, and it still makes me want to whine like a pup when I think how I’ll never see her face or hear her voice again on this earth. Though I do have hope that we’ll see each other again on the next plane of existence. It’s just that I miss her.”

He’d never opened up to anyone about his beloved sister as he was doing now, but it felt right. And maybe he could find some peace by helping Pam find some, as well.

“I understand that completely,” Pam said, resting her head against his chest again. “I’m sorry you lost her. It doesn’t seem fair that good people have to die.” She was quiet a moment, and they just stood there, comforting each other. “My mother passed when I was just barely in my teens. After that, I moved around a lot with my dad. He was a civil engineer, and we went wherever the projects took him. His last project was in Boise, but he was gravely injured in a workplace accident. He lingered a bit, but finally went to be with my mother. After he died, Sue—the elderly neighbor who left me the cabin and this land—sort of took me under her wing. I don’t think I would’ve made it through that first year sane, if not for her. She was terrific. And then, of course, she died too, just a few years later. Losing her brought the previous grief back, and it’s been

hard to deal with all by myself.” She passed a moment. “Being in the woods helps. Being down here in the mine helps a lot too. I never realized how much affinity I had for the earth and the rocks and the trees. They’ve been healing me, little by little. It’s just that, on occasion, I remember how much I miss them all, and it gets to me a little.”

“No shame in that,” Arlo told her. “Stress brings things back, like I said. I understand, and I’m here. If you want to talk, I’ll listen. If you want to just be quiet, we can do that too. Whatever you need.”

“You are such a good man,” she whispered, and he felt it down to his soul. His inner wolf liked the way she thought of him.

Pam was really touched by Arlo’s compassion. She’d never really known a man like him. She’d never experienced a man who even pretended to put her needs first. But he didn’t just pretend. He had done it, time and time again. They had only known each other very short time, but she felt as if she knew him better than any man she had ever known before. And she trusted him. That was a big thing for a woman whose trust had been betrayed.

Pam was very leery about sharing confidences with anyone after the way Brad had played on her emotions, making her doubt herself. Arlo, by contrast, had done nothing but help her and make her feel better about herself. He had treated her as an equal partner. As someone competent to make their own decisions and even lead him when she knew the terrain better. He had trusted her with his safety, as she had trusted him. Theirs was a partnership, not the kind of twisted dysfunctional relationship she’d had with Brad.

Even on such short acquaintance, she knew that truth deep in her heart. Maybe it was because he was a shifter. Maybe there was just something about shifters that was different from normal men. She wasn’t sure. Maybe it was just something peculiar to Arlo, himself. He was just a good guy, and that was somewhat outside of her experience.

She had been alone up here for so long, and she hadn't trusted her own instincts about men for a long time after Brad broke up with her. Maybe it was time to start again. Maybe it was time to give another man a chance. And not just any man.

Arlo.

He was the only one she had been attracted to in a very long time. If what he had told her about shifters mating for life was true, then he might be safe to experiment with. The chances were really slim that she would turn out to be his mate, so she might as well have fun and explore these new feelings and the new confidence he instilled in her while she could.

Pam reached up and put her arm around his neck, coaxing his head downward. Then she kissed him. His response was all she could have hoped for. He deepened the kiss, his arms enfolding her and bringing her close to his hard, warm body. She reveled in the feel of him against her. Arlo was, by far, the most intriguing man she had ever known and the most attractive—both mentally and physically.

His body tempted her into naughty thoughts and had since she'd first set eyes on him. She was a little appalled at the superficiality of her own thoughts, but she couldn't help herself. He was one good-looking hunk of manhood, and he seemed totally unaware of his appeal, which made him all that much more appealing to her way of thinking. Brad had been all too aware of his appearance. Arlo, by contrast, didn't seem to care one way or another. He was just...so incredibly masculine and rugged. Built to last and not at all shallow. Not in any sense of the word.

She wanted to see him naked. She wanted to feel his skin against hers and welcome him inside herself. She knew without knowing why that he could show her things she had only dreamed of, and she wanted to know it all. With him. Right now.

Pam tugged at his shirt, and he obliged, yanking it off and tossing it to the floor. She had already made a little nest of sorts out of some of the old blankets. The precious quilt was

safely on the table, but the other blankets were spread out in a comfy pile just a foot away.

She knew this was going way too fast, but she didn't want to wait. Couldn't wait. There was an urgency riding her that would not be denied. If she thought too long about this, she'd talk herself out of it, and that wouldn't do. Not in this situation. She was on the run for her life and might never get another chance like this. She was going to grab it with both hands. Or, rather, grab *him* with both hands, and not let go until she discovered all that she wanted to know.

Bolder than she'd ever been before, Pam tugged him downward, and he followed. They were on the blankets, and she was able to explore that hard, perfect chest to her heart's content as he kissed her nearly into oblivion. Only when she felt the cool draft of air on her skin did she realize that Arlo had been busy undressing her as well. She helped him by lifting her arms so he could pull all the fabric loose and toss it to the side. They were both bare from the waist up, but that wasn't enough.

Not nearly enough. She wanted more. She wanted it *all*.

Pushing at his waistband, she signaled without words, and he complied, though doing things in his own way. He removed her pants first, allowing his hands to roam all over her body and even delve within briefly, which only stoked the fire in her blood higher. He touched her so exquisitely, so carefully, and yet with such surety. It boded well for what would come next.

When he had her spread out before him, he rose up on his knees to unbutton his pants, lowering them in a calculated striptease that made her lick her lips in anticipation. When he was revealed, her breath caught in her throat. He was magnificent. Truly. Hard and thick and long. She wanted him inside her so much her body yearned to receive him. It wanted to know what that would feel like. What *he* would feel like, possessing her, claiming her...owning her pleasure.

He lay next to her, tracing delicate patterns on her torso, teasing her breasts before lowering his head to nibble on her skin in the most delightful ways. No words were spoken, but

they were communicating on a basic level that needed no explanation. Pleasure was the language, and ecstasy the goal.

When he moved to cover her, she spread herself wide in anticipation. He growled deep in his throat, and she suddenly remembered the wildness in him that he was, apparently, keeping under wraps. She tried to read his expression, and what she saw there was tight control. She didn't really like that, for some reason. She wanted *all* of him. Man, beast, raging need.

While it was touching that he was holding back for her sake, it was also not fair to him. She thought she had known what she was getting into when she started down this path. She had been ready and willing to accept both sides of his nature, even if she hadn't thought of it in exactly those terms until just this moment.

She gripped his shoulders as he began the penetration. Digging her nails in seemed to get his attention as his gaze shot to hers.

"Don't hold back," she gasped. "Let the wolf out. I want all of you."

She barely knew what she was saying, but it felt right. Dear heaven, it felt completely right as he joined them together for the first time.

He growled, and she felt the rumble in his chest. That wasn't a human sound. Not by a longshot. That was the wolf, riding inside the man's shape. The dual consciousness that was somehow all part and parcel of the same man.

A man she was coming to love. That realization struck her out of the blue, but it, too, felt completely true. Like a destiny that had just become real. It was all good. No matter what happened tomorrow, or the next day, they would always have this moment out of time. This culmination of forces she could not have predicted or even understood. She just knew that right here, right now, this was meant to be.

He joined them together and then paused for a long moment, his gaze searching hers. She didn't know what he

was looking for, but she hoped she didn't disappoint him in any way. He was such a good man, such a brave protector. He didn't have to help her as he had done, but his honor wouldn't have let him walk away from a woman in trouble. She knew that without question. She felt she was beginning to understand him as she had never understood the few other men she had been with.

Arlo wasn't exactly an open book. Quite the contrary, in fact. But maybe it was the magic that they shared that allowed her to understand him. Stranger things had happened. This world of magic and shifters and danger... It was all new to her, but her instincts had seen her through thus far, and they had steered her on the right course for the past several years, since she'd first become aware of her own abilities.

It led her now to the most intense, amazing sexual experience of her life. She thought all this in a split second before Arlo began to move. Then thinking was beyond her. All she could do was feel. And feel. And feel some more as waves of ecstasy rolled over her being, drowning her in a luscious tidal pool of bliss. It was like nothing she had ever experienced before. She doubted she would ever feel this way again with any other man.

In fact, Arlo had probably just ruined her for any other, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Not at that moment. Not when the ultimate pinnacle was just out of reach.

They strained together, reaching for...something. Something indescribable. Something that she felt would elevate her to another level of understanding about the power that was generated between male and female. Yin and yang. Two halves of a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts.

She reached, he responded, driving deep and carrying her away to an unknown place where only pleasure existed. She cried out his name as the world shattered around her, and she felt him tense within her, joining her in the extreme climax that stole both their breath.

It was a long, long time before they broke apart, needing to move to let the ecstasy fade. One could not stand too long in the center of the sun, after all. Pam knew she had a faint smile on her face as Arlo moved to her side, holding her close and cuddling. No other man had felt the need to cuddle after achieving climax. Maybe that was something special to her werewolf lover?

Her smile deepened as she savored that thought and held it close to her heart. They were lovers now. Nothing could ever take that away. Even if Spencer caught them, she would still have this memory, this amazing experience to carry with her the rest of her days, however many or few that proved to be.

She allowed herself to drift off to sleep, secure in Arlo's arms, her body tingling in the aftermath, with joy.

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CHAPTER TEN

Pam woke sometime later to find herself snuggled into the blankets and covered up. She was warm in her little nest, but she knew it was time to get up. They still had a lot of work to do.

Arlo wasn't in the main chamber, but she sensed him through the earth. He wasn't too far away. She got up, cleaned up as best she could, and dressed.

When Arlo came back, he smiled at her in a way that made her insides warm all over again. He came over and kissed her, making her toes curl, but he drew back to smile again.

“I wish we could stay here all day, but...”

“But we still have to resolve a few things with Spencer,” she finished for him. “Okay. Let's eat, and then, we can get on with the task at hand. Not that I didn't enjoy our interlude, but you're right. Darn it.”

He chuckled and cupped her cheek, looking deep into her eyes for a long moment. He kissed her softly on the mouth then let go. He stepped away and helped her sort through the cans she'd stored in the cavern as if he hadn't just blown her socks off with the most tender kiss she'd ever received. This complex man was downright intoxicating.

Canned ravioli heated over a tiny electric camp stove that ran on batteries tasted oh-so-good when it was ready. Pam had a battery backup power station that was about the size of a car battery. It had all sorts of different plug-in points for different devices. It also had a solar collector so Pam could recharge the unit simply by sticking the flexible solar panel outside the mine during the day.

“This thing is pretty cool,” Arlo commented as he looked at the power station. “We had something like this back when I was in the Army.”

“I used to go camping a bit,” she told him. “When I moved up here, I brought all my camping gear with me, and I carted this up here the last time I was in the mine. I figured it could be useful here. It's not big enough to power much at the house,

and I have solar panels on the roof there, in any event. But it's perfect for this kind of application."

Arlo nodded, tucking into his food. She'd made them a can of soup to split plus the ravioli. Arlo took over the cooking when they'd finished the initial meal, because apparently, his stomach was a bottomless pit. He made two more cans of both soup and some kind of pasta for himself and wolfed it down without complaint while Pam tidied up the place.

"Much as I'm enjoying being down here with you," Arlo sent her a smile that made her blood heat with desire, "we can't stay here indefinitely. For one thing, we need more food. If we have no backup coming, we're going to have to do something ourselves."

"Like what?" She paused in her tidying, unable to imagine what he had in mind.

"Like, turn the hunter into the prey," Arlo said, and her mind boggled. Was he for real? "Or at least find some allies."

"The bear shifters you mentioned?" she asked. "Do you think we can make it to their territory?"

"We might be able to get there, but Spencer has some very potent magic at his disposal. It would be foolish to underestimate him." Arlo frowned a little. "Still, we might be able to sneak away and get to the bears. I'm pretty sure they'll help us, and then, we can make plans to end the threat Spencer poses."

"But what if we head for the bears and don't make it? If Spencer is as strong as you say, he might outmaneuver us." She didn't like thinking about that.

"That's why we need to plan for all contingencies," Arlo replied. "One plan for if we make it straight through. One plan for if we run into trouble. One plan for any unexpected encounters with Spencer—or if he brings his own allies into the game."

They spent the next half-hour making plans and contingency plans. Arlo showed her the way he had learned to make plans in the Army. He let her contribute, which touched

her greatly. There were things she could do in various situations. Magic she could use that was unique to her. As they worked, she began to gain confidence in their ability to get out of this situation alive.

A short time later, they resumed their journey, heading toward bear territory.

They made their way through the mine in a westward direction. Pam was leading them toward the exit closest to their destination, though it was still quite a distance to travel in the open to get to their possible allies. Arlo hoped Spencer had given up for the night and gone away again. He'd done it the night before, but Arlo knew there was no guarantee that Spencer would stay away for a second night. He had to be getting desperate—and even angrier that they had been able to evade him this long.

Spencer hadn't seemed like a patient sort of man. He was used to getting what he wanted, when he wanted it. Arlo refused to oblige him. If they met up somewhere out in the wilderness, Arlo would do his best to end Spencer once and for all.

It would be risky, though. He knew that for a fact. Any mage who could conjure up an Elspian Ring was someone to tread carefully around. Still, if he had no other choice, Arlo would do his best. It would be a little easier, of course, if he had reliable backup. That's where the bears came in. Among the most magical of shifters, the bears could be of great help in a magical battle. And one specific bear that came from this area came to mind. An old comrade from his army days, now retired. If Coop was home—and why wouldn't he be—he would be a huge help.

It was well after dark when they finally emerged from the mine. Pam had stopped a few times and tried to listen to the earth to see if there was any news of Spencer or any other possible threats awaiting them outside. Arlo hoped no news was good news, but he had the niggling feeling that it wasn't going to be that easy.

They were lower down the mountain than they had been when they entered the mine, and a bit farther west. In fact, they were just below the road Spencer had been on the day before when he was lobbing magic missiles at the rocky terrain above them. They had decided to use the road to travel on, as long as nobody else was around.

They weren't far out of the mine when the night lit up red around them, the eerie light reflecting off a layer of snow.

Shit! Spencer wasn't taking a second night off. He'd been waiting for them.

But they'd made a plan for this. Arlo looked at Pam and nodded. She knew what to do. His brave lass nodded back, swallowing hard before turning back toward the mine entrance. She ran back to the mine and went in. It was up to Arlo to lure Spencer inside—exactly where they wanted him.

Arlo ran after her, making much more noise—on purpose—than he usually did. He wanted to make sure Spencer knew where they were and followed along.

He heard crashing through the woods behind him as Spencer took the bait. Arlo almost smiled as he made sure Spencer saw him entering the indentation in the rock that hid this entrance to the mine. They had a contingency plan for this scenario, and Arlo was glad to see that Pam was already in position, ready to enact their strategy.

Now all they had to do was get Spencer in place.

The minute Spencer entered the mine, Pam collapsed the entrance they had all used. Spencer ran after them, Pam causing a rolling cave-in that followed his progress, licking at Spencer's heels. They ran down the twisting tunnel, leading ever farther into the side of the mountain. Pam knew exactly where they were, of course, though Arlo was a bit turned around, even with his wolf's sense of direction and familiarity with underground dens.

The plan was to drive Spencer forward to the point where it was easier for him to keep moving forward rather than trying

to go back the way they'd come. When there was a good two hundred yards of collapsed tunnel behind him, and they had reached the point where they were still some distance from the next big junction, Pam turned and caused a rockfall between Spencer and the two of them. Arlo knew Spencer had seen them and growled his anger as he tried to blast the rock coming down very close to his head, but he'd stopped, closeted between two cave-in points.

They hoped he would think it was too far to go back and use his energy to move forward, blasting the rockfall with his magic to clear it. That was one of many options in their plan, at least. What Spencer did now would determine which branch of their many-branched plan they would have to go with next.

"Is he secure?" Arlo asked, breathing hard as the dust settled with surprising speed. But, of course, Pam was controlling that too. She was really something. Arlo felt his admiration for the woman increase yet again.

"He's trapped," Pam confirmed. Then she tilted her head and smiled crookedly. "At least, for now."

"If he moved forward, we have two choices," Arlo offered, laying out the options they'd planned for earlier, giving her another chance to choose. "We can run for it and hope he doesn't get out of the mine before we get clear, or we can stand and fight." He touched her cheek, looking deep into her eyes. "What do you want to do, sweetheart?"

"I want to end this." A look of grim determination came over her face, and he felt his heart swell with pride. "I refuse to keep looking over my shoulder, worrying the boogey man is coming after me for one minute more."

"That's my girl." He pulled her close for a quick squeeze, then released her as the sound of loose pebbles skittering down the newly fallen rock started up again.

