

PART 1

Wolf Given

By Megan Derr

Ulrich's nose twitched.

Something wasn't right about the forest, but he could not place his nose upon whatever was off. There were no strange smells; everything was what he would expect of a forest. Trees, water, animals, there were some sweet berry patches not too far off. A deer had died and was rotting several yards away. Smoke, ever so faintly.

Ah. That was it. He could smell smoke, but no humans. Or any other species, for that matter, but usually where there was smoke, it was humans. Why could he not smell them?

His nose twitched again as he tried to pick out any sign of them past the smoke, absently stroking the black leather collar around his throat, hardly aware he was doing it.

The wind picked up, disheveling his neatly trimmed black hair, playing with his dark gray cape. Autumn leaves rustled beneath his boots as he finally walked on, falling around him as the breeze knocked the few remaining leaves from their branches.

There was a distinct chill in the air, but he liked the bite. He was from a mountain pack, where heavy snow and bitter cold was a way of life. These lowlands only thought they knew what the words snow and cold meant; they would not last a day in his homelands.

He felt a twist in his gut, thinking of home. Everyone had told him the homesickness would ease, but it hadn't. Four and a half years in the lowlands and all he wanted was to return home. Unconsciously, he reached up to touch his collar again.

When he realized what he was doing, he dropped his hand with a sigh and made himself focus on his work.

A member of the King's Special Guard had died here, and it was his duty to figure out why and how. It was mostly a formality, really. He had been told to try, but not too hard, for the dead soldier in question was no great loss. That he was dead was more of a relief, really. His family was pitching a fit though, and it never paid to ignore the fits of the wealthy and powerful.

Money and a desire to repay troublesome debts had put the man in the Special Guard, and those very same reasons had seen him sent off to solve the mystery.

Though his instinct had been to refuse and foist the assignment on one of the men under his command, Ulrich had not been able to let go of his own curiosity. They had known of the bastard's death only because someone had returned his wolf skin and collar to the man's family.

He had never known anyone in the lowlands to hold to such an old-fashioned tradition as returning the skin of a dead wolf to its pack. These days, most just returned the collar. It was far easier, and less barbaric, according to the soft and lazy folk of the lowlands.

His nose twitched as he caught a hint of...something for the span of a heartbeat. So quickly gone again, he half-figured he'd imagined it. Six weeks of hard travel and exhausting investigation had led him this far, to the dark, black

woods where folks had last seen 'the unpleasant black wolf' headed.

Ulrich sighed, and wondered irritably why the bastard could not have simply gotten himself killed by a bear or some such. No, he had to get himself killed by someone who seemed to have honor, which meant he'd probably died in a fight or doing something he damn well knew he shouldn't be doing.

Realizing he was stroking his collar again, Ulrich snatched his hand away and glowered at his surroundings. He could smell the faintest hints of the bastard, so he had definitely been here...but he still could not smell humans, for all the scent of smoke was getting stronger.

Sighing, he continued walking, enjoying the cold and the forest itself even if he resented his reasons for being here. Four and a half more months, he reminded himself, and he could return home. Then he could claim a house of his very own, resume his studies, maybe finally start looking into the matter of a mate. He'd slogged through four and a half years of duty to his King, he could make it a few more months.

Walking on, he kept alert for any sign that he was not simply wasting his time here—or the slightest indication that he had tried hard enough, could call it a wash and return to the city. So far, he could see no sign of either. Damn it.

Then the sound of childish laughter caught his ears. He froze, wondering if it was simply wishful thinking, but then it came again.

Following the sound as best he could in the forest, he abruptly found himself on a well-worn footpath. Taking it, he continued to follow the sound of laughter, and as he drew ever closer to it, he began to hear voices as well. There were three in total—the laughing child, an old woman, and a man of modest years.

A few minutes later, the path dipped down a sharp hill, which in turn spilled into a small valley. At the center of it was a tidy little cottage. He could smell the smoke coming from the chimney, the wildflowers sprinkled through the lush grass, the brook running near the house...but not the people.

They saw him, and the laughter stopped.

Ulrich drew to a halt as the old woman and little girl suddenly fled into the house. The man, who seemed to be right around his own twenty-five, retrieved a bow and arrow he'd left near the front of the cottage. He nocked an arrow and stood waiting.

Horribly confused, for he was no threat and had not thought he was giving an impression of threat, Ulrich slowed his steps and drew cautiously forward. "I am sorry if I have caused some offense," he said as he drew close enough to speak without shouting. "I did not intend such; I am merely searching for something. Please, there is no reason to be alarmed. I am of the King's—"

"Yes, I know," the man replied, not lowering his bow. "You wear the same damn uniform."

Ulrich would have responded to that, but he was too jarred for a moment even to think. The man's accent was pure highland. Thick and rolling, a hint of husky melody. Beautiful. He'd not heard another speak in the sounds of his home for months, not since the others had either gone home or elsewhere to serve out the remainder of their duty. Few highlanders bestirred themselves to do their duty to the King so deep into the lowlands, and he was the only one who had elected to serve it at the castle proper.

The man was not a wolf, however. He did not wear a collar, and he did not smell li...

He realized with a jolt he still could not smell any of the humans at all.

In the next moment, he finally saw why—around the man's neck was a silver chain, from which hung a talisman. He would know that sort of talisman anywhere, for they often were used to prey upon his kind. It was why, despite their

usefulness for many things, the talisman was called a Wolfsbane Charm. No one and nothing, not even the great wolves, could smell any person or thing to which the talisman was attached.

Only a very talented mage could make them, however.

Like falling dominos, another realization fell in his mind. "You're a wild mage."

The man tensed, but did not quite let fly the arrow he still held nocked.

Eagerness caused Ulrich to move forward despite the danger. "You are from the highlands," he said, breaking into a smile, feeling the strangeness of an expression he had not felt like using in a long time.

"Back off, soldier of the King," the man snarled. "Being from the mountains won't keep me from killing you."

Reality returned like a slap to the face, and his momentary joy went out like a snuffed candle. He backed up again. "My apologies," he said, frowning again. "Might I ask why you're being so hostile? I promise you, I intend no harm. I'm of the King's Special Guard. My honor is my life."

The man let out a sharp bark of laughter. "Just like the other one? I know enough about men in uniforms to know not a one of you has honor – even a highlander. Or maybe especially a highlander. Has the Pack Schwarzenberg gotten so soft and pathetic they would dance to the King's tune?"

Ulrich snarled in immediate rage, that his pack would be so unjustly maligned. He lunged forward to meet the insult as he should—and howled in pain as he met with a barrier he had neither smelled nor sensed.

He sat up slowly, gasping in pain, vision blurry for a few moments. "Damn it," he said. "That was uncalled for. What have I done to give the indication I would hurt you?"

"Didn't you just try to hurt me?" The man asked coolly.

"You insulted my pack," Ulrich snarled. "I have done nothing to you, save draw close to ask for assistance. You accuse me of lacking honor, but clearly you possess none yourself. I am sorry that I attempted to ask for assistance, and will trouble you no further."

Turning away, he slowly limped his way back up the hill. He stumbled twice, not certain he would regain his feet the second time. He did, however, and stubbornly did not look back to see what the three humans were up to below.

Let them shoot him in the back if they were so inclined; maybe that was what had become of the poor bastard whose skin had been returned to the castle.

Ignoring the hurt that had come from being so callously treated by someone who should have called him brother—the man had even known his pack by his collar—he focused on overcoming the physical pain of meeting a magic ward at full force, slowly dragging himself to where he felt safe enough to camp for the night.

Then he finally allowed himself to pass out.

He woke sometime later with a groan, his entire body a great, throbbing ache. His head especially hurt something fierce, and he wondered who or what had convinced him to drink like a pup. And just what had he drunk to wind up in a forest...

Oh, right.

There hadn't been any drinking and more the pity. He was in the Great Forest. It extended from the south half of the lowlands, stretching nearly all the way across it, then spilled down into the neighboring kingdom, where the natives

called it something weird. The Giggling Forest, or something.

Ugh, if not for the fact he knew he'd taken a nasty hit from a barrier, he would have thought his wandering thoughts indicative of a concussion. Moving slowly, pausing several times to let the pain recede a bit, he finally regained his feet.

He looked up to take in the sunlight through the trees. Far too bright to be remotely close to when he had collapsed. It was a fair bet to say he had been unconscious for a day or so—not too bad, considering he'd been hit with barriers nasty enough to put him out for the better part of three days.

What should he do now? Whoever the hell those people had been, they did not like royal guards. Especially that highland wild mage...

Ulrich frowned, turning over the encounter in his mind. Though it was not expected that one highlander would immediately regard another as friend, it was typical to give a brother the benefit of the doubt. He reached up to touch his collar, remembering the way the man had immediately known he was of the Pack Schwarzenberg.

The collar was warm and supple beneath his fingers, the embossed marks comfortingly familiar. Marks for his pack, for his family, even his own name for those who knew how to read them. A wolf's pride and joy was his collar, and though the royal guard he served tried time and again to make the wolves remove them while in uniform, no wolf ever listened. Wolves removed their collars for one reason, and one reason only.

He whipped around as the back of his neck prickled, pain inconsequential as he sensed danger—

Then a figure came through the trees, drawing him up short, and Ulrich positively hated that he could not smell the man.

"What have you done with her?" the man snarled, and let fly an arrow.

Ulrich barely dodged it, and anger drove him to shift and throw himself at the infuriating human, knocking them both the ground to struggle and fight, snarl and rage. The man tried to throw him off, but he was having none of that.

He shifted again as they scrambled, resuming a human shape at just the right moment, pinning the bastard to the ground. "What are you talking about?" he snarled, still trembling with rage. "I try to ask for help and you threaten me. I lay here unconscious from your damn magic spells and you attempt to shoot me, accusing me of—what? Damn it, human, what is the matter with you? I have done nothing, I have hurt no one. You are the one attempting to shoot an innocent man."

"No King's man is innocent," the man hissed. "Where is the girl? The child?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Ulrich snapped. "I have only recently woken from the affects of your nasty little barrier. If you do not cease with this nonsense, human, I will tear your throat out."

The man snarled back just as angrily. "Who else would hurt the child but another lowland wolf?"

Ulrich saw red, but managed just barely to hold on to what was left of his temper. He bent his head until they were close enough to kiss. "Human, I am a highland wolf, and will be until the day I die. I do my duty here, nothing more. Very soon I will be home again and good riddance to the weak and pathetic lowlands." He drew back slightly. "What of you? You are highland, your accent marks you plain as anything, and here you skulk in the lowlands, defending lowland children."

For a moment, it almost looked as though the man were in pain, but it was gone so quickly, Ulrich wasn't certain that was what he'd seen.

"You did not take the child?"

"I have no use for children," Ulrich snapped. "You could have more faith in a brother, human."

"You could let me go, wolf."

Ulrich did no such thing. "Are you going to try and shoot me again?" he demanded.

"No," the man snapped. "Not unless I discover you have lied to me."

Deciding it was the best he was going to get, Ulrich let him go and rolled away, regaining his feet and shaking himself—and promptly dropped to his knees as the pain returned full force with the abating of danger.

The world spun beneath him, and his stomach gave an unpleasant lurch. Damn it, he really hated magic. He pressed the back of one gloved hand to his mouth, willing away the urge to heave up his empty stomach and wishing the bloody pain would ease. It had been a long time since he'd stupidly run straight into a barrier; long enough he'd forgotten just how agonizing it could be.

A hand settled on his shoulder, making him tense, because if the damnable man wanted to kill him now then he likely could – Ulrich had used the last of his strength to fight him only moments ago.

"Drink this," the man said, voice gone oddly gentle.

Ulrich jerked his head up, though the move cost him, and looked mistrustfully into eyes that were the color of autumn—not quite brown, gold, or red, but a combination of all three.

Realizing he was staring, he tore his gaze away and looked instead at the small, dark glass bottle the man held out. He frowned. "What is that?"

"A tonic," the man said quietly. "It should take away the pain, and restore at least some of your strength."

Ulrich's lip curled and he looked up again to glare. "Right. You drove me away yesterday, without even bothering to listen to me, then you come today to shoot first and ask questions later—now you are trying to help me? Do I look like a pup still suckling at his mother's teat?"

"It's nothing personal," the man said patiently. "Wolves aren't well-regarded around these parts. You'd understand why if you knew all they'd done. Especially the last one in a uniform like yours. Just drink the damn thing, Schwarzenberg wolf. I have to find that girl, and the sooner you're dealt with, the sooner I can get back to doing that."

Shuddering as the pain racked his body anew, Ulrich decided he really didn't care if the bastard was attempting to poison him. Accepting the bottle, he pulled the stopper and downed the contents.

Cold flooded him, then a rush of warmth. The tonic tasted faintly of blueberries and honey. He licked his lips as the strange warmth slowly faded—leaving him with nothing more than a negligible headache. In fact, he felt well-rested and ready for most anything.

He grunted and stood as the man did the same. "Thank you," he said stiffly.

The man shrugged, tucked the empty bottle away in the pack he wore, and turned away.

"What did you mean, the girl is gone? That little girl I saw briefly yesterday? Where would she go? These woods are dangerous enough for grown men, surely."

"Yes," the man said, shoulders tight with tension. He turned back to Ulrich, eyes blazing with fury though he

otherwise seemed calm. "She knows better than to wander off or talk to anyone, especially since a wolf in the garb of a King's Special Guard tried to steal her away—to eat."

Ulrich drew a sharp breath, dismay crashing through him. "He went feral? Why? How?"

"You think I know?" the man demanded. "I barely came across her in time to save her. Now she is gone again! Damn it, every time I meet a wolf, there is nothing but trouble!" He turned away and stalked off, barely making a sound despite the dead, dry leaves littering the forest floor.

"Wait!" Ulrich said, and chased after him. "Let me help."

The minute he said the words, he wondered what the hell he was thinking. His part was done—obviously this man had killed the wolf, because that wolf had gone feral. Mystery solved, and no one would even think to blame a man for killing a feral wolf.

"Help me?" the man asked contemptuously. "I've had enough wolves to last me a lifetime—I'm not putting up with another longer than necessary. If you want to help me, you can do it by leaving."

Ulrich rolled his eyes. "Not all wolves are bad. You're from the highlands, why are you acting like a dense lowlander?"

The man's eyes flashed. "I'm not in the mood to trade insults, wolf. Go away."

He really wanted to throttle the man. Or maybe just shake him, like a pup with a toy. Where that image had come from, he didn't know, but it pleased. "I'm a wolf, as you have obviously noticed—I can track the child far better than anyone."

"Even if she's wearing a Wolfsbane charm?" the man asked with an amused smirk.

Ulrich frowned, then made a face. "All right, fine. I can still help, and would like to help. One bad wolf in uniform does not mean we're all bad. You're one of the most obnoxious humans I've ever met, but that doesn't mean I'm going to hate all humans."

The man let out a sharp bark of laughter. "One bad wolf? Try three. I'm not eager to see if number four is the exception to the rule. Go away, wolf, or I'll nock an arrow you won't soon forget."

"I have done nothing to warrant this behavior!" Ulrich bellowed, stalking close and grabbing the man up, shaking him hard. "I am a good wolf. I serve my Pack, I serve my King, and had you told me that you killed that wolf for turning feral, I would have commended you and gone on my merry way. Instead you threaten me, shoot at me, then promise to do it again when all I have done is attempt to ask for help, and then offer to find a child. You would rather reject me for being a wolf than accept my offer of help? She could be dead or dying, and you don't want my help?"

They glared at each other in silence after that, but Ulrich found it hard to hold on to his anger looking into those strange, autumn-colored eyes. He really hated that he could not smell the man. Sound and sight were not nearly as useful as smell and taste.

Finally the man dropped his eyes. Ulrich took it as a victory, but still waited.

"All right," the man finally said, an unhappy edge to his husky voice. "Let's find her, and then you can get the hell out of my sight."

"Fine," Ulrich snapped, and let him go, wishing he could bite the bastard just because. "My name is Ulrich Schwarz, of Pack Schwarzenberg."

The man nodded stiffly at him, and slowly held out a hand in greeting. "I am Grosvenor Allaway."

"You're a wild mage of the highlands," Ulrich said, and stripped off his glove to shake Grosvenor's hand, liking the strength in it the calluses and scars that said this was no idler. No soft lowlander afraid to get his hands dirty.

"I was a wild mage of the highlands," Grosvenor said. "Now, I am just a huntsman." He said nothing more, but pulled his hand away and continued walking.

A huntsman? That was rather an unworthy position for a wild mage. That was like setting a well trained knight to chopping wood. He'd be good at it, but there were better things for him to do.

Grosvenor continued, "Unfortunately, I am not quite certain where she may have gone. The trail ended abruptly, and I could find no trace of anyone or anything. Given the size of this forest, and its reputation for strange goings on..."

"She could be anywhere," Ulrich finished grimly, "or nowhere. Best to go where the trail ends and take it from there, now that we have established I did not take her."

