



Eagle Clan Series: Father of the Wolf

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Dedication

This first novel of the Valàfrn is dedicated to all those family and friends whom I might call clan. You have taught me honor, shown me strength, and given me courage. Thank you. And a special thank you to my mom; you are the heart of the Eagle Clan.

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Chapter One

Warren, Pennsylvania August 26, 1980

If Life Bites, Bite Back

Hope

Obviously she, Hope Carter, was insane. She sighed and shifted her weight away from the rough brick wall. What else could one call a person hiding outside her place of work at three in the morning? The word *coward* might fit, too. She'd ducked out the door only minutes after calling her best friend to come pick her up. Steve, her pity chauffeur, would be here soon. Despite the brisk night, she was waiting outside. She was *not* going back into the veterinary clinic just to be shanghaied into another shift.

She limped to the corner of the building where a small bench sat hidden from the doorway. She sank to the bench and buttoned up her light jacket against the cool air.

Steve's station wagon pulled around and parked illegally right in front of the bench. The car's engine purred in the eerie quiet, until it too became silent.

"Hey, why are you lurking back here?" He swung from the car entirely too energetically for the time of night, and Hope felt even more worn out by comparison.

"Sandy wanted me to work another shift," she explained.

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"But you've already worked a double. She's taking her title a little too seriously. That's crazy!" Steve picked up her small bag.

"I thought the same thing." His cologne swamped over her, making her sneeze. *Steve needed to learn the word moderation.* She sneezed again and fanned the air with her hand. "Joe never showed up, so they're short handed again."

"You could have told them no and waited inside." He frowned at her and shifted his weight from heel to toe, then back again.

"I almost agreed to do the shift. If it weren't for the weather being so crummy today, my legs might have held up for a while longer."

"No way. You shouldn't even have done the double and I'll tell Sandy exactly that."

"You don't have to do that, Steve. I'm fine, really. Let's just go." What was with him tonight? He was wired and almost dancing in place.

"Is Julie on tonight?"

"Yeah." So the receptionist was the cause of his excitement. He was more than a bit sweet on the new girl, and she wanted them to hit it off, but not while the romance kept her from reaching her much desired bed.

"Great! Go start the car. I'll be right back." He bolted for the front of the building.

"Steve—" Hope broke off. He paused in his fast escape, but she could see he was already mentally browsing through his stock pick-up lines. She could go with him and ask the girl for her phone number, but then she'd have to listen to Steve gripe the whole trip home. So instead, she frowned. "Please hurry. It's late."

"I know." He halted and glanced longingly at the clinic. "But this is my best chance to talk with her. She's mostly on nights and I really want to ask her out."

"Oh fine, just hurry. It's been a long day." *To say the least.*

"Thanks, Hope!" He tossed her the keys and jogged toward the front of the clinic. Soon he was out of sight. She juggled the keys and dropped them to the sidewalk.

Damn. She glared down at the keys, then over at the car, which surely glared back at her. She would be warmer in it than sitting outside

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in the cool night air, but she couldn't force her legs to carry her toward the evil beast. She'd rather wait until Steve returned before getting in for the drive home. She choked back a laugh. Nothing like more evidence to support her insanity plea. She relied almost completely on him to drive her places.

She slouched on the bench and focused on stretching her cramping legs. Fifteen years ago, a car accident had left her a mangled mess. Her body had never properly healed, and she hadn't yet recovered her trust in the everyday machine most people took for granted. As far as she was concerned, cars were her enemy and she only held a tentative treaty with the dangerous beasts.

She picked up the keys and debated the rudeness of shouting for Steve, when she saw movement in the alley across from the clinic. With only a glimpse, she had the impression of some large dark animal, a fast moving shadow, and a flash of dark fur.

Please, not tonight. All Hope wanted was her warm bed. Instead, she was about to chase off after a stray. The poor thing was probably someone's house pet that wandered off. She *had* to try to catch it. No animal should be left loose to starve, reproduce, or be hit by a car.

Hope placed her weight on her aching legs and limped slowly across the street toward the alley. Here, alone in the dark, she had no reason to camouflage her uneven steps. She slipped Steve's keys into her jacket pocket and pulled out a flimsy kennel lead designed to slip over the heads of small dogs. *Big as the critter seemed, he'd better be gentle.*

She peered into the alley, looking for the dog, or any sign of which way it went. Light from the full moon filtered through the clouds, doing little to cut the deep shadows caused by the crowding buildings.

There, about thirty feet away, another movement caught her eye. She made out several elusive shapes.

Not a stray. A pack.

Four large dogs moved toward the other end of the alley. In this urban area, a pack of scavenging, possibly feral dogs would be a menace. A shiver slid down Hope's spine. The animals crept forward with a stealth that felt threatening and dangerous, as if they were hunting.

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But hunting what?

She felt helpless. Tracking a pack was the responsibility of animal control. Already the dogs were far down the alley, nearly out of sight at the other end. With a shrug she turned to go back to the clinic. Her feet froze when she heard a short, cut-off scream. *What the hell?* She spun back, dropping the lead in shock at what she saw.

The dogs were gone, and in their place were men.

The scream had come from a terrified woman who continued whimpering as she was pinned against the wall by the biggest of the brutes.

Three others surrounded them.

Hope followed her instincts and yelled down the alley, "Hey, you! Stop!" She had to help the woman any way she could. *Oh, shit. Damn her misleading instincts!*

All eyes turned in her direction.

Hope's heart slammed painfully in her chest, while time seemed to hold the world within the moment.

The man holding the woman slammed her violently against the wall and dropped her on the ground in an unmoving heap, then stalked toward Hope. In the darkness of the alley, the shadows seemed to cling. They were too far away and too dark. The men's features were blurred beyond identification.

The man kept coming.

She stepped back. Fear shivered through her. *She wasn't getting out of this one.* Tonight, her legs barely managed a walk. She gasped as each jarring step drove shards of pain through her leg from knee to hip.

What would he do to her? Somehow she knew he wasn't simply planning to chase her off. She could almost feel his cruel intentions in the touch of his angry gaze. He'd hurt her, kill her, or worse.

Still forty or fifty feet from the clinic door, she halted. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Help!" Hope yelled. *No one will hear you.* The streets were empty, and the clinic was the only all-night business on the block. But she screamed again anyway. She also turned and quickened her awkward

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steps, praying to at least reach the road with its slightly better lighting.

She looked back. Two of the other men now flanked the first. The fourth stayed with the woman, kneeling beside her, doing who knew what.

Strange. They'd yet to make a single sound. There were no threatening words. No heavy breathing. No sound of footsteps. *Hell*, not even their damned clothing rubbed together. The only sounds she heard were her own pounding heart, gasping breath, and dragging footsteps.

She limped away from them, looking back several times, trying desperately to see the man's features so she could identify him if she did get away. Not if, *when* she got away.

Almost to the road! The leader's stalk turned into a languid jog. The other two men froze in place.

The rumble of an engine cut into the quiet. Headlights and relief flooded over Hope as the car drew closer. She stumbled onto the edge of the road, waving her hands and yelling to get the driver's attention. With his or her help she'd scare off the men, and then call the police and an ambulance. The woman on the ground needed medical attention.

Hope glanced back down the alley to see which way the men went so she could tell the police. But they hadn't left. They'd only sunk back into the shadows, into near invisibility.

The Buick slowed at her waving, and then went right by. The driver and his passenger stared at her out the window.

How could they not stop?

Shit. She'd have to take a rain check on salvation. Just her kind of luck. She'd have to save herself, so she'd better keep moving.

Only the leader continued toward her. The others were gone. No. They'd gone back to the woman. One threw her limp body over his shoulder. Was she unconscious, or dead?

At the other side of the road, Hope wondered why the man only walked, as if to taunt her. As if he had no doubt about his ability to do whatever he wished to her or to anyone.

And, to be honest, she believed it, too. *It's all too creepy.* The confusing facts didn't add up. The men's intensity. Their lack of sound.

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The *damned* shadows that clung to them.

The man, not more than fifteen feet away now, walked directly at her, yet she still couldn't make out any facial details. He was tall and broad shouldered, but like a shadow, he lacked any details to identify. All the features the police would want. She couldn't tell what clothes he wore, his face, eye color, or even his hair color.

Even if she got away they'd never catch this man. Self disgust filled her at the thought of being a helpless victim all because she chased after a stupid homeless dog. She stumbled forward another step, then another. She had to make it to the clinic. She had to...

She didn't. The attacker's massive weight slammed into her back, knocking her from her feet. Hope grunted when she hit the pavement hard, face first. She let out a strangled cry as her attacker rolled her over, straddling her. His weight trapped her in place. Her scream was cut short as he slammed his fist into her face. Horrible pain shot through her head once, then again. Black peace clouded the darkness around her. Pain and a burning need for air finally cleared her vision and brought her back to her senses.

He lifted her easily onto his shoulder and started back toward the alley. Hope sucked in the cool night air and began to struggle and scream again. There was no way in hell she would go down without a fight. Frustrated by not being able to kick hard enough to hurt the bastard, she flung herself sideways and pounded his back with her fists, managing to throw him off balance.

He growled and threw her back to the pavement. This time when he fell on her, he followed his punch with a painful, fierce grip on her hair, pulling her head back.

His breath blew hot and foul into her face. "That's right. Fight me." The crazy psycho licked up across her cheek. He followed it with a biting nip to her jaw. "Humans are the best prey for so many reasons," he growled in a dry harsh voice as he tore his hand across her chest. Her jacket and blouse ripped open easily and his nails clawed her flesh.

If the asshole wanted her to fight, she'd oblige him. She braced her arms and heaving her body upwards in a sharp arch. When his forearm

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brushed her face, she turned into it and bit him deeply, tasting the copper of his blood.

He yelped and pulled back, and she kicked him with her stronger leg, solidly connecting with his groin. Surely she caused him no lasting harm, but his pain was enough of a distraction to give her another chance to scream and crawl the few yards back onto the road.

The clinic door slammed open and Steve stepped into sight calling, "Hope? Are you out here?"

"Steve! Help me!" she cried. What a wonderful man. She'd never tease him for being late again. His timing was perfect.

The man's grabbing hands let go of her and his weight disappeared. She looked up, but her attacker was gone. Just gone. She lay on the edge of the street, alone.

No, not alone. Two eyes in the shadows glowed malevolent green, feral eyes promising all the agonies of hell. They were the eyes of her attacker, no matter how strange they seemed now. She'd remember them even if she never saw another feature of his face. Those hate-filled, glittering green eyes.

Steve reached her side, firing questions at her. "What happened? Did I hear you scream?" He squatted down and wrapped his arm around her. "Did you fall? Are you hurt?"

"Steve, look," she said, trying to draw his attention to the deep shadows of the alley.

He followed her gaze, but the man was no longer there. All Hope saw was movement and a quick glimpse of black fur and a bushy tail. If she didn't know better, she would have said it looked wolf-like. But must have been the stray dog.

Had the dog been with the man? Had there been more forming a pack? What had happened to the woman? What could she tell the police to help them catch this man?

Steve tried to help her stand, but her weak leg buckled. He more than half carried her back to the clinic. As they reached the dim light at the front of the building, Steve let out a gasp. "What the hell! Who did this to you? What happened?" His fingers brushed her tangled hair back from

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her battered face.

She knew she must be quite a sight. Suddenly, she was too tired to explain. Her whole body ached and her head throbbed.

"You're going to the hospital. No arguments."

Hope didn't argue. She barely nodded before slipping into the welcoming black of unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Despair crawled over Athair's skin and tore at his heart. He knew this fog-shrouded clearing and was sickened by the sight of the ravaged village before him. The acrid smell of their smoldering homes burned his senses. Dead sounds echoed through his soul, crying out the last emotions of many who had died. His family and friends had been killed here only hours before he returned. Sorrow rooted his feet to the ground, holding him in this moment, drawing out his pain.

On the verge of an anguished howl, Athair pulled himself sharply from the dream. The same dream, always the same. But it wasn't just a dream. This nightmare was a memory from the day the clan had been torn apart. He and his two brothers were the only adults of the clan left alive after that horrible day. Barely into maturity, he'd become the second eldest of what remained of the Eagle Clan.

They'd been unprepared for the Irish hunters. No one had expected them to find the clan's village despite their regular hunts. The humans never understood the truth, only believed what they saw in the few who were deranged and dangerous, or drunk on power. Their fear exaggerated the lie behind the legend of the werewolf. The common man saw wolves as evil and a man-wolf as an abomination that stole children and fed on human flesh. If they saw the more noble side of the canines of the world, maybe his clan and the rest of the Valàfrn could someday be accepted. Athair dreamed of the day when he and his family could live without fear.

A discreet cough drew Athair's attention to the doorway, where a young man stood. Young was a relative term; the man was nearly three hundred years younger than Athair.

Rath tensed, his body motionless but rippling with discomfort. His

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golden eyes flicked towards the exit, showing his desire to be done and away. *What could be so important?*

Quietly, Athair asked "What is it, Rath?" He hid the strain the nightmare always brought and willed the tension from his own body. He extended his empathy. Yet from the sympathy Athair felt in Rath's emotions, his effort was wasted.

"Romie and Mo are trying to kill each other. Dàn said to come get you," Rath answered in Gaelic, their native language.

"What?" Athair shook his head, *He must still be asleep. Only in a nightmare would the light-hearted twins turn on each other.* "Where are they? What happened?"

"What do you think happened? Romach walked in on Molach and Allaidh," he said with a snort. "She is not always clear about when she has moved on to her next partner." Rath was the oldest of the children saved from the village massacre of Athair's dream. Nine children were found hiding in a cave with his brother, Sgrios' mate, Cairistione.

In the past two hundred years, Allaidh had shared her beautiful body with the young men of the clan. For a time, her actions helped to keep their wild libidos at least somewhat spent, but recently, the urge for long-term bonds overrode their good sense and caused bickering and bloodshed. *Why didn't they realize that Allaidh would not bond with any of them?*

"How serious do they fight?" Athair's words were muffled as he pulled on a lightly woven shirt and followed the younger man from his small lodge.

"Rather, Father. From what I saw, the fight began nearly an hour ago. Allaidh must have run before it started."

The children called him "Father" as a show of respect and appreciation for raising them as his own. Several of the younger ones didn't remember their parents and he tried to fill the role as best he could. Only his stories kept their lost families close, but that would never be enough. Valàfrn thrived within the clan, but suffered greatly without the strength of an extended family.

Growling and snarling pierced the quiet before they reached the

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front of the dugout lodge the twins shared. The sounds came from the back, so Athair and Rath jogged around the brush that covered one side of the roof. Athair spotted two gray wolves circling each other, each looking for an opening to attack. Their large bodies were both marked by small cuts and bites, but they were not yet badly injured.

Athair stepped between them before either used his appearance as a distraction to initiate another attack. "Romach and Molach! I am ashamed of you. Brothers should strengthen one another, not weaken each of you. Never should it come to this." Although he'd said their names in a low growl, the rest of Athair's words flowed in his usual quiet, firm voice. The two wolves stood still, their flanks heaving, panting and bleeding, but no longer snarling as the anger faded from their identical, flashing blue eyes. "Blood is too precious to ever fall to the ground between brothers. You will heal each other and come find me this evening to explain your actions."

He used his empathy to read them deeply. They were done with their fight. Both were feeling hurt, but not angry. The only reason their fight had continued so long was because neither of them had wanted to give in first.

Athair gave the brothers one last chastising frown, which encouraged them to drop their hostility and begin licking their wounds clean. A moment later he caught their remorseful emotions as Romie began licking a nasty cut on Molach's cheek. Satisfied the incident was under control, Athair considered their deeper underlying problem. The young men needed mates. At nearly four hundred years of age, they needed emotional attachment more than simple sexual release. Unfortunately, their sheltered, secluded lives didn't offer much choice. The time had come to consider other options.

"Rath, do you know where Sgrios is?" Athair asked.

"No, but Dàn does. He's down by the stream."

Of course Dàn would know. "I would like to thank him anyway."

Athair wondered if the other clans held to the old traditions. They'd lost so much with the deaths of their elders. *How were the other clans dealing with changing times?* Perhaps they would soon find out.

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He and Rath walked down the slight hill toward Dàn's favorite spot by the stream. Athair worried about the strangest of his adopted sons. Lately, Dàn had pulled further away from their group, wanting to stay by himself most of the time. While raising the others had challenged Athair, Dàn had always been lost to his care. There was some element Athair could not provide, no matter how hard he tried.

"You should speak English now, Rath," Athair said, remembering Rath's use of Gaelic during their conversation.

"Why?" Rath shrugged in frustration. "We don't see other people often enough to bother. Why speak another language when we are among ourselves?" He said this in Gaelic, of course.

Calmly, because Athair partly agreed with the younger man, he said, "Because, it is safest to be prepared for the time when we must deal with humans." This was his usual answer to this question, but it might take on new meaning if his brothers agreed with the drastic measures he was about to suggest.

As expected, Rath had no verbal response for Athair's often repeated reply, other than a low grumble as he turned to leave. He continued with a few choice Gaelic phrases, descriptive enough to make Athair smile.

Such lack of respect. Still, it was only stress that made Rath speak so. Rath, like the others, needed a true mate with which to bond. Allaidh leaving him for the twins had brought the lack of a mate into focus. Her loss was even more difficult because it wasn't in their nature to give up possessions easily, even uncomfortable ones.

Athair walked down to the small woodland stream, where he found Dàn staring at the water as it bubbled peacefully past.

Dàn nodded in deference. His expression remained impassive when he looked up and greeted Athair, "Father."

"Thank you, Dàn, for having Rath awaken me."

Dàn's gaze dropped back to the stream. Athair reached out with his empathy and tried to read Dàn's feelings. He looked so uncertain. Athair felt fear, and then nothing as the boy's defenses fell into place. Being able to read emotions and sometimes thoughts of the younger clan members

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made Athair's parenting somewhat easier. But some, like Dàn, had learned how to block being read. It had been quite some time since Dàn had allowed his emotions to be felt without immediately withdrawing behind his wall of protection.

"Dàn, do you know where I can find Sgrios?"

"He hunted to the west last week, but is with Acair now. You'll be able to find them both behind the meeting lodge cutting firewood." Dàn continued to stare at the stream. "He plans to leave soon. I'll have Lasair ask him to wait for you." Only Lasair dared to speak with Sgrios telepathically, so only she could convince him to wait.

"Thank you." Something was definitely bothering Dàn, but Athair knew better than to push him. If he needed to know, then Dàn would come to him with whatever problem had appeared in his visions.

He could have mentally contacted his twin brother, Acair, but he hesitated to do so. He wanted to offer his plan to both his brothers at once and Acair was so strong Athair would be unable to hold back information from him. If he connected with him, Acair immediately would know why he wanted to meet. This impromptu meeting could change everything for them. So much of the clan's future depended Acair's experienced leadership of and Sgrios' violent distrust.

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Chapter Two

Forgotten Fears

Streams of Consciousness

Hope awoke with a gasp. *Her mind screamed with pain. Her flesh burned with fire.*

She opened her eyes to the familiar and terrifying sight of a sterile hospital room. What had happened? The accident blazed through her mind. The horrible rolling, burning death that had stolen her family.

They'd gone out for ice cream to celebrate her acing her driver's exam. Lightning had crashed around the car in a brilliant display, making Hope jump. Mom tried to laugh off her nervousness by saying the storm was providing fireworks in her honor, but she'd known differently. No feeling of celebration had accompanied the flashing light and pelting rain, and no amount of cheerful wishing from her mother could make the storm any less malignant. The rain soaked the roads, forcing her to drive slowly along the tree lined highway toward town. Although nervous about the storm and weighed down with the feeling of impending doom, she carefully followed every rule, anxious to prove herself as a good driver.

A tractor trailer with a heavy load decided to pass them after following them for several miles. The truck was almost past when it started to pull back into the right lane. Whether she over compensated or

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the truck clipped their car, she didn't remember. But she did recall the steep bank and looming forest rising before her. The car rolled and crashed into the trees, flipping this way and that. She braked and fought with the wheel. Something in the back of the car exploded. She knew she must have screamed, but she couldn't remember doing it.

In fact, she didn't remember anything but pain after the explosion. Pain, as if she'd been broken into tiny pieces, which of course, she had. She found out later, much later, that the truck driver called for help, then heroically ripped open the driver's door and dragged her out. After saving her, he went back and pulled her mother from the passenger side, but he couldn't reach her father or her brothers before the car burst into an inferno. They died in the explosion. Her mother died right next to her, while she lay unconscious, unable to even say goodbye.

Hope shifted her weight, gritting her teeth when the sheet rubbed against her scraped knees. *She could feel her knees?*

The pieces slowly fell into place, and finally she remembered the attack outside the clinic. She was in the hospital, but not for the car accident, which had happened long ago.

Steve opened the door and peered into the room. "Are you awake?" he whispered.

"I'm awake. Come on in." She sat up and ran her fingers through her hair in an effort to feel normal.

"The police are here to talk to you. Do you feel up to it?"

* * * * *

Athair hurried toward the meeting lodge, which was actually more of a pavilion than a building. Its open area was sheltered between the steep rocky hillside and the rear of Acair's cabin. Unlike the cabin, the pavilion had only a thatched roof that worked best on sunny days. Although they had been in the same area for centuries, they'd agreed to keep the structures as natural as possible. Not showing the number of actual dwellings that existed here was one of the ways they stayed hidden from humans and other dangers. If humans did come to this unlikely

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place, they would only see one small cabin unless they looked very closely. Acair's rustic cabin, made of roughly cut logs, was the only one built above ground. The other members of the clan had ancient style homes cut into sheltered areas of the uneven valley. The underground rooms were small, dark, and den-like, suiting the clan's needs in every way.

As Athair settled into a chair at the long table under the roof, he studied his two brothers stacking the last of the cut wood. His twin, Acair, looked like him, but was slightly darker in coloring. He was tall and muscular, with sable hair and strong features. Acair was the strength of the clan. As the eldest, he had led them through troubled times. He was only an hour older than Athair, but that gave him the less than appealing job of leadership. For the sake of the rest, he rarely let the strain of his decisions show, keeping his emotions contained. He shouldered the burden of responsibility and complained to none but Athair, and then only rarely.

Sgrios was another story. He flooded the shelter with his pain and anger. His raw emotions throbbed with painful intensity. Athair felt fortunate to catch Sgrios in their village, as his stays were always brief. Shortly, he would leave to join the wild wolf pack again. Remaining in human form, with all its memories and guilt, was too painful for him to endure for more than a few hours at a time. The last few years had been hardest for him. Sgrios spent more and more time with the wolves and less time with the clan.

The three brothers led the clan as best they could. The younger ones were kept safe and fed and taught as much as possible. Unfortunately, their efforts weren't enough to offer hope for the future.

Sgrios paced the room, obviously too closed-in, even in this two sided pavilion, to relax in any way. "Lasair told me to wait for you. What for, Athair? I must leave. Soon."

Unstated, but easily understood by both of them, was Sgrios' belief that he was a danger to those around him. Barely able to control himself at the best of times, he stayed away to avoid painful memories and to protect those he still cared for. Athair ached for his brother, who had lost so

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much. Perhaps it would have been kinder if they had let him choose death a long time ago. Back then, he and Acair had thought Sgrios would eventually heal. But now, they knew no amount of time could repair a soul torn so violently in two.

Athair opened the discussion. "We need to consider resuming contact with humans, so that we, especially the young ones, may seek out mates." Athair's breath caught as he waited for Sgrios' explosion. He was not disappointed.

With an angry growl, Sgrios raked Athair with a challenging stare. "No! Fool! It would mean our destruction." His dead mate, Cairistione, had been human.

"Fool, indeed!" Athair roared, but regained his composure with a sigh of resignation. "We already have our ruin in sight, brother. It is not your doing." Cairistione's father had brought hunters and death to their clan. Sgrios had no trust left for humans or his own decisions.

"What exactly are we considering?" Acair asked, spreading a powerful calming energy that would affect even Sgrios. "As much as I know something must change, I fear contact with humans will be too drastic a choice for our people to easily accept."

Ignoring Sgrios, who paced furiously back and forth, Athair shared the desperate idea that had been pushing around his mind for weeks. "I believe we must send some of our young men into nearby villages to reopen communication with humans."

Sgrios snarled a profanity in regard to the prospective towns and was ignored as Athair continued, "The young men can relearn human ways and bring the knowledge back to us. At the very least, it will ease the tension we face everyday."

"Our numbers are small, but I agree we must separate the younger ones before there is a death." Acair ran a hand restlessly through his hair.

Acair's words stilled Sgrios' agitated motion. He turned. "They fight each other that viciously? I didn't know it had come to that."

In reality, the violence had been escalating dangerously for decades. Sgrios had not witnessed much of it first hand. Because his temper was perilous at best, neither Acair nor Athair had wanted to bring

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it to his attention, if it could be avoided.

"We have had many problems," Athair said. "They need to find their mates, or at least find means to relieve their passions. Allaidh now does more damage than good. Romach and Molach came to blood over her this very morning." Athair paused. "Yet I don't feel right sending them out alone. If they must go, they should go in pairs."

"This feels wrong to me," Sgrios said, "But I no longer trust my instincts."

His shoulders slumped, as he resigned himself to the necessity, now that he saw how grave the situation had become.

"Perhaps we have hidden ourselves away too long and let too much time slip by in the name of protection," he said, regaining the voice of reason he had used so long ago. He continued in the silent language, which was heard in a deep rumbling whisper. *"Or perhaps we do not seek the right people. We must also seek the others if we are to survive this dark time."*

Both Athair and Acair stared in disbelief at hearing the thought without words. Long ago, Sgrios had shown the gift of prophecy, which was most often given in the silent language. Although most in the clan had some telepathic ability, it was rarely used while in human form.

The silent tongue allowed the listener to feel the speaker's emotions and sometimes, his thoughts. Sgrios avoided that intimacy whenever possible. The others were grateful for this kindness, but this thought had come without any inflection or emotion. Surely it was true prophecy.

Acair turned to Sgrios, "To whom do you suggest we go?"

"The Bear Clan."

Acair nodded thoughtfully. "They are the closest clan and have strong numbers. Who do you feel should go?" In this, he deferred again to his youngest brother. Besides the gift of sight, Sgrios had traveled further than the others, even if mostly in wolf form. They knew he had made contacts within the Bear Clan.

"It will have to be one of us. The young should not cross territorial lines by themselves without an invitation, especially now. There is turmoil within their clan. One of you will have to go." With a low growl and a sly look, he added, "I am not welcome at the present."

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Athair understood he should be the one to go, and he accepted the obligation without argument. "Acair, you must remain here. You are needed to organize the young and stay close in case they need you. I will go to the Bear Clan. I will also take one or two with me. We should divide the young ones as we can." They were all quiet for a several minutes. "I will take Rath and Dàn with me to the Bear Clan. Rath, to give him relief from Allaidh, and Dàn, in the hope we may find him a mentor."

"There are two towns not far away." Acair said. "We will send a pair to each. Romach and Molach to the east. Leth and Lasair to the south."

"Not the girl," Sgrios protested. "We cannot risk her loss."

"She will not mate within the clan. Lasair is strong and sensible, and you know how protective Leth is of her. He will never allow her to come to harm." Athair waited for Sgrios to argue further.

Yet to his surprise, Sgrios instead offered, "I will take Reultan and Díon to hunt with the pack. Both could use the experience." Sgrios had never taken others with him on his journeys.

They all looked uneasy about his decision. Acair said, "So it will be. Sgrios, we need to discuss your experiences outside our home so I may prepare the young one. We must be sure they know what to expect and how to protect themselves."

* * * * *

Hope felt very lucky to have such a good friend. *Steve is wonderful.* She repeated the mantra, *Steve is wonderful*, and reminded herself of her best friend's many virtues. *He's supportive. He's optimistic. He's fun to be around. He's always there for her. He is wonderful...*

Steve was a complete pain in the ass! He was driving her nuts. She wished she had a radio to help drown out his big brother act.

He was currently lecturing her on her choice of waiting alone in the dark in the middle of the night in town. This had followed the lecture on how she should have taken better care of her leg and told her boss where to stick the extra shift. His exact words had been, "Grow a backbone,

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would you?" Followed by, "Stand up for yourself and make your own decisions" and "They need you more than you need them."

"I can't believe you went down that alley alone! What were you thinking? 'Hey! Single woman here, come and get it'?"

"Knock it off, Steve. You know very well the diner isn't in an unsafe area. We've worked there for years. The crime rate is nearly non-existent."

"You should have called me." He glared at her, and finally she understood. *He was scared for her!*

"I just wanted to see if the dog would come to me." She reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze to reassure him. "You know how quickly strays move on. I had to at least try before it left the area."

"Still—" He glared again at her, but relaxed some sitting on the side of the bed

"I don't want to argue over this," she said. He wouldn't normally dare lecture her quite so long and hard, but the hospital had wanted her to spend the day under observation. So she was trapped and unable to escape his big brother act. Steve hadn't shut his mouth since she'd awakened. For all she knew, he might have been lecturing her while she slept, too.

"What you need is a man to take care of you."

"What?" *Where had that come from?*

"You heard me. You need a man. When is the last time you even had a date?"

"None of your business," she answered tartly. It had been a while since her last date. A couple years, in fact. The time just slipped by when she wasn't looking. She had no time for dating in her busy life. She had her elderly grandmother and a bunch of house cats to keep her company. What did she need with a man?

"I'm serious. I could hook you up with one of my friends." At her undisguised horror, he said, "Hey, they're not that bad!"

"Yeah, they are. And no, I don't need a man right now. I've got the clinic to finish before I'll have any time to relax." The clinic was her dream. She was planning an animal hospital located at her home in the

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country. Yes, as much as she looked forward to being her own boss, that wasn't the main reason behind her plans.

* * * * *

Dàn sat quietly at the edge of the stream, watching the easy flow of the current. If only life were that easy and could just take you wherever it wished. Inevitably, the right choice would be made for you. Good or bad, it would be the right one. Sometimes there would be a split in the current offering of two choices, but mostly you would simply be in the path. Flowing within. Never seeing the whole. Never seeing the choices, what was missed or what was to come.

Many could follow that philosophy, trusting in fate or God or any other belief that took control and concern from their hands.

Dàn knew he'd never have that option.

Even now the weight of knowledge, of seeing the stream and its many currents, clenched like a fist on his heart. He wondered what choices he could make to drive the current to the best path. Would it be as simple as dropping a stone into the stream? Digging one out of the stream bed? Or perhaps skimming one over the surface with a skipping pebble?

What if he chose wrong? His decisions would affect all those around him. Would his choices save or sacrifice those he loved?

It was several hours later when he felt an intense stare. *He, the watcher, was being watched.* He raised his gaze to meet that of a large black wolf on the opposite bank of the stream. Sgrios. With the barest shimmer of blue sparks, the wolf shifted form to become man.

"You sit long and see little." Sgrios must have been on the bank, watching him, for some time.

"I sit long and see much. But far from enough."

"You look concerned." Sgrios said.

"I am." He could see much of what was coming and knew this current would be difficult to control. *Yet he had no choice.* He had to find a way, the right way, to bend the stream to his will.

"When do you leave for the Bear Clan?" Sgrios asked.

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"Tomorrow." Sometime the current was changed by many small stones rather than a few large ones. "Where will you take the others to hunt?"

"I had planned to go east."

"Could you go west instead?" The first small stone fell to the water, causing barely visible waves.

"Yes."

Dàn let out his breath and watched the tiny ripples spread out across the surface of the stream, the change subtle, yet vast.

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Chapter Three

Tricks of Memory
Choosing the Course

Hope's knees quivered. She gripped the counter to stay on her feet as she connected the information on the newscast to the woman she'd seen being attacked in the alley. The woman had been found dead. More terrible than dead, she'd been torn apart by animals. It was unclear yet how, or by what. *Shit*. Dental records had been necessary to confirm her identity. *Torn apart by animals*.

She'd pretty well convinced herself that she had imagined most of the attack. She almost believed it had been a couple of teenage hoodlums trying to mug her just as the police said. Not that she'd told them, or anyone, her interpretation of the night's events. Her conclusions were entirely too strange.

But now? The woman had been covered in bite and claw marks, as if by vicious animals. Her name was Sarah Collins. She was twenty two.

Just what had Hope seen that night? Why couldn't she get the police to understand that the men and dogs she has seen were connected? She sucked in her breath and tried to regain control of her pounding heart as her grandmother walked into the kitchen.

"Hope, dear, did I hear something break?" Granny's eyesight wasn't the best anymore, but she saw the shattered bowl at Hope's feet

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easily enough. "Goodness! What happened?"

Hope stared down blankly at the scattered shards. *When did she drop the dish?* She only saw the young woman's happy face pictured before her eyes. She looked back at the TV. They were still telling about where her body had been found and cautioning others to watch for dangerous animals.

Granny must have looked at the screen too. "Oh my! The poor girl didn't have a chance. I just can't imagine what would take a soul so far from the path." She shook her gray haired head sadly, probably thinking the woman had been a lost hiker.

"I—" How could she tell Granny that this was the girl she had seen attacked? *She couldn't.* It would only worry her grandmother. She wished she could talk this out with someone. Maybe putting her fears into words would show how unlikely they were. But she couldn't talk to Granny. And not Steve. He already thought she'd fallen off the deep end. She wasn't close to anyone else. Hope bent with a towel and began wiping up the broken pieces.

Granny bent her light frame, kneeling to help Hope. "Are you all right, dear? I've been so worried. You just haven't been yourself since you were hurt."

That was an understatement. Except, to which "hurt" was she referring? The first time that had put Hope in physical and mental therapy for six years? Or this recent one that would likely send her back? No, she wouldn't worry Granny with this.

It would pass, like all terrible fears do. Wouldn't it?

* * * * *

The wind blew through the trees as Athair led Dàn and Rath toward the territory of the Bear Clan. As they loped over long miles, Athair thought about the two young men with him.

Long ago, before they had fled Ireland, the Oracle gave one truth about each of the boys as was the custom with newborns. According to that ancient one Dàn would hold the future within his grasp, and Rath

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would find his destiny as the sword of fate.

The prophecy for Dàn was easy to understand, for he was a true seer. In other times, with a chance to learn from Oracles, a shaman and other seers, he would have strong sight, perhaps without known limits. Athair chose him to travel to the Bear Clan in the hopes their seer would agree to teach and guide him.

It would take little to make him formidable in his talent. Already he used his skills unconsciously and was usually one step ahead of everyone else. When Athair went to tell him of the decision, Dàn was in the middle of preparing his travel pack. He had known he would be chosen.

Rath's truth held more mystery. It possibly was general and meant that he would fight for what was right. Or it could mean that Rath would be Dàn's defender? If so, then he was already fulfilling it.

Both boys were dedicated and serious and lacked the youth they should have enjoyed. Of course, they had their young bodies, but they were controlled by the calm minds of elders. Neither had been given the chance to act young and carefree. After the massacre, Acair had taken these two to hunt as they were the only ones old enough to control their wolf forms. From then on, they had shouldered responsibility like adults and missed out on what should have been their childhood.

As dusk was gathering, Athair turned to look to the young men behind him. *Return to yourselves*, he thought to them. A shimmer of power and mist flowed over them, and all three of them returned to human form. "We draw near the edge of our territory. Tomorrow we will need to announce ourselves. We should hunt here, and then find a place to rest for the night."

Neither boy answered him, but shimmered into wolf form again. As he did often, Athair was grateful for the power of their magic which allowed them to shift any items they carried with them. Each had brought a small pack, which included changes of clothes and such. When they shifted forms, the items were bound to them. A simple spell learned early kept human objects from interfering with a wolf's movement.

Athair watched as the two wolves moved out together to flush game. Rath was strong, heavily muscled and dark gray. A nearly black

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wolf. Dàn was lean, fast, and white. They worked well together and quickly, cleanly catching two rabbits, enough to satisfy their hunger. Because they did not wish to show themselves just yet, they devoured their dinner without a fire or cooking it in the human way.

Athair chose to not hunt. He anxiously studied the area looking for any wolf or human sign. They had crossed the last road many miles back. By avoiding the settled areas, they had made it this far without any contact with humans.

Clans did not live near each other because they tended to fight one or both clans into extinction if territory lines came into dispute. Athair had led Rath and Dàn for nearly three weeks now, and it was likely they would soon be met with less than open arms. Still, anything besides open violence would be considered a good sign.

* * * * *

Hope wondered if what she remembered had really happened that night. She went over and over the event, first with the police after the body had been found, and then later by herself, replaying every detail, even the illogical ones.

She knew she had seen a dog-like animal go into the alley. She had seen several other animals in the alley, in addition to the men. They attacked the woman, and then one of them attacked Hope. Then an animal had looked back at her from the alley after the attack.

All this was fact, but remembering details and specific impressions was not so easy. And her conclusions were impossible.

She had begun to think the animals *were* the men, which was completely crazy. She knew that couldn't be, and yet her conclusion felt right. Four animals. Four men. The one who had attacked her and those animal eyes, shining out from the darkness.

Werewolves.

She was so far gone around the bend that she had Steve take her to the library while he went grocery shopping, and she spent almost two hours researching local animal attacks. What she found was that a very

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high percentage of those killed were attractive young women, traits animals wouldn't notice. Just what was it that werewolves looked for in prey? Her nervous fears beat at her as she sat at the round table again, surrounded by a stack of books about fantasy animals. She found plenty of information about the mythological beasts, but none of it was reassuring.

Common legend said that werewolves were any mortal able to change into a wolf or a half-wolf. This ability was explained by the use of magic, a curse from the Greek god, Zeus, or a biological disease called Lycanthropy. The books went on to tell how werewolves were difficult to exterminate. They could be killed with silver arrows or bullets and could also be burned to death, decapitated, or drowned.

She also found a few supposedly historical accounts of villages in Europe that had been harassed by the monsters. In each of the two cases she read, a werewolf was caught and convicted of stealing and killing children. To Hope, these accounts seemed more like the lynching of pedophiles rather than proof of werewolves.

As a teenager, she'd seen a shrink to help her with her issues. Did she still have the number? Maybe she should set some time aside for a visit. Wouldn't that be an interesting discussion?

No doubt the professional would see her questions about werewolves as more evidence of her repressed guilt. Perhaps he would be right.

* * * * *

Athair woke at dawn when Rath nudged his shoulder slightly with his nose. The three had slept in wolf form and were now surrounded by seven silent unmoving shadows. The shapes were of wolves. But by their unnatural stillness, he discerned that they were members of the Bear Clan, not true wolves. Athair had hoped that they would be able to greet the neighboring clan at the border on equal terms. However, the Bear Clan didn't seem to remember the territorial lines as being in the same place he did. If they expected a challenge, the situation could turn unpleasant very

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quickly.

Athair searched the shadows for a leader to address. He turned slowly to the largest of the shadows, which stood closest to them. As Athair focused his attention on it, the shadow defined itself into a golden-eyed, tawny wolf, which stepped forward aggressively. This new wolf had a strange scent to him. Athair shifted to the form of a man and stood with his arms relaxed, trying to appear unthreatening. Both Rath and Dàn remained wolves and bristled at his sides. He would have to talk to them later about diplomacy.

The golden-eyed one shimmered into a tall blond man who said bluntly, "I am Sundair. What are your intentions here?"

"We seek trade and friendship." Athair extended his perceptions, hoping to catch some of Sundair's emotions to help him know how to best approach him. Yet all he sensed was a subtle mixture of turmoil overlaying a fierce protectiveness.

"We need no more trade or friends."

One of the smaller wolves at his side shifted into a slender blond woman. She looked slender and delicate next to the man. Laying a hand on Sundair's arm, she spoke quietly in another language. He answered her, and she turned to Athair with a slight smile. "We will take you back to our Alphas if you wish. Otherwise, you must turn back here."

"We would be pleased to meet your Alphas. I am Athair, son of Ankulf. And these are Rath, son of Rayvir, and Dàn, my chosen son. We are of the Eagle Clan." Rath and Dàn both shifted to human form.

The female's smile, though still tense, brightened somewhat. "I am Domari, sister to Sundair, son of Sandulfr, son of Sulf. We'll need to travel quickly and silently for the next few days. There are human hunters in these woods, among other dangers." After that brief explanation, she and her brother shifted to their wolf forms and started off toward the west at a ground-eating lope. Obviously, she was done with conversation and expected them to follow her, which they did. Athair, Rath and Dàn found themselves in the middle of a loose, fast moving formation.

Thank you, Father. Dàn's silent words entered Athair's mind as they ran.

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You know my feelings for you. Athair didn't want Dàn to have any disadvantage among the Bear Clan. In elder times, the clans placed importance on a man's lineage. I did not wish you to lose face to any here. Often, posturing can be as important as strength. Parentage could be important to other clans in a way that had not existed for the Eagle Clan since the massacre.

My lack of status will cost our clan. I didn't know. I am sorry.

You have nothing for which to be sorry. No harm has been done. Your mother was good and honorable. Take pride in her. As for the rest, never feel shame over that which you have no control.

Several miles flew past before Dàn answered back. I wish I knew of my father.

I would tell you if I could. Athair felt Dàn's bleak emotions and they tore at him. If only he could offer him more. But Dàn yearned for knowledge that none left of the clan held.

I know. I think my differences must come from him and I worry about who he might have been. Who I may yet become.

As much or more than any other, I am proud to call you son. You alone control who you become, not your mother or your father. You have more strength in you than you know. If you wish to use a family kinship, you may use mine or your mother's. Many chose to honor their maternal line. No one would think that strange.

And with more luck than they had any right to hope for, maybe Dàn's father was one of the clansmen and not someone different. Something worse.

* * * * *

Hope sat at the kitchen table staring at the faded business card clutched in her hand. She had found the number of her psychiatrist yesterday. But should she call? How did one recognize the moment sanity slipped away? Was she crazy? Or simply crazier than usual?

Was she going to turn into a werewolf?

The question sounded nuts, even to her. In the past, she had found

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ways to cope without becoming too delusional. Years of facing one day at a time had shown her that anything could be dealt with if it could be broken into small practical steps. But what was the first step when the world of fantasy suddenly merged with one's own life? The first step in this should be to determine what was real.

Of what facts was she sure? She was attacked on the night of a full moon. She did see canines run into the alley before the attack. The attack included several spooky things, like the men's and dogs' ability to move without making noise and those strange eyes that glowed like they belonged to a night predator. After the attack, she had seen the dog or wolf again. The woman, Sarah, had been found dead and torn up.

Hope had read so much about werewolves and even watched some movies, that the information blurred in her brain. None of it confirmed the existence of werewolves outside of fantasy. She still had no answers and had made no headway on her first step.

Still, that was the only conclusion that she could think of to explain all the facts.

Either werewolves were real and she might be one, or they were fantasy and she was a lunatic. At least she had found the phone number for her psychiatrist. But should she call now, or wait for Granny to catch her with a chew toy?

There were many conflicting sources, but most agreed on one point: If a werewolf bit a person but didn't kill them, he or she became a werewolf.

But what if the person bit the werewolf? Ewww. Not a pleasant thought.

Not to mention that she had also been nipped and clawed, and the marks were slow to heal. She still didn't know what that meant, if anything, but she checked for fangs each time she brushed her teeth. And what about all that hair? Was there a hair remover on the market with that kind of performance ability? If so, she had a great idea for an advertisement.

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Chapter Four

Everything in Small Steps
Currents of Betrayal

Hope had to forget all the nonsense about werewolves. According to what she'd read, she wouldn't know anything for sure until the next full moon came and went, hopefully, without her needing a serious shave. At least she didn't have much longer to wait. Thankfully, she should know one way or the other within the next few days.

Never mind that werewolves didn't really exist. They were myth, not reality.

Was her mind trying to betray her again? After all these years of thinking she was getting by, was she now imagining werewolves? What would be next? Vampires, elves and fairies? As a child, she had always wanted to believe in unicorns. So maybe she could conjure up one of those.

No. She wasn't crazy. Werewolves *did not* exist. Neither did unicorns, and that was a shame. She had to believe that a series of unconnected details paired with her exhaustion had simply played tricks with her already loosely wrapped mind.