Letting her go, he faced the massive boulders Pam had caused to fall and stack, blocking the *Venifucus* sorcerer into the small passage. They'd opted to trap him and deal with him where Pam had control over the earth rather than face him out in the open where he seemed to have the advantage. While

Pam could have tried to crush him completely in a rock fall, Arlo had vetoed that idea since mages had a way of popping back up just when you thought you'd vanquished them. The only way to be certain they'd defeated Spencer was to see it up close and personal. Of course, that was the most dangerous way, too, but they didn't have a lot of good choices in this situation. They had to get this guy, and the only way to be sure about mages was to see it done properly.

Arlo reached for his ankle holster and took out one of his weapons. He would use every tool in his admittedly small arsenal. Bullets probably wouldn't do much against Spencer's ability to shield, but a bit of gunfire might serve as a distraction.

Arlo had thought about going wolf and doing his best to tear out Spencer's throat but had nixed that idea for two reasons. First, he didn't think it would succeed given Spencer's ability to shield himself with his magic. Second, even though Arlo was faster in his wolf form, he would never leave Pam behind if it came time to run. He would be at her side, no matter what. To the end of time.

And that thought didn't scare him as much as he thought it might. She was his mate. She just didn't know it yet.

"He's using magic to dislodge the rock fall from his side," Pam told him, her eyes closed as she communed with the earth. "He decided to move forward, not back. It'll take him a bit more time to break through, but he *will* break through. His magic is really strong." She opened her eyes, turning to Arlo and meeting his gaze. Her expression was both somber and anxious.

"And when he does, you know what to do," he said, his voice firm.

"Trap him again with more rock," she affirmed, nodding.

"If we tire him out by making him dig himself free a few times, I might be able to get close enough to stop him permanently." Arlo was hoping Spencer's magic was the kind that needed replenishment rather than his being able to draw on powers around him as Pam could.

Arlo didn't know enough about Spencer and his particular brand of magic to know for sure, but this plan would probably work. Eventually. They just had to stick it out longer than the enemy.

If Arlo had thought running away would give them better odds than standing their ground, he would've done it in a heartbeat. The problem, as he saw it, was that they had been on the run from the beginning with this man. Running from Spencer hadn't really helped. If he could be sure they would make it to the bears, and that the other shifters would be willing to help, even if his old friend Coop wasn't in town, Arlo would've done that. But bringing down magical trouble on an unsuspecting group of bear shifters living peacefully away from most human influence wasn't Arlo's first choice.

Bears could be fickle, for lack of a better word. They usually were very solitary—or, at least, insular, among their own small family group. The military bears Arlo had known were cut from a different cloth, for the most part, than the rest of their breed. He knew he could have relied on any one of those men to help. Coop was one of those guys, but if he wasn't home right now, Arlo wasn't certain of his welcome among Coop's family.

After all, he'd only met a few of them once. Coop's younger brothers had traveled to meet Coop one time when they were in the States on leave. The younger bears—not quite men, but definitely not boys—had driven hours to surprise their older brother then had joined the unit for a night on the town. They'd been fun to hang out with, but Arlo couldn't count on that slim acquaintance to be sure of his welcome among them and the rest of the family.

Like it or not, the best move right now was to face Spencer. It was the move that had the highest likelihood of success, though Arlo hesitated to calculate the percentages. Spencer was clearly a very powerful mage. He'd surprised them a number of times already, and though they had survived each one of his attacks, it hadn't exactly been a walk in the park. Arlo wasn't sure how they would do facing him head on,

but he didn't see any better alternatives given the information he had at the moment.

They could hear him now, pounding away at the rock fall from the other side with magic blasts. Very similar to the way he had pummeled the mountain the day before. Spencer's magic was potent. That was for sure.

Arlo felt the sound and vibrations growing more violent as Spencer made his way closer to where they waited. They had picked this spot in the tunnel deliberately. They could keep backing up and trapping Spencer behind more rock for some distance. With any luck, by the time they reached the junction, Spencer's strength would be depleted enough to take him.

"He's almost through," Pam said, her voice a bit shaky with nerves.

"Use your best judgment," Arlo reminded her in a steady voice, hoping to convey calm.

She nodded at him then placed her hands against the side of the tunnel, closing her eyes. They had backed up from the face of the rockfall to give themselves a bit of room. Without Pam's ability to command the earth down to the smallest particle of dust, they wouldn't have stood a chance in here, but she was able to keep the earth stable above them and clear the air of any debris that would make it hard for them to breathe. Her control was masterful, and Arlo marveled at her power.

She waited until the very last minute, when Spencer could see them as well as they could see him. He paused, smiling evilly, but Pam wasn't done. She caused another controlled cave-in, and he disappeared once more as they retreated down the tunnel.

"He won't pause next time," Arlo warned her.

"That's okay. I just wanted him to know we were still here. Gives him a little incentive," she replied with a hint of her old spirit.

Arlo leaned in to kiss her quickly because he just couldn't help himself. "Drives him nuts too, I suspect," he added with a chuckle.

She smiled up at him as he moved back. “You’re probably right. And I won’t wait that long next time. He’ll probably break through ready to shoot those energy blasts at us.”

“We won’t get away with this indefinitely,” Arlo cautioned, going again to the weakness in their plan that they had already both acknowledged when they were discussing it.

“I know. But if he expends enough energy for us to get the drop on him, it’ll be worth it,” Pam replied, as she had before. It sounded like nerves might be getting the best of her, but Arlo reached out and put his hands on her shoulders, looking deep into her eyes.

“No matter how this day ends, you’ve been amazing, Pam. I want you to know that. And if we make it out of this alive, we’re going to have a serious talk about the future, you and me.” He leaned in and kissed her sweetly, knowing they didn’t have enough time for this, really, but he just had to say it. He wanted her to know—at least in part—that he was serious about her and their relationship.

When he pulled back, her expression was dazed for just a moment before she smiled. He loved that just-kissed look on her face and he wanted to see it every day for the rest of their lives. With that as incentive, there was no way Arlo would let Spencer prevail. No. Way.

“I’ll hold you to that,” she whispered. She would probably have said more, but they started to feel Spencer’s energy blasts hitting the rock just on the other side of the rockfall. They broke apart, knowing Pam would have to act soon, moving faster this time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Twice more, Spencer drew closer, and Pam caused more rock to fall. They were in the junction now, and they had literally run out of room. When Spencer blasted through the most recent rockfall, he would be in the open chamber that connected to several tunnels. This would be the place for the final confrontation, but neither of them knew if Spencer was growing weaker. If he wasn't, they were in big trouble.

This time, when Spencer blasted his way through, he paused for a moment on seeing the chamber. An evil smile came over his face as Arlo and Pam stood their ground. They'd debated the merits of hiding or positioning themselves in different parts of the chamber, but Arlo refused to leave her side, for which Pam was silently grateful. It probably lowered their chances of survival, but she wanted to be close to Arlo. If they were going to die in this mess, she wanted to be with him when they left this world.

Too soon, she told herself. It was too soon to feel so closely aligned with him, but she couldn't help the way she felt. Her emotions were all wrapped up in Arlo, and she feared they would never be untangled again. That might be bad for her if he decided they weren't meant to be a couple after all, but she would deal with that when and if it happened. Right now, they had even bigger problems.

"End of the line, little dryad," Spencer ground out, glee in his maniacal grin as he raised his arms to send another energy blast at them.

"I don't think so." Pam motioned with one finger, and a big rock flew from a side tunnel to smash Spencer's hands out of alignment before he could launch his attack. He cursed and shook out his bruised arm.

Pam tried to hide her excitement. He hadn't been shielding. Either he had just forgotten or he could no longer shield because he was running low on energy after blasting his way through yards and yards of rockfall.

She prayed it was the latter. She also prayed for a miracle. A little help right about now would be really great.

Spencer raised his arms again, and Pam tried to bat his arms away a second time with another rock, but this time, his shield deflected it. *Damn*. She tried not to let her fear and disappointment show. She refused to let him see that she was afraid of him. As afraid as she'd ever been in her life.

Arlo opened fire, but none of his bullets got through. More's the pity. When he'd emptied the clip, he made a point of reloading before lowering the gun.

"You're out of options," Spencer said, his voice as cruel as his expression.

"Perhaps not."

A new voice made them all turn their heads. There, in a side tunnel, was a man Pam had never seen before. He strode forward as if he had nothing to fear and just appeared out of thin air every day. He nodded once in Pam's direction and stopped roughly halfway between where Arlo and Pam faced off against Spencer. He was out of the direct line of fire, but no longer hidden in a side tunnel.

Where in the world had he come from?

"Who are you?" Spencer spat at the man, sneering.

"Sir Cameron le Fey," the man replied offhandedly, but Arlo audibly sucked in a breath. The name meant something to him, though Pam didn't know yet if the man was on their side or Spencer's. "I came in answer to the lady's prayer. I am here to end this," he said, turning slightly to face Spencer. "Or rather... I am here to end *you*."

Spencer sputtered for a moment then laughed as he reclaimed his balance. "You can't be serious," he scoffed. "You and what army?"

"I am very serious, laddie." Pam heard it then. The slight trace of a Scottish brogue. "If you repent and promise to change your ways, I will spare you. If you persist on your evil path, I will have no choice but to do my duty and put an end to it. Your choice, Spencer. Choose now."

Spencer cursed and aimed an energy ball at the newcomer. Pam wanted to shout at the man to move out of the way, but

Sir Cameron stood fast, and the energy hit him full blast. He didn't move so much as a whisker, but there was an ethereal glow about his person, and for a split second, it looked as if he was wearing an old-fashioned suit of plate armor that glowed with golden Light.

Pam thought back to the Sue's tales about the magical world and the forces of Light who were sworn to defeat the forces of darkness. She remembered one tale in particular about an ancient Order of Knights. The *Chevalier de la Lumiere*. Knights of the Light. Chosen by the Goddess, Herself, and sworn to Her service. Could this be one of those luminaries?

Sir Cameron had claimed he had come in response to Pam's prayer. She'd prayed for help just before the man had appeared, so it made sense to link the two events, though it still seemed incredible.

Spencer looked shocked and very, very angry when his energy blast did nothing to the man. He tried again with the same results. Then he raised his hands for a third time, and Sir Cameron raised his own hand and held the palm facing outward. The energy Spencer threw at him rebounded from Sir Cameron's hand and crashed into Spencer, knocking him flat. There was a sickening crunch as he cracked his head on a rock, and then, Spencer was gone. Dead. Killed by having his own power and rage reflected back at him. Fitting, Pam thought, though she hated to see anyone die.

Still, Spencer had been trying to kill them for the past couple of days. It was a relief that he would no longer pose a threat. Pam sagged just the tiniest bit, but she noticed that Arlo was still on high alert as he watched the stranger.

Cameron sighed as he walked over to check on Spencer. Arlo moved in front of Pam, to join the other man.

"He's dead," Cameron said with a trace of regret in his tone. "I dislike killing, but if a soul is set on evil and has no desire to change his ways, it cannot be helped. Pity." Cameron

shook his head once then turned to look at Arlo. “I’m Cameron,” he said, holding out a hand toward Arlo.

Reflexively, Arlo took it and was impressed by the man’s strong grip. “I’m Arlo,” he said simply, still trying to figure out where the man had come from and why he was here. “Did I hear right? You’re fey? Are you the same fey who helped a group of bears in Grizzly Cove a while back?”

Cameron smiled, his impossibly white teeth gleaming even in the dimness of the cavern. “Aye. Are you a friend of Big John’s?”

Arlo felt himself relax a tiny notch. “I’ve worked with him and his men in the past,” he allowed.

“Ah, I see. You wouldn’t be one of Moore’s men, would you?” The brogue deepened the tiniest bit as Cameron relaxed.

Arlo nodded. “I am, indeed. Jesse’s XO, as a matter of fact. Arlo Makepeace, at your service.”

“XO means Executive Officer, I think.” Cameron interpreted the military shorthand as if tasting the words. “Aye. It’s good to see some of the Wraiths involved in this—whatever it is. I’ve been tasked to find out and assist in whatever way I can.”

“Tasked by whom?” Arlo had to ask. If the glimpse of armor hadn’t been a hallucination, this man took his orders from the divine.

Cameron glanced upward toward the ceiling of the cavern and grinned slightly. “Now, that would be telling. Suffice to say, my orders come from the highest authority.”

Arlo nodded, grinning back. “Understood. I guess that means you’re sticking around for the debrief?”

“If possible, yes. I’d like to get a firmer grasp on what’s going on here and see where I might be of some use.” Cameron looked over at Pam. “And I’ll be very pleased to make this young lass’s acquaintance.”

“Forgive me, sir.” Pam stepped forward. “I’m Pam. Thank you for coming to our aid and thank you for answering my

prayer.” Arlo looked at Pam sharply, and she nodded at him. “Just before Spencer broke through into this chamber, I prayed for help,” she confirmed.

Arlo had to marvel at the way things had unfolded. If he’d ever had any doubts about the existence of the Goddess and Her interest in the mortal realm, they’d have been blown away by this turn of events.

Cameron held out his hand to Pam, and when he took hers, he bowed over it like the old-fashioned knight he’d seemed in that flickering instant when Spencer’s magic had hit him head-on. Pam seemed both charmed and a bit in awe of the other man, and Arlo’s inner wolf wanted to growl. No other man should be kissing his mate’s hand. The only thing stopping Arlo from making an altogether inappropriate dominance show was the fact that Cameron had just saved both Pam and Arlo’s lives. He owed the man, and the least he could do was cut him a little bit of slack. If he kept up his attentions to Pam, though, all bets would be off.

“Perhaps one of you would be kind enough to show me the way out of this cave?” Cameron asked politely as he let go of Pam’s hand.

Arlo pointed to Pam. “That’s my lady’s department,” Arlo said, purposely using the somewhat proprietary wording. “She is part-dryad, and the earth is her domain.”

“Ah,” Cameron said, nodding. “Then please lead on, milady. We can postpone the after-battle analysis until we are more comfortable.”

“What about the...um...body?” Pam asked, glancing over at Spencer with a look of distaste.

“Yes,” Cameron said, frowning. “We will have to deal with Spencer’s mortal coil. Would you be willing to inter him, for the time being, where he fell? I can put protections over the place so that nothing will be able to disturb him. That should hold for the time being until we can come up with a more fitting and permanent solution.”

Pam gulped and nodded, waving her hand to cause the earth to cover the body, a cairn of rocks forming over Spencer's prone form. She even piled a set of particular rocks over the head of the temporary grave so there would be no mistaking this pile of rocks from any other. Arlo marveled again at her power. She was really something.

Cameron went over to the rock pile after she'd placed the last stone with her magic. He wove patterns in the air that glowed and then descended to cover the grave. Glowing lines of protective energy seeped into the arrangement and disappeared, but Arlo suspected that the power remained, even if evidence of it had faded from view.

Cameron nodded in satisfaction as he stepped back. "That'll hold things for now," he said, as if to himself. Then he turned to face Arlo and Pam expectantly.

Pam jumped a little and started walking down one of the side tunnels. She knew her way out of this maze better than anyone, and she led them unerringly to an exit not too far away. They came out into the sunshine, and Cameron took a deep breath then tilted his head. Arlo followed suit and couldn't help the grin that came over his face.

"The bears are near," he said in a quiet tone. Then he gave a low whistle of sound that imitated a very specific bird.

A moment later, an enormous grizzly appeared out of the forest, followed by two others. Behind them was a man in camouflage gear, carrying a large rifle casually slung across his chest. He nodded at Arlo and grinned.

"Coop! Thanks for coming, man," Arlo said, shaking his head even as he noted the three bears who must be Coop's younger brothers.

"I should have known you'd be involved in the ruckus up here," Coop replied, moving past the bears and walking closer to Arlo. "Everything settled now?"

Arlo nodded. "We've been dodging a *Venifucus* mage for two days, but Cameron here showed up and took care of our pest problem just in the nick of time," Arlo said, giving credit

where it was due. “Cameron le Fey, this is Tom Cooper, a friend from my military days. Coop, this is Cameron, a new acquaintance who has some serious magical mojo. And I don’t suppose you know Pam. She lives in the cabin back a ways. This is her land.”

Coop nodded to both in turn but addressed Pam first. “We’d heard the cabin had been inherited by a city slicker, but the talk in town speaks well of you, ma’am. I’m sorry we haven’t crossed paths in all this time, but Arlo can probably tell you that I tend to roam a bit now and again. I only just got back home last week.”

Pam smiled graciously at him. “It’s all right, I’ve met your grandmother a few times when I was in town. She’s really sweet. She talks about you a lot. She’s very proud of her grandsons. Am I to assume these bear-shaped fellows are the three rascals she talks about as Randy, Jerome, and Nathaniel?” The bear heads nodded agreement and showed toothy grins. Pam smiled back. “I’m pleased to meet you all, finally, and thank you for coming all the way out here. I don’t mind saying that we were in big trouble until Cameron showed up.”

Coop made a tsking sound and shook his head mournfully. “Damn, bro. You must be losing your touch. Time was, there was nothing ol’ Arlo couldn’t handle.”