"Have we?" Grosvenor asked.

Ulrich growled.

Grosvenor smirked, clearly amused. "You've a remarkably short temper for a wolf."

"Only when my honor is questioned," Ulrich replied. "You're remarkably dense for a highlander."

"Yes," Grosvenor replied, his brief levity vanishing like the sun behind a bank of storm clouds. "So I was often told."

Ulrich rolled his eyes. "I meant no offense. We need not be at odds, huntsman. If you would just be pleasant for a few minutes, I would not even hold a grudge for the arrow this morning." He wrinkled his nose. "Though I do wish you would remove that damn talisman. It's damned awkward talking to someone half my senses say does not exist."

"No," Grosvenor said flatly.

"If the girl was not wearing one," Ulrich snapped, "I could already sniff her out. What if something were to happen to you, in the course of our search? We are partners, you and I, until the girl is found." Damn it, was the man really so thick and stupid? "Why are you set against anyone getting your scent?"

Grosvenor shrugged irritably. "None of your business, wolf."

Ulrich rolled his eyes again. Honestly, if not for the grouchiness, Grosvenor would not be a bad person. He was handsome enough, certainly. Obviously he lived in the woods—he had an edge to him, a rough look despite the surprising cleanliness of his appearance, that only came from living in the wilderness. His hair was the sort of blonde that turned to gold when it soaked up sunlight. He had the sort of broad, well-muscled build that Ulrich loved in a man.

His own build was much more slender, something that more than one lowland idiot had taken to mean he was weak.

If only the man wasn't so damnably grouchy, Ulrich might have grown to like him. They were both highlanders, after all. Brothers stuck in the detestable lowlands. "Are you ever in a good mood?" he asked.

"When wolves aren't around," Grosvenor retorted.

Ulrich sighed and gave up talking. He wondered why he had even volunteered to do this—the way Grosvenor moved and behaved, he was as comfortable in the woods as most men only were in their own homes. Ulrich probably was not

needed.

Well, too bad. He was going to prove he wasn't a bad wolf no matter what. If he had no clue why it mattered, well, that little detail was negligible.

His stomach abruptly growled, and he was abruptly reminded he had not eaten since midday yesterday.

Grosvenor stopped, and turned back to look at him, pretty mouth curved in another of those damnably annoying smirks.

Pretty mouth?

Ulrich scowled at himself, and then at Grosvenor. "Are we almost where the trail grows cold?"

"Yes," Grosvenor replied, but swung his pack down and dug something out, tossing Ulrich a small packet. "Jerky. That should keep you, wolf. What's one of your marvelous and wonderful kind doing in the woods without food?"

Oh, yes, at some point he was going to shake the annoying man until his teeth fell out. Still, he unwrapped the jerky and ate voraciously. "I figured if I was here long enough to need food, I could hunt it. Easier to travel light." He swallowed a bite of jerky. "Thanks, especially since I know you'd rather let me starve."

"If I get sick of you, there are better ways to kill you than starvation," Grosvenor replied.

Ulrich only shook his head and bit off another bit of jerky to chew. It was venison, and remarkably good for jerky. The army issued stuff had always tasted more like dried wood than meat, on the rare occasions he had to eat it.

He shoved a last bite into his mouth as they reached the clearing where the cottage lay – but rather than head toward it, they circled around it, and eventually headed back into the forest, where the brook vanished into the trees again.

"Here," Grosvenor said. "I followed her trail from where they draw water, to here. Then nothing."

Ulrich nodded, listening absently, for his attention was already on the anomaly his nose had picked out. He could barely smell it...something...sticky and sweet... With a thought, he shifted and put his nose to the ground, absorbing too many smells to count, each one a fascinating story all its own...but that sticky sweet smell, that was no forest scent. That was man.

He barked as he found it, and shifted back, shoving his fingers into the grass along the bank until he at last pulled free something no bigger than a tiny pebble. A bit of cookie—gingerbread, into which was pressed a small bit of bright pink hard candy. It looked like it had fallen off of a larger cookie, maybe while being eaten.

He heard and sensed Grosvenor come up behind him, annoyed all over again that he could not attach so much as a single scent to the man. "Looks like she was eating a cookie," he said with a shrug. "Not very helpful..."

Grosvenor's face had gone pale.

"What?" he asked. "Is there something dangerous about a cookie?"

"I hope not," Grosvenor said, and took the bit from him, holding it to his own nose. "But Gretel—the old woman—hates gingerbread. She would never make it. She's scared of gingerbread."

Ulrich frowned. "What in the world is there to be scared about in gingerbread?"

Grosvenor looked at the bit of cookie. "She told me the story only a couple of years ago," he said quietly. "As a child, she and her brother were abandoned in the forest by their father and stepmother. Poor, unable to feed them...it was not

an uncommon practice back then, here in the lowlands, or so I was told."

"That is disgusting," Ulrich said, though he had heard much the same himself. In many of the smaller, more remote villages, they still did it. In the leaner, poorer times, children were always the first to go. After all, the explanation went, more could be made when times got better.

"Yes," Grosvenor agreed, "but that's what was done to Gretel. She and her brother were abandoned in the woods. They tried to find their way home, but only wound up lost. Then they stumbled across a house made of gingerbread. Gretel said it was like something from a dream – gingerbread with candy for the shutters, the shingles, the door..." He shook his head. "A kind old woman invited them inside, fed them and cared for them..."

He fell silent, and Ulrich suddenly had a terrible feeling in his gut, and wished he had not eaten the jerky.

"She was kind and sweet, far nicer than their parents had ever been. Good food, sweets, and she lived in that magical house..."

"Come to the end of the tale," Ulrich said harshly, unable to bear the waiting.

"She was going to eat them," Grosvenor replied. "The food she fed them was drugged, to keep them meek and compliant while she plumped them up. The house was made with magic, and the woman was a powerful witch. Gretel said she discovered the truth only by mistake, when she was taking the slop out one day and stumbled across an animal playing with some bones it had dug up—human bones, but tiny. Children's bones. She said, taken with other things, and the constant dreamy state in which she existed, it was not hard to figure it out. She ran inside and shoved the old woman into the oven she had been in the process of heating. She and Hansel fled, and eventually came to a village. That is as far as she told the tale to me."

Ulrich glanced at the bit of gingerbread cookie. "Surely you do not think..."

"I don't know," Grosvenor replied, "but I do know that no one besides Gretel, Annie, and I live here. I do not bake and Gretel would never make gingerbread. Where, then, did it come from?" He crushed the cookie in his fist, then threw the crumbs into the brook. "We must find her, and hope that I am wrong, or that we are not too late."

At least he was saying 'we' Ulrich thought. "Now I've a scent to follow," he said, "I'll see what I can do." Shifting back to his wolf form, he put his nose to the ground and hunted for the smell of gingerbread.

He found one more bit of it, some hours later when afternoon had given over to evening. They would have to stop soon, and he could see Grosvenor knew it—and did not like it.

He examined the bit of sweet he held, a bright green hard candy. All their hours of searching, and it was the only thing they had found. Disgusted, he dropped it to the ground again and stretched his tired limbs. "I do not get it. Where in the hell could they be? Surely you have some idea, huntsman. Is this not your wood?"

Grosvenor grunted. "I see you do not know much about the Great Forest."

"I know nothing about it," Ulrich confessed with a shrug. "I know people mutter superstitiously about it; I could not even get anyone to guide me through it. They call it something else across the border, I do not recall what."

"The Laughing Forest," Grosvenor said. "They say that portions of the Great Forest are haunted by laughing ghosts. Others say the forest itself is laughing at unwary travelers. Out this way...well, there is no laughing, but sometimes the silence is too deep. Like now."

Ulrich had already noted that, but he'd been trying to ignore it. If he were in wolf form, his hackles would be up. "So maybe we're getting close, despite the lack of a trail to follow?"

"Maybe," Grosvenor replied. "If one considers being caught in a web getting close to the spider."

"Lovely," Ulrich said, grimacing. "Why would an old woman who preys upon children live so deep in the woods?"

"He who seeks the path never finds it, he who waits for the path is never found, he who follows the path travels with ease."

Ulrich grunted. "Try too hard, or too little, and you get nothing. It's children she tempts, so they have no trouble finding her." He shuddered. "Why would anyone want to eat the flesh of her own kind? Why children?"

"Innocence," Grosvenor said, as he swung his pack off his back and began to make camp. "Mages all require power of some sort to work their spells. Certain...aspects of people...are power in their own right and can be contorted to a mage's purpose. Innocence is one of them, and most often found in the young, especially children. Even Annie, despite being almost eaten alive by a feral shifter, still possessed some innocence."

"I am sorry a fellow Guard would do such a terrible thing," Ulrich replied. "You showed him more honor than he deserved in returning his skin and collar to the castle."

Grosvenor shrugged. "It's ingrained," he said. "So you came out here to find the reason for his death?"

"Yes," Ulrich replied, wondering when the grouchiness would return, and why it had momentarily subsided. Maybe he was simply too tired to keep it up, for it had been an extremely long day so far. "Once we find the girl, I will return to the castle and never trouble you again. What other bad experiences have you had with wolves?"

"Another one came through this area a couple years ago, killed two men and nearly the third – brothers, all of them. Masons, by profession. The villages around these parts still mourn their loss, especially since the third brother just couldn't stay after his two younger ones were killed. Then that man-eater came around..."

Ulrich nodded. "That is two of three—what of the last?"

"None of your business," Grosvenor snapped, sour temper returning abruptly. He all but threw food in Ulrich's direction.

Rolling his eyes, Ulrich accepted the food and made short work of more jerky, cheese, and a sort of sweet flatbread. "Shouldn't we make a fire for you?" he asked.

"I'll be fine," Grosvenor replied. "We have the same accent, as you have pointed out."

Ulrich grinned. "You've been down in these weak lowlands longer than me, huntsman. You could have gotten soft."

Grosvenor gave him a withering look and said nothing, merely finished eating his own food as around them the forest grew increasingly dark. When dark finally took over completely, even Ulrich's sharp vision could not pick out much detail in the figure sitting only a couple of arm lengths away.

Damn it, he wished the man would remove that infuriating talisman. He could understand it if they thought there were feral wolves to fear, or something along those lines, but they were hunting a witch. Witches didn't need scent to find people. Being a wild mage, Grosvenor would know that. So why keep the talisman now that he knew he had nothing to fear from Ulrich?

Trust, of course. Ulrich could not blame him, though he would have thought the bonds of the highlands enough to give him the benefit of the doubt. It could be fear as much as trust, though he didn't see what Grosvenor had to fear from anyone. A huntsman born and raised as a highlands wild mage. Back home, that was no idle thing. Hell, as often as not, they were marked for marriage to one pack or clan or another the day they were born—in the oldest clans, before they were born.

Which made him wonder, what in the hell a lone highlands wild mage was doing in a spooky forest in the lowlands? Had he been banished for something? Was he hiding from something? Perhaps his grouchy wild mage was far more than he appeared...

He wondered how much snarling would result if he dared to ask.

"Don't you ever sleep, wolf?" came the sharp voice, as if summoned by his thoughts.

Ulrich smiled in the dark. "Occasionally. My thoughts keep me occupied. Are they disturbing you as well?"

"Wolves disturb me," Grosvenor snapped, "especially wolves who will not sleep when by all rights they should be dead to the world."

At that, Ulrich did yawn, but still he could feel his thoughts jittering about in his head. "What is a wild mage doing all the way down here?" he asked. "I am astonished your family let you leave; surely there must have been bids on your hand."

"It's none of your business," Grosvenor snarled.

If Ulrich were able to smell him, he did not doubt Grosvenor would smell like pure, violent fury at that moment. "My apologies," he said. "It is not my place to pry, you are correct. I miss my homeland, is all, and meeting you stirred thoughts of it." He sighed in the dark, staring up at the shadows of the trees, the hints of starlight beyond the thick canopy. "Being the youngest of seven, even in the Alpha family, I was never going to contract a notable mate. I volunteered to serve the King before they could make me."

No, so low in rank, he would be lucky if he was not married off to tidy up some minor deal or another, and sent to join another Pack. It's what the extra sons and daughters were for, after all. Still, so long as he had a home of his own, and a nice mate, he would call himself content.

If sometimes he wished he were as important as his eldest brothers, well, that was his own dumb fault. He was a seventh son—useful for the pesky little things. Such was highland life.

"There are worse things to be than the seventh son of the Schwarzenberg Alpha," Grosvenor said, breaking into his wandering thoughts.

"I know," Ulrich replied. "I have no complaints. I only meant that being in a low position, with no chance at prestige, I had to wonder why someone who obviously would have qualified as a prestigious marriage would choose instead to live in the lowlands. But, as you said, it's none of my business."

On impulse, he shifted and then curled up on the forest floor to at last finally try and sleep, though it was still some time before his thoughts settled enough he was able.

He woke a few hours later to a niggling sense of wrongness mingled with a strange feeling of rightness.

Placing either feeling proved impossible for a moment. Then he realized the wrongness came from the air itself. There was...something...in it that didn't belong there. He couldn't smell it, which definitely set his senses off. Magic?

The rightness was far more disconcerting. Sometime in the night, he had moved to sleep right up against Grosvenor.

Some time after that, it would seem, Grosvenor had shifted onto his side to twine around Ulrich, and thrown an arm over him. While Ulrich was in wolf form.

That set off bells that even managed to drowned out the sense of wrong in the air.

Even in the highlands, where wolves were a common sight, most humans were never completely comfortable with the wolf packs. Oh, they were comfortable enough, but he could count on one hand the number of humans he knew who were comfortable enough with wolves they would curl up with one, while shifted, in sleep.

That took being raised with wolves at a level few humans ever merited.

Whatever his current feelings on wolves, at some point in his life Grosvenor had been perfectly at home with them. Being a wild mage as well, that stirred up all sorts of fascinating questions.

Unfortunately, getting answers would have to wait, as that feeling of wrongness was growing worse.

Growling softly, he shifted to human form—right as Grosvenor's eyes opened.

Autumn eyes stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment. Then they filled with fury as Grosvenor's face turned red, and Ulrich rolled away before he wound up with a knife in his gullet. "There's something wrong."

"Yes," Grosvenor replied. "You're still breathing."

"Not what I meant. We'll discuss that—"

"Shut up!" Grosvenor cut in, and Ulrich realized he finally sensed it. He looked around, turning in a slow, careful circle, then said in a flat tone, "The forest has changed. We've been moved, or the forest moved around us."

"What?" Ulrich looked at him, then took a closer look at their surroundings. It was still fairly dark, but growing lighter, and he could just barely see that Grosvenor was right. Though it still smelled much the same, the changes so minute he had not noticed them, their surroundings were not what they had been before. "How is this possible? Even with magic..."

"I told you, the forest is a strange one," Grosvenor replied. "Some say it is a sentient being all its own, having absorbed so much magic through the centuries. Or maybe all the magic came from the forest, once upon a time. Who can say? But we are in trouble, because now I have no idea where we are, and if it continues to change on us each time we rest—we may never find our way back to the safer parts of it." He shook his head. "I have seen strange things in the forest, but never this."

Ulrich looked at him. "You really do not need to sound so impressed, under the circumstances. What do you mean you're lost? You're a huntsman."

"You're a highland wolf," Grosvenor shot back. "It's impossible for your lot to get lost."

Remembering one particularly delightful occasion upon which his brothers had gotten him drunk and then quite neatly lost him in the woods where he'd grown up, Ulrich found this statement amusing at best. Especially when he knew they had done it to each other, in a longstanding family tradition of affectionate humiliation. He snorted. "I never made that claim, I assure you. Depending on what I've had to drink, and how much I was permitted to have, I could get lost in my own home."

Grosvenor turned sharply away, but Ulrich thought he caught a bit of a smile.

So his wild mage could smile. He wondered if he could get Grosvenor to laugh, as well.

His levity died as he heard and smelled something in the trees. Then silence. Not taking any chances, he shifted to his wolf form and growled low. Nearby, he heard Grosvenor draw and ready his bow.

Mud, he thought. He could smell mud. Not unusual in a forest, but something about the sudden rise in the smell

bothered him, and now he could smell it mixed with other things—

Bones. Blood.

Then as quickly as that they were being attacked, but by what he couldn't say. Mud, in the crude shape of small humans.

He didn't waste time asking questions, but snarled and bit and fought as three of the strange things descended upon him from the trees as the world around them turned to gray morning. The mud tasted thick and bitter in his mouth, leaving an aftertaste of blood. Spitting out a clump which had once been part of an arm, he threw himself at one of the strange things and went for the throat, tearing it out.

The muddy head fell, and rolled away to lie still on the forest floor. In front of him, the mud-doll thing collapsed into a shapeless pile. He turned and went for another as hands with surprising strength grabbed him, tore at him.

When at last the chaos stopped, he was filthy and bloody and caked in drying mud. Turning, he growled at Grosvenor, who looked no better—in fact, he looked much worse. The nasty little things had managed to tear through his layers of clothing, and a shallow but still nasty looking wound ran the length of his stomach.