Worst of all, Granny was beginning to look at her in that worried way and ask, "Are you all right, dear?" And mostly she was all right. Her injuries were better, leaving no lasting signs of the attack. *Except for the*

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urge to howl at the moon. Well not even that. Yet.

* * * * *

Athair and the boys traveled for three more days, and yet learned little about the members of the Bear Clan. Sundair and Domari clearly lead the group, and they allowed none of the others to interact with them. Domari went so far as to apologize for this lack of communication. She was only willing to explain that the Alpha Pair were her and Sundair's parents, and that they would treat them fairly.

Athair was curious about the appearance the others took in human form. Their clothes were different, mostly decorative and of bluish colored cloth of various shades, which and revealed enough of the women to make him blush. He still felt more comfortable around women with more decorum. He'd grown up with women in long dresses and still preferred to guess at what was under all that cloth rather than have their bodies exposed for all to see.

Several of the clan had colorful tattoos reminding him of ancient Celtic customs. The only Eagle Clan member who chose the skin art was Díon, who would do anything considered rebellious. Díon had the wonderful ability to control the fine details of his appearance, so the tattoos he wore could change daily and often did.

Their hair styles were also strange. One of the young men actually had bright blue spikes. Although Athair found this somewhat outrageous, he was intrigued by how and why they would choose to do this. He wondered how long it would be before some of the young decided to adopt the style. And he smiled at the reaction he knew Allaidh would have to the relaxed clothing of today's women. His children deserved to be part of this world, and finally they would get their chance.

On the sixth evening, the group left the forest and entered a cleared meadow. Domari motioned for them to take human form as they began across the field. She moved to Athair's side and quietly said, "You will need to follow me directly to my parent's home. Please do not talk to the others until after you have met with the Alpha Pair. There is much you

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must know if you wish all to remain safe here in Lakeside.”

Athair nodded at her cryptic remarks and passed them on to Rath and Dàn. Preparing for whatever was to come, he studied the village as they approached. Along the far side of the meadow, many small homes were scattered beneath one outstretched arm of the thinning forest. Soon they were walking on a slightly overgrown flagstone path past the first of the homes. The houses were small and quaint. Most were built of stone or brick, but some were of wood and were painted white, tan, pale blue, or green. One was a cheery yellow. Most had well-maintained shrubs and flower gardens in their yards, although more than half of them looked empty, with no curtains in the windows or other signs of current inhabitants.

A couple of the houses had large, bowl-shaped, gray disks set near them. Athair had no idea what those were. There were many things he saw that puzzled him, and a few that reminded him of the bits and pieces Sgrios had shared with them over the years.

In front of the yellow house sat a shiny yellow machine. It had windows and seats on the inside, and Athair concluded this must be one of the horseless carriages Sgrios had told him about. They had seen a few on the roads, but the machines had moved too fast for them to see clearly. Athair had wondered if his brother had exaggerated many of his stories. Sgrios had told him so many over the years that were outrageous, but it seemed the world had developed at an amazing pace.

Several people were gathered outdoors enjoying the warm evening. Youngsters played in a cleared part of the field throwing a small ball around, while others sat nearby at tables and cheered for those playing.

The homes did not crowd each other, yet there were many of them. The path they followed widened to a road, perhaps eight or ten feet wide. He couldn't imagine how the Bear Clan had managed to live within this village, but he found it very encouraging. Perhaps his clan could relocate to a small town too, something they had all thought was too risky to consider. He wondered how this clan maintained their secrecy.

Then he noticed that there were wolves about as well as people. And he stared in surprise as one of the people started a fire magically

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under the steaks they were cooking. How could that be?

Surely these were not all of his kind. The area was spacious. There looked to be housing for hundreds, maybe thousands here. But with so many of the homes unoccupied, where were the rest of the people?

The path that had become a road now had houses on both sides. They still had plenty of space around each, but the buildings here were larger.

Domari and Sundair continued to lead them in silence, but the others in the group talked quietly. Athair clearly heard two of them discussing their trip to the nearby village and the hunt they had enjoyed. It seemed it had been a pleasant trip until they had come upon Althair, Dàn and Rath. They had cut their travels short to return to Lakeside.

As they left the road and passed between two large homes, Sundair quieted them and signaled them to alertness. The only sound was music floating from the open windows of the house to the right. They entered a dense apple orchard, where light scattered into dim streams at either side of the path. The hair rose on Athair's neck, and he tensed. The darkness seemed to move with a presence, all its own. Then ahead of them, three shadows wavered and grew into human forms, men who stepped into the light to block the path.

Standing tall before them, a man all in black snarled, "Who are these strangers?" He growled aggressively toward Sundair. "Why have you brought them to our town?" Five others stepped from the shadows, including two women.

"This does not concern you, Bequlf." Sundair said as the siblings advanced as though to force their way between the newcomers.

"If it concerns the safety of my people, it concerns me." His group pushed close together to form a blockade.

Sundair hesitated, and then seemed to come to a decision, "They are of another clan. We are taking them to Sandulfr."

Bequlf motioned to two of the men, who stepped apart as if to allow them through. "How do you know they are not dangerous? Other clans might attempt to steal our territory." He glared at Sundair, demanding answers Athair didn't think he would get. He continued, "The

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Eagle Clan is closest, and they are nothing but stealing dogs.”

Rath stiffened.

With an evil smirk, Bequlf said “These smell of that same trash.”

Despite Athair’s restraining hand on his arm, Rath faced Bequlf with clenched teeth and an intense growl. He was a man in his prime and very proud of his family. He was unlikely to suffer such insults without retaliation.

“Thieving trash.” Bequlf growled back and launched himself the short distance to grab Rath by the throat. Instinctively, Athair jumped between the two, prepared to defend his adopted son. Bequlf’s interrupted attack forced him to stumble into Athair, who caught him by his jacket and lifted him effortlessly inches above the ground.

“Enough.” Sundair shoved Bequlf and Athair apart. “This gains us nothing.” He glared sternly at Bequlf. “You may talk to Sandulfr about them if you wish. Otherwise, it is not your concern.”

“I will see to this myself.” Bequlf stepped aside and straightened his jacket. He threw Athair a malevolent glare. “You will regret coming here,” he promised.

Privately, Athair agreed.

Dàn’s silent thought confirmed Athair’s gut feeling. *This will not go well, but we must continue as we have begun.*

Do you know more? He questioned Dàn.

That we must proceed on this course. Unfortunately, they will turn on one of us. Dàn’s guarded expression gave nothing away and as usual, Athair could sense little of his emotions. All he could assume was that Dàn would tell him more as it was needed. Until then, Athair would have to make plans to get them both away and safe.

When this happens, I will clear the way and you and Rath will return to our clan. Tell Rath what you know, and of my wishes.

Dàn definitely knew more than he chose to share, which usually told Athair more than what he said. He knew they would turn on him because of his interference. Not the children. Still, he worried about them. Rath was strong. A born fighter and a survivor. Dàn sought only peace. All of his struggles were internal. Although Athair’s first instinct was to

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protect the boys, he knew they were both strong enough to face what was coming. He trusted Dàn's instincts. If he said they should continue, then it was probably their best choice.

* * * * *

"Hope, will you go pick up lunch?" Steve asked her in a chipper, optimistic voice.

"I thought Julie was going to get it today."

"She's helping with the kittens. Will you please go?" His voice had a slight begging quality, and she realized that he wanted the private time with Julie.

"Yeah. I'll go." She could hobble that far and the stretch might even help her feel better.

"Thanks, Hope. You're the best! Julie is so excited about feeding the kitties." He pulled his car keys from his pocket and tossed them to her.

"Wait! Where was lunch ordered?" She had figured she could walk to pick it up, but if he wanted her to drive, it must be further away.

"Frank's Deli."

A place all the way across town.

"Come on, Hope. It's really not that far. There's only one turn the whole way. You can do it. Look, the day's beautiful. You can practice the steps we've worked on. Please, do it for me."

Julie stepped around the corner carrying one of the newborn kittens in a feeding towel. "Steve, did you get the formula?"

"Just a second. I need to heat it up." Steve said this to Julie, and turned back to Hope with a sappy smile stretched across his starry-eyed face.

"Fine. I'll go. But you'd better ask her out this time." Hope grabbed her purse and went to Steve's car. She stopped beside it and sucked in a deep, fortifying breath. Steve was right. The day was nice and there was no reason she couldn't be the one to go get lunch. Frank's Deli was easy to get to and only a few minutes away. She could do this.

Steve was positive she could overcome her fear of driving. In the

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last six months, he'd been pushing her to try harder. His newest program was to break the act of driving into small easy steps.

Step one: *Get into the car.* Although this at first seemed simple, Hope still hesitated to open the driver's door. But only for a moment. Then she sat down on the seat, closed the door, and buckled her safety belt.

She sighed in satisfaction. She was inside the car. She had finished step one.

Step two: *Start the car.* Hope put the key in the ignition. Maybe the car wouldn't start. Maybe she would have to ask Julie to get lunch after all. Hope turned the key, and the engine fired to life. Steve's car was only a couple of years old. He kept it in perfect running condition, even changing the oil on schedule. So of course it would start with no problem.

Step three: *Go.* Steve always said, don't think about it. Just put the car in gear and go.

Hope didn't think. She backed out of the parking space, turned onto the street, and slowly drove the four blocks to Frank's Deli. She pulled into Frank's lot, parked, and turned off the car.

She'd done it! She had driven on this simple errand. She bounced from the car in her excitement, and then had to go back for her forgotten purse. Their order was ready and waiting. She paid for it and was soon on her way back to the car, still smiling.

Steve's plan of using small steps actually worked. Hope chuckled as she thought, step one, get into the car. She sat inside it enjoying that small triumph. The feeling was liberating. She felt independent and whole and for once, not scared. She knew Steve would be proud of her success in this personal triumph. She could only imagine the look on his face when she came back with lunch. So she'd use his steps to get back.

She buckled her seatbelt and turned the key. And for the first time in her adult life, Hope was glad to hear the sound of the engine coming to life. She put the car in reverse and began backing out of the space.

Squealing brakes and a honking horn had her stomping the brakes. Rationally, she knew the other car had plenty of room to pass and that the driver was a jerk. But she shut down physically as her memories took

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over. Her body simply locked up. Her eyes closed and she sat there shaking, sweating, and totally lost in all her old terrors. She relived the car wreck, felt again the pain, loss, and guilt. The self pity.

A tap sounded against the window. She looked up to see Steve standing there. How had he gotten to the deli? How had he known?

He opened the door. "Move over Hope. I'll drive us back."

She started to move, and the car jerked. It was still in reverse. Steve reached over and put it in park, giving her time to slide over to the passenger side.

"You did good to get here." He sat down next to her, but made no move to drive back just yet. "I'm proud of you for getting this far."

"How did you know?"

"I called Frank to check. He said you were sitting here not moving. I thought you might need me." He wrapped his arm around Hope and hugged her in a tight, brotherly hug.

She stayed in his embrace for just long enough to get her bearings back then pulled away. "Thank you." She huddled into the passenger seat, clutched at the seatbelt, and tried not to think about how she had failed again.

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Chapter Five

Remembering Reality
Adrift

Athair followed Sundair out of the grove toward a cluster of buildings that surrounded an open courtyard. A couple stood in front of one of the buildings waiting for them to approach. Athair's suspicion that they were speaking silently to some of the others was confirmed when the man welcomed them. "I am Sandulfr, son of Sulf and Makani. This is my mate, Soarsa, daughter of Soarvyra. Our daughter, Domari, tells me you had a run in with Bequlf. You have my apologies. Their fight is with me and should include no others." He motioned them to enter the building. "Please come in so we can talk."

The building was a community meeting place. Long tables sat on one side of the room, and relaxed sitting areas on the other. Sandulfr led them to a group of cushioned benches. The only members of the traveling group that remained were Sundair and Domari. The others had drifted off to other areas of the building.

Before sitting, Athair introduced himself and the boys. "I am Athair, of the Eagle Clan. These are Rath and Dàn, my sons, who choose to travel with me." At Sandulfr's nod, he continued. "We came to learn more about the current ways and to build relationships outside our clan." Athair paused, wondering how much to divulge in this first meeting.

Sandulfr seemed to understand his hesitation. "I have heard little

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about the Eagle Clan, except that you have remained apart from the world. Please, tell me why you have come here now." He said this without accusation. Athair could easily read his open curiosity. Sandulfr seemed like a man of honesty and integrity. Athair liked him immediately.

"We are too few to continue as we are."

"I see. Do you wish to join us?"

"We came only to learn. No more." Athair did not know where their connection might lead, but he did know it would be a mistake to show high expectations at this time. "If we are not welcome, we will leave without trouble."

"It's not that you're unwelcome." After a thoughtful pause, Sandulfr continued, "But Lakeside isn't a stable community right now. I will need a reason for your time here, a reason the others won't find threatening."

Dàn shifted subtly on the couch beside Athair, drawing attention to himself. "They will find us threatening regardless of your reasons. It suits their purpose." Athair silently asked him to hold his thoughts, but Dàn continued, "They will use our presence against you." He said this to Sandulfr with obvious regret. "I don't know why they will do so, I only know it is true."

"He is a seer?" Sandulfr asked Athair in surprise.

"Yes." How he wished Dàn could have been trained as he should have been. Without training, others would find his ability questionable.

"I have had little training yet. Do you have a soothsayer here with whom I may speak?" The yearning in Dàn's voice was almost more than Athair could take. And all at once he knew that he had failed this orphan even more than the others by keeping the clan separate for so long.

Sandulfr said, "My sister is our strongest seer and our youngest Oracle. Domari, please go let Maura know she should come meet our new friends."

Domari left immediately.

"I am sorry that we are unable to offer our usual hospitality to you at this time," Sandulfr said "I have to ask that you stay within this

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building until I can be sure of your welcome among the others. There are guest rooms in the back for you to use for as long as you wish."

"Thank you. It is more than I had hoped." Athair assured him.

"However, if Dàn says the others will cause problems, then they will. If you would rather we leave, we will do so. But with regret." He had pinned many of his hopes on building a positive relationship with this clan. "Perhaps we could meet outside your territory."

Sandulfr seemed to be considering that option and discussing it silently with his mate, when Dàn shifted his attention to the door. Almost immediately it burst open and Bequlf and his gang shoved their way into the room. The number of Sandulfr's supporters suddenly doubled as his protectors moved closer and made their presence known.

It begins, came Dàn's silent thought to Athair.

Bequlf stalked over to the seating area. His obvious aggression brought them all to their feet to face him on even ground. Sandulfr stepped forward to meet him.

Without any respect to his leader, Bequlf growled, "Why have you let them come here? It is disgraceful how you make no effort to protect my people."

"They have offered no threat to our people," Sandulfr said.

"Yes, they have." Bequlf countered. "This one attacked me on their way into town. And one of them has been harrying our hunters and our women." Bequlf advanced, as if to challenge Athair. He held his ground and was not intimidated by Bequlf's actions. He was confident he was strong enough in physical and magical ability to match anything the other man wished to do.

Yet, Bequlf's second accusation surprised Athair. Then he remembered Sgrios and asked Dàn for confirmation, *Dàn, does he mean Sgrios?*

Yes, Dàn answered.

That will make this situation more difficult. Just what had Sgrios been up to? He had hinted at bad blood between himself and the Bear Clan. Just what trouble had Sgrios been causing? And why?

No. It changes nothing, came Dàn's complacent reply.

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"What do you know of these strangers? Nothing! Yet you have trusted them to come into the very heart of our town," Bequlf challenged.

"That is enough, Bequlf." Soarsa stood frowning from Sandulfr's side.

"It is not enough. I insist they complete the ceremony of trust before they continue among us. Although, I doubt the thieving dogs will survive the test."

From that, Athair figured this ceremony would not be pleasant. Both Sandulfr and his mate stilled their voiced argument and seemed to communicate silently for several strained minutes. They were both tense and angry, and Bequlf looked greatly satisfied by their unspoken discussion.

Finally, Sandulfr said, "Very well." And turned back to Athair, who could easily read the regret on Sandulfr's face as he was forced to do as Bequlf wished.

Bequlf apparently had been dismissed with enough force to convince him to leave them alone to continue their discussion now that he was getting his way. Yet Bequlf seemed hesitant to leave, and Athair became aware of the other people standing around watching the drama unfold. By their postures and alertness, Athair figured they would mostly support Sandulfr if the disagreement became physical. Bequlf must have realized this as well, because after he glanced around the room, he motioned for his group to follow and they swept from the building.

Sandulfr said, "I am sorry that our problems will make this more difficult for you. But I can think of no other way for you to remain here without him using your presence to cause more trouble."

"I understand." Athair said. "We are willing to continue."

"Have you any knowledge of this ceremony?"

"No. We will need as much information as you can give us."

"The test will be symbolic of your trust in our people, and will require you to ingest a ceremonial drink during a spirit walk. At which time, the spirits will judge if you are worthy of our clan's trust."

"How will they judge?" He was curious. He knew some of their people could talk with spirits, but none of those left in his clan could do

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so. Usually those who could took the position of religious advisor, shaman, priest, or sometimes, Oracle.

"The spirits will answer a question you ask." He paused for a moment, and then said, "You do not need to do this. I can give you time to think it over, while Soarsa and I arrange for a meal to be brought here. The ceremony will take place tonight."

The leaders and the others left, leaving the three of them alone, except for one young male who stayed on the other side of the room playing billiards. He was obviously keeping an eye on them.

Athair sat down on one of the comfortable sofas and waited while Rath and Dàn settled also. Rath radiated stress, but Dàn seemed unconcerned by the unexpected turn of events. But then it probably wasn't unexpected to Dàn. They would need any information he would tell them to make this decision.

"Dàn, it's time to be honest. What do you know?" Athair demanded.

Before Dàn spoke, Athair noticed that Dàn actually was tense. His hand shook as he nervously ran it through his blond hair. That wasn't comforting. Dàn was worried about what was to come.

Dàn met his eyes and said, "The ceremony will not go well." He sighed, and then shrugged slightly. "But we must go forward. As bad as it will be, it will be worth it in the end."

"How will the ceremony go wrong?" Athair asked. He was used to drawing information from Dàn in parts. Dàn seemed to think that it was easier for them to deal with that way.

"The shaman will poison you. They plan to make your reaction to the toxins look like you failed the test of trust. He will use your failure against Sandulfr."

"Then we should just go." Rath snorted, "They have nothing we need at that cost."

"The poison will not kill any of us," Dàn continued with an evasive smile. "And believe me, she will be worth the pain."

"She?" Both Athair and Rath echoed. Since the ultimate purpose in rejoining the world was to find them mates, the word 'she' definitely

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caught their attention.

"Yes, *she*. Finally, we will all have hope," he said enigmatically.

No matter how often they asked, Dàn would tell them no more about the woman. But he did say, "Athair, you must remember to run when the ceremony goes wrong."

"I will not leave you." How could Dàn think he would abandon them during a fight?

"We will distract and delay them only long enough for you to escape, and then we will follow." Athair found it comforting to have Dàn's knowledge to help guide them, but he also sensed that what Dàn didn't tell them could have filled the wind.

* * * * *

The part Dàn worried about having withheld was the existence of a large void in his premonition. He knew from past experience that a void usually meant the missing knowledge would be most relevant to him. He rarely foresaw events that involved him in personal and often painful ways.

How he wished he could have had more contact with seers who could help guide him. It was overwhelming at times like this to see so much.

Dàn watched a tall, willowy woman enter the building and start toward them. She had long, silky, black hair that fell to her waist and dark, almond-shaped eyes. She had to be the Oracle Sandulfr had promised.

Oddly, Dàn could not read her thoughts at all. It was odd, and a bit disconcerting.

He stood and tried to remember his manners as she walked toward him. It was so rare that he had to start a conversation without knowing the person's intentions that he actually stuttered.

"H-hello."

"Hello." She started to put out her hand to shake his, but pulled back without touching him. "I'm sorry. I don't think we should shake

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hands."

Her action puzzled him. She didn't want to touch him. Usually, people welcomed the mind touch that came with physical contact, especially with him. Some claimed it left them feeling more positive about life. He tried again to read her to find out why she avoided it.

"Please don't," she said, brushing her fingers over her temple. "It's somewhat painful to have to shield myself from you. You are very strong."

"I am sorry." He was shocked by her statement. "I did not mean to hurt you."

No one had ever felt his intrusions before. It made him very unsure of himself. He looked to Athair for support, and suddenly realized he and Rath had abandoned him to join the man playing billiards.

"It's all right." She smiled. "I know you meant no harm. I am Sandulfr's sister, Maura. Domari said you wanted to talk with me, but she didn't say why."

"I'm Dàn." He suddenly felt ambivalent about asking for her help. Despite being an Oracle and sister to an Alpha, she seemed very young. Of course, age was usually not obvious to the eye with his people, but still he had expected someone else. Perhaps someone who did not look so innocent.

"Do you still wish to talk with me?" she asked quietly, making him wonder if she could read his thoughts.

"Yes," he answered. Who was she to be able to block him and know so much? Sandulfr had said only that she was his sister and the youngest Oracle. Dàn suddenly wanted to know more about her.

"What was it you wanted to talk about?"

He hesitated before answering. "I was hoping to talk with someone who could help me control my sight."

"And you aren't sure if that person is me," she said, again showing her insight.

"I don't know." He found that lack of knowledge embarrassing. He knew so much, and yet his sight failed him when he wanted it most.

"Well, let's sit and relax for a moment. We'll talk about less

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important matters until you decide," she suggested reasonably. She settled herself elegantly with her calf length gown flowing softly over her crossed legs. She looked up at him with a raised eyebrow when he continued to stand looking down at her.

"Sorry," he mumbled. He sank into the seat across from her.

"It's okay. Please, tell me what brought you to our little town." She folded her hands on her lap and looked at him with patience and confidence.

He started to tell her about their situation. Awkwardly at first, then more openly, as he became more comfortable talking with her. Before long, he had spilled out that he was a strong seer and that he feared what was coming that he couldn't see. "I can usually see what will happen, but this time there is a dangerous black void I can't see though."

She watched him thoughtfully while he talked. "I believe it is as you think. You can't see into the void because it involves you." She gave him an understanding smile at his frustration. "Do you really need to see what will come?"

"No. But if I could see, I would use it to protect my family," he answered honestly. "I cannot see what will come for Rath, either."

"Why worry over what you can't change?" she asked with a frown.

Now he was puzzled. "What do you mean, what I cannot change?"

"A seer may see what will come, but he or she is not able to use that knowledge to change the future. I find it so frustrating that I often wish I didn't have the gift at all." Maura looked down at her clasped hands.

He stared at her in astonishment. He had often changed the future and had never thought of that ability as being unusual. Now it had just another talent that set him apart.

"Why are you staring at me like I've suddenly grown a second head?" Her head tilted slightly, and she blinked her slanted eyes in curiosity.

"I can change things," he said quietly, afraid of her reaction. *Of her rejection.*

"You can change the future after you have a vision?" She leaned forward to study him as she awaited his answer. Her intense stare made

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him feel as though he was an interesting experiment she had yet to figure out.

"Yes," Dàn said simply.

She leaned back into the soft cushions again and mulled over his simple answer. Then she asked, "Are you sure? What have you done?"

"I have kept people from being hurt, stopped arguments before they happened, and other things," he said vaguely. In truth, he had done so much over the last three centuries that listing everything would be impossible. His visions were as common as drops of rain and he always felt the need to help wherever he could.

She was quiet as she pondered that. Almost to herself, she said quietly, "If I could change what was to come, I would spend all my days in meditation." She gave her head a little shake. "So, how do you do it? How do you keep from seeking visions all the time?"

He sighed. "I don't seek the visions." *Yet another aberration.*

"What?" She said without comprehension.

"I don't seek the visions. They come at me all the time."

Apparently that was another of his oddities. He was depressed by the thought. "I cannot stop them, even if I wished to." They were like never ending stories that played out at the edge of his vision. Constantly there, where he could see. Where he felt compelled to watch.

And this was always followed by his sense of duty and responsibility. He felt he had to help those around him whenever he was given a chance to make a difference.

"Look, Dàn. I am sorry I misled you. I know you were seeking guidance from me as a seer, but I won't be able to help you. The clairvoyant talents you have are different from my own and far beyond my abilities."

He closed his eyes in defeat. Would he never find someone who could help him to understand who and what he was, and show him what he was meant to do with these strange abilities?

She reached across the space and gently laid a slender hand on his arm. As soon as her hand touched him, he felt a rush of warmth. *And acceptance.* Along with the knowledge that she fought hard to keep him

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from her mind despite the physical contact.

When he reluctantly met her eyes, she said, "I may not be able to guide you, but I'd like to be your friend, if you can use one." She lifted her hand from his arm and smiled softly. "And I do think you *can*."

"Yes. I can use a friend." He already missed the contact of her hand and her mind.

"Incidentally, I can see part of your premonition's void." She looked down at her lap and twisted her fingers together anxiously.

"Will you share it with me?"

"Perhaps some of it." He was surprised to see her eyes shine with tears. She wiped one from her cheek before continuing. "Your concerns over Rath's safety are unnecessary. You will be able to protect him when the time comes. He will not be hurt seriously."

"But I will be." Suddenly, he realized her tears were for him. He couldn't remember anyone ever crying for him before. It was very humbling. Their presence brought a lump to his throat. His heart tightened like a fist in his chest. He wanted to reassure her that he would be fine regardless of what she saw. "I thought as much by the fact that I could not see it. But you say Rath will be fine? I couldn't see him, either."

She nodded her agreement. She still had tears on her lashes and he was uncertain what he should say.

Abruptly, Dàn sensed Athair behind him, just before a hand fell lightly upon his shoulder filling him with warm strength. Athair said, "Dàn, we must soon prepare for the ceremony." Silently he added, *Son? Your stress is a bit overwhelming for the rest of us. Can I help?*

Helplessly, Dàn looked up into the face of the man who had been the closest to a father he had ever known and said, *She cries for me.*

You need to gather yourself. Or we will all be crying for you within another moment.

While Athair introduced himself to Maura, Dàn took the time to do as he had suggested. Athair had been right, of course. His surprise at Maura's tears had echoed and amplified the melancholy feelings running through him. It was fortunate that so few people were close enough to be affected.

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Soon, Sandulfr, his mate, and a few others came back to the meeting house where they ate a relaxed meal with Dàn, Athair, and Rath.

After the meal, they shared coffee and talked about the upcoming ceremony. Dàn and the others learned that the Bear Clan's eldest shaman, Belquavir, was to lead the ceremony. He was well respected, but he was also Bequľf's uncle. In the past, Belquavir had gotten along reasonably well under Sandulfr's leadership, but now their relationship was strained because of Bequľf's recent challenge.

The ceremony was planned for moonrise, which would be around eleven o'clock. The moon would not quite be full. Still, the moon was held in reverence, especially for ceremonies.

It was nearly time. Sandulfr lead them to a special clearing behind the meeting house, where three small fire pits were centered between the outstretched limbs of nine large oak trees.

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Chapter Six

Going Forward Regardless
Ghost of a Chance

Dàn relaxed as the oak circle brought him a sense of inner peace. He knew this was a place he would like to spend some time. A light breeze played through the limbs and rustled the leaves as if the trees whispered among themselves. Everywhere he looked he saw serenity and balance.

The shaman waited in the center of the three fire pits. He was dressed in long robes decorated in earth tones, with dark gold embroidered edges. Unlike most of their kind, this man showed his age. His hair was gray and his face showed fine wrinkles. He was a rather plain man, except for his piercing black eyes, which immediately obliterated Dàn's feeling of tranquility.

This was the man who would poison Athair. The one who plotted to kill Athair if his plan did not work to perfection.

And Dàn knew his plans. They would begin the ceremony as expected, but the drink given to Athair would contain a highly toxic compound they thought would cause Athair to become violent. They would then subdue him and expel him, Dàn, and Rath from Lakeside, using the event to discredit Sandulfr. But how could it work? Surely only a weak clan would turn on its Alpha for such a shallow reason.

The shaman briefly explained where to sit, and that they were not

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expected to participate in the first steps of the ceremony. Each was given a drink before the ceremony was to begin. The bitter drink contained a hallucinogen that would “help” them talk with the spirits. Very few of their people had that ability even with the drink. Dàn knew of none who did, although with his luck it he would discover it be another one of his exciting skills.

It was time.

Athair, Rath, and Dàn sat together in the center. All three were tense and nervous, but tried to look relaxed despite knowing what was to come. Dàn thought he might have been wrong to warn them of the coming attack. He’d only done so because he worried that Rath would be killed trying to protect him or Athair. He had been able to see that Athair would live. But not Rath, who was at times unpredictable. Rath had been his closest friend for centuries and Dàn wished he could do more to insure his safety.

The shaman began the ceremony by calling others from the shadows to bear witness to this test of faith. Dàn saw several people gathering along the edge of the clearing, circling in line with the trunks of the great trees. Some looked familiar, and he thought he recognized both Alpha leaders and Maura.

In a flash of light the shaman lit all three fires, sending them flaring high for several minutes before they settled into small, steady flames.

Then his chanting began. The chant wasn’t soothing, like most of the ones with which Dàn was familiar. It was filled with sharp painful cries, that when they came together, rang with discord. The shaman’s chant continued in this way, and those watching added to the chant. They only supported certain words and phrases that seemed to flow equally from the people as from the wind, the trees, and even the crackling flames.

That portion of the chant called to Dàn. It felt familiar, as if he had heard it often, probably as others might remember a favorite lullaby.

If he could just hear past the shaman’s chant, he thought he might be able to get the spirits to give him the answer they needed. The answer to a question they would not get the chance to ask.

Perhaps the ceremonial drink had begun to work.

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Dàn looked over at the others. Rath sat with his eyes closed. He was tense, but seemed all right otherwise. Athair looked uncomfortable. He was pale, and had a sheen of sweat on his brow. His open eyes glowed fiercely.

Dàn tried to speak to him silently, *Athair?*

There was no response. It was as if Athair couldn't hear him, or didn't want to acknowledge him.

Dàn pushed hard with his powers to *see* into Athair's mind. What he found blazed red with pain and rage. There was nothing of Athair in that touch. Nothing of the gentle, loving man who had raised him. The touch didn't even feel human.

Now Dàn could clearly see how the traitor's plan could succeed. They would claim that Athair couldn't control the animal within. That he had to be destroyed. How absurd that they had chosen the calmest of their clan to turn violent. Dàn suddenly wondered what Sgrios would have done in this position. But then, Sgrios would never let himself become so vulnerable.

Athair began to tremble and growl.

Rath watched him for a moment, and then glanced at Dàn with a worried expression. Rath started to lean toward Athair, as if to touch him.

Dàn stopped him with a silent, *Wait. You cannot help him. He will not recognize you.*

What can we do?

Nothing, yet. But be ready to aid in his escape. And ours.

Just say when.

Athair growled loudly. Dàn found it amazing that he had held his human form this long. But not for much longer. Already there were tiny sparks flying from his skin, a sure sign that Athair was losing his battle for control.

The shaman noticed Athair's growling and came to stand behind him, chanting in a loud voice. Dàn realized that the shaman was indeed calling spirits, very unfriendly spirits. The other chanters called on helpful spirits; hence the difference in their chants.

And the spirits were answering their calls. Dàn clearly saw several,

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which seemed threatening. At the shaman's command, they neared Athair.

Another spirit approached Dàn. She was lovely and seemed to want to tell him something. Something he very much wanted to hear.

But Athair shifted to wolf form, and Dàn was yanked back to his true surroundings. He shot to his feet. Athair circled Rath and Dàn warily, glaring past the fires at the shaman who stood just out of reach.

Dàn silently warned Rath not to make any moves that would draw Athair's attention.

The shaman worked a protection spell that would contain them within the circle of fires.

Dàn figured he could probably break the spell, but it suited his purpose for the time being. Athair would need time to gain control if he could possibly do so.

Dàn watched with interest as the shaman skirted them and began arguing with the leaders, claiming that Athair had failed to complete the ceremony and could not be trusted.

Dàn felt a brush against his shoulder and slowly turned in that direction. The friendly spirit from earlier was at his side. She reached out her ethereal hand and traced a finger along his jaw, leaving a warm tingle in its path. He sensed she was offering to help him.

He was in no position to turn down help, regardless of the insubstantial source. He attempted to project to her that Athair needed calming. He did not know if she could help or not.

The spirit drifted closer to Athair and held out a hand to stroke his head. At her touch, Athair flinched and snarled in anger. Then he seemed to calm somewhat.

As Dàn touched Athair's mind, he realized the spirit had taken away most of his rage. But his pain remained. Athair was still far from in control.

The shaman and the leaders approached the circle, intending to restrain Athair and expel them from the town. Dàn knew that would not be dramatic enough for the shaman or Bequlf's plans. They still needed to publicly discredit their leaders.

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Now was the time. Dàn knew they had a choice. Just possibly, Athair could make his escape without being too badly injured.

The shaman stepped boldly into the circle, clearly tempting Athair to attack him. And he certainly would have if Dàn had not mentally held him still. Until that moment, he hadn't been sure he could. He flooded Athair's mind with his own control, providing the strength Athair needed to dampen the pain and shift back to human form.

As Athair shifted, the shaman grabbed him roughly and dragged him from the circle in front of Sandulfr. Bequlf and several of his gang followed and took custody of Rath and Dàn as well.

"You brought this animal into our village. It is your duty to protect our people and yet, you risk us all for these strangers," the shaman challenged Sandulfr.

"I don't understand what happened," Sandulfr said. Then he shifted his attention back to the more important details. "Although Athair of the Eagle Clan failed to hold his form for the ceremony, he certainly hasn't proven to be dangerous in any way."

"Only his weakness and the strength of my spirit guides keep him from savaging all here and it was your poor judgment that welcomed him into our midst. Always you place the welfare of others ahead of your own clan. You may not care for the safety of our young but others do. This is only one more example of your inferior leadership. You are not fit to be Alpha of the Bear Clan."

Bequlf suddenly stabbed Dàn in the back with a short knife. Although the wound was nowhere near fatal, the sudden pain pulled Dàn's concentration from Athair, who was again assaulted with the drug-induced pain and rage. He abruptly shifted back to wolf form and violently struck out at those nearest to him. He had the shaman on the ground in seconds and was tearing into him. The area fell into complete chaos.

Several of Bequlf's supporters attacked Athair to rescue the shaman, who was seriously wounded. Some were armed with weapons and some shifted into wolves using tooth and claw.

Rath had seen Bequlf stab Dàn and had shoved his own guard

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aside to pull Dàn away. Mentally he shouted at Dàn, *Is it now? Or should we wait for them to kill us?*

Now!

"Good," Rath answered aloud in a gruff voice. Clouds boiled above them and lightning shot across the sky. Rath's best magical talent was weather control, and he could perform with grand style. He was also quite good at non-magical defense, which he demonstrated by slugging Bequlf and dragging Dàn behind him.

Dàn focused on Athair's fight for freedom. He had a pack of eight wolves attacking him. They darted in and out around him jumping at him from behind, giving Athair little chance to defend himself. Several of the bystanders had taken the leaders to the side to protect them from being hurt. Others were attending to the shaman, Belquavir.

One of the wolves started to dart in after Athair and a bolt of lightning took him out of the fight, and possibly out of existence. That left an opening to one side, and Dàn *told* Athair to go that way, to run. Athair was torn and bleeding and wouldn't be able to take much more.

Whether he was aware of Dàn's urging or acted out of the instinct to survive, Dàn didn't know. Athair broke free of the pack and ran. Rath brought in heavy fog to aid in his escape. Within the blink of an eye, Athair was gone from sight with the pack fast on his heels in pursuit.

Dàn followed the chase, mentally aiding Athair as he struggled to stay ahead of the pack. He provided strength and guidance to Athair while disorienting the others.

Dàn, we've got a problem here. It was Rath.

Dàn looked around to find Bequlf and his remaining supporters gathering around him and Rath, who continued to fist fight with anyone who got within his reach as he altered the storm's focus to aid them.

We need to get out of here. Any bright ideas?

Let's run, Dàn suggested. He could use little magic here while helping Athair to make his get away. And someone was beginning to counter Rath's storm. If they were to use his weather to escape, they had to do so now.

Rath growled something like, "How about a breeze?" just before a

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forceful wind blew through the clearing, throwing people to the ground. The wind formed a dozen small tornados that scattered the people, but did no actual damage to them or the property. A pocket of calm air surrounded and moved with Rath and Dàn as they shifted to wolves and dashed for the fog enshrouded woods.

They had run for only a few miles before Rath's weather and their camouflage was lost and they could hear the pack closing in on them from at least two sides.

Rath asked Dàn, *What should we do?* He fully expected Dàn to know how to get them out of this trouble.

But he didn't know. This was part of that very much unappreciated void in his premonition. He had no idea what to expect, but he hated to say so. *I haven't any idea.*

That stopped Rath in his tracks. He gaped at Dàn. *What?*

Dàn urged him to keep moving, while trying to explain. *I cannot see what is coming. That is bad news for me. I think we should separate. You can catch up with Athair and help him.*

No.

Unfortunately, that was the response that Dàn had expected. And against all reason, he was pleased by Rath's stubborn loyalty. Glad to have Rath at his side for whatever was to come.

They are gaining. Could you at least help with this fight? Rath asked, sounding harassed at having to protect him. Then he added, *Or are you still helping Athair?*

Still. Controlling and focusing Athair required nearly all of Dàn's magic. Not only was he strengthening Athair and healing his worse wounds, he also was forcing his reasoning on Athair's wild mind. The task became more difficult as the distance between them grew longer.

Dàn and Rath ran on. The others were no longer gaining on them, but Dàn began to suspect that they weren't trying to catch up. They were just letting them run. *But why?* Because they liked where they were heading. That wasn't reassuring.

Then he saw the ravine, and barely stopped Rath from tumbling over the edge. Using his excellent night vision, Dàn saw that it was more

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than twenty feet to the bottom. Though the fall would probably not kill them, it would have hurt like the devil.

He and Rath ran to the right, but had only gone a few dozen feet when the pack surrounded them. They were cornered, with the steep drop off behind them.

Several of the pack, including Bequulf, leapt at them and attacked with tooth and claw. Although outnumbered, Dàn was pleased when they held their own. At least for a while.

This type of fighting was more to Rath's taste. And Rath did seem to be enjoying the fight. He'd managed to tear a wicked slash in the neck of one of their opponents and the other facing him sported several bleeding bite wounds. He'd been spending too much time with Sgrios.

On the other hand, Dàn could certainly use some quality time with the brutal man himself. If he survived. Although he was holding his ground with the one squared off with him and both of them were bleeding from only small cuts, he knew he and Rath would have to jump and risk the ravine.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp sting in his flank. Looking down, he saw a dart hanging from his side. Rath cursed silently, *Damned cheating mongrels. They've drugged me.*

Darkness closed in around Dàn, who fought to stay conscious. He barely succeeded.

* * * * *

Rath awoke to the sound of screams and to agony beyond imagination. His screams? His pain? If not, it felt as though it were. The pain was personal, not distant. Fortunately, the experience was brief before he passed out again, returning to the comfortable arms of darkness.

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Chapter Seven

Courage or Insanity?
River of Blood

Lightning shot across the sky above the road and Hope sucked in her breath. The crashing thunder shook Steve's car. Of course, he was driving, but even without that terror Hope was assaulted by her many other fears. Any ride in a car was difficult for her, but driving or even riding through storms terrified her beyond reason and paralyzed her. And after the incident at the deli, she was in no shape to attempt the drive home. So she was even more grateful than usual that Steve had offered to be her chauffeur to and from work today. It wasn't in the job description of a veterinary technician to cater to the neurosis of the veterinarian on shift, but fortunately Steve had proclaimed it his role in their friendship, not their profession. Hope had to wonder if her plans to open her own clinic played any part in his heroics. Either way, his help was appreciated and she was in no position to examine the teeth of her very own gift horse.

Another bolt swept across the sky. She closed her eyes and tried to pretend she sat in her rocker at home. At least it was only sprinkling so far, even if the lightning formed a nearly endless, far too intimidating, display. The thunder was so loud her ears began to ring with the pain of its echo.

Steve was talking, probably trying to distract her. She just couldn't focus enough to make out his words. She'd thought she was getting better

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at controlling the fear. Even her failed drive to the deli had been a partial success. Steve had nearly thrown a party for her accomplishment, even if she hadn't managed the short drive back. It almost made up for Steve coercing her into the drive in the first place.

It had been fifteen years since the accident that had taken the lives of her parents and two younger brothers, leaving her orphaned, crippled, and scarred. That night had been stormy, too. One psychologist felt it was her guilt that kept her paralyzed for eight months and fed the fear that had terrorized ever since. Not that her injuries hadn't explained the lack of feeling and movement in her legs. They were severe. Her left leg had been broken in fourteen places. And her left side was badly scarred from the burns she'd received from ankle to neck. She hadn't even awakened from her coma until a week later. She'd missed the funerals and her chance to say goodbye to her family.

The sudden downpour pulled her back to the present. That, and the tight pain in her chest reminding her to breathe.

In. Out. Deeply. Once. Twice.

* * * * *

Blazing red pain drove Athair through the woods. Hate for his enemies kept a growl in his clenched jaws. He wanted to turn and kill those chasing him, but instead he ran on. Some force within him gave him no option but to run.

The willpower was not his own, and it quickly became one of the enemies. One more thing to fight, to hate. It forced him to move when he wanted to stop. Forced him to flee when he would fight. His body and mind rebelled. His abused muscles fought back against the foreign will. For endless miles the ground fell behind him, until he could no longer hear those in pursuit.

Still he ran. Still he was driven.

* * * * *

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Slowly, Hope opened her eyes and tried to focus on what Steve was saying.

"I really think that little spaniel is going to need to stay in the clinic for a while. Its blood work is just not improving like we had hoped." He glanced in her direction, and seemed surprised to see she was at least listening to his prattle.

To pacify and reward his efforts, she said, "I think you're right."

Encouraged, he went onto another topic. "Did you see the new Mel Gibson movie yet?"

"Not yet,"

"I'm taking Julie to see it this weekend." Steve smiled. She'd finally agreed to go out with him. Hopefully this would go better than the last time Steve jumped into a romance. At first, Hope thought they had the chance of becoming an item. But after only a couple dates, the girl had become someone for him just to hang out with. "Julie said *yes*. I can't believe it. When I asked, sh—oh, damn!"

Steve slammed on the brakes. The car slid slightly, and Hope saw a flash of gray as a large animal darted before the car. With a solid thud, the animal was thrown ahead of them and landed in the flood of their headlights.

"Oh, no," Hope said. The animal was a motionless gray mountain.

"I'm so sorry, Hope. I didn't see it. It was moving so fast." Steve understood that the death would affect her deeply. She could never stand to see animals suffer and HBC's, *hit by car*, were the worst for her to face.

"I have to move it from the road. Stay here." Steve got out of the car and rounded the hood.

Hope hadn't taken her eyes from the animal. It looked like a large wolf. Very large. The poor thing deserved better than this. As she watched Steve approach it, Hope saw what he couldn't. Two pale, glowing eyes, blinking open.

Her head continued to throb as she moved from the safety of the car into the now steady rain. The drenching rain and her weight on her left leg added to her discomfort.

Steve hesitated when he saw her skirting the wolf. "What are you

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doing?"

"He opened his eyes. He's not dead." Hope told him.

Steve reached the wolf's head, and it emitted a low, threatening rumble. He pulled back shrugged his shoulders. "We can call the game commission from your house."

He went to the driver's side door, but turned back when she didn't move. The storm had lessened, but not stopped. Rain continued to fall, soaking them and the wolf. Hope figured it had gone into shock and would be killed by the elements even if its wounds weren't fatal.

"We can't just leave him. We have to help him."

"I don't think that's a good idea." Despite his objection, Steve continued to stand there.

"He'll die without our help." She said in desperation, pushing her slight edge against Steve's animal-loving heart. "We can't just leave him."