“How about a mage who can cause avalanches all day without tiring?” Arlo countered. “I admit it. I wasn’t sure we were gonna make it, but Cameron here stepped in to handle the magical part.”

“That’s my job,” Cameron agreed, though he frowned. “I’m just glad I made it here in time. Pleasure to meet you, Coopers,” he said, addressing all four of the newcomers.

“Since you’ve come all this way, can I offer you some refreshments back at the house?” Pam offered politely.

“Uh, we left the body in the tunnel. It’s buried for now, and magically protected, but I’d feel better if there was a guard,” Arlo put in before the bears could answer.

The three grizzlies raised their paws, and Coop interpreted. “My brothers will stand guard here. I’ll go back with you to the house so I can hear what happened and what I need to bring back to my Clan.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Arlo agreed, and they all started walking, leaving the bears at the mine entrance to stand watch. Coop had left a walkie-talkie near one of the bears, and Arlo knew that, if trouble showed up, one of the bear brothers would shift and alert them via the radio.

Pam was exhausted when they finally reached the cabin. She was happy to see her home again, but the sanctity of it had been violated. She wasn’t sure if she’d ever feel truly safe here again, and for that, she grieved. She went into the kitchen and made coffee for her guests, glad she’d baked a pound cake the day before Arlo showed up. She’d planned to freeze the majority of it but hadn’t yet put it into the freezer. She stacked small plates for the men to use and was about to head for the front room where they had gathered when Arlo came into the kitchen.

“Can I help carry things?” he asked, his deep voice touching in the quiet stillness of her home.

“Yes, thanks.” She turned to him, and he came to her silently, taking her into his arms for a long, strong hug.

He felt so solid. So real. So comforting. Just what she needed right this minute, to help her come to terms with everything that had happened.

“It’s going to be okay,” Arlo told her, his voice creating a warmth in her that started to displace the cold fear that had gripped her as they walked back.

Delayed reaction to all that had happened in the past days. She knew it but couldn’t help how she felt. Being close to Arlo helped, though. Being in his arms kept the cold at bay and made her feel safe down deep in her soul.

“What if Spencer wasn’t on his own?” She asked the question that had been plaguing her all the way back to her

house. “What if others follow? I’ll never be safe here again, will I?”

Arlo drew back slightly to meet her gaze. “Well, I don’t have enough intel at the moment to give you a solid answer, but I do have some ideas that I’d like to discuss with you that might help. Let’s go back inside and talk things over with Coop and Cameron. I think they can both help, in different ways.”

She held his gaze for a long moment, but he didn’t seem to be in any rush to let go. Finally, she took a deep breath and nodded at him.

“Okay.” She pushed back and gave his arms a squeeze of thanks before turning to the platter with the cake on it and the plates.

Arlo was right there, at her side, picking up the tray with the coffee pot and four mugs. Between them, they were able to bring everything in one trip and set it all down at the scarred table that served a multitude of purposes. Most of the time it held her supplies for whatever craft project she was working on. Luckily, she had finished one a few days ago and cleared the table off, so it was free to be used for her unexpected guests.

She had just enough chairs for them all. The table had been here when she moved in, as had most of the furniture. Sue’s family had used it over the years, and though the cabin was small, it had clearly been a family haven for years before Sue took ownership. There were four chairs around that table and two bedrooms. One for the parents and one for the kids, Sue had told Pam when sharing her memories of the place and spending time there with her folks.

Arlo served the coffee while Pam gave everyone a plate and passed around the cake. That way the men could take as much as they liked. When everyone had a serving of cake and a cup of coffee in front of them, they got down to business.

Arlo started by giving the others a succinct briefing on what had happened since he’d arrived on her doorstep. The appearance of Spencer and their headlong flight from him

through the forest and then into the mine tunnels. Pam sat there, taking it all in, nibbling on cake that she didn't even taste, in a state of semi-shock now that the excitement was all but over. She couldn't believe what she'd been through in the past days. Her life was quiet. Uneventful. Sedate.

But the moment she'd met Arlo, everything had changed. Not that he'd been the reason for the change. That was squarely at Spencer's door. Arlo had helped her through some of the scariest moments of her life. He was her savior, though she didn't have hero worship for him. No, it wasn't that. She was grateful that he'd arrived when he did and had helped her, but the way she felt about him was very real. Very raw and not at all fleeting. She was very much afraid she was deeply in love with the man and didn't know where this was all leading and how it might end.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A man like Arlo wouldn't necessarily fit well into the life Pam had led up to now. He was a man of action. A guy who liked to be at the center of things, living life to its fullest. Until now, Pam had been more or less a wallflower. She'd lived quietly and never really got too involved in the world. She'd had friends—particularly Sue—but after all, Sue had been an elderly woman. They'd sat around having tea and talking most days. They hadn't exactly been painting the town red and running for their lives from evil wizards.

Pam realized as she sat there, letting the men's voices rumble around her, that she'd actually *lived* more in the past couple of days than she had in all the years leading up to this point. And—shockingly—she'd enjoyed it. Really enjoyed it. Aside from being worried sick about possibly dying, the rest of the time had been exciting and new. She'd felt daring and powerful at times. Arlo had made her feel capable and confident, as well as sexy—which was something new for her.

The few men she'd dated in the past had been as bland as she had been. They'd never sparked anything more than a momentary desire that wasn't all that memorable. Arlo, by contrast, made her feel...so many things. It was hard to describe the sheer joy she'd found in his arms and the pulsing desire that made her want to be with him again and again. For the rest of her life.

Too soon. It was way too soon to think about anything permanent. She knew that. Yet, she couldn't seem to help herself. Her mind kept imagining what it would be like to be with him forever. She couldn't picture him wanting to live here, away from everyone and everything. No, he was an action man. He'd want to be in the thick of things. Plus, he was a werewolf, and she knew that they lived in Packs. They liked being surrounded by family and friends. They were social creatures.

Pam could see by the way Arlo interacted with his old friend, Coop, that he liked being among comrades. The men were having an animated discussion that seemed to feed something in Arlo's nature. He still had that basic intensity

that defined him, but it was tempered by his analytic side, taking and measuring all the things they were discussing. Suddenly, she felt woozy.

Putting her hand on the table a little more forcefully than she'd intended, she steadied herself. Arlo frowned and put one hand on her shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asked in a low, concerned voice.

“Sorry.” She looked around at the others. “I’m sorry. I’m just a bit tired. If you don’t mind, I’m going to lay down for a minute.”

Arlo was still frowning when she got up and fled into her bedroom. She went straight into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. There. That felt better.

When she straightened up and saw herself in the mirror, she almost groaned. She needed to clean up. Shedding her clothes and putting them directly into the hamper, she got under the warm spray of the shower, pleased with the way the water seemed to sluice away all the ugliness of Spencer’s pursuit.

She soaped up and rinsed off but then stayed under the warm water, just...being...for a long moment. A cool waft of air came into the shower enclosure, and she opened her eyes to see that the bathroom door had opened, and Arlo was shutting it behind himself.

“The others are gone,” he said from the other side of the foggy shower door. “The bears are going to help Cameron deal with Spencer’s remains. I think they’re going to do a funeral pyre that will ensure Spencer’s energies return to the earth without tainting the area. He was, apparently, a very potent mage, according to Cameron.”

Pam wasn’t sure why those words let loose the torrent, but suddenly, tears flowed with the shower water, and she hiccupped. All the emotion of the past days caught up with her. All the fear and terror. All the anxiety of the overwhelming situation got to her and came out in quiet sobs.

The shower door rolled back, and Arlo stepped under the spray of warm water with her. Tugging her into his arms, he held her close. He was naked. The man was quick and silent when he removed his clothing. She suspected that was a skill important to shapeshifters, but at the moment, she was just grateful to have his support—and no fabric between them. She needed the realness of skin-on-skin. The grounding of her body to his.

He held her as the emotions welled up and finally found an outlet. She'd been brave and strong during the whole ordeal, but recent events were so far outside her normal realm of experience that she was a little surprised she'd held it together this long. She knew she had to toughen up, but not right this second. No, right now, she was enjoying the comfort of Arlo's powerful embrace.

"It's all right, you know," he whispered near her ear as he held her close. "Even big strong soldiers sometimes give in to tears, or the shakes, after an especially hard mission. Even with all our training, sometimes, things just get to be too much, you know?" He kissed the top of her head, and something inside her melted at his tenderness. "And you don't have any training at all. Yet, you held up like a trooper when the going got tough. I'm so proud of you, Pam. So utterly enthralled by how competent and capable you are, and how you handled a situation that was so obviously out of the norm for you. You're amazing, babe."

He kissed her head again in a non-sexual way, and it made her feel as if her spirit was renewing under his care. He was giving her back her strength. Her identity. Her soul.

"You're the amazing one," she told him, her voice only a little stilted as the tears started to ease. "I don't know what I would've done if you weren't here."

"You would've handled it," he said confidently, moving slightly back so he could look into her eyes. "You're badass, Pam. You've got all kinds of power that you probably don't even know about yet, and you're smart. That's a hell of a combination."

She didn't think she was like that at all, but either he was a really good actor or he actually believed what he was saying. If he believed it, she might just start believing it too. She already knew she felt stronger when she was with him. She felt more capable and more able to handle whatever came at her. She felt just a little *badass*, as he'd called it, she realized. Just a little. But maybe, if she hung around with him a bit more, the feeling would grow until it was reality.

"I don't think I've thanked you for everything you've done," she said, putting one hand on his chest, over his heart, feeling the steady rhythm there, the solidness of him.

"No thanks necessary, ma'am." He gave her a roguish smile. "I'm just glad I arrived in time to be of service."

She thought about that for a minute. He had come here to make contact with her on behalf of some people who thought she might be part of their extended family. The whole situation with Spencer had interfered, and she didn't quite know where to go from here.

"You just called me *ma'am* again," she reminded him, willing to forego thoughts of the future in favor of the pleasures of the present. She rubbed her palms over his chest and then intertwined her fingers behind his neck, tugging his head downward for a kiss.

"Forgive me, temptress," he teased, rubbing his lips along hers. "Is that better?"

Temptress. Hmm. She liked that.

She rewarded him with a deep kiss that rocked her world. Arlo was like no other man in her experience. He was everything she had never realized was missing from her life. Adventure, creativity, challenge, and sheer joy. He brought all of that to every moment they were together—especially during intimate moments like this. It would be good to experience his lovemaking without the life-or-death threat hanging over her head.

These next few moments would tell her for certain whether what she'd felt when she was with him in the mine was real or

some kind of stress-induced fantasy. She was almost afraid to find out, but then, she recalled that he thought she was badass, and thought that probably included having courage, as well as bravado. She had to find out. For both their sakes.

“I want you, Arlo. I want you now,” she whispered when the kiss broke as her body slid against his under the warm spray.

She had a trace of soap on her skin that made everything slide in a sensual way, and she was reveling in the feel of his hard body against her soft places. She trailed one foot up the back of his leg, loving the way her inner thigh felt against his outer thigh, then his lower hip. *Whoa, mama.*

“Are you sure, my temptress?” he whispered, low and sexy, a slight growl to his voice that lit her on fire.

She really liked it when he called her that.

“Very,” she replied on a gasp as he moved quickly to back her up against the cool tile on the wall inside the shower enclosure.

His mouth was on her neck, nibbling his way down her body as he used lips and tongue to full advantage on her sensitive skin. When he reached her breasts, he lingered long enough to drive her wild with need, laving and sucking until she quivered and cried out. But he wasn't done yet. He moved lower still, kneeling in the close confines of the shower as warm water continued to cascade over them. He hitched one of her legs over his shoulder as he zeroed in on the place that wanted him most desperately.

Fingers, lips and tongue tormented her, invading and retreating, caressing and pressing until she wanted to melt into a puddle and roll down the drain with the hot water. She came with a shrill exclamation that she tried to suppress. She had been told shifters had keen hearing, and just because the house was empty didn't mean those bear brothers might not be lingering in the area, able to hear her. It was both embarrassing...and a little exciting if she was being honest with herself. She'd never been an exhibitionist, but the idea that someone knew what they were probably doing lent an

edge to this encounter that she hadn't expected and would probably never acknowledge out loud.

When her first climax was tapering off, Arlo stood, moving her body around as if she were a limp ragdoll. She couldn't help him. Her muscles felt like overcooked spaghetti at the moment, but there was more to come. Arlo lifted her up, his hands under her butt, her back still against the tile wall. He spread her legs and wrapped them around his slim hips, finding that special place where he would join them together.

He hesitated only a moment, meeting her gaze as he sought entrance. She urged him on with little contractions of her legs around his torso, and he complied, sliding inside as their eyes met and held.

Glorious. That's how it felt to have him inside her body. Inside her soul.

A glorious completion to something she had never realized was incomplete. Arlo filled her and fulfilled her as no man ever had before. As she very much feared no man ever would again.

But fear was for later. Right now, all she wanted to do was enjoy the ride with this incredibly special man.

Arlo began to move, and it was all she could do to keep up with him. Already partly sated from a lovely climax, he pushed her even higher, reigniting the fire within with a speed she hadn't ever experienced. Within moments, she was ready again, straining with him as he increased the pace of his thrusts, the power of his possession. She clung to him, her legs gripping him, her arms wrapped around his shoulders, holding on for dear life as he drove them ever higher with fast, hard pumps.

When they came, it was together in a blissful union that shook her world. He held her throughout, the warm water spraying gently down on them both, though he took most of it on his back. Still, little trickles of warm water sluiced down from his body to hers, and all the nooks and crannies in between.

She never realized how stimulating shower sex could be, but now that she'd experienced it with Arlo, she definitely wanted to try it again. And again.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When they were both squeaky clean and sated, they got out of the shower. Arlo pulled fresh clothing for himself out of a bag he had brought in at some point before joining her in the bathroom. His clothing was pretty much the same. Those many-pocketed pants and a soft-looking T-shirt that stretched lovingly over the muscles of his chest.

She watched him appreciatively as she fumbled around in her own closet for something to wear. He was finished dressing long before she was, and she turned to find him watching her with a sexy grin on his face. She sashayed over to where he was sitting on the edge of the bed and leaned down to give him a kiss before drawing back and heading for the bedroom door.

“There are a couple of things I need to do before we get in that bed and don’t leave until morning,” she teased, hoping she wasn’t overstepping.

“Oh, I like the sound of that,” he replied immediately. “All night, with you, in a real bed.” He mimed a swoon and fell backwards onto the mattress. She laughed as he straightened. He got up and met her at the door. “If there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know.” His gaze turned serious, and she knew he meant what he said. He was such a good man.

“You can check the fridge and see what we can make for dinner while I go help a friend,” she told him as she opened the door, and they headed out into the rest of the house. The place was empty. Apparently, their guests were still out doing what needed to be done. “Do you know if the others will be staying for dinner?”

“Do you have enough food to feed them all?” Arlo asked with a chuckle.

“Maybe?” she replied, also smiling. “There’s a lot in the fridge and more in the freezer. Go take a look and see what you think. I don’t mind using up all my supplies because,” she paused to face him, meeting his gaze, “the more I think about it, the more I think I need to go to Wyoming and meet my supposed family.”

Arlo felt elation hit him at her words. She was going to come back with him to Wyoming! He'd have more time to convince her to be his mate. Things were definitely looking up.

He headed to the kitchen, keeping one eye on her through the window as Pam went out into the front yard and walked right up to the sentinel pine that had taken so much abuse when it had helped them by restraining Spencer. Pam went to the tree and put her palms against the trunk. He could almost feel the power she willed into the tree, and he definitely saw the way the branches and leaves perked up as she tended to the hero tree.

Arlo noted Cameron's return, though Pam didn't seem to realize the fey warrior was watching her from across the front yard. Cameron seemed to approve of her actions, a faint smile lighting the man's expression as he watched from just outside the tree line. He waited for her to finish before moving, watching her actions with apparent interest.

While Pam worked on the pine and Cameron stood guard over her, Arlo was busy in the kitchen, making dinner. He wasn't a chef, but he wasn't completely incompetent in the kitchen, either. He took Pam at her word and used everything he could find in the fridge and cabinets to make a meal for the three of them. Of the perishables, he left just the eggs for breakfast tomorrow and a few odds and ends unused.

Chicken Parmesan with a side of pasta, a salad, and berries with whipped cream for dessert. It was ready by the time Pam was finished communing with her tree friend, though Arlo kept an eye on her through the window as he was working. With Cameron out there watching as well, she was safe. Very little could get past a fey knight, Arlo knew.

Arlo was just putting the platters on the table when Cameron escorted Pam into her home. They were chatting cordially but stopped when they caught sight of Arlo.

"The bears are running the perimeter," Cameron said to Arlo as he shut the door behind himself. "They declined your

gracious dinner invitation, but Coop will stop up here to check in with you later, he said.”

Arlo nodded. “Thanks. I hope you’re hungry.”

