

REJECTED MATE WOLF SHIFTER ROMANCE



THE ALPHAS
SECRET TWINS

ALPHA WOLF ISLAND

KAYLA WOLF

The Alpha's Secret Twins

Rejected Mate Wolf Shifter Romance

Alpha Wolf Island Book 1

Kayla Wolf



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Chapter 1 - Renfrey

It felt strange to be back at the Halforst Council headquarters after such a long time away. Stranger still to know this was likely to be his last visit to the grand old building that had been the center of his world for his entire adult life. Renfrey had been finding himself lingering in the hallways more than was his habit, studying details that had always been part of the scenery. He hadn't realized, for example, just how many paintings were hanging on the walls. It seemed like just about every major battle in Halforst's history was commemorated somewhere along these narrow hallways, neat plaques below every painting bearing details of the conflict. Brave wolves, weapons bared—jaws full of sharp teeth, or glinting blades held aloft in defiance of their demonic foes. And the demons themselves. Artists never got the demons right, and for good reason. Staring for even a few seconds too long at a demon could damage the mind of even a seasoned demon hunter. If safety came at the cost of artistic accuracy, well, that was a reasonable price to pay.

Was it vanity to wonder if a few of his own battles had made it to canvas? Maybe. But it wouldn't have been a surprise if they had. After all, Renfrey had been one of the Council's top demon hunters for over a decade now. And that was why he was here today, he reminded himself, pulling himself away from contemplation of a scene daubed heavily in red and black. Not for art appreciation, but for a mission bigger than anything he'd tackled before.

Despite his lingering, he was still the first to arrive for the final briefing. He'd always made a habit of getting to places early. He took a seat to the right of the head of the table, knowing the Councillor would likely be conducting the meeting from there, and settled in to wait for the rest of the group to arrive. He hadn't been told who else would be going on this mission, but he suspected there would be some familiar faces. He'd met most of the Council's demon hunters during

his years here, even worked with a fair few of them. But this mission, he knew, would be different from anything that had come before it. Whoever these wolves were, he knew they'd be trusting him with their lives—and vice versa. The thought sent an uneasy shiver down his spine. Putting his own life at risk to fight demons had never bothered him. Having other people relying on him, though, that was a different matter. But this wasn't a mission that one wolf could take care of alone. Like it or not, he was part of a group effort now... and from what he'd gathered from his initial briefing, he was likely to be in charge.

It wasn't long before the room began to fill up with wolves, each taking a seat at the table in silence that Renfrey chose not to break. As he'd expected, there were some familiar faces, as well as some strangers. Eventually, there were six of them at the table. All men, he noticed with some surprise. The gender ratio among demon hunters was fairly even, at least in his experience—it was strange to see no women at the table. Coincidence, or a decision made with intent? It was unlikely many answers would be forthcoming. The Council kept their decision-making processes secret, for good reason. Any information shared with a demon hunter risked falling into the hands of the beasts they hunted, which would put the whole of their world at risk. And the wolves of Halforst hadn't survived as long as they had by taking unnecessary risks against their ancient enemy.

It was Torren who first broke the silence in the end, clearing his throat and spreading his hands on the sleek wooden table they were seated around. He was one of the wolves Renfrey had worked with before—he remembered him being hot-headed, a little too impatient for his own good, but his instincts were razor-sharp and he was one of the strongest fighters he'd ever met. Most wolves favored fighting in one form or another, but Torren was equally skilled in both his wolf form and his human one. If he had a weakness beyond his impulsivity, it was his vanity, Renfrey thought with amusement, watching him push his sweeping silver-blond hair

out of his eyes. A hazard for a warrior, but Renfrey wasn't about to make himself an early enemy by suggesting a cut.

"I'm guessing we all got the same briefing on this?" Torren said, his silver eyes shifting from face to face.

Darion nodded, his expression stony. Renfrey had been a little surprised to see him here—he was certainly a powerful warrior, but he'd imagined that Darion's duties as Alpha of one of the largest packs in Halforst would have kept him from volunteering for a mission like this one. "Kurivon has fallen to demons. We're to reclaim it."

The looks on the faces of the men around the room told Renfrey that they'd all had a similar briefing—but hearing it aloud was still sobering. Kurivon was a name not many wolves outside of this building would have heard before. Even Renfrey wasn't especially familiar with the place. He knew it was an island. He also knew that it wasn't, strictly speaking, a part of Halforst—it lay beyond a portal to another world, a world the wolves of Halforst had only a little to do with. He also knew that it had an ancient association with demons. That was why the Council had made a point of establishing a community of lorekeepers there, using the knowledge and wisdom at their disposal to keep the island free of demonic taint.

At least, that was how it had been until very recently. At some point, the Council had lost contact with the lorekeepers on the island. And if they'd assembled a team like the one Renfrey was looking at, he had a feeling that they suspected the worst.

Any further conjecture was halted by the arrival of a woman in the muted gray robes favored by higher-ranking Council members. Renfrey recognized her face, though he couldn't recall her name—Councillors tended to eschew individuality where they could, preferring to present a united front, as though each gray-robed member of the organization were interchangeable with any other.

“Thank you all for coming,” she said, her tone pleasant though somber. “Most of you are acquainted, but this marks your first meeting as a pack.”

Renfrey glanced around the table, feeling the magnitude of those words settle into the air around them. To a wolf shifter, a pack was more than just the wolves you happened to be living with, more than family, more than friendship. A pack meant a shared purpose, a shared responsibility, a shared destiny... and from the serious looks on the faces of the wolves around him, Renfrey could tell that they, too, had been giving that word a great deal of thought since the Council had invited them to take part in this mission.

“Each of you has been chosen for a reason,” the Councillor continued, once the silence had grown heavy. “Aside from being powerful warriors with a wealth of experience fighting demons, you are each accomplished leaders in your own right. It is this ability to lead that brings you to this room today.”

Darion cleared his throat. “That puzzles me. We’ve each been asked to give up that leadership to be here. I left my pack behind to fight demons on Kurivon.”

The Councillor nodded. “We are deeply grateful for the sacrifice you have all made by being here. Kurivon needs you—but it needs not only your abilities as warriors, but your leadership into the future.”

“Hang on.” That was Reeve, a wolf Renfrey had only met in passing. He was leaning forward, a faint frown on his handsome face. “Kurivon’s infested with demons. Isn’t our main focus stamping them out? I mean, I’m just as proud as my brother of my leadership acumen, but I don’t see why it’s more important than how many demons I’ve killed.”

Renfrey glanced across the table to the stony-faced Darion, finally making the connection. The family resemblance was striking now he looked for it, for all that the brothers held themselves very differently. The same dark brown hair, albeit cut very differently—Darion’s pragmatically

short, Reeve's long and carefully sculpted. He could sense a slight animosity between the brothers, too, a curiosity he set aside for later.

“Clearing the island of demons is only the first stage of the plan,” the Councillor explained, for all the world as though she hadn't been interrupted. “The island has been cleared of demons before—it has become evident that doing so is insufficient to keep their influence at bay. A permanent settlement must be established on Kurivon. You represent the future leadership of that settlement.”

The six of them exchanged glances. “All six of us?” The red-headed wolf who'd spoken was unfamiliar to Renfrey.

“Eventually, yes,” the Councillor said. “As the mission's vanguard, the six of you will make the initial trip to Kurivon to assess the situation and establish a forward base. Once that's done, it will be up to the group to establish a permanent settlement on Kurivon by bringing over your packs—or at least, those members of your packs who are willing to make a permanent move to a new world.”

“Will there be enough room for six packs?” That was the red-headed wolf again, frowning a little as he scanned the table. “Enough resources? How will we handle disputes over territory? How—”

“We're getting ahead of ourselves,” Renfrey broke in, not liking the way the conversation was headed. They were getting distracted by future concerns, a conversation that was far too full of possible conflict. “We'll handle those questions when we get to them. For now, the only pack we need to worry about is this one.”

“Well said, Renfrey,” the Councillor said with a faint smile. “There will be adequate time to prepare for phase two of the mission. Our focus for now is on phase one. Unfortunately, there's not a great deal of information with which we can prepare you. As you know, we lost contact with the lorekeepers of Kurivon three months ago. We'd had problems with communication through the portal before, of

course, but then... Reeve, this part of the story is yours to tell.”

The young wolf nodded as the focus shifted to him. “As most of you know, I spend most of my time on the other side of the portal—on Earth.” Reeve glanced at his brother, whose expression was stormy. Was it a point of contention between the brothers, Renfrey wondered, that Reeve had built his life on the other side of the portal? Did that explain the air of resentment between them? “It’s sheer luck that I’m here right now, actually—I came through with a shipment of new tech and stayed for a while to oversee its implementation here at Council headquarters. But when I tried to go back...” Reeve was clearly trying to keep his tone light, but Renfrey could see the shadow on his face. “I knew right away something was wrong. The whole town was deserted. When I got to the beach, my ship was gone and so were its crew. And I’ve never felt such a strong demonic presence as I did on my way back across the island. I barely made it to the portal alive.”

“That was a month ago,” the Councillor said grimly. “We’ve kept the portal closed and under strict guard since then. I don’t need to tell anyone in this room how catastrophic it would be were demons to break through into Council headquarters.” Renfrey nodded in agreement, a gesture mirrored by the wolves around him. The Council building stood proudly in the heart of Halforst, in the center of its largest city. Nobody was sure whether the portal in the building’s basement had been there before it had been built, or had been discovered afterwards—but whatever its origin, protecting the portal had become an important part of the Council’s responsibilities. They’d imagined that the small community of lorekeepers who lived on the other side of the portal had had the demon threat under control, but it seemed they’d been wrong. That was especially troubling. Even demon hunters like Renfrey weren’t as knowledgeable about demonic taint as Council-trained lorekeepers. Something unimaginably terrible must have happened for the lorekeepers

in Kurivon to have failed in their duty to keep the portal protected.

There wasn't much to say after that. The Councillor wrapped the briefing up with another of her quick little smiles, leaving each of them with a dossier summarizing the information they'd discussed. The six of them lingered uneasily in the room a little longer, feeling the weight of the mission ahead of them settling onto their shoulders. Renfrey watched as the other wolves made what introductions still needed to be made. It felt strange to exchange something so trivial as a name with one another, given what lay ahead of them. Still, he made quiet note of the names he didn't know. Belmont, the red-headed wolf who'd raised concerns about the future of the settlement. Blaine, who'd been reticent to speak. Torren he knew already, and Darion—though not his brother Reeve.

Once his new pack was gone, Renfrey leafed through the dossier of information, checking whether the Councillor had left anything out that would be worth knowing before they left for Kurivon in the morning. There were a few maps of the island that would come in handy, a brief history of major demonic skirmishes, and a list of names of the lorekeepers who'd been stationed on the island before contact had been lost. The Councillor hadn't said it outright, but Renfrey knew that the assumption being made here was that the lorekeepers were dead. When it came to demons, though, there were worse things than death...

And Renfrey felt his heart freeze in his chest as his eyes fell onto a name he'd been doing everything in his power not to think about.

He was only grateful he'd waited to look at the notes until the other men had left. He knew the look on his face would have raised questions, revealed a weakness in him that he was not eager to share. Could it be a mistake? He stared down at the page, willing the letters to disappear, hoping against hope he'd dreamed them. With a wrench, Renfrey thought of that morning, of how grateful he'd felt that he

hadn't run into her here. The hallways of the Council were drenched with her memory, of course—he could barely take a step without gritting his teeth against the thought of her, the way those unusual blue eyes lit up when she smiled, the casual way she'd brushed against him in the hallway and he'd known, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she could feel the electricity between them, too...

Renfrey didn't spend a lot of time thinking about the past—too much pain lay in that direction. Better to look forward, ahead to the next mission, the next battle, the next opportunity to do what he'd been brought into the world to do. But now that he'd seen Syrra's name on the list of the missing, he could feel the biggest mistake he'd ever made lurching out of the darkness to swallow up the future, too. One night, that was all it had been. One night that still burned so brightly in his memory it may as well have been yesterday... how many years was it going to take for that memory to fade?

For one crazy moment, he considered going to find the Councillor and pulling out of the mission. He'd explain that he couldn't do it—find some excuse, make up an injury or an illness that would make him an unreliable member of the team. Or perhaps he could even tell them the truth. He could tell them that one of the missing lorekeepers was the only person he'd ever let himself feel strongly about... they'd understand, wouldn't they? They'd understand that that kind of feeling would make him a liability, not an asset. After all, it was Council lorekeepers who'd first made the connection between strong emotion and demonic taint.

Renfrey found his way back to his quarters on autopilot. There were his supplies, neatly packed and waiting on the end of his bed. He found himself packing the dossier of information into the backpack, and realized as he did that despite the name he'd seen on the list of the missing, he still fully intended to go on this mission. What choice did he have? It was imperative that the portal be protected from the encroaching threat of demons. If they took the portal, they'd have a direct route to the Council building at the heart of

Halforst, putting not only the Council but the entire country at risk. For centuries, the demon hunters of Halforst had been working to eradicate the demonic threat from Halforst entirely. He'd never forgive himself if the demons established a new stronghold as a result of his inaction.

He'd just have to deal with his feelings about Syrra separately. Even the thought of her name made him wince. He gritted his teeth against it, fighting for calm. Just because her name was on the list of the missing, didn't mean he'd necessarily encounter her. The grim truth was that she was probably already dead... not that that thought was any comfort at all. After what he'd done, the only thing worse than the thought of seeing her again was the thought of *never* seeing her again.

Renfrey knew that a good night's sleep was imperative the night before a mission as important as this one. But he still found himself tossing and turning all night, his racing thoughts keeping him from the sleep he needed. It was just one night they'd spent together... but that had been all it had taken for him to know that she was his soulmate. And that was why he'd had to leave. The very next morning, in fact... he'd risen before dawn had come, slipping out of her bedroom like some kind of thief. He'd stopped just long enough to sign on for a mission at the far reaches of Halforst, and he'd spent the next few years doing everything in his power to avoid returning to the Council building, where he knew her blue eyes would be waiting for him, filled with reproach...

Well, he needn't have bothered, it seemed. She must have moved to Kurivon not long after the night the two of them had spent together. Not many lorekeepers liked the idea of being stationed beyond the portal in Kurivon, from what he understood. It had always been considered a lonely, isolated posting, an island in the middle of a foreign ocean, with no company but the other lorekeepers who were counting down the weeks until they could return home to their families.

And though he'd never seen it, the island of Kurivon troubled Renfrey's dreams all night. Images of waves crashing

violently against rocks, of scorched earth and jagged holes torn from the ground, and of the dull red glow of demonic taint suffusing everything as far as the eye could see. And through it all, though he never saw her face, he knew that Syrra was watching him. Waiting for him. Reproaching him for leaving her without so much as an explanation...

Focus on the mission, Renfrey told himself firmly as he pulled himself from that restless sleep. There were people counting on him here—the rest of his new pack, the Council, and every single wolf in Halforst needed him to be at his best. He dressed quickly, taking solace in the familiar rituals of readying himself for battle, checking and re-checking the weapons that would stand between him and the demons he'd pledged his life to destroy.

Renfrey paused in the doorway of his now-empty room, taking a moment to bid the place farewell. He couldn't pull out of the mission now, he knew that. He'd made his decision long ago. He'd spent years leaving Syrra's memory behind ... surely he could do it again.

After all, she was only the love of his life.

Chapter 2 - Syrra

In the early days of the collapse, dawn had been a relief. A cause to celebrate. Another night passed, the gift of another day given to them. But as their numbers had dwindled into the single digits, it had become harder and harder to feel anything but numb in the face of the red-tinged sunrise that opened each day on Kurivon. And now, as Syrra moved in habitual creeping silence through the last building that still stood on the island, she could feel that numbness threatening to give way to outright despair. What did it matter that she'd survived another night, when all the rest hadn't? What could she possibly do with another day?

Besides, it wasn't like the daylight hours were that much safer than the darkness any longer. After the collapse, the demons had been strongest at night, with daylight giving the survivors a merciful break to recoup their losses and gather their strength. But as the siege had lengthened and more and more of the small settlement had fallen, the reprieve granted by daylight had been weaker and weaker. Syrra did her best not to think about how many of her friends had lost their lives during the daylight hours as she moved around the boarded-up library on autopilot. She'd long since lost faith in the rituals she was performing, the wards she was restoring on the doors and windows. But she was loath to stop doing them entirely. They'd become a mark of remembrance, rather than protection... the continuation of a tradition that hadn't saved her friends, but had maybe sustained them for a little while. Besides, it was nice to do something on autopilot. Sometimes, she could lose herself in the familiar actions so deeply that she'd go a few minutes without thinking about the situation she was in.

But today wasn't a day for running on autopilot, Syrra reminded herself as she finished up the last ward, the large one on the inside of the library's huge front doors. Today was the day she made the most high-risk, high-reward decision she'd

made in a long time... possibly in her entire life, she reflected with a grimace. Mina would have been proud of her. Syrra had always been the more cautious of the two of them, Mina the brave one. Did it count as bravery, she wondered, when she had no other choice remaining to her? It was either risk death at the hands of the demons out there, or stay here and starve to death instead. And she knew that after a few days without food, she'd change her mind and wish bitterly that she could go back and make the attempt while she still had a bit of strength remaining to her...

Syrra forced herself to take a deep breath as her hand settled onto the handle of the library's back door. How long had it been since she'd gone more than a few hurried paces from the building? Weeks, at least, with the last jaunt nearly costing her life. No doubt the demons had only grown in strength since then, left to their own devices with all the residual pain and death and misery of the last few months to feed on.

"Don't think about it," she whispered aloud to herself. The practice of positive thinking had become a running joke among the survivors in the last few weeks, but it was still true that it had a genuinely positive impact on a person's chances of survival in the face of demonic taint. And as miserable as her situation was, Syrra reminded herself that she still had something to live for.

Two somethings, in fact. Both of them bundled up and fast asleep upstairs, in the safest room in the library. The thought of their little faces was almost enough to bring her to tears, and that fierce, burning mixture of joy and determination was enough to overcome her reluctance long enough to swing the door open and step out onto the ruined back porch of the library.

The settlement on Kurivon had been a beautiful place, once. She tried not to think about how she'd felt when she'd first arrived here, that curious mixture of peace and loss. She'd wanted it to be a blank slate, a fresh start, a place where she might be able to build a life free of any reminder of the pain

she'd suffered in the old world. For a while, it had been just that. But then... and she felt a shiver run down her spine, knew that she needed to be mindful of where she let her mind wander out here. When demons were around, wandering too far down memory lane could have awful consequences.

And so Syrra focused on nothing but her footsteps and the morning breeze as she set out through the ruined settlement. She let her eyes pass over the scorched earth that had once held buildings with the same blank curiosity as everything else, neither resisting nor encouraging the memories of darkness, flames, and screaming that the sight conjured in the back of her mind. She moved quickly through what remained of the town and then found the tree line, grateful when the lush forest swallowed her and the ruins were left behind. They were always with her, of course. Those memories were unlikely ever to fade. But it was easier to focus on the here and now when they were out of sight.

It was hard to remind herself of the island's beauty when doing so felt like a betrayal of her lost friends. Still, Syrra had always loved the outdoors, always found a certain kind of peace when she was surrounded by trees. Growing up back home in Halforst would do that to a person—the pack that had raised her lived deep in the woods, and she'd grown up with the scent of pine needles in her nose. The trees here were very different, of course—the other side of the portal wasn't just a different climate, it was a different world. Still, she'd grown fond of the dense tropical vegetation, crowded with wildlife as it still was. Eventually, she knew, the vegetation would be warped and transformed by the demonic taint that suffused the soil of Kurivon. A keen eye could pick out the traces of taint where the vegetation was already beginning to turn. But Syrra's field of expertise had never been plants. She knew just enough to get by—which fruits were edible, which shrubs could be dug up to reveal roots that were tasty if roasted long enough in the heart of a fire.

Before the collapse, there hadn't been much need for foraging like this. They'd had regular shipments of supplies

from wolves on the mainland, supplemented by a few vegetable gardens that some of the lorekeepers tended as a hobby more than out of any real need. But once the demonic insurgence had begun, sabotaging shipments, killing livestock and causing plants to wither and die—well, they'd been grateful that Kurivon was home to so many edible plants. And fish, of course. With her satchel half-full of fruit and tubers, Syrra cast her gaze west, biting her lip as she weighed her options. The sun was still high in the sky—demonic activity was always at its lowest when the light was brightest. Could she risk the beach? She'd brought a rod with her just in case. With the chickens long gone and rations exhausted, the protein was at a premium. But even as she'd strapped the rod to her back, she'd doubted whether she'd be brave enough to actually use it.

Syrra lingered on the edge of the trees for another few agonizing moments, gnawing on her lower lip. Then she knelt to the ground, digging into her satchel as the decision crystallized. She'd already taken the risk of leaving the library—what was the point of half-assing it now? She withdrew her supplies—charcoal from the fire, ochre-red paint she'd found in a lorekeeper's personal effects. Working quickly, she decorated her exposed skin with black charcoal, white ash, and red paint, murmuring some talisman phrases as she did. Untested magic, nothing she'd rely on in a pinch... but if it worked, all the better, and if it didn't, well—there was nobody around to see her with her ridiculous face paint, was there? She straightened, grimacing a little as she combed ground charcoal through her curly blonde hair with her fingers. A demonic disguise, hopefully improved in efficacy by the warding spells she'd murmured. She wouldn't pass muster if a real demon actually set eyes on her, but she was hopeful the disguise would at least turn the volume down on her movements, stop her from drawing any more attention than necessary.

Maybe it would actually work, Syrra thought with a bitter little laugh as she headed out across the rocky beach.

Maybe she'd even make some notes about it later. Maybe a few hundred years from now, the Council would look back on this wild little experiment of hers as the first step towards a whole new field of study. Demonic camouflage. She readied her rod once she'd made her way to the edge of the rocky outcropping that extended into the bay here, where the lorekeepers had done most of their fishing before the collapse. The sun was warm on her skin, puffs of white cloud scudding across the broad blue sky. Syrra found herself thinking that the day had no right to be so beautiful.

It was hardly a restful afternoon of fishing. Syrra checked the beach every few minutes, her senses on high alert to every gust of wind through the trees behind her, every breaking wave on the crescent-shaped beach. Once or twice, she almost missed a tug on the line, so intently was she monitoring her surroundings for demonic encroachment. But she was glad she'd taken the risk, in the end. The fish must have grown complacent in the weeks it had been since anyone had fished here, and Syrra caught four before her nerves got the better of her and she packed away her rod. Not bad for barely an hour's work, she thought, feeling an ominous twinge of something almost like optimism. She returned her mind to the here and now, to her bootprints in the sand, to the itchy feeling of dry paint flaking from her skin. No demonic interference yet—the costume had done the trick, perhaps. Or she'd just gotten lucky.

“Don't get cocky,” she whispered to herself, something she'd said to Mina a thousand times. She wasn't safe until she was home—even then, ‘safe’ was a relative term. She moved quietly through the trees, resisting the rising urge to throw caution to the wind and run. The babies would be stirring from their naps by now, if they hadn't already, and she was aching to see them. Since the collapse, she'd never actually felt confident they were safe unless she had both of them in her line of sight—or ideally, in her arms, nestled against her chest where they belonged. Syrra reminded herself, with a faint smile, to make sure she cleaned off the face paint before she

went to see the twins. Emmy had wailed like a banshee when she'd made the mistake of letting her daughter see a test run.

Maybe it was the triumph of a successful foraging trip, or maybe it was the thoughts of her children, but by the time Syrra finally heard what was happening up ahead, it was too late to do anything but freeze. Footsteps. How had she missed them? Mistaken them for her own, perhaps. Cursing her inattention, she dove as quickly as she could behind a tree, fighting to keep her thoughts level and quiet. Demons were drawn to internal activity, that much they knew... the precise nature of that attraction was a matter of academic debate, and irrelevant now to Syrra, hunkered behind a tree with a squelching satchel of fish and nothing but her long, bone-handled blade tucked into her belt to protect her. And she knew, from bitter experience, just how little that would do.

She listened intently, not daring to risk a glance around the tree just yet, frantically retracing her internal map of the central island of Kurivon to figure out exactly what she was dealing with, here. She'd come back a different way for safety, taking the long way around the path she'd trodden in case a curious demon had set up a trap for her on the walk back, which meant she was at the southernmost part of what had once been a small but pleasant community of lorekeepers. Hard to remember what had been down here now... cottages, mostly, the domestic wing of the settlement, with the library and other work-related buildings lying farther north. Not that there was anything left but ruins to mark their place... charcoal and ash, and the occasional charred bone if you didn't divert your gaze quickly enough—

Focus, Syrra. Why are the demons there?

She hadn't lost track of time. The sun was still high, and the demons ought to have been more or less dormant. Even when they did manifest to stalk the island, usually at dusk or later, they tended to congregate around the library, around the only remaining building they hadn't yet managed to tear down and destroy with that savage, unblinking lust they seemed to feel for acts of destruction. Demons grouped and

gathered around sources of energy, that was their pattern—that was half the reason she'd assumed she'd be safe taking this path home.

But she wasn't. She pressed her back against the rough trunk of the tree, taking deep breaths through her nose as she willed her heartbeat to quieten enough for her to listen. Footsteps, confusing and irregular as they were, hard to count... but there were at least a dozen pairs of feet out there, shambling and thumping against the scorched and blackened soil. That was more than she'd seen for a long while. Even in the dead of night, when she risked a glance through the library windows, she'd rarely seen more than a couple of sets of red eyes in the darkness, glinting like death—patrolling. Hoping for some break in their defenses, some error, however small, that could be exploited... but only ever one or two of them. Demons rarely appeared in greater numbers than were necessary for their grim purposes.

So what grim purposes could they be carrying out in the wreckage of the town, at the precise time of day when they were at their weakest?

Her intuition had been gnawing at her, like a child tugging with growing impatience on her sleeve. There was something she was overlooking... something she was forgetting about the southern end of town, something beyond the long-destroyed cottages and awful stains of demonic taint on the earth. The earth... her eyes widened and she clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle her gasp. She'd forgotten. Dead center of the town square, once regularly re-traced with sacred chalk, but still theoretically extant... the one feature of the landscape that couldn't be completely removed, even by the most steadfast pair of demonic claws.

The portal. The passageway from this world to the other... the span of soil where the mysterious barrier that kept Halforst and Earth apart was at its thinnest. She'd forgotten the portal—they all had, in the early days. It had been too painful to remember, too demoralizing to reflect on what might have been different if the very first act of the long-lost war hadn't

been the destruction of the portal. She remembered the sight now, her heart thudding sickly against her ribs at the memory. A dozen cottages, still standing, glowing prettily in the orange light of sunset. And there, in the middle of the square, the portal, still festooned with wards and talismans... all burning with an unnatural crimson light.

The demons had emerged from the trees at sunset, and their first act had been to destroy the portal. Tactically sound, the terrified lorekeepers had been forced to admit. Without the portal, they couldn't flee the island, or call for reinforcements to quell the demonic threat.

But that had been months ago, and despite the lorekeepers' best efforts, the trappings around the portal had never been successfully restored. Syrra hadn't even visited the site in weeks. So what had brought so many demons out to skulk around its perimeters? In the early days, the besieged lorekeepers had argued fiercely that they ought to be doing more to protect the portal, that the demons might find a way to burst through and launch an attack on Halforst. But those fears had been exaggerated, they'd all come to agree. Demons had never shown any aptitude with the kind of magic required to open a portal... they didn't seem to have the capacity to understand it. The most compelling evidence for this conclusion was that they'd so promptly destroyed all the magical artifacts, runes, and wards that lay at the portal site. The artifacts were what allowed the portal to be opened for travel, not the materials that actually composed the portal. It would have been easier to destroy the rocky foundation of Kurivon than the portal itself.

Had they realized this, Syrra wondered? Had they gathered to re-attempt the impossible—to destroy the portal itself? It was a pointless task. Even if Syrra had been strong enough on her own to reopen the portal, she simply didn't know how. It was a less likely escape route for her and her babies than the ocean, and she didn't see the demons attempting to destroy *that*.

Syrra took a deep, steadying breath, then ran a fingertip through the charcoal on her cheek, redrawing the protection rune. She wasn't safe here, and time was ticking away... with every second she delayed, the light would wane and the demons' strength would grow. Her babies were at home without her, likely growing restless now. Her other hand slipped down to the long blade at her belt, and she felt an eerie calm settle over her. Things were strangely simple, now. What recourse remained to her? She had to get home. If there were demons in the way, so be it.

Syrra stepped out around the tree, keeping her body low to the ground and her movements minimal as she gauged the situation as quickly as she could. There it was, the scorched town square, decorated by nothing but the ruins of the old cottages... and the unsightly, heat-shimmering shapes of half a dozen demons. She kept her spine straight, kept her breathing level, quietly fought against the gut-clenching fear that the sight of them always drove into her like a spike. She let her gaze blur, skating over them as though they weren't there... the first thing any acolyte learned about demons was that the more closely you looked at them, the worse things would get. They were just shapes, from this distance, blurred, not-quite-humanoid outlines of red and black.

Six, she thought faintly. Half a dozen... so many, and with the sun still high. They must have been burning through a tremendous amount of energy to be out here. But why? The town square was the same blasted expanse of ruin it had been for weeks, since their fellows had leveled every building and burnt the remains. Why keep watch? She could feel a fluttering, bright sensation deep in her ribcage, a feeling so unfamiliar and strange that it took her a few seconds to find its name. Hope. It was hope.

Because if nothing visible had changed in the square, the only thing that could have summoned the demons in such great numbers was activity in the portal.

The Council, at long last, were on their way.

Chapter 3 - Renfrey

They went through wolf-shaped, in the end, after a few moments of quiet discussion in the antechamber that sealed the portal off from the rest of Council headquarters. A few of the men had raised objections, especially those who considered themselves better fighters on two legs, but wolf-shaped was the safer bet. It made it easier for them to carry their supplies, for a start—their rucksacks would transform with them, and be recovered once they'd shifted back.

Wolf shape, Renfrey stressed, was also much more durable. They'd been warned that the demons would likely sense their approach and be waiting for their arrival. If they arrived in their more vulnerable human bodies, there might not be time to shift before the foe was upon them, and Renfrey wanted as few casualties as possible in the early days of the mission.

And so it was that six great wolves stood, exchanging uneasy glances in a room that suddenly felt rather crowded. Council mages were working around the edges of the space, diligently not letting on that they would have much preferred not to be crowded on all sides by six enormous wolves. Renfrey saw a dark gray wolf—Belmont, he remembered—lifting one chalk-dusted paw with an apologetic air, revealing a thoroughly scuffed rune beneath it. Adjustments were made, the mages' low murmurs growing more urgent... were the lights in the room dimming, Renfrey wondered, or was it just his imagination?

They'd not been told much about the journey through the portal—trust the Council to hold back as much information as they could, even from the people who were risking their necks for its defense. What Renfrey did know was that what they called the portal wasn't actually a structure in any sense an average wolf would understand, like a doorway or a window. It was a place where whatever unimaginable material

that separated the two worlds from one another was thin enough to peer through... and, if you knew exactly where to apply the right kind of magical pressure, it was a place where a passageway could be opened.

Renfrey had wondered aloud, just once, whether there might be other portals in Halforst, to other worlds than Earth. The question had been met with only stony silence, and he hadn't made the mistake of speculating aloud again.

The transition happened so quickly that for a moment Renfrey was disoriented. One minute, he and his men were crowding themselves into as tight a space as they could, waiting impatiently for the hooded mages to finish their work... the next, he was blinking in sudden light that was almost blinding in contrast to the gloomy room they'd been in. The others were still with him, though, judging by the barks and growls of alarm and surprise he was hearing, and Renfrey blinked hard, determined to keep his wits about him. Because as his eyes adjusted to the light, he knew they were exactly where they needed to be.

And from the looks of things, the demons had sensed them coming.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Renfrey sized up the scene. They were in a wide, flat, open area, no sign of cover within a hundred yards—the space was ringed by trees, but not close enough to be of tactical merit, not just yet. The ground beneath his paws was charred and scorched, the all-too-familiar crunch of charcoal complimenting the unmistakable acrid tang of demonic taint in the air. A metallic, acrid smell that always made him think of some strange hybrid of rot and rust, infection and mechanical exhaustion. Six demons, his quick glance told him. Six demons for six wolves. Another coincidence? They'd certainly been waiting for them, but they mustn't have known exactly where they were set to appear—they were scattered around the area at random, only now turning in the direction of their unwelcome visitors.

He felt his pack fall in behind him as though they'd done it a thousand times before, felt a thrill of adrenaline in his veins as he sized up the closest enemy. Demons all had different approaches to battles, and they wouldn't know how these ones fought until they'd had some first-hand experience, but one thing Renfrey knew was always true—when it came to taking them down, one at a time was the best approach. A wolf alone was a formidable foe, but demons the size of these ones would be certain to best even a determined wolf in single combat. Their strength here would be in unity... the first test of their brand-new pack.

Renfrey just hoped, as he signaled the snarling band towards the nearest demon, that it wouldn't be their first and final.

Torren was the first to engage with the foe, not surprising Renfrey one bit. While the others circled the demon, he dove in to distract it, snarling and snapping as his jaws delivered a series of nips and bites that made the creature turn and twist. Up close, Renfrey sized it up as best as he could without looking too long at any one part—it would only take a careless wolf a few errant seconds to be drawn into horrified contemplation of a demon's warped, impossible anatomy, and he'd seen too much death first-hand to risk it. So the creature remained a vague, blurry impression of black and red, charred flesh, occasional blackened bone jutting through the leathery skin at angles that made no sense given the shape of the creature. It was about twice the size of a wolf, and proportioned like one, though it was shambling on its two hind legs, the forelegs free to swing with undeniable menace at the encircling wolf pack. Amidst the leather flaps of what could have been matted hair or shredded skin, Renfrey could make out bright, glowing red points. Eyes, most likely... though it was impossible to tell how many of them were functional, if any.