Ulrich growled again, fear curling in his gut that Grosvenor had come so close to dying. Any deeper, and that cut would be a gut wound from which no one could have saved him.

"Sprites," Grosvenor said. "Nasty little monsters, those. Made from mud and blood and the bones of children." He stepped forward, then grimaced in pain and held a hand to his wound—then remembered his hands were covered in mud, and with a sigh let it drop. "I don't suppose you could sniff out water? I'm a little too exhausted to find it myself, wolf."

Chuffing, Ulrich wiped his face in the grass to get rid of the worst of the mud, then cast his nose to the wind. At least the danger had faded, for the moment. Catching a whiff of what he needed, he barked at Grosvenor, then led the way from the mud-spattered clearing, very carefully not thinking about all the little bones he could see scattered amongst them.

An hour's hard, exhausting travel brought them to a good-sized stream. Pausing only long enough to ensure there were no traps or sprites lying in wait, Ulrich half ran, half slid down the bank and landed with a satisfying splash in the frigid water.

He stayed in just long enough to get clean, then clambered out and shook himself vigorously dry. Only then, feeling they were safe for a time, did he shift back and begin to work on a fire. Nearby, he could hear Grosvenor stripping down. He turned to ask, "Do you have spare—" and stopped short.

Grosvenor's clothing had kept pretty much all but his face covered. Even his throat had been well-covered by high-necked clothing. Bare of that, he could see two things that Grosvenor obviously had not wanted him to see, but the dressing of his wounds and the excess of mud had ruined any chance of his continued ignorance.

One, Grosvenor wore a collar. It was pale gold in color, to mark him as not properly wolf, but rather what was often called 'wolf brother'—a human close enough to a Pack that they counted him amongst them and would defend him the same as they would their own. Except many of the marks he should have by now were missing, and it looked as though most of them—all but his personal name—had been marked out.

The second thing he noticed was the deep, faded scar in the space where shoulder met throat, on Grosvenor's right side. A wolf bite, and one given when Grosvenor was extremely young. Probably when he was about twelve, the age when a boy was considered strong enough to be able to endure such a thing.

"Wolf given," Ulrich breathed. "You're wolf given."

Grosvenor snarled and threw his clothes into the water, then followed them in. Ulrich listened to him swear, but could not tell if he was swearing at Ulrich or the water.

The grouchy bastard was wolf given—but living alone in the lowlands. What in the hell was going on here?

Wolf given meant that he'd been promised since birth, and quite possibly in this case even before conception, to an alpha family of a particular pack. Such betrothals were not made lightly; they took decades of work. As he got older, they would have narrowed down whom in the alpha family he would marry. The bite would have been given by the alpha on the day the decision was made. To be wolf given, or wolf promised, was a high honor amongst the clans. Rare was the human accepted fully into a pack.

So what in the hell was he doing here?

Ulrich wished he could read the marks upon the collar, but they were illegible. It was obvious he'd be better off throwing the collar away, so perhaps it was sentiment or some such that kept the collar around Grosvenor's throat.

What could have been so disastrous that someone would break such an important betrothal with a wild mage? Wolves by their nature possessed no magic beyond their shifting; to obtain a wild mage for the pack was a matter of great importance. Nothing short of murder usually halted such a marriage, especially since if broken, no one else would take a wolf given; the old belief was that if the wolves did not want the betrothed, there must be something seriously wrong.

At least that explained why Grosvenor had not wanted to remove his Wolfsbane Charm. Ulrich would have smelled in an instant that he'd been wolf given, the small hint of wolf sunk into him by way of the alpha's bite. That also explained why he was so comfortable with wolves that he slept with one without really noticing he was doing it—and made it all the more upsetting that he now claimed to hate wolves.

Shaking his head, conceding that it was still none of his business except he would love to know which pack had gotten so stupid it let a wolf given wild mage slip through its fingers, he resumed building a fire. By the time Grosvenor climbed from the water, shivering something awful but clean and wound dressed, the fire was roaring nicely.

"If you ask me any questions, you will be lucky if all I do is ignore you," Grosvenor snapped as he hung up his wet clothes to dry. He was dressed in clean clothes, but was still shivering as he sat close to the fire.

Ulrich put a few more branches on the fire, and said nothing, merely looked at him inquisitively.

Grosvenor ignored him, instead retrieving his pack and pulling out food for breakfast. "We had best find Annie quickly," he said tersely, "or we will have to stop to hunt for food, and I cannot think that will go well for us, given recent events."

"Right," Ulrich agreed, and ate his food quickly. "Are you warming up?"

"Yes," Grosvenor replied, then reluctantly, "thank you for the fire."

Ulrich shrugged. "So how do we find this witch before she finds us, and why did she attack us?"

"I could not say," Grosvenor said. "Perhaps she does not like another mage taking such an interest. If anyone is a threat to her, it is me."

"Do you think..." Ulrich stewed over it for a moment, then decided the worst he'd get was derision, and he was used to that. "Do you think she might be the reason the dead wolf went feral? It is a hard thing to do, to turn a wolf feral."

Grosvenor frowned. "I...it's possible, though I don't see what her purpose...no, that's not true. He was trying to eat

Annie, and Gretel. Perhaps the witch was trying to use him to bring her food? But that seems a stretch. It hardly matters, anyway. The point is to find Annie, and we are wasting precious time."

"We also do not know where to go," Ulrich pointed out. "Better off to remain here, recover our strength, and figure out what to do, rather than run about a changing forest in hopes of finding what we need."

Making a face, Grosvenor conceded the point and subsided into silence to eat and warm himself.

Ulrich wondered at their chances of finding the girl alive. If the witch knew they were hunting her, would she keep the girl alive and fight them off, or devour the child right away and use what magic she gained from it?

Thinking about it curdled his stomach, but ignoring the reality of the situation would do more harm than good. "Is the child still alive, do you think?"

"Yes," Grosvenor said slowly, blinking as he clearly set aside his own thoughts. "My impression from Gretel was that the witch cannot simply eat—she must prepare the child first. Since Gretel and her brother were taken, people have been more cautious. I would imagine the witch has more trouble finding what she needs these days, so I do not think she would waste her prize by..." He grimaced, and finished, "getting ahead of herself."

Ulrich nodded. "Still, as you say, we should not waste time." He stroked his collar absently as he thought—but stopped as he felt eyes upon him. Looking up, he just caught Grosvenor looking away. The silence between them shifted into something tense and thick. "You are wolf given," Ulrich said quietly, "so why are you not wolf mated?"

"It's none of your business," Grosvenor snarled.

"Packs have fought over less than the mistreatment of a wild mage," Ulrich replied. "My own pack has but two to its name, both of them elderly now. They would do and give a great deal to lay claim to you, as would many packs, yet you rot here in the lowlands?"

Grosvenor laughed bitterly, but Ulrich did not miss the sadness in it. "My own clan kicked me out; my former family and my ex betrothed alike prefer to pretend I do not exist, wolf. The mark upon me is nothing more than a bad memory, and if I could be rid of it, I would." He threw his remaining food back into his pack, then went to pack up his still wet clothes. "If we return to that clearing, we can try to backtrack the sprites. I doubt they were aware enough not to leave a path, and hopefully the witch did not think of it."

As plans went, it was a thin one, but there was also a distinct lack of alternatives. Nodding, silently vowing to learn more of Grosvenor's story once the child was safe, Ulrich took care of the fire. Once that was done, he shifted back to wolf and led the way back to the clearing, for they had been in too great a hurry to erase their own path.

He had not expected the remains of the sprites still to be there, but he smelled them long before they came into sight.

The field was just as unpleasant of appearance as it had been of smell. Mud was everywhere, so dark it was almost black, smeared across trees and shrubbery, covering most of the ground. He could see small bones scattered throughout, and his stomach knotted with disgust.

Children. What manner of magic was so important, so grand, that it merited devouring children?

Growling low, he sniffed around the clearing until he had the scent well and truly in his nostrils—then onward he went, moving through the forest as quickly as was possible while following a trail. Everything else faded from his attention; nothing mattered but finding the source of the sprites.

He was aware of another presence keeping fairly decent pace with him—Grosvenor. Impressive. He really was wolf given, and properly raised to it.

Then his attention was torn away by the sudden, abrupt scent of a human. The girl child, it had to be. Throwing his head back, Ulrich howled, then rushed forward faster than ever, determined to reach her now he had her scent—

"Ulrich, no—"

Grosvenor's warning came too late, and realization later still, and just as he realized he had been summoned straight into a trap, Ulrich's world exploded into pain.

~~*

He woke with a groan, and for a moment could not figure out why he was unable to hold a hand to his head.

Only after some struggling did he realize that it was because he wasn't in a form that had hands. He was wolf, and after a few attempts to alter that state, he realized he couldn't.

It was just as well, really. As awareness grew stronger, he saw he was in a cage. Crude, but effective, for the wooden bars of it were carved with magic that mere strength would never overpower – and everywhere were bundles of wolfbane. Damn it.

Her scent. The girl's scent had triggered something and made him stupid. He remembered that much.

Grosvenor. Where was the wolf given? Was he all right? Had Ulrich's stupidity caused Grosvenor to be caught as well? Perhaps he had been smart enough to escape, to work out some other way of rescuing the girl.

His brothers, Ulrich thought with a sigh, would never have been so stupid. How could he have been taken in by such an obvious trap? Perhaps if he had not been so busy wondering about Grosvenor... but that was no excuse. He should have been paying more attention.

Ulrich whimpered and again berated himself, pacing restlessly about the tiny confines of his cage as best he was able. Out. He needed out. There was nothing worse than being trapped, and he wanted out now to find the child and his wolf given.

Then his own thoughts drew him up short, and he whined, laying down to his bury his head in his paws. It was natural to be possessive; wolves were very possessive by nature. Grosvenor was wolf given, which woke everyone one of those possessive instincts—even if the idea of a wolf given high mage going to a lowly seventh son was laughable.

Pack, that was it. He wanted Grosvenor for his pack. He would be a splendid addition, even with that grouchiness, and the pack would appreciate him. Why was a wolf given hiding away in the lowlands? What pack had been stupid enough to let him go, and why? Few were the crimes for which one such as Grosvenor would be banished or otherwise forced to leave.

He whined again, and set the thoughts aside. There was little point in thinking about the wolf given when he was trapped in a spelled cage in the lair of a child-eating witch.

No scents reached him, an agonizing state of affairs. Thanks to the spells and the wolfsbane, he could smell nothing past the confines of his cage. He could see, though, and what he saw was a dismal cellar filled with barrels of food, herbs hanging from the ceiling, crates and bottles and jars. He did not think he wanted to know what some of those things contained, and was almost grateful he could not smell the truth.

The sound of movement drew his attention, and he tensed as he saw the cellar door swing open...and small, dirty feet appeared on the stairs. He watched intently as the little girl walked toward him, carefully carrying a large, heavy bucket.

She moved to the corner of his cage and tipped the contents of the bucket into a large porcelain bowl in the corner of the cage that until then he had not paid much attention.

Water. He couldn't smell it, damn it all, but he could see it well enough.

He moved closer to the bars, peering at the little girl. She was drugged—heavily. There was not a single lowland child who was not unnerved by the sight of a wolf, and if this one had nearly been the meal for a wolf turned feral...she should be running, or at the very least crying. Some show of fear. Yet she stood still and patient, as though waiting for something. Her eyes looked wrong...fuzzy, or something, around the edges. Distant and vague, certainly. Whatever she was really seeing, it was not him or even their surroundings.

Poor thing. Little girls were meant to be given ribbons and sweets, and taken up on shoulders to ride around the village for a bit, before being sent back to their mamas. He'd always liked his little nieces and cousins and all the other pups in the village who came along to play with 'Uncle Rich'.

Thoughts of home depressed him, for locked away in this miserable cage in the cellar of a witch—and all because of his own stupidity—home seemed further away than ever. He continued to watch the girl, curious as to her reasons for lingering.

She stared at him, then at the water, then at him again. Then she repeated it.

It was drugged.

He didn't know how he knew it, but he knew it as well as his own name. The water was poisonous, and he did not care to find out what it was intended to do to him. With a witch in residence, there was any number of possibilities, none of them appealing.

Chuffing, he got his muzzle beneath the bowl and upended it, spilling the water out onto the floor beyond the cage.

The girl gave a faint, whispery smile that was gone as quickly as it had come, then slowly turned and walked back the way she had come.

Left alone in the near-total dark, Ulrich lay down and wondered miserably what he was going to do.

He did not know how long he remained in that hell, only that the girl came three times more with water he promptly poured out, despite the growing agony of his thirst and hunger. It was, as plans went, a sound one. If the witch suspected, for whatever reason, that he was not drinking it, time alone would be enough to eventually force him to it. Food he could do without for some time; water he could not.

Before that became a problem, however, someone new came to visit him.

Though completely drained of energy, Ulrich stood and growled, his fur standing on end as he took in the woman who was too young and pretty and perfect to be real.

He barked loudly, sharply, hackles up as the witch drew closer, longing to bite her face off, to rip out her throat and make her suffer for all the pain she had caused others. For caging him, for taking Grosvenor, or for leaving him for dead.

The woman laughed, a sound that raked across his raw nerves. "You're even prettier than the last one," she said,

curling her hands around the bars of the cage, mocking him with the gesture. He could not touch the bars and she knew it, the bitch. "No wonder that damned mage is so angry with me."

Grosvenor was alive? Ulrich did not want to get his hopes up, but he could not deny that tiny bit of information eased him.

She laughed again, tossing back long, gold hair over one shoulder. "He killed the last one. I had hoped you would serve me better, pretty highland wolf, but I see you have not even been drinking your water."

He drew back as she slowly knelt, growling low and deep as she smiled in a way that made him want to run and attack in equal measure. "Bad wolf. Do what I say and drink the water, or I will do far worse than this to your pretty mage."

She threw something at him—and Ulrich abruptly saw red.

A finger. It was Grosvenor's little finger.

"I was going to eat it," she said with a laugh, "but I thought it would be better off going to you."

Hot rage poured through him, acerbated by the shame that this was his fault. Beyond thinking, beyond reason, he threw himself at the bars – and howled in pain as the magic burned him, stabbed through his system like a thousand knives.

He paused to recover his ability to breathe, then did it again.

All the while the witch laughed and laughed. "That's right," she crowed. "Exhaust yourself. Expend that energy. Then you will have no choice!"

Snarling, he threw himself at the bars again, that little finger spurring him on every time the pain became too much to bear.

He felt dizzy. Nauseous. Shaky. But more than anything, he felt angry. Shoving back everything else, he threw himself at the bars one last time—and heard a definitive cracking sound.

Then abruptly he was free, just barely standing on shaky legs on the dirt floor of the cellar.

The witch gaped at him, both of them frozen from the shock.

He recovered first, and before she could run or cast a spell, he was at her throat. Her blood was hot and tangy, with some foul taste that made him retch as he finally pulled away. When his stomach finally gave up trying to leave his body, and the taste of blood had been washed away by the bitter nastiness of stomach acid, he half-walked, half-stumbled his way to and up the stairs.

Grosvenor was tied up on the bed, and seemed to be unconscious. One hand was poorly bandaged and crusted with blood, more blood dripped down the bed frame to pool on the floor.

Ulrich whined, then attempted to shift—and gasped in relief when it finally worked. Struggling to his feet, he stumbled his way to the bed and dropped down on the edge of it.

He whined low in his throat as he took in Grosvenor's battered state. Though his ability to smell had returned to him, he still could not smell Grosvenor. That would not do, and though it was a huge breach of etiquette, Ulrich reached out and yanked away the charm around Grosvenor's neck.

The scent of Grosvenor struck him hard, crashing through even the haze of pain that had come with fighting magic with brute strength. He smelled of blood and herbs and fear, but he also smelled of the highlands, of wolves, of magic.

Tearing himself away from the sight of Grosvenor bruised and bloody, passed out from pain and sheer exhaustion, he looked around the small cabin for something to cut the ropes. At last spying a dagger, he stood and slowly crossed the room to fetch it.

It was clean, almost eerily so. He wondered if she had used this to cut off Grosvenor's little finger, and felt anger stir anew in his blood. Returning to Grosvenor, he cut the ropes and then drew him close. He breathed in Grosvenor's scent, storing it away to remember forever, wondering if he could ever be forgiven for letting this happen.

He let go of his fierce grip only when he felt movement, sensed Grosvenor waking. He drew back just enough to look into Grosvenor's autumn colored eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked quietly. "Besides...your finger..."

Grosvenor nodded, and pushed him away, shifting until he was sitting on the edge of the bed. "You're not feral," he said after a moment, as he slowly began to unwind the bandage around his left hand. "She said..."

"The girl managed to let me know the water she was giving me was poisoned," Ulrich said, then drew up short. "The girl. Where is the girl?"