Cameron smiled. “Aye. Thank you for taking point on dinner. I was watching Lady Pamela’s work with the big pine tree out front, and it’s clear she bears the dryad’s gift in large measure.” Cameron escorted Pam to the table and held her seat for her politely.

Pam sat, blushing a bit at Cameron’s compliment, then met Arlo’s gaze. “Yes, thank you for making dinner. This looks amazing.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Arlo teased. “I’m not really an expert, but my mother made sure I knew how to boil water before she let me loose on the world.”

“This is more than boiling water,” Pam protested with a grin. “This is a feast.”

Arlo sat next to Pam and offered her the platter first, then passed it to Cameron before taking his own serving. They ate quietly for a while, and Arlo realized he was a lot hungrier than he’d thought. The others were eating steadily as well, sparing a few moments to compliment him on his cooking skills in between bites.

Once they were finished eating the salad and main course, Arlo served up the fruit and cream. Pam took a few minutes to put the coffee on. She motioned for him to sit and eat while she bustled about the kitchen.

Cameron exclaimed over how good the coffee was, just as Arlo had done, once it was served. Pam finally revealed the name of her supplier of coffee beans, making a joke about entrusting them with privileged information.

As they were finishing up dessert, a knock sounded at the door to the cabin. Arlo went to answer it, admitting his friend Coop. The newcomer accepted a cup of coffee and sat at the table with them.

“There’s no one out there right now, but we did see signs of disturbance where more than one person has been

trespassing. The tracks look like it goes back more than a week,” Coop reported.

“That’s about how long I’ve been feeling like somebody’s watching me,” Pam agreed, shivering.

“You got the scent of the mage we took out today,” Arlo commented.

Coop nodded. “That’s how I know there’s been more than one person. My nose may not be as good as yours, but I can tell the difference between that guy and the others that have been up here with him. My brothers and I counted at least two other scents. One male and one female.”

“As long as none are present tonight,” Cameron put in, “may I suggest that a speedy removal from the area at first light might be the best course of action? Not to infer any lack of courage, but this place isn’t very defensible.”

“That didn’t always used to be the case,” Coop said, surprising Arlo. “Time was, even I couldn’t get past the wards on this property. My family always said it was owned by wizards and that we weren’t welcome.”

“The lady who left the place to me in her will came from a magical family,” Pam admitted. “If they had protections on this place, I guess they faded over time, and I don’t know how to put them back, even if I wanted to.”

“I came here to try to convince Pam to visit Wyoming. She has kin there that she’s never met,” Arlo brought the conversation back to the point. “We can head there in the morning, if you’re agreeable.” He looked at Pam, waiting for her answer.

“I don’t see much of a choice,” she replied. “I’ll go with you to meet my supposed cousins. Though what they’re going to think of me just showing up with danger on my trail, I can’t imagine.”

Arlo chuckled. “They’re going to think that’s par for the course. Just about every one of those ladies has had some kind of threat to their lives in recent weeks. Every time Sally gets a lead on another of her lost kin, she sends someone out to find

them. Usually, just in the nick of time. Like what's happened here.”

“That seems just a bit too coincidental,” Cameron observed, frowning.

“Agreed. Either we have some kind of a leak in our communications or something magical is going on to our detriment,” Arlo admitted.

“Why are the kin of this woman so important?” Cameron asked, clearly curious.

“They're all part-dryad. Sally is trying to gather enough of her relatives to do some large magical working that will help restore their ancestor, the dryad Leonora, who is being kept alive inside of a willow tree. She was gravely injured in an earlier battle with a *Venifucus* mage,” Arlo revealed.

“Ah. I understand now. Elemental energy is among the strongest in this realm,” Cameron said contemplatively. “It would make sense that the enemy would try to kill or capture and drain dryads—even part-dryads—of their magical energy, if at all possible.” Cameron seemed to come to some sort of decision. “May I tag along with you to Wyoming? I can assist if you run into trouble along the way, and it's just possible that I could be of help in the rescue of the dryad.”

Arlo was surprised and pleased by the offer. “That would be great,” he answered immediately.

“As it happens, the High Priestess Bettina told me a little about Leonora's predicament when she asked if I would pop up here and see if I could help you two out,” Cameron went on, surprising Arlo a bit. He hadn't connected the call to the High Priestess with Cameron's appearance, but he probably should have by now.

“So, you're the cavalry she called in?” Pam asked, voicing Arlo's thoughts as well.

“Yes and no. Because of my oath to the Goddess, I could not pop in had you not asked for my help. Your prayer to the Divine allowed me to use greater magics to get here almost

instantaneously. Had you not asked for help, I could not have come so quickly.”

“Your oath?” Pam asked hesitantly.

“As a Knight of the Light. Surely, you saw my armor,” Cameron said, leaning back in his chair. “Normally, this is not something I would talk about easily or openly, but there have been indications recently that the time for secrecy is at an end. I believe we are heading quickly toward another showdown with Elspeth, if she has truly returned to this realm. If not, her servants will keep working toward that goal with ever-increasing fervor. Personally, I think she’s here already, though she has yet to make a public appearance. We just have to be ready for her when she does.” His tone was grave, his expression dark with concern.

Everybody was silent for a long moment, taking that in, before Pam spoke again. She turned to address Coop, changing the subject.

“I’m sorry if my presence brought evil people to the area, and I hope this doesn’t impact you or your family,” she said contritely.

Coop actually smiled. “Don’t worry about it, ma’am. Fact is, the trespassing seems to be limited strictly to your land. We keep a close eye on our territory, and we haven’t had any incursions there.”

“Speaking of which,” Arlo interjected, seizing the opportunity. “I wanted to talk to you about keeping an eye on things here while we’re gone.”

“And I’d like to extend an invitation to you and your family to feel free to use the woods. This place is too big for me to just keep it to myself. I suspect your wild nature means you like to roam, and I don’t want to put any roadblocks in your way,” Pam said hastily, before Coop could answer. His smile widened at her words.

“That’s mighty neighborly of you, ma’am,” he answered. “I think my Clan will be happy to hear that and will probably want to open formal talks about an alliance when you get

back. If what he says is true..." Coop gestured to Cameron as his smile fell away, "...then we'll need to be looking out for each other if evil comes calling."

"As you already have," Pam reminded him, smiling softly. "Thank you for your efforts today. I really appreciate it. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to repay you."

Coop smiled again. "When you come back, you could take a look at my mother's greenhouse when you have a moment. She keeps trying to grow vegetables, but her yield isn't quite what she'd hoped. Maybe you could give her some pointers?"

Pam chuckled. "I'd be happy to," she agreed. "As soon as I get back."

Cameron went outside with Coop when they finally called it a night. He said he was going to reinforce the wards, then he planned to sleep on the couch. Pam had already retrieved a spare pillow and blanket and put them on the end of the couch. Coop indicated he and his brothers would be on patrol outside for the rest of the night and see them all off in the morning.

Arlo would have preferred to leave immediately, but the mountain roads around here were not to be attempted in the dark. They were just a bit too treacherous, and he would never take that kind of chance with Pam in car. Plus, he planned to fly them out, and it would be better to have light for take-off. They just had to get from here to the airfield in one piece.

Pam invited Arlo into her bedroom for the night, but they didn't make love. They'd been through so much that day. They were really just too tired and needed sleep. Plus, Pam said she felt strange having Cameron in the house, and Arlo didn't argue. He just held her all night long, loving the feel of her warmth against him as she snuggled close.

In the morning, Arlo woke just before dawn as the first of the forest birds began their morning songs. He got out of bed without disturbing Pam and padded into the main part of the house. Cameron was already up.

“No disturbances overnight,” he reported when he saw Arlo. “I talked with Coop a short while ago. He’ll be back for breakfast so we can finalize plans. He sent his little brothers back home and got some of the others from his Clan to fill in the perimeter watch. Nothing’s going to get past the bear phalanx without us knowing about it.”

Arlo approved. Coop knew his Clan’s strength better than Arlo. If Coop thought he had enough manpower to stretch this far outside their territory, Arlo wasn’t going to quibble.

“Thanks,” Arlo said, heading for the refrigerator. He might as well start cooking breakfast if they were going to get an early start.

Arlo scrambled all the eggs that were in the fridge. They should probably use up the perishables, because if Arlo had his way, it would be a while before Pam returned here. If and when she did return, he planned to be right at her side. He’d fallen head over heels and knew she was *it* for him. His mate. His one and only. From now on, wherever she went, he wanted to be right by her side.

Now, all he had to do was get her to agree. He wished that would be as easy as it sounded.

Pam joined them in the kitchen a short time later, just as the food was being put on the table.

“Looks like I got here at just the right time,” she commented, taking a seat at the table while Arlo put a plate filled with scrambled eggs in front of her.

“That you did, milady,” Cameron said, sitting opposite her with his own plate.

Arlo brought coffee over for all of them then sat beside her. “We have a lot to do this morning. After we eat, you should probably pack a bag. Plan on being away for at least a few days. I know for a fact that your cousins are going to want you to stay, and there is still a problem here on your land. Coop is going to be working on that while you’re in Wyoming, so don’t worry. We’re not going to let the bad guys run amok up here.”

“That’s good,” she said in between bites. She probably would’ve said more, but there was a knock on the door.

Arlo rose to answer it to find Coop on the other side. Arlo invited the bear shifter inside and served him the final plate of eggs as he sat at the table.

“I was just telling Pam that your Clan is going to be busy trying to identify and eliminate the threat here in Idaho while she’s in Wyoming,” Arlo said, silently encouraging Coop to take up the explanation. Arlo wanted Pam to know and trust the bear shifters who lived adjacent to her property. It would make things a lot easier.

“I’ve got a few of my cousins working on the perimeter today,” Coop told them. “We’re going to set up a regular patrol. We don’t like the idea of powerful mages who are on the wrong side wandering around near our homes any better than you do. We’ll do our best to neutralize the problem before you get back, and I promise to keep you both informed of our progress.” Coop looked from Pam to Arlo and back again, then turned back to demolishing his plate of eggs.

“Thanks, man,” Arlo said, knowing he owed the bear shifter for his help. Coop was a good friend, and he’d just proved it once again.

“No sweat,” Coop insisted. “If you don’t come back for a while, I’ll be happy to make sure the house is okay too. Whatever you need.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” Pam said, clearly overwhelmed by the gesture of friendship.

Coop finished his food, even as the other men scraped the last of their eggs from the plates. He stood and collected the empty dishes, carrying them all over to the sink. Much to Arlo’s amusement and Pam’s clear surprise, Coop washed the dishes and utensils, placing them in the drying rack next to the sink as if he did so every day.

Bears did have a way of making themselves at home in other people’s houses, Arlo reflected. But they were big

goofballs at times, so it was usually endearing rather than annoying. Coop was no exception.

Pam went back to the bedroom to start packing her bags while Arlo, Cameron and Coop went over the plan for the next few days. Coop had the rudiments of a patrol schedule already drawn up and plans for contingencies should they run into trouble. Arlo gave Coop direct contact numbers for himself and the Wraiths' chain of command. From now on, anything that affected Pam and her property was Arlo's business and, by extension, also the business of the Wraiths, since she was related to both Jesse and Jason Moore's part-dryad mates.

Coop waited to see them off, accepting a spare key to the house from Pam, who had packed two large bags with what felt like clothing, as well as a briefcase that had her laptop, planner, and other paperwork from what Arlo could see. He stowed all of it in the borrowed pickup and made sure there was enough room for the three of them to sit across the wide bench seat. He hadn't counted on having Cameron along for the ride, but the man had already proven himself more than useful. In fact, Arlo knew he owed the fey knight a life debt twice over—once for himself and once for his mate.

Arlo wasn't too proud to admit that until Cameron had shown up with his unbelievable level of magical power, Arlo had been truly concerned that they might not be able to come out of the scrape with Spencer alive. That evil mage had been more potent magically than anyone Arlo had ever gone up against. His strategy of delay and retreat had worked, up to a point. But that final confrontation would have been extremely difficult to win without Cameron's unexpected arrival and magical superiority to Spencer.

Coop saw them off, staying behind at the cabin as Arlo drove down the mountain road in the early light of dawn. He noted a few bears in the woods near the perimeter of Pam's property. Coop's Clan was as good as their word, already patrolling to keep the place safe.

It was only about twenty miles to the airstrip where he had left the aircraft. He'd chosen the six-seater Beechcraft Baron when he'd taken off from Wyoming, which was a good thing,

considering he was bringing home an extra passenger. There would be plenty of room for Cameron, as well as Pam's luggage.

"The airstrip is owned and operated by a lynx shifter family," Arlo told his passengers as they neared their destination. "They loaned me this truck and have kept an eye on the plane for me. Everything should be good to go as soon as we get there."

"How far away is it?" Pam asked. "I didn't think there were any airports near here."

"We ought to be there in another ten minutes or so," Arlo replied. "Then I'll just have to do the pre-flight checks before we get in the air. We should be at our destination around lunchtime."

One of the younger lynxes was manning the airstrip when they got there, and he saw to it that the truck would be returned to its owner and that the twin-engine plane was fully fueled and ready to go. They were taxiing slowly to the end of the runway, which ran parallel to the public road, when Cameron drew Arlo's attention to a car that was shadowing their progress.

"If I'm not mistaken, that looks like trouble," Cameron said quietly from the rear of the plane.

Pam had opted to sit next to Arlo up front, which pleased him to no end. She'd been asking questions as he went through his pre-flight routines and seemed enthusiastic when he told her he'd teach her to fly if she wanted to learn.

Suddenly, the sportscar on the road raced ahead of them to take a position at the end of the runway. The little plane didn't taxi very fast, and the sportscar easily got ahead of them on the ground. A woman stepped out from behind the wheel and raised her hands upward.

As they watched, a twisting cloud formed out of thin air and rose, lightning crackly from the woman's hands into the sky and then back downward.

“A strong weather witch,” Cameron observed. “She’ll probably try to hit us with lightning.”

“Believe it or not, this little beauty has been hit by lightning a couple of times while in the sky and shook it off with no problem. Not sure what will happen on the ground or with magically-induced lightning,” Arlo mused.

“Let’s not find out,” Cameron said dryly. “Can you take off from the taxiway?”

“Sorry. Not enough room at the moment. I’ll need the full runway since this is a small airstrip, and we need to start at that end with current wind conditions,” Arlo reported.

“I think I can do something,” Pam said unexpectedly, her gaze fixed out the window at the woman waiting for them at the end of the runway.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Pam wasn't entirely sure what she was doing, but she felt called to fix her own problem this time. Sir Cameron's appearance had been truly heaven sent, but Pam didn't want to get in the habit of relying on others to save her. Not all the time, anyway. Not when she had power of her own that she was just learning how to use in this new, dreadful way.

It couldn't be helped, though. If bad people were going to try to kill her, she was going to have to learn how to defend herself...and use deadly force to do it. Evil could not be allowed to live and fester in the world. Not anymore.

Pam followed her instincts and spread out her senses. Ideally, she liked to be touching the ground when she used her magic, but it wasn't strictly necessary, she was learning. Though she had the feeling that she'd better do this while they were still on the ground because it would be harder to use her earth power once they were in the air.

As they closed the distance toward the end of the runway, she let out her power, seeking the earth around the woman who waited to smite them. Pam felt around under the other woman with her earth sense and found a fault she could exploit. Someone had dug on that ground not too long ago, and the earth was unsettled. Pam could use that.

In tune with the earth as never before, Pam could feel the evil coming off the woman in waves. Mother Earth didn't like this woman. The earth itself found the evil woman an abomination and was angered by her presence on the surface. Pam didn't need to use much energy to prod the ground into opening up beneath the weather witch's feet and swallowing her whole.

As the rocks and soil filled back in around the woman, she was torn asunder by the power of the earth. Pam felt when her magic was released and cleansed by its return to earth. The lightning dissipated, and the clouds skuttled away as if they had never been called. The weather witch was no more.

Pam shook her head with distaste and sorrow. She had never killed anyone before. She hadn't really killed the witch

up close and personal, but Pam knew she'd still been the instrument of the other woman's death. That it had been a righteous death, Pam could feel in her very soul, but she still felt odd about the whole thing. Not bad enough to want to change what she'd done, though. That woman would have gladly killed them all, so Pam felt that what she'd asked the earth to do had been justified.

"Is that going to be a problem for the lynxes?" Sir Cameron asked from the backseat.

Pam snapped out of her reverie and shook her head. "No problem at all. The earth is more stable now than it was before. Someone had been digging there in the past, and the backfill hadn't settled properly. It's settled now." There was no humor in her tone, which was filled with the finality of what had happened to the weather witch. She turned to look at Arlo. "You can tell the lynxes it's okay. The magic dissipated and was cleansed back into the earth. There's no taint of evil. And the body was...um...pulverized. There is no trace of her left. They just have to figure out what to do with that car."