"He'll probably die anyhow." Despite his pessimistic words, a new quality in Steve's voice lifted Hope's expectations. "He's hurt pretty badly if he's just laying there making no effort to get away."

"I know, but we need to try," Hope pleaded. As always, it felt like a chance for redemption, a chance to steal back and restore a life that might be lost to the road.

"I think we should leave him for people with more experience with wild animals," He said, but she already knew he would give in. "I can see this going very wrong."

"Your objection is duly noted," she said, with a small smile for his understanding. "How do you think we should start?"

"How about a way to contain his enormous teeth?"

"A muzzle of some kind. Good idea. Do you have any rope in your car?" She asked hopefully.

"I'll look, but I don't think so." He turned back to the station wagon to begin his search.

Hope heard his soft complaints and decided for about the millionth time that Steve was a very good friend. She looked at the wolf, her newest patient. He hadn't moved or even twitched. The only sign of life had been his menacing growl and the blinking of those unnerving gray eyes.

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She stepped back into his line of sight and watched as those strange eyes focused on her. She flinched as her headache produced a particularly strong stab of pain and a touch of dizziness. Pushing aside her discomfort, she said in a soft, soothing voice, "Hello, fellow. We seem to have a situation here. I would like to help you, but you have to be nice and not hurt me. I'm a doctor."

Why had she said *doctor* instead of *vet*? Never mind. Just so she could keep her patient calm. He didn't seem afraid, just in great pain. But the pain would make moving him difficult and the muzzle essential.

She began to look him over as she waited for Steve. It was no wonder he was in so much pain. He was literally covered in wounds! Surely the car hadn't caused all of them. The worst seem to be around his neck and shoulders, including several cuts that may have gone bone deep. They looked like bite marks. She'd seen similar marks on dogs brought in after a fight, but never so many on one animal. Now she knew where all the blood came from. The gashes were savage, possibly fatal. The pool of dark blood spread slowly around the wolf's body.

What could have done that? He must have been attacked by something really big, or maybe many animals at once. She couldn't imagine a battle that could bring such a prime example of the species so low.

Steve walked back and said "I can't find anything. Not even an old sock."

"A sock?" She gave him a wry grin, "How about a stocking?"

"Will it hold? I don't want to take any chances."

"I don't know, but we can try." She turned away from Steve to pull up her pants leg and slide off one of her knee highs, then the other. No need to show her scars to Steve. *Or to anyone*. The stockings probably wouldn't hold, but against all reason, she didn't really think they were needed other than to let Steve feel safe.

As she moved closer to the wolf, she wondered if she was perhaps losing what was left of her sanity. First werewolves, and now wolves. Just what were the fates trying to tell her?

Her hands hesitated. How could she be sure this wasn't a

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werewolf, too?

Oh yeah, because they'd just hit him with a car. Surely werewolves would know better than to run into a road. And now, she actually planned to use her stockings to tie a wild wolf's mouth closed, and then move the seriously injured animal in the slim hope of saving its life.

Something was very strange about the wolf's behavior. Did it maybe have rabies? Some animals were affected so that they became sluggish instead of aggressive. Or maybe it *was* a werewolf or a vampire or an alien. Since reality had abandoned her nearly a month ago, at this point, who knew?

She murmured quietly to the wolf, "Easy now, my wolf. I need to put this on you to make it safe for us to help you. I don't want you to move until I know how badly you're hurt."

The wolf didn't so much as blink, but she thought his gray eyes seemed alert and intelligent despite the pain he must be suffering. His eyes followed her face as she moved closer and slowly knelt near his head.

A shadow fell over Hope as Steve stepped behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder. The wolf growled, a deep rolling sound that had Steve stepping back again.

"Are you sure about this?"

She didn't answer him, but slowly moved her hand toward the wolf.

Steve continued, "Then I think we should move him quickly, so we can sedate him and determine the extent of those vicious looking wounds. Especially since whatever used him as a chew toy may not be too far away."

The wolf blinked into Hope's brown eyes and gave a small lick with his tongue, giving her the impression that he agreed with Steve. Her hands were now very close to his head and she slowly proceeded to muzzle him, wrapping the nylon around his jaws twice. Then she tied it off behind his ears. He never moved, but held the eye contact with her throughout the entire procedure.

Steve brought a blanket from the car that they could use as a stretcher. They placed it carefully behind the animal and rolled him over

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onto it. Hope marveled at the muscle tone beneath his thick, wet pelt and noted that his other side was just as badly torn up.

Next, Steve moved the car so that they wouldn't have to carry him very far. They lifted him into the back of the wagon, and then made the short trip to her home.

The wolf made no other sounds or complaint, nor did he struggle when they moved him inside. *Very strange.*

* * * * *

The second time Rath awakened, he was disoriented and unable to move. He was hanging, with his wrists tied high above his head. He couldn't see clearly, only the outlines of people standing around him. And he couldn't hear the words being said.

Dàn? He asked silently, hoping Dàn was still with him. Still alive.

For a long moment, there was no response. Then, *yeah, I'm here,* came the weary answer.

I can't see. What's happening? The blurred surroundings and muffled noise closed in on him.

You don't want...to know. Dàn's answer was slow and broken, as if he were being interrupted.

Probably not. But—Rath's sight began to clear. His hearing as well. So that must have been Dàn's doing. But why? Then he looked around him, and began to understand. He was tied to a tree. Dàn probably was, too. If he turned his head, he could see their hosts where they were gleefully beating someone. He assumed it was Dàn. The light was dim in the deep forest and the air smelled of blood. Rath listened to the impact of each hit. The number and spacing of the blows sounded as if two were dealing blows, but only one receiving them.

So do you want to go back to sleep?

Yeah, but I think I'll hang around for a while. How are you holding up? If Dàn was the one being beaten, and surely he was, then how long had they been at it? Why were they doing it?

I'm not doing so well, Dàn said.

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Maybe you could pass out for a while and take a break.

Can't. Dàn sounded strange. Defeated?

Why not? Rath said. Just take a short nap.

Athair.

Oh. You're still helping him along. How's he doing?

He just got hit by a driving machine.

Somehow, Dàn made that sound like a happy event. But compared to their current situation, he supposed it probably was.

All at once, the imbeciles noticed Rath was awake. Bequlf stepped in front of him and said, "Glad you decided to rejoin us. Perhaps you could explain to your friend why he should cooperate with us." And with that, he punched Rath hard in the stomach. A couple of times.

Well, that hurt like hell. Rath gasped through the pain. His vision blurred and he growled at not being able to hide the agony the abuse had caused. What was the guy wearing on his hand, some kind of metal glove? Rath coughed on the meager air he could draw in and looked down at the man's hand. It was indeed covered in metal. Not so much a glove, but a set of interconnected rings covered in chain with what looked like short metal, blood-covered claws over the knuckles.

When Bequlf saw him studying the weapon, he held it up proudly and pointed at the claws. "Silver tipped, of course. Not enough to kill you, but more than enough to disable your powers and cause lots of pain."

After a few more blows, Bequlf said, "So, are you ready to talk yet?"

Rath gasped for breath. Normally his magic would begin healing any wounds immediately, but not this time. Bequlf must be telling the truth about using silver. He'd always thought silver was illegal to use, except on criminals. So why was this asshole torturing them with it? He scowled. "I don't even know the damned question, you worthless bastard."

His insolence earned him more abuse, which left him unable to offer any more bright comments aloud. At least for a while.

Had Dàn been getting the same? If so, for how long? *Hey Dàn, how do you like my technique? I plan to wear him out.* He asked just so he could

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hear a friendly voice. Anything to distract himself from the pain.

I tried that already.

"Hey, Bequulf. I think they're talking to each other," one of the men in front of Rath said. "They shouldn't be able to do that. Should they?"

"No." A sadistic grin lit Bequulf's face. "But if they are, we can use it to our advantage. If they can share thoughts, they'll also share each other's pain." At which point he hit Rath's face three times. "I think I'll hurt you until he tells me what I want to know."

As that was said, two others dragged Dàn to the tree across from Rath. Probably so Dàn could watch as they heaped abuse on him.

But it also allowed Rath his first look at Dàn since their capture.

Shit! What have they done to you? he asked. Dàn was a mass of bleeding gouges. His face was bloody and bruised, and both eyes were swelled shut. Blood dribbled from his nose and mouth, and his clothes hung in rags, torn where they had cut him more times than he could count. Dàn's body must have been trying to heal, because Rath could also see many fine white lines marking recently healed wounds.

Everything they could think of is my guess. Dàn sounded exhausted. He certainly looked it. He hadn't struggled or even lifted his head when they had dragged him to the new tree. Once he was retied, he sagged against the ropes allowing them to support his weight.

Now that they had their audience in place, Bequulf started in on Rath again. But after the second punch, something blocked the third blow. Quietly, Dàn said, "I can't let you do that."

That sent Bequulf into a temper tantrum. He ranted and yelled about the silver bands that were supposed to stop the use of magic. And indeed both Rath and Dàn were wearing heavy, wide silver bands, with sharp ridges that cut into their forearms. Rath at least could do no magic.

He smiled. So, Dàn had discovered another ability. Yet he had been hurt by silver in the past, making this something to think about later.

I would ask how you did that, but I'm too grateful to care, Rath told Dàn. But his pleasure faded when Bequulf changed tactics and started to beat Dàn again. Because now, Rath had to watch. And he could do nothing to help.

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Stop him. Rath said. *Protect yourself.*

I can't, Dàn answered. *Not strong enough.*

Rath knew it was pointless to argue with him. *Stubborn fool.* Dàn would continue to protect him and Athair, allowing these jerks to practice their latest torture. They were using a spiked club now, instead of simply fists.

All Rath could do was curse them and he did so colorfully, until he realized they only reacted to his outbursts by beating Dàn with more enthusiasm. Finally he fell silent and watched as they slowly killed his friend.

It was obvious Dàn wouldn't last much longer. "I'll tell you anything you want. Just stop." Rath said in defeat.

Stall for time, Dàn whispered in his mind. But he gave no explanation why.

Rath trusted Dàn to have some plan, so he did stall. Bequlf turned to Rath, looking irritated that he couldn't beat him for interrupting. He demanded, "So, talk."

"About what? The weather?" Rath spit out his usual rebellious answer.

Bequlf responded by stabbing Dàn in the shoulder with a long narrow knife, which proved that pissing him off was not the best idea. Dàn was so badly hurt that through it all, he never moved or reacted. All that proved he was even still alive was the protection that surrounded Rath.

"Look, I don't know what you want! Just tell me, so I can answer you." Anything to stop the abuse on Dàn.

"Tell me where the other one went," Bequlf growled as he twisted the knife from Dàn's flesh and the tree.

"Athair?" How the hell could he know that?

"Yes."

"I don't—" Rath started.

Don't say you don't know. Dàn murmured.

"—want you to hurt him." He finished lamely.

"Of course we won't hurt him. We want to kill him. Not hurt him."

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He punctuated the comment with another punch to Dàn's stomach. He hadn't even twitched at the recent blows.

"Hey! Stop that!"

Be ready. Sgrios comes.

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Chapter Eight

Choice

The Weight of a Stone

Athair felt a jolt as energy was ripped from him. Its loss was replaced with a flood of awareness. The pain was incredible, but the weakness and disorientation were worse. The poison had done its job well. He would have been an easy kill. It was amazing he had gotten away at all, and now he must rely on these humans to heal him. What a laugh. He should have been able to heal himself.

The man thought him an animal. But the woman, she saw only with her heart. She was very tender with her own deep wounds. As soon as he was able, he would thank her by healing her. What he needed was sleep. Deep, healing sleep. But not yet.

They opened the back of the moving machine, placed him on something with wheels, and rolled him into a building. The first room was painted in bright colors and was filled with windows. The second was mostly white, so bright it made his eyes water after the dark night. Here they moved him onto a metal table. It was cold and hard, it brought fear to him again. The distance to the floor made the room spin around him. To stop the spin, he closed his eyes and tried to remember the woman's voice and what she had said to him. What was her name? What had the man called her? It was a nice name. Finally the room came to a stop. Hope. That was her name. She was Hope. She would make it right. A wave of

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dizziness swept over him.

Make what right? So much was wrong. He opened his eyes and looked at her. Did she know that she was empathic? He could feel her trying to soothe him. Then she gave him an injection. Aahhh. The pain began to ease. She was Hope...

* * * * *

Sgrios burst into the center of the group as a wolf, but he quickly shifted between forms depending on the need. A ripping, tearing bite here. His deadly knives in the very next moment. He was fire and fury, and completely without mercy.

Only seconds after his entrance, he had killed two of the men and cut the bonds from Rath with a single slash at the tree. When Rath would have fallen, Reultan was there to catch him, and he helped him to where Dàn was. Díon cut Dàn's ropes, gently cradling Dàn's still form as he lowered him to the ground.

Sgrios snapped another opponent's neck with one hard, deft twist, the cracking sound like a dry branch. A fourth tried to run, but was caught with bolas tangled about his legs. He didn't even have time to struggle before Sgrios was on him, slashing his throat.

The rest scattered from his swift, devastating attack. Nothing could have prepared them for Sgrios' fully unleashed rage.

Sgrios tangled another with a second set of bolas and threw two long knives, both finding deadly marks in the back of the necks of two retreating fighters. After retrieving his knives and dispensing of the downed men with a single flashing blade, he shifted to wolf form and shot into the night after Bequlf and the rest.

Rath leaned weakly against Dàn's tree, trying to get his bearings. Díon knelt beside Dàn for a long moment, and then he and Reultan moved off to check the area. Rath couldn't see how his friend still breathed. Or did he? He was completely still. Suddenly, Rath thought help must have arrived too late after all.

Don't worry. I'm still here, came the soft words to him in

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reassurance.

Still unconvinced, Rath replied, *Good. I didn't want to have to carry your dead weight back home.* Rath stared at Dàn's battered body.

Even alive, you may have to carry me.

Looks like I owe you again. Least I can do is carry you home. Rath knew it was certainly true, though he would be hard pressed to carry himself at this point. How he wished he could use his limited healing powers to help Dàn. At that, he remembered the silver bands and struggled to pull them from his and Dàn's arms. Dàn's skin felt cold. Dead.

Thank you. They burned, came Dàn's voice.

Maybe I don't really want to know. But are you dead? Am I imagining this whole conversation? Or worse, am I talking with your ghost? You should know I am totally disturbed by talking with dead folk. Even nice dead folk.

Not dead. But damned close. Sgrios may be able to help.

May? In more than four centuries, Rath had rarely heard Dàn sound hesitant as he made a prediction. What if Sgrios couldn't help or took too long to come back? This felt far too much like saying goodbye, but what if they had no other chance. Dàn?

Yes Rath?

Thank you. For everything. I mean for being a good friend, and you always have been, even when I wasn't. If I can do anything, I will. You know that. You saved me today and also long ago. I'll never forget that debt. He would have continued, if Dàn hadn't interrupted.

Rath?

What is it, Dàn?

If you promise to stop bewailing my demise, I will promise to not die. Or at least do my best to live.

Okay.

Just watch for Sgrios and call him over as soon as he returns.

Rath looked around to see if perhaps Sgrios had come back during their exchange. He hadn't. He watched as Reultan and Díon checked the bodies of the traitors. He questioned his brother, *Reultan, are they dead?*

Oh yeah. Very. Remind me to never piss off that wolf.

How many are there? I cannot see well from here.

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Seven total. I am a lover not a fighter, but even to me his combat skills are inspiring.

Rath wasn't very good at empathy, but he could easily feel Reultan's sense of awe. *How so?* Rath was glad to have a distraction.

He is efficient. Each kill was quick and precise. The first had his throat torn out. There's one with a broken neck. The two Sgrios took down with bolas have slit throats. And this one— Reultan stood over a very gory body. *I take back the precise comment. I don't know what he did, or with what weapons, but the man's chest is ripped open. I think his heart was torn out.* Reultan walked toward the last two that were almost twenty feet past the other victims.

What of them?

Knife to the back of the neck. The two wounds are exactly the same, entering deeply at the base of the skull. They never knew what hit them and there was no time for them to heal themselves. He turned and walked back to join the others. *That is one scary wolf.*

Reultan went to Rath's side without looking at Dàn. "Díon and I can begin healing you while we wait for Sgrios."

Rath shook his head. Reultan was his brother and it was natural for him to offer to heal him first, but Dàn was more critical. *Dàn first, he said silently.*

"I'm sorry, Rath." Reultan said gently after a short pause to look Dàn's way. "Dàn's dead."

* * * * *

Shortly after Hope gave the wolf anesthesia, the terrible crashing storm lessened, allowing them to concentrate on the animal's injuries. Only a few minutes later, the night was completely calm. At first Hope welcomed the sudden drastic change in the weather, but then it took on an eerie feel...almost surreal, supernatural.

Although the quiet should have allowed Hope to control her nerves and focus on the surgical repairs necessary to save the wolf's life, she ended up asking Steve to find a radio to provide background noise. Somehow the noise made an abnormal situation at least seem believable.

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Here she was stitching up a wolf that shouldn't be here with injuries that were too terrible to imagine. The weather seemed to be out of control, and her mind kept drifting back to thoughts of werewolves. The Eagles' *One of these Nights* played quietly in the background.

With a deep sigh, Hope pushed all thoughts from her mind except those needed to repair the wolf's mangled flesh. There were twenty or more bite marks bad enough to require stitches. She closed each one, starting with the worst of them. He had one terrible gash that carved out the left side of his neck and shoulder. There was significant damage to the muscle and it continued to bleed until she repaired the severed artery.

For more than four hours, she and Steve worked to put hairy Humpty back together again. Finally, when they were close to completion, Hope checked the wolf over one last time to be sure they hadn't missed anything. She had drawn blood and would start lab work in the morning. She wanted to restore this wolf to perfect health.

Steve helped her move the animal to a back room set up with crates and runs where he could recover. Placing him on the cement floor seemed too cold and alone, so Hope made a pallet of old blankets for him. Beside it, she hung the IV bag she insisted would help him recover more quickly. Then she moved the radio and set it to a rock channel with the volume on low. She believed music was soothing to hurt and scared animals and hoped that it would help the wolf.

Long after Steve left, she stood at the gate of the run, watching the wolf sleep. Stairway to Heaven played quietly in the background and she thought about the strange turns her life had taken recently. She only had two choices, to deal with it or deny it. Most days, she had the strength to deal with whatever life threw at her. But every now and then she remembered it was okay to deny what was before her. Some days, that was the only way to get through.

This was one of those times. She would get this wolf back on his feet and find him a place to belong. She wouldn't worry about werewolves and what goes bump in the night. Except for the events of that one strange night, the world was exactly as it was before. So she would put that night from her thoughts. And if she went wild with the

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full moon, so be it. She would deal with it when the time came.

* * * * *

He's not dead, Rath said.

"I know you were closest to him. I'm sorry, brother."

"He is not dead," Rath said stubbornly aloud in a dry cracking voice. Then he realized Reultan and Díon would not have the strength to help Dàn. Only Sgrios could.

Rath watched as the two exchanged a look that clearly said, *Poor Rath has lost his mind, but we'll take care of him anyway.*

Reultan said, "We can heal you some now. Will you let us?"

Yeah, let's get to it.

With help, Rath lay back on the ground and tried to relax. He knew Reultan would lead the healing. The fact they were brothers would strengthen his powers, enough so that Díon, being a better healer, wouldn't matter. The healing powers could be better channeled with the proper ceremonies, but even here, without benefit of a ceremony, their healing could be very successful.

Rath closed his eyes and felt the healing warmth soothe away his many aches and pains. Without looking, he knew both Reultan and Díon knelt beside him slowly moving their hands over his injuries. Their power would be channeled into the wounds to increase the speed of natural healing. He could feel pain easing from his broken ribs as they knit back together in the course of only a few moments.

Rath focused on the power flowing into his battered body. He felt the distinct touch of his brother and also Díon. And another?

Yes, definitely a third source of power. More gentle. Subtle. Weak.

Dàn!

Rath bolted upright, interrupting the healing. "Knock it off Dàn! You don't have the strength for that," he shouted hoarsely at Dàn's inert body.

His unexpected outburst rocked Reultan and Díon back on their heels. Rath laughed at Reultan's worried look. Díon looked shocked too,

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and another, less definable, emotion flickered across his face.

Rath was saved from explaining himself by Sgrios' return. He loped straight to Dàn and shifted back to man form to begin examining Dàn's injuries.

Now that he was in much better shape, Rath went to help Sgrios. But before he could say anything, Sgrios growled in a low voice, "Send the others away. This will not be pretty."

It was an odd request. Usually the addition of more people added strength to a healing. Yet even with his doubts, he asked Reultan and Díon to gather the dead bodies so they could be buried. Rath helped them with the closest ones, until they were far enough from Dàn and Sgrios.

When he approached Sgrios, he saw that Sgrios had removed Dàn's torn shirt, revealing many critical wounds. And Rath saw for the first time the fatal wound. Dàn's throat had been cut, probably in retaliation for Sgrios' arrival.

Dàn was dead.

"Call Dàn back." Sgrios said "It's almost too late."

Too late? *Dàn. Sgrios says it's time to come back.*

No response.

Dàn? Come back now!

A long moment passed before Dàn said faintly, *Rath? When?*

"Dàn wants to know when."

Sgrios carefully placed his hands over Dàn, one over his throat and the other one over his chest. "Now," he said.

Now, Dàn.

Before the thought faded, Dàn's body arched in a massive seizure. His heart began to pump, and blood flowed from his wounds, flooding from his throat.

The blood gradually slowed. Rath figured both Sgrios and Dàn himself were working hard to save his life. Sgrios worked to heal the fatal slash to his throat. Dàn slowed his breathing and heart rate to give Sgrios time to work.

Rath quietly began the healing chant used in more formal ceremonies without knowing if it would help or not. The chant gave him

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something on which to focus. A purpose.

Sgrios focused on Dàn's torn flesh, pouring his energy into the healing. His energy was so strong it could actually be seen as waves of bluish light that soaked into Dàn.

As Rath watched, a thin, red mist formed and swirled over Dàn injuries. The strange mist instantly healed all minor cuts and bruises it touched, lingering and coiling for long minutes over more severe knife wounds and broken bones.

Was the mist part of Sgrios' healing? Or was it Dàn's work? Rath couldn't tell, but he planned to ask them later. It was certainly nothing he had ever seen before.

Rath looked up and saw Reultan and Díon returning, and he used his abilities to remove the blood from Dàn to diminish the amount of gore at the scene. That was within his power and would make Dàn's recovery seem more plausible.

Reultan and Díon approached without interrupting and joined in the chant. A look at Reultan's face showed Rath he didn't believe Dàn could be healed.

The healing continued for most of an hour. The progress was obvious. Soon, the wounds were only thin white scars. Dàn breathed normally, his body relaxed as if asleep.

The red mist still wrapped itself around him, comforting and protecting, yet menacing.

Suddenly, without warning, Dàn's body arched in another long, hard seizure. The mist spiraled over him in agitation. Tiny red sparks flew toward Sgrios, who was holding Dàn still. Pulling his hands away, Sgrios bellowed, "Rath! Call to him. He must wake up."

Dàn! Wake up Dàn! Rath shouted.

Another seizure hit Dàn. Moments later, it passed.

Dàn's eyes opened and for an instant, he met Rath's gaze. He appeared calm, as always.

Then a third seizure hit Dàn. He howled in anguish. The mist wrapped tightly around him, in comfort, while sparks continued to flash in all directions. When his body slackened this time, he lay limp and

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whimpered with each breath. *Please, send them away. I don't want to be seen like this.* His stricken voice flowed into Rath's mind.

Then Rath realized Díon and Reultan were staring at Dàn in shock and fear. Díon was pale and his face was beaded with sweat. Reultan had backed away and gawked at the spectacle.

"Both of you!" he roared in fury at their callous behavior. "Go!"

When they only looked at him in surprise he growled, "Set up a camp near the steam."

When they still didn't move, Sgrios gave them a threatening growl that sent them hurrying away.

Dàn cried out softly despite his obvious attempt at restraint. His loss of composure bothered Rath more than anything else had. Dàn had not uttered a sound during all the abuse they had just suffered. In fact, he could remember only a few times that Dàn had reacted to pain at all.

Dàn? What can we do to help? Rath asked.

Nothing, he answered silently as he struggled to sit upright.

Rath reached for his arm, intending to help him. His hand was still inches away when scorching red sparks bit into his fingers, burning them deeply. He yanked his hand back with a yelp of pain. Dàn fell flat again.

"Guess I could have warned you." Sgrios showed him his own singed palms.

"What's happening to Dàn?" Rath rubbed his reddened palms, focusing his weakened energy to soothe the pain from them.

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like this," Sgrios said. "What does Dàn say?"

"Not much. Haven't you asked him?"

"No. He is too weak to talk aloud, and I won't inflict myself on him with mental contact."

"Oh." Maybe he should try to get some answers from Dàn. *Dàn? Do you know what's happening?*

Somehow, I am changing. And it hurts like bloody hell!

Do you know why we can't touch you?

I have no balance.

"He says he has no balance, and that he is changing. Does that tell

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you anything?"

"Maybe. The trauma of puberty often initiates or expands powers in the young. Perhaps the torture stimulated Dàn to a new level of strength. That could cause a magical imbalance."

"I've never heard of that happening before."

"Neither have I, but Dàn is constantly surprising us. Isn't he?" he said wryly.

It made sense to Rath. As he thought back to the only other time Dàn was seriously injured, he remembered that Dàn had been stronger after he healed. That injury had been caused by a silver tipped crossbow bolt, probably accounting for his current immunity to silver.

"So what do we do now?" Rath asked.

Let me rest awhile. Dàn spoke silently.

"Set up camp and rest for the night," Sgrios said. "Neither of you are up to traveling yet." He stood and started walking in the direction the others had taken, calling out over his shoulder, "Wait here with Dàn. I'll see to a fire and some warm food."

Not knowing how long they would have to wait, Rath sat down and made himself comfortable next to Dàn. "Looks like it's just us again."

Rath set Reultan's canteen by Dàn, "There's some water left, if you're thirsty. I don't think I can hold it for you, so I hope you're strong enough to do it yourself." He watched as Dàn gritted his teeth and struggled to sit up, this time succeeding. Barely. Since he couldn't help Dàn move, Rath shifted an old log behind his friend so he could rest against it.

Dàn took a long drink from the canteen and croaked out, "Thanks," in a nearly inaudible voice.

"So, how's Athair doing now?"

I don't really know. He was nearly unconscious when...I lost track of him.

I suppose we will try to catch up with him. Do you know where he is?

About a day southeast of here.

Will he be all right that long?

Yeah, he's much better off than we are.

Will you be able to travel that far? I have to take back my offer to carry

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you.

Dàn smiled at that. *I should be well enough to carry myself by morning.*

“What did you mean by changing?” Rath asked. He’d been wondering about that. “Into what?”

I am not sure, not exactly.

“Was that red mist your doing?”

What red mist? Dàn tried to claim ignorance. Until Rath waved at Dàn’s arms, where some of the mist still clung and moved in soothing motions. At least it was no longer spitting sparks in all directions. *Oh. That mist.*

Yeah, that mist. Rath snorted at his friend’s evasiveness. *Fine. Don’t tell me. It would probably just weird me out anyway.*

Probably, Dàn said with satisfaction. Meanwhile, that strange mist continued moving over his skin.

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Chapter Nine

Denial

A Long River

Hunger gnawed at him and drove everything else from his animal mind. His gray eyes opened and searched around him, breathing in the scents, seeking a meal. He breathed out his empathic call, summoning, seeking. Calling, demanding those weaker than he submit to him.

The wolf that was Athair could feel many near him. He sensed two women, many smaller animals, several cats, and a small dog. It did not matter. Whatever would come to his weakened call would be his.

Several of the smaller animals began making their way toward him. He could feel them coming. One woman slept, but he could sense the other sharply. She recognized his call and stood, but then stopped and puzzled over her sudden need to see the wolf. He felt her reach back with her mind as she started walking. In his mind, the soft feeling was a caress. She felt his raging hunger and stopped again. Then understanding and compassion flooded over him.

Stunned, he withdrew. She could read him. How could that be?

His surprise broke through the hunger and Athair remembered her. Knowing that she, Hope, would come, he ceased calling out to the others. He looked past the hunger, trying to hold on to his sense of reason, the part that made him a man, not an animal. He stood on a pile of

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blankets placed at one end of a small room made of wire. He didn't remember standing, but she must have put him here on this bed to heal. And he was healing. That was what was driving the hunger through him. The thought relieved him, as that meant some of his magic would function despite the poison still affecting him. He reached for the power to shift to his human form and realized the poison prevented that ability and probably most of his magic, leaving him completely at the mercy of this woman, this healer.

* * * * *

Hope felt the wolf's hunger. *Felt it?* How could she feel it? How could she even know he was awake?

But of course the wolf was due to be awake and would surely be hungry. It really wasn't such a long jump. She'd fix some food to take in for him, and if he was still asleep it would be there for him when he awoke.

What would a wolf eat? She started to dig into the cupboard for the dog food kept for Granny's terrier, Taylor, but stopped. Somehow, fixing a bowl of Taylor's Iams didn't feel right. Hamburger and rice would be easier for the wolf to digest his first couple meals.

She looked in the refrigerator and found steaks and no hamburger. She boiled the rice and fried the steaks.

* * * * *

She hadn't come yet. But why? He reached out again to feel her rushing through the rooms toward him. She came through the door carrying a tray with food and water bowls.

That was smart, and it got her off the menu. Not that he ever ate humans, but he was feeling hungry, wolfish, and unpredictable. Was that from the poison or from being trapped in wolf form?

She didn't enter the wire room, but slid the tray beneath a hinged opening...another smart move.

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"Hello old man." She spoke softly to him. "How are you today? You shouldn't be standing yet, but I see you are, so I brought you something to eat." She motioned to the tray and stepped back from the wire, probably thinking he was afraid of her. How ironic.

She continued to speak in her quiet, soothing voice, "Don't be offended by the name. Steve thought you must be the daddy of all wolves. I thought his words were close enough." She sat on an upturned box across the room and waited for him to come closer.

He marveled at her courage to stay near him as she continued to speak in her low silky voice. That voice flowed through him, easing his pain and calming his wild instincts. He wanted to listen to her voice all day, perhaps for all time, but the hunger drove his attention to the tray. Without moving he smelled the meat she had brought him. It was beef, lightly cooked, mixed with rice and some kind of sauce. It smelled delicious.

He stepped toward the food and stumbled, reminding him just how seriously he'd been hurt. His left front leg barely supported his weight. Food would help. With nourishment, his body could continue the healing process. He gave a soft growl of frustration and limped to the food. He bolted the first several swallows to satisfy his starving body, and then continued with smaller, neat bites of the delicious food.

The meal was perfect. Filling and tasty. She had even cut the meat into small bites that required little chewing. He sent out his thanks to the woman using his empathy.

"You're welcome." She stood to leave, then froze when she realized she'd heard him thank her. She turned to stare at him, her mind racing. She remembered the feeling of being called and of sensing his hunger. She eyed him suspiciously. "What are you?" She faced him squarely through the wire, but took a step back so that she was closer to the door just in case.

He stepped away from the wire, and his feeling of surprise filled her. She wondered how she could feel his emotions so easily. Now she knew he felt vulnerable in the cage despite looking fierce and dangerous.

I will not hurt you, he reassured her mentally. He also sent her

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soothing, calming waves of empathy.

"I heard that!" She exclaimed, jumping back and bumping into the doorframe. "What are you?"

I am a man. She watched his wolfish face as his words flowed through her mind. Although his mouth didn't move, his face showed changes in his expression. Clearly he was cautious about the situation.

"You are a wolf," she said, countering him with the obvious.

That, too. He looked tired, and his words were quiet and reserved.

Hope could see and feel the fatigue that rolled off the wolf or whatever he was. "I put a sedative in your food."

That got his attention quickly enough. He tilted his head at her and narrowed his eyes. She felt his disbelief. *You poisoned me, also? What is it with people these days? A simple 'no thank you, please go away' would do. It is no longer safe for a man to take food.*

She interrupted his slightly muddled dialog. "No. I didn't poison you. I wanted you to rest and get better. It will just make you sleep."

Hope paused in her explanation and wondered again if she was perhaps losing her mind. Had she just imagined a conversation with a wolf? *An argument?* Was he really something more than a wolf? He hadn't acted very wolf-like, and this brought her back to the whole werewolf issue. The wolf, or whatever, limped unsteadily to the pile of blankets and carefully lay down.

"What can I call you?" she asked. His name suddenly seemed very important.

Athair. 'tis Gaelic. The children call me Athair. No other name now.

She wasn't sure what to make of this statement, because it didn't make any sense. Less so, because it had come as no more than a whisper since he was quickly fading to sleep. Had he said Athair? What children? His? With a slightly hysterical giggle, she thought, *children or puppies?* He had said children, hadn't he?

It was all too much to believe. She must have overworked herself stitching him back into one piece, but never mind that. She still needed to check him over to be sure he was healing well.

She slowly opened the kennel run door and stepped into the cage.

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His breath was slow and steady, already deep asleep. To be on the safe side she smacked the metal bowl against the floor, producing a sharp ringing sound. He only twitched one ear. Hope crossed quickly and examined him to determine if his injuries had improved. They had. In fact, they looked much better. More like it had been a week or more instead of two days since she'd found him. Strange. Only his neck and shoulder wound still needed attention. She'd left a small tube in that one to allow drainage from the torn flesh. She could now see that it was unnecessary. After retrieving a few tools, she removed the small tube and cleaned up the area.

Although she'd finished her exam, she couldn't bring herself to leave him yet. She found herself stroking his sable fur, marveling at the soft, silky feel to it. The color that she had first thought was gray was actually a beautiful light sable, a mixing of the lightest ginger with a soft brown. The hair closest to his skin was a soft cream. He was a magnificent animal. If he was an animal.

She sighed. She needed to get back to the real world. Leaving the room, she was sure she must have imagined the whole conversation she'd had with him.

* * * * *

Dàn sat with his feet resting in the shallow stream next to their campsite. His body was still wracked by pain and his powers fluctuated wildly. If not for the others watching him so closely, he would have lain down in the flowing water and allow the cool rivulets to run over him, to soothe him. He focused on the feel of the water lapping against his feet and ankles and tried to ignore the misery within the rest of his body.

He felt the power within him fighting for release, but he dare not let go. As fragile as his control was, he would become a menace to the world. Dàn feared that part of himself so much that he hadn't allowed it loose in centuries. It so wanted to be freed. His wounds hurt from the outside, but inside he was torn apart as well from 'it' seeking freedom. Of the two, it caused the greater damage.

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Chapter Ten

Sense without reason
Moments of doubt

It was that evening, as Hope was washing the dinner dishes, that she realized she was completely mad.

Pardon, I am very thirsty. Could you please bring me a drink? This time the mental contact with the wolf felt almost natural, as if it had been there all the time, only now choosing to use words.

"What?" She gasped aloud as the words sank in and she realized the animal was again speaking into her mind.

Juice would be nice.

Deciding that she might as well go with the madness, she got a glass and filled it with orange juice. She could feel his thirst. It made her fill a second glass for herself before walking to the clinic recovery room.

Thank you, he said into her mind as she entered the room.

"I am not talking to you. Wolves don't talk." She said sternly.

He chuckled to her in a low, sexy tone that raised the hair at her nape. Unlike a voice heard aloud, this mental touch vibrated through her whole body.

"They don't do that either." The sensation that had passed through her left her off balance and started a strange ache she couldn't quite name.

His next thought showed he understood just how much this

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situation unsettled her. *Would you rather I pretend to be only a wolf until I leave?*

She thought about what he meant by the offer. They could act as if he was a nice, normal wolf, and once he was well, he would leave without causing any more strangeness in her safe little world. But her curiosity and fear won out. She needed to know more. What if he was one of those who had attacked the girl or he knew who had done it? If he was actually a werewolf, he would have the answers she needed.

"Maybe that would be a good idea," she said. "But I want to know what you are first."

A man, mostly.

"What does that mean?" Was he being deliberately vague?

I am not sure how to explain.

Yep, he was being vague. Maybe if she asked him specific questions, she would get more details. "If you are a man, why do you look like a wolf?"

I can change into wolf form.

Her guess had been confirmed. She was suddenly very glad he was behind the wire. "You are a werewolf," she said in an accusing tone.

I can feel your fear, but there is no reason for it. I will not hurt you. He paused. *Werewolf is one name we have been called, but it's not one I prefer.'* She felt his mental shrug before he asked, *So, do you plan to kill me now?*

Shaken by his question, she studied him as he sat before her. His expression was more one of acceptance than of fear. He actually expected her to try to kill him, after she had worked so hard to save him. The thought dampened her fear and brought her curiosity about him back to life. "Well, as I don't have a pitchfork and torch handy, no. I don't plan to kill you at this time."

Then may I have the juice? It is not poisoned, is it?

"Oh, I forgot. Sorry. And no, it's not drugged." To prove her point, she took a sip from the glass before pouring the juice into a bowl and sliding it past the wire.

He drank it gratefully. The juice was soothing and cool to his tender throat. *Again, I thank you, Hope.* He drank the rest of the bowl. *I may*

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have a slight fever, despite your excellent care. I believe my body is trying to purge the poison I was given.

She refilled the bowl with her juice. "How did you wind up under the wheels of Steve's station wagon? And how were you injured so seriously to begin with?" She sat down on the upturned box.

Athair wondered about how much he should tell her, and decided she deserved to know the truth, or at least most of it. He would have eventually died from the poison and injuries if she had not found him. Considering the strength of the poison, even he would not have healed after losing so much blood. She had saved his life and he wanted to speak with her honestly. But where should he start the story?

I was poisoned by members of another clan. When I did not succumb quietly, they attacked me. I had no choice but to flee. They chased me until I met with your friend's wagon.

"Oh. By clan you mean...there are more werewolves? If you don't prefer to be called werewolves, what do you prefer?"

He nodded. *I am a Valàfrn. And yes, there are others.*

"Why have I never seen one of you on the news before? Where do you live? How do you stay hidden?" she asked.

Should he even try to answer that? Even if he did, it wouldn't be true for any but his own clan. *I do not really know what the others do. I have had little to do with your people or other clans in a long time.*

"Do you hunt people? Or howl at the moon? Will you let me watch you change? Oh, wait." Her face reddened. "You'd better not. You don't have any clothes."

Well, she'd certainly warmed to the subject! Her curiosity was better than her earlier fear. Then again, maybe it wasn't. Fear simplified so much and allowed for a little dignity. Maybe he should show her his teeth just to remind her. He considered that, and then rejected the idea doubting it would have much effect on her through the thick wire cage. Well, maybe he could do something about the cage eventually. For now, he wanted her trust.

She waited impatiently for him to tell her more, giving him a chance to look her over. Her light brown eyes never quite met his. She

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radiated uncertainty and reservation like an injured doe. Hope was pretty in a soft, gentle way. Although her heart-shaped face had beautiful features and perfect balance, he knew she would probably not think so. She wore slacks and a long sleeved blouse with a neckline that hugged her chin. Nearly all her skin was covered. Hidden, protected. Why? He sensed the reason was important, if only to her.

Why do you hide your skin? he asked, because he wondered. But regretted the question as soon as he saw her withdraw. Like prey hiding her vulnerability from a predator? Instantly, he sent her soothing waves of healing. Healing was one of his stronger talents, but in his weakened state he could do little more than soothe her.

Hope sat very still. "I was burned many years ago. I cover the scars," she said simply.

Maybe I can heal them for you in return for your healing me.

"You can heal others?" This time she looked into his eyes with excitement. "Please, tell me how." Somehow, he knew it was her interest in healing others that drew her attention. She didn't believe he or anyone else could ever make her whole again.

Most of my people can do some healing magic. I am the second strongest healer of my clan.

Hope thought this might not be an understatement, considering his wounds were healing many times faster than she'd expected. Could he teach her any of his skills? Certain illnesses or injuries were sometimes beyond her abilities. If a scrap of knowledge could save even one life, it would be worth her time and risk to learn more about it.

Perhaps he really could help her scarring or better yet, repair the ravaged muscles in her damaged legs. It was a wish she had given up on long ago. Or at least, she thought she had. *Slow down girl.* She needed to know him better before she allowed herself to build any dreams. "How can I hear you? Are you telepathic?"

A few of my people are true telepaths and can speak to anyone in the silent language. He hesitated and looked at her with a canine form of a puzzled frown. *I am not one of those. I can only speak to those to whom I have grown close. Mainly, my family.*

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"I can hear you. And we just met." She brushed aside this strange occurrence. It was no odder than believing she had been attacked by a werewolf, or was now holding this polite conversation with one. "Is that how I could tell you were awake and hungry?"

We are nearly all empathic. Most of us are very empathic. At her perplexed expression, he went on to explain the difference. *Telepathy controls thought. Empathy controls emotion.*

"That explains a lot." Hope said thinking about her irrational behavior of late. "You have been controlling me." With a grin she said, "That will have to stop."

I have not controlled your actions. I never took your choices from you; I only encouraged your help. This seemed a fine line to Hope, but he must have thought the difference was significant.

Will you let me out of this wire room? Athair asked, He was in rather serious need of a place to relieve himself. He may be trapped in the body of an animal, but he still had the sensibilities of a man. *I will not hurt you. You may trust me in that.*

"I recently saw an attack by one of your kind, I think. How can I trust you? How do I know it wasn't you who killed the girl or one of your friends who attacked me?"

You don't. But it was not my family, nor I. She had met those of the Valàfrn before. Who would dare to attack humans? Was this what the clans now chose to do with their powers? How could he convince her of his good intentions? *We only left our forest about three weeks ago. We spent that time traveling to this area, which is the territory of another clan. I have never done harm to any innocent, and I will not hurt you. Please trust me.*

"I don't think that would be a good idea just yet." She stood and paced across the room with her limping gait. "I mean, you have admitted to being a werewolf or a vala-whatever."

She paced back again. "You could be lying about not hurting me. And what about other people? Will you hurt anyone else?" She paced away. "What if you are just a wolf and I am imagining this whole thing?"

"Is that better or worse?" She paced back. "I like talking to you."

Athair gave a toothy smile at that comment. He was thoroughly

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enjoying her inner debate, as she talked herself into letting him out.

I will not hurt anyone, and I promise I will be a perfect gentleman in your home. We are people and do not act like animals often. But even we have certain personal needs. Needs that will not be so pleasant in this small room.

"Ohhh," she said on a flowing breath. "I guess if ever there was a good reason, that's it." Desperate for another option, she studied the cage and mumbled what sounded like, "Driven to bravery in search of a toilet."

Then facing the obvious, she turned to him. "If you are to have "humane" treatment, you will have to eventually leave the cage. All right, but we need to have some ground rules."

He nodded.

"One. You will hurt no one. Not me. Not anyone else." She resumed her pacing. "Two. You will stay out of sight. I don't want you to scare my grandmother, or anyone else. And three. You will return to this cage if I say so." She stared at him expectantly.

I will agree to that for as long as needed or possible, he answered, with completely serious intentions. The last rule, in his eyes, was very conditional, seeing as he technically could open the cage if he needed to and was only asking her to help her accept his presence.

She was obviously not reassured, but she showed her courage by releasing the latch on the kennel run gate. She gave a startled laugh and looked at him. "You could have opened this gate any time. Couldn't you?"

Without too much trouble. Had she come to that conclusion on her own, or was she better able to read him than he thought? He stepped from the cage and walked slowly across the room toward the doorway. *Where would you like me to go? Where is your privy?*

"There is a bathroom on the left side, first door. It's not quite done, but it is working." She had been following him at a distance and her directions were little more than a whisper.

He figured having a sudden and unexpected chat with a wolf was probably too much for her to accept, especially if she already had reason to fear his kind. With a deep breath, Athair went into the small bathing room and pushed the door shut behind him.

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Hope decided she was insane. Any way she looked at her recent actions, she was definitely crazy, completely ready for a padded room. After all she had been through and seen in her life, she had just turned a werewolf loose in her home. A very polite werewolf. A werewolf with a sexy mind voice, who made promises to heal her mess of a body. This werewolf didn't prefer the term werewolf. She would have to get the right pronunciation for what he did call himself. Of course, it all would be a moot point if he decided to eat her as his evening snack.

Worse yet, what if she had imagined the attack, and now all this? What if he wasn't a werewolf at all? Then she was more than a few bricks shy of a load. After all, she had enjoyed their conversations, which may have been only in her head. If she was honest, and she was trying to be, she liked him. Even more when she was not facing his wolf-shaped body. The low, masculine voice that filled her mind sent her body tingling in surprisingly feminine ways. That she was attracted to a werewolf was just too weird to consider.

She had to at least try to be honest with herself. She wanted to forget the attack and his possible link to it. She wanted to pretend he was no more than a man. Not a wolf, and certainly not a werewolf.

The only way she would get through this would be to simply stop thinking. Logic no longer applied. For now, she would just go with the flow. And thinking of flow—how would a wolf use a toilet? Could he lift his leg that high, or would she catch him drinking from it?

The soft whoosh of the toilet's flush answered one question.

Then the bathroom door reopened and Hope watched cautiously as the wolf came back to the hall and sat before her. She saw that he was already limping less than before, but his left foreleg still didn't support his weight. "Feel better? If you're hungry, I can fix something."

I am very hungry. You won't poison me again, will you?

"No, but I should give you some antibiotics to prevent infection and maybe something for your fever. Will medicine work for you?"

They may help, but I have no way of knowing. I have never needed them before.

She motioned for him to follow her and turned to walk down the

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hall that led through the breezeway to the house. She stopped before the entry and turned to Athair again. "I should tell you that we have several cats living in the house with us. If that will be a problem, you can stay here on the clinic side."

I do not mind cats too much. If they object to me, I can leave the house.

That wasn't exactly the truth. Most of the cats he'd met, both the normal and the were-type had been down right obnoxious. Not bad personalities, just difficult because of their differences. In the past, he had avoided them whenever it was convenient.

"All right then." Hope continued through the door, past the living room, and into the kitchen. She went directly to the refrigerator, where she pulled out more of the beef and rice meal and prepared and heated it for him.

From the doorway, he took his time looking around the kitchen. It was decorated in warm, natural shades that appealed to him. He moved to one side of the room, where a sliding glass door led to a covered porch. Past the porch he saw a wide lawn, a field, and the edge of a forest. A strong, wild longing filled him. Called to him. He could feel the distant trees inviting him beneath their sheltering limbs. Suddenly the house closed in on him, threatening him. Even the spacious, warm kitchen was too confining. He had to get outside. Get to those woods. Get to safety. A barely audible growl vibrated through the quiet kitchen.

Hope turned and faced him uneasily from the stove. "Are you about to lose it? Is now when I should be running?"

He shook his head. *No. But I need to be outside.*

"Did the bathroom not do the trick then?"

Hurry. Please.

She approached him cautiously and opened the door. He moved quickly across the porch and onto the grass.

Standing still on the lawn, he closed his eyes and accepted the night into him. The night was what he needed. The soft breeze brought his sense of smell alive. The night sounds were a reminder of what freedom meant. The crickets with their merry chirps. The wind rustling leaves. The night soaked into him and calmed the beast within him. The call of the woods

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continued, but it was bearable now that he was not confined within the house. How easy it would be to run through the woods and fields and forget the pain of his injuries. Forget that he was hunted. Forget that his clan needed him.

His clan.

Athair had forgotten about the problems that came with remaining in wolf form too long. Those problems being, that he would become less human and more wolf.

Still it tempted him away from his responsibility, away from his family, and his children. Rath and Dàn were possibly still in danger and he needed to recover so he could go in search of them. But first he needed to have control of his magic again.

He heard Hope's soft step on the porch behind him. Athair forced his legs to take him back, and he lay down near the top of the steps. Once again facing the woods, it took all his strength to resist its appeal. He stared out for several more minutes and then, with a Herculean effort, he turned from the forest with a sigh to face Hope. He almost smiled when he saw she held a large knife slightly concealed in one hand and stood with the other one on the door handle. Despite her fear, she had come out into the night with him. But she had not come unarmed.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

I am having some difficulties with my wolf form. Again she deserved the truth, even if it led to her asking him to leave.

"In what way?" Her body was still tense and she was ready to fight or flee as needed. Still, her voice held steady, and she appeared close to calm.

The longer I am trapped as a wolf, the less I will feel like a man. I will turn feral. Already he felt and thought more as a wild animal would, sensing animals as either prey or predator, instead of by personality or even species.

She looked startled by this. Athair breathed in the scent of her fear. His own body tightened with the sense, preparing to take advantage of her weakness. He gritted his teeth against his wild instincts.

If I can not regain control of my magic, I will continue to become more

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wild and eventually will lose my human self. If that happens, I will even forget I was a man at all. The simple act of forming his thoughts swept out the wild senses and focused his civilized mind.

"You would be dangerous."

Most likely I would run for the hills and not be seen again. Other options are not ones I want to consider. Too much rested on his responsibility.

"Is there any way I can help you regain control of your...magic?" She stumbled over the word *magic*, but otherwise seemed to be dealing with the situation rather well. "Have you tried to change back since you woke up? Maybe you've improved enough."

I have not tried. If it won't scare you, I can do so now. At her nod, he stood again and concentrated on the ritual of change. He allowed the soothing chant to fill his mind and flow over his body. The electric tingling that signaled the change surged through him as his body shimmered. Then the energy dissipated. He failed to complete the change or hold his form as a man.

Discouraged, he lay down again. Hope let out her breath, as though it were her own failure. "Is it the poison that keeps you from changing?" she asked quietly.

Yes. It is a toxic compound that disrupts our magic. I was probably a fool to have allowed myself into this position' Although he did not know the exact compound, he could guess the base ingredient was wolfsbane by its violent effects.

She retrieved the bowl from the kitchen that she had prepared for him and placed it on the porch near his feet. "Your dinner is warm. Maybe that will help." She then pulled out a chair set slightly off to one side, several feet from where Athair lay.

Thank you. It smells delicious. It was delicious. Hope had a very giving soul, to be willing to help him like this. To care enough to accept the strangeness he was imposing on her human life.

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Chapter Eleven

*Family and Clan
Cry of the Hunt*

As he ate the meal, Hope thought about what she had just witnessed. He'd stood completely still, and then had seemed to flicker like a million tiny lights flowed over his wolf body. And for just an instance, she thought she saw a man. A tall, muscular man. A naked man. Then the lights melted away. Maybe she'd blinked. No man remained, just the wolf again.

Was this for real?

Well. If she had finally flipped her lid, at least she had a creative imagination.

He'd finished his meal and now stared off at the woods with an intensity that worried her. He was probably daydreaming of chasing deer and howling at the moon. So maybe she had better keep him talking. It just might help him stay civilized. Maybe she could even get some more answers about her own situation.

"When you told me your name, you mentioned children," she said. "Does that mean you're married? Do werewolves get married?"

Yes, we get married. And no, I am not married. His wolf body relaxed, but his mental thoughts seemed as alert as ever. His words and thoughts carried such deep context and feeling. The word *married* felt sad as it

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entered her mind. Was that because of his empathy?

"Did you say you have children?" And if so, did that mean he had been married, but was no longer? That might explain the sadness.

I raised the young of the clan as my own children. Their parents were murdered. He said the word *children* with pride and wonder, making Hope think of every loving parent she had ever met. And he had said they were not really his children.

"Could you tell me about them? Are they like you? How did you wind up raising them?"

My two brothers and I were the only adults left alive in our village. We found the children, who had escaped and hidden to save themselves. There were eleven of them, from newborn to fifteen years. I cared for them and taught them all I could. We performed the tagradh ceremony.

"What is the tagadah...ceremony?"

It allows a parent to replace one who was lost, to become mathair or athair, mother or father. One of us had to adopt the children and hold the needed connection to their magic. Without it, the children would have suffered horribly and eventually died from their immature magic. In the weeks it took to find the pages that held the steps of the ceremony, we nearly lost the two youngest, a set of twin newborns.

"So you adopted eleven children to become their athair. Their father. That would explain why they call you Athair." He sounded like any other protective parent she knew.

They named me Athair out of respect. Even my brothers call me Athair now.'

"What was your name?" So Athair was more a title than a name. She wondered what he had been like before accepting the responsibility of parenthood.

Ailleag, he said after a pause. Athair is all I have been for many long years. I do not feel like Ailleag any longer. There was such longing in his mind, a sadness about being parted from his children.

"Is there any way to contact your family? Would they be worried about you? Would they know you were poisoned? Could they help you heal?" Strangely, she hoped he would say no. That he would stay with her

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at least a little longer.

I had two of the children with me when I went to the Bear Clan. I don't know if they escaped or not.

"Do you mean the people who poisoned and nearly tore you apart may have your children? And be doing God knows what to them?" She shot to her feet in agitation. No wonder he glared at the woods, growling. He must want to go rescue his children. "We need to go after them. We need to get them to safety."

Athair watched the fire flash in her eyes in the defense of his children, whom she had never met. Children that were in fact, hundreds of years old and nearly as powerful as he was. Still her defense of them was extraordinary. *I am worried for them, but you should know they are adults now. They should have had time to get well away once they knew I had escaped the pack. I imagine they may be searching for me, with plans for my rescue.*

"Ah, how old are they? I was picturing teenagers."

I am not sure you want me to answer that. Rath had just turned four hundred and nineteen, and Dàn was one year younger.

"Why's that? Will it make me think you're old, or what?" She smiled at him, not knowing how old her innocence already made him feel. Humans always amazed him. They lived so fully in only the few decades they were given.

Both of them are over four hundred years old. But the Valàfrn matured differently than humans. Even if they looked like adults by age twenty, they usually did not consider starting a family and taking on responsibility until they reached the age of two hundred.

"Oh, my." She stared at him and frowned thoughtfully. "That must mean you're a bit older than that."

Yes. A bit.

"You were totally right. I didn't want to know that. And I don't think I want to know how much older you are. At least not yet. Especially if you still call them children."

That is probably wise. Though in truth, I will probably always see them as children, regardless of their ages. She was really quite remarkable. Not once had she avoided the unlikely reality of his existence. Never mind the fact

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that she still held the knife mostly hidden at her side. That was good sense for a woman alone. She was filled with curiosity and compassion and completely lacked prejudice. If she was typical of people in this age, his clan may finally have a chance at acceptance. He found the possibility refreshing.

Perhaps her name was as appropriate as his. She, with her soft doe eyes, could be the one to bring hope to his clan. Was that what Dàn had meant while with the Bear clan?

Athair worried about what happened to the boys after he was chased from Lakeside. He knew they were strong and sensible, but many things could have kept them from making their escape. He also knew that Dàn would not have told him if the young seer himself was going to come to harm. There was a quiet sadness about him, and at times Athair even suspected Dàn might consider seeking the solace of death.

Would you tell me about yourself? He wondered what in her life had given her such strength and courage. For just this once, he thought he could lean on someone, on this woman to bolster his own failing strength.

"I would rather not. I don't like to talk about myself."

Please, he asked in quiet entreaty. He didn't want to scare her with too much truth about his way of life, but he needed the conversation to help hold onto his sense of self. The forest was unrelenting in its summons. The scents and sounds drew him almost beyond control.

With a shake of his head, he focused on Hope. She smelled of vanilla and spice. She had moved to sit on the top step only a few feet away from him. She leaned back against the railing with her eyes closed, obviously deep in thought. The light from the moon added a soft glow to her perfect skin. His breath stopped. Her spicy scent and her tender throat awoke a dark hunger in him for the taste her flesh and blood.

This had to stop. He had never hurt a person and didn't want to start now.

Please, he said. *I need this.*

As the ragged voice rolled through her mind, Hope looked at Athair and saw the predator within him. She saw the struggle as he fought to maintain control. She needed to help him if she could. "I'll try."

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She caught his gaze and held it for a moment. This was an opportunity to find out about the one who'd attacked her. "I want to tell you about what happened to me almost a month ago. Maybe you can help me sort out what I saw." She hesitated.

Yes. What happened?

"I was attacked by one of your kind." She went on to explain what she recalled about the attack and the newscast about the girl's body. "Tell me again that it wasn't you." She studied his every reaction.

It was not I.

"You don't think I imagined it, do you?"

No, probably not. He met her gaze with an open, honest expression that made her want to believe him.

"So, are many of your kind killers? Or maybe outlaws?" Was he the only nice werewolf, or was the one who'd attacked her more rare? She hoped most of them were like Athair, because he would be more trustworthy if he was part of an honorable group.

I really don't know. My clan has not stayed in contact with others for several centuries. We were not like that in the past, but times do change. I hope they have not changed that much.

"So they're probably outlaws, then? What of the ones in your family?"

Just like your kind, we have individual personalities. Some are easily corrupted by the power we control. My clan is bound by honor. None would do such crimes.

"Do you have police to stop them?"

Once we had the Shadomàn, who watched for clan members who could bring harm to all.

"Do they still exist?" Shadomàn sounded strange and mysterious, fitting for the ones who would be werewolves hunting werewolves.

Not that I know of, but the Shadomàn were outside the clan so as to remain objective.

"Objective? Oh, in case they had to go after someone they knew."

Yes. They might be called to kill someone they knew and loved, perhaps a friend or relative.

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They might have to kill someone they loved? How horrible. But who else would be strong enough to fight magic except those who held the same powers? For the sake of the Warren police, Hope sincerely wished for a few *Shadomàn* to be hunting the ones who'd attacked her and killed the other woman.

Tell me about your family. Athair interrupted her musing. *Family is important.*

"I live with my grandmother, Ella. I have been with her since my parents died." Hope remembered the day Granny had picked her up from the hospital and brought her and her wheelchair home. She'd felt so old and used up. Her days filled with quiet dread, and her nights with dark nightmares. Granny had let her be for a while, and then forced her to meet visitors who came by, most of whom she didn't remember. But a few had been different and nearly pulled her back awake.

How did your parents die? Athair tugged her back from her dark thoughts.

"In a car accident. The same one in which I was injured. My two younger brothers died, too." It was possible now to say the words, but they still hurt so much.

I am very sorry. That must have been hard for you. His soothing empathy eased around her like a gentle hug.

The caress from his mind to hers offered something no other person ever had. It offered guilt-free sympathy that she was forced to accept. Knowing that he wasn't judging her in any way released those horrible memories, allowing her to talk about that time without choking on the pain. "I was sixteen. It was a long time ago, right after I passed my driver's exam."

You must pass an exam to drive a wagon? So many things are different.

She stared at him in astonishment. "You don't know how to drive a car?"

My clan has stayed to ourselves since shortly after we moved to this continent. I saw many strange new things while in the Bear Clan, and even more here in your home. Only my brother, Sgrios, has gone out and brought back stories about your world.

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"Why were you so isolated?" She could not imagine a group of people living apart from the world for so many centuries.

My brothers and I felt it was too dangerous to live among your kind. I believe now that we made a terrible mistake. One for which our children will be forced to pay. They have lost so much. I wish I could give it all back to them, but perhaps they will have that chance now.

His thoughts humbled Hope. She could see that their discussion of his family had helped keep him distracted from his wild nature. And it was certainly easier for her to talk about than the loss of her own family.

"I think I would like your family," she said.

Perhaps you will meet them someday. They certainly will like you.

"Are your brothers like you?"

Do you mean my magic?

"No. You as a person." Or whatever Athair was. Regardless of the fact that he looked like a wild animal, he felt like a person. It was a strange thought. Even more oddly, she wanted to know him better.

As I mentioned, I have two brothers. They are very different. His far off expression focused on his past this time rather than the distant forest. Acair is my twin, older by an hour. He is strong and reliable. He has always given us direction and a plan. Even when we had little hope, Acair kept us together through the darkest of times.

"He sounds like a good man." Hope thought that Athair and his twin must be very much alike.

He is. The responsibility he carries is hard for him at times. It was his final decision that we should seclude ourselves from the world. At the time, we felt it was our only option.

"What is your other brother like?"

Sgrios.

She watched several strong emotions pass over him, but she didn't understand them. They flashed by very much like pain. He didn't continue for a moment, just closed his eyes and lay completely still. Athair looked very dog-like with his head resting on his front legs.

I think I have begun to understand him better since the poison. If I do not overcome the urge to turn feral, he will surely join me. I find it comforting to

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know I will still have family even if I lose myself.

"Was he poisoned, too?"

No. Suddenly, Athair raised his head and met her gaze, and she felt comprehension dawn over him. *Yes, it was poison, but not how you meant. Sgrios believes he caused the death of many of our clan. It is his guilt that poisons him. He avoids the guilt and pain by running with a small pack of wild wolves, and only rarely returning to human form.*

"I see. Do your brothers' names have meanings like yours?"

Yes, Acair has been an anchor for our people. The seer of our village named him that at the time of our birth. Our parents were alphas of the clan back then, and I think they believed Acair would follow them and eventually take leadership.

As for Sgrios, he was once called Donnchadh, but now he chooses to answer to Sgrios, when he answers to anything. The word is Gaelic for destruction. I fear we will lose him before too much longer. I can feel it in him. He yearns for the final freedom from his guilt.

"What about the two boys traveling with you?" She wanted to turn the conversation to a less painful topic.

Rath and Dàn. They are both good men.

"What are their names in Gaelic?" His culture seemed to place a great deal of value on names and the meanings behind them. She felt like she could learn an important element about each individual simply by hearing his name.

Our oracles often gave a name and prophecy for newborns, so often the name an individual goes by is related to some deeper meaning. Rath means luck and good fortune. I have always found it ironic that his personality is intensely serious and his nature, quiet and serious.

"What about Dàn?"

Dàn is Gaelic for fate.

What a strange name for a child. "How did he get saddled with that name?"

Even without training, Dàn is a powerful seer and probably much more.

A fortune teller? She pictured one of the side show guys in the traveling carnival. "By seer, you mean he can see the future? Seriously?"

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That could be really good for playing the lotto."

What is the lotto?

"Granny's favorite pastime. Lotto is gambling on a list of numbers. What kinds of things can Dàn do?" A thought hit her, and she stared at him in surprise. "Why didn't he tell you to just not drink the poison?"

Athair's eyes flashed in amusement. *Dàn can be somewhat scary even to our kind, sometimes even to me. I know he sees much more than that of which he chooses to speak. He did warn me that they would turn on me. He also said that we should follow that path. I know he has the best interests of the clan in mind. If he said to take the risk, then I knew there would be a good reason to do so.*

"Wow! That is scary." She was stunned by the thought of someone with so much power. Someone who could actually see the future and control what happened to his family. "I guess you must trust him a lot to know you would be attacked and not try to prevent it on his word."

I do trust Dàn. He is a good man. But at the same time, to truly know him is impossible. His strange powers hold him apart from everyone. I often wonder what brought him to our family.

"What do you mean? Isn't he a werewolf like you?" The way Athair spoke of Dàn made him seem like something possibly worse than a werewolf.

His mother was a foundling. I was a boy when she first came to the clan. Later, she left the clan so she could see more of the world. I don't know what she saw or did, but when she was brought back to us she was very ill and pregnant with Dàn. She was never well enough to tell us who his father is or was and she died when Dàn was born. Dàn is one of the children I have not formally adopted, because he had enough control of his magic, even at fourteen, that he had no need of mine. I hope you get the chance to meet both him and Rath.

Hope thought about that for a moment. She would like to meet the people who were important to Athair. And that idea made her pause. She didn't really know him. She only knew that she enjoyed talking with him. *A lot.* She couldn't think about that yet.

The night had deepened some time ago. The moon had risen higher, and now softened the darkness. There was a continuous symphony of night sounds, including the peeping and chirping of insects,

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the occasional rasp of a bullfrog or the hoot of an owl. And their quiet talk.

Specifically, her talk.

That was a bit of weirdness she hoped she wouldn't have to explain to Granny any time soon. *Hey Granny, I'm not talking to myself. I'm talking to a real live werewolf!* Yeah, right. That would certainly have her back at the therapist in a hurry. And probably give her the chance to try some new medication.

What was she going to tell Steve when he asked about the wolf? He would be by in the morning to pick her up for work and would probably want to check on the wolf then just to be sure he was no threat to her. She needed to come to a decision.

"Do you have a plan? I mean, after you are well enough." She wondered why she wanted him to offer to stay. Why did the idea of his leaving suddenly seem like a terrible thing?

I need to see my clan to let them know what happened to me. But I cannot risk traveling until I can be sure I have control over my magic.

Obviously. "How much control must you have, and how can I help you get better? Not that I am trying to get rid of you but—"

You need to have a plan. I understand, and feel the same way.

A long, fierce howl sounded from far away. It was answered by two other voices. They were the first sounds of the night that caused any unease in Hope. The howls continued, some louder, some farther away. All of them raised the sensitive hairs on the back of Hope's neck.

Athair stood up and listened tensely to the distant calls. The hair of his back bristled and he growled a nearly inaudible challenge back into the evening air.

"Friends of yours?" she asked, attempting to joke away her nervousness as she became aware of the dangerous menace that was part of him. She slipped to the safety of the kitchen doorway, still clutching the knife. "I guess not. Want to tell me what's going on?"

They hunt for me, He snarled at her.

She retreated to the other side of the door. At that moment, she figured he could manage just fine without her support.

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Then she remembered him saying he couldn't travel yet. "I don't suppose you are strong enough to run from here yet, are you? I really don't want any guests that are capable of doing the kind of damage they did to you. I already have nightmares from my first encounter with your kind."

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Chapter Twelve

Protection

Renewal

He turned to look at her, finally realizing that she had reentered the house and closed the door between them. He couldn't blame her. He was putting her life in jeopardy. He needed to leave and lead them away from her. Yet he needed his full strength to do so safely.

I am sorry that my presence has placed you in danger. I will lead them away from here. Even if he was unable to go far, he could at least leave enough signs to protect her from the Bear Clan hunters.

"I can't let you do that. You are not strong enough to face them. We need another plan."

He was astonished by her giving nature. That she would help him, someone she barely knew. But then, she didn't know what she faced. Her courage to deal with the unknown was even more surprising.

"What do you know about the ones hunting you?" She opened the door, but didn't return to the porch. "Can you tell where they are?"

There are four voices passing information. They are quartering a forest farther to the east looking for signs of my passing. How far are we from where you found me?

"Just a few miles. The road where we picked you up is to the east."

Then they will find my trail soon, but it will take them some time to follow the scent on a road to here. The rain will have washed away most of the scent.

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"Yes, that's convenient."

If you plan to help me without getting hurt, you must know more about our abilities. The rain was not simply convenient. We can control the weather. Rath brought the storm to add to the confusion and allow the three of us to escape. I maintained the storm to cover my tracks, with Dàn's help, I think.

She could have gone a lifetime without learning there were people with the power to control the weather like a damned TV remote. She glowered at him for bringing such bizarre knowledge into her peaceful life.

She understood that what he planned would amount to sacrifice. It would be his way. He was a predator, but also a protector. The problem was that she was a protector, too.

I need to have control over my magic. As long as my powers continue to fluctuate, they will act like a beacon to the others. It is only a matter of time until they track me to your door. Probably no more than a few days.

She had to help him. It was like an overwhelming urge to ensure his safety, yet she didn't have a single guess as to how to go about it. "What would your family do to help you?"

We use healing ceremonies that may be able to help re-balance my magic. There are also many natural remedies that can help, Athair answered without much conviction.

"Maybe I can help you with the ceremony. What kinds of natural things do you need? Granny has quite a collection of herbs and such." She stepped back into the kitchen and went to a corner cabinet against the far wall, which held candles, incense, and dried herbs of every kind.

He directed her to take out certain candles and herbs. *If we are going to attempt this, we should use a spacious room.*

She led him to the sunken den across from the kitchen. "Will this room do?" He stepped past her with a gentle brush against her thigh. His thick coat tickled her hand and she ached to sink her fingers into his lush pelt.

Yes. He directed her to set the candles around the room, light them, and sprinkle a mixture of herbs over the candles. As she did so with each candle, he whispered a soft chant into her mind. She sensed it was a

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protective ward for her. After the third candle, she repeated it with him for the remaining ones. As she added her voice, each candle flared brightly and began to issue scented plumes of smoke.

Both were surprised by that. "Why did that happen?" she asked.

I don't know. You must have some magic about you, besides your empathy.

"Right." She snorted in disbelief. And just maybe she would use her handy remote tomorrow to insure a sunny day.

I did not expect this either, but you do have power in your voice. Nothing else explains what you see happening. And perhaps because of those powers, this ritual will have more benefit than I expected.

The room slowly became hazy with the healing candle smoke. Athair continued to direct Hope on how to arrange the furniture. Then he positioned himself in the center of the room. *I will need to meditate for short while. Will you turn off the lights?*

"Do you want me to leave?" she asked as she flipped the switch, leaving the room in the shallow glow of the candles.

No. Please stay. I may need you.

Somehow, those simple words warmed her and made all this craziness make more sense. She settled into the deep cushions of a chair in the corner and watched Athair begin his ritual of healing. The flickering light and soothing scent of candles added an aura of peacefulness to the shadowy room. Athair's heavy wolf body sat statue still with his head up and his eyes closed. He began a rhythmic chant that flowed into her mind.

The ceremony went on and on in an endless cycle. Athair never moved so much as an eyelash, yet the strength of his power built. The room seemed to vibrate with his energy.

Without conscious thought, Hope closed her eyes and joined in the chant. Her quiet voice stumbled over the foreign words at first, until she found the pattern and her voice became steady and certain.

She opened her eyes and saw that Athair was barely visible in his central position. The air surrounding him shimmered and crackled. Like the tides, it poured away from him, and then was pulled back. The candle light over these waves of energy made it appear that the air itself was

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dancing over him. As the wave patterns intensified, she could no longer see his wolf form at all.

She suddenly felt weak. Wondering if perhaps it was her energy that flowed around him, she closed her eyes and relaxed back into her chair.

Hope quieted as the chant changed. The difference was subtle, and she soon found the words again. The ceremony was beautiful. She hoped that later he would tell her the meaning of the soothing words.

Her eyes flew open in surprise when a deep male voice joined the chant. Athair's voice was soft and deep, with a strong accent. She had never noticed an accent in his 'mind voice'. This voice was masculine and tingled across her skin in a peculiar, comforting way.

His voice changed the rhythm of the chant again. Hope stilled her voice, unable to find the new words. She sat quietly and watched as the energy slowed its tidal motion and seemed to withdraw into Athair. As it did, he became more visible.

He was no longer a wolf.

He was a man. A large, very attractive man. He was well over six feet tall, and he stood with his back to her.

And what a back! His hair, which was the same varied brown shade of his former pelt, fell neatly over shoulders that were broad and well muscled. His back and waist were trim and hard. And the man had a rear that made her suck in her breath in appreciation.

She knew she would pass out if he turned around. Unless of course, he had a face like Marmaduke. Surely not. Well, regardless. That beautiful back left her panting.

A sigh of energy spread out from Athair, then drew back. As it retreated, it seemed to sap the essence from other energy sources within the room. Even the candles went out. The last of the vibrations from the ceremony ceased.

Athair fell to his knees, and then sagged to the floor. Hope wanted to go to him, but she was too limp to do more than reach toward him with one hand and her thoughts. *Athair?*

She felt a soothing presence flow through her, wrapping around

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like two strong, but gentle arms. He was reassuring her. It was her last thought before sleep overcame her.

Several hours later, she awoke to pain throbbing down her leg. She struggled to stretch out the cramps, and then slowly limped over to Athair. He lay on his side on the floor, with dark shadows cutting across his narrow hips. He was breathing, but deeply asleep despite his uncomfortable position.

She knelt beside him and reached out to shake him awake. Maybe she could move him to the couch with his help. She stopped. Heat poured off his naked skin, hot enough to burn even before her hand touched his shoulder. That couldn't be normal. But then, what was normal for an injured, but recovering werewolf?

Pulling her sleeve down over her hand, she gave his shoulder a slight shake. "Athair, wake up." His only response was a small groan. She tried again, "Wake up. I can't move you without your help." A second shoulder shake produced better results.

His eyes blinked a couple times and he rolled onto his back.

"Oh, my." Hope couldn't believe the view. He had a fabulous body. The sight of him stretched out before her in nothing but his birthday suit made her mouth water. "Nope, not Marmaduke." She mumbled. His face was strong and handsome, while he was still relaxed and barely awake. Despite the temptation, she forced her gaze to stay above his waist.

"Are you okay?" She asked the silly question. He was certainly better than okay. He was downright scrumptious.

"Hope." He said her name and met her eyes. Her mind flooded with his gratitude, his vulnerability, and so much more that she couldn't separate the powerful emotions. The connection between them was so incredibly strong it brought tears to her eyes. So strong it scared her. She immediately pulled back and tried to regain control over her mind.

After several calming breaths, she said, "I wanted to move you to the couch, but your skin is too hot and you're far too heavy." Before she had the chance to continue, she saw his concentration as he attempted to make some internal change.

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"I should be able to get to the couch." He started to stand up, but stopped when it left him gasping for breath and shimmering in a strange, daunting way. "Perhaps I will need your assistance," he said with a chagrined, half smile.

Instantly she was there to help him, lifting his arm over her shoulders so she could support some of his weight. She had expected his skin to burn her even through her light shirt, but he was only warm now. What was burning her was the hard masculine length of his body as Athair leaned against her. She helped him to the couch where he sank into it without a sound. For her own sanity, she gently pushed him horizontal and quickly pulled the afghan from the back of the couch to cover him.

With his most interesting, and obviously interested, parts out of sight, she asked, "Can I get you anything? Maybe a drink?"

She was relieved when he refused with a subtle shake of his head. Now she could escape to bed without worrying about him.

"I will be going to bed then." *Alone.* That had never bothered her in the past, but now the idea of lying in bed all by herself seemed empty and lonely.

"Good night, Hope." Athair watched her with a tired expression. He seemed to want to say more, but his exhaustion kept him silent.

She felt like she was betraying him by wanting to leave, which was ridiculous. She started to explain, "I need to put ice on my leg and get some rest before morning."

"Come here, closer to me. I can help your leg. You'll need no ice."

She went to the side of the couch, without knowing why. He was too weak to do anything for her. He couldn't even stand up on his own. "You're too weak to do anything."

"Oh, yes. I can do this." He placed his hand on her knee. The heat in his hand would have made her pull away, but he wouldn't let her. He held her still with a gentle iron grip. The heat didn't burn, but filled her knee and spread through her calf and thigh. After a moment, he dropped his hand and closed his eyes.

Hope suddenly realized he had used the last of his precious healing energy to heal her battered leg. He should have used it to heal himself.

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Why had he done this?

"What have you done?" Hope whispered. He was very weak now. Maybe he'd already drifted back to sleep.

I healed your leg, some. I am sorry I could not heal it properly.

"You shouldn't have done that much. You can't see yourself. You're too weak to even use your voice." His beautiful voice.

He did not disagree with her, but he did explain, *I can heal others much more easily than I can heal myself. Don't worry about my health. I only need to rest.* He sighed softly and his gray eyes slowly drifted shut.

She felt part of her mind relax with his sigh and she realized that part of him was with her. They were joined in some special way, allowing her to reach out and sense his presence even while he slept. She opened up to the sensation and felt him there, relaxed and content.

His healing heat didn't leave her leg as she had expected. Instead, it spread and evened out to warm her entire body. With the warmth came a tingling sensation that was at the same time relaxing and rather sensual.

Was that Athair's doing? He could do this to her body while he slept? What would he be like awake? Empathic. He had admitted to being able to control emotions. And the weather.

What else could he control?

She needed to put some space between them, to regain control over herself. She turned away from him and started for the door, but made it no farther than the hall before she *needed* to go back to him. To watch over him.

Was this her need, or his? Or maybe both? What had happened to her independent nature?

It was gone, and she didn't miss it all that much.

Athair might need her tonight so she would stay, but not without comfort. First, she locked up the house. Then she went to her bedroom, changed into a long nightshirt, and returned to the living room with a blanket and a pillow. She would spend the rest of the night on the loveseat across from him.

Restlessly, Hope thought about everything that had happened in the last two days. It had been Friday evening when she and Steve had

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found Athair. He had not awakened until Sunday morning. In a few more hours, she would have to leave him here while she went to work.

How was she going to deal with Steve? He had called her this afternoon about 'her wolf.' He wanted to come and take a picture of him to see if he had escaped from a zoo or sanctuary. Steve had done some checking around and found that there shouldn't be wolves in west central Pennsylvania. A few coyotes, but no confirmed sightings of wolves. She had put him off by saying she remembered hearing about a wolf release into the Allegheny National forest. Maybe she could convince Steve the wolf was gone. That he had escaped from her.

But then she would have to explain Athair, the man. Maybe Athair would at least show Steve that she didn't need help looking for a man. Then again, what was she going to tell Granny?

On that train of thought, she needed to find Athair some clothes. She had some old sweat-pants that might fit him. And one of her nightshirts, which were mostly just extra large T-shirts, might work. Anything to cover that body. The thought of *that* body led her mind in a much naughtier direction, like how she wanted to cross the room and touch him, to feel his strong muscles and run her fingers through his hair. Eventually her thoughts led to wild, exotic dreams.

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Chapter Thirteen

*Finding Strength
Changing Tides*

Hope, you must wake up. The voice drifted into her mind. It was soft, but insistently pulled her from sleep.

"Why?" she mumbled, without opening her eyes. She felt as if she had just fallen to sleep.

Because there is a man at your door. He is knocking and making a great deal of noise. She heard his laughter in her mind. I believe it is the same man who drove the wagon.

"Why are you not talking?" She was beginning to wake up, and she wasn't happy about what he was telling her. Athair knelt beside the loveseat, stroking her hair back from her face, his own face full of uncertainty.

I was not sure how much you want to tell the man.

She was completely awake now. She sat up. "Good point. And thank you for allowing me to make that choice." She could now hear Steve at the front door.

"Wake up, Hope! Did you sleep in again? Come on, open the door."

She definitely appreciated Athair's methods. It took a good bit of effort for her to remember that Steve was a good friend and not the complete nuisance he sounded like. Was he always that loud?

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She stood up and stretched, yelling to Steve, "I'm coming!"

Very nice. Athair's mind voice was laced with desire as his gaze scorched over her body. She saw appreciation in his eyes at the sight of her nightshirt bunched over her hips, baring her long legs.

Absolutely no one had ever looked at her, especially her scarred legs, with *that* kind of look. She pulled the blanket around her protectively and began moving toward the door. She pretended not to hear Athair's disgruntled sigh and, *Now, that was just cruel of you. Should he see me?*

"I don't suppose, at least not without clothes. Wait here," she said quietly.

She left him there, while she tried to think of some excuse to use to stall Steve. She opened the door to him without coming up with any good ideas. "Sorry. I slept in."

"You look like hell," he said bluntly. Athair's methods were definitely better, even if they did make her a tad bit uncomfortable.

"Thanks. Now, if you're through being an ass, you can make me some coffee." She did no more than motion toward the kitchen before she headed for her bedroom to get some clothes for Athair.

After finding sweats and a T-shirt that should fit him, she slipped back into the den. He sat on the loveseat, waiting. She handed him the clothes. "You don't mind wearing these, do you?"

Maybe I do mind. He gave her a grin and a wink. *But for you, I'll do anything.*

Oh no! The man had too much charm. He was in a playful mood and she was doomed. She refused to answer him before rushing back to the bedroom to get dressed.

Athair couldn't imagine why he felt the urge to tease her. He simply did. He got the impression that very few people ever teased her. If his gaze alone could make her blush, how would she react to his hands, or his lips?

He put on the pants she had given him and was pulling on the shirt when *Steve* stepped through the door. He seemed to struggle for words.

Athair wasn't sure how Hope wanted him to act around this man. It was possible she and Steve had a relationship. The thought of them

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together hit his gut like a blow. He finished pulling on the shirt and turned to face the other man.

"Hello," Athair said.

"Hello," Steve returned. He finally seemed to recover from his surprise at seeing Athair and held out his hand. "I'm Steve. I'm also sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you. I didn't know Hope was seeing anyone."

That answered Athair's question. Steve didn't sound jealous, just curious and maybe a bit concerned. He shook hands with the young man. "We haven't been seeing each other very long. I'm Athair. It's a pleasure to meet you. Hope has mentioned you a few times." He smiled, thinking Steve reminded him of one of the children. "Do I smell coffee?"

"Yes. I just put on a pot." He turned and headed toward the kitchen, where the coffee was almost done. Athair followed. Steve rummaged through the cabinets for mugs while Athair sat down and relaxed at the table.

Why did it bother him that Steve knew where Hope kept her mugs and sugar? He had no reason to be jealous. There was nothing between them, at least not yet. After he sorted out his problems with the Bear Clan, he intended to explore the possibility of a relationship with her.

Steve stared at him strangely. "You look familiar. Have we met?"

"I don't think so. I am not from around here."

"Do you know how Hope's wolf is?" Steve changed topics. "Last night, she told me he was recovering quickly." He paused. "I've been trying to find out where he came from. I don't think there should be any wolves in this area. He must have escaped from a sanctuary somewhere, but no one seems to be missing a wolf."

Hope, please hurry. I am not sure what you want me to say to Steve. He is asking about your wolf. He reached out to Hope, not sure if she could hear him in the other room.

I don't know what you should tell him. Maybe you should just go hang out in the kennel and look wolfy. She sounded exasperated and her words were accompanied by the image of her stepping naked under the spray of water. That visual left him hard, as well making it difficult for him to pay attention to Steve.

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He was pleased that she not only heard him, but that she had responded in the silent language. She was quick to accept him into her world. *Did I mention I like the idea of being your wolf?* He shared his sensual, possessive emotions with her along with his not so casual comment.

Just tell Steve the wolf got away, if you have to say anything. Hope's mental voice was firm and smooth as the slick soap he could almost feel sliding over her body.

I could always just bite him.

No! Don't you dare, she hissed at him. Minutes later, she came rushing through the door, her blond hair dark and damp. Steve still talked nonstop, even as he shoved a mug of coffee her way.

Does Steve ever stop talking?

"Sorry, Steve. We can go as soon as I wake Granny." She glared at Athair, who was trying to look innocent. *He only does this when he gets nervous. So quit making him nervous.* She sipped her coffee, and then blew across it as if trying to cool it enough to drink.

I guess I should be happy he can hold his bladder. That is how some animals show submission. Athair enjoyed their byplay immensely, and he was becoming aroused by the erotic look of Hope's pursed lips.

"Don't hurry too much," Steve said. "We still have a little time. I was just worried when the door was locked and you didn't answer." He poured two more mugs of coffee, adding a large amount of sugar to his. "I'll just drink a cup or two while you wake Granny and take care of the animals."

"I'll be ready sooner if Athair helps me." You should come with me so I can keep an eye on you.

"I'll be glad to help you," Athair said. He took one last drink of his coffee, and then stood to follow Hope. *I should be sorry I teased you. I would not hurt your friend.*

He nodded at Steve. "Thank you for the coffee."

Then he turned to Hope. *Do I get to meet Granny too?*

That brought fairy tales about Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf to Hope's mind.

Athair wound up tidying the den while Hope put out food for

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Granny's dog and cats. Taylor would still be with Granny and Hope had no idea where the cats were. Usually, they were all under foot while she fed them in the mornings. When she finished, she met Athair and took him to meet Granny.

They walked down the hall toward the back of the house. "Maybe I should introduce you. It would simplify the situation." She grinned over her shoulder at him. "And you did resist biting Steve."

"For that I deserve a better reward. That took a lot of restraint." His head dipped down and he brushed his lips over hers in the lightest of kisses. "Now, that is a fair trade which I would be willing to repeat."

His touch was brief, and her fingers rose to her lips to help her memorize the delicious contact. Her gaze locked on his grinning face and she laughed, finally understanding that he had a good sense of humor and would not be a threat to her friends and family. It was a sobering thought for her, to believe that he was a werewolf and yet still trusted him to be a good person, after having just met him. What would it all mean after he was gone? The possibility of losing him nearly stopped her heart.

"What is it that made you become so serious?" he asked.

"The ones hunting you." She replied simply. "I don't want to leave you here when I go to work."

"I am hardly a defenseless pup."

"I certainly hope not. I expect you to watch over Granny while you recover. I should be home around five tonight." She stopped in front of a set of double doors. "Granny has her own apartment through here. She is very independent, but I'm sure she would like to at least meet you." She knocked on the door and pushed it open.

"Granny?" She called out. "Are you up yet?" She motioned for Athair to wait outside the apartment while she entered. She had only gone a few steps when Granny came from the hallway carrying one of the cats.

"Good morning, Hope. Are you running late today?"

"Yes. Good morning Granny. I am running late, but wanted to introduce you to someone before I leave." Hope stepped back and opened the door wide, frowning when the cat hissed and jumped from Granny's arms. It dashed off to another room.

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She motioned toward Granny. "Athair, this is my grandmother, Ella. Granny, this is a friend of mine, Athair. He will be staying with me a few days."

Athair held out his hand in welcome. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Ella." When she placed her hand in his, he surprised both women by bending to gently kiss it in a most gallant, old-world way.

"Oh my. Sir, you may call me Granny if you like. Hope, you must marry him immediately."

Athair fell in love with Granny at that very moment. She was a tiny woman, with curling gray hair and a devilish twinkle in her eye. Athair smiled at Hope, then Granny. "I could not marry both of you. You have stolen my heart, young Miss Ella."

"Young indeed." Young Miss Ella thought this was the best laugh yet. "I just celebrated my eighty-seventh birthday."

Hope held back her own laughter at Athair's outlandish comments. *You are one of the few who would see her as young!* Then out loud she said, "Since you two are getting on so famously, I should get to work."

"I'll walk back with you." Athair said.

"Once you've seen her off, come back for a visit." Granny gave Athair's arm a pat while she smiled up at him.

"I'll do just that."

They had just turned the corner into the kitchen when Steve shot into the room from the other direction. "Hope, your wolf is gone!"

Hope looked at Athair. *What should we tell him?*

Athair arched a brow. Hope didn't seem to want to tell Steve the truth, which relieved him. Now they would just have to explain the absence of the wolf.

"Relax Steve," Athair said. "We took him to a sanctuary last night."

"Last night?"

"Yeah." Hope took over the lie, "Athair came by last night, and we drove the wolf to a vet clinic over to the east with more experience and access to a refuge. The drive took us most of the night, which is why we slept in."

"Oh." Steve seemed to believe their story, but he wouldn't let it

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rest. "So where's his car or truck?" He pointed a thumb at Athair.

Hope had no answer, so she grabbed Steve by the arm and dragged him toward the door.

"See you tonight, Athair!" she called over her shoulder, giving Steve no time to continue his interrogation. She gathered her jacket and purse and pushed Steve outside.

Athair's soft chuckle was a balm to her nerves. *You are very good at managing him.*

Thanks, but it will be a long, long day.

Hurry back, or I may run off with Ella.

I will hurry. Have Granny call me if you need anything. She has my number. I need to concentrate on Steve and find some way to distract him. He's ranting at me. Now that I think of it, he has some very valid points about you.

Just remember. If you want, I can still bite him.

I'll keep that in mind. She felt him stroke her cheek and then slip from her mind. It took a great deal of will power for her to turn her attention to Steve, who was still lecturing her on allowing strangers into her home, working with wild animals, and dating in general. It made her smile. Steve was a very good friend. Like a brother, he was trying to watch out for her in a sweet, but nosy sort of way.

* * * * *

"Come on Steve, Let's get out of here," Hope called to Steve, who was doing a last check on the animals in clinic. Her last appointment had left and the evening team had arrived.

The day had been just as long as she'd expected, and even more nerve racking. She was haunted by the need to return to Athair. She felt as though he was calling her to him, but was too far away to be heard. The feeling was so strong, she even called the house twice to be sure nothing had gone wrong.

Granny had answered her first call with a complaint that she had interrupted a serious game of blackjack. For the second call, Granny had passed the phone to Athair. His voice soothed her when he told her all

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was quiet and nothing was wrong. Granny was going to next teach him how to play some other card games. Hope offered to pick up some clothes for him on the way home. Now she wondered how she would explain that to Steve.

Steve met her at the back door with his coat. "You're in a hurry tonight. Anything to do with that tall, dark stranger being at your house, all alone with your defenseless old Granny?"

"No, but I want to make a stop before we leave town," she said as they reached the car.

"Sure. Where to?"

Trying to come up with a good reason to pick up clothes for Athair, she thought the best route would be to distract Steve. This time of day food would be the most reliable means of distraction. "I thought we could pick up dinner. You can join us if you want. You know, for my own safety. What do you think about subs?" What she really thought was that there was a department store next to the sub shop.

They reached the sandwich shop in no time. She slipped into acting mode. "Oh, I forgot. Granny asked me to pick up a sweater for her. Will you get the subs while I look for the one she mentioned?" Her lines weren't exactly Emmy award winning, but they were good enough. Steve agreed and she handed him some money for the food.

Hope raced through the store, having no real idea what she should buy. She settled on blue jeans, boxers, and T-shirts. She was in the check out line when she remembered socks and shoes. How odd. It seemed more natural for him to be barefoot.

She made it back to the car a moment after Steve.

"Looks like more than a sweater. How many bags do you have there?" He pestered her during the twenty minute drive back home. Her only response was to say she had gotten carried away when she spotted a sale.

As they neared her driveway, Hope suddenly had an overwhelming impression of dread. Something was terribly wrong. She looked around, but could see nothing out of place. Yet something was definitely not right. The feeling of being watched raised goosebumps on

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her flesh. But watched by whom? Or what? Had the ones hunting Athair found him already?

Athair? She called out, hoping he could hear her.

What's wrong?

She sighed with the reassuring contact. He would know instantly that she felt fear. *I don't know. I feel like someone is watching me. Have you seen anyone? I am almost to the house.*

Her nerves on edge, she gave Steve an unexpected request, "Drive all the way up to the steps, please." Her driveway went around the side of the house, which was where Steve usually parked. The grassy area to the left of the walk was level and would allow him to park directly beside the steps.

As he made the turn, she caught a movement in the bushes from the corner of her eye. Whatever it was, it was much too big to be one of the cats. She pretended to look the other way as she studied the bushes along the side of the house.

There it was again. A flash of dark fur. Then a pair of golden eyes. Especially scary, glowing eyes.

Yup. This was going to be a run-for-the-house kind of moment. A lucky-if-I-don't-wet-myself kind of dash.

"Steve, listen to me. We need to run to the house. Don't look, but there is something in the bushes over to the left. I think it's another wolf." She said this in a quiet, reasonably calm voice while screaming for Athair in her mind. *Please open the door. We are just outside.*

"Are you ready?" Steve asked. From his lack of chatter and his grim look, she knew he had seen something, too.

She gathered the bags at her feet and looked at Steve. "Yes. Go."

They sprang from the car and raced for the opening door. Although they only had to go a few steps, she suddenly knew she wouldn't reach the door in time. Even with the healing Athair had done to her leg, she wasn't much of a sprinter. She felt hot breath and a crushing weight throw her to the ground even as she heard Athair's bellowed, "No!"

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Chapter Fourteen

A choice of perception

A chance of redemption

Instantly, the weight was thrown from her as Athair shoved the wolf away and lifted her tenderly in his arms. *The wolf is Rath. Can we trust Steve?*

Completely, she told him. She clung to him and tried to get her breath.

"Rath, return to yourself." He gave the order when he saw Rath cornering Steve against the wall next to the door. Steve was so terrified by the stalking wolf that he didn't realize the door and its dubious safety was no more than a single step to his right.

Hope pulled herself from Athair's arms and watched Rath's form waver and grow into that of a man. A man easily described by the word *dark*. He trembled with barely suppressed rage. He had been a nearly black wolf. Now he was a man with dark hair and dark olive skin, dressed in black leather pants and a jacket. She wanted to ask Athair why Rath had clothes on after a change, but he didn't. She'd ask him later. For now, it was more important to get everyone calmed down and inside the house.

Athair took control of the situation by placing himself between Rath and Steve, who still cringed next to the wall in shocked silence. She felt Athair sending out calming, soothing waves as he spoke aloud. "Rath, I am very glad to see you are well."

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Quickly recovering from his speechlessness, Steve mumbled something that earned him threatening growls from both Rath and Athair. That was enough to send him scurrying into the house. Hope stepped inside ensure he was unhurt. Then she returned to the doorway.

Athair had moved close to Rath and held him by his muscular forearms. She suspected they were communicating silently, but she couldn't tell what about. She wondered if Rath was alone. "Athair, has Dàn come also?"

"Yes, Dàn is behind the house. He will join us directly."

"Would you like me to do something? Prepare some drinks, perhaps?" Hope asked. She was uncomfortable, but she wanted to help Athair, even if only by escaping to get refreshments. Anything to ease the tension in the air.

"Please, Hope. Coffee would be good. Will you take it to the back porch?"

She agreed and left them. After a slight, tense giggle, she thought, *At least they hadn't greeted each other by smelling butts.*

Athair restrained a smile at Hope's comment, and then focused his attention on Rath, who was still only barely in control of himself. Quietly, calmly, he asked, "What happened?"

Something had gone terribly wrong. Rath was usually very controlled and never acted violently, like he had reacted to Hope and Steve. "Please calm yourself and tell me of the last three days."

Rath took several deep breaths, as if gathering his thoughts. "The drobh attacked us as we made our escape through the forest." Drobh was a derogatory term for clan members that meant a vicious, uncivilized pack of animals. "They did not take us back to Lakeside. They attempted to force us to help them find you."

That puzzled Athair. "How would you know where I was?" It only took a moment for him to find the answer without a word from Rath. "Dàn?"

"Yes. But it was only an excuse to cause us pain." Rath looked defeated at his inability to protect his friend. "They hurt Dàn. He told them nothing." The last he said with pride.

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"Dàn is here, though? He does not answer my call."

"To my shame, I would have told them anything, just to make them stop."

Athair found that very hard to believe. Rath was a strong and determined young man with a rebellious nature. He would have resisted helping them simply because of their methods.

Rath continued, "I didn't know how to help him. Healing is not my strength and I was too weak. Dàn was changed by what they did."

"How did you get away?"

"Sgrios." Rath said with a satisfied snarl. "He tore the cowards apart, helped us get away, and started Dàn's healing. Sgrios is very powerful." His expression softened. "Dàn comes."

As he said this, Dàn edged around the corner of the house. His lean body was obviously still in great pain. He moved with deliberate care. His face was pale, and all his visible skin showed a roadmap of faint white lines from his recently healed wounds.

Even more startling was the crackling emanations of power that wavered over him, and hints of an odd red haze. Athair had rarely seen this before and was not encouraged. His people were always struggling to maintain a delicate balance between their natural and supernatural elements. In theory, any outside trauma could throw off that equilibrium with disastrous results. If the trauma was great enough, it was thought that the resulting imbalance could literally destroy an individual, not to mention a large portion of the surrounding area. While Athair knew he could continue the healing of Dàn's body, he suspected that he could do little for the young man's magical instability.

When Athair would have gone to him, Dàn held out a hand to stop him. "I am fine," he said quietly. He would not step any closer or meet Athair's questioning gaze. "I would like to meet Hope."

He waited at the corner while Athair and Rath walked past him and started around the side of the house. Dàn followed them at a slight distance.

They did not talk while walking to the rear porch, yet they accepted the strength that came from being together. It was a sharing of magic that

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could, to a certain extent, provide strength and healing to one, without taking from the others. It soothed each of them. And it went a long way to calming Rath. To a smaller degree, it helped Dàn maintain control over his wild magic.

As they came into sight of the porch, Steve jumped up and moved back into the kitchen. Athair worried that Steve would never get past his fear of Rath and their people to ever trust any of them. That could make him dangerous, despite Hope's assurances.

She waited for them with a tray holding the coffee cups. After setting down the tray, she bravely faced Rath and held out her hand in welcome. "Hello, Rath. I'm Hope. Athair has mentioned you."

Rath stared at her hand for a moment, and then met her gaze. His golden brown eyes were a strange combination of fierceness and warmth. His body was mostly relaxed, yet he vibrated with restrained emotion. He enclosed her small hand in his larger one.

"Hello, Hope," he said in a resonant tone that slipped through her, accepting and welcoming her. But overall, he frightened the daylights out of her, because he seemed on the verge of losing control.

Hope gently pulled her hand away and stepped to Athair's side. Not understanding her response to Rath or his intentions, she sought the Athair's comfort. *Athair?*

He didn't answer her, but simply placed his arm around her shoulders in a supportive, or perhaps possessive, gesture. And he might have he said something directly to Rath in their silent language, because Rath nodded at her with a humorless smile.

It was hard for Hope to see the intimidating man as Athair's adopted son. Athair was warm and friendly, while Rath was hostile and abrasive. And when it came to age, Athair looked more like an older brother with only a few years separating them.

Athair drew her attention to Dàn, who stood at the base of the steps not quite within the light from the kitchen. "Dàn, please come meet Hope. She is the only reason I live."

Stepping into the circle of light, Dàn said, "Thank you. Your courage and actions may yet save us all."

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At the sight of his appalling injuries, Hope felt an overwhelming need to comfort the young man. She knew he had suffered such injuries protecting Athair. He was tall, but slightly built, compared to Athair and Rath. He seemed much younger and more vulnerable than the others, even though she knew he was only a year younger than Rath. He shouldn't have to carry his burden alone. Hope left Athair's side and reached up to cup Dàn's face in her palm.

Athair gripped her arm and pulled back her hand at the same time Dàn flinched as if burned by her touch.

"No..." Dàn moaned, in a pain filled voice.

She watched as the red mist around him thickened and swirled over the skin of his arms, throat, and face. His image fluttered. With each flicker, a strong shock wave of energy rolled off him and vibrated through the others. Each wave raised their hair, caused their muscles to tense, and their skin to tingle. Dàn's body stiffened and his vivid blue eyes rolled back in his head. The mist swirled in agitation, shooting tiny sparks in every direction. His shoulders trembled violently. Then, soft as a sigh, Dàn collapsed, his body seeming to simply fold in upon itself.

Before he touched the ground, Rath leapt to his side and caught him. With an agonized growl, Rath carried Dàn tenderly to the padded bench against the wall of the porch. Athair and Hope hurried to assist him, but stopped short when Rath ordered them to stay back.

"We cannot help him with this." Rath explained, as he held out his arms showing horrendous burns where he had held Dàn.

"He will not allow even you to touch him," he said to Athair.

"Perhaps the healing ritual—" Athair began. Maybe he could do little for Dàn, but he could help Rath. He reached for one of Rath's arms and began healing his burns.

"No ritual." Dàn said from his prostrate position.

"He fears the ceremonies will cause further instability," Rath said. "The healing that Sgrios started was done while he was still unconscious. He believes his trauma has begun some sort of change in him." With a half-hearted smile at Dàn, he said, "And we know how weird he was to begin with."

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Dàn gave a slight nod and opened his eyes. Hope gasped at their strange new appearance. They were now an iridescent, sparkling blue. Still vivid in color, but almost pulsing as if the previously fluctuating power was now contained within them. It was a relief to all when he let his eyes drift closed again.

Regretting her impulsive act, Hope told him quietly, "I'm sorry. I only thought to comfort you."

"Please save your healing touch," he said, his voice becoming slightly stronger. "My injuries are from within, and from within they must be healed. If they can at all."

"I don't have any magic," she said.

"You do not yet know what you can do. But in time, your strength will grow."

His response confused her. She didn't have any magic, regardless of what had happened during Athair's healing ceremony. What had he meant by saying his injuries were from within? Had he done all that damage himself? Surely not. She thought others had hurt him. In his own way he was much, much scarier than Rath.

She needed to regroup and check on Steve. "Athair, I'm going to see how Steve is holding up. Call me if you need anything."

As she entered the kitchen, she thought about what had just happened on her porch. What had she just seen? What were these people? How was she supposed to deal with this? She had given up the promising excuse that she'd lost her marbles after last night's ceremony. So this must be real. Weird, but real. Really, really weird.

How was she going to explain this to Steve? She didn't understand any of it herself.

Okay. They were werewolves. But not like in the movies. Not dangerous.

It might be a little hard to convince Steve that they weren't dangerous after having one of them attack him. Which meant they were dangerous, but only when trying to protect each other. That might be a good spin for the story. Werewolves with morals.

She decided she'd better not mention their true ages, or the whole

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thing with Dàn going all nuclear on the porch. It would definitely be better for her to start with small details. She would help Steve learn about them one step at a time. It would be easier that way, to start with less of the *scare the snot out of you* information. More of the *they're just like us* type. If she could convince Steve they were good guys after what he'd seen, she might have to start a career in politics.

Steve wasn't in the kitchen, the living room, the den, or the bathroom. Where was he?

Aha. Voices could be heard in Granny's apartment. Steve was talking, and he sounded stressed. Way stressed, and with very good reason.

There were three werewolves hanging out on her back porch.

So maybe the direct approach wouldn't be best. She knocked lightly and opened the door.

"Hi, Steve." She smiled at him, and then turned to her grandmother. She kissed Granny on the cheek like she always did, as though the world were the same today as it was yesterday. "How was your day, Granny?"

"Very nice. Athair is such good company, even if he didn't know any card games. I tried to talk him into strip poker, but he said he wouldn't play until he knew the rules better." Granny shared with them a look that was the next thing to a leer.

Steve stared at them like they were two nuts from the same tree. Then he turned to Hope and confronted her. "Athair is a werewolf."

Okay then, he wanted it direct. "Yes," she said.

Steve continued with an accusing tone, "He's the wolf, isn't he? The one we hit with the car and patched up?"

"Yes."

"Who's the other one?" Steve glance darted to the door. "One of his friends?"

"Sort of. It's his adopted son, Rath." Should she mention Dàn? No. Not yet.

"Wrath. Good name! I can sure picture him on a vengeful rampage," Steve ranted. "So the wolf, I mean Athair, is already healed?"

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He probably didn't need us to do anything. Did he?"

"He would have died without our help, and he's not completely healed." At least she got that impression.

"They can be killed, then?" he asked with a hopeful look.

Granny interrupted him with a snort, "Why would you want to do that? Steve, it isn't like you to want to harm anyone. Athair makes such a nice man. So what if he howls at the moon now and again?"

Hope thought that might be oversimplifying the matter, but she was glad for any reinforcement to fight Steve's fear. Maybe she should try another path. "I'm glad you know now. I hated keeping the truth from you."

"At least there are only two of them. We should be able to get away from them."

"Steve, Athair and his sons are my guests. Athair has not tried to hurt me or Granny. And Rath had his reasons for what he did."

"What reasons?" Steve challenged. His eyes widened and he added, "Sons?"

In for a penny, in for a pound. She might as well explain it all. Or as much as she had figured out, anyway. "Rath and Dàn were tortured. They were trying to find Athair, and Rath was worried that we had hurt him."

"Who is Dàn?" Granny asked with interest.

"Another of Athair's adopted sons," Hope answered.

"How many does he have?" Steve shouted.

"He told me that he and his brothers raised eleven children after their parents were murdered. I suppose some of them would be girls, though," she answered honestly.

"Oh!" Granny said as she sank into the nearest chair.

"It's a shame they weren't all killed," Steve said.

Granny exclaimed, "What awful people would do such a thing to poor little ones?"

"Poor little ones, indeed. Ella, they're werewolves!" Steve complained loudly.

"Children are children." Granny said stoutly. Hope could have told Steve to not waste his breath. The protection of children would not be

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anything less than a priority to Granny. The protection of animals would fall no lower than second. Athair and his children apparently qualified on both counts. It was quite a relief that Granny had accepted this so easily. A relief, and more than a little suspicious. Hope wondered if Athair had told her any of this during their day together.

“Except these children come in litters and see us humans as snacks.”

Hope started to reply, but stopped when Athair opened the door.

Granny immediately smiled a welcome to him, “Come in Athair. We were just talking about you and yours.”

He managed a half smile in return, and then spoke to Hope. “Steve must stay inside the house, and you probably should also. My brother comes.”

Steve jumped up. “See, Hope! We’re prisoners. Hell, we’re probably their buffet!”

Athair looked like he had finally had enough of Steve’s nonsense. Hope ignored Steve’s comment and asked, “Which brother?”

“Sgrios.” he answered Hope in a grim tone. In response to Steve’s opening mouth, he growled at him, “He makes Rath look like the overgrown pup he is. You will stay inside, out of Sgrios’ path, or I will not be held responsible for your death.”

With a silent, *I am sorry for all this. Rath is much calmer now. They had tortured Dàn in front of him*, to Hope and an invisible caress to her cheek, Athair left.

Steve continued to sputter incoherently.

Hope knew from what Athair had told her about Sgrios that his coming to her house would not improve the situation. She also knew that the threat to Steve would be certain if she couldn’t convince him to keep his mouth shut. He could irritate even a saint. And by all accounts, Sgrios was far from attaining sainthood.

Grabbing Steve’s arm in a determined grip, she pulled him onto the sofa across from Granny for a serious, down-and-dirty, time-for-the-truth, talk. “Steve, you need to listen to me about this. They are good people, but very different.” Before he could interrupt her, she went on to tell him

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nearly everything she knew about Athair and his family, describing Sgrios as a crazy uncle, pointing out that all families have their crazies. Athair's just had bigger teeth and a shorter temper.

Hope watched Steve as he began to relax and finally got himself under control. He asked, "So we can leave now if we want to?"

He would pick that question. "I think you could, but it probably isn't a good idea right now."

"Why?"

"Because, the evil, um, people that are searching for them wouldn't hesitate to hurt us or anyone else to get to them."

"Couldn't we just give them up?"

"I suppose we could, but I won't do it. I don't want Athair or his family hurt any more than they already have been."

During all this, Granny listened from a chair across from them.

Hope continued, "You saw what they did to Athair. They did even worse than that to young Dàn." At Steve's somewhat compassionate expression, she was encouraged. "Dàn was tied, drugged, and tortured in front of Rath. So you can see why he was so violent. We all have limits when we have been pushed too far. He has reached his."

"Even you can understand that." Granny added.

Steve still looked skeptical, but he no longer appeared terrified.

Granny brought up the part that Hope had been planning to skip. "Besides, you now know enough to be dangerous to them. I'm quite sure they won't allow you to ever be a threat."

After dropping that bombshell, she turned to Hope. "I think Steve needs some time to sort this out. And I would like to meet the young ones before Athair's brother, the Big Bad Wolf, gets here." With that she stood and left, not waiting for Hope and Steve to follow her.

Hope did. Steve of course, did not.

She and Granny went to the back porch where the three men stood in the shadows, talking. Granny walked directly to Athair's side and put a fragile looking hand on his arm, effectively interrupting his quiet conversation.

"Ella, you shouldn't be out here," he chided with a worried frown

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toward the forest.

"I wanted to meet your boys before your brother arrives." She smiled at him. "And I would like to also meet him. I am much too old to be banished to the house like a child."

"I believe you are about to get your wish, since he is coming across the field now," Dàn said without opening his eyes. He sat on the bench leaning against its back. He looked tired, but at least that strange mist was gone.

"I presume you must be Dàn." Granny smiled. "I'm Hope's grandmother, Ella. You may call me either Granny or Ella."

Dàn opened his extraordinary eyes to study Ella for several long, silent moments. She was tiny and frail, but her eyes sparkled with wisdom, strength, and laughter.

"You are not what I expected," he said.

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Chapter Fifteen

Honor of a Man
Within the Beast

"I don't suppose I am what you expected, but nevertheless I am here," Granny said. "You obviously know who I am. I believe you always perceive more than others."

"I see more than I wish to, but never enough to answer my own questions. I'm very glad to finally meet you, Keeper. I have many questions you may be able to help me with."

Hope was distracted from this very puzzling dialog when a wolf suddenly stalked around the corner. She assumed this was Sgrios in his wolf form. He stopped at the edge of the light.

He was a very intimidating, solid black wolf. His large, lean, muscular body marked him as the hunter that he was. Very few animals in the world could defeat him in a fair fight. Yet she had the feeling that he would never choose to fight fair.

Fear swelled inside her at the familiar sight of him. He looked like the one who had attacked her. She remembered his thick black fur and that glittering green stare.

How cruel to Athair to have this between them. A sob caught in Hope's throat. How cruel to her. She knew he would be loyal to his family before all others. But how could he leave a brother loose to hunt and kill humans? And how were the other three men? Were they also from his

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family, possibly his children? Would he be forced into the role of a Shadomàn, forced to kill ones he loved? Or worse yet, would he be killed by Sgrios?

Hope tuned out the conversation going on around her. Maybe she could hide the truth from Athair. Maybe there were good reasons for the woman's murder and her attack. If she said nothing, would Sgrios even recognize her?

She feared that any choice she made would be wrong in some way. She needed to share this burden. She reached out her mind to Athair.

Sgrios is here.

Athair turned to face the newcomer and placed a possessive hand on Hope's hip, pulling her against his warm side.

Sgrios changed to human form with a short surge of bluish light and was no less intimidating as a man. He had long black hair and flashing dark green eyes. He too changed with clothes. He wore black leather pants and boots, but no shirt. There were two deadly looking knives with unusual blades belted at his waist, within easy reach.

He might have been extremely attractive except that his muscular body was covered in vicious scars and one scar ran diagonally across the right side of face, marring his hard features.

"Sgrios," Athair said in a way that seemed both a cautious welcome and a warning.

"Relax, Brother. I won't eat the humans."

Granny laughed at that, but no one else seemed to find it the least bit humorous.

Hope wondered just how bad he could be. He certainly looked scary enough to be the cold-blooded killer she thought he was. What if he recognized her and became violent? She stepped back, putting Athair between her and the dangerous man, hoping to put off any confrontation for now.

Sgrios matched Athair's glare. "I wanted to see you before I returned to the teaghlach with Reultan and Díon. Dàn and Rath may travel with us if they wish." He seemed to think that Athair would be staying put.

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Dàn spoke up. "I would like to stay here too, if possible." He looked questioningly at Granny.

"Of course you may stay, child," she answered quietly with a gentle look to Dàn. She then continued to the whole group. "You may all stay here under my protection for the night. Young Dàn may stay on as long as he wishes."

"Thank you, Keeper," Dàn said.

Hope's was not the only jaw that dropped at the total insanity of the tiny woman offering to protect four grown men, let alone four werewolves. What was going on between Granny and Dàn? He seemed to be the only one unsurprised by her offer. This situation was way beyond strange. Their entire conversation made no sense to Hope. She wrinkled her brow.

"What's going on here? What exactly is a keeper?" The questions rushed from Hope, despite her intentions to avoid drawing attention to herself. "Who are Díon and the other one?"

"Díon and Reultan are two of us who were hunting with Sgrios," Athair said. "The rest will have to come from Ella, or perhaps Dàn."

After this statement, Granny took control. She didn't answer Hope's questions, but she started directing everyone, explaining only that she would tell all as soon as she could.

First, Granny *told* Sgrios to take Rath to check the area and collect Díon and Reultan.

"What the F—" he started to growl a vicious retort, but after a startled look from Granny to Dàn, motioned for Rath to follow him and the two immediately left. Perhaps Dàn held some control over Sgrios? If so, would they be safe with him? Hope instinctively trusted Athair and Dàn to protect her from any danger. Even crazy, homicidal Uncle Sgrios.

Then Granny directed Athair to set up somewhere for them to eat, either on the spacious porch or out in the yard.

Next, Granny announced that she and Hope would start dinner, so they could all sit and talk while eating. In total confusion, Hope obediently followed her suddenly mysterious grandmother into the kitchen to put together a meal for nine, including six werewolves.

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Granny turned to her. "Why don't you cut the sandwiches you bought, and I can heat up some vegetables to go with them?"

"Why don't you tell me what all that was about?" Hope countered, while she began unwrapping and cutting the sandwiches.

Granny sighed deeply and started the vegetables heating on the stove. Then she filled two mugs with coffee and sat down at the table. "Please sit with me, and I'll tell you a story I should have forced you to hear a long time ago."

Hope set aside her knife and sat down across from her, waiting for her to continue.

"First, you must understand that there are many kinds of people. I know you have accepted Athair and his kind, but there are also many others. Some are like us, and some are very different. Many of the so called myths are actually based on truth, or parts of the truth."

"Near the beginning, when magic was part of life, some of the people were different. They were stronger, with godlike powers. Yet regardless of their strengths or weaknesses, they were still people. Some were good, some bad. One group, the giants, had enormous physical strength and practiced some magic. Others had beauty and more power in their magic. There were wars and fights between people and between the groups. Eventually, humans became involved. They tended to think of the first group as monsters and the second as gods, but that was not exactly true. To help end the wars, the two main groups agreed to exchange ambassadors."

She cleared her throat, and then continued. "The giant who joined the gods was named Loki, who became blood brother to one of the stronger gods. He had several children by three very different women and eventually his nature caused him to fall into disfavor. Loki was captured and imprisoned by the other gods. When Loki was caught, two of his sons, Vali and Narvi, tried to protect him. The gods changed Vali into a wolf and forced him to kill his own brother to prevent Loki's escape." She paused.

Hope opened her eyes wide. "Go on."

"Athair's people, the clans of the Valàfrn, are the descendants of

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Vali. The gods feared Loki's children so much they placed curses on them to prevent them from ever coming to full strength. Vali's curse was for him and his children to constantly struggle against their animal natures. Among other things, Vali could only take human form during the three nights of a full moon. He could not face his own children having the same fate and spent centuries searching for ways to allow them to have relatively normal lives. Vali found that through sorcery and magic, his children could become shape changers. In this way, they would gain control over their physical form. So you see, they are not really werewolves, but more like shape shifters with the base form of the wolf."

Hope stared at her in awe.

Ella stood up to check the food and asked, "Any questions?"

"Only about a million," she mumbled. It all sounded like a fairy tale to Hope, but now was as good a time as any to get answers from her surprising Granny. "How do you know all this? And why does Dàn call you Keeper?"

Granny continued to stir the vegetables, slowly adding seasoning. Then finally, she answered Hope without turning to face her. "Vali's mother, Sigyn, asked her stepdaughters to help protect the children of Vali. The younger one, Eisa, agreed. Eisa became the first Keeper of records. After she died, her daughter became Keeper. I and therefore, you, are descended from Loki's mortal daughter, Eisa." She turned to catch Hope's gaze, but didn't stop at her incredulous look. "One woman in each generation of our family is given the responsibility of Keeper."

"So you really are this Keeper?"

"Yes and you will take over for me when I die." Granny held her gaze, as if trying to force Hope to accept her far-fetched story as reality.

"I already have a job, remember?"

"Then you will have two. You have to accept this. We are the Keepers of knowledge for the children of Vali. We were given a few gifts to help us, including memory, healing, and protection. They really do need us." She stepped close to Hope and caught her chin in a gentle grip. "Have you never wondered why you are so drawn to animals? Why you can save more hard-luck cases at the clinic than any other vet? Or why

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you have a perfect memory for all those medical texts? You are strong so that you can fulfill the role for which you were born."

"Why didn't you tell me all this sooner?" She almost choked on the strangeness of what Granny expected her to blithely accept.

"I wanted to, and I should have. At first your mother wanted you to be raised without knowing. That's why she moved away when you were born. She promised to move back and teach you what to expect when you graduated from high school. Then after the accident, you were so fragile. I wanted to wait until you were stronger."

"Is anyone ever strong enough for that kind of knowledge?"

"Perhaps not. Do you remember the healers I asked to come see you?"

"The doctors and shrinks?"

"No, the ones who came here to see you. The healers. They were Valàfrn. You reacted by ignoring them and rejecting their help. You reacted so strongly that I stopped asking them to come. I had no idea how to make you accept their presence long enough to tell you the truth. After a time, I stopped trying. I am sorry for that weakness now."

"Granny—" Hope halted. She hesitated to bring up the attack, but knew it was time to be honest. "Do Keepers act like a magnet to them?"

"What do you mean?"

"Would any of Athair's kind have reason to hurt you or me because you are Keeper?"

"No. They are forbidden to harm us. The guilty are punished with exile, or worse. And even without punishment, they risk their crime being recorded among the Keeper records for all time. Why do you ask?"

"I believe that when I was attacked a month ago, it was by one of them."

"Impossible." Granny stirred the vegetables hard enough to splatter several pieces onto the stove top. "Is that why you've been acting so strangely? I want you to tell me everything so we can find the one guilty of this atrocity."

"I think it was Sgrios."

"No. It couldn't have been. Although, he does seem to be at the

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brink of insanity." She froze for a long moment, seemingly lost in thought. "I doubt he would do such a thing. Being without a clan is a fate worse than death, even for one such as him."

"Could he just not know? After all, even Athair didn't remember the Keepers of before. How does Dàn know about you when the others don't seem to?"

"Dàn is not like the others. He is something much more."

"How do you know this?" she asked in frustration.

"The Keeper holds and adds to the records about the Valàfrn. It's our primary duty. I have the written account of the village in Ireland, and the tragedy that happened there, Granny said. "I also have family trees and biographies of most from that time. The official record of his birth was vague and said nothing of his father, but the Keeper of the time had a few rather terrifying suspicions."

"As for why the others of his clan don't remember the Keepers, I don't know for sure. I think it must be because the elders were killed in the massacre. The Keepers of those times didn't live in their village and usually only worked with the elders or through a kind of courier system. The Keepers weren't able to travel far, so they often only met with the different clans at council gatherings. Now it is much easier. I have stayed in touch with most of the other clans."

In silence, they both finished preparing the food. Hope tried not to think about what she learned. As far-fetched as it was, the idea that Athair was not really a werewolf but instead was part of a cursed family was rather appealing. Those thoughts also led to the topic of his magic. She wondered what else he could do or change into. Now, that was something to think about.

But what about Sgrios? What if he was her attacker? Was he still a danger? What could be done to stop him? She turned. "Granny?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"What is the penalty for one that hunts humans?"

"It depends on the situation. The Council will have to be called to discuss the problem and determine a punishment."

"The council?"

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"There are many clans scattered around the world. Each Alpha Pair holds a position on the ruling Council. Together they decide what is best for the clans as a whole. In the past, a gathering was held every ten years or so. Now with modern technology and the ease of travel, the gathering of the Council happens only when needed."

Dàn slid open the door and stepped quietly inside. "Athair has the table set up and the others will be back soon. Can I help you with anything?"

"No, Dàn, but do come in. You should be resting. Let me get you a cup of soothing tea." Ella turned to the corner cupboard and retrieved the makings for an herbal tea which she fixed and set before Dàn on the counter.

"Thank you." Still standing near the door, Dàn slowly sipped at the tea.

"You're welcome. It may help you recover some of your balance."

Several minutes went by as he drank. "I would like to learn more about—" he hesitated. "Well, certain things. Will you let me look at the Keeper records?"

"You may look at all but the private journals. And I will tell you what I can from those. Together, we may find some answers about you."

He nodded in response. Whatever was bothering him, he didn't seem very hopeful that the Keeper's records would be of any help.

Soon the light dinner was ready to serve. As Granny and Hope started outside, Granny cautioned Hope. "Hand the second platter to Dàn, but be careful to not touch him just yet."

Athair had found and set up a couple of folding tables and had arranged the porch chairs and benches around them. While Hope went to get Steve, the others set the table and filled the plates with food.

Steve promised to keep an open mind, yet not open his mouth during the meal. Regardless of Sgrios' promise to not eat anyone, she figured he was capable of causing Steve a lot of pain.

Sgrios, Rath and the others joined them. Sgrios did not so much as glance at Steve, who sat at Hope's right. Rath quietly spoke to Athair for a moment, and then they all gathered at the table. Granny blessed the meal

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before they began to eat. Granny talked quietly with Athair and Sgrios. Hope thought that they were discussing what had happened to his people in the last couple of centuries. She was disappointed that she couldn't hear the history lesson clearly.

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Chapter Sixteen

New Beginning
Constance of the Tides

Hope was pleasantly surprised that their meal was finished without bloodshed or even any unpleasantness. Granny invited everyone back into the house to relax and spend the night. Sgrios politely declined, but said he might drop by later. He wanted to keep watch for a while longer. Hope suspected this was due more to his antisocial personality than out of any real concern for their safety.

Dàn was anxious to look at the Keeper records and as promised, Granny took him back to her apartment to look through the books. Hope figured they'd stay in there studying the ancient books for most of the evening.

While with Granny earlier, Athair had watched television, and thought the others might like to watch it for the evening.

In a moment of generosity, Steve offered, "I'll show them how to work the remote and which channels are best." Rath, Díon, and Reultan followed him into the living room. A few moments later, the TV blared as Steve began to channel surf looking for something to interest the younger werewolves.

A football game. News. A commercial. Wheel of Fortune. Someone whistled. It was probably Steve, who was in love with Vanna. Another commercial. Weather. Someone scoffed at that. Steve asked what was

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funny, and Hope heard Rath answer, but couldn't make out what he said. He was probably explaining his ability to control the weather.

"No way. You've gotta be kidding me."

"I'm serious," Rath answered in his deep voice. Then he gave what might have been a short chuckle.

"That's totally cool." Steve laughed. "Maybe we can go to some ball games. If our team isn't winning, you can rain it out."

The jovial tone of their conversation must have relieved Athair, and he said as much to Hope. "I am very glad to see Steve has decided to accept us."

"He really is a good person."

"I wanted to believe you, but I couldn't knowingly allow him or anyone to be a threat to my clan." He said this, and she knew that he would kill if necessary to protect his family. But he truly hoped it would never come to that.

"I'll be sure he never becomes a threat," she said. She understood him completely.

Athair wanted to change to a less grim topic of conversation. So he urged her to sit down beside him at the table and asked, "Will you tell me about your work?"

"I am a veterinarian."

"I know. You're a good one." He said with a grin. He wanted to know everything about her. What was it about her that drew him like no other woman ever had? He reached over and clasped her hand gently. "Is that what you always wanted to do?"

"For as long as I can remember. My parents wanted me to be a doctor, but I think animals are more worthy than most people."

"I agree." He paused, wondering what had made her lose her faith in people. But instead of questioning her about that, he asked about the clinic portion of the house. "Why do you have the equipment here at home?"

"I am planning to open an animal hospital here. I know it must seem cowardly, but I can't face the ride back and forth to town every day. Once I open, I won't have to travel. And besides, the small towns nearby

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can use a local vet. But now —”

“Now what?”

“Now, with what Granny told me before dinner, I don’t know what I should do. She told me I’m supposed to be the next Keeper and that I don’t even have a choice in the matter.”

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. “I don’t know much about what the position will demand from you, but I would think that if you want to have the hospital here, you can.” The feel of her slight tremble awoke his protective instincts. Somehow, he wanted to be part of her life here. Then he could give her what she needed and help her do what she had to do. In the old days, he would have spoken to her family. Perhaps he should speak with Ella before expressing any intentions to Hope. But one look into her soft eyes, and he knew that no matter what Ella said, he would pursue Hope and claim her. He brushed a loose tendril of hair back from her face.

“I guess I’ll just continue with the plans for the clinic until I figure out exactly what it means to be Keeper for the clans.”

“I suppose that is a good plan. Will Steve be working with you?” he asked, wondering just how close they were. Even if they were only friends now, would Steve have better appeal as a mate because of his humanity?

“He offered.”

“So will you be partners?” The thought of the two of them working together every day, sharing everything and relying on each other was enough to tighten Athair’s gut. He couldn’t let it happen. Not if he could help it. Even logically knowing there was no more than friendship between Hope and Steve, he had to tamp down a surge of jealousy from his more wolfish side.

“Probably not. I don’t think Steve wants the responsibility of being a full partner. He has offered to continue as my assistant.” She changed the subject on him. “You seem much better now. Does it help having the others here?”

“Yes. I am almost completely healed now. Sgrios is our strongest healer. He will be able to complete the healing if he is willing.”

“If he is such a strong a healer, why are his scars so awful?”

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"He chooses to not heal them. He will always appear as damaged as he feels." Athair stroked her palm in rhythmic circles. Each touch was both tender and sensuous. She placed her other hand over his wrist and returned his caress. Her touch fanned his desire, sending his pulse jumping out of control.

He wanted nothing more than to carry her off to her bed and claim her for his own. No, the wolf might demand possession but the man needed much more. He needed to do more than simply breed, needed more than just a quick sexual release. He wanted her for his mate. He'd never felt that before. Athair hadn't yearned so strongly for a woman's touch in centuries.

Truthfully, he had yearned. Just never enough to risk his family to search for a convenient body. This was so much more. He needed to touch her, to bring her pleasure. He stared into her eyes. Did she want him, too?

Emotion welled up inside him. He wanted her. He wanted her heart. He wanted her children. But right now, he'd settle for her hands and lips. He turned his hand over to grip hers, and sparks shot between their fingers like static electricity.

"Oh!" Obviously startled, Hope jerked her hand away.

"Oops," he said with a wry grin. "That sometimes happens when I get... excited."

"Is that what you are? Excited?" Her voice faltered, but her gaze met his with her own demands.

"Very," he answered honestly. "I want to make love with you. Now. And perhaps all night long." Perhaps for eternity.

"What will the others say?"

"Lucky devil." He used his empathy to share his desire with her and be sure that this was also what she wanted. She trembled under his touch. Her emotions roiled with the hot intensity of their shared, overwhelming need. Perhaps letting her experience his desire was not playing fair, but the evidence of her need let him shed any feelings of guilt.

He stood and gently tugged her to her feet. When she offered no objection, he led her from the kitchen. Her acceptance washed over him,

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gentling the desire for conquest into something much more heartfelt. He stopped her outside her bedroom door and asked one simple, silent question. *Are you sure you want this?*

Yes, she whispered in his mind, as soft and inviting as the fingertips she brushed over his lips. She opened the bedroom door and led him inside.

He pushed the door closed and pulled her into his arms, nuzzling her neck and nibbling with his teeth and tongue. Her hands slipped under his T-shirt and caressed his chest. His body hardened painfully at her loving touch. She nipped and suckled his earlobe until she was rewarded with his low growl.

He wanted to feel all of her. He slid off her blouse and cupped her breasts through her lacy bra. Then he unfastened her slacks and eased them and her panties over her hips, letting them fall at her feet. He fumbled a moment with the fasteners of her bra before sweeping her into his arms and carrying her to the bed.

He removed his clothes and joined her on the bed. His intense gaze burned her already flushed body. She was beautiful, with long slender limbs and soft creamy skin. He stroked his hands over her flesh with reverence, with the strength of the emotions for her were so intense he was left weak, catching his breath with her every small reaction.

In all his life he had never experienced such anticipation, fear, and longing all at once. It was as if the world had conspired to lead him to this moment, to offer him this precious joy. He would do anything within his power to bring her pleasure and happiness, to share the perfection with her.

His touch burned and soothed as he offered her his healing caress. His hands focused on what remained of her long ago injuries, taking away her scars and pain and giving her his strength. His kiss followed where his hands led, though not always over scarred flesh. He started on her scarred left leg, stroking, nuzzling, and nipping his way up her thigh. Although her musky scent beckoned, he moved to her right leg to repeat his ministrations until he was again back at her essence, which was swollen and moist with need. A few teasing licks, and he continued his

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dedicated healing until there was no pain anywhere in her body. In its place was fierce, demanding pleasure.

His own body cried for release as he knelt between her thighs, never stopping his endless feast of touching and tasting. He accepted her kisses and touches in return, guiding her tentative hands to explore his hard, aching body. Almost beyond endurance after only a few hesitant strokes, he rumbled deep in his chest and lifted her hands away.

Unable to wait any longer, he lifted her hips and slid into her inviting warmth. Their joining gave him unimaginable pleasure. A world of feeling, like home. Love. Tears formed in his eyes. He held her close for several long seconds before he began to move again. He slowly withdrew, and then entered her deeply, building their pleasure with a controlled rhythm. He had intended to take his time loving with her, but her passionate response all but drove him wild. She wrapped her legs around him and he reveled in each stroke. She cried out as her muscles clenched at him, pulling him to a faster pace. The room shook as they both reached a blinding climax.

They lay together afterwards, with his arms still wrapped around her and her thighs holding him. He shifted slightly to ease his weight from her after they had regained their breath. She brushed the long hair back from his face. Neither spoke to break the peaceful mood.

Hope came back to herself slowly. She was almost, but not quite, shocked by her powerful reaction to him. Still, how would she face the others after having crept off to have sex like rebellious teenagers?

"Lucky devil, indeed," she said, teasing him, "What did you do to make me act so indecent? I won't ever be able to face the others." Then she brightened, "Maybe they didn't notice we came in here, and we can sneak back out again and try to act like adults."

"Believe me, they noticed."

"How do you know?" she pressured.

"You had your eyes closed. We caused quite a power surge."

"What do you mean, 'a power surge'?" she asked him innocently.

"First, the lights flickered. Then they brightened to almost blinding. I think they went out at least once. They noticed."

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"Oh."

"Is it so bad for them to know we were together?" he asked, sounding endearingly uncertain.

"No. Not bad. I just don't want them to think I jump into bed with every man I meet." This had happened so suddenly that it left her feeling a bit off balance. Athair felt so "right" pressed against her that she could never regret having made love to him, but as the rest of the world began to intrude, she could help but wonder what their being together this once would mean.

"You don't, do you?" He arched a brow.

"No. I've only been with one other man, and that was several years ago." It hadn't been good. He'd insisted the lights be out, so he wouldn't see her scars. After that, she couldn't think of any reason to show her body to anyone else. Yet somehow, Athair was different.

"It has been many years for me also. Many centuries, in fact."

"Just how old are you? Though, I probably don't want to know."

"Seven hundred and twenty, last June."

"Ewww! You're *way* old!"

"But well preserved," he said with a wink and a leer. He reached over to bite her bare hip.

"Hey! None of that." She slapped at him playfully. "You're old enough to know better. We need to get up. I have to lock the house, check on Granny, and—"

"She's fine. I just asked Rath to lock up. He said Sgrios is here now."

"Where is everyone going to sleep?" She'd forgotten they could communicate silently. The talent really could simplify life.

"Sgrios is on the back porch and Dàn is on Ella's sofa. Steve and the others are in the living room. All are quite comfortable."

"Is Steve okay?"

"Rath said that Steve called them 'all right guys.' That must mean he's doing well."

"I guess so." She couldn't think of any other objections, so she decided to simply accept the moment and cuddle up to Athair's warmth.

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She snuggled down into the blankets and allowed her hands to more boldly explore Athair's beautiful, hard, seven-hundred-and-twenty-year-old body, which led to more interesting diversions once he assured her he would try to control the magic to prevent any more blinking lights.

That gave her a chance to learn just how good his control could be.

* * * * *

Dàn focused every ounce of his being, but still he felt the stutter of his power as it surged and fluxed at irregular intervals. Hours ago, Ella had turned down the lights and gone to bed. She left a book of meditation techniques, which included both modern and ancient forms, and a hand written addition describing meditation that had aided adolescents of the clans during the development of their powers. Dàn combined several as he sat in what Ella and the book called *the lotus position* and used a form of self-hypnosis.

He pictured himself on a beach with the tide washing over him. The regular waves lulled him with comfort as he closed out everything but the sensation. The cool splash of each wave caressed his legs. The warm night breeze brushed over his face and ruffled his hair. The healing moonlight soothed and embraced his battered flesh.

Dàn felt his powers gradually assume the rhythm of the ocean. Steady. Constant.

Still, he maintained the meditation for several more hours. None of the others had realized just how unbalanced he'd been. *How much danger he had placed them all in.* The guilt washed though him with another uncertain stutter. He had wanted the Keeper's help, no matter the risk. But even she hadn't been able to provide that for which he searched. She had no answers for his questions. No comfort for his fears. All she could do was offer to help him search the records in hopes the information was among the most ancient writings. For now, that would have to be enough.

Reluctantly, Dàn opened his eyes—and blinked them several times in surprise.

He sat not in Ella's study, but at the beach. In the surf. Soaked and

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naked. Hmm? How had that happened? Where was he? How would he get back?

He closed his eyes again and extended his senses. Briny ocean air confirmed that this was not a lake. The sound of a car told him of local populations. People. His unnaturally sharp ears heard a group of them talking and joking farther down the beach. "Virginia Beach," one woman thought or said. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference over a long distance.

Maybe he could get back the same way he'd gotten here.

He focused on his meditations and allowed the waves to call to his powers. This time, he imagined the grassy field in Ella's back yard.

The long grass tapped his legs and crickets chirped out their joy in the warm evening air. The soft wind filled with the scent of the forest as the distant trees swayed slowly, bending to accommodate the wind's insistent force and refusing to break under the pressure. They moved gently back and forth, their trunks creaking as their branches brushed together. They were steady. Strong.

"What the hell!"

Dàn smiled. It had worked. No need to meditate for hours. Sgrios' exclamation confirmed his arrival back where he belonged. *Or was the ocean front where he really belonged?* Water had always called to him. Either way, he was where he needed to be. He opened his eyes.

"Want to tell me what just happened?" Sgrios asked.

"I traveled. And returned."

His derisive snort was full of annoyance. "Just like that?" As always, Sgrios accepted Dàn's strangeness without much concern or fear.

"Yes."

"Did you forget how to pack?" His wry question made Dàn chuckle.

Dàn sat nude in the foot high grass. "I guess I still have a lot to learn." As out of place as Sgrios was with both the clan and the world, he'd always accepted Dàn's odd situations. He accepted it and joked about it and never seemed to fear Dàn. It was a welcome change.

"I guess so. Well, you'd better get inside and put on some clothes

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before one of the humans sees you and gets skittish.”

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Chapter Seventeen

Future

Making Plans

After what was surely only a few hours of sleep, Hope woke up, dressed, and reluctantly left Athair to start breakfast for her guests. She entered the kitchen to find that she had waited far too long to be considered a good hostess. Her guests were happily puttering away in the kitchen and had already started preparing the meal.

Ella sat at the table directing the group of young men in their domestic chores. If not for the fear of them burning down the house, it was really quite pleasant in a comic sort of way. Steve attempted to explain the workings of the microwave to Díon and Reultan, who were more interested in the way it worked than in cooking the sausage. Dàn seemed comfortable cooking scrambled eggs on the stove top, while Rath fixed tea for Ella and poured coffee for the others.

Since she wasn't needed as a cook, she sat down at the table with Ella to watch. "Good morning, my very mysterious Granny," she said.

"Morning to you too, dear." Ella said with a smile. She was obviously enjoying the pandemonium that reigned within the room. But then, she had always enjoyed having young people around. Apparently she was more than comfortable around these particular four-hundred-year-old young people.

"Is Sgrios still here?" Hope asked Ella.

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"He went for a walk," Rath said, waving his hand to indicate the room. "This is way too social for him. He left shortly after we woke up."

"He said he would be back for breakfast," Ella added.

"I see. Can I help with anything?" Hope asked, thinking she should have just stayed in bed. At least there she could think of something to do for entertainment.

"No dear. Why don't you go wake Athair?" Ella said.

Reultan chuckled, and Dàn smiled.

Rath laughed outright. "Let the old man sleep. He probably needs it after last night." At which point he blinked the kitchen light a couple of times with a boyish grin.

That sent the rest, including Steve, into gales of laughter. Hope's cheeks warmed.

Even Ella had a chuckle, but she stood and followed Hope as she fled the room. "Don't fret about their teasing, Hope. They mean nothing by it. They are all very happy for Athair." She patted her on the back and continued. "I imagine he will get the worst of it when he joins them."

"I don't mean to be prudish. I just wish they wouldn't talk about it. I had no idea it would be so public."

"I know. But they are very open and consider it natural. They'll joke and tease you two, but they don't mean to hurt you. I will talk to them about toning it down if you want me to, but it would probably be easier for you and Athair if you simply accept their ways."

"I don't know if I can." She knew she was being silly, but she had never had to deal with this situation before. "I'll try."

"How serious are you about Athair?" Ella asked, taking Hope by surprise with her pensive tone.

She thought for a moment. "I like him very much. But don't know yet where our relationship will lead. I mean, do you know how old he is? How long could a relationship last with him?"

"Those questions are fair enough. Just be honest with Athair about your feelings and concerns. He may feel differently than you, yet I'm certain he'll have the answers you need."

Before Hope could question her, Ella switched gears again. "Steve

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called in to the clinic, said his car had trouble, and that neither of you would be in today.”

“I’d forgotten all about work!” She clapped her hands to her mouth. “Will you thank him for me? Oh, never mind—I’ll do it, when I get back from waking Athair.”

She dropped her hands. She couldn’t help but grin with her wicked thoughts of how she planned to wake Athair. She waved Ella back to the kitchen and went to her bedroom to carry out her plan.

Ella returned to the kitchen deep in thought. Uppermost in her mind was her concern about the growing relationship between Hope and Athair. She knew that if they chose to deepen their bond, both would have enormous adjustments to make before they could consider building a life together. Athair knew next to nothing about the twentieth century world. And Hope knew almost as little about the reality of his existence, his strengths and weaknesses, and what it meant to be Valàfrn.

With all this weighing on her mind, she rejoined the young men who were busy preparing breakfast. Rath had managed to burn the toast while she was gone, but Dàn had cooked the eggs to perfection. Although, to give Rath credit, he’d never used a toaster before and scrambling eggs was much the same in any time period, regardless of the heat source.

The other three had somehow succeeded in cooking the sausage and bacon without mishap and were still discussing the microwave. They now had the manual out to study. Even she didn’t know where Hope kept that. Wherever they’d found it, they were deep in discussion about the machine’s inner workings.

Dàn found the plates and started dishing out the food. As Ella sat down at the table next to where he worked, he said, “You need not worry for them. Athair and Hope will be happy.” He paused with a distant look. “They will have four children, the first born within a year.” Dàn’s eyes still had a strange flicker in their depths, but she sensed he was trying hard to minimize their odd appearance. Otherwise, his health was greatly improved from the night before.

Although he was still weak, outwardly he seemed normal. Well, as normal as he was likely to be, discounting the strange mist, for which Ella

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had no explanation. All Dàn would say regarding its appearance was that the mist was now a part of him.

His prediction about Hope and Athair did reassure her. She understood how Dàn saw everything around him. They had talked the night before about the time before his birth. He'd asked about his mother, and who might be his father. She was unable to help him, but promised to look through the old texts in search of anything that might. They also had looked through medical records to see if there were any references to the drugs used on him, and their possible side effects. What they found was that his reaction was unique. Others experienced horrible initial pain, but very few after-effects. Nothing like what had happened to him. Thankfully, the meditation he had used seemed to help Dàn's unusual circumstances.

"Thank you, Dàn. I was concerned about them." And she was grateful. Hope was her closest family. More importantly, Hope would follow her as Keeper. A first. As far as Ella knew, no other Keeper had bonded with one of Vali's children. She wondered how it would affect Hope or their children, if the Council would even allow it. She didn't have any answers, but perhaps Dàn did. Would there really be a child within a year? She certainly hoped so. It would be wonderful to have children around again.

"Hey, Dàn, are you being freaky again?" Díon called while still facing the microwave.

"He can't help himself. Weird is his middle name," Reultan added.

Rath bristled protectively and started to interrupt their teasing when Sgrios entered from the porch.

"Yeah, he's the Prince of Weird," he said. Then he added in a self-mocking voice, "Don't think I don't hear what you all call me, either."

He was purposely taking the attention away from Dàn. The others stepped back in semi-fearful submission, their hands raised in joking defense. Ella wondered privately if they were feigning the fear, or maybe even the joking.

Ella noticed how relieved Dàn appeared when he was no longer the center of attention. He slipped past Sgrios to carry his breakfast to the

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quiet of the porch.

When Sgrios made a motion to follow, Ella said, "Go ahead. I will fix a plate for you."

He nodded his thanks and joined Dàn. Dàn didn't look up when he sat down next him.

Thank you. Dàn said in a silent voice.

"Why'd you let them get to you this morning?" Sgrios asked quietly. "You were beginning to flicker again."

"I know they're only joking, but at times it's hard to appreciate. Especially when I know they do in truth fear me. Even more so, now."

"I understand."

"I suppose you would."

They sat together and enjoyed the morning air until Ella came out, followed by Rath with two plates of food. He handed one to Sgrios and the other to Ella, and then returned to the kitchen for his own breakfast.

Within ten minutes, everyone had congregated on the porch. Even Athair and Hope, who were forced to endure much ribbing. Athair was no longer dressed in Hope's cast off sweats and now wore the clothing she had bought for him.

Rath and Steve, in particular, thought the budding romance was a great joke. Rath welcomed them on the porch by acting like he had been shocked as he handed a glass to Athair. This brought a blush to Hope's cheeks and a glare from Athair.

"Did I miss the fireworks, Brother?" Sgrios asked.

"Something like that." Athair answered tersely.

"I did have to reset the breakers. Twice," Steve said, grinning at Hope's discomfort. Rath and Reultan laughed, and added comments about helping to replace light bulbs.

"Steve!" Hope admonished.

"It's about time," Sgrios' said. His obvious restraint kept the others from teasing too much.

Ella redirected their teasing by bringing up the burnt toast. That, and their discussion about the wonders of technology, kept the conversation relaxed throughout the rest of the meal. As it turned out,

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Sgrios hadn't been as secluded as the rest of them. He knew quite a lot about the current world.

It was after everyone had finished eating that Athair said, "We need to make plans to deal with the traitors from the Bear Clan." The group quieted and gave him their complete attention.

"This morning, they moved their campsite further into the forest. Now they are on the other side of the road closer to the park. They must know where we are, but they have pulled back the ones watching us." Sgrios said.

"Why would they back off once they've found us?" Rath asked. "Why haven't they attacked?"

"Because of Ella," Dàn said, "No one seemed to understand his reasoning, and he continued, 'They know she is the Keeper. She has maintained contact with the Bear Clan. She can offer protection and safe haven to any of our kind. They cannot hurt her or anyone she protects.'"

"How do we use that to our advantage?" Sgrios asked.

"You don't. I can't offer you more than a temporary reprieve of whatever comes," Ella answered. "It is my duty to protect them as well as you."

"Can we at least choose our battle field?" Rath asked.

"Yes. I can think of a few places that would work well," Sgrios said. "If we start back toward home, there is a particularly nasty wooded valley only about a day away. We can lead them to that place."

"What do you mean by nasty?" Athair asked.

"It has lots of ravines and areas of thick woods."

"Those would be even better if we could set traps and ambush the traitors." Díon said.

"We won't have much time before they catch us." Reultan said as he gathered plates.

"Although, you will need to leave my protection soon, you can take some time to heal more completely," Ella said with regret.

"We need to have this settled." Sgrios added.

"How many of them are there?" Steve asked. "I take it they have powers like you do?"

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"There are about half as many as before." Rath said, with a very respectful nod to Sgrios. "Seven or eight now, I think. And a few of them may have lost interest in the fight."

"The pack chasing me will have rejoined them," Athair said. "I'm not sure of their numbers."

"Can you tell us anything?" Rath turned to Dàn, who had been listening.

Dàn closed his eyes and looked anxious. "This is not our battle." Red mist curled against his throat, clearly showing his distress. "But it will eventually come to war. The end will be either wolf against wolf, or wolf against man."

"The traitors are few," Athair said.

"Those few traitors of the Bear clan have ties to other clans. They may not be dangerous now, but they will have many supporters," Dàn continued.

"Why?" Hope asked. "What do they want?"

"For many years, they have been in turmoil. There are some who feel they should be leading the clan instead of Sandulfr," Sgrios said.

"The Shaman is the son of the leader who originally brought the Bear Clan to America," added Dàn.

"So they haven't been here long?" Steve asked, still not comprehending their longevity.

In total seriousness, Sgrios answered, "Only about a thousand years. But the Bear Clan is the eldest clan in this country."

The thought of three generations in a thousand years left Steve gasping in shock.

Sgrios ignored him. "Many think Belquavir should be leader. If not him, then Bequf. But certainly not Sandulfr, who has a human mother. Sandulfr is a man of honor and has led them well for nearly a century. He and his mate are the right alphas for leadership."

"They came across the ocean with the Norsemen," Dàn said. "Belquavir is a direct descendant of one of the eldest lines within any of the clans. His is a pure blood, with no known human mates. Many feel this is proof of his strength, and that he should lead because of it."

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"Belquavir is greedy, not evil. But Bequlf has a cruel streak and enjoys abusing the power he has over others," Sgrios continued. "Belquavir will never see that in him, regardless of how many people he hurts or kills."

"Bequlf has gone that bad?" Ella asked.

"Without a doubt," Dàn said, surprising everyone with his vehemence.

Ella looked at him, "I would rather this dispute not become an outright battle. Do you think we can work a truce between Belquavir and Sandulfr?"

"Not one that will hold," Dàn said. "But we can give Sandulfr time to organize his own defense and perhaps prevent Bequlf from claiming the role of Alpha."

"Even buying time with a truce would be worthwhile," Ella said,

"This will put the Eagle Clan against the traitors. We will be forced into the battle if we aid with the truce. We shouldn't be alone in a decision that will affect everyone's future," Athair said. "One of us should contact the rest of the clan. Although I think Acair will agree to help stop Belquavir and Bequlf, after what was done to Rath and Dàn."

"Díon is particularly good at stealth. He can sneak past the traitors and travel back to the clan," said Reultan.

"It took us several weeks to get here. We do not have that much time," Athair said. "Someone should also go speak with Sandulfr to be sure he will accept our plans."

"He is hunting for Bequlf and the others now," Dàn said with his eyes still closed.

Sgrios volunteered, "I'll go to the Bear Clan to speak with Sandulfr." When Athair started to argue, he continued, "I am the only option. Sandulfr will not listen to the young ones, and you are not going. That leaves me. I can make him listen."

Athair looked doubtful. "Brother, you will need to be *diplomatic*."

Rath chuckled. "Can you convince him of our support and assistance in gaining a truce without killing any more of them?"

"Yes," Sgrios growled. Then he added, "Or I could just force him

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back here and let you play diplomat.”

“Well, that is a thought,” Athair said with a grin. “But only as a last resort.”

“Kidnapping an Alpha is not going to help this situation,” Ella said sternly.

“Could someone drive Díon back to talk with the rest of the family?” Steve asked.

“None of us can drive, yet.” Athair gave him a look.

“Actually, I can,” corrected Sgrios. “I have borrowed a few vehicles over the years. Although, I prefer motorcycles myself, but it seems I will be busy practicing diplomacy.”

“Look, I don’t want to be in the middle of a war. But I can drive,” Steve offered.

They all stared at him in surprise. Here was a human they didn’t know well, offering to help with a problem that might not affect him. After all, the war might not start in his lifetime.

“Steve, that’s an excellent idea,” Ella said. “Why don’t you get the road map from your car so we can plan the trip?”

Steve stood, smiling at her praise, and went to get the map.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Ella said, “You all know I would never place you in harm’s way. If you don’t believe that, ask Dàn. Steve is trustworthy. Yes, even to know where your family lives. Steve will not break your trust or endanger your clan.”

“Hope has already vouched for him,” Athair said. “I think it is a good idea.”

“Who knows, he may suit Lasair. She has odd tastes,” Reultan said with a laugh.

“Perhaps we should warn him off of Allaidh,” Rath said. “She would eat him alive.”

“He might just enjoy being eaten!” Hope grinned.

“He most likely would not survive it,” Rath growled in irritation.

“But I can think of no better way to go. Can you?” Reultan slapped his brother’s back.

“Certainly no better way,” Rath agreed with a laugh.

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"Díon and Reultan will be with Steve to protect him from any unwanted attention," Athair said. "Hope, do you have a wagon?"

"Yes. A Volkswagen."

"So you can teach us to drive while we wait for the others to return?" Athair knew this would be hard for her. He could easily feel her fear of driving, but they needed to get past it. This was only one more step in her healing.

"Athair, I don't drive."

"But you can, if the need arises." He laid his hand on her thigh. She was tense, like prey that had caught the scent of danger. He channeled his strength into her, letting her feel his confidence in her abilities.

"Yes. I know how to drive."

Good. I need you to teach me. He sensed her immediate withdrawal, as if she thought *he* was the threat. Yet he wouldn't allow her to run from this fear any longer.

Please. I don't drive.

Then why keep a wagon? He heard the defeat in her tone. She would do this for him, but she resented being asked. The thought that healing her might hurt their future together made him hesitate. But he pushed her for her own good.

For Granny, and for emergencies.

This is an emergency. What if we need to run from here? I need to know how to drive. I do understand how difficult this will be for you, but it's important. It may save our lives. Athair sighed as he felt her thigh relax under his palm. Hope was ready to face her fear. She was finally ready to heal.

All right.

Steve returned with the map, and Sgrios showed him the general location of the teaghlach. Steve furrowed his brow as he searched for the best route to get there. He chose Route 80, because they would make better time on a larger highway. It would only take three to four hours to get there, depending on the traffic.

Athair frowned. It had taken them almost three weeks to travel that distance on foot. He needed to learn how to drive. It would have to be a priority. And maybe they could see about a phone as well. He would like

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a way to stay in touch with family that was out of range of his telepathic abilities. He had been wondering how the trips to local towns had gone, but he had no way of finding out. Because Sgrios had brought Reultan and Díon east as back up, he hadn't gone back to the teaghlach yet, either.

Some of his worry must have been caught by Hope, because she turned to Steve. "You should stop and call us from the first town on the way home."

"I can do that. How soon should we leave?"

"How soon can you?" Sgrios asked bluntly.

"Now, I guess. We can be back by late tonight," Steve answered.

"Especially if someone can spell me for some of the driving."

"If you'll teach us, we can both help you drive." Reultan said. He motioned toward Díon, who continued to be silent.

"I can teach you. Let's go." Steve picked up the map, and the three of them headed for the car. Reultan and Díon followed Steve without comment.

Athair watched them go. A few minutes later, he heard the car start and pull down the driveway. At least that part of the plan was in action. If there was no other benefit, at least the boys would learn the basics of driving a car.

Sgrios was obviously ready to start his task as well. He stood and started toward the woods, then turned back. "Dàn, do you know where Sandulfr is now? It could save me some tracking time."

Dàn looked thoughtful for a long minute, and then said, "South of here, about four miles."

"Thanks."

"He's heading west with five others," Dàn added.

With a nod, Sgrios shifted into wolf form and shot off toward the South at a steady lope.

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Chapter Eighteen

Overcoming the Scars
Learning a New Trick

Athair watched Sgrios leave. Now came the challenge of getting Hope over her fear.

Ella stood up. "I am going to study the records."

Dàn looked longingly toward Ella's side of the house.

She shook her head at him. "No, I'll continue to look for you. You go with Hope and learn to drive with Rath and Athair."

"No better time than the present," Athair said, hoping to encourage Hope. He gently dragged her from her seat. "So, where is this wagon?"

"We actually call it a car, not a wagon." Hope answered quietly.

"Steve drives a station wagon, does he not?" Athair asked.

"Yes. That's the kind of car," Hope said. "Sometimes cars are called automobiles. Or autos, for short. But usually not a wagon, unless it is one."

"But you said you have a volks wagon. Is that the kind?"

"Yes, sort of. That is who makes my kind of car. Mine is a Volkswagen Beetle. A Bug."

"A bug? We are to learn how to drive an insect?" asked Rath.

"Your language is very strange. See Athair, we should have kept to Gaelic."

By now, they had reached the garage at the side of the house. Hope

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led them inside to see the Bug rather than try to explain.

Athair looked at the vehicle inside the garage. It was like the bright yellow one he'd seen in Lakeside. This car was small and pale blue in color. Surely it wouldn't hold all four of them.

"I forgot the keys," Hope mumbled. She turned and ran through a door into the house, but in only a moment she was back and began to explain the basics.

"These are the keys to use to open and start the car. Each set is different and will only work for a particular car. These are the door locks." She opened the doors and stepped back to let them look over the inside, while she explained how to adjust the seats and what the other parts did. Rath wanted to know what made the car move. She showed him the engine under the rear hood.

When she couldn't answer all of his questions, she gave him the manual. He and Dàn went over the car together, checking the book for definitions and explanations.

Athair took Hope's hand and pulled her away from the car.

How are you managing? he asked silently, but he really already knew. She was tense, scared, and worried about disappointing him. He was proud of her for trying despite her fears.

All right, she answered. Hope was trying so hard. He soothed her in the only way he knew how, empathically sending her wave after wave of positive emotions. His gratitude for her doing this, his pride in her attempt to overcome her fears, his belief in her strength, and his love for her, no matter what.

You are much better than all right. You are amazing. He pulled her into his arms, planning to show her just how deeply he cared for her. What began as a gentle kiss quickly burst into a long, heated moment.

Whatever his original intentions had been, he found this method of distraction to be very pleasant and would have continued if Rath hadn't interrupted them.

"Hey! You two had better stop that before the lights start blinking again," he said, just before he started the car up with a rev of the engine. "Hope, how do we get the Bug out of here?" he shouted over the motor.

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Laughing, she pulled up the garage door and gave Athair another short, but very hot kiss. "Do you think it's safe to let them try to drive after only reading the manual?" she asked, reclaiming his hand and weaving their fingers together.

"Both are sensible, and Rath is very good at figuring things out." He squeezed her hand and led her outside to give the boys more room to back out. "We can watch them from the porch, if they can use the field to practice."

Hope looked very glad to put off having to get into the car. She said, "Great idea! You tell them where to take the car and I'll get us more coffee." She took off into the house.

* * * * *

Steve decided, after only five minutes on the highway, that Route 80 was absolutely the most boring stretch of road that had ever existed. He was beginning to wonder why he'd volunteered to chauffeur his new wolf friends across the state. The boredom alone would be bad enough, but even worse was his edginess and uncertainty about where he stood with them.

Reultan provided the best distraction and entertainment when he started asking about the various buttons on the dashboard. Steve focused on his role as teacher and explained and demonstrated each switch. Who would've thought werewolves would love rock music? Both Reultan and Díon seemed to enjoy Van Halen and Queen. Reultan especially liked Kiss' *Almost Human*. Díon favored the Doors, but also got into AC/DC's *Highway to Hell*. Many miles and more than an hour flew by as Steve shared all he knew about each of the songs and bands.

Reultan offered to drive, and Steve hesitated before relenting. He wanted nothing more than to have someone else drive for awhile. Although he couldn't say that letting them behind the wheel was a bad idea, it certainly livened up the drive. Reultan had a lead foot and loved to pass other cars and trucks. He couldn't seem to tolerate anyone in front of him, saying he considered it a challenge. So within a few minutes of

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taking over driving, they were flying along at over seventy miles an hour, and often much higher than that.

His high speeds led to a long discussion about law enforcement, speed traps, and the cost of tickets for the numerous laws they were currently breaking.

Despite the many risks, Steve had a good time. They listened to music and talked about what was happening in the world. He was revered as an expert on current events. Reultan was fun and easy going about everything new, and Steve had the feeling he Reultan would enjoy getting to know the world together. The young wolf thrived on each new experience, while Díon quietly observed all that flashed by. He asked serious questions, but made few comments about what Steve and Reultan chose to discuss.

After about an hour, Díon took over driving. He was considerably more cautious than his brother, which was good because he was not nearly as smooth at steering and braking. Twenty minutes later, Steve took the wheel again. Especially since they were leaving Route 80 and traveling on smaller highways.

* * * * *

Hope sighed as Athair caught her gently in his arms.

He pressed a kiss to her cheek, then dropped his head lower to nuzzle against her throat, feathering kisses over her tingling skin. "Now it's my turn," he said.

"What do you mean?" The car. He wanted to drive. How would he ever understand what kept her from the normal act of driving? To him, it was only something new to learn.

"You know I mean. My turn to drive."

"Yes, know." She thought back to Steve's wonderful list of steps. Would they help her get through this?

"I need you to help me. The young pups will never let it go if one of them teaches me."

"All right." She felt Athair's determination and knew he wouldn't

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give up this argument.

They walked to the car, where Rath and Dàn stood examining the motor again. Rath seemed fascinated by the machine's inner workings.

Rath looked up and caught Athair's gaze. Athair must have said something in silence, because Rath closed the hatch and started for the back porch. "Good luck. It's really not that hard. There was nothing to hit in the field." He chuckled, "Not even any runaway mongrels from the Bear Clan. They really do seem to have backed off some."

"You can trust your safety to Athair," Dàn murmured to Hope.

Dàn knows me well. I could never put you at risk. To lose you would be like losing my heart. Already, it beats only for you, Athair said as he touched her arm lightly.

The intensity of Athair's mind touch sizzled through her. "I know you won't hurt me. It's the car I don't trust."

"Then we can simply sit and talk for a while." He led her to the passenger side, opened the door, and handed her inside.

Hope hunched down in her seat as the car closed in around her, still warm and filled with a light musky scent that reminded her of the woods at night. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine Athair walking with her beneath a canopy of trees surrounded by chirping birds and leaves carried past on a soft breeze.

The quiet snap of the driver's side door and the car's dip told her Athair now sat beside her. But she stubbornly refused to open her eyes and give up her peaceful walk in the forest.

Tell me where you are.

On a path in the forest. Somewhere safe.

Am I with you?

Yes. His fingers tangled with hers, and she squeezed his hand. How could she be safe without him? His presence brought contentment to her walk in the woods. *I feel the breeze and wonder if you are controlling it.*

If you like, I will call it to cool your cheeks and brush through your hair.

I like that you are in control, that you have the power to shape the wind.

Aye, control is something I do possess. In their woodland daydream, he turned her in his firm grip and drew his lips to within a breath of hers.

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But you also have choices to make. His words blew gently across her cheek as his fingers combed through her hair.

Hope moved the short distance from her lips to his. Her hands clutched at his back. Her body was cradled and engulfed by his.

Her car door suddenly opened, ripping her from their moment together. All at once, Athair tugged her out of the vehicle and into his embrace. "I had to have more than a daydream," he muttered before crushing her between his passion and the side of the Beetle.

How had he gotten from the car? Why?

That stick thing. The gearshift. He explored her mouth, dancing with her tongue. This was not the gentle man from last night. This Athair was driven by need. He didn't ask, he demanded.

And she met his demands. His seeking hands found her willing flesh, each touch setting her ablaze. The tingle of electric between them only sharpened her raging desire.

Athair's hand slid beneath her loose blouse to cup her breast and brush his thumb over its sensitive tip, which tightened and warmed with his energy. His other hand slipped to her hip, burning Hope through the thin denim of her jeans, igniting her in flames.

She wanted to be a part of him. Even his body pushing against hers wasn't enough. Her arms wrapped around his neck, clutching him as if he might dare take even a breath without sharing it with her.

His hand gripped her behind, lifting, grinding her belly against his hardness. Her right leg stole around his, rising higher as her hips shifted to allow them to move closer. With his free arm supporting her, she lifted both legs around his waist.

He ground hard against her center, while his lips still dominated her. His hand abandoned her breast and cradled the nape of her neck.

She tore her mouth free to gasp in air, and then kissed him back to match his fervor.

What is it between us? she asked.

I have never felt this before. She felt his joy and something else that was so powerful that it tightened her throat and brought tears to her eyes. *But we must have bonded, as my heart races each time we touch. I can't imagine*

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being anywhere but your arms. His lips roamed from hers, and he placed tiny, feather-light kisses across her cheek, below her ear, and down her neck. Although her scarring was gone, she still wore a turtleneck blouse from habit. He bit into the thin fabric and tore it, baring her throat and one shoulder.

She pulled back at the barbaric, lustful ripping sound, so possessive and dominant that her heart pounded at the very thought of his power being released in violence. Would he be dangerous? He met her gaze. No, he would not hurt her. He might be a danger to her wardrobe, but not to her. Never her.

Bonding is nice. I like bonding. Hope's head fell back as her body arched into Athair's.

As do I. His head dipped to her exposed neck, nuzzling and kissing her skin.

What if someone is watching? Hope said suddenly realizing that only the car separated them from the open field.

No one can see us here behind the Bug. And besides, you feel too good for me to stop, Athair said.

I wish I was wearing a skirt.

His chest rumbled against her with a low growl. She saw a glint in his eye.

"Don't you dare rip my jeans," she said.

Then get them off. I want to be inside you.

She slid her feet back to the ground and unfastened her zipper. He helped push her pants down her hips. She kicked off her sandals and stepped from the circle of denim.

No sooner was she free of her jeans than Athair lifted her back the car, holding her there with his roaming hands and body weight. She lifted her legs around him before remembering her panties.

They proved to be no problem. Athair reached to one side and tore them free of her hips. Hope moved slightly, allowing the small peach scrap to fall to the ground.

As she tightened her legs, she realized he had done some undressing as well and was pressed hard against her, ready to plunge

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deep where they both wanted him to be. She shifted her weight, grinding her hips, drawing his tip into her waiting wet heat. He held still as she moved over his shaft. Deeper and deeper. Slowly easing over him, then pulling back, teasing both herself and Athair.

His stillness shattered as she withdrew. He pushed Hope against the warm metal, plunging deep and fast into her with relentless, driving, long, hard strokes that burned and begged. She was aching and needy, clutching at him and rocking into his thrusts. Both were panting and ready.

His hands gripped, his entries quickened, as he pounded into her. She tightened around him, crying out with her orgasm as he joined her, stiffening in his completion.

L. Shannon

Chapter Nineteen

The Teaghlach
Dicey Diplomacy

Reultan checked the map and gave directions to Steve. Directions like, “Did you see that road we just passed? We should have turned left there.” And, “I know we’ve crossed this road before. I’m just not sure where.”

Somehow, they still managed to get to a place where both Reultan and Díon agreed they should park the car. It seemed like the middle of nowhere to Steve. The vehicle sat at the end of a long grassy path, more than a mile from the last pavement.

“So now what, guys?” Steve asked as they got from the car.

“We walk,” answered Reultan. “You can come with us if you want.”

“How far is it?”

“Not far. About a mile or so.”

Steve thought about it for only a moment before deciding to go with them. “Will the car be all right here?”

“It should be fine. From what Sgrios said, he was probably the only one in the area who could drive. By now he might be dragging Sandulfr back for some forced diplomacy.”

Steve laughed, and then stared in shock as Reultan and Díon shimmered, shifting into their wolf forms. He had started thinking of

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them as normal. Now, he stood looking at two large wolves. His edgy feeling came back fast. "Maybe I should stay here."

Can you hear me?

Not sure which had spoken, Steve nodded.

I can talk to most people in the silent language. You should come with us. We could be gone for hours. This time, it sounded like Reultan.

"Okay." Steve said. He felt he should go with them even if it was a long walk there and back. He didn't want to have to wait hours by himself. He fell into step behind them, even though he sometimes had to jog to keep up. Every now and then, Reultan would point out some part of the landscape or wildlife.

The mile or so went quickly, and he felt like very little time had passed before they entered a small sheltered valley. The valley was beautiful, cleared of underbrush but still shaded by tall oak and cherry trees. Steve spotted a small rustic cabin standing to one side, but saw no other houses. Did they all live in one house? He shuddered at the thought. The cabin was more than rustic. It was primitive, with rough walls and small windows. There were even animal hides pinned to the outside walls.

Steve hadn't expected electricity or cable, but he'd thought they would have more than this. They had lived like this for how long? Centuries?

Reultan changed back into a man and called out, "Acair! We're back!"

A man, who looked very much like Athair, stepped out of the house and waved. "I see Sgrios resisted his urge to kill you for your misbehavior." The man looked around. "Or did you barely escape with your skin intact?"

Reultan laughed. "No. Sgrios is to the west helping Athair."

"He is with the Bear Clan? How did you get back so quickly, and who is this with you?" he asked, motioning to Steve.

"This is Steve. He drove us back in his car. It was great! He even let us drive. You'll never believe how quickly you can get from one place to another."

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"Sgrios has mentioned such things. I only half believed him. And you drove one? Very good." Acair grinned, seeming pleased by this turn of events. "Please, come in. We were just sitting down to dinner."

He turned without waiting for their response. Both Reultan and Díon followed him immediately. When Steve didn't, Reultan reached back and dragged him along as well.

The inside of the cabin was much more comfortable than Steve had expected. It contained a spacious combined living and dining room, leading him to guess that the home was also used as a meeting place for the family. Acair was already getting more plates from the built in cupboards and Steve noticed two others setting the table. No. There were three. A young girl darted from behind the table chasing a raccoon.

"Bandit! Give that back!" the little girl shouted, laughing and chasing the critter through the door into another room.

Steve stared after her with a silly smile on his face. Was she a werewolf, too? If so, she was the cutest little monster he'd ever seen. She would be great for public relations. They should keep Sgrios locked up here and take the little girl out visiting. They could have a werewolf fan club started in no time.

Reultan elbowed him. *Pay attention. I just introduced you,* came his silent reprimand. Steve looked around to find everyone smiling in the direction the girl had run. Interesting reaction.

"And this is my sister Adhar and her mate, Cradh. That was their daughter, Solas."

Adhar held out her hand and said, "I am pleased to meet you, Steve. I had better go retrieve Solas, or she will miss dinner playing with that beast." She jogged out of the room toward the sound of high-pitched giggles. Soon her rich laughter mingled with the happy sounds.

Cradh shook his hand in welcome, but said little else.

Acair handed Steve a plate and said, "You will get used to it. We all wear foolish smiles when Solas shares her laughter."

"What do you mean?" Steve asked, although he thought he knew.

Acair shrugged, "We are all empathic, even Solas. But she doesn't control her emotions yet, which is wonderful when she is happy. Then we

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all are. She is a strong sender for her age.”

Steve just smiled and nodded at the explanation. He wondered how they had survived the terrible twos. What about colic? And teething? If little Solas could have them all smiling like idiots when she was happy, what happened when she cried? Steve shuddered at the thought.

The sudden crash of the door as it was flung open made Steve jump, and he almost dropped his plate. Standing in the doorway were two of the most beautiful people he had ever seen. Obviously a couple, the woman draped herself around the man in an almost obscene manner. She was tall and slender, with wavy jet-black hair and flashing dark eyes. The man also had black hair. There was a lean, hard look to his body, but he had an open, laughing face. But then, who wouldn't be happy holding such a beautiful woman?

“Look who found me wandering lost in the woods!” The man exclaimed.

Reultan stepped in front of Steve, “Leth! I didn't know you were back. And Lasair—is she back, also?”

Steve narrowed his eyes. Was Reultan trying to protect him from this man? If so, why? Maybe he was another “crazy uncle” like Sgrios. Actually, he did look a bit like Sgrios, except when he smiled. Who was he?

During Steve's musing, Acair ignored the woman, but welcomed Leth into the house while reaching for two plates. Leth stopped him. “Lasair and I already ate. I just wanted to visit with the munchkin I could hear laughing from about a mile away. Where is she?”

A loud giggle sounded from the doorway just before Solas raced into the room and launched herself at Leth. He managed to catch her, but only because he dropped the woman who wasn't quite balanced on her own feet.

Leth giggled along with Solas as he threw her into the air and proceeded to tickle her until she begged for mercy. Steve was struck again by how human these people were. As long as he didn't think about the details, he could easily like them.

Leth's antics left the woman standing alone, and she obviously did

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not approve of being abandoned. Steve found it interesting that Reultan shifted to the left to shield him from the woman, not Leth. Steve didn't want to be shielded from her. So without a second thought, he stepped into view.

* * * * *

Sgrios stayed downwind and well camouflaged as he watched Sandulfr and his fast-moving pack, who were all but invisible despite the bright sunshine that filtered through the trees. They were scattered, but obviously in close communication as they searched for any scent or sign of their quarry.

He was less than optimistic about the upcoming diplomacy. Sandulfr might be the best of the Bear Clan, but he was still of another clan. And he was young. No more than four-hundred-years-old, and likely to be impetuous. Yet the Bear Clan's young Alpha pair was not his problem. He was concerned about how difficult Sandulfr would be to approach.

He followed the group until they stopped for a break. After shifting forms, Sgrios approached Sandulfr, who stood apart from the others.

The wind changed.

Sandulfr spun around, searching for the scent he had caught. His posture spoke of challenge, of a readiness to fight whatever danger he came to face.

Sgrios stepped into the open and concentrated on radiating good will. The best he could manage was a semi-relaxed, somewhat non-threatening posture and a complete blankness to his emotions. He was the wrong wolf for diplomacy.

Sandulfr remained tense and alert.

"I came to talk with you." *Oh, great start.*

"What about? The murder of seven of my people?" Well, there was that. Sgrios knew Sandulfr would expect justice.

"I was protecting the young of my clan," he said. The thought of what had been done to Dàn nearly had Sgrios growling, but he managed

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to contain those un-diplomatic sounds.

"They were charged to detain them."

"They tortured them, and nearly killed Dàn." If Sgrios ever found that the attack had been sanctioned by one of their leaders, there would be hell to pay. From his rare dealings with Sandulfr he felt the man was honorable, but experience had taught Sgrios that honor was something easily lost or sold.

"They did not deserve to die for this."

This conversation wasn't going well, and Sgrios knew his nature was to blame. Talking wasn't his thing. And others found the inability to read his emotions as a sign of insult or even worse, as dishonor. But if he let them glimpse what was within his mind it would only prove his lack of sanity. A growl started low in his chest with the frustration of it all.

"They now have no chance for a trial. They are beyond justice."

Hearing those words, Sgrios knew he would fail. "They received what they deserved," he snarled as he considered how he could force Sandulfr to hear Athair's pretty words.

"Is this why you've come? To gloat over their deaths?"

"No." Sgrios sized up Sandulfr to determine his weight and stepped closer to be in a better range to spring. The others had moved away, but surely Sandulfr had them on alert.

"Then why have you come?" Sandulfr's tone inquired rather than challenged.

"I was sent to convince you to help us form a treaty with Bequľf's faction." Perhaps there was still a chance.

"Why would I do that?"

Good question. If Sgrios was to have his way, the vermin would be hunted down and killed. "The Keeper wishes us to attempt a truce." Sgrios said.

"I see. And how will we do this?"

"The Keeper plans to call in Bequľf and his men. I do not know more. I only came to ask you to return to her home with me. Will you?"

L. Shannon

Chapter Twenty

Possibilities and Preparations

Possessive Tendencies

Steve flinched when the woman turned her intense gaze on him and let a slow, sensual smile form on her lips. She was exotic, with full lips and eyes, which were such a rich brown as to look black. He could almost feel her thick curls, imagining them flowing through his fingers or over his chest.

He could have sworn the temperature went up in the room. It was now too hot for comfort.

"Hello," she purred, moving toward him.

"Allaidh, leave him be," Reultan said. "He is not one of us." He stopped her with a firm grip on her arm.

With a flashing look and a soft snarl, she pulled free. "I only want to say hello."

"You never 'only' say hello." Reultan turned to Steve. "You need to be careful of this one. She doesn't understand limits and she does bite." With that warning, Reultan left them to get his own dinner.

Steve thought he saw Allaidh stiffen at Reultan's remarks, and her eyes dropped to the floor, her expression tight in what looked like pain.

Then she sighed and the look was gone, only to be replaced with hard, designed sensuality. She stepped closer and purred in a very feline growl, "So you're a human. I can smell the difference on you. I've never

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had a human before." She trailed one sharpened fingernail down his jaw. "Will you feel different? Will you taste different?"

She stood so close the last of her words drifted against his ear, followed by the tiniest of licks to his earlobe. Air rushed into his lungs as he remembered to breathe. The rest of his body jerked in reaction as her warm breath blew across his neck.

She made him sweat. She made him shiver. She also made him very nervous.

Suddenly, Acair stepped close and made it obvious why he was leader of their family. He firmly pulled Allaidh away from Steve. "That is enough, Allie." He glared at her in disapproval. "He is a guest, not a toy." She started to pull away, and he gave her a fierce shake. "Leave it be."

She met his glare with defiance. Despite his imposing build, she stood eye to eye with him, not backing down, daring him to stop her. "Perhaps you should keep me distracted."

The sparks flew between them, and Steve stepped back. Although Acair had seemed calm and controlled earlier, he was now on the verge of violence. Steve wanted no part of that.

"Maybe when you grow up," Acair growled. Then he deserted them to return to his seat at the head of the table.

Díon brushed past Steve and pulled Allaidh into a hard brotherly hug for a semi-private whisper. "Don't worry, girl. He'll understand someday." Steve watched as she covertly wiped away tear. Steve had to wonder which was the act—her boldness, or her vulnerability?

* * * * *

Hope relaxed in the passenger seat of the bug as she waited for Athair to settle into the driver's seat.

"You forgot something," he said, handing her the tattered remains of her panties.

"I didn't forget them. I couldn't find them." She sighed and let her eyes drift closed.

"Either way, I like the idea of you not wearing them." His hand

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stroked over her denim clad thigh.

Her eyes shot open as his hand moved upward. "I think this car is too small for any more of that."

"Then you should teach me how to drive. But what should I teach you?"

He lifted his hand and placed it on the steering wheel, which made her regret her words. "First, let's worry about teaching you." While her mind considered what he could teach her later, she directed him in the steps to driving the bug.

She marveled at how relaxed she was, even while he learned to drive a standard transmission. The car bucked and jumped, and he always said some silly or sexy comment to distract her. Before long, Athair was able to shift gears smoothly. He practiced in the field, and then drove down the driveway and back. He parked the bug perfectly inside the garage.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked as he opened her door and grasped her hand.

"No. It wasn't bad." What a shame her therapist hadn't thought of sexual relaxation years ago to cure her of her anxieties. Unfortunately, he hadn't looked anything like Athair.

Hope heard what sounded like someone ransacking the kitchen, and drew to a halt. "What's that sound?"

"My guess is lunch." Athair tugged at her hand, pulling her into his arms. His lips met hers in a hot rush. The contact sizzled through her, reawakening her desire. Athair eased back just as his stomach gave a growl.

"Maybe we should make sure Rath and Dàn don't do any damage," she said. Surely they wouldn't break anything, but they sure could make a racket.

Athair laughed at her suspicions. Yet after she changed her shirt, she learned that Rath and Dàn had indeed dug through the fridge and the cupboards but had put everything back in order. On the table was a neat platter of sandwiches.

While getting plates for each of them, Rath asked, "Have you

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thought about what we should do for dinner? I don't think you have enough food in the house to feed everyone, especially if Sandulfr comes back with Sgrios tonight."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that. How many do you think we should prepare for?" Just a month ago, Hope didn't believe werewolves existed. Now, she was about to play host to a large group of them.

"About twenty, counting his clan and mine," Athair answered.

"I won't be cooking for that many. Why don't we order pizza?" she asked. Rath was right. There was nowhere near enough food to put together a respectable meal for that many.

"What is pizza?" Athair asked with a puzzled look.

"You've never had pizza? I can't wait to share it with you then. Trust me, you'll love it."

After their impromptu snack, Rath and Dàn left for a short drive on the local roads to scout out the surrounding area, and Granny hid herself away in her apartment studying the dusty old tomes. Steve and the others had yet to return. So Hope and Athair decided to relax in the den and take advantage of the short time the house would be quiet. .

She snuggled into Athair's strong arms as they sat on the sofa watching the flames burn merrily in the fireplace.

"I like this." Athair broke the silence and hugged her while he openly shared his feelings of contentment with her.

"I can tell." Her fingers toyed lightly with a length of his hair. "Or is your empathy something you can lie with? I mean, I feel emotions that aren't mine. Can you control which ones I feel, or create a feeling that isn't there?"

"All my feelings for you are honest. I conceal nothing." He sounded slightly offended that she would suggest he would lie to her.

"But you can control what I sense." She didn't really doubt his honesty, but thought he might try to protect her from his darker emotions. "Can't you?"

"In some ways. The amount of control that each Valàfrn has varies greatly. Reultan is strong with his empathy and can project whatever he wishes, whether he feels it or not. Díon can hide his true feelings and

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project what he wishes. Rath is limited with this ability and projects very little."

"And you?"

"I raised them. I have gotten good at reading the truth even in Díon, and can project fairly well. I was quite good at soothing lullabies, which I needed for the youngest." She could easily picture him rocking a baby to sleep and even singing lullabies. She wondered if his role as father figure in the clan had molded him into the man he was or if he was naturally suited to the task.

She sensed his anxiety over something, but how could it be? She thought she must be wrong, but still she questioned him about it. "I can tell you're worried. Why is that?"

"Because I am. But I wasn't intentionally sharing that. Your skill at reading my emotions is improving."

"Maybe so. But I don't have magic." Still, she felt stronger and she could sense much more than she could before meeting Athair.

"Don't forget my healing ritual. You have a link to magic because you will be the next Keeper. And I think I have begun to share my magic with you as well."

"What does that mean?" She didn't feel any different, just slightly more aware. Was it because she would be Keeper, or was it because of Athair's superior abilities? How could she use his magic?

"Bonding is hard to explain, but I'll try." He frowned in thought. "When a Valàfrn finds a mate, we instinctively share all that we have, all we are. We don't control this. The bonding simply happens."

"But I'm still human?" At least, mostly human, if Granny wasn't on an acid trip and they truly were descended from a giant named Loki.

"This ability to bond allows us to mate with humans. With the bonding, my magic becomes yours. You will be able to do nearly all I can. Otherwise, I would be forced to watch you grow old and die."

"Will I be able to read emotions like you do?" That would be neat. "And share them?"

"Yes. But I thought you might be more interested in shape shifting." He chuckled when her eyes widened.

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"Do you mean that I'll be able to change into a wolf?"

"After you learn how. That may take a while. Possibly years."

"So I will become a werewolf!" She laughed. What a howling great joke on her! All her research and fears during the past month, and she would be one of the hairy hounds anyhow after mating with Athair.

"Sort of."

"I've been worrying that by biting the one who attacked me, I would become a werewolf. And now I find out that I'll change into one anyway. I've been worrying about the full moon for no reason."

"You can't become one of us from a bite. His, or yours. I thought you understood that. Indeed, you still won't be one of us, but you'll be able to use my magic as your own."

"I guess I didn't believe you. I'm still not sure I should, since it looks like I will be changing anyhow." She thought it was funny how things worked out. She would howl at the moon, but now she would have company. The idea of him at her side made the picture much more appealing.

"I am lost for words. I thought you'd be happy about the bonding."

Hope felt the hurt that her thoughtless words had caused him and regretted bringing him any pain. She reached up to cup his cheek in her palm and gently kissed him until his body relaxed against hers. "I am happy about loving you, but I didn't know what all came with the relationship. Maybe if you tell me more, then I'll understand." She wondered how soon he could show her how to change.

"What would you like to know?"

He'd been in wolf form the night he'd been hurt, which hadn't had a full moon. "Can you change shape anytime you want to, or only on a full moon?"

"Unless we are hurt, we can shift forms at anytime. If we are injured seriously, we usually revert to wolf form. Actually, without our magic, we would only have human form during the three nights the moon is at its fullest. Otherwise, we are trapped within the wolf. Because you are not affected by Vali's Curse, you never have to fear that fate. What else? Do you have questions about the different powers?" At her nod, he

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continued. "I told you about controlling the weather, and you have seen the healing. You have experienced empathy and telepathy. Dàn has the gift of foresight, which is quite rare. A few others can see ghosts and speak with the dead."

She thought about the good she could do at her clinic with the healing magic. "Can you talk to ghosts?"

"No, I can't."

That was a relief. She could just imagine ghosts seeking him out. "What else? I want to know everything."

"Some can change into other animal forms. Some have affinity with certain elements."

"What would an affinity with elements be like?" She couldn't imagine what that meant.

"Lasair can control fire; Leth has a link with wind. Both Leth and Lasair can speak with animals. Reultan can use his voice to channel his empathy. Allaidh can see into a person's heart as seen in their aura."

"Wow! What else?" Great, so one of them was a pyromaniac. And what use would seeing auras be?

"There are many more magical skills, but the most common are shape-shifting, empathy, healing and telepathy."

"What magic will I have?" She was intimidated by most of the magical skills, but wanted to learn more about healing as soon as she could. It was amazing she had already planned to open the clinic and now may have the chance to learn skills that would make her even more successful in healing animals in need.

"I believe you will have my magic and perhaps some wild manifestations, as well. I can do many different forms of magic, but I'm not particularly strong in any one area."

She had a lot to think about. She remembered he had been worrying over something earlier. "Are you going to tell what you are worrying about?"

"Two things." His breath blew lightly against her hair. "One is that I'm afraid tomorrow's meeting will not go well."

"What makes you say that? It might work out if the traitors respect

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Granny and will listen to reason." She had a bad feeling about the meeting as well, but she didn't want fear to mar their time together.

"Dàn will tell me nothing of what will come. He says it is still unknown."

"That might not be so bad. If it were, he would tell you, right?" Dàn's powers were awesome, even compared to the ones he'd just told her about. Having Dàn on their side felt like having an edge.

"Maybe, if we can change the outcome." So, Dàn held back information about the bad things to come if he could not change them. That was considerate to those who might be hurt, but must be hard for him to deal with. Hope felt another surge of sympathy for Dàn.

Athair had said he was bothered by two things. "What else was bothering you?" She felt his concern even before he spoke.

"Us." Athair said.

"I didn't realize we were a problem." She pulled away from him so she could see his face. His eyes were serious. He really saw some problem for their relationship.

"You will be Keeper. Ella says the others may object to us being together. There has never been a mating between a Keeper and one of the Valàfrn. The ramifications could be drastic and might force many traditions to change. Ella's fear and my own is how our people will react to those changes."

"What changes? What could be so different about us that would cause others to object?"

"What about our children? They will have the long life spans of the Valàfrn, effectively ending the lifetime position of Keeper. The idea of one Keeper remaining and possibly holding grudges against an individual or a clan for thousands of years could be reason enough. Not to mention that being bound to one clan will eliminate any chance of neutrality. Many problems will arise and be cause for concern."

"Then I won't be Keeper." Now that she'd found him, she had no plans to give him up to be a glorified librarian.

"That is not your choice. Your position is extremely important."

"So let them object. What can they do about it? If they want a

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Keeper, I'm the only option." She challenged him to stand up for whatever possible future they might have together. "To get me, they get you. It's a package deal." She pressed close to him and gave him a deep and thorough kiss.

"Hmm, I like that answer."

"Athair, I don't really know what the future holds for us." She wanted him to understand that if they both wanted their relationship, they would have it and nothing would keep them apart. As long as they stood together, not even the ruling council of the Valàfr. "But I would very much like the chance to find out."

"I know what we have. I've waited my whole life to find you. I'll make sure we get that chance."

Athair was content to relax and hold Hope in his arms all day. He felt much more secure knowing she would fight for their relationship as much as he. The thought that the council might object to their bond was intimidating, but not so overwhelming now that he knew her mind. The council had a valid reason for not allowing Keepers to bond with Valàfrn, but that made little difference to Athair. She was his and he wouldn't give her up.

A light rap on the doorframe signaled Rath and Dàn's return.

Rath poked his head around the corner. "We passed Sgrios on our way back."

"Did he find Sandulfr?"

"Yes. He said Sandulfr agreed and will be here this evening, probably in about an hour." Rath disappeared again.

Athair laughed at the thought of Sgrios acting as a diplomat, but his brother had obviously come through. Now that he thought about it, Sgrios had always done whatever needed to be done for the clan. Not once in all their long years together had he failed to act responsibly. During their hardest time, he had made sure the young had food available even when game was scarce. And when times changed, he tried to bring his knowledge of the world back to them even when Acair and Athair hadn't wanted to hear the news. Despite what they all thought, Sgrios had managed to be a productive member of the clan even when not with the

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clan.

An hour later, Sandulfr drove up the driveway in a van. With him were Maura, Sundair, and three other men from the Bear Clan.

"Welcome. I'm glad you have chosen to come." Unsure how much the Alpha would blame him for the problems at the ceremony, Athair greeted Sandulfr cautiously.

"It's in our favor to work together to get this matter settled." Athair relaxed as Sandulfr seemed willing to accept his innocence, despite his violent actions.

"Indeed it is. Have you been here before? If not, perhaps I can show you around." It was a risky offer because by making it, he was declaring his right over the territory. Yet he wanted to have the time to speak with Sandulfr, a chance for them to come to some understanding about what had happened.

"I have been here to speak with Ella, but not for many years. I see they have added onto the house. Perhaps you could show me the new portions after I pay my respects to the Keeper."

"It would be my pleasure." Athair was pleasantly surprised by how easily he could speak with Sandulfr. Perhaps they would be able to discuss the situation after all, and find a solution.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Pizza

Death and Rebirth

Dàn felt a hot, soothing wave of joyful emotion rush into him, and he smiled. He looked up and met Maura's intense gaze as she hurried toward him. She wore a long, flowing dress and a worried look. As she drew closer to the porch, Sgrios stepped between them, bringing her to a sudden halt.

"It's all right." Dàn said to his unexpected guardian. "Maura will not hurt me."

Sgrios gave him a searching look before leaving the two of them alone and heading off toward the woods for another walk. Three steps from the porch, he shifted into the shape of a black wolf and loped off out of sight.

"Maura, I'm glad you're here." Dàn's words felt weak compared to his emotions. He felt a connection to Maura along with his continued curiosity about her.

"I'm so very glad you're well." She studied his face and his many slowly healing scars. *Or are you? I saw your death. I saw it all.* Her eyes glistened with barely restrained tears.

I still live, although I am not yet sure why that is. They sat down on the bench, close but not quite touching.

I went to the spirits to ask if there was any way. One of them had a

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suggestion. Maura looked at him, and Dàn felt her helplessness from when she thought he would die, and somehow he knew the spirits had been her last hope.

Was it the young woman? She called to me and tried to tell me something during the ceremony. He wondered what the woman had been trying to tell him. Perhaps he would be able to go back and find out.

It was. How strange. She said to pray to Cernunnos, the Celtic god of rebirth. I did, and he answered me.

Cernunnos answered you? It had been a long time since he had thought of Cernunnos.

Yes. I felt him in my mind. He said he would care for you, as was right. Do you know what that means? Does that make sense to you?

No. It didn't make much sense. Cernunnos was a powerful Celtic god with many ties to other religions.

At the time, I feared you would die and I was only seeing to the care of your spirit. But Cernunnos said you would live.

He has saved my life once before, but I don't know why. Perhaps because I was born in Ireland. In truth, he felt the connection was more than simply the tie to his birthplace. His only brief meeting with Cernunnos had been both wonderful and terrible.

How did you survive the torture? I saw them kill you. I can see your fading scars even now.

I don't think I did. He hesitated to explain what he thought had happened, which at least made more sense now after she'd told him about her contact with Cernunnos. *I think someone, maybe Cernunnos, held me from death after I had fled life.*

Then you are blessed, indeed. Blessed by the gods.

She slid over on the bench and clasped his hand in her own. "I thought I had lost you even before I'd truly found you." She continued silently, *how did he save you the first time?*

He should have pulled away before she could touch him, but her touch soothed him and did no damage to his balance. Tendrils of mist stirred over their linked fingers. He tightened his hand over hers, accepting her gentle emotions and the soft touch of her spirit. *Cernunnos*

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sent me the dream that foretold the attack on our clan. It gave me time to get a few of the others to safety. But only a few. Even as a child, he had sensed the pure goodness of Cernunnos. To him, the god was all that was good and light in appearance and being. The dream premonition had been a compassionate gift that should have saved many more than it had. His own failure to warn more of the clan would haunt him as a reminder of his own inadequacies.

I'm sure you did all you could. Her understanding and compassion brushed over his old guilt, softening and soothing his remembered pain.

Not enough. My visions began to strengthen after that. They had strengthened so much that he had been nearly catatonic while he fought for control of his mind.

"You are not like the others. You are made of something different. You're stronger and meant for something more important."

"I know not who I am, nor do I know my own destiny." Between his visions and nightmares, Dàn knew the time was coming when he would have to learn the truth about his past and his heritage before searching for his destiny. Otherwise his choices may be taken from him and the future given to him may be disastrous for all others.

"I will watch over you while you watch over others."

"Is this your offer of friendship?" he asked, while almost afraid she would wish for more from him. More was not an option, at least not yet.

"For now."

It was more than he could hope for. "For now."

* * * * *

Steve snagged Hope's arm as she walked by. "I'm heading home. Call me if you need anything. Okay?"

"I will. I appreciate all you've done. Thank you." Hope hugged Steve tight. "Are you sure you don't want to stay for pizza? It should be here any time now."

"No." He hugged her back. He looked tired and worn thin, with all that he'd gone through today. "I just need to get some sleep in my own

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bed.”

“I understand. And things are pretty calm for now, even if the house is packed with Sandulfr and Athair’s clans.”

Steve stepped out and started to close the door behind him, but hesitated and looked back at Hope. “I like Athair. He’s good for you.”

“I’m glad you like him. He’s special in so many ways.” Steve’s acceptance of Athair was important to her. If she was lucky, they would both be part of her life from now on. Life would certainly be easier if the two men could get along.

“Is it like that?”

“Yes, I think it is. He makes me feel whole again.” He’d done more than heal her physical injuries. Athair truly felt like the part of her she hadn’t known was missing. Now that she could feel him and the connection between them within her mind, she felt complete.

“I’m happy for you.” Steve hugged her one last time, and then headed for his car.

Hope watched as he left. The pizza delivery car was on its way up the driveway, so she grabbed her purse to pay for it. The boy carried a stack of boxes up to the door.

“Come in. Please set them on the table.” She dug out a handful of bills to cover the cost.

“Sure thing, Ms. Carter. You have quite an order tonight.”

“Oh my, Jimmy?” Jimmy was the eldest son of James Jordan, who lived down the road a few miles. “I hardly recognized you. You’ve gotten so tall.”

“Dad says that if I want to buy my own car, I would have to get a job.”

“How long have you been delivering pizza?” It was hard to believe that James had a son old enough to drive. He was only about her age.

“This is my second week. I really like it so far. Some of my friends said people are mean to delivery guys, but I haven’t seen that. I get great tips.” He said the last with an outrageous grin, which made Hope laugh at his antics.

Hope paid Jimmy and tipped him well, then carried the pizza into

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the large formal dining room. Athair had hinted at the territorial nature of their kind when two clans come together. So half the boxes went to one end of the table, and half to the other. She'd already set out plates.

Next, she went in search of her guests. Granny declined pizza. She said she had some preparing to do for the meeting. Most of the younger members were in the den watching television. They had already smelled the food and were more than ready to dig in.

She checked the porch where she'd last seen Athair, and found Dàn and Maura deep in conversation.

Maura looked up as Hope opened the door. "Do I smell pizza?"

"Yes. It just arrived." Maura and Dàn sat close, reminding Hope of teenagers on a date. She was glad to see Dàn finally relaxing and healed. Even his white scar lines were nearly gone.

"What's pizza?" he asked.

"It's the best. Come on. You'll see." Maura held onto Dàn's hand and he looked content to follow where she led him.

"It's in the dining room. Help yourselves." Hope watched them go, while wondering where she might find Athair. She suddenly felt silly chasing all over the house looking for him. It would take some time to get used to her new skills. *Athair?* she called out mentally.

Yes, Hope? he answered immediately.

I just wanted to let you know dinner is ready. Hope smiled as she felt Athair's answer. He was carrying on multiple conversations, and she heard an echo of his comments to Sandulfr as he relayed the information about dinner.

Thanks, love. I hope you ordered plenty. Sandulfr said they didn't stop for lunch today. His group is starving. Athair paired the comments with a mental caress.

Where are you? She tried to send a similar show of affection back to him, and was rewarded with his feeling of pleasure.

I was showing Sandulfr your clinic. Is that okay?

Of course. She smiled at his use of "okay." He was adjusting well to her more relaxed language.

He thought it was amusing that you locked me up in the dog kennel. She

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shared his amusement over the memory.

Did he, now? So what do you think of him?

He is a man of honor. He has fought hard to get to where he is, and he deserves the leadership position he holds.

By fought, do you mean he had to fight to become leader? That was a scary thought and a good reminder that these were not average people.

In his case, yes. He took leadership by challenge. He defeated the previous Alpha in fair combat.

How terrible. She had been looking forward to meeting more of Athair's kind, but Sandulfr sounded rather intimidating.

He did it to stop the man from attacking a group of humans who had wandered into their territory.

Hope met the two men at the breeze way and led them back to the dining room. Several boxes of pizza and most of Sandulfr's people were gone.

Dàn answered her unspoken question, "They went back to the den to watch the end of the movie."

"Good. I was worried about it being too crowded in here." She looked around to be sure there were enough chairs for those who remained. Dàn and Maura sat at one end of the table, and Rath, Reultan, and Díon sat at the other. With them was another man Hope hadn't yet met. They were sampling different soft drinks by passing the cans between them.

Athair said, "I don't think I had the chance to introduce you to Leth when they got back." Leth stood at Athair's words and bowed slightly, managing to look formal despite being clad in leather from vest to boots.

"It's nice to meet you, Leth." She wondered at his choice of formality.

"And you as well." His manners perfect, Leth shook her hand and smiled.

"Leth is Sgrios' son."

Hope must have stiffened without realizing it, because Leth's smile widened and he chuckled. "Athair, you have ruined my good impression. Where is Daddy?"

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"He went for a walk," answered Dàn.

"You would be wise for you to remember your place, you young rascal," Athair chastised Leth, lightly cuffing the back of his head. Then he got pizza for himself and Hope.

"Of course, Athair." Leth dipped his head in meekness while managing to wink at Hope. Despite their similar looks, it was hard to relate this amusing young man to Sgrios in any way.

Hope smiled as she watched the clan's reaction to the taste of pizza. Dàn, especially. He closed his eyes and savored every bite. He seemed to have so many burdens and was still able to enjoy the simple pleasure of new flavors.

He was about to get a third slice at Maura's urging, when he sank back into his seat and a pained expression crossed his face. "Oh no." His words were whispered, but he still drew everyone's attention.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Maura asked him.

Dàn shook his head slightly. "Someone's been hurt. I think killed."

"Who?" asked Athair.

"I don't know. I'm sorry. I was trying to not see, but then I recognized the turn in the road." Dàn rested his forehead against his palm, his expression filled with painful regret.

"Is there time to stop it?" Athair asked as he stood.

Dàn's miserable look told what his words confirmed. "No. It's done. He's dead." He rose and with Maura at his side, led the way through the house and out onto the front porch.

"Show us where," Hope said as she, Athair, and Sandulfr followed Dàn and Maura down the steps and just past the end of the driveway. From there, Hope could easily see the county sheriff's car and two men standing next to the roadside.

"Wait here." Hope stopped. "I know the sheriff. I'll ask him what happened. That way, fewer people will be involved."

"That makes sense," Sandulfr said.

Athair nodded, and she felt his comforting presence within her mind as she walked around the bend toward the sheriff. She wondered what could have happened. Who'd been hurt? Why? What if it was Steve

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that Dàn had seen? She prayed it was a mistake and that no one was hurt. But as she got closer, she saw a car partially hidden at the side of the road.

Jimmy's car.

And next to the car, Sheriff Blackwell was laying a blanket over... probably Jimmy. Hope closed her eyes, thinking how happy Jimmy had been to have a new job and a new car. And now he had nothing.

Relief that Steve was safe warred with her sadness over Jimmy's death. Hope needed to find out what happened. "Sheriff?" she called.

Sheriff Blackwell turned and walked to meet her before she got too close to the scene. "Hope. What are you doing you here? I was just coming to see you."

"I thought I heard something, so I came to check. What's going on? Isn't that Jimmy's car?"

"Do you know why Jimmy was out here?"

"He brought our pizza for dinner. Was he in an accident? Was he hurt?"

"Hope, listen to me. Can you answer a few questions?"

She nodded as he led her to the other side of the department car. She tried to remember what Dàn had said. Maybe it was just an accident.

"When did Jimmy bring the pizza? Do you remember the time?"

"Not long ago. Maybe a half hour. But I don't think even that long. What happened to Jimmy? How could there be an accident, when he couldn't have been going very fast after just pulling out."

"Jimmy was not in an accident."

Hope's mind whirled around what the sheriff had implied. "What do you mean?"

"Have you seen any strangers lately?" He pulled a small notepad from his shirt pocket and flipped it open.

"Why?"

"There was a call reporting seeing a strange man stop the pizza car. The caller gave a good description."

"You mean someone attacked Jimmy?" How could that be? He was just a boy. Who'd want to hurt him?

"I don't know. I'm worried about you and Ella living out here by

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yourselves.” He flipped the pages again, this time stopping on one with scribbled writing on it.

Her mind flashed back to the night she had been attacked in Warren. Could there be any connection? “What was the description of the person?”

“It was a black haired, scarred man, dressed in black leather. He should be easy to identify, but I want you and Ella to lock up tonight and call dispatch if you see anything.” The sheriff snapped the notepad closed and met her gaze.

“I will. I promise.” Hope responded automatically.

Doubts beat at Hope as she went back. She blocked Athair from her mind as she considered what she had just learned. The description matched Sgrios. But he had no reason to hurt Jimmy. Why would he do such a thing? But then, he also looked like the one who had attacked her. Could it be that he really was that unstable and had become nothing more than a vicious animal? One that attacked and killed without reason?

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Tryst or Trust
Gift of Brothers

Athair tried to connect his mind to Hope's one more time, and again he failed. At first he thought she was too scared or confused to open herself to him. But now he knew she had locked him out on purpose. Why she would do so baffled him. She should know by now that whatever was wrong, he would help her make it right.

Hope walked back to the group slowly. When she came to them, she continued past and angled toward the house.

"Hope?" Athair questioned her quietly as he matched his stride to hers.

She glanced his way, but said nothing.

"Hope, talk to me. Who was it? Who was killed?"

"Jimmy."

"Who?" At least it hadn't been Steve. Athair thought she would have been relieved that her friend wasn't hurt.

"The boy who brought the pizza."

"Oh. Did you know him?" She must have, but he wanted her to open up. To tell him what was wrong.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. Does the sheriff know anything?" Was that why she had shut him out? Was it her way of dealing with her pain? With loss?

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Several steps later, she said, "Not much. Someone stopped Jimmy's car and killed him."

"What else?" Her clipped words told him that the sheriff had told her more.

"Nothing."

"There is more." Why was she lying? Although she had managed to block most of her emotions, Athair could still sense confusion and sadness. Both emotions were expected. So what was she hiding from him?

"There is nothing more."

They reached the house and Hope slammed inside, leaving him standing with the others. He took a moment to explain what little he knew about the incident to Sandulfr, and then he went after Hope to find out what was wrong and why she was lying.

He found her in her bedroom. "Hope, what are you doing?"

She looked up at him, her expression grim. She was loading a pistol.

"Who do you intend to shoot?" Did she know how to use a gun? It looked like she did. She slid the bullets into the gun's chambers with a sureness that told him she'd had training and at least some experience.

"The one who killed Jimmy." She looked up for an instant, and then her eyes darted away.

Are you ready to tell me who that is?"

"Oh Athair. I'm so sorry." She sank down onto the bed. "I..." Her words faded away without him learning anything. He tried to sense her thoughts, but her mind was still closed.

"Please Hope, you must tell me what you are thinking so we can face it together." He knelt before her and took her hands in his, uncurling her fingers and placing the gun on the night stand. "Tell me who you think killed the boy."

This time she met his gaze. "Sgrios."

"What did you say?" He couldn't have heard her correctly.

"I'm sorry, Athair. It was Sgrios."

"It couldn't have been." Sgrios had no reason to kill Jimmy. Maybe she had forgotten the traitors were camped nearby.

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"It was. There was a witness. And I think he was the one who attacked me, too. A girl died that night."

"It was not my brother." Where had this come from? Had she been afraid of Sgrios all this time?

"You said yourself he was poisoned by his guilt. Blame the poison if you wish, but you need to see what he's become. Sgrios has killed before, and he will again. He must be stopped."

"You can't mean this. I won't let you kill him. I doubt you could, anyhow."

"Oh, I didn't think about his powers." She blinked twice. "I'd probably need silver bullets, wouldn't I?"

"He did not kill that boy." Athair growled, but regretted it when she pulled away.

"Someone saw him stop Jimmy's car, and they called the police. The sheriff described Sgrios perfectly. Where was he when Jimmy left?"

"He went for a walk, but I don't know where. I was with Sandulfr, remember?" Someone had seen Sgrios stop the boy's car? Why would he do that?

"That gives you an alibi, but it doesn't help him. I don't suppose you know where he was a month ago, either." Surely she wasn't implying he was a suspect. Was she? He could settle the other issue quickly enough.

"Actually, I do know where he was. He was hunting."

"I guess you could say that. He was hunting humans. He was hunting *me*."

"You've forgotten that our home is halfway across the state. It took us three weeks to get here."

"And you're forgetting that Sgrios steals cars, but prefers motorcycles. He would have had plenty of time to kill that girl and get home to your family."

"You really think he did it." He knew it wasn't possible, but she did have a valid argument. One he needed to counter quickly, if there was any chance to save the situation.

"Yes, I do."

"It doesn't feel right. Tell me again what happened the night you

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were attacked." There had to be some way he could convince Hope of his brother's innocence.

"I followed a black animal into an alley, where I saw the girl who was killed. There were four men. One of them chased me down, beat me, but ran when Steve came looking for me."

"When you saw these men, were their features hard to discern?"

"Yes, I remembered details about the girl, but little about the men. All I saw was the black wolf-like animal and his green eyes shining back at me after the attack. As close as we were, I couldn't make out my attacker's face."

"He used an empathic blur. Some of us can manipulate emotions to interfere with perception." So Sgrios *was* innocent. How could he have doubted his brother?

"That's a useful skill for a predator." Her voice was condemning.

"Yes. But not for Sgrios." Somehow, he had to make her understand and believe. Their relationship was at stake. She could never trust him if he defended her attacker.

"I know you don't want to believe it but—" She sounded resigned.

"Listen to me. A couple of things you just told me clear Sgrios of at least one of these crimes. He did not attack you." Athair knelt before her and met her gaze. "Will you listen to why I say that without a doubt?"

"Yes. I'll listen."

"You said there were four men, right?" Athair clasped her hands in his to reassure himself that she wasn't afraid of him. Her suspicions showed him that their relationship still needed work. They had to have trust between them, but trust could be built brick by brick.

"Yes. Four."

"Sgrios hunts alone. This trip with Reultan and Díon is the first he's ever taken with others. He goes to escape our presence, to be alone or with wild wolves, but not to actually hunt. And certainly not to hunt humans."

"I see what you're saying, but I don't know what it proves."

"Then what about the empathic blur? Sgrios is incapable of using that skill. He can no longer use his empathy that way."

"Why not?" He felt her curiosity and was encouraged.

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"That is a precision skill of empathy and requires a delicate touch."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say."

"Think of the skill required to blur perceptions as being like that needed to sew fine silk. Instead of a needle, Sgrios holds an axe."

"So he's an axe murderer. That doesn't make him innocent."

"Hope, if he had tried to blur your perception, you'd be dead. There's nothing delicate or subtle about Sgrios' emotions. Can you understand that? You. Would. Be. Dead. His empathy is too potent to be used casually. All these centuries, he has locked his emotions behind that hard shell, to keep from accidentally hurting anyone. You aren't dead, so it wasn't Sgrios. As for Jimmy, I don't believe my brother killed the boy. But I intend to find out who did."

"Fine. I need to call Steve. I want to be sure he's all right."

"You do that while I see what I can learn about the boy's death."

Athair said nothing more and left Hope sitting alone on her bed.

She reached for the bedside phone and dialed Steve's number.

After only one ring, he answered. "Hello?"

"Steve, this is Hope." *And I just did something really stupid.*

"What's up? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I just wanted to make sure you got home without any problems." And have you tell me how to fix all my problems.

"Sure, why? Is something going on? Why do you sound like you're about to cry?"

"I- I just knew you were tired and wanted to be sure. I'll let you get some sleep." She was glad he had gotten home, but she didn't know how to tell him what she'd done to Athair.

"Wait. What's wrong? Did you and Athair have a fight?"

"I guess we did." She wiped a tear from her cheek and rubbed a hand over her eyes. Steve would know. He always knew.

"What about? Tell me what you fought over."

"His brother, Sgrios." She started to explain. "I thought—I accused him of the attack in Warren."

"You said this to Sgrios?"

"No. I told Athair," And she had hurt him. She'd shown him she

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didn't trust his family, and that she didn't trust him.

"How did he react?"

"He used logic to prove Sgrios couldn't have done it." Logic they could have used together, instead of fighting with each other.

"How horrible. I hope you dumped him for being so reasonable. I mean, how dare he use logic to prove his point? Really, the nerve—"

"All right. I get it. But I was scared and angry." And now she knew better. Even if Sgrios was a murderer, Athair was still who she wanted to be with.

"Seriously, you worked it out. Right?"

"Not really. I hurt him by questioning his brother." And she had to figure out how to make it up to him, to show him she was willing to fight alongside him instead of against him.

"That probably did bother him. I don't think he would let anyone hurt you. I've seen how he looks at you. It's like you are the most precious thing in his world."

"I know. I'll apologize to him as soon as he comes back. I'll find a way to make it right."

"You should. Oh no! I just thought of something."

"What?"

"Am I glad I came home!" He laughed. "Your make-up sex may blow away the whole house!"

* * * * *

Athair hurried back through the house and motioned to Sandulfr. Together, they went back outside.

"She told you more?"

"Yes. The boy was most likely killed by one of our kind. I plan to hide the evidence to protect the clans. I could use your help in this."

"I'm willing. Can you tell me what your mate knew?"

"She believed Sgrios killed the boy, but it isn't possible. Regardless of her so-called proof."

"I agree. If he was in the mood to kill, he would seek out more

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challenging prey. Probably my strays, since they're the current thorn in his side."

"You know Sgrios?"

"I've met him, but mostly I know his type."

They reached the bend in the road that partially hid the accident scene. They could see that another patrol car had arrived with two more officers. Jimmy's car and body were unmoved. Together they turned the corner and approached the scene.

The sheriff stood at the side of his car and yelled into a small black device tethered to the car by a cord piece. It was mostly hidden in his large hand. "I don't care what's going on! You get that ambulance here pronto!" Athair decided the handheld piece was some kind of communication device, similar to the telephone in the house.

He led the way toward the man. He didn't know present ways, but he did know people. Certain features never changed, like how to deal with those who felt they were in control.

The sheriff tossed the handheld back into his car and greeted them. "How can I help you?"

"I just wanted to offer my help." Athair he reached out his hand as if to shake. At the same time, he used his empathy to convince the sheriff of his honesty and how useful he could be. He felt Sandulfr reinforcing his empathy, but making no effort to take control.

"How do you suppose you could help?" The sheriff responded well.

"We're experts in animal attacks and heard that may be what you're dealing with." He used his own brand of empathic blur to encourage the sheriff to believe him and ignore that they turned up here without reason. "Can we see the body?"

"Yes. It's under the blanket. Looks to me as if there are both bite and knife wounds. The body is so damaged, it's hard to tell." The sheriff reached back into his car to answer the squawk of the radio, and Athair and Sandulfr walked toward the body.

Athair knelt next to Jimmy and flinched at the boy's terrible wounds. He had definitely been killed by a Valàfrn. To be so violent, the

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killer would be considered rogue. How would they clear Sgrios and cover up this crime?

"So you have any suggestions for disguising this?" Athair asked Sandulfr in a hushed whisper.

"I think a car accident would cover it well, but many memories will need to be adjusted. Especially those of our so-called witness."

"We will need to change the scene, as well. Can you get them away from here? Give me ten minutes."

"Sheriff," Sandulfr called out. "I believe I can help you gather evidence. I have some tracking skills and can show you where the trail leads away from the crime."

"Do you think we may find the beast?" The sheriff walked up to them.

"Perhaps. You should bring your deputies and weapons, in case it was a pack." The four started off into the woods, following Sandulfr's made-up trail.

How could he simulate an accident? The only way Athair could think of was to run the car into one of the large trees lining the roadway. He lifted the poor boy's mangled body into the vehicle, and climbed into the driver's seat. He looked for the safety belt, but found it cut in two. There was no time for any other options. The car started easily and Athair backed it up the road. Fortunately, Hope had explained about automatic cars as well as those with a stick shift. This one was an automatic. He backed quite a ways, but how fast would he have to go to make the accident realistic? Probably faster than he had driven in the field. He floored the gas pedal and the car spun its tires while the engine roared. He aimed the car at a thick tree a little way from the patrol cars. Two breaths later, the car smashed into the tree and plowed off to the side into another.

Athair fared worse than as the car. He and the boy's dead body were thrown through the windshield. Athair bounced to a stop some fifty feet before landing in a painful heap.

Wrecking the car had proven to be a far from intelligent idea. True, it had accomplished a reasonable fake scene they would force all to

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believe, but the pain he had endured was worse than he'd expected.

He lay on the ground gasping for air through his crushed lungs. The world swam around him. He must have a head injury as well. He tried to lift a hand to his throbbing skull, and found he'd broken his arm. He couldn't move it.

He tried to heal the worst of his injuries with magic. As it worked, he lay there waiting, thinking of Hope, and praying that Sandulfr hadn't gone too far.

Then Sgrios was at his side. "Just what the hell did you do?" His words were snarled savagely, as if Sgrios was considering finishing him off for his stupidity.

The throbbing agony in his head eased. Finally, he was able to take a deep breath as his lungs healed and reabsorbed the blood that had flooded them.

"You're a damned fool." Sgrios continued to berate Athair as he healed Athair's battered body. Athair looked up at his brother through the blue glow of magical energy.

"I had no idea it would be like that." Athair spoke slowly to get the words out on panted gasps.

"Why would you take any risks now that you have Hope? You would make her grieve for you already? You're lucky I followed your worthless hide out here."

Athair sat up. He was amazed by how strong Sgrios had become in his healing magic. In just moments, his broken body was put back to rights. *It was astounding.* "I needed to disguise the evidence."

"You did *not* have to do it this way."

"We need to keep our people hidden."

"Not at this cost. What if I hadn't been here? If one of us must risk our lives, please, let it be me. There is no mate to mourn me."

Athair clasped his brother's arm so he could stand. He relished the physical contact, and he knew Sgrios meant that if he died, there was a chance he would be rejoined with Cairistione.

"Many would mourn for you, brother." Athair wobbled and Sgrios braced him upright.

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"What's left to do?" Sgrios asked. "I'll help you finish."

"Only to convince the officers they were wrong about what killed Jimmy."

When Sandulfr and the officers returned, Athair encouraged Sgrios to stay out of sight while he and Sandulfr helped the policemen see the scene the way they needed to.

When they finished explaining how they saw the evidence, they were all in agreement that Jimmy had been in a terrible car accident and had died from his injuries.

As for the supposed witness, that had actually been a hoax. To get the sheriff on the scene quickly, the call had been made before Jimmy had left Hope's. There simply hadn't been time for anyone to see Sgrios stop the boy's car more than a half hour before the sheriff had arrived. Yet Sheriff Blackwell had admitted he and the others were in the next town attending a fellow officer's anniversary party when he'd received the call.

Someone had purposely incriminated Sgrios. They could all easily guess who it had been.

* * * * *

Dàn sat at the table in the kitchen. Maura placed a cup of tea in front of him, and sat down across from him with her own.

"You are not responsible for the boy's death," she told him again.

"I should have known. I should have stopped it."

"You did not kill the boy, so you are not guilty of any part of this crime," she insisted. "I know you don't hate me for what Bequulf did, but I saw it happen and did nothing to stop it. This is the same for you. It isn't your fault when others get hurt."

"I just wanted a few minutes of my life to be normal. But getting what I want usually means someone else is hurt. No pizza is worth a lost life."

"Some might argue about that." She smiled at him. "I know what you mean. I have seen visions where someone I loved was hurt and I could do nothing to change that. I can never do anything. You at least can

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save some lives and prevent pain. You should think of the good you do, not about the things you can't change."

Díon walked into the kitchen, interrupting their quiet conversation. "Hey, I forgot to give you this." He held out a long staff for Dàn to take. "It belonged to the Oracles before...well, I thought you should have it now."

As Dàn's fingers wrapped around the wood, he felt soft, gentle emotions fill him. But from where?

Díon explained, "Adhar has kept it all these years. She used it for years to help Cradh, but they don't need it now. She agreed that you would be the best one to have it."

Dàn stroked his hand over the smooth wood and the staff responded with soothing energy that flooded up his arm. The staff was sentient.

* * * * *

Hope dropped the curtain back into place. Finally, Athair was coming back up the driveway with Sandulfr and Sgrios. Athair smiled in response to something Sgrios said. Had he told Sgrios about her accusations? How would he react to her now?

Sandulfr stopped at his van, but the brothers came directly to the house. She stepped back the doorway of the den, which was now empty.

When Sgrios saw her waiting he said to Athair, "Why don't you go relax to regain your strength? I'll make sure everyone gets settled, and I'll be around for a while if you need me."

Regain his strength? Hope shifted her gaze from Sgrios to Athair and saw that he looked pale and his skin had a slight bluish tint. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Don't tell me that. Something went wrong?" She looked closer, and spotted drops of blood flecked over his shirt, many tiny flecks that Athair brushed off the fabric.

This time, Sgrios answered. "Your mate tried to beat some sense

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into his head with the trunk of a large tree. Regrettably, it didn't help."

"What on earth?" She caught Athair's eye, and noticed the fine white lines of recent scars which faded even as she watched.

"He wrecked Jimmy's car to create a convincing scene. But he forgot to buckle up."

Alarm flared in Hope's breast. Athair could have been killed. She wrapped her arms around his waist to feel his solid build and reassure herself of his good health. "Why weren't you hurt worse than this?"

"I was." Athair said and he held her tight. "Sgrios healed me."

"He's fine, but he may be weak for a while." Sgrios was about to step back out the door when he caught Hope staring at him. "And yes, I know. Don't worry about it. Everyone always thinks the worst of me. I am quite used to it by now." Sgrios closed the door quietly behind him.

"I really am all right. Can we sit down for a little while?"

"Sure." She took his hand, and they walked together to the couch.

"I'm sorry I scared you. It was a risk I shouldn't have taken."

"Our last words would have been a fight," she said, speaking her thought aloud.

"I want to apologize for that as well. You had good reason to fear Sgrios. The facts did make him appear guilty."

"No. I should have trusted you. You know him better than I ever will. I should have believed you when you said he was innocent. Please forgive me."

"I love you, Hope. I will forgive you for anything."

"How seriously were you hurt? Can I do anything to help?"

"We can try out your ability to heal with magic, if you want. Sgrios may have healed my injuries, but a sharing of energy would speed the return of my strength."

"How do I do it?" She turned sideways on the couch to face him.

"It's not very difficult. Some choose to rub their hands together to start, because the friction creates heat. Heat is energy. It isn't really needed, but it could help you while learning. Think of the power within yourself and picture it as a source. A ball of energy or a spring of power. When you feel that part of you expanding, draw it into your hands. That

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will allow you to direct it where you wish."

"I feel it! But what do I do?"

"Now we touch." He held out his hands. "And we share."

She reached to touch his fingers, but jerked back when a spark shot across the short distance separating them. "What was that?"

"That was you, my dear. Your energy is strong." He touched his hands to hers, and heat burned through her body. A burn that consumed, but didn't harm her. Athair closed his eyes in the pleasure. Was this her, or him, or both of them? Whatever was happening, it heated her desire and made her want to share more than energy with Athair.

"Steve made a comment on the phone about make-up sex that I thought sounded pretty good...."

"By make-up sex, you mean we make love to show that the fight is over and all is forgiven?"

"Yes."

His low chuckle was all the answer she received before his lips claimed hers.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Accepting Whatever Comes
Restless Waters

"Hope, give me a hand, please."

"Of course, Granny."

Granny said nothing more as Hope followed her back to her apartment. Once there, Granny went into her private kitchen, got a butter knife, and went to the library area. The library had an unusually cluttered look, with ancient books and scrolls scattered over her small desk, sofa, and coffee table.

"What can I help with?"

"I want you to help with the summoning of Bequulf." Granny opened a glass-fronted book shelf and slowly removed each heavy book and gently set them aside until the bottom shelf was empty. "Hand me the butter knife, please."

Hope passed the knife to her and watched as the older woman used it to pry up the bottom shelf, revealing a hidden compartment. Inside, Hope saw several books, five wooden boxes, a long, plain dagger, and a handful of smaller items in a woven basket.

Granny lifted out a book and a wooden box, and then replaced the shelf. She handed the book to Hope before struggling to her feet.

Hope studied the book. It was ancient and leather bound, but rather plain looking. The cover was a mottled brown with the letter "V"

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tooled onto the front. Did the “V” stand for Vali? Hope started to open it, but Granny stopped her by lifting it from Hope’s hands.

“First, we will need to prepare a place. We are not of magic like they are, so we must wrap the magic around us during a ceremony.” Granny stood in front of the card table. She placed the book on the table and motioned for Hope to stand next to her. “This will seem strange, but remember that we will still be in this room and will remain completely safe.”

“What will happen?”

Granny held out her hand, showing Hope four small stones. Each had a symbol on it. “These are rune stones. All rune stones are special. These can summon the Children of Vali to the Keeper. They were given to the First Keeper to gather the scattered clans and maintain contact with each group. Now I will use them to call to Bequif and summon him to the meeting.”

“Granny, why am I a part of this?”

“Because you will be Keeper when I’m gone. I’ve waited far too long to begin your training and today, I will begin to correct that mistake. Don’t worry, dear. I’ll tell you exactly what to do.” She picked up the book and stepped around to the opposite side of the table. She then laid down the book and opened it to about half way. “Place your hands on the table.”

Hope did as she was told.

“Close your eyes.”

She heard the words, and her eyelids immediately grew heavy and slid closed. The table was still under her hands, but it felt different. She explored the texture with her fingertips, feeling the deep grain of old wood instead of the papery feel of the folding table. Hope shifted her weight nervously and noticed that the floor had gone soft under her feet, unlike the hardwood of the library. It was soft, like they stood in a moss covered glen. With the image of the glen came the scents and sounds to go along with it.

“With the gifts of Odin’s wisdom in her hand, Eisa used the wisdom to choose the words. Eisa, daughter of Loki, used the words to call the magic. Eisa, she given to mortality, used the magic to summon the

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chosen. Eisa, my mother long gone before, passed the wisdom, the words, and the magic down through the ages to me. And to you."

Hope opened her eyes. Granny now looked the role of Keeper in a long, red silk robe. She also held a totally different and powerful presence. She was the Keeper. Hope and the Keeper now stood on opposite sides of a round wooden table. The center of the table was carved into a depression which held the four rune stones. Three lay with their runes down and hidden. The fourth lay face up, but she did not know what the rune said.

The Keeper spoke an ancient language and sprinkled fine dust over the one rune. Thin smoke curled up from the table. Again she said the words, and then Hope heard the Keeper speak the formal name Bequlf, son of Basqulf. The smoke spun in lazy circles.

Hope wondered if this was the extent of the ceremony. How did it work? Would Bequlf hear the words and come? She watched as Ella repeated the steps again. Something in the way the words sounded felt wrong, as if the ceremony wasn't working.

As the words were said a third time, Hope realized they were slightly different. This time they called to Belquavir, the shaman. This time, the smoke thickened and a soft voice answered the Keeper.

"Keeper, I have answered your call."

"A meeting must be set," the Keeper said bluntly. "A truce must be discussed"

"If it is your will." Belquavir sounded reluctant.

"It is. Come to me. And bring Bequlf." The Keeper's voice rang with command, and obvious disapproval for Bequlf.

"He will not go there."

"Then where?"

"The park, where we once liked to walk."

"Yes. The park, at noon." The Keeper's voice softened.

The Keeper swept up the runes into her hand. The smoke thinned, and Hope saw the card table and the library. Hope touched her fingers to the center of the table, almost expecting to find a depression there. But of course, there was none. The table was as flat and flimsy as ever.

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She looked up in surprise when The Keeper slammed the book shut with enough force to blow dust from the ancient pages.

"What's wrong?"

"That-that disrespecting miscreant. How dare he? Just who does he think he is to ignore a summons?"

"If Bequlf didn't have to answer, why would Belquavir?"

"Bequlf should have answered. A summons is considered an honor, because it provides an individual with a voice in the Keeper's records. I usually don't need to use the summoning runes in present day, because I can telephone those I need to contact much more easily. But to use the stones adds honor to a call. In this case, it was more dignified than yelling across the back field. Bel at least recognized the honor that was given."

"What did Belquavir mean when he mentioned the place where you used to walk?"

"Bel and I were friends at a time when we both needed a friend. It was after George died that I moved our family to this place. I wanted to be closer to a strong clan. Bel's mate had also died, and we had grief in common." The phone rang, and Granny lifted the receiver to answer.

Hope listened shamelessly, but Granny said little on her end of the conversation. The call was short and she hung up after only a minute.

"That was Barbara, from next door. She is at the hospital with Colleen. The poor girl broke her arm. Barb called to let me know that Samantha is riding over to spend the day here."

"This isn't the best day for you to babysit."

"No, it's not. But you know Sam won't be any trouble. She can stay here when we go to the park."

"When will she get here?"

"Any minute now."

* * * * *

Samantha LaBarron galloped through the woods on her pony, Thunder. She leaned low over his back to encourage him to go faster.

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Guilt didn't slow her at all, even though she had promised to ride directly to their neighbor's house. Instead, she was running Thunder on what she privately called their race track, which was actually just a narrow trail that looped around the wooded hill between the two homes.

Today, she and Colleen had been planning to ride together, but Colleen and their mom were on their way to the hospital instead.

Really, it was Thunder's fault. With his typical sense of humor, he had started a game of tag when he should have come to her whistle. Colleen already had her young mare, Sundance, saddled and was warming her up in the paddock. Sunny got excited by Thunder's game and threw Colleen off with a couple of bunny hops.

Sam patted Thunder's shoulder with a couple of hard slaps in forgiveness for his earlier crimes.

Colleen broke her arm in the fall, but she seemed more embarrassed by being thrown in such a silly way. Mom and Colleen left for the emergency room and Sam offered to stay and take care of the horses. Mom had only agreed after she promised to go to Aunt Ella's house after feeding the animals.

If she hurried, she could get to Aunt Ella's in about twenty minutes, but that was a very fast ride. If she took her time, she would be there in about an hour. Sam figured no one would worry about her until afternoon, so she had plenty of time to enjoy a good long ride.

She loved the race track, and so did Thunder. She leaned lower over his neck and hugged him as he ran in a slow canter. His love of the run brought a smile to her lips. He would happily canter around the track for three or more laps before he started to tire.

He reminded her of her favorite books about the black stallion. She laughed. Thunder was hardly a black stallion type. But he had that kind of heart. And heart was more important than type any day. Thunder was a paint colored, pony gelding with a heavy body and strong legs. In everything but color he looked like a Welsh Cob. Deep down though, Sam knew he had the heart of an Arabian Stallion. Maybe even a black one.

* * * * *

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Athair sat down next to Sandulfr on the back porch, using the opportunity to study Sgrios as they discussed the upcoming meeting. Sgrios looked as he always did, uneasy in his own skin and anxious to be away from the strain of socializing.

Even with his brother's unease, Athair could easily forgive Hope's accusations. He knew Sgrios was capable of killing and would do so without a second thought in the heat of battle. Despite always appearing on the verge of explosion, Sgrios actually was tightly controlled when around others. He restrained his emotions and actions to avoid harming those around him. But was he, after these long centuries, finally losing his battle for control? Although Athair considered Sgrios cleared of the crimes, the boy's murder had made him wonder if something might cause Sgrios to kill an innocent.

No, Sgrios wouldn't lose his honor again, not like that once so long ago.

"Did you speak with Dàn?" Sgrios asked.

"Yes, but he didn't tell me anything we don't already know,"

Athair answered.

"Do you think he knows more that he's not telling us?" Sgrios sat slightly apart from Sandulfr, but it was obvious they had been talking for some time.

"I do. All he said was that we should expect Bequulf to cause more problems." Dàn had been more blunt than that. As even tempered as Dàn usually was, he had grown angry at the mention of Bequulf. "What is the plan if Bequulf becomes a problem?"

"If he starts anything, we will finish it," Sgrios growled.

"How many will he have with him?" Athair studied Sgrios more closely. There was a stillness to him that was unnerving.

"About a dozen," Sandulfr said.

"Against how many of ours?" Athair puzzled over Sgrios' odd behavior. He almost seemed at ease, relaxed. "Will we be able to hold our own?"

"I brought five with me." Sandulfr named three men to whom they had not yet spoken.

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"We have the five boys with us. That makes our numbers about even," Sgrios said with a satisfied rumble. So that was what had him so relaxed. He was battle ready, accepting that he would soon have the chance to expel his pent up powers.

"Hopefully it won't come to open battle." Sandulfr showed more optimism than Athair had for the upcoming events.

"If you don't mind my asking, why doesn't Bequlf just challenge you for leadership in open combat?" Athair asked.

"Because he would lose," Sandulfr answered.

Neither Athair nor Sgrios responded to his egotistical comment, but they shared a look that Sandulfr must have interpreted as disbelief.

"I defeated his father before I was not much more than an adolescent. Bequlf has never had the skill to defeat me in a fair battle."

"If he can't win a challenge fight, then why does he continue to instigate trouble for your clan?" Athair asked.

"Only he can answer that. I suppose enough of the others support him that he believes he has the right to be Alpha. But if the clan truly wanted him, I would step aside. In fact, I would leave the clan and the area. I could never follow where he would lead."

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Taking a Stand by Force if Needed
Treacherous Voice

Athair watched Ella graciously welcome each member of the Bear Clan by name as they arrived at the secluded picnic area for the meeting. She treated the supporters of both Sandulfr and Bequlf with equal respect. Her only sign of distress came when Belquavir bowed to her. Athair stood close enough to hear the man's quiet words.

"Ella, I am sorry to bring these troubles to your doorstep. Please forgive my part in this."

"Bel, please don't apologize. It is the follies of the young. We can only hope that in time, they will gain our wisdom."

"Even with time, some do not have enough knowledge to choose the best path."

"Truth beyond knowledge, and wisdom beyond years. That is the blessing of age. The acceptance that we are merely leaves cast upon rushing waters."

"I miss days spent with you, Ella."

"I feel the same." She turned the conversation back to their current situation. "Is there any hope for success on this day?"

"I wish I could say yes, but Bequlf is deserving of his chance to lead. Sandulfr has brought this upon himself."

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"So it is a matter for the Bear Clan. Why has the Eagle Clan been brought into the middle of this private conflict?"

"They were only asked to pass a test of faith, which they failed." Belquavir tensed and stepped away from Ella. All warmth dropped from his expression. "How do you wish to begin?"

Athair didn't hear Ella's answer. Hope dug her fingers into his arm and stood tensely staring at the group around Bequlf.

What is it? Athair asked her silently.

Who is that man in the center? She locked her eyes on him.

He followed her gaze. *Bequlf. Why?*

He's the one who attacked Dàn and Rath? Hope trembled against his side.

He slipped an arm around her in support. *Yes. He and several of the others.*

He is the one who attacked me. Sgrios and Bequlf shared enough features that their resemblance could be confusing in a dark, terrifying situation, especially with the use of empathic blur.

That doesn't surprise me. Hopefully he will soon find himself before the Council for his crimes.

I'm sorry that I accused Sgrios of my attack. I was wrong to doubt your judgment of him. Although he sensed her heartfelt thoughts, he noticed that she never took her eyes from Bequlf.

That's quite all right, Hope. Your concerns were well founded. Sgrios is a dangerous man capable of killing. But he also clings to remnants of his old ways. And he will always be my little brother.

I wish I had known Sgrios before, because he scares the dickens out of me as he is now.

I know it's hard, but you can still see the man who was Donnchadh. You just have to look beneath his pain and anger. Admittedly, that is not an easy task.

Do you think Bequlf will try something? Hope still stared at the traitor and Athair searched her emotions to see how she was holding up under the strain.

Dàn thinks he will. Athair shared his pride in her as he felt the controlled anger causing her to tremble. Anger, not fear.

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Hope watched Bequlf laugh at a comment made by the woman at his side. He stood grouped with his supporters for quite some time before turning to finally face those waiting for his attention.

He stared at Hope with a malicious grin twisting his lips. "I know you, but from where?" Suddenly, his green eyes widened in recognition and his glowing gaze confirmed her own memory. They were the chilling eyes of her attacker.

Bequlf moved closer with an intimidating, stalking gait. "So we meet again. It would seem the fates are laughing at us."

"If the fates have any sense of humor, they are howling in glee." Hope straightened and faced Bequlf squarely.

"Why are you at this meeting?" Bequlf asked with a puzzled look.

Ella looked surprised and a bit worried. "She is my granddaughter. She will be the next Keeper. When did you meet Hope?"

"When he attacked and tried to kill me," Hope said. Athair's hand came to rest on her shoulder, and she was sorely tempted to back into his support. But she wouldn't allow herself to run from this monster again.

"He what?" Ella's voice hardened, and she glared at Bequlf.

"She saw something she shouldn't have seen," Bequlf said without explaining more, as if he could have a valid reason to hunt humans.

"I saw him and his men kill a young woman. They were hunting humans." Hope lifted her chin and challenged him to argue the point, to deny his actions.

"Things are not always as they appear," Bequlf answered enigmatically.

"Just what does that mean? Are you saying I didn't see you attack Sarah Collins? Or are you saying she wasn't killed?"

"I'm saying you should mind your own business. Or will you need another lesson before you learn to stay out of my way?"

"Perhaps if I didn't have assholes like you attacking me for no reason, I could live a nice quiet life," she snapped. "But *no*. You think you can walk all over other people. Well, I'm though being a doormat. So if you still have anything more to say to me, say it now."

Bequlf growled low in his throat in response to her shouted

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accusations. His face darkened and he stepped toward her as if to attack her right in front of everyone.

Hope almost stepped back, but she was so livid at all the problems Bequulf had caused and all the people he'd hurt, she stood her ground. Athair tensed beside her, and his hand tightened on the shirt at her back. She fought his effort to tug her backwards. He intended to meet Bequulf, who was now right in front of her. Athair's strength reinforced her own courage. She was in the right and had no need to take any crap from Bequulf. Not now, or ever again.

"You are walking a dangerous path, little girl." Bequulf's voice lowered to a rumble and she realized he was trying to use his empathy on her. Trying, but not succeeding.

"Does that mean I'll have to bite you again?" Hope mocked Bequulf, even as he seemed about to wring her neck. She pressed her hand to Athair's hip, restraining him when he would have pushed past her to confront the other man. She could easily feel his protectiveness and knew he would be happy to defend her if the need arose. But she needed to show Bequulf that she would not back down, that she was no longer afraid of him.

Bequulf's hands clenched and his face reddened with anger. The quick tensing of his muscles was the only warning Hope had before Bequulf pulled back his fist to punch her.

The blow never landed. Belquavir interrupted Bequulf's swing by spinning his nephew off balance. "Think, boy," he growled at Bequulf, giving him a hard shake and pulling him away from the others. Whatever the older man said in silence didn't sit well with Bequulf.

Athair wrapped his arms around Hope, and she leaned back against him. He reveled in the contact. He would have enjoyed tearing Bequulf apart for threatening Hope and he would have. Even though she had been courageous enough to stand before the man's raised fist, Athair had still pulled her back. He wished Belquavir had been slower to pull the cur out of his reach. Still, there surely would be other times he could repay what was still owed.

He was proud of Hope's courage in standing up to Bequulf, but he

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was concerned how Bequlf might retaliate for his loss of face at this gathering. Bequlf and Belquavir now stood apart and appeared to be having a heated mental debate, reminding him of two bears in a staring match. Talking them into a truce at this point seemed very unlikely. At least the failure could not be blamed on Hope. Bequlf had been the one to attack her, and now that his actions were public, he could be brought before the council for his heinous crimes. Athair reached for Hope's mind and shared his pride with her. *You are wonderful.*

I was terrified

It didn't show, not even empathically. Athair rubbed his hands down Hope's arms, sending her a tingle of energy. *Are you all right now?*

He allowed his pride to soothe her, sliding his hands over her skin until her gooseflesh disappeared and she relaxed against his body.

Yes, but I don't think I helped our plans to arrange a truce.

I don't believe an honest truce was possible anyway, given the situation. Although, he had figured that the traitors would agree to the truce, and then break it.

I still feel responsible for making it less likely. What can be done about Bequlf? What will keep him from hurting anyone else?

He should be brought before the council for his crimes. Sandulfr suggested it also for his attack on Dàn and Rath. But it will probably do little good. Bequlf and Belquavir have many friends among the ruling council. With the ease of communication in current times, they have spent a good bit of energy strengthening their position over Sandulfr.

You mean they might get away with it?

He hated hearing the disappointment in her voice. *Perhaps some of it, but surely not all of their crimes.* He wasn't really sure that the traitors would have any real punishment, but he needed to comfort Hope. He would do anything to take the frown from her face.

Then he realized Ella was about to begin again.

* * * * *

Dàn paid little attention to the meeting as it progressed. Instead, he

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reviewed every possible future he could see while trying to find one that wouldn't end in despair. Each change he considered left someone dead. And never one the world would be better without.

The primary vision of the future he could find no way to avoid flew through his mind again. It was a vision of Bequlf pulling a knife and throwing it. This time he threw it into Hope's chest, killing her instantly. With it came the knowledge that both Athair and Sgrios would be lost when she died, as well as the line of Keepers. And with the loss of the Keepers, all of the Valàfrn clans would fall into chaos.

Then the vision played again, but instead of Hope the knife was thrown at Sandulfr. Even Sandulfr wouldn't survive a direct hit from that blade. In typical Bequlf style, its edge was coated in silver flakes. Even a small cut would fester until completely cleaned and a mortal wound would indeed be fatal. This view showed Sandulfr dead, and was followed by the knowledge that Bequlf would be accepted as Alpha even if the fight wasn't a formal challenge.

Too many details could still affect the outcome. Too many factors remained unknown. He continued to try out scenarios by planning to interfere in one way or another. And with each possibility, Dàn concentrated on the future with that change. Each and every one was no better than if he had stayed out of the scene all together. Someone always died.

Over and over he watched as a different life was lost to this senseless situation.

Then he heard a little voice whisper another option. A possible way for him to save everyone, and a promise of one who would watch over him.

* * * * *

Athair held Hope in his arms until the groups began to settle at the picnic tables. Ella made an effort to calm everyone enough to perhaps at least talk about the possibility of a truce between Sandulfr and Bequlf. After they took their seats and had a chance to relax, she began by asking

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each person to tell their side to the situation.

Sandulfr was asked to go first. He stood up between the benches. "I have no quarrel with anyone here. I seek only to resolve the matter and regain peace among us."

Athair was impressed by Sandulfr's sincerity. He truly wished no ill will on Bequlf and still considered him a clansman, despite Bequlf's actions against them all.

"Bequlf, do you have anything to add?" Ella asked, as Bequlf was speaking quietly to the woman in his group.

"Yes, I do. I understood this to be a truce meeting, but I thought it was between the Bear Clan and the Eagle Clan. There is no disagreement between me and Sandulfr. But the Eagle Clan has slighted and attacked us one time after another and I demand satisfaction for their insults."

Ella seemed as surprised as Athair was by Bequlf's tactics. He hadn't thought that Bequlf would claim Sandulfr as an ally.

"Bequlf, will you please be more specific in your claims of insult?" Ella prompted.

"When the Eagle Clan came into Lakeside, they were asked to pass a test of faith. Their elder, Athair failed that test and attacked our Shaman. Then the other two joined the fight and aided Athair's escape from justice. Since Athair committed a crime, he should have been subject to our laws. He fled that judgment."

"Please continue."

"When they were tracked and captured, the two younger ones resisted custody and injured several of my men. They refused to help us apprehend Athair despite our questioning. Then the other elder, Sgrios, who has long been considered a rogue, attacked and killed several members of our clan. He is a murderer and should be held accountable for these crimes. The Eagle Clan has shown a history of violence and should not be allowed to be free to continue their atrocities."

Athair stared in wonder at the villain-turned-prosecutor. Bequlf had laid out the case against them so well that even Athair could consider himself guilty. Bequlf had neatly turned the situation around to portray Athair and Sgrios as murdering lunatics and himself as an innocent, law-

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abiding citizen. At least he had only accused Rath and Dàn of delaying justice. Little could be done to them, even if Bequlf's claims were believed.

"Athair, do you wish to counter these claims?"

"Yes, I do. Not only are these allegations inaccurate, they are completely false."

Bequlf started to interrupt Athair, but Ella stopped him before he could cause more problems. "Bequlf, please wait. Athair must be given time to state his viewpoint in this matter."

Bequlf glared at her, but remained silent.

"Athair, will you please explain your side of the faith ceremony?" Ella asked.

"Rath, Dàn and I agreed to complete the ceremony. It is true that I failed to complete the ritual, but the reason I did so was because I was poisoned, which caused me to appear out of control."

"Why did you attack the shaman?"

"I cannot say. I remember very little, except the pain caused by the poison." This was all true. His memories were vague and distorted.

"Do you have any evidence that you were poisoned and not simply responding to the ritual and failing the test?" Ella asked carefully. She was afraid for him, and Athair could feel her anger at the injustice that might result.

"I do not. I have only my own knowledge of what is in my heart. I had no reason to hurt any of the clan we had approached, in hopes of building an association."

"I have evidence," Hope said, interrupting Athair. "I drew blood from Athair when he was ill. It should contain the poison, wouldn't it?"

"Lies!" Bequlf shouted. "She lies for him."

"You accuse the next Keeper of impeding justice between the clans?" Ella asked clearly.

"No. I accuse Athair's mate of lying to protect him. She should never be given the chance to be Keeper. She is not impartial to the clans. All tradition states that the Keeper must remain apart from the clan to maintain honesty in the Keeper records. She will never be able to report as a neutral party. I make a claim of improper bonding and request the

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council be called to pass judgment.”

“The council has already been called. The accusation can be heard when they arrive,” Ella said in a calm voice.

“What?” Bequulf shot to his feet. “This meeting is only a pretense of justice! You have no right to call yourself our Keeper with this lack of honesty.”

Dàn stood up, as did the others, to face Bequulf’s rage on an even footing. Belquavir tried to calm Bequulf and seemed upset over his maligning of Ella. The scene was playing out as he had envisioned, but he felt as if it were occurring in slow motion. Dàn knew what was coming and needed to be prepared for it. He concentrated on centering his energies even as he watched the drama playing out before him.

“Careful, boy.” Belquavir said quietly to Bequulf as he pulled his nephew away from Ella. Bequulf fingered the knife at his side, as if for reassurance. Hope stepped to Ella’s side and placed herself between her grandmother and Bequulf.

Sandulfr joined Belquavir in attempting to calm Bequulf. “Isn’t this what you wanted? The charges can be heard by the council. Justice can be done.” Sandulfr placed his large body in front of Bequulf, as if hoping his imposing presence would draw Bequulf’s attention.

It worked.

“You have been in league with them the whole time!” Bequulf bellowed. “You let them enter Lakeside. You threatened me for seeking information from the young ones. You joined them and pushed for this meeting. You have betrayed your own clan.”

Before Sandulfr could reply, Bequulf drew his knife and slashed at him. The attack caught Sandulfr unprepared and the blade cut deeply into his forearm. The next swing would have been fatal, except Athair grabbed Bequulf’s arm and twisted the weapon from his grip.

Athair took the knife and held it to Bequulf’s throat while he gripped Bequulf’s arm behind his back. Bequulf snarled and raged, sounding more demented than Athair had under the influence of poison.

“Calm yourself, or I *will* be facing a murder charge.” Athair said quietly.

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Instantly, and unnaturally, Bequf relaxed in Athair's arms.

Dàn knew this was a magical skill Athair possessed. He had learned the technique when Molach and Romach had colic shortly after coming into his care. Usually the recipient went to sleep immediately, but Bequf only calmed enough to regain a semblance of control.

But it wasn't to last.

"You will regret this," Bequf threatened. "Perhaps I should let your lady pay your debts." He stared coldly at Hope, who was close but not within reach.

Athair tightened his grip on Bequf.

Dàn knew Athair was tempted to end the conflict with a single slash of the knife. But he wasn't the kind of man who would take a life lightly. Now, if Sgrios were in his place, the situation would have a very different ending.

"I see the first thing you did for her was heal her scars," Bequf snarled. "I would have, too. Looking at them would have made any relationship, even just sex, impossible."

"You would be wise to stop talking." Athair moved the knife ever so slightly, drawing a fine line of blood across Bequf's throat.

Bequf's voice dropped lower. "When I saw her scarred body, I made up my mind to kill her and take her flesh. Perhaps I still will."

Dàn shuddered at the thought of this monster on the loose. He *chose* to kill and eat human flesh. That he existed was beyond Dàn's understanding. How could anyone become so evil?

Bequf smiled at Hope. "And I must thank you for the delivery meal last night. You may have gotten the pizza, but what I got was much tastier. Perfect for the carnivore in me."

"Oh my god." Hope gasped. "Jimmy."

"You knew him? That is even better." Bequf licked his lips, as if remembering a fond taste.

The moment had arrived. Dàn centered his powers as Bequf slid his free hand under his jacket. In one swift movement, two of his men grabbed Athair. Bequf pulled out a gun and shoved himself away from his captor, sustaining only a tiny nick to his neck.

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He turned on Sandulfr. Perhaps he thought to end the power struggle once and for all. Sandulfr had placed himself in front of Ella and Maura, who had been tending his wounded arm.

Dàn, Rath, and Leth stood between Hope and Ella. Dàn prepared himself for what was to come. Both Leth and Rath started toward Athair, thinking he would be the target of Bequľf's rage. Dàn tried to stop them, but it was too late.

Bequľf waved the gun in their direction and fired wildly.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Strength from Within
Cresting Tide

Maura watched Dàn fall as the bullet ripped through him. She screamed and ran toward him, but stumbled and fell on Ella's porch steps. *How the hell had she gotten there?*

"Damn you Dàn!" Maura called. She sagged across the steps, and Sandulfr laid a sympathetic hand to her shoulder. She shrugged free of his grip and wiped tears from her eyes. Maura started back in the direction of the meeting place on foot. Their van was still at the park.

Had her future with Dàn already ended? Were memories of his death all she would have of him, either in her prophecies or in her presence?

Maura shook off her dark thoughts, although she feared what she would find.

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Athair pushed Leth aside, but not fast enough. He felt the impact of the bullet as it tore through Leth's shoulder. Two of their cars were only a few feet away, so Athair used one for cover. He watched Rath drag Dàn behind the other. Dàn must have been shot as well.

With a groan, Leth slouched against the side of the car. Athair

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pulled his vest aside and examined his wound. Leth struggled to sit up, but only succeeding in obscuring the injury.

"Sit still, Leth," Athair ordered.

Leth's pain filled eyes met Athair's gaze. Athair nearly laughed. Although Leth was obviously in pain, his anger made him struggle against Athair's aid. Now that he was still, Athair got a good look at the wound. The bullet had gone clean though, and Leth was already beginning to heal. Athair concentrated his own healing energy to help speed up Leth's recovery. Within a few minutes, both the entrance and exit wounds were closed, leaving only the fading scars and drops of splattered blood as proof of his injury.

* * * * *

Hope found herself sitting in the driver's seat of the Bug. One moment she was about to be shot, and the next she sat here with her heart pounding about a million miles an hour.

How had she gotten here? Why? What happened to Athair? What about everyone else?

She started the car with the spare set of keys she kept in the glove box, and backed out of the already open garage. Then she spotted Sandulfr and Maura beside the porch.. Granny was coming down the steps, carrying a staff.

"Get in," Hope yelled as she pulled close and stopped to let them climb in. It was a squeeze, but within moments she had the car tearing down the road to the park.

Granny sat beside Hope and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. She said nothing, but she felt Granny's fear. She too had seen Dàn fall under the gunfire. She was afraid to ask how they had all wound up back at the house. Or what they would find on their return.

"Oh shit." The words slipped quietly from Hope as she saw the isolated storm over the park. Her hand shook as she shifted gears to make the turn, but she only slowed enough to hold onto the road.

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"You'll pay for that one," Sgrios growled.

"Like I paid for the last time?" Bequlf taunted Sgrios with words while teasing him by stepping close, only to have one of the others hit him from behind.

"You paid with the lives of your men that day, but the price will be your own today. Which of these will be lost with you?"

"I wouldn't bet on anyone of mine dying." They circled warily around each other, while Bequlf's men took pot shots at Sgrios with each turn.

"Do you want to die as a man, or an animal?" Sgrios shrugged off a poorly thrown punch aimed at his back, and never took his eyes from his true opponent. Bequlf would want the glory of defeating him, Sgrios intended to use his arrogance as a weapon.

"Since I will not be the one to die, maybe you should answer that question." Bequlf held his knife in one hand, and swiped lazily at Sgrios.

"You value the strength of your men too much." His talk and toying was all a distraction. Sgrios was ready to move on to the main event. "They'll not be able to save you from justice."

"They do not face you. I do."

"So, this is private?" Sgrios knew the fool would jump at the chance to fight him one on one. But surely even Bequlf had better sense than that. Or at least, he should have better sense.

"Yes."

Sgrios shifted forms, pouncing and dragging Bequlf several feet. Then he leapt off Bequlf and darted into the woods.

Bequlf followed, but his minions were distracted by Sundair leading the others, intending to apprehend them.

Sgrios led Bequlf deep into the forest to be sure they wouldn't be interrupted. Then he turned and attacked. Both as wolves, they fought viciously. But neither was able to put down the other. When Bequlf flashed to human form and pulled his long knife, Sgrios countered that move with his own matched blades.

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Sgrios dodged a slash to his chest and faked a blow toward Bequľ's upper body. His other blade cut a deep gash in Bequľ's leg.

Bequľ shifted back to wolf form and ran for a side path and perhaps a chance at survival. For Sgrios had no intention of letting him live to reach trial. He was guilty of too many crimes, yet had many supporters who would recommend leniency.

* * * * *

Athair helped Leth to sit up as his strength slowly returned. Leth was a pale, but steaming mad as well. Both crouched to get a better view of what was happening. Leth fingered his deadly knives. When he would have leapt from behind the car to jump back into the battle, Athair restrained him a moment longer.

"We will be aiding Sgrios, will we not?" Leth challenged.

"Of course we will. But we will also go in with a plan," Athair tried to explain.

"What plan? I didn't come here to watch him die." As if Athair would ever ask Leth to watch his father die.

"I know you didn't, but I won't let either of us get in his way, either." Athair scanned the scene and what he found was not too discouraging. "Your father has done as I expected, and taken Bequľ from the battle. Now we must rally the others and catch Bequľ's supporters before they decide to flee."

* * * * *

Sgrios stalked him along the path. The fool probably thought to set some trap. Bequľ should know better than to continue the fight on even ground.

Crash! Some large animal pounded toward him through the low brush. Sgrios barely jumped out of the way as a paint pony lunged from the undergrowth, onto the path. Wild-eyed with terror, the pony stood trembling. Its small ears flicked forward at Sgrios, then back before it

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turned and pushed back into the brush. There on the pony's flank Sgrios saw the long gouges of a wolf bite. And then the reason for the empty saddle sank in.

Bequlf had a hostage.

Sgrios rushed to follow the pony as it retraced the track it had just run. When it slowed, he pushed past it and continued on the visible trail. There stood Bequlf, with a small girl held in front of him like a shield. As if traumatizing a child would gain him freedom.

"Let her go." Sgrios met the girl's wide, scared eyes. Bequlf hadn't even bothered to control her mind.

"She goes when I go," Bequlf growled over the child's head.

"She'll be your downfall, not your freedom."

The girl whimpered against Bequlf's palm and twisted, trying to pull away. Her eyes begged Sgrios for mercy. Mercy he no longer had to give.

"Throw down your blades," Bequlf demanded, thinking that would give him a better chance.

Sgrios threw his knives to the side and moved a step closer to Bequlf. He had no need for the blades. His emotions, like his other weapons, were still well concealed. He let Bequlf think he had the upper hand while waiting for the best time to strike.

"See? That wasn't so hard. And I thought you'd be hard to beat." The girl looked up, but not in defeat. She was actually angry that he had given in to Bequlf so easily!

Sgrios said nothing, but shifted his feet and inched closer.

"Don't take it too badly. We all have a weakness."

For once, Bequlf was right. Each man did have a weakness, and it was the fastest way to defeat. But he was wrong in thinking Sgrios wouldn't risk the life of a child. She was only a useful distraction. Another tool in their current battle.

"I have often felt you belonged more with us than against us. You would do well to use your powers to seek pleasure, instead of barely scraping by in this life."

Now that offer was unexpected. The scum actually thought he

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might join them. And the choice did have its appeal. To be able to rape and pillage his way through this world. To be without judgment or guilt. But it was far too late for him to ever be free of guilt. It was true he had few qualms about killing, but he still held honor, or the pale remnants of his honor. He clung desperately to that tiny piece of his heart that was still uncorrupted.

But Bequlf didn't understand that. Few could. Bequlf took his hesitation as consideration and stepped closer, loosening his grip on the girl. "Think of it! We could be unstoppable. Together, we could lay whole towns to waste."

Sgrios laughed. "Been there. Done that. Taught the class." The girl closed her eyes to shut him out. She obviously thought he was joining Bequlf.

With a show of mettle, she bit down on Bequlf's hand and shoved herself free, stumbling down the path and screaming for help. She fell, but kept crawling away.

Sgrios was impressed by the girl's spirit. He leapt at Bequlf and knocked him to the ground. Bequlf's knife was torn from his hand as they struggled for leverage. Just as Sgrios grabbed one hand, Bequlf reached one of Sgrios' discarded blades. He thrust the knife up between Sgrios' ribs with a horrible, ripping pop.

Sgrios pinned Bequlf against the hard packed dirt of the trail and freed his long bottled emotions. All his pain, anger, and guilt. Then his sadness, loneliness, and grief poured out. Last was the most terrible, his lack of purpose, and the barren emptiness that was his existence.

No one could handle the severe emotional load he carried. Not even one with all of Bequlf's depravities.

Sgrios stood slowly, staring down at the man he could have become. Bequlf lay unconscious, covered in his and Sgrios' blood, but physically unharmed.

The girl would need tending. She would have caught some of the barrage of emotion as well. He found her braced against the side of a thick tree. Her paint pony had returned and stood quivering over her motionless body. He crouched next to her and laid his bloody palm to her

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forehead, pulling the wild magic back and easing her awake.

She gasped and jerked away from his touch. "Please, don't hurt me," she said, but she didn't try to run. Then he remembered she hadn't been able to earlier.

"I won't hurt you." He looked her over for injuries and saw that her ankle was twisted at an odd angle. "I can help your leg if you'll let me. Will you?"

"Yes. You saved me. You stopped him, didn't you?"

"You helped me." He slid her pants leg out of the way and gently healed her ankle. It had been broken, not just sprained. "You were very courageous."

"No, I wasn't. I was afraid."

"It's okay to be afraid. You're brave because you acted despite your fear."

Her gaze followed a drop of blood running down his side. "You're hurt, too."

"Not too bad," he said, regardless of the amount of blood he had lost from the serious stab wound. He had been hurt worse and still lived. More the pity. He would survive this as well.

Her pony stiffened and the girl's eyes widened. "Watch out!" she cried.

* * * * *

Rath dragged Dàn behind the car and began searching for his gunshot wound. "Damn it Dàn, when will you ever learn to duck? You have no self-preservation skills at all. I'm beginning to think that watching your back is a full time job. You'd better hope I never decide I've paid you back enough. What would you do then? I'll tell you. You'd get yourself killed in the first thirty seconds."

Where in hell had he been hit? Rath ripped open Dàn's shirt, searching for what surely must have been a mortal wound while he continued to rant.

"Duck. That all I'm saying. *Duck*. You protect everyone else, and

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forget to duck. I know you have the ability to shield if ducking is beneath your dignity, but you don't bother to do that either."

The strange red mist covered Dàn's chest so thickly Rath couldn't see the entry wound. *Damned mist*. He reached into it, feeling for the injury.

"I mean, how many times can you die, anyway? You're a wolf, not a cat! Sooner or later it will be the real deal, the end. Is that your plan? Have you lived long enough? The least you can do is not get yourself killed when I have to watch. I'm not squeamish about much, but I don't want to have to keep watching you get splattered all over the place."

The mist crackled around his hands, but didn't burn him as it had before. Still, he could find no wound. Certainly, anything that could knock Dàn from his feet would leave a pretty large hole. But where?

"And in the name of Loki, if you are not going to duck, at least you could have the kind of injury that I can find and heal. Why are you not breathing? You're just laying here. You're starting to really piss me off!"

* * * * *

Athair searched for men still loyal to Sandulfr. Sundair was fighting hand to hand with one man, two were behind a table unsure of what to do, and the last had been caught.

They needed to all work together. "Leth, go get those two and free the one who's being held over there. I will help Sundair secure this side."

"Fine. Here. Take my spare knife." He held it out.

"No." Athair shook his head. "You're better with it than I am. I have my own ways."

"I remember!" Leth laughed. Then he moved swiftly across the park to the two who needed encouragement.

Athair raced to Sundair's side, where the alpha's son had knocked one man unconscious, but now faced two others. Athair grabbed one opponent from behind and surged his own special skill into use. The man slouched in his arms. His own personal weapon was a lullaby spell. One he felt fortunate to have found and had used often over the years, though

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rarely in this manner.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Drawing from Within
Turning the Tide

Just as Rath thought he felt the wound right over Dàn's heart, something bit his searching hand. *The mist! It just kept getting better and better.* Rath pulled his hands back as the mist thickened and began to take form. Take form! But what form?

In the space of a heartbeat, the mist had formed a delicate, shimmering red dragon, which stood protectively on Dàn's chest and hissed at Rath. It was about two feet long, but consisted mostly of tail, neck, and two delicate wings. If it had weight, it was probably less than two pounds. Maybe less than one.

The dragon circled about on Dàn's chest and lifted its tiny head to study his face. Its long neck stretched and it placed one delicate, clawed foot on Dàn's chin for balance. It breathed a cloud of red mist directly into Dàn's slightly open mouth.

Dàn immediately shuddered and breathed in the mist. He opened his eyes to meet the gaze of the tiny dragon. Then Rath's.

And he smiled! "So, I see you've met Dearga."

"Well doesn't that beat all?" Rath said. "Here I am, bemoaning your demise again and you have a dragon guardian angel. I swear Dàn, this is the last time. The very last time!"

"I'm sorry." Dàn said, although he didn't look sorry at all. He sat

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up and stroked the dragon like it was a pet kitten. Actually, it folded its wings and arched its back into each stroke, while making a satisfied humming sound. "I promise I will try to 'learn to duck' as you so indelicately put it. Incidentally, you and Dearga were ranting at me on very similar topics. She has even adopted the same tone," he added dryly.

"Dearga, huh? That's a good name. She is very red. Where did she come from, anyhow?"

"She's the mist I've had with me. You saw when it started. I've asked her, but she doesn't know where she came from before that. Only that she was sent to be with me." He used one finger to scratch her chin while she cooed up at him in adoration. "I've been able to see her clearly whenever I closed my eyes, but this is the first time she's taken solid form. I rather like her."

"Dàn, you really are...well, I don't know what the hell you are. Except interesting. I will give you that. I never get bored around you. Do you feel up to helping with this situation?"

"Definitely."

* * * * *

Sgrios spun, but not quickly enough. Bequlf, in his wolf form, pounced and tore at his shoulder.

Before Sgrios could react to the savage attack, the girl's pony jumped into the fray. He grabbed the wolf by the back of the neck and brutally shook him, using his sturdy muscles to throw the wolf against a tree. Not satisfied by far, the pony stomped Bequlf with his front hooves, then bent to his knees, dropping his full weight on the still body of the one who had dared hurt his girl.

He sniffed at the wolf, then turned and shook his painted body in satisfaction, or perhaps to leave his anger behind. He pranced back the girl.

She knelt next to Sgrios, but only after giving her companion a *thank you* pat.

Sgrios sat up and gritted his teeth against the pain. "Looks like

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we're even now." He stood and patted the pony.

"Thunder is the bravest pony ever."

"Thunder is indeed heroic." Sgrios went to Bequlf's inert body to check for life. Unfortunately, he was still alive. "Do you think Thunder will carry the wolf out of the woods?" He couldn't bring himself to kill the worthless beast in front of the girl.

"I think so." She froze in place. "The wolf is the man, isn't it?"

No point in denying it, the girl was brave and smart. "Yes. He is."

"Are you like him?"

That was a loaded question. He was too much like Bequlf. Many already thought he was a lawless rogue deserving the justice of death. They were probably right. But not for any crimes committed in the past three centuries. Still, he knew the answer she sought. "Yes."

"Oh." She picked up Thunder's trailing reins and led him closer to the wolf's body. "Can you lift him? I don't think I can."

Such courage in one so young. Pain shot through Sgrios chest, but not from the knife wound. She reminded him of Cairistione in so many ways. He closed his eyes briefly to control the emotions welling up within him. "Yes, I can lift him."

She steadied the pony as Sgrios lifted Bequlf up, and then used his bolas to tie him securely in place.

"So, he's not dead?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"What will happen to him?" the girl asked as she turned Thunder and started back down the trail. "Do the police have a division for your kind?"

"No. We police our own."

"Oh. So, you're like a cop?"

Yeah right. He was the long arm of the law. The kid had a sense of humor. He smiled. Well, he sort of smiled, but he didn't answer her question.

* * * * *

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Hope drove the car dangerously fast all the way to the park and right into the picnic area. Never mind the car or the act of driving. Forget the storm. She had to get to Athair. Nothing else mattered.

When she saw him fighting hand to hand with one of Bequulf's men, she aimed the car in his direction.

Athair, watch out! She called to him as she sped directly at the enormous man who fought her lover.

Although her plan, if it could be called that, had been to run the man down or at least force him away from Athair, Athair used the distraction to jump the villain. He pulled the man off balance and wrapped his forearm around the man's throat. She slid the car to a stop, but didn't see what Athair did to cause the man to fall unconscious.

Hope ran to Athair's side and hugged him tight. She had been so afraid he would be killed before she could get back to him. Before she could tell him how much he meant to her.

There were still several people fighting, and a couple had shifted into wolf form. But mostly the battle had turned in their favor.

Granny climbed from the car and hurried to where Hope saw Dàn and Rath standing up. Dàn took the staff from Granny and listened to something she said. Then he walked into the center of the picnic area. Whatever he was doing seemed to flood the clearing with energy. But the energy seemed to affect each person or wolf in a different way. Hope felt it flow through her body like a caress, but one of Bequulf's men fell to the ground and covered his head, screaming in pain. In only moments, all of Bequulf's supporters were either asleep or unconscious.

The battle was over, at least for now.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Settled Thoughts and Calm Waters

Dàn watched as the groom kissed the bride. He envied the loving devotion he could easily feel rolling off of Athair and Hope. The connection they shared was almost visible to his sensitive eyes.

A vision of their future flashed before him, showing the two playing with their toddler daughter in the backyard. The child would be named Faith, and she would grow into powers that no Keeper of the past had ever known. But she would also have a decision to make about those powers.

Maura gently squeezed Dàn's arm to draw his attention back to the couple. Together they threw rice and wished Hope and Athair congratulations. Maura's touch brought another sight to his mind. He saw him holding hands with her, and walking barefoot on a beach at sunset. A joyful vision that was ripped asunder as the scene changed to show the vast ocean between them. Dàn closed his eyes in despair as he heard Maura's cry of agony echoing over the raging water.

The cheer of the small crowd pulled Dàn from the vision's grip. The Oracles blessed the union by binding the couple's hands with black, white, and red ribbons.

The council had finally been convinced to accept Athair and Hope's bond because the Oracles shared his vision of Faith's future. They had

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debated for several days about whether a Keeper should be allowed to mate with one the clansmen. In the end, they understood that all future paths included Hope and Athair together. The question then became whether Hope would be accepted as Keeper after joining with Athair. Since the only other alternative was to bring an end the direct line of Keepers, they decided to allow Hope to become Keeper after Ella.

Personally, Dàn found it to be a silly debate. Hope would become Keeper, no matter what the council decreed. It was her destiny.

More than two months had passed since Ella had summoned the council to make judgment on Bequlf and address his claim that Hope could not become Keeper and bond with Athair. The time since then hadn't been wasted, but instead was used to plan the wedding. Hope and Athair had discounted any other possibility.

What Dàn didn't understand were the council's decisions regarding the traitors of the Bear Clan. They had judged that Bequlf would be exiled for his attack on Hope. His closest supporters had chosen to join him in exile. The attack against Athair, Rath, and Dàn were discounted as no more than territorial squabbling. And the danger to humans was dismissed entirely for lack of evidence.

Dàn closed his eyes, but new images continued to haunt him. A war was coming, and it would be terrible. Yet this war would also be mostly unseen. He knew it was unavoidable. Belquavir would encourage Bequlf to fight to reenter the Bear Clan and claim leadership, and that could never be allowed. Dàn could see what a menace Bequlf would be to all people if he was given any more power. Already he stalked the streets in nearby cities, using or killing people whenever he wished. He reveled in the pain of others, either wolf or man. He would never be anything but a cold-blooded predator. If he ever became an Alpha, he would be a killer with his own army. Dàn had once dreamed of another man similar to Bequlf, a human who hunted and used those he saw as less than himself. And Bequlf could be so much worse.

Dàn saw the struggles of the coming years and knew that he and his family would place themselves between Bequlf's evil and the safety of the world.

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But the darkness ahead was not without light, and now it was not without Hope.

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Author Bio

L. Shannon came into existence in June of 2004. When Shannon isn't busy bothering her hubby, she shows her dogs, gardens, and watches over her four Butterfly Koi ponds. For her, writing started as a battle against insomnia and has steadily grown into a war against reality. Her friends kindly say that reality never stood a chance.

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Burnin' Down Nash Vegas by Mia Romano © 2006

Chapter One

Aaron Montana watched the thick cigarette smoke curl around the beautiful woman performing on stage. He wondered if the money she received in tips was worth being treated like a pole-dancing stripper.

Stepping down from the stage, Bailey Carson strummed her guitar, singing her latest country song in the crowded honky-tonk bar in Nashville, Tennessee. Every night that she walked the aisles between the tables, men would stuff a few bills in the pockets of her tight jeans, slurring out a suggestive comment or two.

Aaron sat at the back in his usual spot, wondering if she ever got tired of it all. He loved the way her violet-tinted eyes sparkled when the crowd pounded the tables, begging for one more song. The low sultry twang of her voice soothed him more than any whiskey. Did she go home alone every night to a run-down apartment overlooking the street-lined bars below? Was she trying to support six kids that an ex-husband had abandoned her with? He'd read in a tabloid that she was single, but it hadn't given much more about her private life other than she liked her privacy.

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He knew she couldn't possibly be making that much money as a bar singer. It was part of the reason he always liked to tip her generously. A woman with Bailey's talent and beauty shouldn't have to struggle so hard, walking the lonely path of life. But then again, wasn't he guilty of being a loner himself?

Aaron pushed himself from his table, downed the rest of his watered-down bourbon and coke, and walked to the front to place a twenty in the tip cup. Too bad the drunken fools who padded her back pockets wouldn't remember a word she'd sung by morning.

He didn't need four or five drinks to forget whatever ailed him. Watching the dark-haired beauty as she performed her magic had him walking around in a stupor. So why couldn't he bring himself to ask her to dinner, or even say hello? Hadn't he paid his dues from a broken heart long ago?