The creature uttered a high, keening sound of either pain or rage, and staggered—Renfrey darted out of its way and saw Torren diving back into the fray, locking his jaws around

what looked like a deformed ankle and shaking his head furiously. The hideous splintering sound of breaking bone, and the creature sagged to one side, its leg no longer supporting its weight. Thick, dark blood the color of ash ran from Torren's jaws as he howled his victory. Renfrey barked a warning, darted aside—and Torren's triumph turned to panic as he tried and failed to follow his pack. That thick gray blood was pooling on the earth beneath their paws, and Torren's forepaws were stuck fast. His back paws scrabbled for purchase as he tried to wrench himself free, panting with exertion, but the creature was raising one great arm—Renfrey barked a warning, and a flash of dark fur knocked the limb aside. Reeve—or was it his brother, Darion? Hard to say, the two were almost indistinguishable in these bodies, but as one wolf's jaws closed around the demon's great arm, the other was diving for the place its throat ought to have been.

With a final heave, Torren wrenched himself out of the thickening gray blood on the earth, and Renfrey flashed a quick warning to his pack to keep their paws clear before he dropped back to circle the groaning demon. It was weakening with every fresh wound the wolves were tearing in its hide, but it wasn't vanquished yet, and its allies were approaching fast. Blaine was already eyeing the closest ones, and through his packmate's eyes Renfrey had a clear view of the demons, all spindly, asymmetrical limbs, jagged and broken like crushed spiders. Two of them, similar in appearance—the same species, he wondered? Or were all demons the same species? They ranged so widely in appearance it was hard to think of them as bearing each other any relation... but for the similarity that they were always hideous, they were always aggressive, and they always turned that aggression on wolves, not on one another.

Renfrey felt rather than saw Belmont drop into formation beside him, minding his flank, keeping his head turned to give the rest of the pack a more complete view of the battlefield. It was a practiced skill for wolves, fighting as a group like this, and Renfrey was uncomfortably aware that it

had been a while for him. All wolves shared the ancient, ancestral ability to share one another's minds in these bodies, to look through each other's eyes, feel one another's movements and know where the pack was as well as know the placement of your own paws on the soil. It could be a little disorienting, seeing through six pairs of eyes instead of one, feeling the sensory input from more bodies than just your own. But it was also an incredible strength... which Renfrey was reminded of almost immediately, as a talon whistled through the air behind him and he was able to flinch out of its way just in time, warned by a packmate's view of the demon.

He wheeled to engage with the fourth demon, leaving Belmont to square off against the more cautious approach of the spider-legged demons. The one that had struck at him was shaped more like the first beast they'd engaged, lumpy and misshapen, but it possessed a turn of speed that its fellow hadn't displayed, and its warped limbs had sharp blades sticking out of them at haphazard angles. Renfrey let his gaze slide off the creature again, mindful of not lingering too long on any particular detail, using his peripheral vision to keep track of the creature's movements. When it struck again, he sank his jaws into the limb and shook with all his might, remembering Torren's success with a similar approach. Sure enough, he felt something splinter and crunch inside the beast's body, and it uttered a howl of pain as Renfrey wrenched the limb free of the body, dismembering the monstrosity. Now he just needed to keep his paws clear of the sticky blood as he retreated to aid his pack with the other demons—

But it had been a mistake to assume that the demon's passing resemblance to its fellow meant that it would share the same features. The liquid that spilled from the gaping wound he'd left in its body wasn't at all like the thick, oozing sludge that his pack were dodging around as they continued to fight. It gushed freely from the creature's wounds with the consistency of water, and when it hit the ground, a great, hissing cloud of steam rose up, stinging Renfrey's eyes before

he could close them. The scent was just as noxious, obliterating every other odor he'd been able to detect. Yelping, he stumbled away from the creature, relying on his packmates' vision to steer himself to relative safety, swiping furiously at his eyes with one paw once he'd cleared the growing cloud of noxious vapor that was emerging from the dead demon's booby-trapped body.

Foolish, he scolded himself as he felt reactionary tears dripping through the fur on his face, his body working hard to clear his eyes of the stinging fumes. He'd made an assumption, and this was the price he paid. He blinked hard, relieved to note that his vision was returning—slowly though. Too slowly. Could he fight blind, relying on his pack's vision alone? Risky. Too risky. He scanned the battlefield through his pack's eyes, frustrated by his momentary incapacitation. One of the spider-legged demons had fallen, and the pack had encircled the remaining one—and Renfrey's eyes widened as he took a few steps forward, uttering a mental command to the other wolves. All five glanced over to him, and he felt a quiet burst of triumph as the demon followed their gaze.

He pawed at his eyes a little more, whimpering as though in terrible pain, pressing his body low to the ground. That was all it took. Sensing weakness, the spider-limbed demon lunged through the unprotected gap in the wolves' ranks, raising half a dozen of its spindly limbs to strike at the wounded wolf... then howled with rage as it ground to an unwilling halt, its supporting limbs stuck like glue in the spreading pool of sludgy blood that was still pouring from its fellow's body. Renfrey sprang back to his feet with his vision mostly clear, uttering a short bark of glee as he saw his pack close in around the incapacitated demon and rip its remaining limbs from its body.

That was four, Renfrey noted, a jerk of his head drawing his wolves close to him again and as far as possible from the still-smoking wreckage of the demon whose noxious blood had temporarily blinded him. He'd counted six when they'd emerged. Where were the others? The six of them

scanned the scorched, ruined expanse of the battlefield, their body language uneasy. He hadn't miscounted, he was sure of that. Had the remaining two simply fled for the tree line? It wasn't like a demon to bid a retreat when blood still remained to be spilled.

“Look up!”

Later, he'd wonder if he had imagined the voice that had rung out across the battlefield, snapping his awareness upwards in the nick of time. Outlined against the clear blue sky, two unwholesome shapes blotted out the sun, jagged, patchy wings holding them aloft in a way that made a mockery of physics. The wolves scattered just in time, and the first of the demons crashed hard into the scorched earth, talons punching viciously into the place they'd just been. There was no time to wonder who had shouted the warning that may well have saved their lives, no time to do anything but press the advantage. Renfrey leaped, every muscle in his body dedicated to getting his jaws around a weak point that one of his wolves had identified. The demon's wings took up the larger part of its twisted body, and though they were enormous, Darion had quite rightly observed that the place where the wing joined the body was vulnerable.

His teeth dug in, the acrid, smoky taste of demon blood flooding his senses yet again. With his eyes clenched tightly shut for protection, he used his forepaws to brace himself against the demon's lumpy, scorching-hot ribcage, then pulled with all his might, head lashing back and forth as he worried the wing joint. For a moment, he was worried that the wing wouldn't give—he could feel the creature spreading its other wing with a furious shriek, clearly eager to regain the advantage of the sky. He couldn't let that happen. And then, with a sick, wet sound like a booted foot through a crust of snow, he felt the wing separate from the demon's body.

No time to celebrate the victory—he leaped nimbly back as the creature fell, thrashing, into a pool of its own blood, already pouring from the dozen or so wounds his pack had inflicted to distract it while he delivered the killing blow.

They were working well together, he allowed himself to think for half a second. Then the pack shifted away from the remains of the fifth demon, searching for the sixth.

There—above them. Having witnessed the fate that befell its brother, the last demon was wisely hanging back. It was a long, snake-like creature, its body undulating unnaturally in the air... he counted eight pairs of wings before he stopped, a warning twinge of nausea in his gut telling him that he'd given the beast too much of his focus. Red eyes glinted in its underbelly, brightening as it sensed their attention, but his pack was too experienced with demons to fall for that hypnotic lure—he could feel all six of them blurring their vision, focusing on places beyond and beside the demon to keep it in view without falling under its spell.

It struck like lightning. One minute it seemed to be struggling to keep its serpentine bulk aloft—the next it had folded its mismatched wings and was blurring with a terrific speed towards them. Renfrey barked a warning, moving instinctively to intercept the beast, already bracing for the impact, but its path was more erratic than he'd guessed, its twisted, snake-like body whipping around like a hose. It hit three of his wolves when its body struck the earth, knocking two back and pinning a third beneath its writhing, glistening body. He recognized Torren's gray fur, realized with a thrill of horror that it was matted with bright red blood, and in the same breath, realized the edges of the beast's mismatched wings were jagged and razor-sharp. The other wolves it had struck were wounded, too—but it was Torren who was pinned beneath the demon's bulk, and the wolf howled a pained protest as the serpentine body flexed and coiled itself around him.

All six wolves flinched. Through the psychic connection, they could feel the pressure on Torren's ribs and the splinter of pain as one cracked beneath the demon's inexorable pressure. Renfrey barked a warning as two of the wolves lunged at the nearest part of the creature, biting and tearing at whatever they could reach. Wounds opened in the

demon's side, but the pressure didn't ease. Renfrey dropped back, circled the beast, warring with his own frantic impulse to dive in and save his packmate. He couldn't waste time with flesh wounds. They needed a killing blow before the beast cracked any more of Torren's ribs—

There. Reeve was worrying at what seemed to be the creature's head, biting again and again at dark red patches on its head that bore a passing resemblance to eyes. But Renfrey could see it angling its body to protect its underside. Suspicion crystallizing into certainty, he lunged, snapping his jaws down on one of the glowing red bulges he'd seen when it was in the air above them. The creature flinched away from his bite and he felt its acrid blood spill... felt, through their shared mind, the pressure on Torren let up for a moment, too.

His wolves needed no further instruction. The beast howled and thrashed as they redirected their efforts to the glittering eyes in its belly, its wings fluttering frantically as it tried to regain the advantage of the air. Torren had scrambled free of its clutches, wincing with each breath, and Renfrey had half a mind to let the beast escape them. He needn't have worried. It had barely cleared ten feet before it faltered in the air, thick black blood running from the half-dozen wounds his wolves had torn in its underside. With one final, horrible shriek, it crashed to the ground barely twenty paces from the pack, thrashed a little, and lay still.

The six of them exchanged glances, breathing hard in the eerie silence that had fallen. It was Darion who moved first, breaking off from the pack to circle the battlefield. Already, Renfrey could see that the fallen bodies of the demons were disintegrating, melting like ice under the sun. Demons rarely remained corporeal for long after they'd been killed—it was part of what made them difficult to study. The wounds they inflicted, unfortunately, didn't disappear quite so easily. Torren had already shifted back, unsteady on two legs with a pack of great wolves around him. It was the right move. Though they were more vulnerable in their two-legged bodies, they also healed more quickly—and any injury sustained by

their wolf bodies would carry across in a less severe form. Torren's face was bruised and he winced when he touched his side, but the whole pack was still standing. That was a win, as far as Renfrey was concerned.

Darion returned from his lap of the battlefield, and when he shifted back, Renfrey and the others joined him. He'd almost forgotten the rucksacks they'd been carrying when they shifted—it already felt like years since they'd made their preparations on the other side of the portal. They began unpacking on some wordless signal, the leftover adrenaline of battle clearly unwilling to let them be still for too long. They'd already agreed that they'd make camp close to the site of the portal, giving it as much protection as they could.

“Six of them,” was the first thing Blaine said, shaking his head. “Six demons of that size, in broad daylight? They said the infestation was strong, but this...”

“It's bad,” Renfrey agreed, keeping his tone level. “That's why they sent us. And we fought well.”

“Minimal injuries, too.” That was Torren, wheezing as he spoke with a wry smile dancing in his eyes. If he was well enough to joke about the situation, the hurt couldn't be much. Renfrey moved away from the group a little, shading his eyes with a hand as he scanned the area. The remnants of the demons had all but melted away into the earth... but that wasn't what he was looking at. He was scanning the tree line on the far side of the clearing, already growing less and less certain of what he'd heard. The voice that had called out in warning. Should he ask his pack, he wondered, glancing over his shoulder. Surely they'd heard it too. But what if they hadn't? What if that voice had been in his mind alone? He was the leader here. He couldn't afford for his pack to think he was anything less than rock solid. If they found out that he was hearing voices, this pack of experienced demon fighters would know it for what it was.

An early symptom of demonic taint.

Chapter 4 - Syrra

She lingered for longer than she should have, on the edges of what became a battlefield. She should have taken the opportunity to get out of there while the demons were distracted. Part of her had even been vaguely worried that it was a trick... a hallucination designed to distract her while the real demons snuck up behind to catch her unawares. But why would they bother with such an elaborate trap? If they knew where she was, they'd have killed her already. It wasn't like there was anyone left on the island to stop them.

No, she could only assume that the half-dozen warriors who lunged into battle with the assembled demons were real. And the blinding, splitting joy that rocked through her at the realization that the Council had finally sent help scared the hell out of her. There was a certain comfort in losing hope, a certain peace in resignation to your own inevitable death. Watching the wolves put an end to demon after demon, she felt a strange uneasiness building in her chest. The thing about having hope was that it meant you had something that could be taken away. And right now, she didn't think she could survive having yet another thing taken away from her.

Maybe that was why she made the unbelievably stupid move of calling out across the battlefield. Even as her voice left her lips, she knew it was stupid... she hadn't spoken at a volume above a low murmur in months, and shouting hurt her throat. She wasn't even sure if the wolves had heard her. They got clear of the swooping demon, though, something she was grateful for... but with adrenaline thumping sickly in her head, she knew it was past time she got out of here. Part of her wanted nothing more than to stay until they'd beaten back the demons, to run and embrace them and thank them from the bottom of her heart for finally, *finally* coming.

But even as that dream crossed her mind, she knew it was a bad idea. For a start, there was the face paint. The

wolves had no way of knowing she wasn't a demon. Hunters like them, and she could only assume they were hunters, based on the practiced ease with which they fought, were trained to exercise extreme caution when meeting people in demon-infested areas. Demons were full of tricks, and one of their favorites was to impersonate non-demons... that particular trick had cost more than a few unwary lorekeepers their lives, especially in the early days of the settlement's collapse. Best-case scenario, they'd take her prisoner for a few days until they could be sure she wasn't a demon. Worst case, they'd kill her on sight. The fact that she was disguised as a demon wouldn't help her case, either... and no matter what happened, she couldn't leave her babies alone.

Still, she lingered until it seemed clear the wolves had won their battle before she disappeared back into the trees. As she went, though, she felt an odd chill run down her spine, her mind gnawing on an odd detail of what she'd witnessed. One of the wolves... her eyes had kept going back to him, over and over. It wasn't that he was especially distinctive in appearance, not from her distance, anyway—an enormous wolf with jet-black fur. But there was something about him that almost felt... familiar?

“You're losing it, Syrra,” she whispered to herself, picking up her pace. It felt reckless, running across the island, but she had a feeling that any attention she might draw from the demonic residents of the island would be dwarfed by the bloodshed that had just taken place on the site of the portal. They were unlikely to waste any of their energy on her when six of their fellows had just been torn to bits. Syrra grinned breathlessly, allowing herself to enjoy the vicarious triumph, just for a moment. After long months of seeing her friends and colleagues die at the hands of those monsters, it felt good to know that half a dozen wins had been chalked up on her side.

Assuming, she reminded herself belatedly, that all of this wasn't some highly elaborate demonic trick.

She let herself in through the back door of the library, relieved to see her wards had held. No sign of demonic taint

on any of the scrying wards, either, which relieved her. The demons often occupied themselves with slinking around the library's perimeter, testing for weak points in the protective matrix of spells she'd built, and she didn't like the idea of them doing that while she wasn't home... but it seemed they'd been a little distracted. Another grin curved her lips upward as she locked the door behind her. It felt good to smile. She hadn't been doing much of it lately, not even with Emmy and Asher.

She needn't have worried about them missing her, she realized with a rueful grin as she tiptoed down the hallway. Both babies were still fast asleep in their cot, lying in their accustomed position—face to face, one hand under each chubby cheek, exquisitely symmetrical. Syrra stood in the doorway for a long moment, following the peaceful rise and fall of their little chests, letting some of the tension of the day drain as her own breathing steadied. No need to wake them. She closed the door quietly and stole back downstairs.

It was important, Syrra had learned, not to dwell on things—even things as big as a possible rescue mission. She couldn't afford to pin all her hopes on the wolf pack she'd seen that afternoon. What if they'd only been on a scouting mission? They may well be gone already, back through the portal to safety. She had to proceed as though she and her children were still alone... which meant taking quick action to preserve the supplies she'd risked her neck for. So she passed the afternoon in a pleasant buzz of activity, storing the fruit and tubers she'd foraged, butchering the fish and setting a fire to smoke them. Gratitude and grief intermingled, as they always did... it was Mina who'd taught her the trick. At the time, she'd thought it a pointless skill, because every cottage in town was equipped with a freezer to keep fish fresh. Now, nothing remained of the cottages but ash and scorched earth, and she was grateful she knew how to preserve the food she'd caught.

The twins woke an hour or so after she'd arrived home, and she brought them downstairs to play. She always felt

uneasy when they were downstairs with her, in what had once been the main hall of Kurivon's library. Even with all the windows boarded up and the doors secured with wards, they felt vulnerable down here. Every time their bright little voices lifted in laughter or curiosity, she tensed, frightened their joy would draw a demon's attention, then reflexively frightened that it would be her own fear and dread that drew the demon instead. Tonight, though... she reminded herself, firmly, that the demons had suffered a major blow that afternoon. She wasn't going to let down any of her defenses, of course, but she could afford to let herself relax a little.

Dinner was more satisfying than it had been for weeks. Afterwards, she lay in a tangle of blankets, propped up against an empty library shelf with one twin under each of her arms and a book propped on her belly. Emmy always seemed more curious about this strange little ritual than Asher, who simply took it in stride—her son stared contentedly at the pictures on the pages, but her daughter would occasionally reach out with a chubby finger to thoughtfully trace the words. The library's collection had been dwindling for a long time, they'd quickly run out of other sources of fuel for the fire, much to the lorekeepers' dismay, but Syrra had been keeping her collection of children's books from the flames for as long as possible.

Maybe, she let herself think for the first time in weeks, just maybe, they'd make it out of here with the collection still intact. Maybe one day, each of the dozen or so well-worn children's books would be a treasured family heirloom, a reminder of what the twins had survived. She often hoped they were too young to ever remember any of this. It would be a blessing, to forget the last few months.

But thoughts of the future were a trap, she knew that, and once the twins were dozing off she set the book down carefully and gathered them up for bed. She had her own room in the library, strictly speaking, a bed set up in the small room next to the babies' room, but it had been a long time since she'd slept in there. With everyone else gone, and just her to

rise in the night if the babies started crying, it felt silly to sleep in a different room. Silly... and desperately, awfully lonely.

Tonight, though, she couldn't sleep. Even with the soft sound of her children's breathing to lull her to sleep, she found herself restless, tossing and turning beneath her blanket, wincing with every creak of the floorboards beneath her. Her mind kept straying to the wolves, now that there was nothing left to distract her. Were they safe, she wondered? Had they been exploring the island all day, or had they made camp somewhere? They must have seen the library if they'd been scouting... why hadn't they tried to enter the building? An abundance of caution? Or something more sinister? She kept picturing the pack being set upon by demons, torn limb from limb, her heart thudding miserably in her chest.

And finally, she knew she wasn't going to get a moment's peace until she'd checked on them. She stole out of the twins' room as silently as she could, feeling a curious disconnection between her mind and her body as she dressed herself, methodically lacing up her boots and setting her knife in her belt. Going out at night was as good as a suicide mission. Was she really taking this risk right now? Sure, the demons had suffered a significant blow today—this was a safer night than any in recent memory—but still, she was tempting fate.

But somehow, all that rationalization was powerless against a bone-deep conviction that she was doing the right thing. There was something about the pack, something beyond the fact that they were the only non-demons on the island besides her and her babies. She felt oddly calm as she slipped out into the darkness, one hand on the hilt of her knife, the other easing the door slowly shut behind her.

The night had come over cloudy, to her relief, and she moved quickly through the darkness. Should she have covered her face and hands with charcoal, she wondered, to disguise herself? Too late now... and besides, demons were rarely fooled for long. They hunted with something more than vision. She only hoped they weren't hunting tonight.

No sign of the wolves outside the library, or on the path that led south. She hugged the tree line, forcing herself to move slowly and quietly, stepping on soft grass rather than the scorched earth where buildings had once stood. Relief surged through her, bright as sunlight, when she reached the southernmost clearing and saw that the barren expanse had been broken up, temporarily at least, by the unmistakable shapes of tents. She counted six, her heart thudding giddily in her chest. Six tents, and the faint glow of a fire on the outskirts, a man's shape outlined against the glow. Syrra felt her pulse accelerate. Of course they'd set someone on watch—these were trained hunters, they were hardly going to sleep unguarded, were they?

She knew she should leave. The silhouette of the man was relaxed but alert, leaned back against the shape of a rucksack but with the easy upright posture of someone with military training. As she watched, she could see his head moving, his eyes tracing the dark expanse beyond his circle of firelight. Go, Syrra, she told herself, her feet remaining stubbornly still. He might have heard you already. Do you want to get caught spying on them in the middle of the night?

No, she thought faintly, stunned by how absurd the instinct was. Get closer. Get a proper look at his face.

It was the same thing she'd felt earlier, watching the pack fight, the way her eyes had returned again and again to the same wolf. Now, though, the stakes were a whole lot higher. Moving as slowly as she could, almost holding her breath, she crept forward, trying to move like a tree in the wind. Just a little closer... a few feet closer and she'd be able to make out his features... why that was so important, she didn't know.

There. His gaze was far away, fixed on the trees at the far end of the clearing, and Syrra stopped in her tracks—partly to keep quiet, but mostly because of the shock of recognition that had struck her like a lightning bolt. She'd expected she might know at least one or two of the wolves, especially if they were all Council hunters. When she'd been finishing her

lorekeeper training at Council headquarters in Halforst, what felt like thousands of years ago, she'd been on good terms with quite a few of the demon hunters. They came through regularly, always full of stories, and she'd counted quite a few of them among her close friends. That had all changed, though, for reasons she did her level best, every day, not to think about.

But how could she not think about it, now? All the careful walls she'd built against this memory were dissolving, now... and all it had taken was the sight of his face. Not even his face, though she remembered that, too, the line of his jaw, his proud, strong nose, the rough rasp of dark stubble accentuating the glow of his olive skin. No, what had frozen her solid was the unmistakable curve of scar tissue that ran from his temple to his jaw. She'd never forget running her curious fingertips over that scar, never forget the look in those silver eyes as he'd caught his wrist in her hand and gently but firmly pulled her hand away.

Of all the demon hunters on the Council payroll, Syrra thought, her heart thudding so loudly against her ribs she felt certain he was going to hear it. Of the hundreds of trained warriors they could have sent... why did it have to be him? Why did it have to be Renfrey? There was a dull, sick feeling in the pit of her stomach that was spreading like a bloodstain, and it was only sheer force of will that stopped her from dropping to her knees right then and there and vomiting the contents of her stomach. Instead, she stood in frozen silence, emotion raging through her like a lightning storm.

Well, that confirmed it. This wasn't a demonic trick. Slowly, carefully, inch by inch, she began to make her escape, moving backwards away from the camp without taking her eyes off Renfrey for a second. She'd well and truly achieved what she'd set out to achieve, hadn't she? The wolves were safe and sound, making their camp on the site of the portal... trust the Council to ensure the path through to them was protected first. And the wolves were definitely wolves, not a hallucination designed to trick her.

If they'd wanted to lull Syrra into a false sense of security, they'd failed utterly. The one person in all the world she wanted to see less than a demon was right there by that fire. Fury boiled in her as she reached the tree line, but she resisted the urge to speed her movements, forcing herself to move in utter silence. How dare he just sit there? How dare he lean back on his rucksack with the warm light of the fire on his face, as if he wasn't history's greatest monster? As if he hadn't swept into her life three years ago and then swept out again without so much as an apology, leaving absolute wreckage in his wake?

Syrra had spent the last few months so desperate for rescue she could hardly breathe. But right now, as she hurried through the night with the bitter taste of anger hot on her tongue, she'd have much preferred for the Council to have cut their losses and abandoned her here for good.

After all, hadn't that been exactly what Renfrey had done?

Chapter 5 - Renfrey

Renfrey didn't sleep especially well. He hadn't been expecting to, not their first night on the island—that had been why he'd volunteered to take first watch, in the hopes that some time spent in quiet contemplation of their surroundings might ease his adjustment to this strange new world. The climate was more humid than he was used to, the damp, tropical air in stark contrast to the cool, temperate forests of his upbringing in Halforst. The tropical forest was noisier, too, as well as being composed of different species than he was used to. A few times, a shriek or howl set the pack on high alert while they were setting up camp, with the hot-headed Torren even shifting into his wolf form at one point before realizing that it was only the cry of a bird that had caught their attention.

But there was something more than just the unfamiliar surroundings that was making him uneasy. And as he sat by the campfire, hearing the soft sounds of his pack slowly falling asleep, that uneasiness came into sharper focus. This place they were camping, this wide, clear area with the portal at its center—it was obvious to him the clearing wasn't natural. Once, a settlement had stood here. The demons had clearly worked hard to clear not only the buildings but their foundations as well, but the scorch marks of their efforts remained. And if even the buildings had been destroyed so thoroughly, what hope did that leave of any survivors here? Demons tended not to turn their efforts to destroying architecture while there were still living beings to torment... the completeness of the destruction forced him to confront the likelihood that every lorekeeper on this island now numbered among the dead.

He thought of the long, long list of names and felt his chest tighten. Rage, yes, and a grim determination for vengeance for the lost. But the thing he was really trying not to think about was one name in particular. A name he'd been

trying to force down, down to the darkest recesses of his memory. A name that had sprung back up with effortless ease the second he'd heard that voice call across the field.

She was dead, he told himself sharply as the night air tousled his hair. Dead, just like all the others. It wasn't her voice, you fool. You didn't hear anything. It was the cry of a bird, it was a hallucination, it was a trick from the demons you were fighting—

“Renfrey?”

The voice startled him so much that his knife was halfway out of its holster before he remembered himself. Exhaling sharply, he restored it to its place, annoyed with himself for getting distracted enough to let his packmate surprise him. It was Belmont, who flashed him an understanding smile as he took his place on watch. It didn't make him feel much better. The one thing he'd been determined to do when he left for this mission was to keep Syrra out of his thoughts. And already, she was haunting him in ways he'd never anticipated.

With his watch over, it took him a long time to get to sleep, tossing and turning in his one-man tent, and he woke up so often it was hard to tell whether he'd ever actually slept in the first place. He was almost grateful when he saw the gray light of dawn beginning to dispel the darkness. A new day meant fresh distractions and hard work that he could sink himself into completely. With any luck, the sleepless night would render him too exhausted to spare a thought for her.

The day dawned bright and clear, and the night had been quiet—no sign of demonic encroachment towards their camp, and a quick scout of the area revealed no sign they'd been spied on overnight. His pack was in good spirits, even Torren, who winced a little when he lifted his arms above his head but assured them that he was healed enough to return to full duty. Renfrey resolved to keep an eye on him and sensed that a few of the more cautious members of the pack were doing the same. His passion was admirable and his energy a

valuable resource for the group, but it would do none of them any good if he worsened his injuries by underestimating their impact.

So it was that he left Torren, Darion, and Blaine at the camp, taking Belmont and Reeve with him to scout out the rest of the island. At least for the first few days, he wanted to keep their camp closely guarded. He was mindful, too, of their split purpose here, of banishing the demons and re-establishing a settlement, and of their group, it was Darion he felt would be best to begin the planning process. He was a stoic, practical wolf with experience running a large pack—he'd know what a new settlement would need, what to prioritize and what to leave until later.

And so the three of them set off to scout out the island. Renfrey stayed in his human form to carry a map the Council had given them, the other two flanking him in their wolf shapes, the better to hear any potential attack before it came. He looked down at the familiar map of Kurivon and its surrounding islands. The archipelago was composed of dozens of small islands, though Kurivon was the largest by far, with many of the smaller islands not much more than rocks jutting out of the sea. Beyond Kurivon, though, there were maybe half a dozen islands of a decent enough size to consider building on—though that was a consideration for a future date. Distant future, if the demonic taint was as bad out there as it was here on Kurivon.

He flipped the page of the map, focusing on the last record of Kurivon. There was something deeply sad about looking down at the neatly drawn map of a settlement that had been blasted from the surface of the island. There was the portal they'd emerged through, and just as he'd guessed, around it had stood the settlement's little cottages. 'Town Square', it was labeled—a slightly whimsical title. There hadn't really been enough lorekeepers living here to make the settlement large enough to qualify as a town.

One day, he promised the absent mapmaker. One day, your town square will be restored.

But that wasn't the only part of the settlement that had been mapped. To the north on the map lay another cluster of buildings, and this, he understood, was where the lorekeepers' work had taken place. No doubt the demons had made short work of these areas... he saw a building labeled 'armory', another labeled 'infirmary', and felt another twinge of grief before steeling himself against it.

It didn't take the three of them long to reach this part of town, and both wolves at his side stilled when they emerged from the narrow path through the trees. Another area cleared of trees, much like the one they'd emerged in, but his eyes widened with surprise as the three of them spotted the key difference. The flat, barren ground was scorched and blackened, true—but at the northernmost end of the area, almost in the tree line, a building still loomed. He blinked hard, almost worried the building would vanish like a mirage, but it was still there, clearly the worse for wear but intact. There were scorch marks all over its wooden edifice, and he could see jagged holes that had been torn in the roof, but it was still standing. How? How, when the demons had clearly had time to reduce every other building on the island to even less than rubble? What had stopped them from taking this one apart, too?

He wanted to break into a run right then and there, but he held himself back, his curiosity burning like an impatient fire in his belly. Something so incongruous had to be a trap... but even that didn't make sense. Intelligence in demons could vary, but he'd never encountered a trap so insultingly obvious. Beside him, he felt his packmates shift, clearly as curious as he was about the building they were looking at. Renfrey flipped open the map and scanned it, frowning, at a loss for what else to do.

"It's the library," he said, tapping on one of the larger buildings on the map. It wasn't only the northernmost building in the clearing, he realized—it was the northernmost building on the island, and as far as he could tell, the only one left standing. Reeve was frowning over his shoulder at the map,

but Belmont's sharp silver eyes were on the building, and he pointed, clearing his throat softly before he spoke.

"The windows."

Renfrey saw what he was pointing to after a moment, and his eyes widened a little as the significance sank in. The windows had been boarded over from the inside, each rectangular facing revealing nothing but uneven wooden surfaces. Something told him that they'd find a similar situation if they tried the double doors at the front of the building, framed by a half-demolished porch.

"Those are protective wards," Belmont continued, pointing. Sure enough, he could make out some odd patterning on the wood that obscured a few of the windows. "That's lorekeeper work."

Which meant...

"Survivors," Reeve said, his eyes widening with surprise and delight. Impulsively, he took a few steps forward—but it was Belmont who reached out to stop him, his eyes not leaving the building. "What?" Reeve said, his eyes flashing with impatience. "The building's warded. It's still up and it's been reinforced from the inside. That means—"

"We don't know when," Belmont said softly.

"The building's still up."

"Wards can outlast their makers." The implications of that sank in, in the silence. Renfrey pictured a building full of bodies, still wrapped in the desperate magic of its last inhabitants' final moments.

"We should check," Reeve said, but his voice was quieter than it had been, and the energy had drained from his body. Renfrey felt for him. For a moment he, too, had entertained some wild hopes about what the still-intact building could mean. "We at least have to *check*."

"It could be a trap." Renfrey kept his tone deliberately neutral despite the flash of anger it drew from Reeve. "Unwise

to go in when we don't have our full—”

“Come *on*,” Reeve ground out, his impatience flaring. Renfrey held his gaze, not letting his face move a muscle, letting his silence speak for him. It only took a few seconds before Reeve dropped his eyes. “Sorry. You’re right. Can’t risk getting killed on day two because we went blundering into some death trap...”

They approached the building slowly, keeping close, watching their surroundings as well as the building itself. Aside from what he was beginning to understand as the usual racket from the surrounding vegetation, bird calls and the rustling of wind through the leaves, the area was quiet and still. The residual itch of demonic taint that suffused the whole island was as present here as it was anywhere else, but he couldn’t feel any major spikes, any intuitive warning that something was awry... and judging from his packmates’ expressions, they were the same. Still, they stayed close as they circled the building, scoping it out. From the windows, he gauged that there were two floors to the building, but that was about as much information as was forthcoming from outside.

“Every single gap’s covered,” Reeve said, shaking his head. “Even the cracks between the planks. They really didn’t want the demons seeing inside, huh?”

Up close, the warding effort was even more impressive. The lorekeepers—for who else would have holed up in this building for so long?—had used every material at their disposal, it looked like. Some of the symbols were marked out in chalk, as was traditional, but that had given way in some places to more conventional art supplies, oil paints at one window, and—increasingly as they reached the back of the building—charcoal. A few patterns were even drawn in what looked worryingly close to the color of dried blood.

The wolves exchanged glances when they reached the library’s front porch. On the one hand, Renfrey was worried about walking into a trap. On the other hand, the building was so thoroughly warded that he couldn’t imagine a demon

setting foot inside long enough even to lay a trap for them. Reeve and Belmont were both looking at him intently, and he sighed.

“We’ll check—*quickly*—for survivors,” he said, grimacing a little at the whoop of delight Reeve let loose. “And I’ll remind you not to get your hopes up.”

“Thanks, boss,” Reeve murmured, his smile fading. Renfrey turned his attention to the door. Better to go in without any hope than to have it ripped away from you. He was grateful that the quiet Belmont hadn’t said what he’d no doubt noticed about the exterior—none of the wards looked fresh. The newest of them had been painted a month ago, maybe even longer.

As he’d expected, the front door wasn’t locked. Instead, it was covered so thoroughly in runes and symbols that he hesitated to touch it for fear of disrupting any of the work. No demon would be able to approach this door, let alone open it. And that was making the assumption that the demon in question was intelligent enough to understand a door, or dexterous enough to work one. The lorekeepers had done well to keep this place safe, he thought. He couldn’t help but imagine their fear as they worked to defend this last remaining outpost against the demonic incursion, clustering together in the largest building on the island...