Immediately Grosvenor left off with his bandages, though it was obvious he was in a great deal of pain, and stood up. He strode toward a door in the back of the cabin, and pushed it open.

Ulrich followed close behind him, into what proved to be a kitchen. He carefully avoided investigating any of the lingering scents.

The little girl was huddled by the fire, shivering despite the almost stifling heat of the room. She looked up, tears pouring down her cheeks—and stared in disbelief at what she saw. For a long moment she was silent, then she bolted to her feet and ran toward Grosvenor. "Hunter! Hunter!"

She sobbed in his arms as Grosvenor quietly soothed her with meaningless murmurs, holding her in a tight embrace. Finally, when it seemed she was going to make herself sick from crying, he whispered a few soft words and she went limp in his arms.

"There," he said, "she'll sleep until I wake her."

Biting back all the things he wanted to say and ask, Ulrich nodded and turned. "Let's get out of here."

"The witch won't follow us?" Grosvenor asked.

Ulrich remembered the taste of bitter blood in his mouth, and pressed the back of his hand to his mouth in an attempt to ward off another fit of retching. "She's dead," he finally managed, and without another word led the way from the kitchen.

They lingered just long enough to gather supplies and find their things, then they left the gingerbread house as quickly as their weakened states permitted.

Only an hour or so passed before they simply could not go another step. Making a fire took the last of Ulrich's energy, and then he must have dozed off, because when he woke again it was dark.

He looked around, and immediately saw the shadowy forms of Grosvenor and the child. She was still fast asleep, but he could see Grosvenor was awake. "I'm sorry," he said into the silence. "It was stupid of me to fall into that trap."

Grosvenor stirred in the dark, idly tossing a twig into the flames. "No," he said slowly. "You could not see the trap she laid, and she laid it well. I did not even sense it until too late. How in the hell did you break free?"

Ulrich made the mistake of trying to sit up, and hissed in pain. "I beat through the spells," he said when he trusted his voice. "She..." he swallowed. "She threw your finger into the cage, and I lost it. I threw myself at the bars until magic simply wasn't enough to sustain them.."

"You fought your way through a magic barrier?" Grosvenor exclaimed. "That should have killed you. What in the hell were you thinking?"

"That you were suffering and it was my fault, and if I did not get free, we all would die," Ulrich replied quietly. "Are you all right?"

Grosvenor was silent for a moment. Being able to smell him...Ulrich thought he would be miserable when Grosvenor finally made a new Wolfsbane Charm. He smelled good, even with the lingering taints of blood and herbs, the ruined state of his clothes, and all their days hiking through the woods.

"I'm fine," Grosvenor said at last. "My hand hurts, but I've endured worse pain. Once we get home, everything can be set to rights. Thank you, for rescuing us."

Ulrich shrugged off the gratitude, uncomfortable with a Grosvenor who was not biting his head off. "It was my fault we were captured in the first place. I came along to help, but got us into worse trouble than you would have found otherwise."

"There is no way to say that for certain," Grosvenor replied.

Making a face, Ulrich slowly moved around the fire until they were sitting next to each other. "Shouldn't you be yelling at me, or something? I do not trust this nice part of you. I expected to have my head bitten off for screwing up."

He could tell that his words had startled Grosvenor, and almost thought he heard the faintest of laughs. Grosvenor threw another twig into the fire. "I'll yell at you later, wolf. Right now, I simply do not have the energy. She was going to eat me, did you know that? I guess my being wolf given added something to me and my magic, that she wanted badly to have."

Ulrich could not help the hot satisfaction that came with those words. "Of course," he replied. "You were bitten by a wolf and given the barest essence of wolf. Nothing improves the blood like wolf."

Grosvenor let out a sharp bark of laughter, and Ulrich had a sneaking suspicion he was rolling his eyes. "Of course," he said dryly. "Spoken like a true wolf. I have not missed that arrogance."

He was lying, Ulrich knew it. Grosvenor was truly wolf given; born and raised to it, bitten, bearing a collar, and completely at ease with him no matter what form he took. Rare was the wolf given who took so naturally and beautifully to it. He was made to be with wolves, of course he would miss them.

Even the arrogance.

The question escaped him before he could bite it back. "Why are you here, and not with a pack?"

Beside him, Grosvenor stiffened.

Ulrich did not think he was going to answer, but just when he opened his mouth to apologize, Grosvenor replied, voice soft and sad in the dark, face just out of reach of the firelight. "My marriage to Pack Rothenberg was arranged two years before I was born," he said slowly. "When I was twelve, and bitten, it was at last decided I would marry the Alpha's eldest son. I was chosen over the daughter of another Alpha, and they had dithered long over whom he would marry."

"He had no interest in me, however. Thirteen years separated us, and his interests always lay elsewhere. When I was sixteen, I stupidly let a lone wolf seduce me. I thought I was in love with him. You can figure out the rest, I'm certain."

Wincing, Ulrich nodded and did not bother to ask him to finish the tale. It was easy enough to put together the rest of the picture.

The history of the Packs was filled with such stories – a pup seduced by a wolf, convinced to run away, and abandoned somewhere along the way. Pride, however, was in generous supply in the packs. If Grosvenor had tried to return, even being wiser for the experience and sorry for it, his family would not have taken him back. If the pack had acknowledged him at all, it would not have been in any kind way.

Hell, his grandmother had been the youthful victim in such a scenario—except his grandfather had forgiven her. He'd heard the story a thousand times growing up, because it was an outrage for years that he had forgiven her for running away with another wolf.

He reached out unthinkingly to find Grosvenor's hand, curling his own around it, shame pouring through him as he felt the place where a finger should be—but Grosvenor did not pull away. "I am sorry, wolf given. You should come home with me; we would take a wolf given high mage."

"Yeah, right," Grosvenor said bitterly, and finally withdrew his hand. "Shut up, wolf, and go back to sleep. We've got hard traveling in front of us, and very little food to keep us going. Stop wasting energy on pointless conversations."

Smiling in the dark, unable to not, Ulrich obediently bedded down to sleep. Memories of the dead witch tried to rise up to haunt him, but the scent of Grosvenor drove out all else, and moments later he was lost to a deep sleep.

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They reached Gretel's cabin a couple of days later, driven on by dreams of baths and hot meals and real beds.

At least, Ulrich hoped he would be getting all of the above, but under the circumstances he would not begrudge anyone too much if they simply sent him packing.

When they arrived, the old woman—Gretel, he recalled—was sitting in a rocking chair in front of the cottage. She went still as she saw them, then stood, gathered up her skirts, and actually ran as they drew near. "Oh, my baby, you found my baby," she said, and took the girl in her arms, kissing and petting and crying.

Ulrich smiled, and looked at Grosvenor, startled when he smiled back.

He made himself look away, and focused instead on the old woman and child, hanging back slightly when they and Grosvenor made to return to the cottage.

Grosvenor stopped when he realized Ulrich was not with them. "Well?" he snapped. "Are you coming?"

"Wouldn't it be better if I went?" Ulrich asked, trying hard not to think about what kind of food the old woman might cook for them. He could smell meat, and bread, and he wanted it bad. "Me being a wolf and all?"

"Shut up and move it," Grosvenor said, and turned to stalk off.

Ulrich smiled, shook his head, and followed after him.

Inside, the cottage was warm and smelled like food and warmth and like it had been lived in for a very long time. Loath to ruin the floor, he yanked off his boots with the last of his energy and left them just outside, then padded after

Grosvenor into the cabin.

He moved to the fire and promptly sat down to sit beside it for a while, groaning when he felt soft fur beneath him and not sticks and leaves and damp earth. If it were allowed, he would sleep right here for a week straight. Possibly two.

Then Gretel removed the lid from a steaming pot set on the back of her stove, and the hint of meat he had caught before exploded into the most magnificent smelling stew he'd ever had the good fortune to smell. His stomach growled audibly, but he was too enthralled by the food to care.

Gretel laughed, and a moment later brought him a large bowl of it, topped with slices of buttered bread. "Here you are; it's the very least I can offer for all you've done for me, and after we were so rude to you at the start."

"You had reason," Ulrich muttered, and then lost all interest in talking or anything that did not involve eating. He barely even noticed when his empty bowl was promptly replaced by another, not stopping until three bowls of the stuff had been devoured and he at last was ready to stop. For now. "That was perfect."

Laughing again, Gretel took away the last of his dishes and put them all in a washing tub. "I'm glad you like it. Thank you for helping to rescue Annie, and from what I hear you saved Gros as well."

How much had he missed while he was eating? Ulrich shook his head. "It was my fault we were captured, the least I could do was get us free again. Anyway, I partially failed, as Grosvenor did not escape without permanent injury..."

He would always feel guilty about that, and would never forget the image of that finger thrown upon the floor of his cage.

Gretel clucked her tongue, then stood from where she had sat on the edge of her bed to check on Annie, who remained fast asleep. "Yes, let me see your finger, dear," she said to Grosvenor. Moving to a small cabinet in the kitchen area, she pulled out a basket that Ulrich saw was filled with bandages, tinctures, and other healing miscellany.

Grosvenor grimaced, but obediently unwound the makeshift bandages he had fashioned from his own clothing.

Clucking again, face lined with dismay and disapproval, Gretel set to properly tending the wound. "At least it's a clean cut," she said. "Nor is it infected, which is good, for else your entire hand may have had to go." She finished treating it, wrapped a fresh bandage, and smiled. "There. It'll never be good as new, obviously, but it will be as close as you can get."

"Thank you, Gretel," Grosvenor murmured. "I don't suppose we could trouble you for some soap and hot water, if we do the hauling? I feel like I'm wearing half the forest right now."

"Of course, dear," Gretel said. "I'll get it all ready, if you two are up to hauling the water."

Groaning, but unable to resist the chance at a proper bath, Ulrich hauled himself to his feet. It took nearly an hour of miserable scooping and hauling, but they did at last get the bathtub filled, with extra buckets of hot water nearby.

He let Grosvenor go first, while the old woman vanished to do other things to give them privacy. For his part, he tried to keep his eyes to himself, but they were irresistibly drawn to the wolf bite, as seared into his mind as Grosvenor's scent.

Wolf given. He belonged with wolves – real wolves – and not buried here in the lowlands to deal with pathetic lowland wolves and witches.

Looking away from the scar only caused his eyes to look at other portions of Grosvenor, until finally Ulrich had to stand up and go poke around the cabin lest Grosvenor catch him and decide to fetch his bow and arrow.

He wanted to go home, and he wanted Grosvenor to go with him. After all of this, and given how hard he had worked for the King, he was certain he could persuade his superiors to grant him an early release. Then he could return home, and with his wolf given—

Who would never be his, he realized, the thought knotting his stomach. Not that it mattered, because it didn't...but wolves were possessive, and he'd found the wolf given. Finders keepers.

Except that wasn't true. That he'd found Grosvenor counted for nothing. He was a seventh son, and even the fact his father was the Alpha did not much improve his standing. Seventh sons were last resorts, used most often to send to other packs. They did not get wild mages.

The thought should not have been as depressing as it was, and Ulrich turned away from pondering the whys of it, staring out the window at the forest they had only recently left behind. He was in no hurry to return to it, unless it was because he was headed home.

"Your turn," Grosvenor said from behind him.

Nodding, Ulrich moved to the tub and stripped out of his foul clothes. Gretel had kindly left some clean ones for both of them, saying they had once belonged to her husband, several years dead now.

Sliding into the water, happy it was still more than a little warm, he was more than content to simply soak for a bit. Only when the water began to really cool did he move to scrub himself clean. When at last he ran out of excuses to stay in the water, he grabbed a towel and climbed out.

The back of his neck prickled, and he turned—to see Grosvenor staring hard out the window, a scowl on his face.

He'd definitely felt someone watching him. Had Grosvenor liked what he'd seen? Ulrich bit back a grin, not quite able to explain why he was grinning, and swiftly dressed in the waiting clothes. Feeling more like himself than he had in days, he started to clean up the mess they had made.

Getting the water out of the tub was much easier than getting it in. An hour later, they sat before the fire with mugs of tea and slabs of some sweet cake he'd never had before.

Gretel laughed as she handed him a third piece. "Your mother must have despaired of ever getting your stomach full," she said teasingly. "Though, I seem to recall that all boys and men come with that challenge."

Smiling sheepishly, Ulrich ate the last piece of cake as quickly as he had the first two, then finished off his tea. "Your cooking is magnificent."

"It's what drew my husband's attention my way," Gretel said proudly. "I could cook better than any woman in the village."

"The whole country," Ulrich declared, and beamed when she cut him a fourth slice.

Grosvenor rolled his eyes.

"So will Annie be all right?" Gretel asked, moving to check on her again.

"Yes," Grosvenor replied, sipping his own tea and slowly eating what was only his second piece of cake. "I put her into a deep sleep, before we started back. She should wake in another day or two. It's entirely possible she'll think the entire thing a dream, and if so, I would not press her to think otherwise."

Gretel nodded in agreement, and looked at Ulrich. "It's nice to see a good wolf, for once. Grosvenor has said such a thing existed, but I confess I never really believed him."

Ulrich blinked, then looked Grosvenor, who was scowling into his tea. He grinned, and turned back to Gretel. "Did he really? My mother would say otherwise, but I have always tried to be a good wolf."

"Your mother would be very proud of what you've done for Annie and Gros."

His mother would knock him upside the head for falling into the trap, and remind him that his eldest brothers would never be so stupid, but he was happy he had not gotten anyone killed. "I am happy I could help, and am grateful for your hospitality."

"You're just happy to have a full stomach, wolf, and angling for breakfast."

"Which he'll get," Gretel said with amusement. "Now, you both must be tired. If you'll fetch some more firewood, I'll put out the blankets and pillows for you to bed down before the fire."

More than happy to comply if it meant he could finally sleep, Ulrich stood and stretched with a groan, then headed for the door.

Grosvenor followed him, and then led the way to the shed a few yards away from the house and the firewood stacked along one side of it.

"I'm probably headed home in a couple of months," Ulrich said into the quiet, not certain what in him provoked the words.

"Good for you," Grosvenor said with a shrug that Ulrich could only just see in the growing dark. "Try not to get caught by any more witches."

Ulrich seized upon that statement. "You could come along and make certain of it, since obviously I'm easy prey for witches?"

"What?" Grosvenor asked, dropping the wood he'd picked up. "You weren't serious about that."

"I was," Ulrich said. "My pack would welcome you. I told you, the only wild mages we have are both old. I don't think either one is as capable as you've proven to be. You're wolf given, you should be with wolves."

Grosvenor blew out an irritated breath. "Meant to be with wolves—and all of you decided that before I was even conceived. What makes you think I even want to go back, or waste any more of my time on a pack of idiots? Forget it; I live here now."

"You miss the highlands—why else would you cling to your accent? Why else would you curl up with me, despite my being in wolf form? And you told that old woman that there were good wolves, even if you told me you thought all of us were bad." When Grosvenor said nothing, he went in for the kill. "You still wear your collar."

"Shut up," Grosvenor snarled, even as his hand jerked as he stopped it from reaching for the collar in question.

Ulrich reached out and touched it himself, curling his fingers under it and tugging hard to bring Grosvenor just a little bit closer. The sudden urge to kiss him rose up and Ulrich squashed it for the stupid impulse it was, because Grosvenor was not his to kiss and there was no reason to, anyway. "Come home with me," he urged. "Return to the highlands with me. If you decide you cannot stay, I'll escort you back here myself, and no hard feelings." He bit back an urge to say 'please' because wolves did not beg, even if he wanted to for some strange reason.

"I was rejected by one pack," Grosvenor snarled. "I don't feel like facing that a second time."

He tried to move away, but Ulrich grabbed his shoulders, made him stay. "You won't. I promise my pack will welcome

you, on my life. I—we would love you to join our pack. I know it."

Grosvenor stared at him, and even in the dark he could feel the weight of those eyes. "Why should I believe you?" Grosvenor finally asked, voice bitter—but the slightest hint of hope, of longing, was all Ulrich needed to hear.

Victory was so close he could nearly taste it. "I don't think I've ever even heard much about Pack Rothenberg, so obviously they are nothing but a pack of fools. Schwarzenberg is not so stupid." Impulsively he reached up and unfastened his own collar, then fastened it around Grosvenor's neck before Grosvenor could move away. "Come home with me, wolf given. You belong with pack, and mine will claim you gladly."

He heard the catch in Grosvenor's breath, but did not remark on it. He simply waited, and hoped...

"All right," Grosvenor said, the words barely audible, and Ulrich could tell he was already wondering if that was the answer he should have given.

"Then give me yours," Ulrich said, and waited, tense, as Grosvenor obediently undid his own white leather collar and fastened it around Ulrich's throat.

It felt strange, different than the one he had worn nearly all his life. But Grosvenor was sunk into the leather, and he found he rather liked having the scent of Grosvenor so close to him. "I have to return to the castle, to receive my formal release and permission to go home. That will take a few weeks. Did you want to come with me, or shall I return here for you?"