Arlo flipped the radio on and spoke in code to the small control tower. He mentioned an extra vehicle, and the young man who was manning the airstrip picked up on what he meant right away. He said they'd take care of the *extra vehicle*, and not to worry about it. Arlo cautioned the younger man to search it carefully and report back if anything was left behind, and the lynx assured him he would do so within the hour.

"So much for Spencer's girlfriend," Sir Cameron said with finality.

Pam turned around to look at him. "You think she was...?" She trailed off. Of course, the woman was associated with Spencer. Who else would come after them with such hatred? If she wasn't really his girlfriend, she at least had to have been in league with the late sorcerer.

Arlo positioned the plane at the starting stripes and had one more exchange with the lynx on the ground, reminding him to check in with Coop as well. Pam had heard Arlo telling the lynx on duty that if the lynx family ran into any trouble,

they should call on Coop and his bear relatives, who were allies. The lynx shifter had nodded sagely and said he would call Coop that very morning, which seemed to relieve Arlo in some way.

Pam liked the way he looked after people. He was helpful to those who had helped him, which was just polite, but he also seemed to really care about the welfare of others, which was the mark of a good man in her book. Everything she learned about him just made her love him more.

Love. Yup. She was well and truly in love with the big galoot.

She just wasn't sure what he was feeling. He'd said a lot about shifters playing for keeps, and the like, but he hadn't come out and said that he intended to *keep* her.

More and more, she found herself daydreaming about what it might be like to be with him...for always. She'd been alone for so long. It was like a dream come true to find a man who not only seemed to respect her, but who also knew her deepest secret—her magical core—and didn't even blink.

When her magic had started to manifest after her parents were both gone, she'd been unsure how to deal with it. Nobody she knew had the kind of abilities and sensitivities she had. She'd kept it secret...until she met Sue. The older woman had brought up the subject of magic one day, much to Pam's surprise. After Pam had gotten used to the idea, Sue had become her teacher and confidant. Her friend had been the only person on earth who knew about Pam's secret abilities.

Telling the men she'd dated about her abilities was something Pam had thought about but had never done. Although she'd dreamed of marrying Brad, she had never really trusted him enough to reveal that part of herself. When she'd tried to imagine their future together, it had never really come clear.

But she could readily imagine a future with Arlo. He was the one man who made her want to do more than just imagine a future together. Arlo made her want to grab for it with both hands and hold on tight.

If he wanted the same, of course. She only had hope, at this point, that he was feeling something similar. Until he came out and said it, she was just working on guesses and hopes. And dreams. Lots and lots of daydreamy dreams.

They arrived in Wyoming a few hours later. The flight was more fun than Pam had expected. She liked flying but had never been in such a small plane before. It was both more intense and more *real*, in some indefinable way, than being in a jumbo jet. She'd asked Arlo a lot of questions about the plane and the controls, and he had seemed happy to explain things to her. The feeling of being so close to the sky was exhilarating, but she was just as glad to be back on terra firma. Her element, after all, was earth.

Arlo had radioed his friends on the ground just before they arrived. He'd explained to her and Sir Cameron that he didn't want to give the other side any chance to mount a *welcome*. Just in case they were monitoring transmissions. The Wraiths' home mountain was becoming more well-known than they liked, but it couldn't be helped.

As a result of the late notice, only a few people were at the airstrip to welcome them. Aside from the ground crew, a handsome man in a large SUV pulled up, right into the spacious hangar as soon as they'd parked the small plane inside. He got out of the vehicle and waited for them to deplane.

Cameron was the first out, and he went right up to the man, shaking hands with him. They were both speaking too low for Pam to hear as she exited the plane. Arlo was right behind her. He paused as Cameron stepped aside to make the introductions.

"Alpha, this is Pamela Auerbach. Pam, this is the Pack Alpha, Jason Moore. He's mated to your cousin, Sally," Arlo clarified. He'd told Pam all about Sally and Maria, who were mated to the brothers, Jason and Jesse Moore. Jesse was the Alpha of the Wraiths while his younger brother, Jason, was Alpha over the entire Pack.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Alpha,” Pam said politely, offering her hand for Jason to shake. He smiled, his gaze sizing her up, but not in an unfriendly way.

“Sally is back at the Pack house, organizing a proper reception for you, but she sends her regards. I’m sorry to hear you ran into trouble in your home territory,” he said kindly.

“Thankfully, Arlo was there to help me, and then, Sir Cameron arrived in the nick of time to help us both,” she said, including the fey knight in her remarks while Arlo moved off to open the cargo door and retrieve her bags.

She noticed that he transferred her two bags of clothing into the back of the big SUV. She had her computer case with her, so they were all set in short order.

“Let’s get you all back to the Pack house, and we can do the debrief there. Sally and Maria really want to meet you, Pamela,” Jason told her.

“Call me Pam,” she replied easily as he opened the back door of the large SUV for her. Cameron, she noted, was already in the passenger seat, and Arlo was getting in on the other side of the backseat.

Pam allowed the Alpha to close the door after her, and she settled into the luxurious interior. Arlo quirked a smile at her from across the bench seat, and she smiled nervously back. She was going to meet her family—though she really still couldn’t quite believe that she had blood relations. She was getting anxious about it too. She really wanted them to like her.

Jason got in and started the SUV, taking off at a brisk pace. The airstrip was some distance from the Pack house, but the scenery passed her by in a blur as her nerves increased. It was silly, really, but she couldn’t help it.

At one point, Arlo reached across the bench seat and took her trembling hand in his. That helped a lot. A whole lot. She looked at him and sent him a thankful smile as Cameron and the Alpha carried on a detailed conversation about the attractions of the area. Small talk. Nothing heavy. They would

get to that soon enough, she sensed. Once they were in a more secure location.

A few minutes later, Jason pulled the vehicle up in front of a very large house in the middle of the woods. It looked like an inviting place, and he had no sooner brought the SUV to a halt than two women rushed out the front door and walked briskly to the car.

Sally and Maria were everything Pam hoped they would be. Welcoming. Friendly. Funny. They greeted her like an old friend, and Pam felt oddly as if they were just that—old friends who had never met before.

They swept her into the house and introduced her around to a large number of people Pam was afraid she would not remember later. They settled around a table in what looked like a dining hall, though it was much more homey than institutional, after collecting cups of coffee from a sideboard that held the selection of beverages both hot and cold. Pam took a tentative first sip and nodded approvingly. The coffee was almost as good as her own. It was a small sign, but a good one, that these people had high standards.

Sally asked Pam a lot of questions about her background, but the interrogation was mitigated by the fact that Maria gave as much, or more, information about them in return. Pam knew Sally had been a detective. Arlo had given her the basic background for all of the part-dryads who believed she was a member of their extended family. After meeting these two, Pam believed it too. There was just something about them that...clicked. Something about their magic that made her feel comfortable around them. Kinship, or something very close to it.

Arlo watched Pam get swept up by the other two women with an indulgent smile. He wondered if he would see her again before dinner, then realized he needed to have a serious conversation with both Jesse and Jason. They needed to know that Pam was his mate before this went much further.

Cameron paused by the SUV and stretched, looking around. "If you don't mind, I'd like to take a brief walk around the property," he said, looking at Jason.

"There are wolves out there," Jason warned, looking skeptical. "They don't know you, and you could be challenged."

"Not to worry. I won't be seen if I don't wish to be seen," Cameron told the Alpha, making all three werewolves frown. "I'm fey, remember?" Cameron sighed and shook his head. "Truth is, I don't much like flying in airplanes. I need to get my feet under me before I go any further. I swear to harm none and disturb nothing on your land, Alpha. You have my oath." Cameron held up one hand like a scout and looked solemn.

Jason just shook his head and grinned slightly. "All right. Just come back when you're ready. I want to get all the facts while they're still fresh in everyone's minds. Meet us in the dining room. You can't miss it. First archway on the right." Jason pointed to the house, and Cameron nodded once before wandering off down the drive.

Arlo and Jason looked after him for a moment. Then Arlo cleared his throat and got back to the matter at hand.

"Is Jesse around?" Arlo asked Jason as they walked toward the front door together. The women were already out of sight.

"He's in the office, I think. If Maria's here, he can't be far behind, and I know he wanted to go through some reports I had in the back office."

Arlo nodded. "Good. I need to tell you both something before the debrief, if you have a minute."

"Nothing bad, I hope," Jason glanced at him, concerned.

"No. Nothing like that. Something good. Something really, really good," Arlo was quick to tell him.

Jason smiled broadly. "Well, hot damn. I won't steal your thunder, but I sense I'm going to be congratulating you any minute now."

They were inside the house at that point, so Arlo refrained from saying anything further until they were in the back office. The last thing he wanted to do was ruin his chances with Pam by saying something out of turn where she might hear it. He knew he had to approach her carefully. She had been raised human, after all. She might be a powerful earth elemental, but she was new to the world of shifters and magic, in general. He had to find the right way to explain to her that she was his mate.

Right now, though, he had to tell the Alphas. Finding one's mate changed everything. Jesse would have to realize that Arlo wasn't going to be taking on as many missions—if any—in the near future. He needed and deserved a honeymoon with his mate. As was only proper. The first year or so of a mating was an intense period for the couple. They *needed* to be together more than not. It was an imperative the two Alphas well understood, now that they were both mated.

They found Jesse in the back office, looking through some files. He closed the folder in front of him when Arlo and Jason walked in and gave them his full attention.

“Good to see you back, Arlo. Sounds like you ran into more than we bargained for up in Idaho.” Jesse rose to shake Arlo's hand in greeting.

“Definitely,” Arlo replied, shaking his head. “But I brought back two powerful allies, and...” He hesitated for a moment. This was going to be a big announcement. “I found my mate.”

“I knew it!” Jason crowed from beside Arlo. “Welcome to the family.”

“Thank goodness, we've got another wolf in the family,” Jesse said, grinning broadly as he got up and came around the desk to give Arlo a back-pounding hug of congratulations. They all knew the last part-dryad had mated a vampire and the one before that had gone for a cougar shifter.

“Should we start planning the party?” Jason asked.

“Not quite yet,” Arlo responded, his expression going serious. “She doesn’t know yet.”

“Well, what are you waiting for, man?” Jesse teased.

“Just trying to find the right words. The right time. The right place. You know?” Arlo didn’t know how else to explain it. He just hadn’t found the right circumstances to discuss this with her yet. But he would. He had to.

“I guess that’s understandable,” Jason allowed. “After all, you’ve been in serious action the past few days, evading what was, from all accounts, a very powerful *Venifucus* mage.”

“And then, Cameron showed up out of the blue,” Arlo added. The appearance of the fey knight, while welcome, had also put a cramp in Arlo’s style, to some extent.

“Tell me more about this Cameron guy,” Jason asked, but Jesse held up his hand.

“I checked him out with the Lords. He’s legit. More than that, he comes highly recommended by the High Priestess, herself. Can’t get much better than that. And I did talk to Big John over in Grizzly Cove. Cameron showed up there not too long ago, and the bears actually like the guy.”

Jason shrugged. “Good enough for me, I guess.”

“We’ll go over it all in the debrief,” Jesse replied, shooing the other two toward the door. “Right now, I want to meet him and your mate. And don’t worry. Mum’s the word on the mating until you make it public yourself, Arlo.”

“Thanks, guys. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

They found the women in the dining hall, sipping coffee and talking like old friends. Arlo was glad to see how Pam was taking to her new family. He wanted her to be happy. Her contentment was his primary job now, though she didn't yet realize it.

The three men were in the front hall, approaching the wide archway that led to the dining room when the front door opened, and Cameron came in. He smiled when he saw them and nodded in greeting.

"Lovely land you have here, Alpha," Cameron addressed Jason. "And a couple of juveniles getting up to mischief with an air rifle out by the road."

Jason swore under his breath. "Thanks, I'll get someone to go chase them down. Give me a minute," Jason said to the others before he moved down the hall to snag one of the men coming in from the back of the house. There was a low discussion, and then, the man turned and went back the way he'd come before Jason came back.

Arlo hadn't moved while Jason did his Alpha thing. He was content to stand near the archway, looking into the room where he could see Pam. She was smiling. Laughing at something the others had said. She looked happy, and that made his heart feel good.

"Let's say hello to the ladies and then move to the conference room," Jesse suggested, moving into the dining room with a grin on his face. He went straight to Maria and greeted her with a kiss on the cheek.

Arlo wished he could do the same with Pam, but he wasn't entitled to that kind of familiarity just yet. Maybe soon. If she accepted what he had to say about their mating and agreed that she wanted to spend the rest of their lives together. Goddess, how he prayed it would turn out that way. He wasn't afraid to admit he was nervous about the whole thing.

It was decided pretty quickly that the ladies wanted to stick together for the afternoon, talking about dryad things and

getting to know each other. The men, as Arlo had suspected, were going to have a session in the conference room, where he would give them what was essentially an after-action report. They would also be having a serious talk with Cameron about his role in the action that was yet to come, if any.

So, after a quick hello and a pause to gather cups of coffee, the men left the ladies to their own devices and headed for the conference room. Arlo hated to leave Pam, but he knew they would all meet again for lunch. They'd had a tailwind on the way here from Idaho, so they'd arrived a bit earlier than even he'd expected.

Arlo went off with the other men and settled in to give a full report. Cameron added his part when it came down to the final battle, and then, it was question time. It was also time to get to know more about Cameron and what he planned to do now that he was here.

While the men went off somewhere, Pam enjoyed getting to know her cousins. There was little question in her mind that they were related now that she'd met them. Soon after first meeting, they'd shown her how to call up her own magical family tree, and sure enough, there they were. Both Sally and Maria, plus a few others they were able to help identify. Plus, one other that shone brightly on Pam's tree, which pulsed with a golden bronze energy that reminded her of the earth.

Both of the other women stared at the tree and the new branch that Pam had brought forward. It pulsed impatiently as she fed her own magic into the energy tree that rose to her palm from the floor of the room. The new branch glowed and was closer to Pam than to the others. This woman—they could tell it was a woman—was more closely related to Pam than the others were.

“Good heavens,” Pam said aloud, her memory jogged by the energy tree, “Uncle Timothy must have had a daughter.”

“Who's Uncle Timothy?” Maria asked, examining the tree closely.

“My mother had a brother, but he disappeared before I was born. I guess this means that my mother was the one with dryad blood,” Pam realized, noticing her mother and uncle’s presence on her branch of the family tree with wonder.

She felt tears well up behind her eyes, but didn’t let them fall. Had her mother not told her about their magical heritage because of her brother’s disappearance? Had she thought it too risky? Pam would never know now, but it touched her heart to think that her mother might have kept Pam in the dark in an effort to protect her somehow.

“That makes sense,” Sally agreed, drawing Pam back from her reverie. “But tell me more about this Uncle Timothy. He disappeared, you say? When and where? Do you know any details?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know much. Mom didn’t like to talk about him, except to remember him on his birthday, which was July twenty-ninth. Other than that, she didn’t often speak of him. She would light a candle for him on his birthday and tell me little stories about them as children. They were only about two years apart. They’d been close, but he disappeared when he was about eighteen, and nobody had ever found a trace of him, though I guess the police tried for a while. Most thought he’d run away from home and would show up eventually, but he never did. After a few years, Mom lost hope and figured he had to be dead. He wouldn’t have just left her like that, without word for all those years.”

“That’s really tough,” Maria said, sympathizing. “But maybe, if we find his daughter, she’ll be able to tell us what happened to him.”

“I did some background work on your parents when I was first looking for you,” Sally offered. “I have the files back in the office. I didn’t pursue their history very far after I learned they were both gone, and I didn’t know which of them might carry the dryad blood. I opted to follow the trail to you rather than back trace for other family lines, but now that I know the dryad blood is on your mother’s side, I can start there and work backwards to see if I can track down any word on your

uncle. Maybe that'll give us a lead on where to find his daughter.”

Pam liked the sound of that. If her uncle really was alive—or even if he wasn't—she'd like to solve that mystery in memory of her mother. And finding a first cousin would be really special.

They went to the office and sat down to work. A couple of hours later, they'd made a little progress when Sally stood and declared it was lunchtime, and the three women trooped back to the dining room to find the men there, waiting for them. As were a lot of other people. *Lots* of other people.

It felt like the whole Pack had shown up to take a look at the newcomers. Pam felt really conspicuous, but having Cameron around helped take at least some of the focus off her thankfully. And having Arlo at her side made her feel even better. She'd missed him the past couple of hours, even though she'd enjoyed getting to know her relatives and exploring what might have happened to her uncle.

Lunch turned out to be a raucous affair, and Pam was introduced to many, many people. All were uniformly welcoming, which took the edge off her nervousness to some extent. Being around Maria and Sally helped a lot too. They were really nice, and they put her at ease almost as much as Arlo did.

There was something about going through a life-or-death situation with someone that made you feel really close, she supposed. Either that or Arlo was just the sweetest, nicest, fiercest, and bravest man she'd ever met. Probably a little bit of both.

The love she felt for him had not faded in the new light of day. Being safe, among new friends, had not dimmed her desire to be near him. If anything, her love for him had deepened and strengthened even more. And he still really hadn't said anything solid about the future to her. He'd said, back in the mine, that they would talk about it, but they hadn't yet. Was she destined to be disappointed, or would he declare himself when they finally got a moment alone? Or would she

have to take the bull by the horns and demand to know where they stood as a couple?

She wasn't sure she had the courage to do that. The easiest way to lose a guy was to give him an ultimatum. But she really wanted to know if her heart was going to be broken.

Pam sighed and pushed the thoughts from her head as lunch drew to an end. The big dining hall started emptying out as everyone got on with their day.

Pam spent the afternoon with Sally, helping with the research into her mother's family. Maria spent the time making video calls with all the other dryad family members that had been located so far, then calling Pam over into camera range to meet them. Pam got to chat with them all and found she liked them right off the bat. She'd like to get to know them better, and Maria seemed to be coordinating plans to get them all together at some point in the near future.

Before she knew it, the afternoon had passed, and it was time for dinner. They trooped back into the dining hall and staked out a place at the large round table in one corner. The men came in a few minutes later and joined them.

Dinner was a repeat of lunch with more elaborate food and even more people. Pam marveled at the way all these shifters ate. Not one of them was what she would call fat, yet they all ate enough for a small army.

"You'll get used to it," Sally commented drolly, seated on Pam's right side.

Pam realized she'd been staring, and Sally had caught her at it. Blushing, she looked away.

"And when you use a lot of magical energy, you'll be able to eat as much as they do without any consequences," Sally added. "Of course, in that kind of situation you can't really enjoy what you're eating. It's more about fuel than delicacy."

Pam remembered how hungry she'd been in the cave. They had easily eaten all the supplies she had stocked that had been intended to last for much longer than the short time they'd been in the mine.

“I know what you mean. I’ve experienced that already, to a small extent,” Pam admitted.

She had told them about the encounter with Spencer and the subsequent journey here, including the run-in with the weather witch at the little airport in Idaho. Both Sally and Maria had told her, in turn, about how they came to know about their dryad heritage. She already felt a kinship with these women who were distantly related to her. They were really great.

They talked all through dinner, and Arlo was a constant, warm presence at her side. She enjoyed listening to the men’s conversation, as well. It was clear they all knew each other well, except for Cameron, and he was fitting in well, despite his differences. He talked of mutual acquaintances, including some bear shifters they all knew in a town on the Washington coast.

After dinner, Pam found herself yawning. It had been a really long day, but a seriously good one. She had new friends and even extended family, and Arlo hadn’t run off, never to be seen again. Quite the contrary, he’d stuck by her at meals and was both attentive and considerate, if a bit quiet. He took her hand as they all rose from the table and caught her attention.

“How about a little drive and a nice walk in the forest before you turn in?” he asked in a low voice. She loved the rumble of his words. They felt like velvet stroking over her skin, and she would have given him anything he wanted if he would just speak to her that way some more.

“Sure,” she agreed, despite her fatigue. What was being tired compared to spending more time with Arlo, in the forest, under the moonlight?

She said good night to her newfound cousins and went outside with Arlo. He led her to a new vehicle she hadn’t seen before. He had the keys in his pocket, so he must have arranged for it to be here sometime before. She liked that about him. Arlo was always planning well ahead of events. He was dependable.

He opened the passenger door for her and helped her up into the pickup's raised cabin. He closed the door gently then went around to the driver's side and hopped in. The truck started right up, and Arlo patted the steering wheel affectionately.

"Ol' Betsy sounds like she missed me," he said with a grin, turning in the dim light to look at her.

"This is your truck?" She looked around a bit more closely at what she could see of the interior of the cabin as Arlo nodded.

"I got her last year," he confirmed. "I've been doing a little work on her now and again to make the ride more personalized."

"Like the lift kit?" she asked, remembering how far off the ground the passenger cabin was.

He chuckled. "That's the most recent improvement. I put a winch in back and a trailer hitch. Just in case."

In case of what, she didn't ask. It was clear he enjoyed working on his vehicle, and who was she to pass judgment on that? It seemed a harmless sort of hobby to her. Even if it did mean she had to jump a little to get up into his truck. She just shook her head at the image that brought to mind and smothered a laugh.

He drove upward on the small road that zigzagged up the mountain, heading for some destination only he knew. But she trusted him. Arlo would never put her in danger. Not on purpose.

Arlo pulled off the asphalt and onto an even smaller gravel road a few minutes later. He parked the truck in a small lot that already had a few other vehicles parked and turned off the engine.

"We can walk in easily from here," he told her, an eager light in his eyes that she didn't fully understand, but she was more than willing to follow wherever he led. "It's not far."

He got out of the truck and came around to help her down before she could ask. "What's not far?"

“Our destination,” he replied cagily, then took her hand and began walking into the woods.

She liked the feel of the trees right away. They welcomed her and seemed familiar with her kind of magic. She felt a message of joy from them as she walked beneath the pines with Arlo.

“The trees here are getting used to dryad magic,” she observed as she walked along in wonder.

“Well, Maria lives not too far from here with Jesse. The Wraiths have staked out this area while the rest of the Pack mostly lives a bit farther down the mountain. And your ancestor, Leonora, lived here for a long time, even before our Pack claimed the territory, I think. These trees know and love her from what Maria and Sally have said,” he explained as they strolled along.

They walked along in silence for a bit, Pam listening to the song of the trees. It really was lovely here. The trees were even more alive and talkative than the ones surrounding her cabin. Probably because they’d had a dryad or two to talk to for a good long while.

The wooded paths seemed to meander with some kind of purpose, though she couldn’t figure out what that was just yet. Then she noticed a building just up the slope from their walking track.

“Is that someone’s house?” she asked, looking at the place through the darkened forest. It fit into its surroundings as if it had grown there naturally. “It’s lovely.”

“It’s my house,” Arlo told her, stopping on the path and turning to face her. He took both of her hands in his. “If you agree it can be your house too. Or, if you don’t want to live here, we can go somewhere else. I wouldn’t recommend going back to Idaho anytime in the very near future, but maybe in a few months, when things cool down, we could go back there, if you wish. Whatever you want, Pam. I just want us to be together.”

Her heart in her throat, Pam wasn't sure what she was hearing. She needed him to make it clearer.

“Why?” she croaked, hardly daring to breathe.

He tilted his head in that wolfy way and smiled with one corner of his mouth. “Because I love you. You're my mate, Pam. I'm just hoping and praying you feel the same.”

“Oh, thank heaven,” she exclaimed, her knees almost giving out with relief. Arlo's arms came around her, supporting her. “I love you too. So much. I've been longing to hear you say it.”

“You have?” Arlo seemed genuinely surprised but also very pleased.

She nodded, looking up into his whiskey-brown eyes. “I have,” she confirmed, her voice dropping low. “I want to be your mate, Arlo. Forever. I can't imagine going on without you in my life.”

“Well, thanks be to the Mother of All for that,” he said with feeling. “I've been in agony, hoping you felt the same.”

He moved in closer, dipping his head to seal his words with a tender kiss that soon turned fiery. She was lost in his kiss. So much so that, when he swooped her up into his arms and made a beeline for the house in the woods, she had to gasp and giggle at her own astonishment. Arlo opened the door and carried her over the threshold like something out of an old romantic movie, making her little heart go pitter-pat.

He stopped in the entryway and let her legs slide to the floor, though he kept hold of her waist. As he closed the door behind them, she got a look around the living room and liked what she saw. Bigger than her cabin, it was built for comfort and had all sorts of modern amenities that her cabin sorely lacked. Then she spotted her bags sitting neatly just inside the door.

“Wasn't that a bit presumptuous?” She quirked her eyebrow toward the bags.

“A bit,” he agreed, “but it was more hope than presumption. If you'd said no, I'd have taken you back to the

Pack house and delivered your bags later, giving you more time. Then I would redouble my efforts to convince you that I was serious about being hopelessly, helplessly, forever in love with you.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that,” she said, twining her arms around his neck and pulling him down for a lingering kiss.

His hands were busy, removing both her clothing and his own. Before long, they were both naked, writhing against each other, bodies yearning to be joined. As it should be.

Arlo lifted her off her feet again, but he surprised her by taking her not to the bedroom, but farther into the living room. There was a big sectional couch in front of a ginormous flatscreen television. Hmm. Couch cuddling sounded like fun, but he didn’t take her around to the seating area. Instead, he leaned her against the back of the couch while he kissed the living daylights out of her.

Pam felt the softness of the fabric against her butt, and then, Arlo lifted his lips from hers and his whiskey-colored eyes met hers. He was smiling crookedly, and his expression held a hint of deviltry that made her pulses speed up. He was in a playful mood, and she was more than willing to see where his desires might lead.

“Do you trust me?” Arlo asked, his tone a bit growly with both amusement and challenge.

“With my life.” There wasn’t even a shadow of a doubt in her mind.

Heat and satisfaction flared in his eyes. “Good. I think you’re going to like this.”

His big hands on her hips turned her until her back was to his front. Then he took her hands and placed them on the back of the couch. He spooned her from behind, his thick rod cradled between her butt cheeks, making her yearn. She wasn’t sure exactly what he had in mind with this position, but she was more than willing to see where he would take her. And *how* he would take her. For goodness’ sake, she just wanted him to *take her* already!

He rubbed all of him against all of her, his front to her back. She shivered and stifled a moan. His hands hadn't left hers, his fingers intertwined slightly with hers as his palms lay over the backs of her hands. With gentle movements, he coaxed her hands to slide down over the headrest of the couch, the soft fabric a sensual slide against her palms as she bent at the waist.

Arlo's mouth was at her ear. "Comfortable? No pain?" he asked in a puff of breath as his teeth nibbled gently on the shell of her ear.

"I'm all right," she whispered back, her breath whooshing out of her as she realized the vulnerability of her position. She was bent over the couch, her ass in the air, her pussy open to him, ready for whatever he might have in mind. And judging by the thick cock that pressed against her, he was definitely ready for something.

"Good," he growled, sliding deep inside her from behind, the penetration unlike anything they'd shared before. She keened a cry of impatient desire as he seated himself fully... and deep. "This is going to be so good, my love. My *mate*." His inner wolf growled that last word, and she felt the connection deep down in her soul.

Yes. They were mates. This was all as it should be. This was the man...and his inner wild side. Both of them were claiming her in this primal way and all she could do was hang on and enjoy. And boy-o-boy was she enjoying this. Her passion spiked and her body shivered, and he hadn't even started moving yet.

"Yes," she breathed, her hands on the cushion of the couch, holding her somewhat steady while he rose up above her. His hands went to her hips, adding more stability for what was to come.

Then he started moving. Slowly at first, he seemed to be checking to make sure he wasn't hurting her in any way, but once he seemed to decide she would be okay, he unleashed the wildness that was never far below his surface. He increased his

thrusts, moving this way and that, hitting different angles and driving her crazy with pleasure as she came again.

Yet, he pushed her higher. Deep, frenzied thrusts punctuated by his hands roving over her ass and then between. He slid one finger into that forbidden place, surprising her with the intensity of the sensation. His cock hard in her, his finger teasing even more, he drove her completely over the edge when he spanked her ass with his free hand, making her come hard around him, her body spasming and locking onto his as pleasure rolled over her in devastating waves.

She felt him come out of the dimness of her own pleasure, and the warmth within her caused another shockwave to slide along her senses. She sobbed his name and babbled of her love. She thought maybe she was fairly incoherent at the time, and maybe she even fainted for a few minutes, but Arlo held her throughout, cradling her in his embrace. Safe.

Not only her body, but her heart...and soul.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next day, Maria came to collect Pam at Arlo's house, teasing her a bit about how fast she'd fallen for the hunky soldier. Pam took it well, especially when Maria admitted to doing the same thing with Jesse.

"There's just something about these sexy wolf soldiers, you know?" Maria sighed as she looked off into the distance where Jesse was talking with Arlo.

"I know exactly what you mean," Pam agreed. They were silent for a time, each mooning over her man until Maria shook her head and chuckled.

"I swear, every day feels like I fall in love with him all over again. I hope you have the same thing, Pam. These werewolf men are really something special." She shook her head before resolutely turning her back on the sight of the men in the distance. "The reason I came here was to bring you down to where Leonora is resting. Sally's going to meet us there. Are you up to it?"

"Sure, just let me grab my coat."

Pam went back into the house to grab her coat and the sweater she'd packed so hastily the day before. She'd need both if they were going to spend time outside. It was windy today, even colder than it had been near her cabin. A weather front had come through overnight that brought more arctic air down from the north.

She rejoined Maria, who was also bundled up, just outside the house. Arlo and Jesse had moved closer, and Arlo put his hand around her waist as she joined the trio.

"Maria is taking me to see where Leonora is," Pam told her new mate with a soft smile.

"I know," he replied, smiling back at her. "We'll escort you most of the way, then leave you ladies to do your dryad thing. But we'll be nearby if you need us."

Oh, she liked the sound of that. It might be old fashioned, but she liked the feeling that he would be there, looking out for her, caring for her, being near in case she needed him. She

wanted to do the same for him. This was a part of being a couple that she had never really experienced and always wanted.

They walked down to the parking area and got into the SUV Jesse and Maria had arrived in. It had a larger passenger cabin than Arlo's truck and fit them all comfortably. They drove around to another part of the very large territory claimed by the wolf Pack, and Jesse parked the vehicle in another of the little gravel lots that had been put in to make parking easier at different spots on the mountain.

"We walk from here," Jesse announced as he shut off the engine.

They all piled out of the warm SUV into the chill mountain air. It wasn't quite as windy here as it had been closer to the summit. Pam's magic meant she didn't feel the cold easily, but arctic winds did tend to make an impression.

They walked together, two couples following a faint path through a smattering of snow. Most of the snow had melted since the last storm, but if the wind was anything to judge by, they'd probably be getting a new coating—or more—of the white stuff soon. Which was another reason why Pam felt it was really important to go see Leonora's resting place today, before anything else could happen to prevent her from visiting.

She didn't know why, but she felt like there was something important she needed to do regarding her ancestor and her resting place. It didn't really make a lot of sense, but the closer they got to the location, the more urgent the need to get there became in her mind.

"Something's wrong," Pam said, all her senses going on alert suddenly. Something was very wrong, but she had no idea what it was. Not yet at least.

Then they heard it. A chainsaw started up in the near distance, and both Arlo and Jesse broke into a run. Pam took one look at Maria and saw the same determination to help that she felt as they followed behind the men, not moving quite as fast or as silently but doing their best to follow.

Arlo and Jesse pounded over the ground, heading for the sound of the chainsaw. Arlo had a terrible feeling he knew where they would find the would-be lumberjack. But there were supposed to be all sorts of protections around the willow where Leonora rested.

Arlo reached for his phone as he ran, dialing one of the other Wraiths. Somebody needed to know what was going on, and the rest of the mountain needed to be put on alert. Not to mention, they might need a little backup as soon as possible. For now, though, it was just Arlo and Jesse, with whatever small arms they had on their persons and the wolves in their hearts.

He prayed they could deal with whatever threat they would find before the women caught up with them. He didn't think for one minute that either Maria or Pam would stay behind docilely and wait for their mates to handle things.

Jesse slowed before they reached the clearing where the willow stood off to one side. He signaled to Arlo silently, and they split up, approaching from different angles. There was a man there, wearing a light-colored ski jacket and winter camo pants and boots. His head was covered with a white beanie, and he held a bright orange chainsaw in his hands, revving the motor as he approached the willow.

The chainsaw wasn't all that large, but it could definitely take more than a bite out of the tree. It might even be able to fell it altogether, and Arlo wasn't sure what that would mean for the dryad within. If the tree died...she probably would as well.

Just as the man got close to the tree, the chainsaw sputtered and died. The man cursed and before he could try to restart the tiny engine, Jesse stepped out of the tree line, leveling his 9mm handgun at the man.

"Stop right there," Jesse ordered in his very best command voice. The man spun, and Arlo cursed under his breath, doing a double take. If that wasn't Spencer, it was his twin.

But they'd killed Spencer. He'd seen it with his own eyes. And Cameron had disposed of Spencer's body with all due care. It could *not* be Spencer. Yet, the man with the chainsaw was the spitting image of him.

"Can't do that, I'm afraid," the man said, turning back to his work. He certainly sounded a lot like Spencer too, though perhaps a bit more nasally. He pulled the cord to start the chainsaw again then turned back toward the tree and touched the spinning chain to a lower limb.

Jesse pulled the trigger and fired a single shot that should have drilled the guy, but instead, the bullet ricocheted off some kind of magical shield, and Jesse had to duck when the bullet rebounded toward him.

"Shit." Arlo could hear Jesse's low curse over the whine of the saw and made a decision.

Arlo shucked his clothing as quickly as he could and went wolf. If bullets couldn't get through the shield, maybe the wolf's fur could deflect enough of the magic to get close to the mage. Wolf fur was good like that. A lot of magic just rolled right off Arlo's back when he was in wolf form.