The three of them stood at the entrance to the library for a long moment, waiting for their eyes to adjust to the gloom inside. His skin was prickling with sensation, adrenaline held at bay by the curious feeling that there was nothing to fear here. Was it the wards, he wondered? Being on this side of a well-warded doorway had always made him feel safer. Reeve and Belmont seemed to be feeling the same way, curiosity taking over from apprehension as their eyes adjusted and they began to look around the cavernous space they’d found themselves in.

If he hadn’t known from the map that this was a library, it wouldn’t have taken him long to piece it together.

There weren't many bookshelves around, and it wasn't hard to see why when he looked at the interior of the windows and realized how regular and evenly sized the planks were that had been used to board them over. In one corner, he saw a pile of books, neatly stacked—but the smell of smoke that permeated the space told him that they were likely being used as firewood and kindling.

“Burning books?” Reeve sounded offended. “No lorekeeper I've ever met—”

“What's the alternative, Reeve?” Belmont's voice was calm, but it cut the younger wolf's voice dead. “I don't imagine they were making regular trips into the forest for firewood, do you?”

“I just mean—it must've gotten dire, if they were burning books.”

Renfrey left the wolves to bicker behind him as he moved slowly into the gloom of the library. They were right about the firewood, at least—if this building had been furnished once, it was considerably emptier now, with the occasional skeleton of a half-dismantled bookshelf or the unburnable metal screws from a chair scattered across the creaking floor. He found himself picturing the lorekeepers huddling together in this space, knowing that there were demons stalking outside, knowing there was no way to send for help without risking a fatal journey across the demon-infested island...

They'd survived, though. They'd survived for quite some time, judging by how much furniture they'd gone through to keep the fire burning. They found the fireplace not longer after, a central place marked out with chalk. Belmont knelt beside it for a long moment, staring down into the charcoal, but when Renfrey asked how long ago it had been lit, he only shrugged.

“I'm afraid I don't know how to tell. The ashes are cold,” he added, brushing his fingers through the dust. “But even a fire lit last night would be cold by now.”

That was when they heard Reeve's voice, calling them from the gloom on the other side of the hall. His tone was strained, and for a moment Renfrey worried he'd run into trouble... but it quickly became clear that it was grief that was putting the pressure on his voice, not fear.

"They kept some of the shelves," he said hoarsely, nodding to what he'd found. Belmont lifted the torch he'd pulled from a pocket and shone it ahead of them, revealing what Renfrey couldn't think of as anything but a shrine. Bookshelves, at least three of them, stubbornly maintained... and on the shelves, a magpie's hoard of miscellaneous objects. Some of them were obviously personal—handwritten notes and letters, well-worn photos of the smiling faces of loved ones, even a few pocket-sized paintings. But there were stranger items, too. A broken dish that had been inexpertly repaired with glue. A piece of driftwood with a rude word carved into its side. A single black feather, placed so reverently in an otherwise empty section of shelf that Renfrey held his breath for fear of disturbing it.

"The dead?" Belmont's voice broke the silence in a whisper. "A monument to the dead?"

"Maintained by the living," Renfrey said, feeling a lump in his throat as his eyes moved across the shelves upon shelves of trinkets and treasures.

"But for how long?" Reeve, a frown between his eyes. "When did the wall of memory stop getting updates?"

Renfrey turned away and moved off into the dark, leaving his packmates to study the shrine. He told himself it was more efficient for the group to split off now that they were reasonably convinced that there was no danger left here, but the truth was that he couldn't bear to look at the wall for another second. Too afraid he might glimpse a familiar face among all the pictures, a face he'd done everything in his power to forget... a round, soft face with the most breathtaking blue eyes he'd ever seen.

Seeing Syrra on that wall would confirm that she was dead. And as much as he'd spent the whole night telling himself just that, over and over again, the truth was that he knew concrete proof would destroy him. He couldn't afford to show that kind of weakness. Not now, in hostile territory, surrounded by demons. Not in front of the men he was supposed to lead, the wolves he needed to be strong for.

He heard Belmont call his name behind him, a faint note of concern in his voice.

"Checking upstairs," he called back, glad at least that he'd mastered the knack of keeping emotion out of his tone. "See what else you can learn down here. Check the shrine against the list of lorekeepers in the files, see if there are any solid answers there."

The stairs were at the back of the great central hall, leading up to a narrower second floor that overlooked the entrance. Renfrey took them two at a time before he turned to look over the railing at the top. He could imagine librarians looking down over the shelves from up here, surveying the whole library from their vantage point—he imagined the hallway behind him led to offices and the like, or perhaps rooms for private study. That kind of thing certainly took up a great deal of space in the Council headquarters. It was a miracle they'd allocated any space at all for their demon hunters to train.

The hallway split off behind the banister, with maybe half a dozen doors in the wall to each side. He felt an odd shiver run down his spine when he looked back and forth between them, some instinct telling him to turn right. The first door opened on an empty room. The second door frame contained no door at all—he imagined it had been consigned to the flames of the fire. Beyond it, in the gloom, he could see what looked like a makeshift camp bed, though something about the cold, rumpled look to it told him it hadn't been used in some time. The third door was closed, and the prickling on his skin intensified as he reached a cautious hand towards it. The metal, cold on his palm.

And then, an identical sensation, but this time at his throat.

“Turn slowly,” came the familiar voice. He knew, before he’d even obeyed her instruction, what he was going to see. The owner of the voice that had called out a warning to him the day before, sparing him and his pack from the demon’s ambush. The owner of the bright blue eyes that had haunted every nightmare he’d forced himself to forget for the last three years.

“Hi, Renfrey.” Syrra’s face was pale and her blue eyes burned without mercy as she held the blade firm against his throat. “No sudden moves, yeah?”

Chapter 6 - Syrra

No plan, Syrra thought through the haze of adrenaline that ran through her. How had she been hunkered up here for nearly half an hour with absolutely no plan? The minute she'd heard footsteps on the stairs, everything had narrowed to a single, deranged point—which was that the wolves must, on no account, be permitted entry to the room where her children were sleeping. That was all that mattered. If she had to cut all of their throats, she'd do it with a song in her heart.

And of course it was Renfrey who'd come up the stairs. Alone, like an absolute fool. She clicked her tongue, finding some relief in being angry with him. Frustration was an easier feeling than most of the ones that were trying to make themselves heard right now. "Absolute rookie mistake," she said, a little surprised by how level she seemed to be keeping her voice. "Don't the Council teach hunters not to get separated?"

He looked like he might laugh had she not had a blade pressed so closely against his throat. Instead, he swallowed carefully before he spoke. "Building's warded thicker than the Council itself. Safer here than anywhere on the island."

If he was trying to compliment her, she wasn't interested. "Still stupid to get separated from your soldiers."

"Pack," he corrected her. She lifted an eyebrow.

"That's a surprise." Watching his eyes closely—those damned silver eyes of his, how did they manage to glow so differently to every other wolf with eyes the same damned color?—she pressed the blade a little closer against his skin. He tensed a little, as one does when a deadly weapon is close to the jugular, but there was no sign of any reactivity to the protective runes carved into the hilt of the blade. Nor had the spells she'd whispered as the three wolves entered the library seemed to have any effect on them. If he was a demon, he'd be

a lot more uncomfortable than he was right now. Still, she lingered. It felt good to have the knife on him.

“I know you know less threatening ways to check for taint,” Renfrey said, having the absolute audacity to sound a little amused. She considered jabbing the knife into his throat just to prove a point, then exhaled as she withdrew it. “Much appreciated.” He rubbed his neck, and she rolled her eyes.

“I barely touched you.”

“I’m bleeding,” he pointed out, pulling his hand away. Syrra frowned. The blade wasn’t that sharp, was it?

That moment of uncertainty was all the advantage Renfrey needed. She stifled her reflexive scream of rage as he lashed out with that unnerving speed of his, seizing her by the wrist and deftly liberating the blade from her grip. No matter, she thought, curiously calm as her eyes flicked to the door he’d been on the verge of opening. If he went for the door again, she’d kill him with her bare hands. She had no doubt she could do it. Right now, she had more rage in her body than she could ever remember feeling... and that was saying something.

“I’m here with my pack to clear the island and build a new settlement,” he was explaining to her, words she could barely hear over the pounding of her pulse in her ears. “To hold back the demons—I know you saw us fighting them, yesterday, near the portal. I know it was you that called out. Saved my life.”

“I wish I’d stayed quiet,” she snarled, a little gratified by the look of shock she saw on his face, just for a second, before he smoothed it over. “Where have you *been*?”

A long, cold silence. His expression flickered so much that for one heart-in-her-mouth second, she almost thought he might be about to give her a straight answer. “The Council didn’t realize the extent of the situation until very recently,” he said finally, and she heard a bitter, ugly sound escape her. It took her a moment to realize it was laughter. “Syrra, please—”

“Yeah, Renfrey. I was asking about the Council. Of course.” She laughed again, unnerved by how comfortable it felt, how tempting it was to succumb completely to the absolute madness of it. “What else could I possibly mean?”

“Renfrey!”

The sudden flash of electric light distracted her. There, at the end of the corridor, were the other two wolves she’d seen with Renfrey. It was the younger one who’d shouted, the one who’d found the shelves—he came barreling down the hallway, his companion bringing up the rear with the torch in hand. Belmont, she’d heard Renfrey call this one. Calmer, more observant... and she could already feel him sizing her up, even as the other one worked his way through the shock of her presence.

“Holy crap, someone’s alive!” The delight in his voice would have been charming, had she not been so full of anger she could have died. “We were worried all the lorekeepers had—wait.” There it was, the familiar double-take. The wolf craned his neck, studying her eyes. “Wait, you’re—”

“Not a wolf, yeah, yeah,” she said impatiently. “Can we skip this part?”

“Good idea,” Renfrey said, and she seethed at the way the other wolves deferred immediately to the tone in his voice. “Syrra, you and any other survivors will come with us.”

“Like hell. Come with you where, the battlefield where I watched you all nearly get torn to shreds by the demonic vanguard?”

Renfrey’s expression flickered. Professional as he may have been trying to be, she could tell her insubordination was getting to him. This wasn’t how he’d anticipated his heroic—little rescue mission going, was it? But it was Belmont who frowned. “What do you mean by vanguard?”

“Those six are nothing. Glorified scouts.” She didn’t mention the fact that the half-dozen demons they’d fought had still been responsible for the deaths of more lorekeepers than

she cared to count. “The mass of the army is very much intact. And I’m absolutely not interested in shivering in a tent while you play soldier. I’m fine exactly where I am, thanks.” She folded her arms, tightened her jaw. There would be nothing she could do, of course, if they tried to take her by force, a fact she tried not to think too much about.

“You’d prefer to stay here?” Renfrey’s disbelieving gaze took in the gloomy hallway, the torn-up carpet at their feet.

“You have information that could help us,” Belmont agreed, his expression solemn. “We’ll be stronger as a group. We could bring some of the warded shelves that are nailed up in the windows, perhaps?”

“No!” she barked, her voice echoing from the hall and making the wolves flinch back. “Don’t *touch* them,” she warned, aware that she sounded insane, unable to do anything about it. “Don’t you dare.”

“Understood,” Renfrey said quickly. “We’ll leave the library intact. But you shouldn’t be here alone. Demons prey on loneliness—you’d know that better than any of us,” he added. She saw him wince as he said it, fought back a laugh as she saw his mistake. He’d meant it as a gesture of respect for her lorekeeper training, to lessen the insult of telling her such a basic piece of demon lore. The insult he’d delivered instead was far graver.

“I certainly would,” she said brightly, knowing the grin on her face was probably an even more unsettling sight by torchlight. “I’m an absolute expert in loneliness, aren’t I, Renfrey? A learned scholar! I might be a lorekeeper by profession, but my true specialty is in being *abandoned without explanation or cause*.”

The silence that fell now was decidedly uneasy. She kept her eyes trained on Renfrey, satisfied that the glances his soldiers were exchanging indicated they’d begun to piece the situation together. Renfrey looked furious, and frustrated, and deeply, deeply sad... and somehow, seeing all that play out

across his face wasn't giving her the satisfaction she'd hoped it would. Maybe it was her own sadness, getting in the way. Maybe it was the traitorous lingering impulse, not quite buried beneath all her rage and resentment, to throw herself into his arms and let him carry her off into the sunset.

"It seems that you two have much to talk about," Belmont said softly, putting an end to the agonizing awkwardness. "In private, perhaps?"

He led the other wolf down the hallway, and she noticed the force with which he was obliged to pull his reluctant fellow along. Renfrey stood as stiff and unmoving as a statue until the sound of their footsteps on the staircase had stilled... then he turned to her, voice dropping into a low, furious whisper.

"How dare you attempt to humiliate me in front of my pack? How dare you wield our history as a weapon against me?"

"How dare I?" The audacity was so breathtaking she almost lost her wits completely. "Really, Renfrey? That's how you're going to play this? You abandoned me! Utterly! You left me without so much as a *note*—"

"—I had to *work*," he snarled, the need to stop his voice carrying lending an ugly rasp to his tone. "I have been hunting down demons for *years* before I met you, and just because we spent one blasted night together—"

She spat in his face. It hadn't been a gesture she'd planned on—she'd imagined it once or twice, in her more elevated revenge fantasies, but she hadn't dreamed she'd ever actually do it. He seemed stunned, too, flinching back from her before lifting one slow hand to wipe his cheek with his sleeve. His silver eyes were dark with fury when he looked back at her, and she held his gaze fearlessly. "You deserve that and worse for what you did, you mewling coward," she said. It was a line she'd practiced, and she was pleased with the delivery, even if her voice shook. "You knew exactly what we

were, and I won't be insulted by the suggestion it was anything less."

"That's as maybe," he said after a long, taut silence. "But the fact remains that my priority is and always will be fighting demons. You, remaining in this building, alone, with all this negative emotion—"

"—is a far lesser threat than forcing me to come and reside at your camp," she finished, narrowing her eyes. "I promise you, Renfrey. If you force me out of this building to play happy campers with your little pack of oblivious idiots, I'll dedicate the rest of my life to cutting your worthless throat in your sleep."

His eyes narrowed. Did he really doubt her, even now? "You wouldn't."

Syrra seized on that with a triumph that burned. "Why not? If it was just one night together... but it wasn't, was it? You think I wouldn't be capable of cutting my soulmate's throat. Well, I'd think you wouldn't be capable of abandoning your soulmate like she was nothing but a worthless heap of garbage, but here we are, in a world that's just full of surprises." She reached out to retrieve her knife from Renfrey's unresisting hand. "*Try me.*"

The man she'd once very much believed she loved looked at her for a long moment in the gloom, his jaw clenching and unclenching as though he was physically chewing on the dilemma he was in. She waited, serene in her silence, finding an odd peace in the center of the fiercest and most blinding rage she'd ever felt in her life.

"Syrra," he said softly, and she felt herself almost break at the sound of her name, so gentle, in the voice she'd been kidding herself she'd forgotten. "I'm asking you, please, to come with us. We can talk about this—or not, it's up to you. But you're not safe by yourself. Please."

For a moment, she almost caved. Absurd, how strong this connection was, even now. She remembered how she'd

spent her life wondering whether the soulmate bond wolves spoke of would ever apply to her, whether she'd ever feel that lightning-strike of passion that her adoptive family always talked about. It was so intrinsically linked to being a wolf that she'd worried that it was something she'd simply miss out on, the same way she'd missed out when all her siblings and peers had discovered their ability to transform.

The joy she'd felt, when she first looked into Renfrey's eyes and knew what she was feeling. The joy not only at having found the love of her life, the man she was destined to be with... but in realizing that she wasn't quite as different as she'd always imagined. She might not share her adoptive family's bright silver eyes or magical ability to transform her body, but she'd known in that bright, brilliant moment that at least she had a soulmate.

And that joy had lasted all of twenty-four hours. Long enough to spend the most passionate night she'd ever experienced with a man who seemed to have been crafted according to her exact preferences. Long enough to be so deeply in love with him she could barely remember what her life had been like before. Long enough that when he left, the next day, for the farthest reaches of Halforst without so much as a note to explain his absence, her heart broke into a thousand pieces.

And long enough to conceive two beautiful babies, who in their short, short lives had already brought more love and joy to Syrra's life than their worthless father could ever hope to. It was the thought of her daughter and her son that steadied her, now, and not for the first time. It was the memory of their bright little faces, the knowledge that they were fast asleep right through that door, and that Syrra was the only person protecting them from their coward of a father. If it killed her, she would protect her children from the loss she'd suffered when Renfrey walked out of her life.

"Get out of this place before I start screaming," she said, her voice as cold and flat as the steel blade in her hand. Renfrey recoiled from the look on her face, and for a moment

she saw pain in his eyes as fresh and hot as the pain burning in the middle of her chest. How pathetic, she thought faintly as he turned and walked away. Even now, she loved him. Even now, an embarrassingly large part of her would have been willing to forgive and forget, to fall into his arms with no assurance that he wasn't about to hurt her the way he'd hurt her before.

She murmured a little mantra of gratitude under her breath... gratitude for her children, and for the strength that they brought out in her. One day, she vowed, she'd learn the knack of protecting herself as fiercely as she protected her children. But for now, she'd just shelter behind the shield she held aloft for them.

Once Renfrey was gone from the hallway, she stalked out to the balcony, imagining herself as regal as a queen in her tattered clothes and charcoal-smudged skin. The wolves were lingering in the doorway still, and she kept her face tight when the three of them looked up at her. From this distance, she couldn't make out their expressions... but she had a feeling she knew what the conversation was about. A woman alone on a demon-infested island, they'd be saying. No way she hadn't succumbed to demonic taint.

Well, let them whisper, and let them suspect. All the better, if it kept them away from her doorstep and out of her way. She watched on, impassive, until the wolves had left the hall and closed the door behind them. She counted, gravely, to thirty. And once she'd done it, she sank slowly to her knees, hands still gripping the banister above her, and let the storm of sobs wrack her body like a ship being dashed against the rocks.

Some time later—a few minutes? An hour?—she felt her sobbing break off abruptly, pierced by the familiar sound of a small voice, raised in bleary discontent. That was Asher. She'd always been able to tell them apart, even if nobody else on Kurivon had known how she'd done it. Mina had tried to crack it, but to no avail. There was no trick to it—only mother

magic, she'd joked once. That cry belonged to Asher. She knew that, because it was true.

They were both awake when she let herself into their room, blinking curiously up at her tearstained face. As far as they were concerned, it had been an afternoon nap just like any other, and the relief that washed through her was so acute she almost started crying again. They were safe, she told herself as she rocked the grizzling Asher soothingly in her arms, stroking her son's soft, downy head of blond hair. As far as Renfrey knew, she was alone in here, and that was how she liked it.

"We're going home soon, babies," she whispered into Asher's ear. Emmy had sat up in the cot, peering curiously up at her mother. "We're going to have a proper home again, just like before. You'll both have your own room when you're big enough, and you'll be able to play in the sunshine... We just need to wait for those silly men out there to make it safe first, alright? Alright."

She should have been happy. There was more hope for survival now than there had been for months. But all she could feel, as the strange sameness of the afternoon wore on, was a growing sense of unease. Six wolves—even highly-trained demon hunters as they were—could six wolves really clear out a nest of demons as significant as the one that had taken over Kurivon? She hadn't been exaggerating when she'd told them that the six they'd killed that first day were only a fraction of the forces that infested this island.

They were the experts, she reminded herself. They were the Council's best and brightest, sent to restore order to Kurivon and rebuild the settlement—wasn't that what Renfrey had said? They didn't need her help. Her responsibility was to herself and to her children. To keep them safe, to protect them from the horrors that lay beyond the library walls.

And she was absolutely putting Renfrey high on that list. If anything, he was worse. You knew where you stood,

with demons. Being hurt by a demon made sense. She didn't begrudge demons any of the scars she bore.

But being hurt by your soulmate? That was the kind of darkness she couldn't forgive.

Chapter 7 - Renfrey

She was alive. That was the thought he kept circling back to, like a song that had gotten stuck in his head. Syrra was alive. There was so much to worry about—Syrra was alive. They needed to decide what they were going to do about the library—Syrra was alive. He was going to need to give his men some answers about the history the woman had so kindly aired in earshot of one of the nosiest wolves he'd ever met—Syrra was alive. It was relief, and it was joy, and it was an underlying fear so acute he was doing his best not to acknowledge its existence.

Syrra was alive.

They made it halfway across the blasted, empty space in front of the library before Reeve's curiosity overwhelmed his politeness, and Renfrey already knew what he was in for when the wolf came to a firm and deliberate halt, boots scraping in the dust. He ought to have been grateful, he supposed, that Reeve had waited half as long as he had to interrogate him. Reeve was a very wealthy man, and in his life before pledging allegiance to this little pack, he had rarely had to take instruction from anyone.

"Who's *that*?" he said, his face wreathed in a deceptively cheerful smile.

"Syrra," Renfrey said, even her name tasting sweeter on his lips than he was happy with. "A Council lorekeeper. Her name was on the list—"

"What's the deal?" Reeve cut him off impatiently, waving a hand to dismiss his attempt at distraction. "I don't want her resume, I want an explanation of the *energy*."

"The energy," Renfrey repeated dully.

"Also, she's not a wolf."

"Is that a question?"

“It’s weird.” Reeve was shifting from foot to foot. It seemed that his impatience, now that it had broken the confines of his politeness, was raging through him like a storm. “Everyone’s a wolf. Everyone in the whole Council’s a wolf. It’s a wolf operation.”

“Not strictly,” Belmont pointed out. It was the first he’d spoken, and the look of quiet defeat on his face told Renfrey that he’d hoped to avoid this little scene. He wondered if the two had shared a hushed conversation, waiting for him on the porch, and felt a rush of affection for the quiet, stoic Belmont. He’d tried, at least. “The Council opposes demons and keeps Halforst safe.”

“And Halforst is wolves,” Reeve said impatiently. “If I knew humans were welcome in the Council, I’ve got half a dozen employees on this side of the portal I’d like to bring over—”

“She’s not human,” Renfrey snapped, forgetting himself for a moment. That silenced Reeve and even stilled the shifting of his feet for a moment. “Well, she might be. Nobody knows. This isn’t my story to tell,” he added, annoyed with himself. It felt like a betrayal, to share the secrets of Syrra’s upbringing without her being present—a lost infant, found in the woods and taken in by the pack who’d discovered her. But as betrayals went... a hot flush of shame moved through him. It was far from the worst he’d done to her, wasn’t it?

“But you’re going to tell us anyway, right?” Reeve prompted in the unnerving silence. Renfrey gritted his teeth and exhaled, suddenly regretting everything about this mission—regretting that it was a group project, regretting that he’d accepted leadership of the pack, regretting that he hadn’t turned around and walked right out of the building the moment he’d seen Syrra’s name on that page. But he hadn’t, had he? He’d accepted the mission, accepted the leadership. He was here, with five lives depending on him. Six, if you included Syrra... which he couldn’t help doing.

Renfrey sighed and ran a hand through his close-cropped hair. “Fine,” he said hollowly, not liking the whoop of triumph it drew from Reeve. “But we’re going to talk as a pack, alright? I’m not going over it twice—or letting you tell it for me,” he added darkly. Reeve nodded enthusiastic agreement. Belmont only inclined his head in grave acceptance of his leader’s choice, which he appreciated, though the conspiratorial way Reeve elbowed Belmont in the ribs when he thought Renfrey wasn’t looking didn’t exactly set his mind at ease.

The sun was well on its—way toward sunset when they reached the camp again, which had already taken on an almost home-like quality—at least for Renfrey, who hadn’t felt a sense of belonging to a place in decades. The other three hadn’t wasted time while they’d been away, he noted with approval. There was enough firewood for the next few days, stacked neatly beside one of the tents with a sheet of tarpaulin covering it in case of rain, the firepit had been reinforced with stones, and the camp generally had a more lived-in feeling. But those efforts paled in comparison to the sheets of paper that were spread out carefully across a sheet of fabric that had been laid out for the purpose.

“Just some early ideas,” said Darion, who seemed almost embarrassed by the attention. “Nothing ironclad. Taking advantage of the space already clear, building on the obvious principles—I’m no city planner.”

“This is solid work nevertheless, Darion,” Renfrey said, distracted for a moment from the weight of what had taken place at the abandoned library. On a neatly updated copy of one of the maps the Council had sent with them, Darion had sketched out a plan for a small town. The portal would be central, ringed by buildings but with a clear space around it that would double, as the lorekeepers had had it, as a town square.

“It’s a start,” the wolf said with a shrug. “Once we know what we’re dealing with on the demon front, we can

prioritize what gets built first, how ambitious we get. For example—”

“Speaking of demons,” Reeve said meaningfully, and Renfrey noticed the way Darion clenched his teeth at the sound of his brother’s voice, darting a look sideways at him that—was loaded with more than just frustration at being interrupted. “Or more to the point, speaking of the damage done—”

Renfrey sighed. “We’d best all sit for this one, I think.”

Another improvement to the camp, it turned out, was the provision of seats. Torren’s idea—he’d been chafing at the restrictions imposed on him by his healing injury, it seemed. He’d dragged out a few likely pieces of timber from the other wolves’ firewood gathering efforts, and so it was that the six of them each had a stump of wood to sit on around the fire.

“I’d’ve carved our names into them if you’d been any later,” Torren said with a rueful grin. “Not like I’m useful for much else until this rib stops troubling me.”

“It’ll stop troubling you faster if you rest the thing,” Blaine rumbled, scowling from beneath his furrowed brow.

“Yes, *Father*,” Torren said, affecting a high, trembling falsetto as he did so, though Blaine was all of three years his senior.

“Shut up,” Reeve said. He had a curious charisma that allowed him to get away with that kind of rudeness though not, Renfrey noticed, with his brother, who scowled but said nothing. “Renfrey got halfway through this story and if I don’t find out the ending, I’m going to burst like a balloon.”

“Reeve,” Belmont said with a soft note of warning.

“A report,” Renfrey pushed ahead. “We searched the northernmost part of the settlement. One building remains—two stories, in reasonable shape considering the circumstances. Preserved largely due to the work of the lorekeepers, who it seemed were using it as a kind of emergency shelter and base of operations.”

“Were?” Torren was leaning forward.

“One lorekeeper remains,” Renfrey said. He’d intended to keep his voice level to avoid betraying any emotion about Syrra, but the effect ended up being a coldness towards the dead that he hadn’t intended. He cleared his throat. “One survivor, which, given the circumstances, is... downright miraculous.”

“Where are they?” Torren wanted to know immediately.

“Patience is a virtue,” Belmont murmured, but Torren wasn’t as adept as Reeve at picking up the quiet wolf’s suggestions.

“You left them in the library? *Alone?*” Torren looked just about ready to bound to his feet and rescue the lorekeeper himself. “They’ll be torn apart by demons overnight if—”

“She chose to remain,” Renfrey snapped, cutting Torren’s diatribe mercifully short. He fixed the impatient wolf with a meaningful look, waiting until he’d settled back into his seat with an apologetic shrug of his shoulders. The last thing he needed right now was to lose control of the group, to let his authority slip. They trusted him. He’d maintain that if it killed him.

“She’s safe enough where she is,” Belmont said into the silence, his measured voice bringing a much-needed calm into the atmosphere. Renfrey was grateful the soft-spoken wolf was on his side still—a useful ally. “The library has been thoroughly warded.”

“Thoroughly enough to fend off an army of demons?” Torren asked, more quietly, but there was still a frown furrowing his brow.

“The library is the only building still standing on this island,” Renfrey pointed out. “If anything, the lorekeeper is safer than we are.” An uneasy chill moved through the group at that, but Renfrey didn’t regret what he’d said. It was

valuable to remember where they were, and why. “There’s more. Regarding the lorekeeper.”

“Here we go,” Reeve murmured under his breath, and Belmont shot him a warning look across the circle.

“Her name is Syrra. She and I have a history I’d prefer not to go into. Suffice to say that we know each other, and that she has reason to bear me a considerable grudge.”

Renfrey waited, hoping like hell he’d played this right. The last thing he wanted was to dive into all the messy intricacies of his relationship with Syrra—the night they’d spent together, his subsequent decision that it would be best for them both if he stayed out of her life. But her naked hostility meant he needed to at least acknowledge—what had Reeve called it? The *energy*.

“It won’t interfere with our work here,” Renfrey clarified when he’d let that particular information rest with the group long enough. “But I felt it needed an explanation, in case her conduct seems... troubling.”

“It did,” Belmont affirmed quietly, surprising him. He hadn’t expected the stoic wolf to chime in on this particular point. “I feel I should point out—this woman has been alone in this place for a very long time, and is clearly gripped by strong emotion. You said yourself, back at the library, that that was a dangerous combination.”

Even Reeve looked shocked. Renfrey held himself tightly in check, even though he could feel his wolf growling low in his throat. What was this man implying about Syrra? Belmont met his gaze, calm and unflinching.

“I only mean to air the possibility,” he said softly. “Demonic taint can be a slow and subtle thing.”

“Your concern is appreciated, but misplaced. I’d have noticed,” Renfrey said through gritted teeth. But Belmont didn’t seem convinced.

“With respect, Alpha...” Why did hearing his title from Belmont feel more insouciant than respectful? “There are

many stories in the hunter's canon of demonic taint afflicting individuals, with even their closest loved ones not realizing until later in the process. I'm not suggesting we do her any harm," he added, perhaps a little unnerved by the fixed expression on Renfrey's face. "Only that we keep our wits about us."

"Well said," Renfrey managed through gritted teeth, hoping he didn't sound as furious with Belmont as he felt. The man was right on all counts, that was what was so infuriating about it. He knew his reaction was irrational, knew it was coming from the same stupid place in his chest that had never stopped singing Syrra's name, never stopped thinking about her, never stopped wishing that he'd never walked out of her room that awful morning... with extreme difficulty, he suppressed the thought. Belmont sat back, looking satisfied to have said his piece, though there was a faint hint of concern in his silver eyes still.

"You were telling us something else about her," Reeve said, clearly unable to suppress his curiosity despite the tension in the air. "About her—" He gestured. "Her eyes, and whatnot."

This drew raised eyebrows from the group, and Renfrey cleared his throat sharply. "Her eyes," he said, shooting Reeve a cross look, "are distinctive, yes, in that they are blue, rather than silver. This has always been the case," he said, glancing sidelong at Belmont. "It's not to be taken as an indication of demonic corruption. Syrra isn't a wolf."

A murmur of curiosity at that. Wolves composed the vast majority of Halforst's population—it wasn't unusual for a citizen to go their entire life without meeting anyone who didn't share their species' bright silver eyes. "What is she, then?" Blaine asked gruffly.

"That's her story to tell," Renfrey repeated, shaking his head a little. "What I know is that she was taken in as a baby by her pack, and that her eyes have been blue as long as

anyone can remember. When cubs her age learned to shift, she didn't. A gifted lorekeeper, though. Profoundly gifted."

"I'll say," Darion said unexpectedly. "Holding back an infestation of demons single-handed? Alone? That's some power."

Renfrey suddenly felt very tired. "Yes. She's very impressive. Always has been," he added, feeling his mind slip without permission back to the day they'd met. She'd just finished her training—though it wasn't training the lorekeepers called it, not at those levels. Some kind of specialized research project. At any rate, she and her friends had been celebrating in the bar he'd chosen for his lonely little tradition of having a single drink when he'd successfully vanquished a demon.

He'd known before then, of course. He'd seen her in the hallways, he knew what they were. Every second they spent together, he knew what a terrible idea it all was... but he'd been willing, then, to pay the price. Had he ever imagined the price would be quite this awful? He hadn't. But if he was honest with himself, even knowing what he knew now, he still doubted he'd change anything.

She really was that remarkable.

He found excuses to be by himself for the rest of the evening—patrolling the perimeter a few times, wolf-shaped in case those more sensitive senses picked up anything their human bodies had missed. When nothing came up, he retired to his tent for a few hours to go over the notes from the Council. Pointless, really—he'd all but memorized the information on the pages already—but he didn't want to risk any more questions from his men. He'd gotten far too close to snapping at Belmont for suggesting Syrra might be corrupted, and he didn't want to risk another altercation like that.

Demon taint. It was too awful to even consider. A mercifully rare affliction, but an invariably deadly one. Once the rot had taken hold, nothing could be done to vanquish it. He'd heard Council medics say that a patient, once afflicted,

was better declared dead right there and then. Because however slowly the infection progressed, the result was always the same. Eventually, the flesh gave way to the rot altogether, and a demon stood where a wolf had once been.

Belmont had been right to raise the possibility when he had, as loath as Renfrey was to admit it. Demons were at their most dangerous when you didn't know they were demons, when they could still make use of the thoughts and memories of their host bodies to maximize the amount of damage they did. There were old stories of entire towns falling before the violence of a single demon, disguised as it was in the body of a trusted friend.

There were a few things that invited demonic taint in. Strong feeling, that was the most common one, at least in the folklore... you often heard stories, largely apocryphal, about jealous lovers succumbing to demonic influence, or occasionally more tragic tales of wolves who'd lost their soulmates and couldn't find another reason to fight off the demonic taint. The troubling thing about a condition so dangerous was that even the Council scholars were at odds over what it actually was, what caused it, and how it could be prevented.

Renfrey had done exhaustive research on the subject himself, of course, after—but that particular door was one he wasn't interested in opening. Not tonight.

Plenty of wolves spent huge parts of their lives surrounded by demonic taint and never succumbed to it, after all. Wasn't he working with half a dozen examples? And Syrra—his heart twisted—was one of the strongest people he'd ever known, one of the cleverest, the most resourceful. She wouldn't have let herself slip into demonic corruption, would she? Of course not.