"Return," Grosvenor said stiffly, and began slowly to gather up firewood again. "I have to pack, and make certain Annie and Gretel will be all right. Take care of my own cabin."

"All right," Ulrich said. "You will come with me?"

"Yes," Grosvenor snapped. "You have my damned collar, wolf, and I have yours. That is a promise made; do not insult me by questioning it."

Ulrich smiled in the dark and murmured apologies, hoping the next few weeks moved quickly.

PART 2

SEVENTH SON

The Seventh Son

He'd never been so happy to see a cabin, before. They'd traveled well over a month, and six days into it, the snow had started.

Nearly a decade in the lowlands was still not long enough to forget how brutal a highland winter could be. If some

crazy part of him had missed it, well, that was his own madness.

Though it seemed to be a shared madness, because the deeper into the cold and snow they got, the happier Ulrich became. Grosvenor found it amusing, because he did not dare find it anything else. Like endearing. That would be stupid.

He let out a groan of relief as they spilled into the dark cabin, setting his pack down on the floor—and then promptly joining it.

"I think there's firewood in the back," Ulrich said, shaking the snow off. Even in his human form, he was nothing more than a giant puppy. Grosvenor could never decide if he wanted to pet him, or kick him. He was spared making the decision as Ulrich vanished into the back.

Not five seconds later, a crashing sound reverberated throughout the cabin, followed immediately by several colorful swear words. Rolling his eyes, Grosvenor hauled himself to his feet, and moved stiffly into the back room.

"Light might help," he said acidly, though he knew full well that Ulrich could see well enough in the dark. "Did traveling in the cold not wear you out enough, you need to injure yourself before you'll settle down?"

Ulrich laughed in the dark room, and Grosvenor followed the shadowy movements as best he was able. "I forgot about the low beam in this room, and cracked my head on it. Dropped the wood I was holding, but never fear, I'm still alive."

"Oh, good," Grosvenor muttered, and turned to stalk back to the main room.

He fetched his pack and pulled out food while Ulrich worked on the fire.

"It's not much," Ulrich finally said several minutes later as they warmed themselves and ate, "but it will keep us warm and dry until we can reach the pack proper tomorrow."

Grosvenor blinked at him, suddenly confused. If there was one word which he would never use to describe Ulrich, it was shy. The idiot was so...so...direct and earnest and eager to please, he drove Grosvenor crazy with it. Shy just was not in his repertoire. Yet that's precisely what he seemed right now, blathering about the cabin not being much. "Anything is better than another night in the cold and snow," he said, but looking around the cabin, he could see it was far from 'not much' even in the weak light of the fire.

It was simple, and small, as most highland homes tended to be, for small was much easier to heat in the cold months than large spaces. Old, and a bit run down, but well tended and cared for, obviously. What little furniture filled it was draped in heavy cloth, and the whole place smelled musty and disused, but it seemed a good little cabin. "This is yours, I take it?"

"Yes," Ulrich replied, smiling in his puppy-like way that no grown man should be allowed to get away with, honestly. "It belonged to my great uncle; I spent a lot of time with him, as a child. When he passed, he willed the cabin to me. It will be nice to fix it up, pull my things out of storage—especially my books."

"Books?" Grosvenor asked, intrigued despite himself. All through the month and a half journey, Ulrich had talked and talked and talked. About his home, his pack, his family—but not much about himself. True to wolf fashion, the obsession was with the whole, not the individual. Pack mentality, his mother had often called it, with a note of disdain.

It had always confused him, that disdain. Weren't they clan, which was like pack? It wasn't until later that he'd understood selfishness, and self-interest, and how that drove everyone, no matter what words they used to color it.

Except Ulrich, whispered that stupid voice at the back of his head. The same stupid voice which had driven him to acquiesce to returning to the highlands with Ulrich. He reached up unconsciously to touch the collar at this throat, the feel of the brown leather marked with Ulrich's name and pack as familiar now as his own collar had once been.

He would have to give it back, now, he realized, and hated the pang of regret which accompanied that thought. Whatever. Of course he had to give it back. He'd promised to return to the highlands, and they had made it. Soon he'd have his own hateful collar back, unless by some miracle the Schwarzenberg Alpha actually accepted him. Ha. He really didn't know why he'd been stupid enough to agree to this.

"Are you warm enough?" Ulrich asked, interrupting his thoughts. "Let me notify the pack I'm here, and then I'll get the bed made up for you. Tomorrow, I'm certain you'll be in my father's house. It's much better than this old place." He stood up and was gone before Grosvenor could reply.

Not that he knew what he would have said. What was wrong with this little cabin?

He thought he knew, though. These were the highlands, and whatever he might have been in the king's castle, here Ulrich was just the seventh son. Normally, he would have had next to nothing to do with a wild mage. A wolf given wild mage was a valuable commodity in the highlands, important enough to marry a wolf who would someday be Alpha.

Except, he thought with old bitterness, his Alpha had wanted nothing to do with him. Not until Grosvenor had been so desperate for affection he'd fallen for the oldest trick in the book, and then only to save face. Which he'd done by rejecting the pleas and apologies of the wild mage he'd always preferred to ignore as much as possible, and casting him out into the freezing cold.

Bah.

If by some chance the Schwarzenberg Alpha actually agreed to his presence, what would become of him? Given to one of the alpha's sons? Would he be handed over to Ulrich, as the one who had brought him here?

No, and he didn't know why he'd even thought such a stupid thing. Perhaps they would just let him stay on as himself, without attaching him to one wolf or another.

He snorted. And maybe lowlanders would stop being sniveling idiots. Pack mentality. They would find someone to marry him, to make him truly pack and all that rot. Familiar rot, and he hated that he still could not hate it, even when it had cost him so much—everything, in fact.

Outside came the long, eerie howls of a wolf. It made his chest ache, that sound. Lowland wolves were more civilized, using more human means of travel and communication where they could. Pathetic, Grosvenor had always thought. What was the point in being wolf if one wasn't going to act wolf? The howls of the wolves was as much a part of the music of the highlands as the cry of the wind, the thunder of the great waterfalls, the songs of the clans.

Over the sounds of the winter wind, he could just hear an answering howl. Three of them, responding to the news of Ulrich's return. Grosvenor's heart began to beat rapidly, even as he told himself to calm down and stop being stupid. There was no reason to be nervous; he knew the outcome of the looming meeting. Once rejected, always rejected. They would cast him out, and back to the lowlands he would go. Gretel would always welcome him; the lowlanders were soft, but that also made them more forgiving.

He did not look up as Ulrich returned, not needing to see to know the idiot was grinning and shaking snow everywhere. How in the hell did one man manage to be so inexplicably happy all the time? About nothing?

They were the same age, but sometimes he felt like there was years between them. "Family successfully contacted?"

"Yes," Ulrich said, beaming as he sat down. "I think the snow is too heavy for them to travel tonight, but if it settles enough tomorrow, we'll see them then. You'll like my pack."

Grosvenor wondered which of them he was attempting to convince of that. He hoped the snow didn't let up until the

spring thaw, if only because he really wasn't in the mood for Ulrich in kicked-puppy mode. The very last thing he needed right now was Ulrich crushed that his precious pack hated the reject wolf given he'd brought home. He stripped off his gloves and examined his left hand, where every now and then he still thought he could feel his lost finger.

He shuddered at the memory of that vile witch, the look in her gray eyes as she'd talked about all the different ways she could eat him to gain his strange highland powers. The pain as she'd cut off his finger as a 'snack for her pretty feral wolf' in the cellar, and he'd known she had meant Ulrich. He'd felt awful that the wolf who had nothing to do with this, was the one who'd been turned feral over it.

Waking up to see that Ulrich was holding him, and perfectly fine, had been more of a relief than he could bear to think about. He didn't like the idiot much, but he didn't want to see him turn into the monster the past wolves had been.

"I'll go get the bed ready," Ulrich said after a moment. "Hopefully, the bedding doesn't smell like it's been stored away and neglected for five years."

"Can't smell worse than a gingerbread house," Grosvenor muttered, shuddering again. He set the last of his jerky aside, no longer hungry.

Ulrich shared his grimace, and then vanished into a back room.

Feeling suddenly restless, Grosvenor abandoned the fireplace to wander around the main room. The cabin really was a tidy one – one main room, the back storage room where they'd gotten the fireplace, and a separate bedroom. That was especially nice; he'd grown up in a house where the kids slept in a loft to give the parents an illusion of privacy in the one large room below.

Except he'd been wolf given, so as often as not he slept with the pack into which he would someday marry. In winter especially, they often preferred to sleep in their wolf forms, and nothing was warmer than bedding down with a pile of fur, even if said fur occasionally smelled a bit.

As he'd gotten older, that hadn't been quite as proper, since technically he'd belonged to stupid Alban after that...but Alban had never wanted him, not until too damned late.

Sighing, Grosvenor reached out and yanked away the heavy cloth covering some bit of furniture. A large chair, worn but comfy looking. The color was impossible to tell, but he rather thought the firelight hinted at a deep red. Dropping the cloth, he moved to what looked like a matching chair and yanked that cloth away as well.

By the time he was finished, he had uncovered the two chairs, as well as a dining table and chairs, and a large chest which proved to hold all manner of miscellany, including a few of the books Ulrich had mentioned.

He looked up at the sound of footsteps, and went still as Ulrich returned. He had stripped off his winter clothing, leaving him in only trousers, boots, and undershirt. He looked like a shadow, almost, with that dark hair falling in his face, the dark brown of his eyes impossible to discern in the weak light.

Ulrich was handsome, there was no denying that. He was tall and lithe, and moved with the grace that Grosvenor had only ever seen wolves possess. Ulrich smiled as he saw what Grosvenor had done. "Needs a bit of cleaning, but it looks as though everything has held up rather well, eh? I'm glad. I half feared this place would fall down while I was gone."

Grosvenor started to reply, but the sound of claws on the porch drew them both up short. Ulrich was obviously just as surprised as he, but the cold and snow and wind must make it hard to pick out any scent.

Even as someone pounded upon the door, Ulrich opened it. "Father."

Ulrich was swept up in a tight embrace by a man that, even without Ulrich's words, was obviously his sire. They looked almost exactly alike; his father had a broader, more muscular build than his slender son.

"It's good to have you home, son," his father said at last, and only then did Grosvenor notice he wasn't alone—yet another Ulrich imitation had come along. Not as old as their father, but surely around a decade older than Ulrich. Sterner looking, not as handsome, and completely lacking in Ulrich's maddening puppy like quality.

He stood quietly by as the family reunion continued, wondering if they would expect him to leave immediately, or would at least let him wait until morning. Rothenberg hadn't, but Schwarzenberg might be a bit different.

When at last they turned to him, he stood still and awaited judgment.

Ulrich smiled at him. "May I present to you Alpha Etzel Schwarz, of Pack Schwarzenberg, and my eldest brother, Detlef. Father, brother, this is Grosvenor Alloway. I met him in the lowlands, and assisted him with rescuing a kidnapped child. I discovered he is wolf given, and persuaded him to return here with me. I told him that we would have a place for him."

"Why does he not already have a place?" Schwarz asked.

Grosvenor sighed. "With all due respect, Alpha, that is a long story and we have travelled hard to get here quickly. If you must hear the tale tonight, then I would like at least to make some tea."

"I can do you one better than that," Detlef said, and hefted a basket that until then Grosvenor had not noticed he held. "Our mother sent along food, figuring Ulrich's stomach had not changed much in five years. There's enough here to feed twelve, I swear."

That made him laugh, catching him by surprise.

Ulrich rolled his eyes, and turned away to tend the fire that had gotten low while they stood their talking. "Come on then, bring that food and we'll tell you the full of it."

A couple of hours later, Grosvenor wanted to crawl away to bed and pretend he was still safe in the lowlands. Even that had to be better than sitting here waiting to be condemned.

"We will have to contact Rothenberg," Schwarz said slowly, after a long silence. "Though they cast him out, it is best to have formal documentation of it, so they cannot come in some day when they need a wild mage and take him back. Why is he wearing your collar?"

Ulrich flushed. "Oh—sorry. I forgot. I gave it to him as a promise that he'd be accepted here. We were so tired after getting here, I never got around—"

Grosvenor frowned, irritated that one simple question had Ulrich tripping over himself. Like it was such an important matter...except to pack it was. He didn't belong to Ulrich, and now that the promise was obviously fulfilled, he should not still be wearing it.

He reached up and unbuckled the collar, holding it out for Ulrich to take, and started to take his own back.

Schwarz shook his head. "No. Ulrich, go ahead and get rid of that one. We'll see he's fitted with a new, proper collar tomorrow. Grosvenor, wolf given wild mage, welcome to Pack Schwarzenberg."

His breath caught in his throat, and even his annoyance over the matter of his collar could not stifle the feeling that came with hearing an Alpha welcome him into a pack. "Thank you," Grosvenor said, and bowed his head. "I hope I can serve."

"We are honored to have a new wild mage among us, I assure you," Schwarz assured him. "Once the formalities with Rothenberg are addressed, we will see you are made a proper member of pack." He cast a thoughtful look at Detlef,

who gave a minute shrug that Grosvenor would not have noticed had he not been watching them so closely.

As easily as that, he knew what his fate would be—he would marry Detlef. Who better to marry than the future Alpha? Nothing would secure his place better.

It should have made him happy. He was wolf given before he was even born; his destiny had always been to eventually be the mate of a pack Alpha. This was where he was meant to be, what he should be...so why was he disappointed? What had he been hoping for? He had true acceptance within his grasp, just as Ulrich had promised.

Ulrich...yes...the stubborn, irritatingly earnest and kind wolf who, now that he was back in the fold of the pack, was merely a seventh son. Grosvenor snuck a glance in his direction, but Ulrich was lost in deep thought, frowning at the fire.

Suddenly, he'd had more than enough. Unable to bear another moment of talking, Grosvenor stood up. "I thank you again, and look forward to my future with Pack Schwarzenberg. For the moment, however, I long for a bed. Ulrich was kind enough to make it up for me, and I believe I will make full use of it. I am certain you would like time to catch up with your son after five years, anyway. I bid you all good night."

He left before they could stop him, vanishing into the smaller bedroom, not quite closing the door all the way. The room was cold, but the blankets on the bed warmed him quickly. They smelled musty and disused, but after all their hard traveling, the bed and musty blankets were heaven.

Closing his eyes, he settled into the bed and simply enjoyed resting on something soft. At some point, he heard the front door open and close, and wondered if the Alpha and his eldest son had left. When Ulrich did not wander in to check on him as Ulrich invariably would, he supposed they had not. Shaking the idle thought off, he tried to relax enough to sleep.

Just as he started to drift off, however, the soft voices on the other side of the door drifted to him. Just the Alpha and Ulrich, but the tone of their voices was serious. Despite himself, Grosvenor found himself straining to hear what they might say.

"Father...I was wondering..." He'd never heard Grosvenor sound so nervous before, so uncertain.

"Yes?" Schwarz asked.

"I was wondering, if—well, if it might be possible for me to court the wolf given. I...I found him, and brought him back, and he is already accustomed to me...I would like to, if it were at all possible."

Grosvenor went still on the bed, unable to process what he'd just heard. Before he could figure it out, however, the Alpha settled the matter.

"No, Ulrich, and you knew that. He is a wild mage, and deserves a higher ranking mate within the pack. It would be insulting to him, and the pack, to make him your mate. That aside, Detlef should have another mate. His wife has been dead six years, another mate would be good for him. Besides, we are negotiating with Pack Autenberg to marry you to one of his younger sons. The matter will not be settled for certain until the Spring Gathering, but I cannot see why the arrangement would not go through. It will be a fine match for you."

"Of course, father," Ulrich said quietly.

Grosvenor dragged his pillow over his head, to block out their voices, and the unwelcome weight of the crushing disappointment pressing down upon him.

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He woke up late the next morning, drawn out of sleep by the sunlight slipping in past faded green curtains from the single window in the bedroom. Deplorable, to wake so late, when ordinarily he was up before the sun. Still, they'd traveled long and hard. His body had obviously needed the rest.

So did his head—he still felt too tired to deal with the thoughts clamoring for attention. Shoving them away, especially those concerning his eavesdropping last night, Grosvenor threw back his blankets and climbed out of bed.

Raking back his disheveled hair, yawning, he ambled his way to the main room of the cabin. The smell of food made his stomach growl, drawing him to the table.

The image of Ulrich, half asleep and half naked, slumped over the food-laden table, made him forget about eating.

Scowling, Grosvenor bypassed the table to reach the small stove. A beat up old kettle was still steaming, and finding the little tin of tea took only a moment. If he made more noise than strictly necessary banging things around as he fixed his tea, he didn't particularly care.

Taking a seat, he sipped at his tea and glared at Ulrich until he finally dragged himself into a sitting position. The tea was strong and sweet; like everything else in the highlands, it had an edge to it the lowlands would never possess. An edge he had missed, even if he didn't like admitting it, if only to himself.