As the little chainsaw began cutting through part of the willow, Arlo launched his attack. He bounded out from the forest and fought his way through the magical miasma that filled the space between himself and the mage. He leapt...and got stuck in mid-air, held fast by the magic of the man who was doing his best to damage the willow with increasing ferocity.

Arlo caught sight of Cameron in the woods to his left. He saw the man's mouth move and read the words, *Get ready*.

A moment later, Arlo was crashing hard into the mage as the magical field fell. Arlo's bulk knocked the man to the ground, and though the guy tried to fight Arlo off, he was in a bad position to do so. Arlo's massive jaws went around the man's neck and snapped it as they plummeted to the ground. He was dead before he hit, and Arlo let go, shaking his fur back into place and padding off to the side, scanning the area for more danger.

Maria and Pam came running into the clearing around the willow, breathless. Maria went straight to Jesse, who was examining the damage to the tree, while Pam froze as she caught sight of the man at Arlo's feet.

"Spencer?" she breathed in clear disbelief.

Seeing no further enemies to fight and wanting to talk to his mate, Arlo shifted back to human form. He was naked and cold now that the heat of battle was fading.

"Can somebody throw me my clothes?" Arlo asked.

Cameron sent Arlo's pants flying through the air to land next to him, followed by the rest of his gear. Arlo dressed quickly, as Pam drew cautiously nearer.

"It can't be Spencer, can it?" Her gaze went from Arlo to Cameron and back again.

"Spencer?" Jesse spoke up from over by the willow where Maria had her hands on the cut place, doing some dryad magic to try to fix it. "The guy from Idaho?"

"The very one," Cameron replied in disgust. "But this is not Spencer. Not the same man at all, though they do look very similar. I would guess this is a younger brother. Very powerful and also skilled in the use of the Elspian Ring. I found one out there and disabled it. Otherwise, you might still be hanging in mid-air." He nodded to Arlo. "Ballsy move, that." He sounded admiring.

"Thanks," Arlo nodded back as he put on his boots. Thankfully, the snow left from the last storm hadn't penetrated his clothing too badly. Just as Arlo stood, the woods around them filled with wolves both in their fur and their two-legged forms. "Looks like the cavalry's here."

Pam moved to stand next to him as they looked down at the dead man. Cameron was to Arlo's left, Pam on his right.

"This isn't good," Pam said, her face pinched. "Somehow, they know about Leonora."

"Every dryad we've found has had the *Venifucus* on her trail," Arlo agreed. "And now, this."

“You’ve got a leak, laddie,” Cameron said quietly.

“We’ve been over all our com gear twenty times,” Arlo said, his frustration rising.

Arlo agreed with Cameron’s observation, though. Somehow, the enemy was getting the jump on them every time they located another dryad, but this... An attack on their home territory. This was going way too far.

Jesse issued orders to those who’d just arrived. They were to set up a perimeter and search the area. The dead man might not have been alone, and he had to have arrived here somehow. There had to be a vehicle of some kind nearby. Maria was still working on the tree, but Jesse turned to look at the others. His jaw was clenched, his expression grim.

“Communications blackout, starting right now,” he ground out.

Arlo nodded agreement, but it was Pam who spoke up.

“It’s too late. We already started researching the next dryad. My uncle’s daughter. If the *Venifucus* have been able to spy on our searches somehow, then they already know what we know,” Pam told them, her tone both horrified and resigned.

Cameron’s jaw hardened, and his eyes grew intense. “I’ll go after the lass myself,” he stated, steel in his tone.

As he said the words, Pam felt the rightness of them. *Yes. That’s the way it’s supposed to go.* She didn’t know why she felt that way, but she did. She kept it to herself for now, though.

“We’ll give you all the information we have,” she promised the fey knight, speaking for the others, though she probably didn’t really have the right to do so.

Still, she knew Cameron had to be the one to retrieve the last piece of the puzzle. The last part-dryad needed to form the Elven Star. Who better to fit that last remaining piece but a man from the fey realm? If the others asked, she’d tell them

that. Plus, she knew better than any of them that Cameron had all sorts of magical skills way beyond a mere human mage. So far, there hadn't seemed to be anything he couldn't handle.

If the enemy kept sending stronger and stronger mages out to stop them, it only made sense to send the most powerful ally they had. And they were going to need guidance to perform the Elven Star. Pam felt now that it was Cameron who was going to be the one to coach them through that complicated bit of magic. It all made sense to her. He was involved now, and they wouldn't stop until Leonora was either free...or gone from this realm forever.

Cameron nodded at her then looked at Arlo. "Your people are well able to deal with these remains, are you not?"

"Funeral pyre within the hour," Arlo agreed. "And we'll track down his transport and any others he might've been traveling with."

"Fair enough," Cameron said, then met Pam's gaze. "There is just enough time, I think, to pay our respects, and then, I must away to find your cousin before the enemy does." Cameron gestured for her to follow him. "Let me introduce you to your ancestress."

She wasn't quite sure what he meant but was willing to trust him. Cameron had already proved himself twice over to her. He led her to the willow tree where Maria was still laboring to try to mend the damage caused by the chainsaw. He stilled her movements with gentle words.

"Come with me now, lass. Meet your ancestress. She has been waiting a very long time to see you."

Maria turned to Cameron and then met Pam's gaze with a question in her own eyes. Pam shrugged and followed Cameron's lead as he placed his hand on the willow. Pam did the same and was immediately transported to someplace... Other.

She floated in a green and gold cloud of energy. Her body was shaped like her, and Maria and Cam looked like they did

in the real world, but she knew, without knowing how she knew, that this was anyplace but the mortal realm.

“This is the place between realms where your ancestress has been waiting for you all to gather.” Cameron’s voice sounded the same but somehow echoed a bit in the weird space between spaces. “Ah, she comes,” he said, turning to look behind himself.

A moment later, a lovely woman stepped into view. She was not young but not old. Petite and powerful. Her eyes were filled with delight as she gazed on Maria and then Pam.

Pam felt the impact of that green gaze. Recognition of like energy. But where Pam had a little trickle of dryad magic, she could easily see that Leonora was the real deal. This...*this* was a dryad. And earth elemental in her purest form. The idea was a little staggering.

“Could this be young Cameron? Child of my friends Liandra and Berwid? How fare your parents? You have grown in the many years since I saw you last.”

Leonora had known Cameron as a youngster? Pam’s mind boggled.

“My parents were well the last time I was in the fey realm. I will tell them you asked, dear lady. Please allow me to make the introductions.” He turned smoothly to Maria and Pam. “These are but two of your descendants.”

They spent what felt like an hour discussing various topics from Maria and Pam’s heritage to the other part-dryads that had been located already. Cameron didn’t rush them, but Pam suspected he was the reason they were able to be in this half-realm at all. She hoped it wasn’t too tiring for him. She also began to wonder what Arlo and the others must be thinking back in the mortal realm. It probably looked like the three of them had just been standing still for an hour communing with a tree. She hoped Arlo wasn’t worrying about her.

“Fear not, milady,” Sir Cameron brought the conversation around to a natural conclusion. “I go now to retrieve the last of your descendants needed to perform the Elven Star. I will

guide the magic, and with any luck, it will bring you back into the mortal realm hale and hearty and ready to go another thousand years. Woe be to your enemies, who harmed you so greatly.” His smile was almost feral, as was Leonora’s answering grin.

“I am in your debt,” Leonora said with quiet dignity. “In all of your debt. Please tell the others. I am so grateful for your efforts on my behalf. I cannot wait to walk among you in the forest that is our home.”

“And we can’t wait to see you there, where you belong,” Pam said impulsively, earning a deeper smile from Leonora.

“For now, we must go. Rest easy, milady. Though your resting place was attacked today, it will be guarded much more closely from this moment on. The wolves will keep watch by night and day now that we know the enemy is aware of your plight,” Sir Cameron assured her.

“Tell Master Dmitri I enjoy his visits, though we cannot speak. I have sensed his presence almost every night. He is a strong ally who keeps his word,” Leonora told them.

“I’ll be sure to tell him,” Maria volunteered. “I’m so glad to see you,” she said with feeling that was easily reciprocated in the dryad’s expression.

“Me too,” Leonora whispered as Sir Cameron did something to break the spell, and Leonora faded into the wisps of energy until it all went black and spit them back into the real world.

Pam blinked and used her hand on the tree to steady herself. It was disorienting to return so quickly, and she was surprised that her limbs weren’t stiff at all. She looked around and found that nobody had moved from where they’d been standing when Sir Cameron had taken them into that Other place. She looked up at him and caught his grin and a quick wink.

“Time works differently in the various realms. What felt like an hour or more in one place is the blink of an eye elsewhere. And vice versa, so I wouldn’t recommend realm-

hopping for pleasure. It gets tricky.” He shook his head with a mock frown. “Now, let’s get that information on our next target, and I’ll get going. The sooner I get to her, the safer she’ll be.”

“The tree...” Maria stuttered a bit, her eyes wide as she looked at the part of the tree limb that had been cut.

Pam blinked. It was healed. There was a small scar, but nothing greater to indicate the trauma that had been inflicted.

Magic.

Sir Cameron winked again and began walking. The two stunned women followed behind as if he were the Pied Piper.

“With the both of you inside, the tree was infused with a fresh dose of your magic. It healed spontaneously because you were feeding it power, though you probably didn’t feel any drain.” He looked at them over his shoulder. “Did you?”

The women shook their heads and looked at each other, then back at him. It was Pam who found the words to ask.

“Were we actually in the tree with Leonora, then?”

Sir Cameron shrugged. “In a manner of speaking. Perhaps for the blink of an eye. Or perhaps not. We three were merely visiting another place, but only for the tiniest bit of time in this world.” He shrugged again. “It’s kind of complicated, but suffice to say, nobody noticed if we were missing for any tiny length of time. If, indeed, we were.”

Well, that answered nothing, but Pam supposed she would have to live with it. Getting answers out of a fey was supposed to be maddening and next to impossible. Sue had told her all about the fey realm, though Cameron probably didn’t realize the extent of her knowledge. There was a reason the word *fey* had come to be synonymous with *fickle* in some cultures.

Jesse and Arlo were standing together off to the side of the mage’s body. They were speaking with a quartet of soldiers dressed in winter camo gear. Even as Pam met Arlo’s gaze, the four men were sent off to deal with the body, and Jesse turned and walked straight for Maria. He put his arms around her and hugged her close.

Then Arlo and Pam were close enough to do the same, and she couldn't help herself. She'd been so worried when she got close enough to see what was going on.

“You were amazing,” she told him. “You're the bravest man I know.” She couldn't tell him enough good things. He'd been truly heroic, as far as she was concerned, and she wanted him to know it. She wanted him to know how much his mate loved and admired him.

Judging by the kiss he laid on her a moment later? He knew.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Less than an hour later, they were all farther down the mountain in the Pack house. Sally had been asked to gather her data on the last dryad and power down all her computers. The office and the entire Pack's com devices were going to get a thorough delousing—electronically speaking.

Jesse had put in a call to some com specialists he knew to get expert help, but they wouldn't be able to get to Wyoming for a day or so. Until then, they were going old school for information sharing. Paper and pen. Cell phones only for coded conversations or the most mundane of communications. Anything sensitive would be passed person to person until they nailed down if, and how, information was being leaked out of the Pack.

Cameron stayed only long enough to formulate the bare bones of a plan, then took off in a borrowed vehicle. Pam was sorry to see him go but also eager for him to be on his way. Her first cousin's life might be at stake, and she knew in her heart of hearts that Sir Cameron could save her if the enemy was on her trail. She sent up a quiet prayer of thanks and hope that all would be well for the cousin she had yet to meet.

"This feels weird," Sally announced as they sat around the table in the dining hall, drinking coffee. She looked grumpy.

"Not having your computer?" Maria asked.

"Or my smartphone," Sally agreed. "I didn't realize how dependent I'd become on those devices until I was cut off cold turkey." She had the grace to laugh at her own words. "Man, I'm a brat. Like some kid whose parents take away their gaming system due to bad grades or something."

Pam chuckled. "Not as bad as all that, I don't think," she allowed. "But it was really hard getting used to living at the cabin after being raised in cities my whole life. There's no internet where I live. If I want to upload or download something, I have to go into town."

Sally looked appalled, and even Maria seemed surprised.

“Don’t worry. We’ll have internet back just as soon as we get done with the audit. I thought our systems were good enough, but obviously, I’m missing something,” Jesse told them, shaking his head ruefully.

“Not your fault, Jesse,” Jason said, clapping his older brother on the back. “We back each other up, and I didn’t see any problems either.”

“It’s probably some new tech that we don’t yet have,” Arlo told them. “But that can be fixed.”

“As long as we can identify the problem,” Jason said, nodding. “My biggest fear is that it’s not a tech problem but, rather, a personnel issue.”

Jesse growled low in his throat. A primal response from his inner wolf that made Pam’s eyebrows arch. Maria just put her hand on his, and he calmed down.

“If we have a traitor...” Jesse began, but his words turned into a growl, and he couldn’t continue.

Arlo frowned. “If we do, we’ll take care of it,” he said with finality. Jesse nodded after a moment.

“But I’m hoping it’s not that,” Jason repeated, trying to keep his tone light. “I’d much rather it be a tech issue. That, we can solve with relative ease. If we missed a traitor in our midst, that will call all sorts of things into question, including my ability to lead the Pack.”

“Never that, brother,” Jesse said firmly. “Anybody challenges you, they’ll have to deal with me and most of the Wraiths. You gave us a chance when we were too broken to fit anywhere else. You have our loyalty for life.”

Jason reached over to take his brother’s hands in his and squeeze hard. “You were never broken, my brother. Just a bit bruised.” One corner of his mouth quirked upward. “You just needed time and a place to find yourself again. I’m glad you came home.”

“I am too.”

The moment was special. Poignant. Pam held her breath, touched by the scene between the two brothers. She knew it was a bit odd for the younger brother to outrank the elder, but this gave her a bit of an indication of why and how that had happened.

As the moment passed, Arlo cleared his throat. “Well, one great thing came out of all of this,” he said, taking Pam’s hand in his. “Pam’s agreed to be my mate.”

Pam wasn’t quite sure about his timing at first, but then, she realized that they all needed something happy to focus on at that moment. She was glad to be the cause for celebration when the day had been so chaotic in so many other ways.

Congratulations were spread around, and people from other tables came over to see what was going on as the buffet was laid for dinner, and more people started drifting in. The room became boisterous as everyone who came in was greeted with the news that Arlo had finally found his mate, and the Pack had another part-dryad in it.

Pam was congratulated and welcomed to the Pack over and over, and Arlo was basking in his Pack’s attention and love. It was clear this was a shining moment for him. For her too, if she was being honest. She’d never had this kind of reception from anyone and had certainly never had this large a *family*.

They’d told her how the Pack was a giant extended family, but she hadn’t quite believed it until now. For the first time in her life, she felt like she *belonged*. Not just with Arlo, but to the larger Pack as well. She had blood relatives in the Pack already, and so many new friends... It was mind-boggling.

And then, a thought occurred to Pam. Sue had been right, after all. That little cabin in the woods was where Pam truly had met the love of her life. Pam sent a little smile heavenward where Sue was surely looking down on them and smiling so bright it brought a momentary tear to Pam’s eye. Tears of joy and happiness mixed with the sadness of loss. But losing Sue had brought Pam the cabin, and the cabin had brought Arlo. In the great circle of circumstance, she saw suddenly how all

these little things had to come together to bring Arlo and her to the right spot at the right time. And it all culminated, here and now, with the Pack around them and the joy so bright in the air, she could practically see it.

The simple dinner became a festive occasion with plans being thrown around for a “real” mating party to follow. This was just the warm-up, many teased, and she took them at their word. Both Maria and Sally had warned her that wolves loved the throw parties. The bigger, the better.

Despite having spent the past few years on a mountain all alone, Pam realized she liked the idea of a huge party and a large Pack to lean on when things got rough. But what she really *loved* was the fellow sitting beside her, grinning like a man in love.

Just like she was grinning back. He was her mate. Her present. Her future. Her life. Her love.

Later that night when they were lying in bed just snuggling exhaustedly after making love, Arlo brought up the topic of her cabin in the woods again. Pam had almost dozed off, but she didn't mind talking, especially when it was about their future.

“The cabin in Idaho won't be safe for a while, but I don't see any reason for you to give it up,” Arlo mused. “If nothing else, we could use it the way your benefactor's family did—as a vacation home. Not that we need to get away to the mountains when we already live on a mountain.”

“But there is the gold mine,” she offered, wondering how he'd take the news. There was no reason anymore not to tell him the truth about the mine.

“Played out, isn't it?”

He sounded curious. Could he guess what she was about to tell him? She leaned up on her forearms so she could meet his gaze and smiled.

“I found a nice, healthy seam of gold the last time I prospected down there, as well as some rough garnets that I

want to mine. Sue left me the place because she saw it in a vision that I was meant to find my destiny there. Well, I did. I found you there, but I also found a new source of gold that she had never been able to find. I doubt anybody without my gifts or some really high-tech equipment would have found the new seam, but Sue knew I would. She was setting me up for financial security after she was gone. She'd already enriched her extended family greatly with the buckets of gold she'd found there—that they never knew about. They just thought she'd made good investments, or something. They never knew about the mine. Sue said a couple of times, in passing, that she thought it was time someone else gained by the property, other than her family. I never imagined Sue would leave the place to me. You see, her family had written her off as useless because she wasn't a battle mage." Pam huffed, still angry at Sue's family for being so snobby about magic.

"So, you're telling me I'm mating an heiress?" Arlo grinned wide and teasing. She loved the glint in his whiskey-colored eyes when he was playful like this. "You're rich?"

"*We're* rich," she corrected him. "What's mine is yours, my love."

"Not sure I actually need any gold, but I like the idea that our children will never have to worry about money," he said, his face holding nothing but honest speculation. She loved that the gold didn't really matter to him. She knew many other men would have reacted quite differently. Then his words registered.

"Children?" She hadn't really thought that far ahead, but the idea tickled her mind with beautiful possibilities. "Oh," she breathed shakily, joy spreading through her heart. "I'd love that. Do you think they'll be shifters?"

"Very probably, but who's to say? That's all in the hands of the Goddess. However they turn out, they will be loved and protected to the best of our ability," he vowed, leaning up to kiss her softly.

She followed him back downward, prolonging the kiss until it turned into something more tempestuous. They didn't

Speak again for a long, long, pleasure-filled time and after, Pam drifted to sleep in Arlo's arms, a happy smile lifting the corners of her well-kissed lips. She liked the dream of the future he'd given her. Them. Together. With children who would be beautiful and talented and perfect, just like their father. They would raise the kids together, just as they did everything now. Two halves of a perfect whole.

Even if bad times came and more evil people came after them or their friends, they could handle it. They had already been through a trial by mage-fire and come out on top. They would weather any storm and face any danger for the promise of the beautiful future they could have. Together, they could face anything, and the world looked a little brighter than it had ever looked before.

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EPILOGUE

Cameron hadn't driven a motor car in a very long time, but he soon got the hang of it again. He was very concerned about Leonora's condition. She'd tried to hide it and had succeeded in keeping the deterioration of her state from her descendants, but she hadn't been able to fool him. They had little time left to gather the needed part-dryads and work the magic that might bring her back to this realm and heal her in the process. The poison of her wound was slowly eating away at her, despite the drops of vampire blood that had been gifted to her to help prolong her life.

Cameron was also concerned about the way the *Venifucus* seemed to be one step ahead of the wolves and their allies. The fact that Leonora's resting place had been attacked directly today was of major concern and indicated a bigger problem in the Pack's communications—or people. Now that they knew about it, Cameron had every confidence that the Moore brothers would turn the place upside down and inside out to discover where the problem truly lay. He would leave that in their capable hands since it was likely a technology issue, which was out of his purview and expertise.

If it had been a magical problem, that would have been more in his line, but alas, he thought not. The one thing he could do to help everyone concerned at this juncture was go get that last part-dryad and coach them all through the spell.

The Elven Star was not something to be taken lightly or done on a whim. They'd have to prepare carefully, and each woman would have to be taught her role and how to play her part. Then they had to coordinate their magics in a way that blended them into a harmonious whole. He didn't anticipate a lot of difficulty in doing that since what he'd seen of the part-dryad power so far seemed all in the same tight spectrum of earth and forest energy. He didn't think the others would be all that different, considering their antecedents, but he wouldn't know for certain until he had them all together.

But that was in the future. For now, he had to focus on the task at hand. The part-dryad that seemed quite mysterious based on the scant information available. There was something

different about her background that he couldn't quite put his finger on yet. The single image they'd managed to retrieve—a years-old employee photo—had intrigued him more than anything he could ever remember. Something about this girl was calling to him, and when that sort of thing happened, Cameron had learned to listen.

He didn't know why or how, but he was being drawn to the last of the missing dryads for some reason, and it would be the adventure of his very long lifetime, he was betting, to find out. That thought firmly in mind, he put the pedal to the metal and headed for a place he'd never been to find a woman he'd never seen in person but who felt...very important. To him, personally. Not just to the mission at hand.

And that was a phenomenon totally unique in his experience. He couldn't wait to see what the future might hold. It felt like quite the mystery, and to quote one of his favorite authors from this realm, "The game was afoot."

*

Thank you for reading *Wildwood in Winter (Brotherhood of Blood ~ Wildwood #3)*. If you want to read more about Pam and Arlo, there's a free bonus story available to my newsletter subscribers. Simply [click here](#) to find out how to get it.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review. The next book is called *The Elven Star*. In it, the final and most magical daughter of the dryad will be uncovered and brought back into the family. Keep scrolling to read an excerpt.

A complete list of all of my books, separated by series, follows. But as you might've realized by now, all of my paranormal books are linked by common characters, situations and events. They're segregated into series mostly based on location and the species involved. There's a reading order on [my website](#) for those who enjoy that sort of thing. Happy reading!

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Chapter One

Early Spring was one of Kaleen Fairchild’s favorite times of year. The extensive garden of her parents’ suburban home was just starting to come out of its winter slumber and signs of new life were everywhere.

The crocuses were just finishing, and the daffodils were waving proudly in the brisk air. Tulips were just starting to bloom here and there throughout the large backyard, and trees were starting to form tiny leaves or flowers, each according to their nature. A very old and large oak had pride of place to one side of the wide backyard, with an old swing hanging from its lower branches. There were bushes dividing up the space and an old boxwood hedge along one side separating the rose garden from the rest of the expanse.

Kaleen remembered her father spending many hours out here, coaxing the garden into just the shape and design he wanted. She missed his pattering about back here. Had missed it since she was a child when he disappeared one night, taken by folk from another realm. She’d spent many hours out here ever since, weeding and tilling the soil and planting things in his memory...and in her mother’s as well.

They weren’t dead. Just gone. And she wasn’t sure she’d ever see them again. But she held the hope that one day they would all be reunited and then her father would be pleased with how well she’d kept his garden and her mother would come to enjoy the pink dogwood tree Kaleen had planted just for her. Kaleen’s mother had always claimed the pink dogwood—much rarer than the wild white variety—was her favorite.

It was a bright, sunny day, and the garden was truly waking up. Kaleen was alone, as she always was. The big house was empty, and the garden was her solace. Even on the

coldest of days, she always spent at least some time out here among the trees, who were her only friends.

It wasn't a bad life, though it did get lonely at times. Her parents had left her very well off with a big house in a quiet neighborhood. The house was sort of a mansion, really. If a small one. Her nearest neighbors weren't all that close and they tended to keep to themselves.

Kaleen had been alone here since the day after her eighteenth birthday, though her mother had formulated plans for Kaleen's higher education and set the wheels in motion for Kaleen to attend a nearby college. The money had been there. Plenty of it, actually. Her parents had left her wanting for nothing...except their presence.

Quiet by nature, Kaleen had gone through with the plans her mother had left, getting a degree in accounting. She had a few private clients and did per diem work for a firm in town. All in all, it kept her busy and got her out of the house, but it wasn't exactly fulfilling work. It was just a job that helped her manage the large estate her parents had left behind.

She had been working hard until last week. The April tax deadline had passed and now she finally had a little breathing space. The per diem work peaked around the various tax deadlines throughout the year and her own clients were all set for now. She had taken the next few weeks *off*, though she would still answer the phone if anybody wanted to talk to her. She just wasn't going to be focusing on work as much as she had been since mid-January.

It was a great time to be out in nature and she felt it calling to her. She'd discovered some unique abilities after her mother had gone, but she had nobody to ask about them. She'd just experimented a bit on her own, playing around out here in her favorite place, making things grow and talking to the trees and bushes.

She knew there was magic in her blood. Her mother had lots of it, after all, but her mother had never told her about listening to the song of the leaves or being able to make things grow just by touching them, or the earth around them. That

had to be some artifact of her human side, she guessed, but again, she had nobody to ask, so she didn't know for sure. Someday she might find out. If her parents ever came back.

That melancholy thought came all too often, even after so many years. She missed them. She missed being loved and being able to tell them she loved them. She missed so much about having a family, but she didn't really know how to fix it. As far as she was concerned, her situation couldn't be fixed. She was in a limbo sort of place where she couldn't be with the people she loved unconditionally and she didn't know how to find others in this world whom she could trust and love just as much.

Which was why she was still alone. She'd tried making friends, but they inevitably let her down. She'd tried dating but had never fallen in love. Lust, certainly. But not love. Much to her regret. She sighed and touched a tulip, causing it to bloom, which made her smile. Her mother had loved tulips.

“Kaleen Fairchild?”

The deep voice jolted her out of her reverie. Kaleen looked up to see a giant of a man staring down at her with intensity in his deep blue eyes. He was tall and lithe, but powerful in the extreme. She jumped to her feet and faced him.

“Who wants to know?” Annoyance peppered her tone.

She wasn't going to be snuck up on in her own garden. How in the world had he managed to do that? Nothing and no one was *ever* able to enter her domain without her knowledge.

“Permit me to introduce myself. Sir Cameron le Fay, at your service.”

Shock colored her expression and she backed up a step involuntarily. “You're fey?”

Cameron tilted his head in question. That wasn't the usual response from those in the mortal realm. He looked at her more closely.

Long blonde hair. Clear blue eyes. Her hair was just a bit darker blonde than usual in fey and her eyes a little darker blue. Still, she had the delicate look of the fey realm, but there was an earthy quality about her too. Could she be part-fey? Half-fey, maybe? Only one way to find out. He had to risk being rude and ask.

“What do you know of the fey realm?”

“Nothing good.” She shook her head. “The fey stole my father away.” That last was in a whisper that was tinged with both deep sorrow and festering anger.

“Timothy Fairchild. That was your father’s name, right?” Something was off here. Something Cam was puzzling to figure out. This child of the earth should have no knowledge of the fey realm or its denizens.

She looked even more alarmed than when he’d told her his name. “How did you know that?”

Cam tried to get the conversation back on track.

“I came here at the behest of your cousin Pamela. Your father’s sister’s child,” he explained patiently. “She sent me here to find you. To put the two of you in contact with each other. And to see if you had inherited your father’s earth elemental gifts.”

“My father’s what?” She sounded as if she didn’t know the first thing about her father’s dryad power. Cam supposed it was possible, given the stories he’d heard about the other part-dryads the Wyoming wolf Pack had found so far.

“Your father had a way with plants, didn’t he?” Cam asked, trying to sound nonchalant but watching her reactions carefully.

“He liked gardening, yes, but I don’t see how that—”

Cam cut her off as gently as possible. There was too much to say and do and too little time to convince her. “Forgive me. Time is of the essence. Your cousin sent me to find you. The rest we can discuss later, but first, I need to pass on her message.”

“If what you say is true, why didn’t she come here herself?” Kaleen’s little chin was stuck up in the air in challenge. Cam found it endearing, though it wouldn’t do to let her know that, just yet.

“Since you seem to have some knowledge of the magical world, have you ever heard of the ancient order known as the *Venifucus*?” Cam asked in return.

Slowly, she nodded. “An evil order formed by the followers of Elspeth the Destroyer, thought to have died out after she was banished centuries ago.”

“I’m very sorry to say, they did not die out. They went into hiding and have recently emerged, still intent on returning Elspeth to this mortal realm. In recent months, they have been targeting those with dryad blood.”

“Dryad?” she repeated, interrupting him.

“Earth elementals with power over growing things,” he explained quickly. “Our research shows that your father had dryad blood in his heritage, and therefore, so do you. There are several women in your extended family who have only recently come to discover their lineage. They have all been targeted, in one way or another, by those who would seek to destroy them and steal their power. It was feared that you might also come under attack, so I set off to find you. To warn you, or intercede on your behalf if you were already in distress.”

“The question remains. Why you and not my supposed cousin?” she insisted.

Cameron sighed. “Because she has only just survived being hunted by no less than three very powerful *Venifucus* mages and discovered her true mate in the process. I don’t know how much you know about shifters, but in the early stages of mating, it is very hard for them to knowingly put their mates in danger. Her new husband is very protective and would not have responded well to the journey here, where you might also come under fire. I volunteered to come after you and hopefully bring you back to them, so you can meet your

extended family and get out of the path of danger, should it be pursuing you.”

She seemed to consider his words, then looked around her at the peaceful garden, and shook her head.

“As you can see, nobody’s pursuing me, as you put it. Except you, maybe.” She chuckled at her own words.

“The thing is, though unintentional, the research done to find you might have put you in danger. Since you’re part of the family, I don’t think anybody would mind me telling you that two of your distant cousins are mated to two very powerful werewolves. Brothers, in fact. The elder brother is Alpha of a large group of ex-military shifters. Have you heard of the Wraiths?”

“The Wraiths?” she repeated his words, a little frown line forming between her eyebrows. “Some kind of shifter mercenary company, I’ve heard. And legends about them are used to frighten shifter children into good behavior.”

“The very same.” Cam grinned a bit at her explanation. “The leader of the Wraiths is an excellent fellow named Jesse. His new mate is a veterinarian named Maria. She is, like you, part-dryad.” He nodded toward her. “Jesse’s younger brother is Alpha over the larger Pack to which the Wraiths are attached. His name is Jason, and his mate is a former police detective named Sally. She’s the one who’s been leading the investigation, trying to find the others.”

“And her investigation is uncovering other people like me, and somehow putting them in danger?”

“Not intentionally, as I said. But, many of the part-dryad women who have been found to date, have been in peril. Attacked by *Venifucus* even as Sally was trying to find them. When I left their base, it was feared that their communications had been compromised in some way, despite their very best efforts. The entire Pack had been ordered to power down all electronic devices until a thorough security audit could be run by outside specialists they called in just to work on this problem.” Cam shook his head. “As you can imagine, the Wraiths harbor many specialists among their number, so it

seems incredible to them that their systems might have been infiltrated. The even more troubling possibility is that someone in the Pack is betraying them. The whole Pack was in a bit of an uproar when I left.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” she agreed cautiously. “So, you think this detective’s research might have opened me to the possibility of attack?”

“In a nutshell, yes.” Cam had to hand it to her. She was taking this news rather better than he had expected.

“Well, as you can see, nobody’s attacking me right now, so you can just leave.” She gestured around the empty garden with her hands outstretched. “You’ve delivered your warning, and I am warned. Thank you.”

“I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation,” he began, but she cut him off.

“This is my land. My home. I am well aware of my abilities, and have protections all around the place. Nobody can get to me here.”

“And yet, I walked right in and you didn’t even know I was here until I said hello.” He hated to point that out, but it was the simple truth.

“Ah, yes, but did you intend to do me harm?” She had him there, and she knew it.

“Of course not. I’m here to help you, not cause more problems.”

“Then, I believe my protections are adequate. They are designed to keep evil away from me and my territory.” She narrowed her gaze and looked him over. “Though I now believe you mean to help, I don’t agree with the need for such assistance.”

“Are you familiar with the Elspian Ring?” He had to try to make her understand.

She sighed as if annoyed. “An obsolete piece of magic that only the most powerful of evil sorcerers can produce. Thought to be extinct since the banishing of Elspeth, who invented it.”

“Not extinct. I’ve seen two such workings in just the past few days. In one case, the spell prevented your cousin from knowing that evil mages were prowling through her territory, spying on her homestead. The forest—her friends and early warning system—didn’t even see them. The Elspian Ring blocked the regular flow of magic. My point is that each of your distant relatives has faced increasingly more potent magic being used against them. Your cousin had three high-level mages sent against her. At least one of them, and perhaps two, were able to produce a viable Elspian Ring. I saw it myself. I can only imagine what forces they are marshaling to send against you.” He shook his head. “Which is why they sent me. A fey knight with a thousand years of experience fighting evil in the mortal realm. I was here the last time we fought Elspeth. If she has returned—and I, for one, believe she has—then I have pledged an oath to stand with the good people of this realm to fight her and her supporters once again.”

Kaleen was silent a moment, looking him up and down. “Only a thousand years?” Her tone was just a bit snide. “My mother’s a lot older than you.”

To read more, get your copy of *The Elven Star* by Bianca D’Arc.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bianca D'Arc has run a laboratory, climbed the corporate ladder in the shark-infested streets of lower Manhattan, studied and taught martial arts, and earned the right to put a whole bunch of letters after her name, but she's always enjoyed writing more than any of her other pursuits. She grew up and still lives on Long Island, where she keeps busy with an extensive garden, several aquariums full of very demanding fish, and writing her favorite genres of paranormal, fantasy and sci-fi romance.

Bianca loves to hear from readers and can be reached through Facebook (BiancaDArcAuthor) or through the various links on her website.

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