Renfrey took the first watch again, resolving not to let his thoughts return to the subject. But when Torren came to relieve him and he settled down in his tent again, he realized his mind wasn't going to let him get away that easily. He slept,

thankfully. After the near-sleepless night he'd had the night before, and the draining confrontation first with Syrra and then with his pack, that was no surprise. But his dreams... his dreams tormented him, all night long. In them he watched, powerless, as Syrra moved through the burning shell of a town, her expression utterly blank as horrors unfolded before her. In these dreams, he couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't step in to protect the residents of Kurivon from the demonic assault. He knew, dimly, that that was what he was seeing. Death upon death upon death... dozens of bodies, piling up just out of sight. He saw Syrra's bright blue eyes surveying this horror, fighting with everything in him to speak, to move, to do anything to comfort her.

And then he was sitting up, gasping for breath in the thick air of his tent, a strangled scream dying on his lips. In the last few horrible seconds of that dream, he'd watched as those stunning blue eyes had filled up with the bright, garish red of fresh blood.

Chapter 8 - Syrra

The twins could always tell when she was restless. The three of them went through their usual evening routine as the night closed in, and Syrra tried to be her usual cheerful self for them, but it was always much easier to lie to adults about being okay. Babies didn't listen to what you said, they listened to how you said it, and she could tell that her unease was affecting both Emmy and Asher. She took them to bed a little earlier than usual, knowing it would be best for all three of them if she got some time to herself to decompress after the confrontation that afternoon. Though she'd worried they might not settle, she felt tears of gratitude well up in her eyes when they both went off to sleep with a minimum of fuss.

She just had to wait this out, Syrra reminded herself as she headed downstairs. She'd prioritized the babies' dinner, feeling too turbulent with emotion to eat, but she knew she'd need the strength in the coming days, so she forced herself to finish her plate. It wasn't much. She'd been low on rations for a while—uncomfortably low—and she knew that before the week was out she was going to need to go foraging again. Would it be easier, she wondered, with the wolf pack on the island to distract the demons? Or would their activity stimulate more demonic presence, making it more dangerous for her?

The wolves, she reflected sourly, had probably brought plenty of rations. For about the fiftieth time that evening, she cursed her rotten luck. If it had been anyone else but Renfrey leading the pack! She'd be out there with them right now, her and the twins, raucously celebrating their good fortune and the end to her long, hard, lonely days here. But Renfrey... she gritted her teeth at the thought of him, not liking how quickly that shadow had returned to stalk the corners of her life. She couldn't afford to spend any more time around Renfrey than was absolutely necessary. She was too weak, too susceptible to the way she still felt about him. She hated him for what he'd

done, but the truth was she loved him still, too. She had a feeling she always would.

“Soulmates are stupid,” she whispered to the fire, answered only by the shifting of the wood and a puff of smoke escaping. Understatement of the century. How cruel, to inflict a love like this on someone who didn’t deserve it. She struggled, sometimes, even to be grateful for what being with Renfrey had brought her—the birth of her children, the twin lights of her life. As much as she adored them, she didn’t love the circumstances into which they’d been born. The loneliness, the terror, the grief that had beset her throughout her pregnancy. The profound isolation of it.

It had been a month since Renfrey had walked out without a backwards glance when she’d found out she was pregnant. Council medics were very efficient with confirmation of that kind of thing, and once she’d recovered from the initial shock, it made sense of a lot of her symptoms. She’d imagined she’d been nauseous and exhausted because of the grief and confusion associated with her soulmate’s sudden betrayal—to learn it was pregnancy-related was almost a relief. A very short-lived relief, of course, followed immediately by a paralyzing terror of what her life was going to look like when the baby arrived. It had been almost enough to make her reach out to Renfrey, to swallow her pride and ask a Councillor to get a letter to him.

Almost, she thought, a bitter grin curling her lips in the firelight. Her resilience in that moment of weakness was something she was still proud of, years later. Renfrey had walked out on her, that was the thing. He could have stayed, could have talked to her, could have left a note... there were a thousand better ways he could have done what he’d done. He’d made his choice. She didn’t owe him a damned thing, including the news that he was going to be a father. Because the truth was, he was no more a father to her children than he was a soulmate to her. Syrra had had no choice, when she’d first set eyes on the handsome warrior in that crowded bar—no choice but to fall head over heels for him, no choice but to fall

into his arms that night, no choice but to revel in the best sex she'd ever had. She couldn't choose her soulmate, and one day, she might make her peace with that.

But what she could choose was whether she invited him to take part in her children's lives with her. And why would she?

That had been what had inspired her, in the end, to make her application to work on Kurivon. She'd been thinking about it since she'd finished her advanced lorekeeper training, in fact, curious about the prospect of working in a whole new world. The Council was always in search of lorekeepers willing to make the difficult relocation, away from packs and friends and family... but for Syrra, who had already left her pack behind for her lorekeeper training at Council headquarters, the decision was easier. Now she had a baby on the way, two babies, a medic informed her brightly, a few months more into her pregnancy. That needn't be a deterrent, her superiors assured her. Kurivon was a beautiful place for a child to grow up. And there were plenty of lorekeepers on the island who were more than happy to help out with the kids.

That had perhaps been the most touching part of the whole situation, the way wolves she barely knew had rallied around her when she needed them. She'd been worried they'd ask prying questions about the situation, about who the father was, why he wasn't around, why she never talked about him... but no such questions had ever come, from anyone. She ended up telling a few close friends a truncated, anonymized version of the story—a one-night stand with a man she never saw again—but in general, nobody seemed to care.

And so she'd given birth right here on Kurivon, surrounded by friends as close as family. And for a year, it had been beautiful. Almost idyllic enough to make her forget about Renfrey, about the shadow in her history, the man who part of her had always wondered about. Would he return one day? Would he recognize that the twins were his children? They both had his bright silver eyes, and though they'd have to wait until puberty to know for sure, Syrra suspected strongly that

both babies were wolves like him... would the family resemblance begin to show, as they grew older? Asher had soft, fair hair like his mother's, but she could already see Emmy's hair growing through as dark as her father's...

"It's not going to come up," she told the flames, narrowing her eyes as she whispered the vow. "He's never going to meet them, so he's not going to know."

If she got her way, he'd never even know the babies existed, let alone see them. How she was going to pull that one off remained to be seen. Already, she was beginning to wonder whether it wouldn't have been safer to invite the wolf pack to camp here in the library with her, behind the safety of all the wards the lorekeepers of Kurivon had been able to erect before they'd lost their lives. They seemed like good men, and they were here to do something very brave and very dangerous. She hated the idea that they might come to harm out there. But she couldn't very well invite them in and leave Renfrey out in the cold, could she?

Difficult, she thought, her eyelids beginning to droop as the evening grew late. A difficult situation, a difficult set of questions, a distinct lack of answers. And all the while, she knew, the demons were making their plans, gathering their forces. They wouldn't let a defeat like the one they'd suffered yesterday stand. There would be a reckoning, sooner or later, a much harder battle to fight.

Syrra fell asleep right there at the fireside, something she hadn't done in a long time. It was a restless night of dreams, a few of which had the faint touch of prophecy around their edges. It had been a long time since Syrra's dreams had been anything more useful than anxiety. She woke and hurried to write down what she'd dreamed, knowing how quickly the gifts of prophecy dissolved in the cold light of morning, but she was out of practice and the dreams were frustratingly vague. Syrra stared down at the pages of her journal, eyes narrowed with disappointment and the ever-familiar touch of grief on the edges of her mind, from the place where she'd stored it all for later. Mina had always been their most talented

seer, sifting meaning from even the most baffling of dreamscapes...

Well, Syrra thought with a sigh, even Mina would be hard-pressed to get much out of this cryptic little journey. In the dream that had glowed with the unmistakable light of prophecy, she'd seen Renfrey, sitting on the edge of an outcropping she recognized as being the northernmost tip of the island of Kurivon. That part of the coast was completely unprotected from the full force of the ocean beyond, and the view of the ocean could be frightening, especially when storms were rolling over. In the dream, she'd sensed a storm brewing, though whether it was literal or symbolic, she wasn't sure. Perhaps both, Mina had always said when her dreams presented her with choices like that.

That alone had been strange. That tip of the island was the most remote from where the settlement had stood, through the thickest part of the island's uncleared vegetation... the dream figure would have had a long, difficult journey to isolate himself so thoroughly. Symbolic or literal, she wondered again? But he wasn't alone. He was sitting at a campfire, and sitting across from him—this was where her notes became incoherent. There were hundreds of people sitting across from him, she had written, and there was one person sitting across from him, and both things were true, and neither.

And then, underneath that, when she'd felt the last of the memory of her dream slipping from her mind, she'd abandoned coherent sentences and simply written one word, in bold, aggressive strokes that had torn the page a little.
FATHER.

She set the notebook down and started on her chores for the day, frustrated and unnerved in equal parts by the cryptic dream. "Whose blasted father?" she found herself muttering, every time she thought she'd succeeded in putting the dream from her mind. The obvious interpretation was Renfrey's father—she pictured a gray-haired version of Renfrey and wrinkled her nose. In the short time they'd spent

together, he hadn't said anything about his family. Neither had she, for that matter—they hadn't exactly wasted much time on words beyond some cursory flirtation and a whispered invitation back to her quarters.

But dreams were rarely so straightforward. Renfrey as a father, she wondered? He wasn't a father. He was barely a sperm donor. It was sheer luck she'd conceived after the night they'd spent together. She wasn't entertaining that interpretation. Next.

Her father? The dreamer had to be considered, in the interpretation of prophetic dream, that was what Mina had always said. Syrra mulled it over as she swept out the fireplace, both the twins giggling as they played in the far corner of the library. She missed her father fiercely, that was true. She missed her whole pack fiercely. The last time she'd seen them had been when they'd come to visit her here on Kurivon, a few weeks after the birth of the twins. It had been one of the happiest weeks of her life, having her adopted brothers and sisters and cousins crowd around to coo over Asher and Emmy, feeling her mother's fierce, glowing pride, seeing the way her father kept turning away to hide the tears of joy in his eyes.

It had been her father who'd helped her find Asher's name, she remembered. She'd felt awful about not having named him, especially when she'd known her daughter's name for almost as long as she'd known she was pregnant. The knowledge had glowed in her belly like a bright, burning coal—and she'd whispered it aloud to herself, feeling a grin of recognition split across her face. Ember.

But finding out that they were twins—that had thrown her. Emmy's name had been so obvious to her, but her mind stayed stubbornly blank when it came to the other little life growing inside her. She wanted the names to match, she knew that much, but nothing had quite felt right. A shortlist of dozens of names grew into the hundreds with the helpful suggestions of her lorekeeper colleagues, and then the babies

had been actually born, and—well, in all the chaos, she'd simply been too paralyzed to choose.

The story had made her family laugh when they arrived to meet the babies, and she was quickly reassured that she wasn't the first new mother in history to struggle with this particular issue. The babies were both healthy, happy and thriving, that was the important thing—they didn't know they didn't quite both have names yet. And later that evening, her father had glanced at her across the fire with her son cradled in his huge, gentle hands.

“There's a family name that might suit him,” he'd said quietly, looking down at the sleeping baby. “Its last caretaker passed some ten years ago, and I'd imagine he'd be pleased to see it taken up again.”

“Yeah?” She'd leaned forward, blinking the tiredness out of her eyes. Her father was a man of few words, and they were always worth hearing. “Would that be...” She hesitated, biting back the end of the sentence. She'd been told a thousand times that she was the only person in the pack who gave any thought to her being adopted, and she could usually set those insecurities aside, but with the birth of her children, she'd been giving a lot of thought to the issue again.

“He was your great uncle.” Her father hadn't even acknowledged what she'd said, but the light way he stressed ‘your’ told her she was being reprimanded for thinking of herself as less than family, even for a second. “Best healer I ever knew. Used to make us laugh so much we didn't even feel the sting of the medicine on our scrapes and cuts. Asher,” he said, after a pause, and before the second syllable had even faded from his lips, she knew it was her son's name. “For the trees, back home.”

“It's perfect.”

Her father had only smiled. He'd always been an understated kind of man. But she thought of him, thought of her family, every time she called her son's name. That had been over a year ago now, and she missed the pack so fiercely

it felt like her heart might break. What did their father matter, after all? What did the paltry connection of a blood relation mean when compared to a real family? Her mother and father weren't her blood, but they were more kin to her children than that coward of a man calling himself Alpha.

And in that moment, she knew with perfect clarity that she had to do whatever it took to clear this island of demons and make it a safe place for children to play again. A safe place for a community to grow and prosper. A safe place for her family to visit again, to marvel with her at how much Asher and Emmy had grown, to be a part of their lives in a way that their so-called father had forfeited his right to forever.

To make that happen, she knew, she was going to have to work with the allies she had, as distasteful as she found it. It was foolish, letting the pack sleep out in the open, vulnerable to attacks from demons. She had a whole building here, warded to the gills, and if her family had taught her anything, it was that there was safety in numbers. Yes, she hated the idea of spending time around Renfrey. Yes, it would be difficult in the extreme to keep him away from the children. But she'd find a way to make it work—for their sake.

And so it was, three days after the tense first meeting at the library, that Syrra found herself leaving the safety of the building yet again. This time, she went armed not with her satchel and her foraging tools, but with a white flag she'd fashioned out of a tattered pillowcase. She'd waited this long, she told herself, because the weather had been overcast for the last couple of days—sunlight was the weather demons hated most, so she'd waited for a clear day to make her approach to the wolf pack's camp. The truth was, of course, that it had taken her this long to work up the nerve. It was going to be hard to look Renfrey in the eye, she knew that. She'd find the strength—she knew, at this point in her life, that her reserves of strength were basically limitless when it came to keeping her children safe. But she certainly wasn't going to enjoy it.

It was a hot, damp day, even more humid than usual. Kurivon's climate always got oppressive in the days before a

storm, and she had a feeling they were in for a beauty quite soon. All the more reason to invite the wolves inside. She'd weathered a tropical storm in a tent before, and it hadn't been pretty. And if the demons were clever, they'd take advantage of the weather to attack. She was a little surprised they hadn't done so already, if she was honest... but the island had been quiet since the pack's arrival. Too quiet, some might say.

She emerged from the tree line with her white flag raised and her teeth gritted. But to her surprise, the little campsite was empty of wolves. It didn't take long to find them down the other end of the desolate cleared space that had once been home to Kurivon's cottages, all six of them clearly deep in conversation about something. She couldn't help but look around the area as she approached, a little surprised to see the charred and blackened ground altered with chalk marks.

They'd seen her coming, of course. Even in their two-legged bodies, wolves had incredibly sharp hearing—she'd long since given up on sneaking up on them. She was surprised by the restraint they showed, reacting to her presence. The hostility was evident, especially in the faces of the three she hadn't met yet, but none of them moved to challenge her. Nor did they raise weapons, although that might have been because they weren't carrying any. Unless you counted the stationery and chalk in Renfrey's hands.

She'd prepared a speech, but her curiosity got the better of her, and she deviated almost immediately from what she'd planned. "Are you sketching out *foundations*?"

"Good eye," said one of the strangers, a tall, slender man who kept pushing a too-long lock of silver-blond hair out of his eyes. The look he was giving her—the look all of them were giving her, actually—told her that Renfrey had been filling them in on their history. She gritted her teeth, feeling her skin crawl as she forced herself not to wonder how he'd told the story. "We're planning the rebuild."

"Isn't that getting ahead of yourselves a little?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "I hardly need to tell you that the

demonic threat remains unhandled.”

“Part of the strategy,” Renfrey broke in, and she could tell by his tone that he was annoyed by how much his men had shared with him. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit, Syrra? You made your wish to be left alone quite clear, and we’ve been respecting that.”

It was true, she had to admit. She’d expected a close eye to be kept on the library, but she hadn’t seen a patrol so much as pass by. Renfrey was keeping his distance. “About that,” she said, giving her flag a paltry little wave. “I’ve been considering the situation, and I think, tactically speaking, it would make more sense for you to use the library’s lower floor as a base of operations. You’re vulnerable out here,” she added, jerking her head towards the cluster of tents behind them. “The demons will strike when you’re sleeping, and it won’t be pretty. Besides, there’s a storm coming. The library roof will keep you much drier than canvas can.”

She’d expected her invitation to be met with more enthusiasm, if she was honest. Not the ringing, awkward silence that met her words. All six of the wolves were exchanging glances with each other, making her feel a mess of emotions she associated with adolescence more than an active war zone. To her surprise, it was the quiet red-headed wolf who spoke first, not Renfrey.

“It’s a kind offer,” he said, and she braced herself for the ‘but’ she could hear in his words. “Though I’m afraid we have some... concerns.”

“Concerns,” she repeated, a sinking feeling in her stomach that quickly gave way to anger. Did they have any idea how much this little trip had cost her? It was like they didn’t even know how much she was being the bigger person, here. How much of the moral high ground was hers. “Let me guess—you’re worried I’m afflicted.”

“You understand our concern,” Reeve said, the pushy one she remembered from the other day. “You’ve been here,

completely alone, for weeks at least—and you were quite emotional with our fearless leader here.”

“Reeve,” Renfrey snapped in warning. “Syrra’s reaction to our presence was justified, and I’ll say no more on the matter.” He gave her a look that was part exasperation with his packmate, part apology. “It’s a kind invitation.”

“But,” Syrra said dully, “you’re going to decline. Fine.” Anger surged up, hot and acrid, filling her chest and throat and mouth and threatening to choke her. “Damned fool idea anyway. Die out here for spite.” She turned to go, but whirled back almost at once, feeling her curls flick into her face and pushing them impatiently back. “I’m a lorekeeper,” she snarled. “I was one of the best the Council had, even *before* I spent months holding back a demon invasion bigger than anything you six have ever seen. Alone, for a lot of it, as you’ve so astutely observed.” She narrowed her eyes, drew herself up to her full height—still dwarfed by the looming wolves around her, of course, but they shrank back a little from her regardless. “I was born stronger than any of you. Remember that, when the demons chase you to my door, and hope that I’m still in a collaborative mood.”

And with that, she turned on her heel and stormed away across the field. The satisfaction of telling them off lasted almost the whole walk home, but when the empty library came into view again, she felt it begin to cool, her heart beginning to sink again. So much for her potential allies, she thought bitterly. There was no satisfaction in the knowledge they’d fare poorly against the demons, either. She didn’t want them to suffer and perish knowing she was right. She wanted them to win. She wanted Kurivon clear, she wanted her home back and a future for her children.

Syrra hesitated on the library’s porch, inches from turning back around and returning to the wolf’s camp. To hell with the humiliation. She’d suffer a thousand humiliations if it meant a better future than this for the twins. But before she could, she froze where she was standing, an awful familiar prickle in her stomach telling her what she already knew. Two

of the wards on the front door of the library were glowing... as she watched, a third flickered to light as well, and the unearthly edge-of-hearing hum of warning cut through the quiet of the afternoon.

Great, fat raindrops began to fall from the storm clouds that had gathered with their typical lightning speed. But the overcast sky didn't fully explain how much darker it had gotten since she'd left the library.

The temporary lull was over. The demons were on the move. She only hoped, as she slammed the library door shut behind her, that the wolves had seen the signs quicker than she had.

Chapter 9 - Renfrey

The demons fell upon them just before sunset.

Renfrey had felt an uneasy prickle running up and down his spine for most of the afternoon. It had almost been a relief when Syrra had made her sudden and unexpected appearance, offering them quarter in the library, proposing a truce... was this what his wolf had been growling about, what his intuition had been tugging at him to pay heed to? But Syrra had left in a fit of pique almost immediately, and the lingering sense of worry had only intensified. He was furious with his pack for turning her away as they had, and more furious still that he couldn't fault their logic in doing so. Had Syrra been any other lorekeeper, any other person in existence in fact, Renfrey would have agreed with his pack completely. Too dangerous to invite her into their midst, to treat her as an ally when she could be harboring the seeds of demonic taint.

She wasn't, though. That was what he kept thinking, over and over, irrational as it was. She wasn't a demon, she was Syrra. He just knew. It was exactly the kind of baseless, irrational thinking that he hated, the kind of emotionally-driven decision-making that got better warriors than him killed. This, right here, was proof that he'd made the right decision all those years ago, when he'd walked out of her room and not let himself look back. And so he'd let his pack make the call, and they'd returned to their work, planning the new settlement. It would be at least a few weeks before they got any solid structures finished, but he was already looking forward to sleeping in something other than a tent.

The demons timed their attack well, he'd reflect later. The wolves had just decided to call it a day, exasperated by the thickly falling rain, though their thickly-drawn chalk markings were holding up surprisingly well under the onslaught. They were scattered and not on their guard as they headed back to camp, already arguing about how best to cook their rations for

the night when it was raining as hard as it was. Renfrey had turned to look back over the empty stretch they'd walked up from, some movement catching his attention out of the corner of his eye. A shape, out in the gathering darkness... his mind playing tricks? No, he realized, ice freezing in his gut. There was something out there, something vaguely quadrupedal, scraping a foreleg rhythmically against the ground. It took him a few frozen seconds to realize that it was meticulously scrubbing at the chalk marks they'd made on the ground.

Then he heard Reeve's voice raised in fury, felt the twinge in the air of shifter magic, and heard the low growling of a wolf under attack. Renfrey turned, and his four paws hit the muddy earth, already accelerating into battle.

Ten of them this time, if you included the one he'd seen out in the rain. Nine of them in the camp, and they'd already caused utter destruction. Their rations were scattered across the muddy ground, their store of firewood had been knocked over and was already soaked through with rain, and four of the six tents were down, gouges ripped in the canvas by demonic talons. But that could wait until later. Renfrey dropped into the haze of battle without missing a beat, his jaws fastening around a long, demonic limb and biting down until he felt something burst sickly between his teeth. These were smaller than the ones they'd fought that first day, and a little more like one another in shape—each had four legs, each had a roughly cylindrical body, each was coated in thick hair that slid wetly from their bodies at the slightest provocation and heaped up behind them like shed skin. They were like a revolting parody of a wolf, these creatures. But they were easy to kill.

Too easy, Renfrey realized, standing triumphant over the twitching corpse of the final creature with his pack at his side. He knew a distraction ambush when he saw one. They wouldn't wait this long to attack then throw such an easy battle at them. And as the realization settled, he was already running. His pack were with him, blessedly present in his

mind and following his reasoning as quickly as he was. The library. That would be where the body of the assault was.

He only hoped that Syrra had gotten inside before they'd attacked.

They burst through the trees together into the northernmost clearing that had once been the settlement of Kurivon, and Renfrey felt his heart sink. The library was unrecognizable, a lumpy, misshapen silhouette in the last traces of daylight. It took him a second to realize what he was looking at—the library hadn't actually changed shape, for all that it looked like it was bearing strange, cancerous growths. No—it was beset by demons. At least half a dozen of them, clinging to its surface, stabbing and gouging at the wood with frenetic energy. He growled his despair as he watched one draw back a long, blade-like appendage, readying itself to stab it right through one of the boarded windows.

A sudden, unearthly light, and the demon's limb dropped from its body. He stared, unsure of what he'd just witnessed, as the blade-like limb disintegrated before it hit the ground. The creature slithered up to the window it had failed to strike, a ten-foot tongue emerging from some hideous mouth within its body. Another flash of that light, and the tongue curled and blackened like a twig being held in a flame. The demon screamed and fell away from the building, its ruined body curling up as it struck the ground hard.

It wasn't alone, he realized dizzily. There were dozens of demonic corpses littering the ground around the library, some of them already dissolving. The wards, he thought, and it was a realization that came from the shadowy touch of Belmont's mind on his. The wards they'd seen daubed on every available surface in the library. He watched, dumbfounded, as another demon fell from the wall with a howl. He'd known lorekeepers to possess protective magic, knew that many of the enchanted weapons he carried owed their power to it... but he'd never seen such a vivid demonstration.

He'd imagined they were coming to Syrra's rescue. Quickly, he revised that position. They were falling back to the tactical stronghold that was the library. She'd been right, he thought, and his pack's shared mind thought it with him, their chagrin identical. She'd been right when she said they'd be on her doorstep soon enough, begging for mercy... his embarrassment was cut through with clear, aching relief. Relief that the library and its wards were keeping her safe. Relief, too, that this seemed like incontrovertible proof that she wasn't afflicted by demonic taint. No demon could work this kind of power against their own kind.

Their approach was difficult. The library was surrounded by crowds of demons clearly desperate to tear it down. Renfrey spared a curious thought for what it was about buildings that they took such a profound dislike to, then quickly redirected his attention to keeping the pack safe. Distracted as they were, the demons were easy to surprise, and they took down a fair swath, moving quietly through the gathered crowd with their jaws dripping with bitter demon blood. The safety of the library lay ahead.

But as they grew closer, Renfrey realized something was wrong. There were more demons clinging to the library's outer walls than there had been, and though the flashes of strange light were still regularly cleaving limbs from bodies, he could tell that the light was weakening. As he watched, one long, taloned limb slid towards a ground-floor window. He waited for the inevitable flash of a ward... but it didn't come. The demon's limb lingered by the window for a moment, then, emboldened by the lack of light, began to press itself against the glass, harder and harder. He heard the glass shatter, and then the pack were on the move.

The library could not be allowed to fall. He knew that as well as he knew his own name.

And so the night closed in on them. Renfrey lost track of time in the blur of battle, lost track of everything but the here and now. He tore through demon after demon, his fur growing matted with their stinking blood, his jaws clashing

together again and again as he ripped fur and scales and oily hide from his foe, over and over. They stayed close to the library, hugging its perimeter, picking off as many demons as they could to stop them climbing up the side of the great building. Enough of the wards were still holding that the building was doing as much damage as they were to the foe, but Syrra had been right when she said that they hadn't yet glimpsed the true might of the demon army. He gave up counting his kills somewhere after three dozen, and he knew his pack had done the same.

Exhaustion was setting in. It had to be close to midnight when Renfrey found himself pushed back onto the porch of the library, realizing with a jolt that his pack was here too, fighting for their lives. The rain was still falling, and the demons were still coming, and though he'd glimpsed Syrra through windows once or twice, frantically restoring the library's wards, he knew she couldn't work fast enough to keep this tide at bay single-handedly. Pulling on the reserves of adrenaline that had saved his life more times than he could count, he fought on with grim efficiency, tearing each foe limb from limb with the minimum expenditure of energy. His pack's strength was with him. The strength of the library itself, looming above him, seemed to bolster him, too.

But the demons just kept coming. Surely there was an end to them. Surely—and Renfrey made the mistake of trying to scan the darkness beyond the library's pool of light. That moment of distraction was all it took. A demon pressed its advantage, and he felt a great wound open in his shoulder, stinging with more than just the shock of a sharp blade. Reeve was there, a blur of teeth and claws, ripping the beast's limb from its misshapen shoulder, but the damage was done—and he knew why, when he looked at the dismembered limb and saw its edge dripping with something viscous that sizzled against the wooden slats of the library's porch. Renfrey's whole foreleg had gone numb and wouldn't bear his weight. His pack closed in around him, instinctively protecting him,

and he howled his fury at the uncaring storm that continued to pelt them with rain, adding insult to injury.

The doors behind them slammed open. Syrra, her blonde hair pulled back behind her ears, her face streaked with the charcoal she'd been using to restore the wards. The demons surged forward, hungry with enthusiasm at the sight of the open door, and the wolves dropped back through the opening and into the foyer of the library.

“Watch your feet,” Syrra snapped. For a moment, Renfrey wondered if she was joking. Then he looked down to see the floor intricately patterned with a mixture of chalk and—his heart skipped a beat at the unmistakable scent—was that blood? The wolves scattered uneasily backward from the rune, static electricity clinging to their fur, and Syrra moved with them. To leave the door unguarded felt deeply wrong, but already today Renfrey had failed to trust Syrra to his own detriment.

The demons surged, and he fancied he could see savage joy in the twisted excuses they had for faces. The wolves dropped back, back, towards the far walls of the echoing space that made up the library's lower floor. Demons followed them, spilling in through the door in awful numbers. But Renfrey's heart lifted a little as he saw the crowd beginning to thin, just a little. He hardly dared hope. Could this be the bulk of them? Could they have finally broken the back of the assault? And was it too late, with more than a hundred of them inside the library?

Renfrey, limping on his useless leg, blood dripping from half a dozen minor wounds, followed an instinct he'd been trying to suppress for years. He looked to Syrra.

She was standing at the back of the hall, her rune-engraved blade lifted in one hand, the other spread wide as though welcoming her guests inside. The smile on her face was as beautiful as it was terrible. As he watched, she closed her eyes—then mouthed a word even his wolf's senses couldn't pick up.

The floor ignited. One moment, the library was dense with demons, the air already thick with the acrid scent of demonic taint. Then he could see nothing but blinding brightness, even with his eyes squeezed shut. He had just enough time to notice that the light was the same color as the light that had been dismembering the demons on the outside of the library before it faded as quickly as it had lit up. He opened his eyes again, blinking hard as he waited for the afterglow to clear.

The library was empty. Not quite empty—there was a fine black powder in the air, hissing a little as it settled on every available surface, dusting the wide empty floorboards of the library, the stairs to the second floor, the stacks of books that were somehow, against all odds, still neat and intact. He felt the dust settling on his fur, too, and shook it off with revulsion in his throat. He could see his wolves doing the same. Demon dust, he thought faintly. Syrra had taken out a hundred demons in one fell swoop.

And it had cost her, he realized, looking up at the woman at the top of the stairs who was now gripping tightly to the banister to stop herself from fainting. She pointed with one hand at the doorway, her brow furrowed, and Renfrey propelled himself back into action as he realized that more demons were coming. Grim dread began to give way to something like hope, though, as his pack closed in, defending the doorway. They were still coming, yes... but not in quite such large numbers. The flood had become a trickle.

They were winning the war.

Later, he'd curse himself for his complacency. He fought on, working around his useless foreleg, feeling his pack stepping in to compensate for the side he couldn't defend so ably. At some point, he must have lost track of the demons still sliding through the door. One must have gotten past them—or perhaps it had slipped in another way, through a back door, perhaps. However it had happened, though, Renfrey felt his heart stop in his chest when he heard a high, wailing scream like nothing he'd ever heard before. His head whipped around,

just in time to see a dark shape moving up the stairs, and Syrra was lunging after it, her blade held aloft and an absolutely unhinged look on her face.

He tried to run after her, cursed as he fell on his face, then gritted his teeth and shifted back. Vulnerable as his two-legged form was, it was faster than his wolf at the moment. He hugged his unresponsive right arm against his body and sprinted after Syrra, who was still screaming bloody murder from the top of the stairs, stabbing at the demon's misshapen form over and over. But it wasn't trying to fight her. Quite the opposite—it was pulling away, moving down the hallway where Renfrey had first encountered Syrra, what felt like decades ago.

When he reached the top of the stairs, the screaming had reached a fever pitch. There was Syrra, braced against the doorway, slashing with terrifying desperation at the dark figure that was slowly but surely working its way around her guard. She fought like a woman possessed, like a woman with no care at all for her wellbeing... clearly a woman with some training with the blade she wielded, who had nevertheless thrown all that training away in the interests of doing as much damage as she could and to hell with the consequences.

Renfrey drew his knife left-handed, grimacing at the awkwardness of the weight, and joined the fray. The demon, not expecting to be outnumbered, fell back from the doorway. The look Syrra gave him was far from relieved—if anything, she looked even more frightened and angry to see him here than she had been when she'd been fighting the demon alone.

“Go back,” she hissed at him, pointing down the hallway. “Go back, I'm fine, get out—”

But she wasn't. The demon, sensing an advantage, lunged with its bladed limb raised high. Renfrey dove to block its attack, but he was clumsy with his left hand, old muscle memory fighting to use his immovable right arm instead. The demon knocked him flying backwards, and he felt his back hit the door Syrra had been guarding so ferociously. The lock

gave, and he flew backwards through the doorway, landing on his back with a thump.

A strange, high sound caught his ear. For a moment, his mind couldn't place the sound, so completely out of place it was on a battlefield. He turned his head, baffled to see that he wasn't hearing things. There was a crib in the corner of the room, and the high shrill sound he was hearing was a baby's cry.

“What—”

And suddenly, his world went dark.

Chapter 10 - Syrra

It was almost a relief when the demon knocked Renfrey out cold in her children's room, which was about the point that Syrra realized she needed to change her thinking regarding the man who'd ruined her life. First, of course, she needed to destroy the creature that was currently hunkered over his prone, unconscious form. She hated the two-legged ones most of all. Something about that vague resemblance to people made it all the more bone-chilling when you looked into what passed for eyes and remembered that demons were about as far from people as you could get.

She made short work of this one. The upside to Renfrey having been knocked out was that demons were very easily distracted by prone enemies—the creature probably died in the same heartbeat as it was rubbing its horrible little hands together with delight, deciding which part of his unconscious body it was going to eat first. She'd only intended to slit its throat with the blade in her hands, but the utter fury coursing through her body had other ideas, and its head went rolling across the floor while its body slumped bonelessly to the ground.

Well, she thought sourly, kicking the demon's remains away from Renfrey's prone form. She'd been thinking of moving the kids' room anyway, demon bloodstains were as good an excuse as any.

Renfrey really was out cold. She checked that he was breathing and that his pulse was strong and steady in his throat, grateful that the adrenaline of battle stifled any awkwardness around the sensation of her fingertips against his warm skin... then turned towards the door she'd slammed shut behind her. No time to move him just yet, and no time to comfort her crying babies, though their wailing had subsided to uneasy grizzling with the death of the demon. She was running the risk he'd wake up in the room with the twins, but

she had no choice. Even now, she knew the last of the demons might be getting the best of the remainder of the wolf pack.

She shut the door behind her and barred it with a chair, then drew her knife again and hastened down the hallway to rejoin the fray.

Below her, in the library proper, a heartening sight. All five of Renfrey's wolves were still up, which in itself was miracle enough—on top of that, they seemed to have progressed to the mopping-up phase of the battle. The library floor was piled high with demon corpses, and she could see three of the wolves circling to check for any signs of survivors. Council training, she thought with a faint smile. She should have known they could be trusted to take care of the end of the battle.