Ulrich yawned, then gave him a sleepy smile. "Sleep well? I checked on you after my father and brother finally left. You were sleeping so hard, I wasn't certain you were breathing for a moment."

"Guess I slept well, then," Grosvenor replied, a trifle more sharply than he'd intended, but he didn't apologize.

"You sound back to normal," Ulrich replied, and Grosvenor was startled by the mischief in his smile. "I told father we may or may not go into the village proper today, though he of course is eager to make you familiar with the pack. I said it depended entirely upon how rested we felt."

'We' in this case, Grosvenor knew, really only meant him. A full night of good sleep was all a wolf would need to recover. They were too hale and hearty for their own good, half the time. He considered it—go meet the pack, or stay here and rest the day.

He was in no hurry to meet the pack, and see if all of them would be as welcoming as their Alpha. On the other hand, as much as he tried to ignore it, last night's conversation still played over and over again in the back of his mind. He did not want to stay here alone with Grosvenor and find out if he'd do something stupid. Being back in the highlands meant playing by highland rules.

"Let's go into the village," he said finally. "No point in lazing around, right?" He didn't look at Ulrich as he spoke, simply started to help himself to the food set out. It was as delicious as dinner had been, and made him think fondly of Gretel. He hoped she was happy living with her daughter and granddaughter, and well away from that damned forest.

Thinking of the forest made him glance by sheer habit at his left hand, the missing finger still a strange sight, but growing more familiar with every glance.

"Are you certain?" Ulrich asked. "No one will mind if we rest a day."

"I'm sure," Grosvenor said curtly, glancing at him briefly, then jerked his gaze away when it tried to wander along that bare chest sprinkled with curly black hair.

"Very well," Ulrich said. "I'll heat some water, if you'd like to wash up. You can get a proper bath at my father's house, we'll be certain to take what we need for it. My mother will probably try to stuff us like holiday geese."

Grosvenor snorted. "That would take what, for you? Enough food to feed ten wolves?"

Ulrich made a face at him, then wolfed down a sausage link.

Fighting a sudden idiotic urge to smile, Grosvenor turned his full attention to his own food, drawing it out as long as he could. The food eventually ran out, however, and he moved to clean up while Ulrich heated water for them to wash.

Two hours later, they were on their way to the village. Ulrich ran a little bit ahead of him, coat long ago turned white to blend into the relentless snow which had overtaken the highlands. At least it had stopped falling for now.

Reaching the village itself took a little less than an hour, and that only because of him and the weather. Normally, Ulrich probably managed the journey much more quickly.

It looked much like any highland village, with houses built to withstand crippling amounts of rain and snow, the peculiar tracks made by wolves that crisscrossed the wider tracks made by human feet, the way everything was made to suit both human and wolf—and the wide variety of both immediately visible.

The lowlands would never tolerate so many wolves on such blatant display. Wolves there were human more often than not; to trot around in broad daylight in their wolf forms was nigh on unthinkable.

He tried not to notice the way they all went still, and watched as he and Ulrich passed.

Beside him, Ulrich shifted, then briefly touched his arm. "Come on, don't mind their rude staring. Knowing the impressive speed at which village gossip travels, they're probably dying to ask you a million questions. I'll keep them at bay as long as—"

"Rich! Rich! Rich!"

Grosvenor startled as a full gaggle of girls surrounded them, all them crying and cheering Ulrich's name.

Ulrich laughed and caught up a girl who couldn't be more than twelve, hugging her tight. "Well, well, what have we here?" he said. "Never say that's you, little Lydia. You grew up on me! I leave for a little while and your turn into a young lady. Who said you could do that? And you got prettier—I bet your father doesn't like that!"

Lydia giggled. "He says I'm not allowed to talk to boys anymore."

"A wise man," Ulrich said with a grin, and tugged at one of her curls before turning to the other girls clamoring around him, eager for their own moments of attention. Finally he hefted one, who could not be more than five or six, onto his shoulders. It sent her into a fit of giggles, and they continued on their way, escorted to the house of the Alpha by a pack of adoring, giggling little girls.

Grosvenor was vastly amused, because he dare not be anything else. "Quite the little charmer, aren't we? If we'd stayed any longer at Gretel's, I think you would have had Annie running away to follow us."

Ulrich grinned, and a hint of the odd shyness he'd shown the night before returned. "The girls are fun, and they like the attention. They don't get much of it until they start to come of age, and they're much easier to handle than the boys, who always need a bit of knocking around."

"Uh huh," Grosvenor replied dryly. "Just how many girls growing up with you were cozened into cooking or baking you something?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Ulrich replied, grinning. He took the girl on his shoulder's down, and kissed her cheek before setting her to rejoin her companions. "You all be good girls, all right? Rich has to go see the Alpha now. I'll see you later."

"Bye, Rich!" A few of the girls smiled shyly at Grosvenor as well, clearly curious, but knowing better than to voice it aloud.

Chuckling, Ulrich waved to them all one last time, then motioned for Grosvenor to follow him inside.

Inside, the cabin smelled like cinnamon and nutmeg and apples, mingling with snow and pine, and the ever present scent of wolves.

He knows Ulrich's mother on sight; though he looks almost exactly like his father, more than a bit of his aggravating puppy like nature is apparent in the buxom woman standing over the stove, tending a fragrant stew.

She looked up at the sound of movement, no doubt registering their scents as well. "Ah!" she cried, and promptly abandoned the stewpot. "There you are! Your father said you were going to be a lay about all day."

"Now, how could I not come see my mother?" Ulrich said with a laugh, and kissed her cheek.

"That's my good boy," she said fondly, then patted his cheek and sighed. "Not that you are a boy, any longer. I see those wretched lowlands knocked the last of that out of you. Now, let's have a look at the wild mage you brought us." So saying, she turned and braced her hands on her hips, examining Grosvenor critically, head to toe.

He fought not to squirm, annoyed that she could discomfit him so—but the mate of an Alpha was never a pushover.

That reminded him suddenly that by marrying Detlef, he would someday be an Alpha mate himself.

The thought did not appeal, and so he thought of something else. "It's an honor to make your acquaintance, madam. Thank you for having me."

"We're honored to have a high mage join us," she replied politely, eyes still analyzing him. What did she see, that required such careful scrutiny? There was nothing remarkable about him, his looks were neither good nor bad. He was a wild mage, but that had always caused him more problems than it had gotten him out of.

Finally, she turned away, and Grosvenor suppressed an idiotic urge to let out a sigh of relief.

"I think your father has gone off to bark at someone," she said to Ulrich. "That man isn't happy if he hasn't lost his temper before lunch, I swear." The words were said with equal parts exasperation and affection. "Are you hungry, sweetie? Wild mage? How about some tea? It's a bit chilly out today, isn't it?"

Grosvenor just barley choked off a laugh. 'A bit chilly' was like saying he'd gotten into a 'bit of a tiff' with his former pack. "Some tea would be splendid, if you are willing to part with it, madam."

"Make yourselves at home, I'll be right out with it. Oh! Mercy me! My name is Agnes, sweetheart."

Sweetheart. Grosvenor almost rolled his eyes. He could not remember a time when anyone had addressed him in such fashion. "Agnes," he repeated dutifully. "I thank you for the tea."

Nodding, she bustled them out of the kitchen and into the living room, where a large hearth kept it heated. Several hooks had been sunk into the elaborate stonework, and Grosvenor stripped out of his wet snow gear and hung it up. Ulrich did the same, then they both settled on the large fur rug in front of the fireplace, eager to get warm.

The cabin was larger than normal, but as the Alpha's house, it would have to accommodate a large number of people constantly going in and out. It was clearly an old house, and Grosvenor wondered just how many of the nicks and scratches and other marks about the place had been put there by Ulrich. He would be willing to bet Ulrich had not been a quiet or still child.

Scowling at his own thoughts, wondering if perhaps the snow had caused him some sort of permanent damage, he struggled for something to say that would take his mind away from the idiotic.

Before he could figure something out, the sound of steps drew him, and he looked up to see Detlef walking toward them, holding a tray weighed down with tea and snacks.

His stomach knotted with anxiety. If all went well, this was the man to whom he'd be mated. The night before had not offered much chance for close inspection. Now, faced with a potential future spouse—something he did not think he would ever have, and definitely not a wolf—he took a closer look.

Detlef had to have at least a decade on him in age, and it was probably at least a bit more than that, if he was the eldest. Looking at him, Grosvenor had a good idea what Ulrich would look like in another ten years or so. Except as he'd noted last night, Detlef lacked the...earnestness, he supposed, that Ulrich possessed. Detlef was sterner, more serious, and had the air of one who expected to be pleased. The presence of a future Alpha.

By all laws and traditions of the highlands, the perfect mate for a wild mage.

He was taller, broader, more serious in demeanor for all he had jested easily the previous night.

Where else did Detlef differ from his brother? What were the other five like?

"Good morning, wild mage," Detlef greeted. "I hope you slept well, and that Ulrich's awful snoring did not keep you up."

Ulrich made a face. "I do not snore, and I never did. Stop telling lies about me."

"I would never lie," Detlef said with an innocent smile. "Father should be along shortly, and I believe he is bringing the other wild mages with him."

Oh, good. Grosvenor sipped his tea to hide his grimace. It wasn't enough to contend with wolves, and his future mate, he had to undergo scrutiny by his fellows wild mages at the same time.

He focused on his tea, and listened idly as the brothers talked and squabbled, wondering for the millionth time if maybe it might have been better to remain in exile in the lowlands.

Then Ulrich laughed, drawing his attention before he'd realized it, and Grosvenor admitted miserably that he never could have refused to return that night, not the way Ulrich had pleaded and promised, and seemed so damnably happy.

Stupid, but his life was nothing if not one long example in how to be completely and utterly stupid about everything.

The sound of people arriving drew his attention, and his agonies in regards to Ulrich were shunted aside in favor of fretting over the arrival of the Alpha and wild mages. Without even thinking about, he reached out to sense their power and compare it to his own. He felt them do the same, and none of the three of them resisted the inspection.

Respectable enough; their power was nothing to sneeze at—but he was much better. Wild magic had always run strong in his family; it was the entire reason he had been wolf given before his conception. Pack Rothenberg had been willing to pay the necessary—and hefty—betrothal contract fees simply on the chance that one of his ability would be conceived.

If only they had known how abominably stupid he would be sixteen years later. It would have spared everyone a great deal of grief and trouble.

He stood up as they approached, and bowed low. He might be stronger, but they were older, and they had not screwed

up their lives. "Wild mages."

"Wild mage," they greeted in turn. "Your power is impressive, especially in one so young."

Grosvenor almost snorted at that. Him, young. Age was a poor way to determine how old or young someone might be. Look at Ulrich—they were the same age, but they may as well be years apart. "I hope that means I can be of use to Pack Schwarzenberg."

"Of course you can," Schwarz said. "The weather cleared shortly before sunrise, and I sent off three wolves to journey to Engel. They'll be able to contact Rothenberg from there, and we should have some sort of answer in not more than two weeks." He clapped Detlef on the back, and smiled at Grosvenor. "Then we can work on settling your properly. Ulrich, you have done well for the pack. Wild mage, I thank you for being willing to make your home here."

"Please, you may use my name," Grosvenor said. One thing he had grown unused to in the lowlands was the formality of the highlands. It would probably take these idiots months to stop using anything but 'wild mage' and 'wolf given' when addressing him.

They all nodded, but he could see they weren't listening. Movement caught the corner of his eye, and he turned to see that Ulrich was looking privately amused—and catching his eyes, he could see they were amused by the same thing.

It almost made him smile, and he turned away before he could give in to the idiotic urge.

"Have you any plans for the day?" asked one of the wild mages. An older man, his hair more gray than brown. Friendly looking, but Grosvenor had stopped trusting looks ages ago. His fiancé had been beautiful, and his seducer deadly handsome. Neither had matched his looks.

Grosvenor shook his head.

"Well, then," Schwarz said, "Detlef can show you around the village. I know the entire pack is clamoring to meet you, so we'll probably have a gathering in the next few days. Until then, Detlef would be more than happy to help you become acquainted with your new home."

Detlef nodded and smiled politely, then held out a hand. "If you are inclined. Ulrich did say you might still be tired, and understandably so, though it's easy enough to see you are true wolf given."

Grosvenor felt wretched, and hated it. The Alpha had accepted him easily, the other wild mages more easily still. He was fitting in without even trying. He should be ecstatic.

Instead, he was miserable, and as much as he hated it, he knew the reason why.

Reaching out to take the proffered hand, he knew after this he would not see much of Ulrich. Oh, from a distance, certainly. They'd probably see each other at meals. But extended time alone was over, and in not more than a couple of months, Ulrich would be his brother in law.

Why, oh why, hadn't he stayed in the lowlands? Wallowing in the bitterness and hurt of youthful stupidity and rejection had to be infinitely preferable to the things that Ulrich was waking, and with which he did not want to deal.

Resisting an urge to look at Ulrich one last time, he murmured his farewells and allowed Detlef to lead him from the Alpha house.

"I'm certain you can imagine what my father has in store for us," Detlef said, mouth twisted in a rueful smile. "I know all this must seem to be moving with shocking speed; my father was never one to waste time. It's a trait that works better at some times than others. If anything becomes too overwhelming, let me know, and I will slow it down as best I can."

Grosvenor nodded. "I am happy that there seems to be a place for me. As to what your father has planned..." He shrugged, and let the sentence hang. What was there to say? They both knew the nature of duty, and really, he could do far worse than Detlef for a mate.

Nothing for it, unless he wanted to reject the kindness being offered him. Honestly, to be anything but grateful was stupid. Accept it, let go of stupid ideas, and move on. "You were married before, yes? I am sorry for your loss. Do you have children?"

Something flickered briefly across Detlef's face, too quickly gone for Grosvenor to figure out what it might have been. "Yes," he replied. "My wife and I had two children, before she passed. A daughter, who is twelve now, and a boy who just turned eight. They are out playing somewhere, I am certain." He smiled at the mention of his children. "They are good kids, I'm certain you'll get along with them."

Grosvenor nodded, struggling for something else to say as they walked through the village. Thankfully, his efforts could be put aside as one person after another approached for an introduction, and the same pleasantries and banalities were exchanged over the next few hours.

"So what will Ulrich do now?" he asked, as they talked about the rest of Detlef's family. He hated himself for asking, but could not keep the question back.

Another incomprehensible shadow passed over Detlef's face. "He is to be married to a young wolf from Pack Autenberg. We are trying to strengthen relations there, and father believes that Ulrich would like it. Plus, they are close enough to get on well." He shrugged, and smiled, but Grosvenor could see it was a strained effort.

The sound of shrieking and laughter drew his attention, and he looked over his shoulder to see Ulrich off in the distance, playing some indeterminate game with a group of children.

Detlef laughed beside him. "Rich always did love kids, even when he was barely more than a pup himself. I think, when he left, the children were sadder than anyone. We all hated to see him go; he's a bright spot. I'm sure Autenberg will adore him."

Grosvenor bit back a tart reply about idiots generally being adored for their simplicity, but it wouldn't do to anger his future mate, especially by insulting his brother. That Ulrich would have laughed it off was no longer relevant.

"So where is your home?" he asked, forcing a smile of his own, and turning away from the sight of Ulrich playing with the children.

"Just this way," Detlef replied, and led the way down a small path until they were just outside the village proper. "Father and I wanted it closer to the village, but my wife..." He shrugged. "She wanted a bit more privacy."

Grosvenor thought he detected a note of bitterness, but it was none of his business, so he ignored it. Instead, he examined the house. It looked much like Ulrich's, but slightly larger, newer, and a bit...fancier, he supposed. Showier, perhaps, was the better word. Some of that had fallen to neglect, but it lingered. Coupled with the bitterness in Detlef's voice, he was beginning to wonder what sort of woman his late wife had been.

But, it was still none of his business. He was not even part of the Pack, yet. Not really.

"It's a fine house," he murmured.

Detlef gave a soft, barely audible snort, but only murmured, "Thank you." He motioned. "It's only about fifteen years old, and has held up well. The roof will probably need some work come spring, but it should hold just fine through this winter, even if it promises to be a bad one. Which reminds me—have you need of anything? I'm certain living in the lowlands, you had no use for real winter clothing. If there is something you need, I am more than happy to provide it."

"I made certain I was prepared before we began our journey home," Grosvenor replied. "The lowlanders are soft, but I never succumbed to it. I knew what I was in for when I decided to return. But I thank you. If I think of anything I missed, I will let you know."

"Good. I hope you will like it...here," Detlef said. "Would you like something to eat or drink? We've been walking and talking for hours now, I'm certain—"

"Detlef! Detlef!"

They turned as a young wolf came running toward them, and stumbled to a halt right in front of them. He smiled, and said, "Detlef, Alpha is calling for you and the wild mage. Says it's not urgent, but to come when you can."

"We're on our way," Detlef replied. "Thank you."

The wolf nodded, and darted off again, vanishing as quickly as he had come.

"He says not urgent, but to father, everything is urgent." Detlef rolled his eyes, and led the way back to his father's house.

Grosvenor carefully did not think of anything the entire way back, and wondered morosely how soon he would be permitted to go to bed.

Back in the Alpha's house, he was dismayed to see that Ulrich was present. Why? Couldn't he just, go away or something? All of this would be easier to accept if Ulrich would just have the decency not to be where Grosvenor could see him.

"Oh, good," Schwarz said, turning away from Ulrich as he noted their arrival. "It was just brought to me." He thrust something into Grosvenor's hands.

Grosvenor stared at it. A collar. It was nothing like the white leather one he had worn for so many years, since he'd been pathetically unable to just throw it away. This one was more like Ulrich's—a Pack Schwarzenberg collar, with his name marked into the leather along with the pack name and his position as wild mage and wolf given. A high honor, to be given a pack collar. It was his due, as a wolf given wild mage, but still...

He thought briefly of the time he'd spent wearing Ulrich's, then furiously shoved the thought away, and bowed to Schwarz. "I thank you. The generosity which you have shown me is humbling. I am honored to be considered worthy of joining Pack Schwarzenberg."

"We are always happy to have a wild mage, and you are wolf given besides. We are wolves who know how to be properly grateful."

Grosvenor nodded, and stared again at his collar. Then he slowly held it out to Detlef, silently requesting that he do the honor's of placing the collar.

Ulrich murmured words of congratulations, then turned and walked away. Grosvenor did not watch him go, but waited as his future mate placed the collar, and thanked him with a stiff smile when the deed was done. Once formal permission came from Rothenberg, acknowledging they did not, and would not ever, want anything to do with him, he and Detlef would exchange vows. Part of that was exchanging collars.

He reminded himself he had nothing about which to be unhappy, and every reason to be jubilant. A man in his position should be grateful for what he had, especially as it was things he never expect to see again. He had a pack, a place, and soon a fine mate.

The new collar was stiff around his throat; it would take awhile before it was as worn and comfortable as his old one had been—or Ulrich's.

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A day or so shy of two weeks was more than enough time to begin to feel somewhat comfortable in his new home.

Except that he still felt like a guest, a stranger being tolerated as best as his host was able. Which wasn't fair to Detlef, who had never been anything less than polite and kind and accommodating. It was not Detlef's fault that Grosvenor did not know how to appreciate a good thing.

He tried, gods did he try. If had not overheard that damnable conversation, would trying be easier? Though he liked to think the answer was yes, he suspected he was lying.

It didn't matter, he reminded himself for the millionth time. Whatever he had overheard, whatever he might stupidly wish, if he tried to take it—

What were his options? Refuse to join unless he got Ulrich? That would get him nowhere. It would insult the Alpha and Detlef, and therefore the whole pack. In addition to that, he would be upsetting their plans for Autenberg. He could not, would not, be that selfish, even if he wanted to be. What had selfishness ever gotten him before?

Exile, that's what.

His only other option was to leave, and see if Ulrich might go with him, and that was not simply stupid and selfish—it was cruel. Ulrich loved his home, his pack, and they him. Grosvenor was not more important than that, and he wouldn't dare to make Ulrich pick.

Anyway, what sort of arrogant ass had he become, to even think for two seconds that Ulrich might? This was what came of wallowing in self pity for far too long.

He looked up from where he had been staring a hole into the floor, and glanced around the room. Detlef's cottage was four rooms—the main room, a kitchen really only separate by a wide bar, the bedroom, and a storage room. The children slept in a loft over the kitchen and living room, and a massive fireplace kept the whole warm.

It was a handsome home, one to be proud of—well cared for, a bit nicer than the others in the village, and in location that was remote but still close to the Pack for help. Such an ideal arrangement and fine house was to be envied. If he lived here for a few years, and then moved eventually into the Alpha's house alongside Detlef...

There would be nothing to complain about. It would be a fantastic life. Wild mages across the highlands dreamed of obtaining lives half so grand.

Yet all he could think about was Ulrich's ramshackle little cabin with its faded curtains and small, tidy rooms. The way it was well away from everyone, and would never be comfortable housing more than two people. He loved pack, but he loved his privacy too, and if he married the Alpha, there would be very little of that.

Well, it little mattered. Any day now, the answer from Rothenberg would come, and his fate would finally be settled.

He stood up and crossed to the kitchen, putting the kettle on the stove to heat water for tea. Detlef would be back soon, unless he'd been delayed by something, and the least he could do was have tea ready for his future mate.

Turning from the stove, he rifled around the overcrowded shelves to find the little tin which held the tea leaves, then pulled out mugs from a cupboard. By the time he'd also managed to put together a light snack, he could hear the sound of someone approaching.

Right as the kettle started to whistle. Turning, he pulled it from the heat, turning back as the door opened—

And Ulrich stepped inside, shaking off snow in that way of his.

Grosvenor hastily set the kettle down, desperate not to be caught staring. They'd barely seen each other since he had gone off with Detlef that first day. Only from a distance, or very briefly in passing. What was Ulrich doing here, damn it?

The sound of the door closing seemed far louder than it should. Maybe he was losing his mind.

Slowly he dragged his gaze back up, and nodded. "Good afternoon."

Ulrich smiled, and damn it, did he still have to look so damnably happy? Couldn't he look just a little bit suffering? Like maybe he was being torn up, too. But, no, Ulrich was so good it gave Grosvenor a headache. He was the sort of simpleton who was coerced into doing all the pesky, annoying, noble deeds in all the old stories. The sort of half wit who would go fight dragons or slay demons just because someone said please.

The sort of idiot who volunteered to help rescue a girl he'd never met alongside a wild mage who had made him ill with a magic barrier and shot an arrow at his idiotic head. Honestly, who had ever thought it was a good idea to send Ulrich off on his own?

"You look like you're settling," Ulrich said, still smiling easily as he slid onto a barstool and helped himself to the snacks and tea Grosvenor had set out. "I'm glad. Didn't I say you would be happy here?"

"You're an idiot," Grosvenor snapped, unable to help himself, only growing angrier when stupid Ulrich only looked briefly confused. "Did you need something?"

Ulrich shook his head, and swallowed the bite of bread and cheese he'd taken. "I just came to tell you that Detlef won't be home until late. He and father were detained working on whatever mysterious Alpha things they do, and Detlef wanted to make certain you wouldn't worry. They were going to send one of the pups, but the snow is picking up and I didn't want to risk a child getting lost." He shrugged, and ate a bit of sausage.

Did Ulrich even really care, anymore? Or was he so well trained, that once told no, he had accepted it and moved on and no longer care? Why couldn't he look just a little bit upset? Grosvenor slammed his teaspoon down on the table, and moved to get more bread, since it had taken Ulrich all of twenty seconds to consume what he had already set out.

"So what are you doing, now that you have no more wild mages to drag around in the snow?"

Ulrich shrugged, and for a moment Grosvenor almost thought something like sadness flickered across his face, but it was probably just his imagination. Good wolves did what they were told, and that was that. Here he'd been depressed and moping, and Ulrich had already moved on. "Playing with the children when the weather permits, doing what repairs I can to my house, helping my brothers when they need it. Normal stuff."

"Not putting together some grand wedding gift for your nuptials in spring?" he asked, and hoped he did not sound as bitter as he felt.

"The matter is not settled yet," Ulrich said quietly, this time looking at his tea. He shrugged again, and looked up, smile in place. "Anyway, I don't know more than his name and occupation. My luck, I'd get completely the wrong gift."

Grosvenor doubted it, but did not say so. "Are you going to eat everything in this house? If I did not know any better, I would swear your pack starves you. Where do you put it all?"

"No one knows," Ulrich said with a grin, and shoved another bit of cheese in his mouth. He chewed and swallowed, then spoke again. "My mother says it's because even when I hold still, I'm still moving. I vibrate in place, and burn off all the energy."

He could believe it, if only because Ulrich wasn't holding still. He only stopped moving when he was completely exhausted, as they'd both been after escaping that damnable witch. By pure habit, he glanced at his hand, the place where a finger should be.

Then jumped when Ulrich's hand took his, and Ulrich's thumb rubbed over his knuckles, and then brushed ever so briefly over the small stump that was all that remained of his little finger. "Does it still bother you?"

Grosvenor frowned and jerked his hand away. "It doesn't bother me."

"You always look at it, as if hoping to see it," Ulrich said quietly, and he wore that awful stricken expression that made Grosvenor want to hit him. Or kick him. Or kiss—no, bad. "Every time she comes up."

"So what?" Grosvenor snapped, and poured more tea so he wouldn't throw the damned kettle at Ulrich's idiot head. "It was...sometimes I wonder if it was a dream, the same as Annie. Then I see my finger, and remember it was real. If I never smell gingerbread again, I will consider myself lucky. Stopped looking like a stupid kicked puppy, or I will kick you just so you have a reason to look that way." He slammed the kettle down on the counter.

Ulrich smiled, then wisely hid the expression by dropping his head to stare into his tea. "Knowing you, it's a wonder she did not opt to cut out your tongue."

He'd thought the same thing himself, once or twice, but she'd like the sounds of suffering too much. So he recalled thinking, anyway.

Shuddering, he pushed away the foul memories and sipped at his tea. "So your brother will not be back any time soon? Where are his children?"

"Last I saw them, they were fast asleep in front of the fire. I'm certain he'll have them stay there, and not come back here 'til the snow lets up a bit. I'm certain you'll enjoy—the peace and quiet."

If he hadn't been paying entirely too much attention to everything Ulrich said and did, he might have missed the slight catch to his voice. But he was paying too much attention, and he did hear it, and he stupidly let it set his heart to racing.

Then Ulrich abruptly stood up, nearly knocking his barstool over, and turned to the door—

Right as it flew open, and Detlef strode inside, covered head to foot in snow. The wind howled beyond him, and though it was only late afternoon, it may as well be full night, for all the sunlight that was visible in the whirl of unending white and gray.

Detlef started to speak, then frowned, looking at them.

Grosvenor hefted the tea kettle. "You're back sooner than we expected," he said with as much of a welcoming smile as he could muster. "Ulrich said your father had kidnapped you for an indeterminate length of time."

"I pleaded snow and made my escape. The children I left, however. I thought..." He didn't finish whatever he'd wanted to say, instead looking again between Grosvenor and Ulrich.

Ulrich shook his head, and smiled his aggravating happy puppy smile. "It's time for me to go, now that I've eaten all the available food. I'll see you both tomorrow." Then he was gone, as suddenly as he had come.

Grosvenor poured the tea, and tried not to find the sudden silence oppressing. Even if it was.

"One of the wolves sent out to Engel returned an hour ago," Detlef said slowly, as he shucked his winter gear and hung it in front of the fire to dry. He combed hands through his damp hair, then walked across the room to sit at the wide bar and accept the tea Grosvenor pushed toward him. "He says that some of Rothenberg have insisted on coming to see you, and resolve all matters in person. A high courtesy, especially in this weather."

Knowing what he did of Rothenberg, Grosvenor doubted it, but he did not say anything. He wondered what Rothenberg was really up to; they could not want him back, but to come all this way to bid him a formal farewell?

Even a pup would know they were up to something...assuming the pup was familiar with Rothenberg, he supposed.

Stifling a sigh, he poured himself more tea. The sip he took, however, tasted like something rotten. He set his cup down again, and shoved it away.

Detlef let out a soft sound that was equal parts laughter and sigh, then pushed his own tea away. He vanished into the bedroom, leaving Grosvenor slumped over his cooling tea in misery and guilt. Before he could figure out what, precisely, one did in this situation, Detlef returned.

He put a bottle on the table, of dark, unmarked glass—but Grosvenor would know such a bottle anywhere. "What is that for?"

"I think we could both use it," Detlef said, and moved around him to grab two glasses from the cupboard. He set them down, then uncorked the bottle and poured until both glasses were well over half full.

Grosvenor quirked a brow at him, but did not ask for clarification. If Detlef wasn't going to spell anything out, neither was he. Least said, soonest mended, wasn't that how the saying went?

They clinked glasses, and drank.

Detlef poured a second time, and that round they drank more slowly. The silence was...not comforting, exactly, but at least one of shared private misery. He didn't know why Detlef was unhappy, other than the obvious matter of his future mate pining for his youngest brother...but they barely knew each other. He would wager he was the least of Detlef's woes. He was nice enough, and they got along, but there was nothing but duty between them.

When the second round was finished, he poured the third, and they sat and drank in silence until the whiskey drove them to find their beds.

His head throbbed the next morning, reminding him why three glasses of highland whiskey was an incredibly stupid thing to do. Then again, he had to face Rothenberg today. If he could not do that drunk, then hungover and too miserable to care was the next best option.

A brief search of the house turned up an absent Detlef, and a note saying he had gone on ahead to finish business with his father before the Rothenberg arrived, and that Grosvenor was to come at his leisure as the snow would not permit real travel for some hours yet.

Grimacing, he got himself cleaned and dressed and as fed as he could stand to be. Feeling moderately respectable, and more than a little sick to his stomach—from more than just the damned whiskey—he pulled on his winter gear and finally ventured outside.

He stopped short when he saw someone coming up the path toward the house—someone he did not recognize, and yet

did. If only because once upon a time, he had been hopelessly and stupidly besotted, and had memorized everything he possibly could about his stupid, selfish betrothed. From the way he took his tea and preferred ale to whiskey, to the way he smiled and how he walked.

The arrogant strut had not changed in the past several years. Not even a little bit.

Grosvenor felt his stomach heave, but did not let it get the best of him. He'd be damned if he ever appeared weak in front of Alban. Instead, he stood and waited, and let Alban come to him.

"You have grown up well," Alban commented as he climbed the porch and stopped just a couple of steps away. "Grosvenor, I am glad to see you are doing well."

"I doubt you care," Grosvenor replied. What had he ever seen in this man?

He was handsome, he supposed. Yet Grosvenor had encountered men more impressive...and they all fell short whenever he thought about Ulrich. Alban was handsome, but in a spoiled brat kind of way. Pretty to look at for a moment, before moving on to something real. Once, he'd been enamored of the dark, curly hair, the blue eyes, the slender build... Now all he could see was the coldness in Alban's eyes, the twist to his mouth that spoke of a lack of humor. The way he moved with an arrogant swagger.

How in the hell had he ever thought Alban was magnificent and too good for him? Just how stupid had he really been?

Alban frowned at him. "Of course I care. Why wouldn't I?"

"Oh, I don't know," Grosvenor said coldly. "Something about throwing me out at the age of sixteen, in the middle of winter, just gives the impression of not caring."

"I know that was a cruel thing to do," Alban replied. "There is no excuse. I can only say I let my temper and pride get the better of me."

Grosvenor just looked at him. He did not know what was going on, but he did not believe a single word of Alban's humble, apologetic words. Alban did humble and apologetic the way Ulrich did mean and petty. It was simply not in his nature. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I want you to come back," Alban said, and reached out to touch him.

Jerking his arm out of reach, then taking a step back, Grosvenor glared. "I think not. My home is with Schwarzenberg, not Rothenberg. You were asked to formally release me only as a matter of courtesy, Alban. More than seven years have passed, and not once did you seek to find me. You have no claim over me. Go away and leave me in peace."

The gentle, humble, apologetic mien abruptly vanished. Alban moved faster than Grosvenor could match, fingers digging into his upper arms even through gloves and fabric. "You are coming back," Alban said, growling the words low. "I have tried to be nice, Grosvenor. I guess your looks are the only thing which have improved all these years. You're still a brat."

"You're still a bastard," Grosvenor snapped. If Alban thought he had not changed, then he was even more of an idiot than Grosvenor thought. He'd changed. Once, he would have fallen all over himself to run back to Alban—and he would have been grateful to be given such an honor.

To hell with that.

He tore free of Alban's grasp and moved toward the stairs, snarling in rage when Alban grabbed him and threw him into the door. "Let me go, you damned mongrel, or I'll show you what being thrown out to fend for myself has taught

me."

Alban smiled, and it was a cold and nasty expression on his face. "Go ahead, little wolf mine. Do whatever you want, but if you do not agree to return to me, then your cute little back here will suffer."

The spell he'd been gathering slipped from his mind as the words registered. "What?"

"Schwarz is powerful," Alban said, and stroked his cheek in a gesture that was a mockery of the intimacy it implied. "Not powerful enough."

"What do you hope to gain by angering an entire Pack?" Grosvenor demanded. "Why would you go to such extremes for a wild mage you threw out?"

"That is none of your concern. All you need do is obey me, my little wolf given," Alban said, stroking his cheek again.

Grosvenor jerked away from the touch, but his struggles to pull entirely away met with futility this time. "I'm still not convinced I should agree," he said. "I tell Schwarz what you've done, they'll leave you too injured to do anything but freeze to death. You're in the heart of their territory—do you really think they'll just let you walk out after threatening me?"

"I'm not threatening you," Alban replied. "You're going to say you want to return with me, and we'll leave peaceably with no harm done to any wolf. Try to refuse, or run scurrying off to tell someone in Schwarz, and I promise that you will come with me anyway—but at a high cost. Understand?"

"Why?" Grosvenor asked. "You hated me, Alban. You never wanted me back."

Alban shook him hard, then roughly released him. "That is not your concern, yet. You will do as I say."

Grosvenor nodded slowly, having no intention of doing any such thing. If the bastard thought he was still so easily whipped...well, he was an idiot. He'd cast Grosvenor out for a stupid mistake at the age of sixteen. After that, Grosvenor had fled to the lowlands, where he'd survived to be a Huntsman. Then he'd nearly been made a witch's meal.

What was there to fear from one pathetic, cold hearted wolf?

"Fine," he said. "I'll be there shortly, after I pack my things."

"I'll wait," Alban said.

"Go away," Grosvenor snarled. "If you're going to bully me into going back to you, the least you can do is give me a few minutes alone. Neither are you welcome in the house of Schwarz's next Alpha. I'm certain you'll be missed in town, hmm? Would it really look good for you to be found here?"

Alban shook him hard, causing his head to crack against the door against which he was still pressed—then let him go. "If you do not show up, Grosvenor..."

"I'll be there," Grosvenor replied curtly.

With a terse nod, and a last rough shake, Alban let him go and turned away. A couple of minutes later, he was out of sight.

Grosvenor waited five minutes more, then darted back inside and gathered up his few belongings—including the small pouch buried at the bottom of his knapsack. From it, he withdrew the Wolfsbane Charm he had slowly made as he and Ulrich travelled. It had taken him forever, snatching minutes here and there while Ulrich was asleep or hunting, but

he'd made it.

Call it a lifetime of knowing he would never have the home he wanted, but he had sensed he would need it.

He'd be damned if he let Alban use him this way. If the bastard thought he was that easily pushed around... Glaring at the absent Alban, he shoved the Wolfsbane charm into his pocket, ready to be pulled out at a moment's notice.

Settling his belongings, he drew a deep breath, then departed.

It took only minutes to reach the village, and he headed straight for the Alpha's cabin. The moment he entered, all eyes fell upon him.

"So it's true," the Alpha growled. "You want to return to Rothenberg."

Nodding, wishing he could simply call Alban out for the bastard he was, Grosvenor strode forward and tucked his hand into Alban's arm. He wished there were not layers of winter clothing between them, he would have dug his nails in and made him suffer the entire time. "I did not know it until I saw him again," he said.

Though it hurt, he sought out Ulrich and continued speaking. "You know better than anyone that living amongst those stupid lowlanders in their idiotic gingerbread houses that I never forgot what I used to be. I was Rothenberg's wolf given first, and if they want me back, I cannot find it in me to refuse. I am sorry for disappoint Schwarzenberg."

Ulrich said nothing, his face gave nothing away; he simply nodded in understanding. Grosvenor knew though, somehow he just knew, that his message had gotten through.

Relieved, he turned to the Alpha and Detlef. "Truly, I am sorry."

Schwarz looked furious, and beside him Detlef was carefully expressionless, but they only nodded. "This is why we contacted them before making any final arrangements here. Mistakes happen. I am glad that Rothenberg at last came to their senses. Please, let there be no hard feelings. We were happy to have you, wolf given."

A few more pleasantries were exchanged, then at last they were on their way. Though he badly wanted, Grosvenor did not look again at Ulrich. What if he was wrong? What if they thought he really wanted to go with Alban?

They travelled in a tense silence for at least three hours, to a moderately sized camp in open lands—land that belonged to no pack, but was free for anyone to use or pass through without question.

The minute they reached Alban's tent, Grosvenor yanked away from him. "You are a pathetic coward, Alban. How did I never see that as a child? What do you hope to gain by threatening me this way?"

"My wild mage," Alban replied, and yanked him close again.

Grosvenor reacted without thought, kicking a leg out to trip Alban, sending them both reeling—but breaking free of Alban's hold. Twisting away, he regained his feet and drew a dagger. "I'm not the boy I used to be, you bastard. Do not make the mistake of thinking I am. You threw me out with nothing but the clothes on my back. I survived. Do you honestly think I stayed soft?"

"You are out of line, little wolf given," Alban snarled.

"Do I really look little to you?" Grosvenor said with a laugh, brandishing his dagger, summoning his magic just in case he might need it. "I've killed two wolves in my life, Alban, and plenty of other creatures besides. Being thrown out of Rothenberg forced me to survive, and I became a Huntsman. You're nothing to me."

Truly, what had he ever seen in Alban? He was handsome, but not remarkably so, and all the beauty in the world did

not make up for the hardness in his eyes, the cruel twist to his mouth when he smiled. The fact that he must bully and blackmail to get his way.

Alban did not even begin to compare to Ulrich.

Furious with Grosvenor's words, Alban snarled and lunged for him, seemingly uncaring for the confines of the tent.

His plan had been to wait for Schwarzenberg to show up, after Ulrich told them all was not as it seemed...but he would be damned if he put up with this. He was no longer the stupid, pathetic child he had been.

Jerking away as Alban lunged, he flashed out with his knife and caught flesh. Blood splashed upon the snow, and Alban snarled in rage, but Grosvenor did not linger to find out just how much damage he had done.

Turning, he bolted from the tent and towards the woods, not looking back, not slowing down. From his pocket he pulled the Wolfsbane Charm, and wrapped it around his wrist as he whispered the activation spell. Then he grabbed a low-lying branch, and hauled himself into a tree.

Enraged wolves passed by below him, but none looked up. A few minutes later, they passed him again, still not looking up. He could see their growing confusion, their anger that his scent was completely gone. In their angry haste, they had ruined his tracks themselves.

So now all he had to do was wait, for either Rothenberg to give up, or for Schwarzenberg to arrive and put an end to this once and for all.

He waited until the angry wolves seemed well and truly gone, then dropped down from his perch and made his way deeper into the forest. Magic helped to erase his tracks in the snow, and his Huntsman skills kept him from getting lost in the unfamiliar forest.

If only he could find a secure place to hide away until it was safe to go back...

How badly had he injured Alban? He'd not been amongst the wolves hunting him, so Grosvenor suspected the hit had been true. Good.

He paused in a small clearing which featured a massive, old tree. Hiding behind it, he finally unwound the charm from his wrist and placed it around his neck.

It was too cold to stay in the forest very long; even his magic would only stave off the worst of it for so long. He needed to find shelter.

The urge to return to Schwarzenberg was strong, but he resisted. He had no way of knowing if it was safe enough to do that. Better to remain out here a couple of days. So, he was back to needing shelter.

Ulrich's cabin. The idea struck him out of nowhere, but it was perfect. Out of the way, Rothenberg didn't know about it, and in a couple of days he could simply travel the short distance to Schwarzenberg.

Smiling because he had a plan, Grosvenor got his bearings and then quickly began to make his way through the snow-drenched forest toward safety.

It was mid afternoon when he finally reached it, and not a moment too soon.

He was too tired to see straight. It had been years since he'd been forced to use that much magic for that long. Shaking with exhaustion, he fumbled to get the door open and tumbled to the floor as it abruptly worked.

Shaking his head at himself, he pushed the door shut with one foot, then made his way wearily toward the fire place.

He did not dare start a fire, but he was simply too tired to make his way to the bed. Pulling his cloak more tightly around him, curling up to keep as much warmth as he could, Grosvenor fell asleep.

He jerked immediately awake as someone touched him, drawing his dagger from his boot before he'd completely woken up. A hand caught his wrist, and he blinked. Stared. Then let the dagger go.

Ulrich chuckled softly at him, and slowly let go of the grip he had on Grosvenor's wrist. "You're always trying to kill me, wolf given."

"What are you doing here?" Grosvenor asked, then realized just how stupid that must sound. This was Ulrich's cabin, of course he'd be here.

"We couldn't find you," Ulrich said, smiling briefly in amusement but otherwise not teasing him for it. "After you left, I told them that I thought you were being forced. Gingerbread houses indeed."

Grosvenor nodded, and relaxed, sitting on the floor with his legs folded. "I was hoping you would get my message. He said if I did not go with him, harm would befall Schwarzenberg. I had no other way, at the time, to inform anyone of that."

"Right after you left, we sent out scouts. We have other travelling even now to find whatever information they can on Rothenberg that we did not look for, before. Detlef and I went after you, and found Alban injured and you gone. Detlef and father are handling matter, I came in search of you." He reached out and lightly touched the Wolfsbane Charm that Grosvenor still wore. "You really like to make it difficult to find you."

Reaching up, Grosvenor knocked his hand away, then took the Charm off. "How did you find me?"

Ulrich shrugged. "A good guess. You needed somewhere to hide from both Rothenberg and the elements. My cabin would be perfect." He stared at his hands, then slowly dragged his eyes up, gaze locking with Grosvenor's. "I'm glad you're all right," he said quietly. "Until the gingerbread house comment...then I worried that Rothenberg had hurt you, especially when we could not find you."

"You're an idiot," Grosvenor said, because if he didn't say that, he might say something incredibly stupid. "Even the witch only hurt me because she had the sense to tie me down, first."

"That's not funny," Ulrich growled, reaching out to take up Grosvenor's left hand, touching the place where his finger was missing.

Grosvenor tried to pull his hand away—really, he did. It just didn't want to obey him. "So—everything will be all right with the pack, now?"

Ulrich nodded. "Yes. We'll sort this mess out. Father loves having messes to sort out, especially in the winter when there's not much to do." He smiled briefly—sadly, and Grosvenor hated it, because Ulrich never looked sad. He shouldn't look sad. "In a few days, all will be as it should be."

Should be. He hated 'should be'. "You're an idiot," he snapped. Ulrich was an idiot. He was noble and brave and selfless and always doing the right thing and the proper thing, helping and defending and all that other claptrap. He was the biggest idiot Grosvenor had ever met.

Barring himself, because only a greater idiot would be so stupidly and hopelessly in love. Why couldn't he have been smart enough not to care? Why could he not be happy with what he had?

Ulrich shrugged, and said nothing.

Grosvenor wanted to hit him, for no good reason other than that damned nobility. The fact he was so drawn to it, even

as he tried so hard to hate it. He scowled at everything and nothing—until his eyes caught a hint of something white at Ulrich's wrist.

It took him a minute to realize what, exactly, it was—and when he figured it out, he didn't know how he was going to spend the rest of his life with Detlef. Ulrich hadn't destroyed his old white collar as his father had ordered; instead, he'd kept it, and wore it on his wrist. He would do something so...so...

He snarled at Ulrich, "You're an idiot, and you drive me mad, and I wish that damned arrow hadn't missed." Before Ulrich could reply, Grosvenor reached out and yanked him close, and kissed him before he thought too long and hard about how he shouldn't be doing something so stupid.

Ulrich tensed against him, clearly startled—then a hand came up to cradle the back of Grosvenor's head, and the other twined around his waist, and Grosvenor found himself being kissed with devastating force.

The groan slipped from him without permission, but it was worth it when it provoked a like sound from Ulrich. Slowly Grosvenor let go of the tight grip he had on Ulrich's coat, wrapping his arms around Ulrich's neck instead as Ulrich held him.

Oh, this had been a stupid idea, but he could never remember stupidity feeling so good.

He realized he'd have to run away again. There was no way, now, that he could marry Detlef and watch Ulrich go to someone else. He'd rather relive the stupidity of his youth than go through the living hell of seeing but never touching Ulrich again.

A hand shoved up beneath his layers of clothing, stroking his back, and Grosvenor moaned and kissed all the harder, pausing just long enough to breathe before plunging right back in to another hungry, desperate kiss. "You're an idiot," he muttered when they broke apart again.

"I know," Ulrich said, laughing unsteadily, then bent to kiss him again—

Only to start at the sudden high, long howl of a wolf.

They both froze.

Ulrich sighed, and for a moment his misery was plain upon his face.

Then it was gone again, and he was simply noble and congenial and unruffled by anything. "That's father," he said. "He's sounding an all clear, which means you can come back as well."

Well, at least then he could get proper food and supplies before he ran away again. The thought of leaving hurt...but it would be far worse to stay, when all he could feel was Ulrich's mouth against his, the way their bodies had pressed together for those few minutes.

Why, he wondered bitterly, could he not have fallen for someone who not so damnably noble and honorable and—and—and so insufferably good.

All too soon they were back in the village, back in the now familiar warmth of the Alpha's home, clustered around the fire with mugs of dark tea pressed into their hands.

Detlef smiled and laughed. "I knew Ulrich would find you," he said. "Did I not say he would, father?"

Grunting at his eldest, shooting him an indecipherable look, Schwarz focused on Grosvenor. "I am glad you are well, wild mage."

Grosvenor nodded. "I am sorry for all the trouble which was caused on my behalf."

Schwarz waved the words aside. "I do not deny I was furious you were leaving with Rothenberg...but once you left, and Ulrich explained, everything made more sense. You will be interested to know that one of the wolves from Pack Rothenberg stepped forward and solved the mystery of all of this for us."

"Oh?" Grosvenor asked.

"Apparently, your former betrothed is rough on his wild mages. Three have died in the years since you have been gone; he works them to death, though the reasons given are always illness and the like. I wish we had known all this before we even spoke to them, but packs guard their business fiercely."

Grosvenor nodded, staring into his tea. So Alban worked his wild mages to death, did he? Somehow, that did not surprise him. He wondered yet again what he had ever seen in such a mean, selfish bastard.

"We have their camp being closely watched," Schwarz continued. "They will be supervised until they are well away from our lands, and they know that we are aware what they tried to do with our wild mage. Moreover," he said with a grin, "your former betrothed is badly injured. His left arm is all but useless right now, and he's exhausted from blood loss."

Good, Grosvenor thought, and barely kept from saying it aloud.

"They will be no further trouble to us," Schwarz concluded. "You belong to Pack Schwarzenberg now, wild mage, unless you do have real objection."

"No," Grosvenor said quietly. "I am honored to be a part of your pack."

He felt Ulrich tense beside him, and curled his hands into fists to keep from reaching out to him.

Detlef abruptly kicked his father.

Schwarz growled at him.

Detlef growled back. "It won't kill you or destroy the pack or anything else except make things better."

"You are not Alpha yet," Schwarz rumbled.

"If you keep being this senile and stubborn," Detlef countered, "I will be."

Schwarz growled again in warning.

Grosvenor shared a look of confusion with Ulrich, then turned back to the two growling wolves. "What in the hell is going on?"

Detlef just glared, until with an exasperated sigh and grimace, Schwarz sat back and ceased growling. "You are a wild mage and wolf given," he said slowly. "It is only proper that you be given a high place in this pack. Other packs would expect it, and you have all right to be offended were I to place you anywhere lower than mate to my eldest son..."

"However, I do not like to see my children unhappy. Where it is within my power to see them happy, I try to ensure it. My eldest has already suffered through one miserable marriage, and while I intend no insult to you, wild mage...it had been brought to my attention that the current arrangements are making two of my sons miserable, and causing you no small unhappiness as well. Is this true?"

Grosvenor almost choked on his tea. He set it hastily down, and carefully picked his words. "I am in no position to take

whatever you offer. I was exiled from one pack, and never dared hope I would belong to another. I have no right to argue whatever fate you bestow upon me...but if I am allowed to say, then I put little faith in place and position. Being wolf given and wild mage did not keep me from being exiled, and neither mattered in the lowlands. I am happy to be part of your pack; I do not care where in that pack I am placed."

The briefest of smiles flickered across Schwarz's face, then he was all seriousness again. "Then, if you will not take offense, wild mage, I believe I would like to reserve my eldest for other matters. If you are amenable, I think it would suit best to arrange a marriage between you and my youngest son. He is seventh, and therefore the lowest in rank of my sons, but he's a good wolf."

He found it hard to breathe for a moment, then realized it was because he wasn't breathing. Drawing the much needed breath, Grosvenor nodded and managed to speak. "I am more than satisfied with that arrangement."

"Good," Schwarz said briskly. "We will hold the ceremony once the weather had cleared up enough to allow a bit of fun for the pack. Ulrich, I expect you to take extremely good care of our wild mage. It's not every day a seventh son is so honored."

"Yes, father," Ulrich said quietly, but firmly.

"Very well, then," Schwarz said with a nod. "Detlef, let us go encourage Rothenberg to be on their way sooner rather than later."

"Yes, father," Detlef said, and drained the last of his tea before standing. He winked briefly at them as he followed his father out of the house.

Grosvenor stared at his own tea, then slowly looked up at Ulrich. "Seems I'm destined to be stuck with you, idiot."

Ulrich laughed, the sound not quite steady—then he lunged, and caught Grosvenor up, and kissed him even more intensely than he had only a little while ago in his cabin.

Their cabin, Grosvenor realized dizzily, and would have actually allowed himself a real smile if he were not so busy kissing Ulrich back.

THE END