She was surprised when one of the wolves lifted his great head—she didn't know the difference between them in these bodies—and uttered a bright, bellowing howl. The others looked up before they joined the chorus, rattling the library's window frames, and she realized with a shock that their bright silver eyes were fixed on her, standing at the top of the stairs. She'd run into this particular awkward social situation before. What could a non-wolf do when wolves were howling? She settled for a broad and decidedly awkward smile, and thankfully, it wasn't long until the two of them shifted back and moved up the stairs to join her.

"The army's gone," Reeve said immediately. His usually impeccable hair was matted with blood and thoroughly askew, and she could see him nursing a few wounds, but he was beaming with the inner light of a warrior triumphant. "Mostly dead, maybe a handful scattered—hard to tell out there, even with the rain letting up."

She blinked with surprise as she noticed the absence of drumming on the roof. Typical of the weather to give them a break right *after* they needed it.

"Renfrey?" That was Belmont, his expression far less cheery than his packmate's. "We last saw him heading up the

stairs.”

“Safe,” she said quickly. “A demon knocked him out, but it’s dead now.”

“It’s not alone,” Belmont said, gesturing to the banister piled high with thick black ash that was going to be a real hassle to sweep up. “That runework was remarkable, Syrra. I’ve never seen such a large patterning hold enough power to do the damage it did. How—”

“Let’s talk shop later,” Reeve said, shifting impatiently from foot to foot. “He’s right, of course, you’re a genius, but let’s finish our sweep before we celebrate?”

She marveled at the difference in the pack’s energy as they set about cleaning up the aftermath of the battle. The stiff, awkward formality she remembered from the earlier afternoon was gone, replaced with an easy familiarity, and a respectful deference to her power, that made her feel like she might burst into tears. The last time there’d been people around who treated her like she was one of them had been—but she closed the lid, gently but firmly, on that train of thought. There would be a time when she’d need to reckon with the trauma she was carrying, but that time was not tonight.

Once they’d made sure the upper and lower floors of the library were all clear of demons, Syrra ducked away down the hallway to check on Renfrey. Still unconscious where she’d left him, one of the twins’ spare pillows propping up his head, but he was breathing easy and she could see that the deep, ugly wound in his shoulder had stopped bleeding. First things first, she decided, scooping the twins out of their crib. Bless them, they’d actually gone back to sleep, despite the absolute stranger lying on the floor of their room. She firmly stopped herself from wondering whether they recognized him on some level.

She’d just finished moving the babies and the crib into the empty room across the corridor when she heard a soft cough in the doorway. Syrra whirled, sick to her stomach at the thought that Renfrey might be standing there—and felt a

mixture of relief and exasperation when it was one of his men, instead. Was it Blaine? Of the six of them, he seemed to speak the least. But his silver eyes were fixed on the crib behind her. Well, too late to come up with a story now. At least she wouldn't have to worry about figuring out a way to hide her kids from a pack of wolves who'd moved in with them.

“Asher and Emmy,” she said faintly, gesturing to each child in turn. Blaine surprised her with a grin that spread across his formidable features like sunshine.

“I didn't know.”

“I don't exactly advertise their presence,” she said dryly, rubbing her forehead.

“Yours?”

“Mine,” she agreed, feeling a shiver of dread at the alternative. What if she hadn't survived? What if it was another of the lorekeepers who'd made it this far, caring for her orphaned children? It was only dumb luck that had spared Syrra and taken the others... she felt that grim spiral threatening to claim her and shook her head hard. Blaine was looking at her closely.

“You ought to get some rest,” he said. “Magic like that takes it out of you.”

He was right. Whenever she stopped moving, she could feel her whole body shaking, just slightly. But she shook her head, jaw tightening. “Need to shore up the defenses first, if we're going to make it through the night.”

He didn't argue with her, which she appreciated. He did tilt his head for a moment though, his eyes on hers. “The invitation stands, then? Despite our rudeness earlier?”

Syrra fought back a laugh, delirious with exhaustion as she joined him in the hallway, closing the door gently behind her. The rest of the pack found their way upstairs shortly afterwards, all human-shaped again. “The invitation absolutely stands,” she clarified, spreading her hands. “If I wasn't so utterly drained I'd make some sort of speech about it, but—no.

You're here, you fought beside me and saved our lives—welcome to the last library on Kurivon.” She couldn't resist following it up with: “That's if you're convinced I'm not going to turn into a demon overnight.”

A couple of the wolves looked sheepish—Torren and Reeve, though, burst out laughing, which was the response she preferred. “We're safe? You've checked outside?”

“Full patrol of the area, no demons in sight.” That was Darion. He'd been one of the ones too embarrassed to meet her eyes when she'd joked about being a demon. She'd known a few wolves like him—traditionalists, usually, so choked by ideas around honor and justice that he'd likely be trying stiffly to make amends for the insult for months. She didn't mind. It was slowly dawning on her that she wasn't alone any longer—that these wolves were here to stay.

“Right, who's wounded?” she said briskly, realizing that if she stopped to think about it for too long, she was going to start weeping. “Don't be brave idiots, demon blood festers in a wound, as you well know. C'mon. We need a fire, and something to eat, and I'll tell you where the bedrolls are so you can get something halfway decent set up...”

It must have been nearly dawn when they all finally turned in for the night, Syrra leaving the little pack stretched out on borrowed bedrolls around the fire in the hall downstairs. At some point they'd organize rooms for the six of them, but for tonight it had felt right to camp out like they had. Their wounds were clean and their bellies were full—Syrra had shrugged and dragged out the remainder of the fish she'd preserved a few days earlier, the wolves promising they'd fetch the rations they'd brought from the campsite in the morning to replenish her stocks. For a gathering dedicated to cleaning wounds and recovering from a battle that had almost ended in calamitous defeat, it was a surprisingly pleasant evening. Nobody even bothered her for details of the feud between her and Renfrey... not much, anyway, and Reeve was easily put off by a warning look across the fire from Belmont. And Blaine, despite being the one wolf in this building to

know about the twins asleep upstairs, didn't mention a word about them. She felt a rush of gratitude for him so strong it nearly knocked her out.

Renfrey. She did feel a twinge of worry when she headed up the stairs. She'd checked on him a few times, found him sleeping easily where she'd left him, but she didn't like the look of the wound. Wolves ought to heal faster than that, especially in their two-legged forms. She knew she should leave it until she'd had at least a few hours sleep, knew that he wasn't getting worse... but still, she found herself slipping into what she was already thinking of as his room, her medicine bag tucked under her arm.

She'd have done this for any of them, she told herself firmly as she unpacked the precious remains of her supplies. Renfrey had been injured the worst, so he got the most careful attention from her, that was all. She'd cleaned the wound already, but she realized as she studied it that cleaning hadn't been enough. There was something still in the wound, some sticky, viscous residue that she realized was magical in nature, not purely physical. No wonder his body wasn't healing—there was something in the way that flesh couldn't push out, holding the wound open.

Worry settled in her stomach like a weight, and she cursed herself for not paying closer attention to Renfrey's injuries earlier. It wasn't like a wolf to be knocked out for so long. The fact that he hadn't stirred when she'd shifted his prone form to make it more comfortable should have been a warning. But she'd been so eager to get out of the room, to get away from the man who still awakened such strong feelings in her. What if her negligence had done serious damage? She passed her hands over the wound a few times, trying to settle the panic that was threatening to overwhelm her.

Come on, lorekeeper. Time to earn your title.

There had always been some debate about healing, among lorekeepers. Some asserted that it wasn't magic at all, that it was simply the application of herbs proven to react

positively to demonic taint. Others insisted that the inherent gifts of the healer came into play. It had been a field she'd considered investigating for a while during her training, before the absolute chaos of her pregnancy and subsequent move to Kurivon had broken out. She'd always been interested in the inherent gifts of individuals, what magic lay beyond the two major known fields of shifter magic and demonic magic. By all rights, Syrra shouldn't have had access to either pool, and yet she was as capable as any other lorekeeper of the tricks of their trade. Where was her magic coming from, if not her wolf, as was usually assumed?

Whatever its origins, she was grateful for it now. She had precious little remaining stock of her stronger balms and tinctures, but there was no point sparing her supplies if it meant Renfrey stayed unconscious, or worse. With a deep breath, she emptied what she had left into the wound, closing her eyes and whispering a blessing in the hopes the words would speed the work of the ointments. More could be made, she told herself firmly, especially now that it would be safer to go gather herbs... but the more she looked at Renfrey's pale, unresponsive face, the less she was worried about something as arbitrary as medicine. With the wound cleaned and dressed, there was nothing more she could do but wait... but she found herself lingering by his side, whispering the blessing again, tracing the pattern of a protective ward on his shoulder with the tip of her finger.

She fell into a kind of waking reverie, half trance, half sleep. The library was quiet as dawn crept over the horizon, the dark sky outside slowly lightening to gray, and then the pale, clear blue of the morning after a storm. When Renfrey's eyelids slid slowly open, she felt something deep in her belly unclench. For a moment, he looked up at her, his expression utterly unguarded—and all the anger she'd felt for him for three years seemed to slide off her like rainwater.

“How's your arm?” she said softly. He didn't break eye contact as he opened and closed his right hand, and her smile

widened with relief. Demonic paralysis could be nasty, not to mention permanent.

Later, she wouldn't be quite sure how it had happened. But suddenly, Renfrey was propped up on one elbow, and as she became aware that he was moving closer to her, she realized she was doing the same, leaning down, one hand quietly pushing her satchel of healing supplies safely to one side. When their lips met, he sighed as though he'd been waiting a lifetime for the relief of it. It was as though they'd barely spent a day apart, let alone three years and a century's worth of grief and anger. That single moment of contact was like waking up from a long, torturous dream and realizing with a thrill of relief and joy that none of it had been real.

She felt his fingers against her neck, sliding through the tangle of hair to cup the back of her head ever so gently, holding her close... as though she needed any more encouragement to deepen the kiss, the sweetness of which was already beginning to burn with a deeper, fiercer kind of desire. She hadn't felt this kind of heat since the night they'd spent together, for all that she'd wished she could—but even in the depths of the worst loneliness she'd ever felt, Syrra had never wanted anyone's hands on her but Renfrey's. He drew her forward, now, his other arm coming in to wrap with an exquisite gentleness around her waist. For a man who spent so much of his time on battlefields, he'd always surprised her with the careful way he handled her... not like something fragile, but like something holy. Shifting forward on her knees, refusing to break the kiss even for a second in case all of this dissolved like a dream, Syrra worked her way into his lap and sighed with pleasure as his arms tightened around her. On her knees, in this position, she had a few inches of height on him, the novelty of which made her smile against his lips. He was always so remote, so unassailable when he loomed above her, face as set and unchanging as the scar that ran down his cheek. Her fingertips brushed against that ridge of scar tissue when she lifted a hand to caress his face, and she felt a strange

flicker of magical resonance in her belly even as he stiffened slightly at the touch.

She'd forgotten about that. Renfrey's whole body was decorated with scars—it came with the territory of hunting demons. Even the fresh wound on his arm would add a new one to the collection. Renfrey had never minded her tracing them with his fingertips... in one of the breaks they'd taken to recover their breath, he'd told her the stories of a few of the more serious ones, letting her caress each one until they quickly became distracted again. But the scar on his face was different. It was the oldest one, that was all he'd tell her about it. But whenever her fingers touched it, he'd flinch as though the wound was still fresh.

That memory only served to intensify the strange feeling that no time had actually passed between the night they'd spent together and this moment, and Syrra simply couldn't find the strength to resist that illusion. She reminded herself to avoid that side of his face, choosing instead to press her lips to his cheek on the other side, losing herself in the pleasing rasp of his stubble beneath her lips, the strong line of his jawline, the surprisingly soft skin of his eyelids fluttering shut beneath her ministrations. She felt his lips on her throat, his hot breath sending sparks shuddering down her back that his hands followed, as if drawn there by magnets. When had her fingers started unbuttoning his shirt, she wondered? She was already pushing it from his shoulders, taking care not to disturb the freshly-bandaged wound. His body was hot beneath her hands, and she ran them down his chest as though he belonged to her.

He did, she thought faintly. He always had. That was what had made it so hard when he ... but that thought wasn't welcome here. Not here, in this precious, fragile, ever so impermanent bubble they'd found themselves in, this liminal space between dawn and day where Renfrey was holding her like he'd never let her go and every cell in her body was singing with the pure, raucous joy of it. She claimed his lips in a fierce, possessive kiss again and felt his breathing speed up,

felt his hands tighten in her shirt and then yank at it with a sudden frustration she was all too happy to indulge. How long had it been since she'd undressed in front of another living person? She tossed the shirt aside, felt him break the kiss long enough to sit back and look at her, his silver eyes alive with light. Nobody had ever looked at her the way he did—nobody's gaze made her feel so powerful, so gorgeous. Every worshipful caress of her full figure seemed to spike her heart rate, and she couldn't stop herself from moaning when he buried his face in her throat and kissed his way down her front, his skillful fingers having already unclasped and tossed aside her bra.

She'd been wrong to worry that Renfrey's injuries might limit him in this arena, she realized—with effortless strength, he was rearranging their position, laying her down on the bedroll she'd worked beneath his unconscious form what felt like a hundred thousand years ago. If his arm was troubling him, he was certainly giving no indication. The look of ferocious intensity in his eyes had nothing to do with pain and everything to do with the hard press of his manhood she could feel against her thigh as he tightened his arms around her, entangling their bodies as he left scorching kisses all over the sensitive skin of her throat. How did he remember exactly where she was most sensitive? Anyone would think he'd been studying her body for years with how easy he seemed to find it to reduce her to a quivering wreck, whimpering and moaning with every touch of his lips against her skin. She was only distantly aware that he was stripping them both completely naked, and when she noticed it was only with an impatient kind of relief. About time they got that silly layer of fabric out of the way. Who were they kidding here, really? It was as though her body had been waiting for this with mounting impatience ever since they'd first reunited in the hallway out there. Longer than that, if she was honest with herself. Much longer.

She was still exploring his body with her hands, caressing the deliciously firm muscles of his abdomen, skating

over the ridges of scar tissue. Some of it she remembered, some of it was new... and every touch was drawing the exact response she wanted from Renfrey, which was a growing difficulty to hold himself back from her. He was breathing hard when he met her eyes again, his silver eyes almost black with lust, and she didn't break that contact when she slid her hand over his hip and around his body to take his erection into a firm, meaningful grip. There was a spike of arousal deep in her gut at the feeling of him in her hand, only accentuated by the guttural moan he uttered, the way he thrust himself against her hand as that ironclad control slipped for a moment.

He'd kept her waiting for long enough. She wasn't going to wait another second to feel him inside her. And he seemed to realize that at the same moment as her resolve crystallized. With that frustratingly effortless strength of his, he lifted her body and adjusted their positions, breathing hard against her throat for a moment before he slid himself inside her. Syrra was grateful when he claimed her lips in an urgent, desperate kiss—nothing else would have silenced the cry of absolute bliss that was threatening to tear itself from her throat, and if they were interrupted by curious packmates right now, she didn't know what she'd do.

How had she survived as long as she had without this feeling? She clung to him, rocking up to meet his urgent thrusts with everything in her, the exhaustion of the day forgotten as her aching body finally received what it had been craving for years. It seemed unthinkable that so many years had passed since they'd last been locked in each other like this, his face against her throat, the sweet sound of his moans of pleasure sending answering shockwaves of delight up and down her spine. The pent-up yearning felt like it was shaking loose with every burst of sensation and she dug her fingers into his back, tightened her legs around his waist, hurled everything she had left into every thrust. The ache in her muscles was as sweet as the ache of her desire, and they both gasped for breath against one another's lips as the inevitable edge drew closer and closer. She knew he wanted to reach that

edge as badly as she did, but she could feel him, too, holding back—climax was a double-edged sword that would put an end to their delicious lovemaking even as it gave them what they both so desperately wanted.

But Syrra could no sooner have held back her orgasm as she could have held her body back from falling from a cliff. There was something almost violent about the way the feeling swelled, ruptured, tore through her like a fever—she was writhing beneath him, working hard to stifle her cries of ecstasy against his lips even as she felt him, too, crashing over the edge beside her, every muscle in his body trembling as fiercely as she was as they were rocked together in the grips of the most powerful climax she could remember. For the longest time, all she was aware of was their bodies, the slick sweat of their skin, the cool rasp of his breathing against her throat, the warm tangle of his arms and the delightful blurring of where his body ended and hers began.

And then, piercing their reverie with all the accuracy of a dart through a balloon, she heard it. The distant, wavering cry of a baby who'd woken up in a slightly unfamiliar room and decided to outsource the trouble to his mother. It was always Asher who woke first. Her body moved reflexively towards the doorway, and it was only when she was halfway disentangled from Renfrey that she froze, every memory that she'd quietly put away rushing back in to fill the space with a horrible lurch.

Renfrey, still flushed from the exertion of their lovemaking, his sweat-damp brow furrowed with confusion... and a dawning horror. Before she could say anything he was on his feet, pausing only to yank his trousers on, fastening them as he moved. She cursed under her breath as she dressed too, furious that she'd let her guard down so catastrophically, terrified of what was about to happen, desperately hoping he might wait and let her explain at least a little before he barged into the room—

But she was fresh out of good luck, it seemed. When she chased Renfrey into the hallway, he was already standing

in the open door to her children's room, and one look at the stricken expression on his face told her that his clever mind had put all the pieces together. She opened her mouth to speak, not sure what she was going to say—his name, maybe? An apology? But then he looked at her, and her voice froze in her throat.

And after the most horrible silence she could remember since the morning she'd first woken up to find him gone, Renfrey turned on his heel and walked away from her, as calm and unstoppable as a great ship. Thirty seconds later she heard the dull thud of the library's front doors opening... and just like that, he was gone.

Again.

Chapter 11 - Renfrey

There wasn't a single thought in Renfrey's head until he reached the coastline. Then, with an abruptness that nearly knocked him over, everything hit him at once.

The sun had just broken over the sea, and he realized with a dull lurch that meant he'd made it all the way to the easternmost shore of the island without paying any conscious attention to where he was going. Had he shifted? Evidently not, judging by his muddy feet and the dirt and leaves clinging to his trousers. Hadn't bothered with a shirt or shoes, it seemed. That was fine by him. There were bigger things on his mind right now. Things like the cot he'd seen when he'd pushed that door open. Things like the sleepy, curious silver eyes that had met his with all the deceptive force of a low wave, pushing him over and dragging him out to sea...

The sea was calm below him where he stood on the cliff, but his thoughts were anything but calm. Even now, he was struggling to believe what he'd seen. Even now, his rational mind was grabbing desperately at scraps, comments that Syrra had made, trying to make it make sense. How could she have failed to mention that there were two babies in the room upstairs? How could she have insisted to the pack that she was alone out here, when it was clear that she was anything but?

But that wasn't what had really sent him spiraling. What had driven him straight out of that building and into the wilds wasn't the surprise of finding that an unoccupied room was anything but... it was the way his intuition had leaped right ahead to the conclusion that his rational mind was only now struggling to catch up to. There was only one reason Syrra wouldn't have mentioned the babies to their pack, one reason she'd have fought so desperately to prevent him, specifically, from realizing they were there.

Syrra was their mother. And though part of him was working desperately to come up with any other possibility regarding their fatherhood, he knew in his bones what the truth was.

No, he thought simply, relinquishing his grip on an idea too thorny and painful to hold for any longer than a heartbeat. No, he wasn't thinking about this. He wasn't imagining what it must have been like for her to discover her pregnancy alone, to go through it without him by her side. He wasn't imagining how much worse the horror and fear of being alone on this demon-infested island would have been with two defenseless babies to care for on top of herself. And he certainly wasn't going to think about what was going to happen now that he knew about the children, knew about his connection to them, knew that he had a responsibility to—

The shift ripped through him almost without his prompting, but as his paws hit the rocky soil, he knew it was the right choice. His wolf's mind was still his own, but in this shape, he had different priorities, different areas of focus... it was easier to drive a thought out of his mind, especially if he could replace it with something more immediate, more primal. Something like hunting demons, perhaps. There were bound to be a few demons lingering in the trees here after the assault last night, weren't there?

The dawn blurred into day. Renfrey traversed the island like a wolf possessed, sticking to the deepest, thickest parts of the forest wherever he could. He was aware of a dull ache in his right foreleg where the demon's deep wound hadn't quite healed, but he welcomed the pain with every hard strike of his paws against the soil. Pain meant focus. Pain shook his mind out of its awful, spiraling thoughts and brought it firmly into the here and now. He tried to bury everything that he was, everything he'd ever been, focusing every scrap of his conscious mind on the here and now, on drawing out the intricate trails of demonic scent to identify the freshest, the most likely to lead him to a victim.

It was mid-afternoon by the time he found one, in the trees towards the northernmost tip of the island. Here, he was about as far away as you could get from the library without going into the water, and if he'd been allowing himself to even remember that the library existed, he'd have been grateful. As it was, all he was thinking about was the rasping of his breath in his throat, the thudding of his heart in his ribcage, and the sure and certain stench of demon blood in his nostrils. This was it. He'd found splashes of blood on dozens of trees, leaving scorch marks in its wake... and the fact that the blood hadn't dissolved meant that the creature it had come from was still alive.

Renfrey geared himself up for a fight, tensing his muscles, preparing the weapon that was his body for the fray. He'd never entered a fight without the knowledge that it might be his last—even the simplest battle against a demon could turn in a heartbeat, and his own death had been a constant companion over the years. This time, though, that companion slipped away about as soon as he stepped out of the trees and into the small clearing to which he'd finally tracked his quarry.

The only thing that told him the demon was still alive was the fact that its body hadn't disintegrated yet. As he looked upon the torn creature lying in a pathetic pool of its own blood, he quickly realized that the splashes of blood and broken branches he'd seen had been caused by the creature dragging its body through the trees. It was serpent-like, this creature, with a long body he could picture undulating and twisting, and there were jagged teeth sticking out of a series of holes that almost resembled mouths. A customary shudder of revulsion went through him, but even that was almost laughably weak. This creature lacked the strength even to addle his senses.

It could barely muster the energy to hiss as he moved up beside it, feeling curiously hollow. Along its side, red eyes flickered as though they were losing electricity, and he got the sense that it could barely see him. Was this the creature he'd spent his whole day searching for? Was this the purpose he'd

pledged his whole life to? Just this, a mangled, broken creature that was too bloody-minded and stupid even to let itself die? Renfrey gazed down at it for a long moment, then placed his forepaws against its body to brace himself and tore its head off.

It wasn't mercy, he told himself as he watched the eyes finally flicker into darkness. There was no mercy for demons—mercy had a dependent relationship with honor, and the very concept was incompatible with a demon. They were nothing but destruction, nothing but evil, nothing but the worst things that could dwell in a man's heart, brought out and made flesh. He stood by the body until he'd confirmed the unmistakable signs that it was finally dissolving, and then he turned without a second thought and walked away.

He knew he should return to his pack. They'd be worried about him by now, if they hadn't been already when they woke to find him gone. He wasn't sure whether his abrupt exit from the library had disturbed their sleep, but Syrra must have filled them in on what had happened by now. Syrra... even her name twisted the knife buried in his heart, and despite the effort he'd committed to building a huge brick wall around thoughts of her, he could feel every last brick tumbling down.

And he knew he couldn't go back. Not for his pack, and not for Syrra, and certainly not for—he closed his eyes against the storm that erupted in him at even the thought of what lay in that room. He was a father. The moment he set foot in that library again, he'd have to face the fact that the one thing he'd been determined to avoid his whole life had nevertheless come to pass. It wasn't fair. Hadn't he sacrificed enough? Hadn't he given away the love of his life? Hadn't he suffered enough, walking away from her the way he had, condemning himself to his howling, lonely isolation for the rest of his life?

No. It wasn't enough. He'd been weak when he met her. He'd let himself believe that one night couldn't hurt, that the odds were laughably low of anything happening. And now

... he found himself at the rocky cliffs on the northernmost point of the island again, staring out over the waves as the sun lowered itself towards the horizon. Nearly nightfall. That meant prime demon hours were approaching—they were always most active in the hours between nightfall and midnight. Dangerous, to be alone out here.

And dangerous was *exactly* what he wanted.

Renfrey had always known he'd die in battle. There was a strange kind of peace in knowing that the fatal blow was coming, it just hadn't quite reached him yet. Simple, if a little grim. That was why he'd always been the first to sign up for the most dangerous missions, the first to volunteer for the battles with the slimmest odds. He wasn't foolhardy or reckless, like many hunters he could name. He just went into each fight balancing the intention to survive it with the knowledge that he might not.

Because when Renfrey had been far, far too young to learn the lesson that nevertheless struck him like a bullet, he'd seen that there were far worse ways to die than fighting for your life. He could die like his father had, for example. Renfrey felt a horrible coldness settle into his bones as the sun began to sink below the horizon, as though his body was already being plunged into night. How long had it been since he'd allowed a full thought about his father to form?

But now the floodgates were open, and Renfrey closed his eyes and settled his head onto his paw, hoping he'd simply dissolve like a dead demon and save himself a lot of trouble. His body remained stubbornly solid, however, and his thoughts continued to coalesce until his mind's eye was looking directly at the transformed figure of... not a man, he corrected himself. Not a man any longer. A figure with familiar jet-black hair, a few inches longer than Renfrey's but identical in texture and shade. A figure looming over two shapes on the floor that his mind's eye, mercifully, left blurry.

For a memory he'd done his best to bury, it was shocking just how much detail had been retained. He could

hear his own young voice clear as a bell, hollow with shock and denial, the ends of each sentence lifting in the cruel, baffling hope that his questions might be met with answers. Only silence—only horrible silence, and the rasping of the monster's breath, and its talons, damp and dripping with clots of gore. Renfrey, standing at once inside and outside of the memory, was acutely aware of his face, whole and unmarked as the last few precious seconds of his childhood bled away.

The monster whirled and struck without warning, a reflexive motion as devoid of emotion as a machine whirring to life at the press of a button. There was no recognition in that awful mockery of a once-loved face, no indication that the beast saw anything but another body to rend and tear. It was sheer dumb luck that had saved Renfrey. The beast had misjudged its balance just enough, as it raised that awful bladed limb, that the wound it delivered failed to kill him where he stood. Instead, it tore his face open from temple to jawline. Later, poring over details of the scene, he'd realize that the beast had been aiming to split him in half... and that it had proven it possessed the power to do so. Twice, in fact.

And that was when Renfrey made the decision that would save his life. He struck, with all the strength his young body possessed, gouging his pocket knife deeply into the beast's throat even as his own wound poured thick hot blood down his chest. The memory dissolved into fragments there—a boy clinging for dear life to the neck of a monster, beheading it inch by grueling inch with a blunt pocket knife. He'd never recovered any recollection of the week that followed... if he was honest, he was surprised he still remembered the fight itself in so much detail.

Because if it had been up to Renfrey, he'd have forgotten absolutely everything about the night he'd killed his father.

Chapter 12 - Syrra

He was gone. It took about five minutes for that knowledge to really settle with her—long enough to get the twins back to sleep, long enough to walk thoughtfully back to her own room and sit down on her own bed. Unslept in, still. Well, she'd never felt less like sleeping in her life. He'd really walked out on her again, hadn't he? The timing of it would have been funny if it weren't so utterly, grimly, exhaustingly sad. Syrra stared at the window as the sky slowly lightened, hating that her body was still purring like a cat in the sunshine, hating that he'd left quicker than even the endorphins their lovemaking had produced.

At least she was accepting it this time, she thought with something like a smile twisting her lips suddenly. The first time he'd left, it had taken her a solid week to realize that there hadn't been some mistake, some error, some awful misunderstanding—that sometimes, men simply walked out of your life, even if everything in your gut was telling you that they were your soulmate and you were destined to be together. Her head had learned that lesson well, judging by how quickly she'd come to an understanding and an acceptance, unwilling as it may have been. But her intuition hadn't learned a damned thing, judging by how quickly it had been willing to jump on the soulmate train again. Gods, lying there in his arms had felt so perfect she'd almost told him she loved him. Small mercies, she thought, waiting patiently for the tears to well up in her eyes.

But the morning wore on, and no tears materialized. She just felt numb, and hollow, and empty, and so tired that even rest was out of the question. And when she began to hear the faint sounds of the wolf pack moving around downstairs, clearly keeping their voices low to avoid disturbing her, she knew it was time that she got moving. With a heavy sigh, she got to her feet and braced herself for yet another awful conversation.

The five of them were clustered close together around the fire—she dimly noticed they’d lit it already, and even swept up the ash from the previous night, something she’d have appreciated if she’d had any spare room in her brain. Five pairs of silver eyes flicked up when she appeared at the top of the stairs, and she gritted her teeth again at the identical looks of confused concern on their faces. Of course Renfrey hadn’t stopped to explain anything. The numbness gave way, just for a moment, to a prickling of hot anger that forced her to steady herself against the banister again. That was a dangerous road to go down, she thought quietly, waiting for the anger to fade before she continued. With how brittle and bone-dry she was feeling right now, a single spark might just be enough to bring her whole situation down in flames. Better to go carefully.

“Morning,” she managed dryly when she’d reached the wolves. It was such a stilted and unnecessary greeting that she saw Reeve bite back on a laugh, which oddly made her feel a little better. “So, he’s gone again, huh?”

“Again?” Trust Belmont to zero right in on the relevant word. She shut her eyes for a moment, suddenly wishing like hell she’d gone to sleep alone last night instead of falling into Renfrey’s arms like an absolute moron. The worst part, of course, was knowing that even knowing what she did now, she wasn’t completely sure she’d have done anything differently. Sex with him was—well, she wouldn’t say it was worth the cost, not exactly. But it was close.

A soft cough from the waiting wolves. She opened her eyes again, and to her relief, found a little lightness underneath the crushing weight of it all. “First, come with me. I’ve always been a fan of visual storytelling.”

All five of these men were single—Syrra knew that from their conversation the night before, suspected that the Council had sent wolves without soulmates on purpose—more proof that Renfrey had never breathed a word about her to anyone, which stung, again. Still, she was surprised by the restraint they all showed when she opened the door to reveal

her sleeping children. All five of them managed to refrain from making any sound at all, though Reeve did open his mouth before catching an elbow in the rib from the quick-thinking Belmont. Syrra couldn't have dealt with a crying baby at that point. After they'd been given a suitable look, she shut the door again, and gestured silently for them to follow her back down the stairs. Blaine, to his credit, didn't let on at any point that he'd already encountered the twins.

And then she launched into the story. To her surprise—and perhaps evidence that she was absolutely losing her mind—she told it well. Not only did she manage to avoid bursting into hysterical gales of tears, the kind of sobbing fit that takes days to recover from, she even managed to make it funny, in places. Even the grim-faced Darion cracked a reluctant smile here and there—mostly at the jokes that were at Renfrey's expense. After all, he wasn't here to defend himself, was he?

“So, that's the whole stupid drama,” she concluded sourly, rolling her eyes like an exasperated teenager telling her best friend about how unreasonable her parents were being. A defense mechanism, probably. Framing the story as some silly childish drama took away from the dreadful hurt it had caused. “We got together, he discovered we were soulmates, he walked out immediately. Skip forward three years and two babies... we got together, he discovered the babies, he walked out immediately.” She exhaled hard, rubbing her forehead. “Say what you like about Renfrey, but he's consistent.”

“I'm so sorry, Syrra—”

“Please don't,” she said faintly, lifting a hand as she sensed that Torren was about to try to hug her. “Please, don't be nice to me or I'm going to fall apart completely. I appreciate it, but just—let's talk about this like we're machines, okay? I need us to be very, *very* practical here.”

“Understood,” Belmont said softly. “In that case...” He cleared his throat. “Do you know why he left? Wolves tend to prefer to remain with their soulmates, in most cases.”

Now she was fighting back laughter. “Good work, Belmont. Strong robot energy. I have no idea,” she said, grimacing. “You know the man, he barely talks about anything. I asked around at the Council after it happened the first time, but they’re as obsessed with secrecy as he is. The closest I could find to a clue is that nobody—and I mean absolutely nobody—has heard him say a single word about his childhood. No family, no pack—nothing.”

The five of them nodded agreement, dashing a secret hope she’d been nursing that Renfrey might have spilled something relevant to one of his packmates. Darion cleared his throat. “Do we think he’s going to come back?”

Syrra could feel their eyes on her, and she shrugged. “Based on last time, I can only guess it’ll take three years and a demon invasion in another world. This time—who knows?”

“If it were me, I’d come back,” Blaine said unexpectedly. “Those are his children up there. A wolf can’t walk away from blood.”

“I’m no expert,” Syrra said dryly, blinking her blue eyes a few times to remind them. “I think it’s best we proceed as though he’s not coming back of his own volition, though. Which means—” She hesitated, glancing around at the gathering, remembering belatedly that she was addressing a highly-trained group of soldiers, not her pack back home, or her found family of lorekeepers. “Sorry. I’m sure you guys have protocols in place for when the Alpha’s—indisposed?” She’d almost said ‘dead’, but she bit her tongue on that one. Angry as she was deliberately stopping herself from being, she’d never forgive herself if a comment like that turned out to be true.

“No protocols,” Belmont said after a pause. “We run on common sense, I suppose.”

“Who’s most experienced here?” Blaine wanted to know.

“How are we judging experience, exactly? Because Darion and I are the exact same age, but I’ve a damn sight more experience than he does—”

“—what the devil are you talking about, you arrogant fool? You think *you*—I’m not doing this,” Darion said abruptly, though he’d cut himself off a little too late to hide the very real fury that had been burning in his eyes. Sibling rivalry, Syrra thought faintly. She didn’t envy Renfrey his command.

“I have a suggestion,” Belmont said quietly, and Syrra noticed the way the group quieted to listen. The understated wolf had clearly made an impression on them all. “I don’t think we need an Alpha at all.”

A murmur of concern at that, but Syrra leaned forward, grateful for any distraction at this point. “Then who’ll decide what action we take?”

“We will,” Belmont said, frowning a little. “We’re all Alphas of considerable ability, aren’t we? The Council explicitly chose us for those qualities.”

“You’re suggesting we split up? Go solo?”

“The opposite.” Belmont spread his hands. “I’m suggesting we work together without pointless bickering matches about who’s in charge and who’s giving the order. We have a shared goal, do we not? Purge the demonic threat from Kurivon, build a thriving settlement that will stand strong against the forces of corruption... and perhaps most pressing of all, retrieve our lost packmate from the loneliness to which he’s consigned himself. What part of that needs someone barking orders?”

“I have to agree,” Syrra said with a shrug. “Lorekeepers don’t have Alphas. I mean, we have different specializations, of course, and defer to each other’s expertise in those areas... but nobody’s giving orders.”

“Wolves need leadership,” Darion pointed out quietly, but she could tell from his expression he was half convinced.

“We’re all leaders,” Belmont said simply. “Syrra’s summed it up beautifully. We defer to each other’s expertise, and we refrain from giving orders. The expertise to which I am deferring here is Renfrey’s, by the way,” the quiet man added. “He has a gift for forward planning which, with respect, is unmatched among our group. All of us expect to bring our packs through to live here on this island, when the building is underway—and we’ll lead those packs. But I strongly believe that it’s Renfrey who should lead us.”

A ringing silence followed his words. Syrra cleared her throat, aware that if she stayed quiet too long she’d start weeping. Belmont was right, curse him. Renfrey was a monster for walking out on her and her children like he had, but she’d seen him with these men, and she knew a leader when she saw one. Damn him, what was his damage? What made him so unflinchingly poised in making decisions for the group under pressure—why did that strength of will fail to carry over to his personal life? To his family?

Belmont cleared his throat softly. “Syrra. I’ve talked too long about him. My apologies. What can we do to make this day... less awful?”

She took a deep breath, grateful he’d at least not asked how he could make her feel ‘better’. There was no ‘better’, not from these wolves at any rate. “I’m afraid the only thing that can fix Renfrey is Renfrey,” she said ruefully. But Belmont shook his head.

“I’m not talking about Renfrey. I’m talking about you.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, trying for a breezy tone and failing. “I can take care of myself. You take care of the pack.”

The wolves exchanged glances, frowning. “Syrra, you’re *part* of the pack,” Reeve said slowly, the way she’d imagine he’d speak to a very small child. It would have been deeply, deeply annoying if not for what he was actually saying to her. “What, you think we’re just going to leave you up there with two babies and a broken heart?”

“Shut up, Reeve,” she hissed, pressing two fists to her eyes. “What did I say about—”

“Sorry, sorry,” she heard him say hastily. “Uh—it would not be an optimized division of labor to ... assign all childcare duties to a single—operative—requesting that function be served by... I hate this,” he finished impatiently. “Let us help with the kids, Syrra, come on.”

She opened her eyes cautiously. “Do any of you... know *how*?”

There was a strange, coarse sound—she realized, to her growing shock, that it was a laugh she’d never heard before. Darion, his stony face creased with amusement. “Do we know *how*? Syrra, no wolf leaves *childhood* without knowing how. Not in my pack, anyway,” he added darkly, eyes flicking around the circle. But the others were nodding in agreement. She felt suddenly light-headed. How long had she been the most aggressively single parent in the world? How long had she been in survival mode for three people? The idea of having half a dozen helpers... she pressed her fists to her eyes again, taking deep, even breaths.

“That would be—optimal,” she forced out in her best monotone, and the laugh she heard this time was Reeve’s. “What about Renfrey?”

“I suggest we scout the island in pairs,” Torren broke in, looking impatient to be on the move. “Any more risks leaving home too lightly defended. When we find him, we’ll bring him home.”

And what would happen then, she wondered? Nope, she thought immediately afterwards. Not going there. She was close enough to crying as it was. “Wards,” she blurted out, seizing on the first thought that wasn’t Renfrey-related like it was a life preserver. “The wards on the library. I can get to work on restoring them. After I get some rest,” she added obediently at a warning look from Belmont. Magic could get downright risky when you were this tired, and she wasn’t

interested in accidentally burning the place down. “That’s if you’re all willing to play babysitter.”

“Many hands make light work, Syrra. Of course we’ll help with the babies.” A soft smile moved across Darion’s face, and she found herself hoping that whoever his soulmate ended up being, she was a woman who wanted a big family. “I imagine they’re a pair of angels, given they’ve avoided our notice as long as they have.”

“If you’re sucking up to me by complimenting my children, it’s working,” Syrra said, giving Darion a grateful smile. “Given the risk of bursting into messy revolting tears, I’m going to say this in as few words as possible, but just—know how much I mean them, alright? Thank you. All of you.”

She was impressed, in the end, with how long she held it together. For nearly an hour after that strange, emotional conversation—the one she’d look back on later as the first time the whole group of them had become a family—she felt almost good. She showed the wolves where she kept all the supplies for the babies, including the enormous stockpile of formula that was still forming the major part of their diet and keeping them healthy and strong. Then, at Belmont’s increasingly less-gentle reminders, she agreed to go upstairs to get some much-needed rest. That was when she broke—at the top of the stairs, stealing one last glance down at the pack, who were gathered in the empty library, talking in low voices.

It wasn’t any one thing that brought the tears rolling down her cheeks as if someone had flipped a switch in her brain. It wasn’t just the fresh yet familiar horror of being abandoned again by Renfrey, it wasn’t just the ongoing terror for the safety of her children, it wasn’t just the grief at the enormity of the losses she’d already sustained over these last few dreadful months of the collapse... it was all of it and more. And the catalyst, strangely enough, had been the kindness of that pack of warrior wolves down there. She hurried up the stairs and down the hallway so they wouldn’t see her weeping, knowing that if a single one of them looked

at her with those bright silver eyes full of concern, she was going to fall into a million pieces. They were good men. The actions of their leader notwithstanding, they were good, kind men and she'd been remiss not to appreciate that.

She hesitated as she passed the closed door to Emmy and Asher's room, torn between wanting to check on them and knowing that her weeping would probably disturb them. A flash of the way Renfrey had looked, standing in this doorway, his expression twisted with a frightening mixture of horror and fear... she caught her breath and hastened on to her own little room, shut the door hurriedly behind her, and managed to bury her face in her pillow just in time to stifle the howl of grief that ripped itself out of her throat like an exorcism. Finally alone, with the floodgates open, Syrra let herself shake with sobs, curled in on herself as though if she could get her body small enough the grief might just leave her alone. It wouldn't, of course. With all the friends she'd buried over the last few months, she knew that the only way out of grief was right through.

The most painful part was the urge to blame herself for how bad this felt. Renfrey's actions were his own—but she was the idiot who'd let herself begin to believe, if only in a tiny, secret corner of her mind, that maybe things would be different now. Maybe setting eyes on his own children would trigger some ancient ancestral urge to protect and care for them—to stay instead of leaving. But of course it hadn't. If that instinct had ever been inside of Renfrey, he'd never have left her, his soulmate, the woman his very essence as a wolf should have driven him to love and protect for the rest of his life... but he'd walked out then, and he'd walked out now. There was no point trying to figure out why, bending over backwards to find excuses for his behavior that made what he'd done less monstrous.

All she could do was cry until she'd run out of tears—then get up and keep living. The grim light at the end of the miserable tunnel, of course, was that she knew she could do it. She'd done it once already, hadn't she?

And if he died out there, alone and beset by demons...
well, it wasn't as though Syrra was any stranger to living
without him.

Chapter 13 - Renfrey

There was something pleasant about losing track of how many days had passed. Renfrey stayed in his wolf shape, where it was easiest to silence his racing thoughts in favor of the natural rhythms of the world around him. He spent his days hunting and hiding, catching small game in the dense trees, finding shadowy places to drowse, half-listening for the sounds of patrols in case he needed to make his escape. The patrols were more troublesome than even the dormant demon presence on the island. On that first day, he'd stopped thinking of the wolves who were searching for him in any specific terms—they were just 'the patrols', an enemy like any other. They were irritatingly thorough, too. The island was large and the forest was dense, and yet they kept coming unnervingly close to finding him. Still, he'd been able to slip away unseen each time, and he knew that their resolve would crack sooner or later.

And they weren't brave enough to patrol at night. Renfrey looked forward to nightfall with everything in him. At night, there were demons to hunt. Nightfall brought the tingle of adrenaline, the promise of the hunt... something to do that occupied him utterly, mind, body, and soul, banishing every lingering thought and dangerous tickle of emotion that could, left untended, mutate into regret. Renfrey was not a creature of regret. Renfrey was a creature who lived in the woods and hunted demons, and that was all he was.

There were a surprising amount of demons, given the blow their side had suffered after the failed attack, an event which Renfrey was refusing to remember except in the vaguest terms. After the beast he put out of its misery on his first night out there, he'd found half a dozen more, small, oozing, rabbit-like creatures with caustic blood that burned and blistered his tongue and mouth when he bit them in half. The following evening he spent stalking a herd of nine-legged deer-shaped demons that left small, circular hoof prints behind them, hoof

prints that smelled like rot and killed the grass beneath them. The third night, a tangle of rope dropped on him when he was dozing, rope that was alive with electricity that sparked and stung—his body was decorated with scorch marks and burns by the time he'd finally put it out of its misery. After that, he was grateful to lose count of the days, his wolf's unthinking instinct taking over, slowly but surely, from his rational mind, so full of traps and pitfalls that might draw him back to the place he'd sworn never to go.

There was plenty to eat out here, to his relief. The woods were full of small creatures that clearly weren't accustomed to an apex predator stalking in their midst, and he quickly located a few tide pools along the rockier parts of the shoreline that were excellent hunting grounds for fish at certain times of day. All he had to do to fill his belly with fish was wait until the patrols were clear—the wolves often staked out the tide pools, clearly waiting for him to appear so they could try to drag him back. It made him angry, when he let himself think about it for too long. How reckless of them, to put themselves in such danger. How foolishly sentimental, to pursue him like this when he'd made his choice clear. He was trying to *help* them. Maybe if his father had thought to try something like this—but that line of thinking was still suffused with that deep, dark red warning glow, and he let the thinking go.

And he kept hunting demons. And he waited, in a peaceful kind of way, for death to find him.

It would be a demon that took him out, most likely. He was a powerful warrior with a wealth of experience to draw on, but there was truth in the old Council saying that isolation was death... eventually, the law of large numbers told him that he'd make a crucial error and either be killed outright, or wounded in a way he couldn't come back from, even with his wolf's accelerated healing abilities. True as that was, he was determined to take out as many demons as he could before he went.

Impossible to say how long it had been when his wounds began to pile up. He'd stopped thinking in terms of hours, days, or weeks... he only knew sunrises and sunsets. It hadn't been long enough to appreciate any change in the seasons, he knew that much. But night after night of battle had taken their toll on his body, his pelt patchy with burns and missing in places where wounds spread and festered. He knew he needed to shift, to spend at least a few hours in his two-legged body if he wanted to accelerate the healing process. As vulnerable as those bodies were, it was a fact that a wolf's injuries healed faster when they were human-shaped.

And so it was that he found himself, for the first time in a long time, building a fire with his awkward fleshy hands. The wind felt strange on his exposed skin, and he found himself missing his thick fur and heightened senses. How did people survive in these bodies for longer than a few hours? Compared to the time he'd spent living wild, it felt like he had cotton wool stuffed in his ears. As for his sense of smell—he might as well not have had a nose at all, for all the good it did. He settled in close to the fire to warm himself as the chill wind gusted across the dark ocean beyond the tiny circle of light. It was well after midnight, and dawn wouldn't be far away... demons tended to be a little less active around this time, and it was still too dark for those irritating patrols to be out, which was why he'd chosen it as a suitable window to be human-shaped.

Waiting for the time to pass, nibbling half-heartedly at the fish he'd cooked over the fire, he found himself checking over his wounds, cataloging all the new additions to his prodigious collection of scars. Some hunters kept track of every single one of their scars, telling the stories with pride, but for Renfrey, there'd been too many battles to remember the stories associated with any but the most dramatic of his collection. He flexed his right arm, wincing a little as the movement tugged on the healing burn on his forearm, courtesy of an acid-spraying demon he'd come across earlier that evening. The poison had rinsed off easily enough in the sea,

but by then the damage had been done. His eyes shifted from the burn, up his forearm to a mostly-healed scar that sent an uneasy shiver of recollection through him.

Damnit. This was why he'd been trying to avoid his human shape. There it was, the deep wound he'd sustained the night of the demonic assault on the library, and the faintest brush of his fingertips across the raised ridge of scar tissue brought back far more memories than he wanted to retain. Not even memories of the battle, of the demon that had inflicted the scar—the demon was long dead, after all. Not so the person who'd healed the wound. He could feel the ghostly presence of her fingers even now, smoothing healing ointment into the wound, whispering under her breath in the strange, lilting language the lorekeepers used for their spells...

And then his memory, his treacherous, monstrous memory, brought back the way it had felt when he'd pulled her into his arms and done what he'd been yearning to do every minute of every day since he'd left her. Sitting there alone on the cliff's edge, Renfrey crumpled in on himself as though crushed by a great weight, wrapping his arms tightly around his bruised and bloodied torso and hoping that the pain of the pressure against his wounds might do something against the pain of the emptiness howling through his heart. How much longer could he keep going like this? How much longer could he keep building something resembling a life around the enormous void at the center of him? She was all he wanted, that was the terrifying thing. The largest part of him didn't give a damn about fighting demons or the oath he'd sworn to the Council—it would have thrown all of that away in a heartbeat if it meant getting to hold her again.

Selfish, monstrous, evil thought. A dark center he'd spent his whole life trying to become strong enough to overcome. Was he failing? Was this where his strength was finally going to give out? It had been hard enough to keep himself from Syrra all these years, knowing how to find her. And now... now it wasn't just Syrra whose loss was going to ache in his chest for the rest of his life. Now it was his

children, too. He closed his eyes hard but the memory wouldn't leave him, the image of those two sleepy little faces, blinking their silver eyes at him where he stood in the doorway. And the look on Syrra's face, half regret, half hope... a hope he'd crushed beneath his heel as he'd fled from the library.

He knew she'd think him a coward. His men too, most likely—what kind of a wolf abandoned his mate, abandoned his children? They didn't understand that leaving was the hardest thing he'd ever done. They didn't understand that it was the only thing that would keep the woman he loved safe from what he was capable of becoming... the only way he could protect his children from the same fate that had befallen him.

Why not open that floodgate, too, while every awful thing he'd ever tried not to think about was rushing through him like a fever? Renfrey was barely aware that he was curled up in the dirt by the fire, covering his face with his hands as though some external force was striking at him. He remembered a tall figure, impossibly huge, impossibly strong. He remembered silver eyes just like his own, a pair of surprisingly gentle hands that would sometimes lift him up to sit on a pair of shoulders that made him feel about a thousand feet tall. He remembered watching his baby sister roll and play with a huge, dark gray wolf who growled ferociously at her before playing dead the moment her tiny puppy jaws touched him. Had it been starting, even then? Had his father spent those days holding back the growing darkness in his heart?

There was no room left in his heart to be angry with his father, or disappointed, or even sad. Those words were pale shadows of what they purported to capture. What were words, when at sixteen years of age he'd gotten out of bed in the night to find his mother and younger sister's mangled bodies spilling blood all over the rug they'd played on as children? What were words against seeing the monster who'd killed them turn, and realizing that it had once been his father?

What were words, when the truth was that his father and the monster had always been one and the same?

Renfrey knew it was inside him, too. When the beast's missed footing had spared his life and he'd reached for the strength to do what he needed to do, that was when he'd first felt it. Deep in his chest, a cold, icy darkness that had numbed everything in him and showed him the only path that didn't end with his body joining those of his mother and his sister. He hadn't even considered that it had been his father who'd given him the pocket knife he used to tear the monster's head from its shoulders. But he'd thought about it, in the aftermath. He'd thought about what had come over him, even as his family's pack rushed to pull him from the scene, and he'd known in his heart that it was the same thing that had killed his mother and his sister. Only this time, it was inside of him.

Something good had come of it, at least. He did what his father hadn't been strong enough to do—he left his pack without so much as a backwards glance, leaving everything he'd owned behind and pledging himself to train with the Council. Some part of him had hoped, with the last of his youthful naiveté, that he might discover a way to kill the evil inside him. But all his training confirmed was that demonic corruption was irreversible. Like an incurable, terminal illness, it would wait deep inside him until he wasn't strong enough to hold it back any longer.

But until then, he'd vowed, he was going to use it to take out as many demons as he could. It would never balance the scales of what had happened... his sister's young life extinguished when it had barely begun, his mother murdered in cold blood by the man she loved more than anything. But one less demon was one less demon, and Renfrey was very good at killing demons. Part of him suspected that it had something to do with what lay inside of him, buried in his heart.

He'd grown almost complacent by the time he'd met Syrra. The cruelty of that. The breathtaking, flabbergasting cruelty of meeting those blue eyes and knowing immediately

who she was to him, who she would always be. It wouldn't have been any less painful to leave her even if he'd never spoken a word to her. That was the justification he'd found for spending the night with her, for letting himself forget, just for a few hours, the profound and all-encompassing loneliness that was his life. And now... now, despite everything he'd done to prevent it, like the hero of some ancient tragedy, he found that he'd become the one thing he'd never wanted to be.

He was a father. And that meant it was only a matter of time until he was *his* father.

The sky was beginning to lighten almost imperceptibly when Renfrey awoke from what hadn't been a sleep so much as a fugue state. For a moment, he wasn't sure what had woken him, but old habit sent adrenaline coursing through him, chasing the torpor from his body even as he held himself as still as he had been. Whatever had woken him hadn't made a sound, but it was present nevertheless. It was his wolf that told him that, magic tingling through him. It was harder to make out individual demonic signatures in a place as soaked with ambient corruption as Kurivon, but he'd honed that sense to an even more deadly point since he'd arrived, and he knew in his bones that a demon was creeping up on him, readying itself to strike.

He rolled away from the blow as it came. For a moment, he'd considered just letting it happen, resigning himself to his fate... there would be a kind of peace in death, knowing that the people he loved would finally be safe. But the stubborn old urge had returned, at the last minute, the temptation to stick it out for just one more battle. Just take this last demon out, that voice whispered. One less demon in the world is worth the effort, isn't it? He sprang to his feet, feeling a little clumsy in the body he'd spent so little time in lately, sizing up his enemy as he pulled on the magic in his bones to shift back.

The first thing he noticed was how wolf-like the beast was. The unmistakable taint of rot was there, but the beast was still clearly a wolf—four legs, two pointed ears, a shaggy coat

and a tail tucked low between its hind legs. The warp had set in around its head and face first—its jaws were too large for its head and its teeth seemed to have outgrown its mouth, too, causing unpleasant strings of drool to hang from a mouth it could no longer close. The strike he'd rolled away from had been from one of its great paws, which even now it was struggling to dislodge from the dirt. He looked at its other paw and realized why. It was as though the wolf's claws had grown at a vastly exaggerated rate, jutting out of its paws at freakish angles, splintering with every step it took. He rarely concerned himself with whether demons felt pain, but when he looked at this creature, he couldn't help but think that it was in a sorry state. There was a low, ugly growl rasping out of its throat as it staggered toward him on its horrible paws, and he heard the claws cracking and splintering with each step it took.

He waited for the creature to get within range, still sizing it up, assessing its movements. Every demon was different, and though this one was more hapless and wretched than the ones he'd grown used to fighting, that was no reason to let his guard down. It could always be a trick, always a gambit designed to lull him into a false sense of security... the beast lunged, but awkwardly, and with so much preamble to the bite he was almost convinced it was a feint. But there was no trick, no last-minute redirection—just its awful, misshapen jaws snapping together in the air where Renfrey's throat had been with a sickening crunch. Renfrey shifted away, circling around the beast, unsettled by how much pity he felt for it. The attempted bite had clearly cost it—as it turned, he could see it shaking its head as if dazed, and as he watched, half a dozen teeth tumbled loosely from its mouth. Its lower jaw stretched open for a moment and it twisted its head as though trying to distance itself, somehow, from its own mouth. There was a revolting wet sound and Renfrey turned away, sick to his stomach, as he saw a dull gray tooth emerge from the beast's foaming gums, crowding in among the mess that was its mouth.

He moved away from it, well beyond the range of its jaws. He wanted to avoid being bitten—he had a feeling that all kinds of infection could result from a wound infected by that reeking mouth—but more than that, he realized he didn't want to see the pathetic thing suffer. It was shambling after him again with its bizarre gait. Renfrey realized with another twist of revolted pity that its unusual stride was caused by the way it was walking—almost on the heels of its paws, struggling to hold its warped talons high enough to stop them from catching and scraping on the ground.

The pathos was unbearable. He had to put this thing out of its misery. Clearly, whatever eldritch processes formed demonic bodies had gone wrong with this one. It was a miracle it had managed to find him at all. His mind made up, Renfrey circled quickly around the beast, wincing at the awkward, agonizingly slow way it tried to turn to follow him. He'd get behind it, get on its back, tear out its spine with his teeth and hope that was enough to switch off the light behind its eyes for good. It seemed to sense his intent and started making an awful, gurgling sound in its throat, a cruel mockery of a howl, stifled by its teeth.

And then it changed. He realized, frozen by horror at what he was seeing, why the sight was so familiar... it was like some monstrous parody of a shifter returning to his two-legged form from his wolf shape. The demon staggered when it made its way to two legs, and when it couldn't find its balance, simply fell to its knees, one hand pressing awkwardly against the ground to support it. Sheer curiosity was all that stopped Renfrey from striking the killing blow at this point. He'd never seen a demon perform like this before. He'd encountered plenty with shifting forms, of course, but they rarely restricted themselves to two discrete shapes the way this one had. And there was something about the hideous, uncanny resemblance to a shifter that made him want to see what it would do next.

He hadn't expected it to speak.

It was incoherent, at first, the sounds that spilled from its ruin of a mouth—the face it bore in this two-legged shape resembled a human’s the same way that a child’s drawing could be said to resemble its subject. It seemed to be struggling to speak around the architecture of its own lips and teeth, hacking hoarsely in between syllables as though trying to clear its own flesh from the channel. But there were words amongst the other sounds, he was certain of it. His fascination—as well as his revulsion—only grew. There were recorded instances of demons who could speak, but in every story he’d read, the demon in question was an incredibly powerful and sophisticated creature that usually required dozens of wolves to take down. This shambolic mess of a creature before him was anything but.

“Back,” he kept hearing it rasp—the consonants seemed easier than anything else, which made sense given how many teeth it had to work with. “Go back...”

This creature was no threat, Renfrey decided. The Council would have scolded him for allowing himself to be so vulnerable around an active demon, but he couldn’t help himself—he shifted back into the body that allowed him speech. The demon reacted instantly, its head whipping up and its expression shifting and warping in a way he couldn’t read. Anger? Fear? Joy? There was nothing on its face he could read or recognize.

“Are you trying to speak to me?”

It was a shock when the creature nodded, its awful head jerking up and down with enough force that he worried it might come loose from its neck entirely. Urgently, it spat the same handful of syllables out again. He frowned, crouching to hear it better, still keeping a safe distance despite his growing conviction that this beast couldn’t harm him.

“Go back?” he repeated. Another of those aggressive nods, and he saw a couple of teeth break loose and fall into the creature’s mangled hands. It was wearing clothing, he realized—or at least some strange mockery of clothing, fabric

wrapped around its lumpy, misshapen torso. It might have been white once, and he could make out an odd mottling that almost looked like... embroidery. His revulsion was growing. "We're not going back. The days of demonic reign on Kurivon are almost over."

The beast just kept nodding, and he began to doubt whether it could hear him. It spoke again, but this time there were new vowels spilling from its hideous mouth. "Ins," it said urgently. "Eye."

"Inside?" he guessed. Another nod, a wet, unpleasant tearing sound, and the creature's head, still nodding, was suddenly hanging lopsided from its neck. "Go back inside?"

The nodding intensified. The beast lifted one of its awful limbs and stretched it towards him. He didn't even bother moving away—he was well beyond its reach, and even if he hadn't been, there was no strength in that arm. "Own," it groaned. "All. All own."

He was getting better at this. "Alone," he said, feeling another odd twinge of awful pity amidst his revulsion. "You? Or me?"

"Alone," it groaned again—and then, as jagged and hideous as the nod, he saw it begin to shake its head from side to side. "Alone—" a guttural, suppurating hissing sound, and then, with a surprising clarity: "Death."

Renfrey took a deep breath. "Go back inside," he repeated, studying the creature's wretched face for any indication it could hear him. "Alone—death."

This time the nod was so vigorous that the creature's head came loose altogether, rolling down its front and resting in its lap. It uttered a hideous howl, one of its limbs scrabbling desperately to lift the ball of its dislodged skull back to its place atop its neck. He could see thick, awful blood oozing from beneath the place where the head joined to the neck, and he turned away for a moment, almost overcome with nausea despite his decades of experience. What was it about this

demon that wrenched at his sense of pity so strongly? Was it the state he was in? Surely not—none of the dozens he'd killed since he left the library had made him feel anything but grim satisfaction. There was also the fact that looking at it wasn't causing him any trouble whatsoever. Every hunter was trained to avoid letting their eyes linger on a demon too long, given the psychic damage it did to comprehend them... but as revolting as this creature was, there was none of that familiar sting, even though he'd been looking right at it since he'd woken to find it here.

It was saying something over and over, its wreck of a body shuddering with the effort. One arm was holding its head in place with some difficulty, but it kept the other stubbornly outstretched towards him. "Earth?" he tried, but the creature kept repeating the syllable. "Purse?" Surely not. "Worse?"

There—its whole body shuddered and it uttered a high shriek that he could only take to mean assent. Go back inside. Alone—death—worse. A shiver ran down his spine as he looked at the creature's desperate, ruined body, the way it was straining toward him with every bit of strength that remained to it... and as he looked, he saw why it was holding out its hand. There, gripped amid the flaps of torn, mutated skin, was the filthy handle of a knife. Clogged as it was by unmentionable grime, he could still see the unmistakable shape of carvings that had been inlaid in the handle.

He'd seen runes like that a thousand times before. The demon in front of him—the ruined creature desperately spitting its last message through a body that was no longer capable of speech—was holding a runekeeper's knife.

"Go back inside," he whispered now, and he saw the beast go still. "Being alone is worse than death."

The demon slumped. The dark red light in its eyes flickered, and for a moment he could make out the pupils that had once lay behind that evil glow. They shone, briefly, in the gathering gray light of dawn... the faintest glint of a wolf's silver eyes. He moved forward, holding his breath, and took

the creature's ruined hand in his. The knife came loose with a little effort, skin tearing from the palm, and he realized with a lurch that the demon's flesh had grown around the handle of the blade. It must have been clutching it for a long, long time. It wasn't Syrra's knife. Hers was longer, and its blade curved... this was a dagger, smaller and straighter. How long had the demon been clutching it?

How long had it been since the last of the lorekeepers had gone missing?

The demon's attention hadn't left him. It was kneeled in a shape like supplication at his feet, body sagging, blood guttering from where its throat ought to have been. Renfrey lifted the blade, wishing he knew more than a handful of isolated words of magic. He spoke them anyway, hoping they'd at least resemble a blessing... and then he drove the dagger directly into the creature's skull.

He'd expected to hear another awful shriek as it died. But all it uttered was a low, rasping sigh as its skull split like a piece of rotten fruit. He stood over the demon's ruined body as it sagged brokenly to the ground, and he watched in silence as, in the growing dawn light, every last trace of it dissolved into the soil of Kurivon.

Chapter 14 - Syrra

Two weeks. She kept track of the days out of habit more than interest, some stubborn part of her unwilling to let go of the passage of time. She liked to know exactly how long she'd been here, liked to know exactly how old her babies were, how close they were to their next birthday—though it would be a while before either of them even knew what that meant. What she didn't like knowing, though, was how long Renfrey had been out there in the forest, completely alone and unguarded, no doubt fighting for his life against demons every night.

Small consolation came from the reports, every patrol, that there had been no sign of him. That meant no body had been recovered, of course... it didn't necessarily mean that he wasn't dead. They'd only recovered around half of the bodies of the lorekeepers who'd died, after all. That was why they'd taken to memorializing the dead symbolically, on the bookshelves against the library's far wall, with photos and items that had been precious to them in life. She was surprised by the interest her new pack took in the wall of remembrance, how often she'd find them standing in quiet contemplation, looking up at the shelves. None of them had known any of the lorekeepers who'd been stationed here, not beyond a friendly nod in the hallways at the Council, if even that. But they paid their respects, nevertheless. She realized that in a strange way, they were reminding themselves what they were fighting for.

Not that it felt much like a fight, at the moment. As they'd expected, the demons had been quiet since the great assault they'd launched that horrible night. They were making the best of the time they had, despite how anxious they all felt about Renfrey. It was incredible how much work six sets of hands could get done in a day. The wolves helped her shore up the defenses, gathering wood from the forest to make much-needed repairs—she was grateful, every day, that the Council had thought to send wolves who knew how to build. For her

part, she set about restoring power to as many of the wards as she could, finding that the drain on her energy was considerably less pronounced. Was it the good spirits of the wolves around her? Or—and this made her chuckle—was it just that she was finally getting a bit more sleep? She'd forgotten how blissful it was to have help with the babies. She'd hovered anxiously for the first few days whenever one of the wolves went to care for Asher or Emmy, but she quickly realized her worries were unfounded. The pack were, to a man, perfect babysitters. If anything, she was a little offended by how quickly her babies warmed to their collection of new uncles.

It felt good to keep busy. If she filled her day with enough tasks, she could distract herself from the ache in her chest where Renfrey had been. She was even having reasonable success with the next level of the strategy, the part where she worked herself so hard all day that she'd fall into bed too exhausted to spare Renfrey a passing thought before she was fast asleep. It was effective most nights, and when it wasn't... well, that was just telling her that she needed to work harder the next day.

And then Renfrey came back.

It was bizarrely anticlimactic. It was just after midday, the brightest part of the day and the time they usually used to do any errands that took place outdoors. As a result, she was helping unpack a fresh load of firewood that Torren and Blaine had brought in, both of them in good spirits after a morning in the sun. It was Darion and Belmont on patrol today—she'd noticed the five of them tended to take it in turns searching for their lost leader, with a different combination of wolves going out each day, but somehow it was never Darion and Reeve who went searching together. What was it that lingered between those two? It went deeper than sibling rivalry, she knew that much, but beyond that she was reluctant to pry. It wasn't even the patrol that brought the news. It was Reeve—or rather, his voice, floating down from upstairs. He hardly sounded like he believed what he was saying.

“Renfrey’s here. He’s outside.”

The three of them hastened to the window after a dumbstruck moment. And there, standing on the scorched ground that lay before the library, stood the familiar figure of a dark gray wolf, his fur patterned faintly by the scars she knew so intimately from his other body. The wolf was standing with his head low, his weight shifted just a little to favor his left foreleg—but given that he’d been out in the woods completely alone for two weeks, he looked in remarkably good shape. He was alive, she thought remotely. She’d known that all along, hadn’t she? She’d have felt it, if her soulmate had died.

“Why’s he standing out there like that?” Syrra whispered, wanting to break the silence that had settled over them like a choking blanket. “Why not come up to the porch?”

Blaine was silent, and she couldn’t read the expression on his face as he stared at the wolf standing out there as if he was waiting for a firing squad. It was Torren who spoke, his voice hushed.

“There’s no way of knowing he’s—safe,” he said, and he almost sounded like he was apologizing. “He was out there alone for weeks. There’s protocols.”

“Protocols,” she echoed numbly. Of course the hunters had *protocols* for this kind of thing. Lorekeepers simply refrained from doing anything as stupid as charging off into demon-infested woods by themselves—for the most part, anyway. She grimaced, shutting her eyes against the unwelcome flash of memory, a handful of their numbers who had done just that... gripped by paranoia, some of them, terrified that they’d been corrupted already, that the only way they could keep the community safe was by leaving it. Those had been the hardest losses, in the end.

Especially Mina.

Torren and Darion went out to speak to Renfrey. Reeve had come downstairs at that point, but he stayed with her indoors, which she appreciated. They watched through the

space in the boarded-up window as Torren and Darion approached, wolf-shaped, and she exhaled in frustration as she realized she wouldn't be able to hear their conversation.

“Wolves,” she muttered with a roll of her eyes, winning an apologetic smile from Reeve. “Can you shift? Translate for me?”

“They're too far away or I'd have shifted already,” he said, shaking his head. “You know I'm the king of the eavesdroppers. The mindsharing has a tragically limited range. One of many reasons I'm going to get Internet back on this blasted island as soon as I physically can.”

Reeve and his Internet... that exasperating topic was almost enough to get her mind off what was going on outside. They didn't even have power on the island yet, nor was the harbor safe enough to receive any shipments of supplies, but Reeve was absolutely fixated on getting high-speed wireless installed. Differing areas of expertise was one thing, but this went a bit beyond that, as far as she was concerned. Still, at least the situation outside was enough to stop him launching into yet another one of his rants about connectivity. They waited in taut silence as the conversation concluded, and both Darion and Torren headed back up towards the library, paws sending up clouds of dust with each step. The ground out there was so unpleasantly dry, even when it had rained as recently as last night. It didn't seem to bother Renfrey. As she watched, he lay down in the dust and stretched the whole length of his body out in the dust.

“He wants to talk to you,” Darion said when the two had shifted and stepped back inside.

“He's unhurt,” Torren added, a look of fleeting exasperation crossing his face at the blunt way his packmate had chosen to open the conversation. “And in decent shape, for a wolf who's been on his own for two weeks. Said he's spent the whole time hunting demons.”

“Where?” Reeve frowned. Syrra understood his confusion—there'd been almost no demonic activity since the

night Renfrey had left. Even the patrols rarely reported any sign of demonic activity in the thick trees they searched. It was clear from the grim looks on the wolves' faces that they shared her concerns.

"He's not badly hurt," Torren pressed on. "A few injuries, nothing that won't heal with time."

"Did he say why he ran off for two weeks without saying a damn word to any of us?" Reeve asked cheerfully, but the look in his eyes reminded Syrra, just a little bit, of how she'd felt in the weeks after Renfrey had left her for the first time.

"He said he needed to think, whatever that means." Torren was angry. Darion was, too, but the bigger guy was better at hiding it. "And Syrra—like Darion said, he wants to talk to you. You don't have to," he added, almost immediately. "If it were me, I wouldn't want a damn thing to do with him."

She felt a rush of affection for them in that moment, standing around her like her own personal bodyguards. Maybe it was that affection that settled her mind, made her feel calm and collected for the first time in weeks... or maybe it was the relief, the horrible relief at knowing that Renfrey was still alive and unhurt, not lying out there in the forest somewhere, bleeding out from a dozen demon-inflicted wounds... "I'll think about it," she said quietly. "He can wait in the meantime. We've certainly done enough of that on his account."

And so they waited, though Syrra quietly suspected she already knew what her decision was going to be. Renfrey remained outside the library as the afternoon wore on, seemingly fast asleep where he'd stretched out in the dirt a hundred paces from their front door. There was a brief moment of consternation when the patrol returned to find the object of their search sleeping almost on their doorstep, but they were quickly filled in when they hurried inside, their surprise giving way to a guarded, grim suspicion. Pleased as they were to see him alive and unharmed, she could tell that his abandonment

of his pack wasn't a betrayal that the wolves were going to take lightly.

Good, she thought fiercely. Because neither was she. Maybe a few years ago, if he'd come crawling back to her with a good enough apology, she might have forgiven him for abandoning her like he had. But back then, it had only been Syrra who'd been hurt by his actions. Now, she had more people to think about. And not just her babies, the children for whom Renfrey could become a deeply problematic father figure if she let him. There were the wolves, too ... the pack that had taken her in, the men who'd accepted her as a sister as easily as breathing, the men who'd all helped care for her children as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm going to hear him out," she told them as evening was falling. "But he's not getting forgiveness, even if he asks for it. Not from me, and not on behalf of the pack, either."

The five of them nodded in agreement. "Stay close?" Blaine, ever the pragmatist. "We won't eavesdrop, but if something goes wrong..." The unspoken threat hovered in the air, the lingering worry that, his apparent good health aside, it was already too late for Renfrey to return to them... the fear that the demonic taint and his solitude had turned him from a problematic ally into an irredeemable enemy.

"I'll keep my wits about me," she promised, tapping at the hilt of the knife that she had tucked into her belt, out of sight beneath the long overshirt she was wearing. "And I'll pay close attention, too. If there's any sign..."

The silence was uneasy. Belmont murmured something, and it took her a moment to recognize the words of a blessing. There weren't many hunters who bothered learning the difficult words of the old spells, and though his pronunciation was a little awkward, she still smiled warmly at the attempt.

Renfrey stirred from his sleep the moment the library's front door opened, and by the time she'd clicked it shut behind her, the wolf was gone and a familiar man stood in its place.

Too late to harden her heart against the relief of seeing him... but at the very least she could fight back the urge to run to him and throw herself into his arms like something from an old story. Instead, she descended the stairs slowly, her back rigid and her face an expressionless mask. No mercy, she reminded herself. Don't let yourself get tricked into gentleness by your stupid, stupid feelings...

"You look awful," she said when she was close enough for him to hear her. He'd remained obediently at the same distance from the house—one hundred paces, that was the protocol, Belmont had told her that afternoon. How were you supposed to measure a hundred paces if you couldn't get within a hundred paces of the place, she'd asked? He'd only smiled.

Renfrey wasn't smiling. Renfrey did, in fact, look worse than awful. He was standing there in nothing but the trousers he'd been wearing when he walked out, tattered and much the worse for wear. He'd lost weight, or at least it looked that way—his ribs seemed more pronounced, and there were shadows on his face that hadn't been there before, as though something had hollowed him out. No trace of red in his eyes, which relieved her, and his body was, curse her spotless memory, much as she remembered it, with the addition of a few dozen new injuries that made her click her tongue. He'd been careless out there.

"You can't come inside," she informed him coolly when it became clear he wasn't going to respond to her opening insult. "Protocols." The borrowed word made her feel stronger. She could feel the eyes of her pack on her, keeping watch from inside the library, and that strengthened her, too. It made her feel pity for Renfrey, out there alone for two weeks... which was the wrong thing to feel. Rage was what she needed, not pity. He needed to be held accountable, not coddled and fawned over like a child with a skinned knee.

"Understood." His voice was raspy with disuse. "I'll remain here for as long a quarantine as is deemed appropriate. Who's running things?"

“We all are,” she said, gratified by the flicker of surprise in his eyes. Had he been expected to be replaced as leader? “The library stands strong. More than I can say for you,” she couldn’t help but add, nodding at his arm, where she could see a half-healed burn that was unpleasantly grimy. “You don’t know how to clean a wound?”

“It was hard to get to the sea.” Reproach in his voice. “Patrols.”

“You wanted to talk to me,” she snapped, suddenly losing patience with the situation. “Talk. Say your piece.”

“I want...” He hesitated, just for a moment, and she could see how much it was costing him to look her in the eye. “What I want is for you to talk to me, actually. If you’re willing. There’s a lot I don’t know about you, Syrre.”

She laughed, then, a bitter, half-crazy laugh that echoed across the scorched field they stood on and sent birds fluttering from the trees nearby. Better to laugh than to burst into tears, she reminded herself. “You can say that again,” she said faintly. “A lot you don’t know about me. My word, yes.”

“My own fault, needless to say.” Something strange about his voice. She was used to him speaking in such a measured, careful way, as though delivering lines he’d rehearsed to the mirror. There was something closer to the skin about the way he was speaking, now. Less rehearsed. “I left you. An act of mindless cruelty, and among my greatest shames, Syrre. You’ve every right to refuse me, but I’ll ask, just once... tell me.” A faint, hopeless smile on that careworn face. “Tell me what I missed.”

She glanced back over her shoulder at the library, at its ominous warded windows in the gathering dusk. She knew she was being watched over. She knew she could storm back inside without a backward glance right now, and the wolves would support her decision. But she knew, as she turned back to Renfrey, that she wanted to speak. For years she’d wanted to speak to him, to spill out every last bit of pain he’d put her through, to rub it in his face and make him suffer a little of the

suffering he'd caused her. She almost asked, half-joking, if he thought he could handle it... but then she realized she didn't care.

And so she opened her mouth and began to speak. And as the sun set over the island of Kurivon, Syrra told her soulmate everything that had happened since he'd walked out of her life.

Chapter 15 - Renfrey

He wasn't going to survive this. He couldn't. The two of them had ended up sitting in the dirt, Syrra sitting on her shins with her feet tucked behind her, Renfrey sitting in a more awkward cross-legged position to ease the pressure on a few lingering leg wounds. There was some patchy moonlight that rose and fell as ragged clouds scudded across the sky, but precious little else to see by. That was a blessing, he suspected. He'd have been embarrassed for Syrra to see the expression on his face too clearly.

He'd always known it must have been bad for Syrra, once he'd left her. He'd come to terms with it, in a strange way—almost as though he'd added the pain of losing a soulmate to the debt he was always fighting to pay. But it had never occurred to him that that loss might be compounded by the fear and isolation of becoming a mother, all by herself, without the one person at her side who should have been there to share in all the joy and trepidation of parenthood. She was furious with him, still—the anger shook in her voice—and he absorbed it all, assimilated it into the ball of pain at the core of him.

But what surprised him—and her, he suspected—was how much of the story she told him was touched with joy. The way her friends and adopted family had rallied around her, taking care of her, drying her tears and helping her prepare for the arrival of her children. The way she'd pursued a lifelong career goal in the midst of her pregnancy, getting selected for a lorekeeper's role here on Kurivon. The family she'd found here, the way her fellow lorekeepers had rallied around her. And the birth of the children. That part especially made him feel like his heart might just give out. Strangely enough, it was the joy that hurt, not the pain. He'd expected her to tell him how frightening it had been to go into labor alone, without the babies' father at her side, how much pain there had been, how much fear and grief... but instead, she was suffused with a

strange rapture as she told him how she'd brought Emmy and Asher into the world. What it had felt like to finally hold them in her arms, after months and months of knowing they were there... how it was simultaneously like meeting a stranger, and meeting someone you'd known forever.

He should have been there, he thought faintly. Syrra looked him straight in the eyes as though she'd heard him think it. For a moment, he genuinely believed his heart was going to stop.

And then she told him what the collapse had been like. The steady encroachment of the demons, the way it had felt like nothing to worry about until, all of a sudden, it was too late even to send for help. The way the buildings had fallen, one by one, the tactics the demons had used to separate and terrify them until someone had had the brilliant idea to move them all into temporary accommodations in the library—accommodations which had become permanent as every other building on the island was destroyed. The way the whole community, right until the end, had protected the babies with as much fervor and dedication as their mother had.

The whole time, he was aware of the dagger in his pocket. That morning, after the last of the demon's remains had melted away, he'd buried the evidence of his campfire then walked down to the water's edge to clean the knife. Most of the blood and filth had come off, though there was still a rusty tinge to the more deeply-carved runes where blood still lingered. It was a fine weapon, though he suspected it had been used for more practical pursuits in its time—lorekeepers only entered into battle when the situation was dire, preferring to use their talents in other ways. Still, it had been crafted to last, and its survival was a testament to that quality. Something stopped him from showing it to Syrra, even though he'd intended to ask her if she'd known who the owner was. The terrible sadness on her face as she spoke of the last few months. He couldn't bear to make it any worse by presenting her with a blade that had likely belonged to one of her lost

friends, one of the faces memorialized on the shelves against the far wall of the library.

Would he be given a place on that wall one day, he wondered? When the battle finally came that he couldn't win? The thought filled him with strange peace, tempered by fear. It was only a matter of time before the darkness in him won out. He could only hope his death came first.

Nobody had built any memorials to his father, had they?

"That's it," Syrra said quietly. Her voice was a little hoarse from the telling of the story, and the shadow on her face told him just how much it had cost her. He wanted so badly to put his arm around her, to hold her close and give her the comfort he knew he could. "So what now?"

"Thank you." He held her gaze as long as he could, wanting her to know how much he meant it. "For sharing that with me, despite—" He took a breath. "Despite how badly I've hurt you."

"Maybe I only told you because I knew it would hurt you more," she said, a shadow of a smile flickering across her face. Trust Syrra's dark sense of humor to emerge at a time like this.

"Mission accomplished," he retorted, wishing it sounded a little less desperately sad than it did. And then, because it had been weighing on him: "They're wolves, the twins."

"Asher and Emmy."

"I know their names." He shut his eyes for a moment. He also knew that if he spoke them aloud, it might undo him.

"I think so, yes." He glanced sidelong at her, saw her smiling faintly into the darkness. "Judging by their eyes, at least. And their appetites." A quick sideways glance at him. "They've been getting on well with your pack. The guys have been helping out with them, since you've been gone."

It surprised him to think of his band of warriors helping out with the children—and added another pang of grief to the aching ball at his center. “Glad they’re making themselves useful.” He cleared his throat. “I suppose they’re angry I left.”

“Worried,” she corrected him without hesitation. “They’ve been worried about you, Renfrey. Why do you think they’ve been patrolling the whole damned island twice a day? Dammit, Renfrey. *Nobody’s* angry with you.” She sounded furious. He decided against pointing out the contradiction. “Not even me. I’ve tried everything in my power to be angry with you—you gave me all the ammunition I could possibly need. Three years I spent planning exactly how I’d tear you apart if I ever saw you again, and then you walk back into my life and—” She shook her head, that bitter laugh of hers echoing across the field before them and into the darkness. “It’s absurd. It’s some kind of gift you have. But it’s not magic. It’s—” She bit her lip, and he fought, again, the almost overwhelming urge to put his arm around her. “It’s you. It’s just—you. People sense how hard you’re trying to do the right thing.”

Even after all the heart-wrenching details he’d learned that night about the family he’d left behind, somehow this was even harder to swallow. He felt the tension in his body rising, blinked hard against an ominous stinging in his eyes. “That means a lot,” he forced out, surprised by how level his voice was given how unhinged he felt internally. “Coming from you, that means—everything.”

“I don’t understand it,” she continued, as though he hadn’t spoken. Her brow was furrowed and her gaze fixed on the darkness ahead of them, and he got the sense this was a subject she’d been over hundreds of times. “My intuition tells me, over and over again, that you’re a good man, that I should trust you, that you’re using all the strength you have to do the right thing. And my intuition isn’t easily fooled,” she added, tapping at her hip, where he knew she carried her rune-carved knife. “Everyone who’s ever met you says the same thing—

even these wolves, who've known you for all of what, a couple of weeks? I trust shifter intuition. I trust my intuition. I trust you. So here's my question." She turned back to him, her blue eyes burning with a fury that he realized in a dizzy rush was mixed with love. "Why the hell do you keep making the *dumbest imaginable choices*?"

He opened his mouth, closed it again. How could he answer that? How could he even begin to answer that? But the floodgates, it seemed, were open. "People spend their whole lives desperate to find their soulmates, and some people never do. We found each other—and you just *left*? Those five wolves in there would kill to be fathers. They're already getting weirdly competitive about who the twins like best. I had to mediate a *fight* earlier today about who was going to bring Asher his favorite blanket. You're their actual blasted father, Renfrey, and I *know* you want that too—but you left! Again! You're one of the Council's best demon hunters—so much so that they not only sent you here, but put you in charge of the whole mission—and yet you run off into the forest alone at the slightest provocation and spend two weeks out there? Alone? Knowing better than anyone that that's a surefire way to get killed—or worse? I just—what's *wrong* with you?" She was breathing hard, her eyes alight. And into the ringing silence that followed, she added: "Sorry."

"Don't be," he said. To his surprise, he felt an odd lightness in his chest. It felt strangely good, hearing it all laid out like that. "Everything you just said is not only more than fair, it's the absolute truth."

"Yeah, I know," she said, flicking a hand dismissively, but he could tell she was a little relieved. "So—*explain* yourself, soldier."

He closed his eyes for a second, hearing the thump of his pulse too loud inside his ears. For a moment, he let himself consider the possibility of telling Syrra everything. Taking a leaf out of her book—starting from the beginning, from that awful day his childhood had ended, and spilling everything that had followed. Showing her who he was, the awful destiny

that lay in store for anyone who got too close to him... and he felt his heart fill with shame as he realized he couldn't do it. After two weeks in the wild alone, he simply didn't have the strength for it. He opened his eyes again, grappling for words, but the look of disappointment in Syrra's eyes told him that, yet again, she was way ahead of him.

"Okay," she said softly. She'd been telling the truth, he realized, dull shock blooming in his chest. She really wasn't angry with him. After everything he'd done... after all the times he'd let her down... somehow, she still didn't hate him. He had to speak. He had to say something, *anything*—

"Maybe—" he heard himself force out, his voice scraping in his throat as though his body was trying to hold it back. "Maybe—tomorrow? Can we talk again then?"

The hope in her eyes was a terrible thing to behold. "Of course," she said immediately, sending a sharp spike of fear lancing through his cowardly heart. "Of course, whenever you'd like. You probably need some rest." She hesitated, glancing back up at the library, and he could tell that she was grappling with the urge to invite him inside. Surely not. Surely a lorekeeper as experienced as Syrra, a lorekeeper with as much hands-on experience of the damage demonic corruption would do, wouldn't break protocol like that just because he happened to be her undeserving soulmate—he felt relief crash over him when she turned back to him with a rueful frown. "Obviously I can't invite you inside."

"Of course," he said, heart thudding with relief. "I'm comfortable here. I understand."

"But I'll bring you some things. A tent, at least, and some bedding, so you can rest in this form, get those wounds under control. And some food and water, of course. The week will pass quickly."

Seven days, that was the official regulation—seven days of isolation, when someone was suspected of having been affected by demonic taint. Seven days, the lorekeepers had agreed, was enough to reveal even the most insidious and

slow-moving kind of demonic corruption. Renfrey, of course, had always known that they were wrong. Some taint moved slower than that. Some taint took years to make itself known—decades, even.

Renfrey was grateful she didn't touch him before she returned to the library. As much as every inch of his body was aching to hold her, he knew that even the brush of her hand could tear him apart completely. He was right where she'd left him when she came back half an hour later with a bundle of canvas, which she quietly set down beside him and left. He set up the tent on autopilot, grateful for something to do with his hands, and crawled inside with the rest of the bundle. A sleeping bag, wrapped around a canteen of water and some of the packaged rations they'd brought over from Halforst. Bland as the food was, he had to admit it tasted a lot better than the raw game he'd been subsisting on for the last two weeks.

But something else fell out of the bundle when he unwrapped it. It was a slip of paper, clearly much-handled, and when he picked it up, he realized why that was. It was a photo. In it, two beaming babies gazed brightly at something just beyond the camera. They had matching sets of bright silver eyes, but he could tell them apart immediately—on the left was Asher with his mother's golden curls, and on the right was Emmy, whose thick dark hair looked exactly like his once had.

He lost track of time, staring down at the photo. The glimpse he'd gotten of the babies in the crib had been burned indelibly into his memory, but this photo showed him their precious faces in so much more detail, so much closer. It must have been taken before the collapse—he could tell they were a little younger here—and even this small glimpse into the life he should have been a part of was almost enough to break his heart.

He found himself walking out into the darkness, the photo still clutched in his hand. He found himself surrounded by whispering shadows whose voices lingered just outside of hearing, brushing against his awareness like silk. He found a fully-formed realization in his mind as though it had been

placed there by some external force. This was a trap. All of this was a trap. Syrra telling him she wasn't angry, his pack wanting him to return... this was the final test of his strength, and the most important. If he gave in now, if he gave up on the isolation he'd fought his whole life to maintain, that would be the end of it. The demonic force inside of him would break loose and tear through everyone he loved, the way it had broken loose from his father.

Was that what he wanted? Did he want to watch Asher and Emmy growing up, knowing that one day they might have to strike him dead? Or did he want to do the right thing... the hard thing, the painful thing, but the right thing... and show them who he really was? He had that opportunity, right now. Right now, he could step into the ranks of the demons and prove, once and for all, what he really was. It was the only way to beat the demon at its own game. Syrra had said it herself—he had some kind of strange power over them, some ability to stay in their good graces despite everything he'd done.

He had to do something they couldn't forgive if he ever wanted them to be safe from him for good. That was what the voices of the gathering army whispered, as he stood there amongst them in the dark like an old friend.

Chapter 16 - Syrra

Syrra was half-dressed before she even realized she was awake, as though her instincts had yanked her body out of bed before her conscious mind had caught up with what was happening. Something was wrong, that was all she knew. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. She pulled her coat on and checked her knife was at her hip, then hastened out into the corridor to check on the babies. Fast asleep, both of them—unsurprising, given the exhausting day they'd had being spoiled rotten by their five new uncles. It was still dark, Syrra thought, frowning as she clicked the door quietly closed. It was well before dawn, the sky not even gray yet. What was she doing awake?

She'd been here too long to doubt her intuition, though, and she woke the wolves one at a time. None of them questioned her, though she didn't explain beyond saying she felt like something was wrong. Their confidence in her was touching, though for once she wished it was misplaced. Maybe it was the conversation with Renfrey that had made her uneasy. Maybe it was the wind. Maybe it was something, anything, other than what she was terrified might be the case.

The five of them gathered at the window at the front of the library, the one with the gap in the boards wide enough for a few people to see through. And Syrra's heart sank into her feet when she saw exactly what she'd hoped not to.

The army was swathed in darkness, and it was difficult to make out their numbers beyond a general estimate... but their ranks definitely reached back as far as the eye could see, the dull red glow of their pinprick eyes showing what the moonlight couldn't. Hundreds of them at least, all facing the same direction in quiet readiness to strike down the library. A horrible fury rose in her gut. Why were they so desperate to destroy everything that anyone had ever built? It was as though they were attracted to the energy that had gone into the

building, the care its inhabitants had for it... and she knew they wouldn't rest until every last piece of this makeshift home she'd built and protected was dust and ash.

“Where's Renfrey?” Reeve asked urgently, and she felt her heart skip a beat. The place where his campsite had been was entirely obscured by demons now. Why hadn't he warned them? Surely a seasoned hunter like him couldn't have been taken so completely by surprise that he was killed without a struggle... and her intuition told her that if he was dead, she'd know about it.

“There,” Belmont said grimly, pointing through the gap between the boards. They all looked at the place he was indicating, and Syrra caught her breath when she saw it. A great wolf, standing among the demons, its head angled towards the library. The beasts around it stood at ease, clearly not concerned about its presence. Syrra was moving before she knew it, unbarring the doors to the library, ignoring Darion's worried rejoinder as she pushed the door open and stepped out into the night.

Sure enough, the wolf was Renfrey. She'd know his scar-patterned fur anywhere. It was some relief, as she moved closer, to note that his eyes were still silver, with none of the dark red of demonic corruption... but that didn't necessarily mean it hadn't taken hold, just that it wasn't suitably advanced to be unmistakable. He was still standing with the demons. He was still facing the wrong way.

She called his name, her voice echoing across the field, uncowed by the prodigious threat that lay before her. Everything felt like it had narrowed to a seething, burning point of focus—she didn't care about the army, didn't care about the battle that was coming, didn't care about the worried murmurs of the wolves behind her. All she cared about right now was the wolf who was padding slowly towards the front of the mass of demons with his silver eyes fixed on her face.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, glad her voice didn't shake. “Why are you standing with them?”

The demon standing behind Renfrey was one of the largest she'd ever seen, and she looked up at it when Renfrey's silver eyes flicked towards it. It was vaguely humanoid, with eight huge arms that seemed at first glance to be holding weapons, though she could tell the glinting metallic shapes were part of the beast's body. There was a dull red glow at the core of the creature that pulsed subtly in time with the other dull lights she could see behind it, and she realized with a sudden lurch what she was looking at.

"It's a hive," Belmont whispered, his voice thick with revulsion. She nodded, not taking her eye off the leader. Since the collapse, the lorekeepers had suspected that the island might harbor a demonic hive—the taint was simply too advanced to be explained by the more isolated demons they'd been encountering. Hives were often classified as a single powerful demon, although they always manifested with a body count in the hundreds or even thousands—their defining feature was their connection to one another, their shared mind. It was a horrible mockery of the way wolf packs were able to share one another's thoughts in battle or during a hunt, and most scholars were revolted by hives on an even deeper level than most demons.

They were also incredibly dangerous. The monarch of the hive was its only vulnerability—killing any smaller hive demon was a waste of effort, as it would be replaced within seconds. That had to be the monarch standing behind Renfrey. And if he was willingly turning his back on it, that could only mean one thing... they were allied.

"Renfrey," she said again, her heart in her mouth. He'd abandoned her twice already, but compared to this, those betrayals were about as serious as cutting in front of her in line. "Please, tell me this isn't what I think it is..."

Behind her, she could feel that the wolves had shifted, felt a brush of fur against her as one of them moved forward. She snapped a warning and hastened ahead of it, adrenaline making her reckless. The hive stayed obediently still as she approached, but she wouldn't have cared if they'd been

spraying her with acid. Her eyes weren't leaving Renfrey. If she was going to meet her death tonight, she was going to know the truth first.

“Shift,” she demanded, her heart pounding in her chest. She was close enough to touch him now, the reek of demonic taint almost overpowering from the army's proximity, and she tightened her hands into fists at her sides. “I want you to look me in the eye as you betray me, for once. You owe me that much.”

He looked back up at her, his wolverine face even less expressive than his human one. She resisted the urge to look back over her shoulder, wondering if his packmates could share his thoughts... or had joining a demon hive had broken that connection? And then she saw the wolf's body shrinking, and within seconds Renfrey was standing in front of her. The expression on his face was so full of sadness that she caught her breath. She held his gaze, tears spilling down her cheeks, and waited for the satisfaction of finally, finally being able to hate him.

But it didn't come. She narrowed her eyes, angrier with herself than she'd ever been. What more could he do to her? He'd walked out on her twice, and now he'd brought an army to her doorstep to kill her, her pack and her children... was anything going to stop her loving him? Was anything going to break this ridiculous faith she had in him? Despair washed over her like a suffocating tide. And in its depths, the gleam of something that was either truth or madness.

“You're no demon,” she whispered, her eyes widening with the shock of it. She looked down, for the first time since he'd shifted, at his hands. In his left hand she could see the photo she'd tucked into the supplies she'd brought for him—one of about a dozen surviving photos of Emmy and Asher. In the other—her breath seized in her throat. She'd know that dagger anywhere. How many times had she searched for it, exasperated, turning her friend's room upside down before discovering it in the pocket of her coat? How many times had she watched as Mina's clever hands harvested herbs with its

sharpened edge, leaving the roots intact so more leaves could grow?

But before she could even catch her breath, let alone ask him about the knife, he was gone. With a blur of motion, he'd launched into a sprint, and before she knew it he was climbing up the front of the twelve-foot tall demon that stood at the front of its army. The great creature barely had a chance to lower its head to look at the man scaling its body before he was driving the dagger into the dull red glow in the center of its awful torso.

The scream that went up nearly deafened Syrra. It erupted from the throat of the monarch and was echoed almost identically by every single member of the hive that stood behind it, all of them writhing in concert with their master. Syrra felt the wolves behind her lunge into the fray at once, moving as one in that effortless unison that she'd always found so beautiful. They quickly surrounded the monarch, fighting off the drones that were attempting to scale their leader to remove the threat to the hive. Because Renfrey was still up there, hanging on for dear life as he stabbed the monster again and again. He was covered in gore, the thick, dark red ooze from the creature's heart glowing with the same dull light as the eyes of its minions, and his arm was a blur of speed as he hacked and slashed, inflicting as much damage as he could on the creature's sensitive heart.

It wasn't enough. Syrra cried out as she saw the beast strike Renfrey hard enough to daze him—he nearly lost his grip, swinging out over the heads of the rest of the hive as he held on for dear life. Her blade was in her hand as she sprinted towards the fray, dodging around shrieking hive demons. All she could see was her soulmate, fighting for his life and hers. And if she was going to die tonight, she was going to die at his side.

She leaped onto the backs of one of the wolves, making a note to thank him for the boost if they made it out of this alive. The monarch was howling as it bashed furiously at Renfrey's stubbornly clinging form, and she took advantage of

its distraction to climb up the other side of its torso with her knife between her teeth. Mina had always made fun of her choice of lorekeepers' weapon, calling its curved design and awkward additional length impractical—and she'd been right, for the most part. But right now, she couldn't have asked for a better tool for carving out the heart of this hive monarch.

Renfrey had slashed his way through the thickest part of the creature's hide already, and she didn't hesitate to help finish the job. Her blade slid into the beast's heart like it was butter, and she levered great, awful globs of stinking hot matter out of its core. Her other arm was aching where she was holding onto the creature, and she could see Renfrey trembling with the exertion too. But when she met his eyes, it was like unlocking a reserve of strength she hadn't even known she had. And with the next deep gouge of their twin weapons, she shrieked hoarsely with triumph as the awful light of the creature's heart began to flicker and fade. The wolves below howled in recognition. All across the field beyond the monarch, she could see the lights fading just as their leader's was. The beast howled again, battering with failing strength at the two figures clinging to its chest. Still flailing those eight awful arms, the beast began to topple over backwards like a great tree.

It must have crushed a dozen of its drones beneath its bulk as it fell, their bodies making awful squelching sounds. She hung on tightly, letting the creature's body absorb the impact, still driving blow after blow into the beast's heart even as it was dying. She'd believe it was dead when it melted, and not a second before... and then she felt Renfrey's hand on her elbow, pulling her gently away, and she realized there was nothing left to kill. The monarch was a great inert skeleton, every trace of red light winked out. The field in front of them was a massacre. Stretched out across the scorched and blackened field were hundreds of moldering bodies, the monarch's whole army withering even as they looked.

“Can you feel that?” she whispered, her heart pounding against her ribs with a joy so fierce and rare she could feel it

bringing tears to her eyes. “Can you feel how much *lighter*? This hive must have been growing here for years... no wonder the rot didn’t seem to fade no matter how many we killed. Most of them were just drones.”

Renfrey nodded in agreement. She tore her eyes away from the withering demons, from the stunning shift in the very atmosphere of the island, and finally looked at him properly. He was swaying on his feet, clearly exhausted, and he was absolutely covered in the demon’s revolting blood, already rotting and crumbling into dust. He was, hands down, the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen in her life.

As if on some signal, the rest of the wolf pack fanned out across the field, moving quickly through the moldering bodies and making a good show of checking for survivors, though she knew as well as they did that there were none to be found. She appreciated the privacy as Renfrey stepped forward and took her hands in his. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, that same awful sadness in his eyes. “I couldn’t have warned you, or the monarch would have gone to ground...” His brow creased, just a little. “How did you figure it out? How did you know I wasn’t part of the hive?”

“I didn’t,” she said simply.

“Did you see the knife? Did you—”

“No,” she said impatiently. “I just trusted you.”

Renfrey looked at her for a long moment, and she could feel his hands trembling where he was holding hers. He opened his mouth, closed it again, clearly struggling to speak—and she remembered sitting with him here in the moonlight, remembered how much it had clearly cost him to hear her speak. Syrra might have been the one who’d been abandoned all these long years... but it was Renfrey who’d been alone.

“Come inside,” she said now, squeezing his hands tightly. “You’re covered in gross demon blood and it’s interfering with my ability to savor our victory.”

She was thrilled to hear him laugh at that... a low, rusty laugh that clearly surprised him too. "You're not exactly parade-ready yourself," he replied weakly, nodding at her. She looked down for the first time, wincing at the sight of her gore-splattered coat.

"Great. Add laundry to tomorrow's list, I guess." She rolled her eyes theatrically. "Like we haven't suffered enough."

She could get used to hearing that laugh a little more often, Syrra reflected as she led Renfrey up the stairs to the library. And something about the way he was squeezing her hand told her that that hope might just be a reasonable one, this time.

Chapter 17 - Renfrey

He couldn't believe he was still alive. It all felt like some bizarre dream, a cruel trick of his subconscious in the last few seconds of his life... the hallucination of survival, a dying man's last comfort. But he was in too much pain for that to be the case. The hive monarch had caught him more than a few blows before it had gone down, and the arm in which he'd been gripping the knife was numb from the shoulder to the fingertips. Part of him suspected he'd have to pry the dagger out of his grip by force.

But what did that matter, when he'd survived? Not just him—all of them. His whole pack, his soulmate. When he'd felt that demonic presence coalesces out of the darkness around him that night, he'd known with absolute certainty that they were all doomed. The only tiny flicker of light that remained to him was the photograph... the photograph of his children, clutched in his hand even now as Syrra led him gently up the stairs. The protocol, he thought faintly as he stepped over the threshold. The thought almost made him laugh. You could take the wolf out of the Council, but you couldn't take the Council out of the wolf.

Syrra shrugged herself out of her blood-soaked coat with evident distaste, dropping the garment in the corner of the room before bustling over to the sink to wash her hands. Running water wasn't a luxury the library had retained during the collapse, but they had enough water stored for her to fill a basin and thoroughly scrub the gore from her hands and forearms, taking care that even her fingernails were spotless. Renfrey sat by, perfectly content to just watch her, reveling in the knowledge that she was alive. She'd been right—the whole island felt lighter, now. Had it really just been the hive that had brought about this change in his disposition? He'd felt so hopeless last night, so full of a darkness that had felt like it couldn't end. But now, as she bustled over to him to clean his wounds, he felt like the sun was finally rising.

It wasn't just the hive, he reasoned as she gently but firmly pried the photo out of his hand. It was Syrra, too. Her faith in him, the strength it had given him to have faith in himself.

"This knife," she whispered, her fingers tapping uncertainly on the wrist of his right hand. "Where did you find it?"

"It was given to me," he said. "At least, I think it was." He'd been thinking a lot about the hapless creature who'd approached him that strange night. "By a demon who ... I think... had been a wolf, once."

Syrra's eyes widened as she pulled the knife free of his hand. At least his furiously tight grip had protected the runes from getting any more demon gore embedded in them. He watched her blue eyes trace the runes on the handle and was surprised to see tears welling up and spilling down her blood-stained cheeks. Without thinking, he lifted a hand to brush one away, and the feeling of her cheek against his fingertips sent a bolt of dizzy joy through him.

"This was Mina's," she whispered. "She was always losing it."

Knowing the name of the knife's owner made him feel strange. "The demon I got it from... it attacked me when I was out there alone, but I don't think it was trying to kill me. I think it was trying to warn me."

"Warn you of what?"

"It—spoke. Told me to go back—that being alone was death." He could still hear the creature's tortured voice, could picture it reaching out with such desperation with the dagger that its hand had grown around like a tree. "I've never seen anything like it."

"We never found her body," Syrra whispered. "She—she just didn't come back one night, and it was just me left. I couldn't go searching for her. Do you think..." She took a

deep breath, and he could see her fighting for calm. “Do you think it was her?”

“I don’t know,” he said helplessly, not wanting to lie to her. “All I know is that I’ve never seen a demon so determined to hold itself back from violence. And ... that whatever it was, it’s at peace now. I waited with it while it dissolved.” It was no kind of closure on the loss of her friend, he knew that. But it was something. Syrra stared down at the knife in her hand for a long moment, then squeezed her eyes shut, spilling the last of the tears and dashing them away with her sleeve.

“Right,” she said abruptly. “More crying later, when we put this on her part of the shelf and thank her for what it did for us. Right now, we’re patching these wounds up. Again,” she said reproachfully, and he heard himself laugh again, the sound a little stronger.

Half an hour later, they were both clean of demon residue... though Renfrey had a feeling he’d be feeling the hive monarch’s blood on his skin for quite some time. The rest of the pack had returned to report that no trace of the hive remained out there, only the faint residue of their dissolved bodies, which ought to be gone within the day. Demon hunting was a pursuit without many trophies, he reflected. He’d have liked to keep some piece of the hive monarch as evidence of what they’d faced together, what they’d overcome.

He’d half-expected recriminations from his pack. Instead, he got a thump on the shoulder from each of the men as they stomped past him on their way up the stairs, headed for some well-earned rest. Syrra watched them go with a fond smile, and he watched her, pleased to realize she’d bonded with the pack in his absence. At least something good had come out of his abandoning her for the second time...

“I’m afraid all the rooms are taken,” she said, one eyebrow raised. “Bad luck, not being here when they were being claimed.”

“I’m happy to sleep by the fire,” he said automatically, gesturing towards a rolled-up sleeping bag. The exasperated

look on Syrra's face stopped him in his tracks. "Oh."

"Yeah, *oh*. Come on. Why'd I have to get stuck with the dumbest soulmate on the planet, I ask you," Syrra was muttering to herself as she pulled him, unprotesting, up the stairs and down the hallway to her room. Through the windows, he could see the sky was pink with the light of dawn. It felt odd to see the sun rising after the night he'd been certain would be his last.

"One of the lorekeepers had a bed set up here because she was always staying too late doing research to go home without waking her whole household," Syrra was explaining, a grief-tinged smile on her face as she gestured to the rumpled bed in the corner of the room. "I started using it when she... well, it felt weird at first, but it felt weirder sleeping on the floor when there was a perfectly functional bed upstairs. Anyway." She sat down on the edge of the bed, those blue eyes not leaving his face. "It's tomorrow. Time to talk?"

It was a simple question—he detected no pressure in it, no sense of demand. He knew that if he'd hesitated even for a moment, she'd have gracefully accepted the delay. But he also knew that if he didn't take advantage of the curious, floating mood that surviving the battle had left him in, he might never spit any of this out. And what he wanted right now, more than anything else, was for the miracle of a woman sitting on that bed to understand as much as she could about why he'd been such a fool for so many years.

It was hard, at first. The words came haltingly—he stumbled over his sister's name, barely managed to choke out his mother's. But Syrra was the best listener he'd ever met. She sat, attentive but calm, unbothered by the silences he'd lapse into mid-sentence, patient when he started sentences again half a dozen times, the warmth in her eyes never fading. By the time he'd reached the worst part of the story, he'd gained enough confidence to force himself through it. And finally, finally, he realized the worst of it was past.

“And so—that’s it. I went straight to the Council and started my training. I spent my whole life swearing I’d never condemn anyone else to what my family went through.”

For the first time in nearly an hour, Syrra spoke. “What do you mean—condemn anyone else to it?”

He stared at her, not comprehending. Had she not been listening? “I killed my father,” he said slowly. Her gaze didn’t flicker.

“He was about to kill you,” she said gently. “You did what you needed to do. To survive.”

“You don’t understand. I killed someone. I was a child, and I killed someone like it was nothing. Just like him.”

She tilted her head to the side, the faintest furrow appearing between her brows. “Oh, Renfrey. It’s absolutely not the same. You see that, don’t you? The demon you attacked had just killed your mother and sister in cold blood, unprovoked. You lashed out at him because you saw that it was the only thing that would stop him from killing you. That doesn’t make you a demon.” A faint little smile of disbelief curved her full lips. “If anything, the guilt you’ve been carrying proves how unlike a demon you are.”

“If it happened to him, it could happen to me,” Renfrey said, shutting his eyes as he spoke that deep fear aloud. “I could turn on you. Turn on the twins.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Syrra said steadily. How did she sound so sure of herself?

“How can you say that? I’ve walked out on you twice. I’ve—I nearly—”

“Have you forgotten who I am?” For the first time, Syrra sounded a little impatient with him. “I was one of the Council’s foremost lorekeepers even before I had to spend months in survival mode on an island so infested with demonic rot I could barely breathe. I’m an expert on demons, and I don’t think everything we think we know about demonic taint is true. Even if it was, Renfrey... I refuse to believe

there's any in you. I think you're a man who lost his family in the worst imaginable way, and I think any shadow you feel inside you comes from that pain, not some demonic intruder."

"I can't be sure of that," he said, frightened of the bizarre surge of hope that her words had sent through him.

"Then I'll be sure of it for both of us." Syrra raised an eyebrow at him, tapping the hilt of the knife at her hip. "You don't scare me, demon hunter. I just took down a whole hive."

Renfrey opened his mouth without any idea of what he was going to say, only an overwhelming urgency to say it. He felt like he was falling from some terrific height, somehow absent of the threat of ever hitting the ground. "I thought about you every day."

"You did?"

"At least a few times, usually more. From the day I left until the day you put that knife to my throat in the hallway. Every single day I tried to come up with a way I could come back to you without putting you in danger, and every single day I failed. I knew you were my soulmate." He'd expected that part to be as hard to say as the rest, given how much he'd tried to deny it, bury it, hide it beneath layers and layers of training and discipline ... but none of that distraction had worked, at the end of the day. And the truth slipped free as easily as breathing.

Syrra's smile had been widening steadily, mirroring the sunrise outside. "It's nice to hear you finally say it," she said softly, and when he saw the mischievous sparkle in her blue eyes, he felt like his heart might burst. "Took you long enough. I'd thought the Council's finest demon hunter would be a little quicker on the draw."

His laugh still felt rusty and strange, but he could feel it getting easier every time she drew it from him. She'd always been good at making him laugh—it was one of the things he'd had to force himself to forget about her. He'd failed, of course. He'd failed utterly to forget her... and he'd never been more

grateful for a failure than he was for this one. “There’s no way I can make up for how badly I’ve let you down,” he said now, and he saw her expression sober, the smile fading from her eyes as she looked at him intently.

“I won’t disagree,” she said carefully, not unkindly. “There’s a lot you’ve missed. A lot I went through without you.”

“I’m not going to insult you by suggesting I can heal all that,” he said, moving a little closer to where she was sitting on the edge of the bed. “But I can make you a promise, here and now, that I’ll never leave you again.”

She leaned forward, narrowing her eyes a little. “Even on the assumption that you’re protecting me from something?” He nodded, heart pounding hard in his chest. “Even if you think you’re turning into a demon?” That made him hesitate, and she sat back, folding her arms across her chest, an exasperated look on her face. “Renfrey—”

“There’s protocols,” he said plaintively. “Syrra, if I suspect I’m corrupted—”

“—then you should probably go and see a lorekeeper, shouldn’t you? I sure do hope there’s a good one around! Do you even hear yourself?” She threw her hands in the air with exasperation. “No, Renfrey. You’re not wiggling out of this one. You’ll swear to me that you’ll never leave again, or you’ll leave right now.”

“Well, if you put it like that,” he said faintly. “I swear it.”

“Good.” She looked up at him from beneath her eyelashes, and he felt the tightness in his chest ease a little at the faint smile in her eyes. “If a demon takes you over, Renfrey, I’ll beat it out of you myself. Understood?” What could he do but nod? Syrra’s smile widened. “Good! Wish I’d thought of this three years ago, would’ve saved us both a lot of time.”

“Then do you think—one day, perhaps, you might forgive me? That Emmy and Asher might forgive me?”

She looked at him for a long, cryptic moment. “Emmy and Asher aren’t old enough to know you ever left,” she said finally, an odd smile on her face. “As for me... I’m old enough, but as far as I can tell, I’m too damned stupid to hold a grudge. And I promise you, I’ve tried. For three long years I’ve tried.” She shook her head, wearing the look of exasperation she usually reserved for him. “I forgive you, Renfrey. I forgave you already. Isn’t that pathetic?”

Something in him gave way like a dam finally bursting, and suddenly he was on top of her, wrapping his arms around her in something not unlike a spear tackle that sent both of them rolling across the bed, Syrra yelping with a mixture of shock and amusement at the force of his attack. He gathered her in close, burying his face in her hair, drawing in the scent of her as though he’d been drowning every second he hadn’t been touching her, murmuring that he loved her over and over against her hair, against her ear, against the hollow of her throat. She was laughing, wriggling as if trying to escape, though he could tell she wasn’t using anything close to her full strength. “You’re going to wake everyone *up*,” she hissed, but the light dancing in her eyes told him that that was hardly high on her list of concerns.

“The door’s locked, isn’t it?”

“It’s an office in a library, why would it lock—oh,” she sighed softly, her whole body tensing as his lips brushed against a sensitive part of her neck. He grinned, letting his breath ghost across the same spot and following it up with another quick kiss, this time causing a full-body shiver to run through her. “Shh,” she said absent-mindedly as he kissed her throat again.

“Should I lock the door?” he murmured, pitching his voice deliberately low to buzz and vibrate against her skin. She let out one of those soft little sighs he found so unbearably

sexy, shifting in his grip as she pressed herself more closely against him. “Hmm?”

“Don’t you dare get out of this bed,” she said, clearly still half-distracted by the trail of kisses he was carefully placing down her throat and along her collarbone. “I’ve got a knife, remember?”

“Understood. I’ll obey every order to the letter, ma’am.” She shivered again, and this time her sigh was more like a moan. He made a note of the most sensitive part of her collarbone and kissed it once more for good measure, his hand sliding stealthily up her back beneath her shirt to tug it gently over her head. She barely seemed to notice the removal, her eyes half-closed as she hummed with pleasure with every touch of his lips. Her body... it was all he could do not to strip them both naked then and there and jump ahead to burying himself inside of her. From the way she was responding to even his lightest touches, he could tell that she was as ready for that as he was... but he held himself back forcefully. There was no way he was going to let himself rush this, even if she did have the body of some kind of goddess made flesh.

Her whimpers of impatience did give him pause, however. So after a moment of hesitation, he settled on a compromise. Her breathing picked up as his other hand slid down, lingering as it went to enjoy the swell of her full breasts, the curve of her waist, the softness of every inch of her as he stroked his palm down the outside of her thigh and back up the other side of it, feeling the heat of her sex and realizing with a shock of arousal and delight that at some point, she’d managed to stealthily remove not only her shoes and pants, but her underwear, too. Had he really been so distracted? He’d have to keep his wits about him in future... but at least there were no barriers to what they both clearly wanted. Still, he let his fingertips linger at the tops of her thighs for a little while, just long enough to make her growl into the long, passionate kiss they’d been sharing and take his lower lip between her teeth.

He knew a warning when he felt one. Obediently, he trailed his fingers across the heat of her sex, feeling his cock jerk in response to the guttural sigh she uttered, the way she thrust her hips forward to firmly encourage more contact. Her folds were already slick and wet with her excitement, and the sensation of letting his fingertips glide down the crest of her made him grit his teeth against the urge to rush. His whole body was aching now, every instinct grumbling at him for holding himself back... and it didn't help, either, that with her hands free she was now enthusiastically exploring his body, stripping his clothes from him with absolutely no modesty, careful to avoid his half-healed wounds but otherwise insatiable as she caressed him. How did every single nerve ending in his body seem to thrill at her faintest touch? Even the glow of those magical blue eyes of hers was enough to make a shiver run across his skin.

How had he ever fooled himself that he could stay away from this woman? It was a small miracle he'd managed to keep himself away as long as he had.

She was relentless in her demands for more from him—more contact, more pressure, more of his fingers diving into the depths of her folds and stroking pleasure from every secretly sensitive place he could find. He couldn't resist replacing his hands with his mouth, glancing up to see her arching her back against the bed and tossing her sweat-damp curls out of her face, the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He lost himself completely in the scent of her, the exquisite taste of her excitement on his tongue, catching every whimper and moan and muffled cry and filing away the information for future reference. Future reference... the thought that this might happen again made him feel dizzy. Not just once or twice, he thought faintly. If he didn't screw this up, they had the rest of their lives together... and he felt Syrra's thighs tighten around his face as if in answer to the sheer delight of that thought. She was gasping for breath, her pale skin flushed pink all over with excitement, and he could feel how close she was. A few more seconds ought to be enough, his fingers working in concert

with his lips and tongue, teasing more and more pleasure from the swollen bud of her clitoris—

And then, to his surprise, he felt her strong hands pulling him forcefully away from her body. He obeyed the explicit instruction readily, though with a mixture of confusion and disappointment dimming the fever pitch to which his arousal had risen... part of him had been half convinced he might climax with her, the sounds she was making were so utterly intoxicating. And then she was kissing him, fierce and sloppy and desperate, tasting herself on his lips as she wrestled him into a different position. Now she was the one who had him pinned to the bed, and though he could likely have overpowered her—strong or not, he had the height advantage and a lot more experience in hand-to-hand combat—why would he want to? What utter fool would change anything about where he was right now? Stretched out on his back, stark naked with the most beautiful woman on the planet straddling his hips and breathing hard against his throat.

“Why’d you stop me?” he breathed against her ear, more to hear her moan than because he wanted an answer. She obliged him with a breathy groan that made his cock twitch with thwarted desire, and then huffed laughter across his throat.

“Thought it might be rude to go ahead without you,” she purred into his ear. It was his turn to groan, the lightning that crackled down his spine too strong to ignore.

“I’d have caught up,” he managed, blurrily, and though she murmured something no doubt very witty in response, he didn’t hear it. Every last fraction of his conscious mind had been flung howling out of the window, because Syrra had curled one deft, skillful hand around his manhood, adjusted his angle a little, and then slid herself down on top of him, enveloping him to the root in one gesture that nearly knocked him out completely.

When he regained something approaching control of himself, he was holding onto her hips for dear life, every

muscle in his body working with everything in him to drive himself deeper into her with every thrust. Her nails were digging into his chest where she was balancing herself against him, using the leverage to rock into his thrusts with a force that was making her eyes roll back in her head. He reached up to claim her lips in a tangled, breathy kiss, their pace growing frenetic and then staying there. Was the bed slamming against the wall, or was that just his heartbeat? He could hear her swearing, feel her hands clutching helplessly at his shoulders as her climax swelled undeniably within her—which he somehow knew, because the same thing was happening to him. There would be no holding back, no easing off, no reducing their pace in the interests of extending their pleasure... he'd already burned through all the willpower he had stopping himself from doing this the minute he'd returned to her from the wilds.

And strangely enough, that was his last thought before the orgasm blasted through him and banished every rational idea from his mind—how utterly foolish he'd been to have wasted so much of his life trying not to be exactly where he was right now. And how lucky he was that he'd ended up here despite his own self-sabotage.

Minutes later, he came back to himself, still breathing hard with Syrra collapsed against his chest, her blonde curls spilled out across his chest. He gazed down at her for a long moment, rather enjoying the way her hair hid his collection of scars. Her chest was rising and falling gently, and he shifted his weight just a little to ease her into a more comfortable position against his chest. She murmured his name as she resettled, and he suddenly felt like there was too much love in him for his body to contain.

He'd keep watch, he thought drowsily. She'd earned her sleep... he could guard the two of them... but before that thought was even complete, he was drifting off into the first truly peaceful sleep he'd had since he'd slipped out of her room back at the Council, all those years ago.

Chapter 18 - Syrra

“Ta-da!”

Syrra opened her eyes obediently at the rather theatrical cue, blinking a little in the bright midday sun. She blinked at what had been revealed, a half-smile already on her lips as she attempted to guess what it was the pack expected of her. They were standing on the expanse of clear land in the southernmost part of Kurivon, once scorched and blackened, now beginning to show the first tiny signs of new growth... but that wasn't what they were showing her. No, this was...

“Some planks of wood?”

“They're foundations,” Reeve said with an impatient roll of his eyes. “Obviously. I knew we should have waited until the building supplies were here and there was an actual slab down—”

“No, it's great, it's very exciting.” Syrra squinted, fighting to keep the laughter out of her voice as she surveyed what lay in front of her. Renfrey was holding the blueprints and studiously avoiding eye contact... she flashed him a secret grin and saw him turn away a little, shoulders shaking as he fought to hold back his laughter. It made her so, so happy to see his laugh coming back to him. He was a different man when he laughed... years younger, it seemed, and much more approachable. And if he'd been worried it would affect his authority in the eyes of his men, he shouldn't have. If anything, the pack's affection for their Alpha had only grown since he'd started opening up to them.

“Kitchen, living room, bathroom—and this one's going to be the nursery,” Renfrey said, gesturing at the ground as Syrra picked her way through the confusing combination of wooden planks and chalk marks the wolves had used to mark out the foundations of her and Renfrey's future home together. “There's a second bedroom beside it for when they're big enough for their own rooms.”

“And we can always build an extension,” Torren put in, grinning brightly from the other side of the building site. “You know, if you need an extra room—”

“You think two of them aren’t enough of a handful, huh?”

“These angels? They’ve never done a thing wrong in their life.” Blaine had both babies, one held in each enormous arm. Emmy was half-asleep, her chubby face pressed against the big man’s shoulder, but Asher was looking around curiously at the foundations. They were both taking more and more of an interest in the world around them lately—Syrra had a feeling it had something to do with the considerable reduction in demonic taint since that fateful night when the pack had taken down the hive.

It was hard to believe it had really only been two weeks since that night. So much had changed since then... and not just between her and Renfrey. His hard facade was crumbling, brick by brick, and every day she was seeing more and more of the man she’d known he truly was... the man she’d loved to distraction ever since she’d met him. Her soulmate, the father of her children, and the leader of the community that she was fully committed to helping rebuild, right here on Kurivon. The following day would mark a considerable landmark in the community’s new history: the arrival of the second pack to take up residence on Kurivon. They were a small delegation from Darion’s considerably larger pack back home, hand-selected from his strongest and most trusted packmates. As much as Syrra was looking forward to having some new people around for once, part of her couldn’t help but feel a little wistful about the end of the era of just the seven of them.

Part of it was the old grief, too, for the lorekeepers she’d lost. New arrivals felt like her old friends were being replaced. But they wouldn’t be. Their shrines would remain in the library for as long as the settlement stood, and she’d make sure every wolf who ever dwelled on this island knew their stories. And with enough time, she knew, she’d heal.

Syrra looked up as she heard Asher's little voice raised in the querulous tone he opted for when he wanted something—and she couldn't help the grin that spread across her face when she saw the little boy reaching his arms out for his daddy. Renfrey had been so worried about meeting the twins, convinced that they wouldn't like him. He couldn't have been more wrong. The two of them had taken to him faster than she'd seen them take to anyone—it had been barely ten minutes before Emmy had been fast asleep against his chest, with Asher proudly showing him toy after toy from his collection. Ever since then, the bond between the three of them had only grown. She knew that he was still frightened that what had happened to his father could happen to him, but every day, she saw him choose his love for his family over his fear of that dreadful fate, and she knew in her bones that it was only making him stronger.

Now, Renfrey scooped Asher into his arms and propped the little boy on his hip, the blueprints rustling as he held them up for the baby's perusal. Asher studied the pages very thoughtfully for someone who had no idea how to read. Reeve and Darion had drifted off a few dozen paces, and she saw Renfrey looking over at them with a tightness in his jaw that betrayed his worry.

“They've been arguing more and more lately,” he said when Syrra slipped her arm through his and liberated him of the blueprints, which Asher had quietly started to chew on.

“Brothers,” she said with a shrug. But she understood his worries. The tension between Darion and Reeve ran deeper than just brotherly rivalry. “You'd think kicking so much demon ass would have brought them closer together.”

“I'm worried about what it'll mean when the packs arrive,” Renfrey said, shaking his head a little. “We know better than anyone how important unity is when it comes to holding back the demons. Tensions between individuals are part of life, but if that gets translated into tensions between entire packs...”

“It won’t,” Syrra said firmly. “We’ll stop that from happening. They may all be going back to being Alphas of their own packs, but you’re still the one who’s gonna be leading them.”

“Repeat that, would you?”

“Sorry, *we* are the *two* who are gonna be leading them.” She grimaced, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and delight. “It’s still weird, Renfrey! It’s still weird. I’m not even a wolf, how can I be the Alpha of a pack?”

“You’re my soulmate,” Renfrey said steadily, and the warm thrill that ran through her when he said it hadn’t gotten any duller over time. “Wolf or not, you’re the other half of me. How can I only be half Alpha? It wouldn’t make sense. Besides, I need you,” he added, that smile slipping across his face so easily now. “These men have more respect for you than they ever had for me.”

“Can you blame us?” Torren shouted back, not looking up from the wooden plank he was adjusting.

“I can’t,” Renfrey said softly, and he slipped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her in close to his side. “If it were me, I’d trust a lorekeeper over a demon hunter any day.”

“We’re a good team,” she corrected him.

“Ah, so you agree—a good team of Alphas.”

“Your father’s a trickster, Asher,” she said regretfully, taking her son into her arms and grinning as he rested a chubby arm affectionately over her shoulder. “A trickster and a scoundrel. Alas. Now, surely we’re building more houses than just this one, hm?”

They spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around the construction site, taking a good look at the plans for the cottages. She had to admit, the wolves had worked with impressive speed to action the plans they’d made during the first few days they’d been here. Having six pairs of skilled hands helped, of course, but it was more than that. It was the

unity of a pack, the singularity of vision that made them all work as seamless parts of the same focused whole.

And for her part... well, she'd been focusing on the demon side of things. As the island's last lorekeeper, at least until the other packs began to come through the portal with their own specialists in tow, she was uniquely situated to begin drafting a new history of Kurivon. The library would one day be restored to its primary purpose as an archive of knowledge, and when that day came, she wanted to have detailed notes about the recent history to add to its stores. And with the help of the six wolves, her adopted packmates, she had not only detailed maps of Kurivon, but accounts of many of the demons that had been sighted and battled. The description of the hive they'd battled alone was going to make a valuable addition not just to Kurivon's library, but to the Council's archives, too.

She was especially interested in Renfrey's account of the unusual demon he'd encountered, the one who'd seemed to struggle to hold itself back from fighting him before it seemed to give him Mira's knife. It would be a while before she had anywhere near the amount of time she needed to study the matter in depth, but she certainly had some thoughts circulating in her mind... thoughts that she was keeping from Renfrey, at least for the time being. They had to do with the nature of demonic corruption, and on whether it truly was as utterly irreversible as the scholars had always said. What if that wasn't true? What if a wolf who was host to a demonic infiltration might just be capable of fighting it off, at least for a little while? What if the reason the demon that had claimed Renfrey's father had failed to kill him like the others was not because of an accident, but because of deliberate sabotage on the part of the fragment of his father that still remained within that demonic shell?

She knew it was a hard subject for Renfrey to discuss, so she wasn't going to bring it up until she had more certain information to go on than a couple of stories. But still, there was something deeply inspiring about the prospect that there might be something entirely new to learn about demons... a

new weakness in their armor, a new way that the forces of good might be able to win this endless war against darkness.

And the first step was this building project. Dozens of cottages, neatly laid out for both family groups and single wolves to live comfortably but efficiently with one another. They'd be built for safety from the demonic threat that still lurked on the islands—Syrra had agreed to ward each one, a skill of hers that was definitely improving with practice. Something told her, though, that what was really going to keep the community safe was each other. A wolf alone was a wolf in danger, that was always the rallying cry... and it wasn't just wolves.

"It's going to be noisy tomorrow," Syrra said softly, leaning her head against Renfrey's shoulder. They'd finished the tour of the construction site, and the rest of the pack had headed back up to the library to start getting things ready. Blaine had taken both twins, as Asher had started to get fussy and overstimulated, and Emmy would probably nap more effectively in a crib rather than the arms of her uncle. "I'm sad. I'm sad about our last meal."

"I don't know why everyone's calling it that," Renfrey said with a roll of his eyes... but she could see the softness in his eyes as he smiled down at her. He was smiling so much more now, and she couldn't get over how it changed his face. Part of that, she suspected, was his scar. She was certain now that she wasn't imagining that it was less red, less angry, since he'd finally told her the full story of how it had been imparted... She shook herself out of that reflection, tuning back into what he was saying. "It's not our last meal. There's thousands more to come."

"Yeah, but none of them are going to be like *this*. This—this has been special, these last few weeks. All six of you, coming to rescue the three of us... I'm not going to forget about that."

"I don't doubt we'll see plenty of each other over the years. Especially if the council structure works out the way I

intend it to.” Renfrey was already future proofing the island’s political structure, working out a way that leadership could be handed down from Alpha to Alpha while still maintaining stable leadership of the island. His plan was to formalize a kind of leadership council of the Alphas of the packs of Kurivon—though they were going to think of a different name for it than ‘the Council’, to avoid confusion with the organization back home. “Besides, Syrra. We all live on the same island.”

“For now,” she said darkly. “You heard Torren, he wants to build boats and settle on all the others. We haven’t even gotten all the demons off this one yet.” The hot-headed young wolf was as skilled a warrior as any she’d seen, but she worried about how reckless he was. She couldn’t imagine how she’d feel if Asher grew to be the kind of man who went charging into danger at the drop of a hat. Was that what motherhood was, in the end? Worrying about everyone you met as though they were your children?

“He might be a little calmer once his pack arrives. Family can have a steadying influence on a wolf.”

“Or an enabling one,” Syrra pointed out. “They might be even worse than he is. You don’t know.”

But it was too pleasant an afternoon to spoil it with too much worrying. The two of them had wandered through the trees, down the very same path she’d taken so long ago when she’d first glanced through the bushes to see the six wolves emerging from the portal. Renfrey’s hand slipped into hers and she closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath as she did so to remind herself of how grateful she was to be where she was, alive and well, and with the man of her dreams at her side.

The sea was calm and quiet today—there wouldn’t be another storm for at least a few days, judging by the sky, and the two of them settled on a rocky outcropping that overlooked the water. Even sitting with him in silence made her feel more joy than she thought was possible. Their hands were still

entwined, and she could feel Renfrey's thumb rubbing a soothing pattern into the top of her hand, the friction leaving a pleasant warm buzz against her skin. A little like a rune, she thought, settling her head on his shoulder. An improvised little rune, full of the magic of the bond soulmates shared.

"Can't believe the others were angling for an extra room in our cottage," Renfrey said under his breath. "As if we haven't got enough to be getting on with."

"I don't know," Syrra said with a shrug, stretching her arms above her head. "I mean, the twins are getting more and more independent by the day. Wouldn't be the end of the world if they had a little brother or sister, would it?" It was a familiar silence that claimed them then, and Syrra knew Renfrey was holding back emotion strong enough to swallow him whole. She gave him a few moments, then added: "Of course, we'd be outnumbered."

A slightly hoarse bark of laughter. "Fatal tactical error. Well spotted."

Syrra let this more pleasant quiet hang for a moment before she spoke again. "I know how much you regret missing out on the early days, with the twins. Newborns are..." She grinned, waving a hand. "Besides, maybe I'm tired of being surrounded by all these wolves, hm? Maybe I'd like to try for a child with my eyes, did you think of that?" She grinned up at Renfrey, reached up to press a quick, fierce kiss to his lips. That was usually a good way of stopping him from overthinking something. "Something to think about, anyway. Someday. If you'd like."

She was surprised to feel him catch her chin in his hand and tilt her face back up, his silver eyes dark and intense from this close. "Syrra," he said softly, his voice taut with feeling. "I would love that. Are you kidding? Our children are miracles. The very *idea* of another..." He blinked hard, and she couldn't resist kissing him, her whole chest glowing with love for her soulmate, for the vulnerability and strength he

showed her every day. “I’m at your service, lorekeeper. If you’re ready, I’m ready.”

She grinned up at him, feeling the wind tousling her hair, knowing she’d have to dig the tangles out later with a comb and not caring one bit. “I shall keep that in mind, Alpha,” she said primly, turning away—and then she felt his arms wrap around her and pull her back towards him. There on the coastline of the island they’d tame together, Syrra and Renfrey dissolved into laughter as they melted into the safety and strength of one another’s arms.

THE END

About the Author

Kayla Wolf is a mom of two, an obsessive reader and a total sucker for paranormal romance. Sexy shifters, sassy women, steamy encounters, and dangerous enemies are the things that make her lie awake at night. Whenever she thinks about these things, she just has to get up and write about them immediately... Come on in, and spoil the beast in you.

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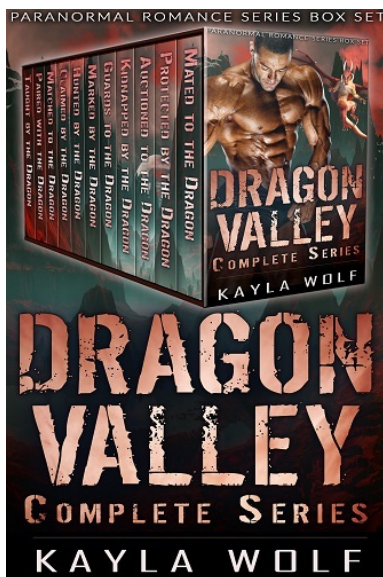
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[Taught by the Dragon](#)

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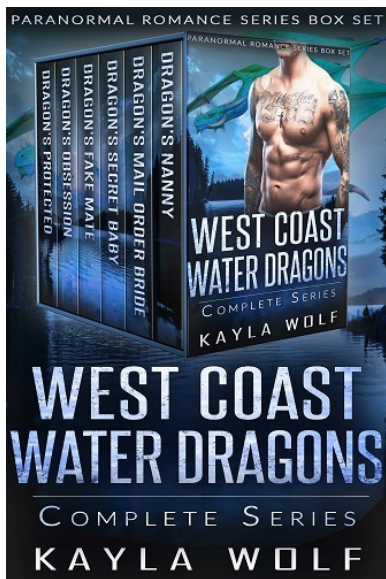
[“West Coast Water Dragons” Series](#)

Have you ever visited the peninsula of the Water Dragons? You will have to look hard for it, because the dangerously hot dragons living here want to keep it a secret from anyone but you... Yes, you read that right: you are invited on a wild ride by the most attractive men on the West Coast (and that’s saying something with Liam Hemsworth around...). So pack your bags, because you’re going on an adventure to a very secret place. Bless the woman who gets lost here...

“West Coast Water Dragons” is a paranormal romance series consisting of stand-alone stories, each with a HEA, that are connected through the dragons who live on the peninsula.

[**OUT NOW: West Coast Water Dragons Complete Series**](#)

SAVE more than 70% compared to the standalone books



Standalone books in the series:

[Dragon's Nanny.](#)

[Dragon's Mail Order Bride](#)

[Dragon's Secret Baby.](#)

[Dragon's Fake Mate](#)

[Dragon's Obsession](#)

[Dragon's Protected](#)

The “West Coast Water Dragons” series is a spin-off of the “Dragon Valley” series.

* * *

“City of Dragons” Series

The City of Dragons is the place of your dreams. Red-hot dragons left, right, and center, waiting for you to explore the concrete jungle with them. Are you ready to enter this city of fantasy, where mates, magic, and more await?

[Dragon King](#)

[Dragon Player](#)

[Dragon Prince](#)

[Dragon Mate](#)

[Dragon Billionaire](#)

[Dragon Roommate](#)

[Dragon Boss](#)

Start reading book 1 of the “City of Dragons” series now:



* * *

Books by Mia Wolf:

“Silverdale Wolves” Series

Silverdale Wolves is a sizzling paranormal romance series where delicious wolf shifters compete for rank, respect and women. These strong males are possessive, demanding ... and very seductive. Once they’ve identified their mate, they won’t allow anyone or anything to get in the way...

[Alpha’s Mate](#)

[Wolf's Mate](#)

[Beta's Mate](#)

[Shifter's Mate](#)

[Demon Wolf's Mate](#)

[Bully Wolf's Mate](#)

[Daddy's Mate](#)

* * *

“Menage Dating Agency for Shifters” Series

Have you ever wanted not just one, but two mates? Two hot shifters to claim you, protect you, and make you melt? Two guys to enjoy cool days, hot nights, and steamy encounters with? If your answer is a resounding yes (and let's face it, why would it be a no?) then sign up for the Menage Dating Agency for Shifters and fulfill your wildest dreams and fantasies...

[Double Alphas](#)

[Double Pumas](#)

[Double Wolves](#)

* * *

“Double Desert Shifters” Series

What if I told you that deep in the desert is a place that all women dream of? A place where every woman is loved by two men, and where curves are like a gift from the gods? Would you stay home? Or would you come with me to check out the Double Desert Shifters?

Double Desert Shifters is a paranormal menage romance series. The stories are standalones, each with a HEA.

[OUT NOW: Double Desert Shifters Complete Series](#) SAVE more than 70% compared to the standalone books



Standalone books in the series:

[My Two Alphas](#)

[My Two Wolves](#)

[My Two Dragons](#)

[My Two Bears](#)

[My Two Lions](#)

[My Two Mates](#)

[My Two Tigers](#)

[My Two Beasts](#)

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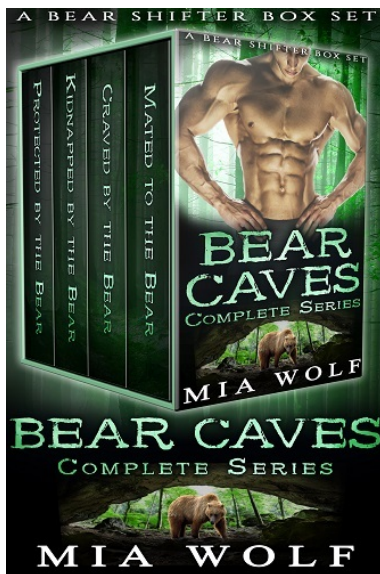
“Bear Caves” Series

Come visit the Bear Caves, a mysterious village where bear shifters live far removed from humans. This village, with its

caves and its festivals houses not just any bears. No, it houses Very Sexy bears, who are not easy to please, but who will protect their mates with their lives without question.

The Bear Caves series consists of stand-alone stories that are connected through the bears who live in the village. Each story has a guaranteed satisfying HEA.

[OUT NOW: Bear Caves Complete Series](#) SAVE 25% compared to the standalone books



Standalone books in the series:

[Mated to the Bear](#)

[Craved by the Bear](#)

[Kidnapped by the Bear](#)

[Protected by the Bear](#)

* * *

[“Wolf Mountain” Series](#)

Come with me to Wolf Mountain, a village with hot, single wolves who are strong, muscled, and ... single. They don't

need a mate. They don't want a mate. Until they meet the one they will die to protect...

Wolf Mountain is a paranormal romance series consisting of stand-alone stories, each with a HEA, that are connected through the wolves who live in the village.

[Werewolf's Surrogate](#)

[Werewolf's Second Chance](#)

[Werewolf's Prisoner](#)

Start reading book 1 of the "Wolf Mountain" series now:

