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The first order of the day is food. *Finding* food, that is, which is going to mean stealing it, and stealing enough not just for me and my new husband but for what remains of his werewolf Pack. Ten very hungry werewolves with stomachs even more bottomless than my own.

This endeavor would be so much simpler if either Bishop or I had ever actually stolen anything.

That isn't entirely true. We have stolen something—clothing and saddles, taken only a little while earlier, from clotheslines and stables outside the village where we now seek breakfast. At least we already had the horses, though that is the only thing we were able to take with us when we fled the burning of Trevelyan last night.

I *do* feel bad about stealing the saddles and clothing. If I had coins in my pocket, I'd have left some behind, and I suppose—lacking that—I could mentally promise to return and repay them, but that's where the line falls in my ethical landscape. I feel guilty, but our own situation is too dire to worry about repaying stolen goods.

Unsurprisingly, Bishop has found the butcher shop, and that's where we are. I'm crouched low behind it while taking advantage of the fact that I'm wearing men's clothing. We also

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stole a dress for later, but the menswear makes running and hiding so much easier.

Bishop is dressed in homespun—laborer’s clothing, which looks odd when I’ve never seen him in anything but the most fashionable gentlemen’s attire. It suits his long, lean frame, though he keeps tugging at the cuffs in obvious irritation and smoothing his jet-black hair, as if the waves are in disarray. Which they are, but I don’t mind.

While I can smell fresh bread nearby, I know meat will be the best source of sustenance for his wolves. He must catch me looking toward the bakery, though, because his dark eyes soften.

“You’d like that?” he asks.

“No, this is fine.”

“Come.”

He extends a hand and leads me down a passage between buildings, expertly making his way to the bakery. The ovens are in the rear, surrounded by a high fence. Without a word, he grabs the top and swings himself up with an ease that leaves me breathless . . . and envious.

I still have so much to learn about werewolves.

I’m a witch, descended from a long line of dark witches. While that might seem obvious from my very fleeting moral quandary about our thefts, I’ve discovered that my mother and aunt’s “dark” is really more a middling shade of gray.

I’m also a lycan, which means my father was a werewolf and I inherited some of his secondary traits, such as an improved sense of smell. Sadly, I did not inherit the sort of easy athleticism and grace Bishop displays hopping a six-foot wooden fence.

I take a moment to watch him crouch on the top, admiring him, the sharp line of his jaw, the unruly dark hair curling around his face, the intense burn of his eyes as he focuses on his goal. Then he springs, as nimble as a cat, hitting the ground silently.

As Bishop lands, I peer through a knothole. To conserve magical power, I won't preemptively use a blur spell here, but I watch with a spell at the ready.

Bishop looks about and then grabs several sacks from a pile. When he eases open an oven, I expect him to use the sack to pull out the hot bread, but he only snatches out loaves with his bare fingers, making me wince. Once two sacks are full, he opens the second oven, grabs something, drops it inside a bag, and hops the fence again.

I take his hands and whisper over his scorched fingers.

"We heal quickly," he reminds me, but I keep casting. The spell will relieve the pain.

He opens one bag and hands me what he'd snatched from the second oven—a currant-dotted sweet bun. I grin and take a bite. When I offer him some, he shakes his head and pulls out a loaf of bread, rips off a chunk as big as my fist, and has it gone in two bites, which also gives me permission to be less dainty with my bun. I devour it and sigh happily. He eats another piece of bread and then we creep back to the butcher shop.

"I took the bread first because this will be trickier," he says. "We'll have to flee as soon as I'm done."

I nod. "Tell me what spells you need."

He considers and says, "It'll be best if you follow me and use whatever works. Just . . . remember that I need to feed my Pack."

I arch my brows, but he's already on the move. He sets down the two bread-filled sacks behind the butcher shop and keeps the two empty ones. Then he listens at the rear door. I can make out two voices within. When the customer leaves, Bishop eases open the door. He pauses, listening, but the only sound is that of someone moving about inside. A raised finger asks me to wait.

I cast a blur spell as Bishop slides through the doorway. He reaches the end of a hall and peers into the shop proper. Then he motions for me to follow.

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I creep after him until I can see the butcher cutting up meat. I cast a lock spell on the front door. Bishop slides behind the butcher and then, when the man puts down his knife, Bishop grabs him, his hand going over the fellow's mouth.

Bishop glances my way, as if gauging my reaction, but I have none—I didn't expect him to ask nicely for free food. His attention turns back to the butcher, and the brawny man fights, but it's like seeing a child grapple against an adult. Werewolf strength means Bishop doesn't even struggle to hold him.

Bishop's other arm goes around the man's neck, and his face remains impassive as he holds him there. Seconds tick past. Then the man slumps, and Bishop lowers him to the floor.

The way Bishop carefully lowers him tells me the man is alive, but he still looks my way and murmurs, "He's only unconscious."

I nod, and I hope my expression reassures him that I'm fine with this. The Alpha will do what he must to feed his Pack, as he said. He didn't need to kill this man, so he didn't, but if it came down to that, he'd weigh his options and make the choice he had to.

Bishop wasn't raised in a Pack. I wasn't raised in a Coven. But I think anyone who grew up in a loving family understands this. When it comes to survival, we have our priorities. We must.

Bishop and I begin to fill the sacks as quickly as we can. We'll be emptying the poor man's shelves, but again, there's nothing to be done for it. Maybe, in this case, we'll find a way to repay him.

As I grab hunks of meat, I keep one eye on the front door. There's a small window next to it, and I watch that for the shadow of a customer. Yet when someone does come, they approach from the opposite side. Bishop hears the person first, his head jerking up.

The person—presumably a customer—yanks on the door,

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expecting it to open. I ease over and see a middle-aged woman in a day dress and bonnet.

Bishop and I duck down behind the butcher table as I consider spells. Fog? No, that'd look odd indoors. A cover spell? I think we're hidden enough and, again, I need to conserve power for an actual emergency.

A shadow passing over the window means the customer is peering in. A loud rapping follows.

"George?" she calls. "George, are you in there?"

"Ma'am," a man's voice says. "Might I trouble you for directions?"

Bishop's head tilts, his eyes narrowing. A stranger to town diverting the woman's attention when we need it diverted? That's much too coincidental. The obvious answer is that one of the Pack followed us, but that narrowing of Bishop's eyes says he doesn't recognize the voice.

"We should leave," I whisper.

He looks toward the door, where a conversation continues. Then he nods abruptly, and we grab what we can, our sacks already almost full.

We slow at the rear door and listen, but it's quiet out back. Bishop cracks open the door and inhales, and I swear his hackles rise.

I sniff and frown as a smell wafts around the building, familiar in one way, unfamiliar in another. "There's a werewolf at the front door?" I whisper.

Another abrupt nod.

"But not one from the Pack?" I ask.

A grunt that means yes, it's not a werewolf from the Pack and also, that's a problem.

Bishop takes the sack of meat from me. "Carry the bread, please. We'll get to the horses as quickly as we can."

I only nod, but he still says, "I'm not fleeing. I need to lure him out of town before I confront him."

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"I presumed as much," I say, and we hurry along the back of the buildings.

We reach the horses. While Bishop arranges the sacks of food, I pretend to wander, checking a buttercup here, smiling at a little yellowhammer there. Putting on a show of communing with nature . . . while keeping all senses on alert.

"Nothing," I say when I return to Bishop. I hadn't gone far from him. If I had, he'd have reacted and given away our game of acting as if nothing is awry.

"It can't be a coincidence, can it," I say.

"No."

"My grandmother implied she has werewolves in her cabal. That would be who she'd send to track us."

"It would," he says grimly as he helps me onto the horse.

Until yesterday, I knew nothing about my grandmother. I'd heard of cabals, but they were European or American and always run by sorcerer families. Werewolf Packs and witch Covens are for specific supernatural types and open only to that type. They're tight-knit community groups with a chosen leader and strict rules that keep their members safe.

Cabals are businesses. At the top is a spellcaster family, which surrounds itself with supernaturals of all types. While some of these supernaturals are bound by blood oaths, most come for the same reason anyone takes employment—money.

I would presume a cabal offers benefits similar to Packs and Covens, which provide much-needed services supernaturals struggle to find elsewhere—like Bishop's cousin Julius being the Pack doctor, with a full understanding of werewolf physiology. But, in the end, a cabal is all about making money.

Cabals are the crowning achievement of sorcerers, and have made them—outside Britain—the wealthiest supernaturals. Since sorcerers have been the enemies of witches since the

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Inquisition, I can't help being impressed at my family building their own cabal. But I'm not convinced it's a good thing to beat your enemy at his own game when that game involves murdering innocent people. I can't help but feel the real way to win is to play by your own rules.

If this werewolf is Beryl's employee, tasked with tracking us, why would he have helped us in town? Because the world of humans has no idea that supernaturals exist, and we like to keep it that way. Once I'd saved a young sorcerer from exposure when he nearly got caught stealing a necklace. I have no particular antipathy toward sorcerers myself—my aunt having taken one as her longtime lover, Alfred Blackwood—but I didn't do it to help this young man. I did it because any exposure puts us all at risk.

In gratitude, the young sorcerer had snapped at me to mind my own business and stalked off, never noticing that the necklace was no longer in his pocket.

But I digress.

The fact that this werewolf helped us at the butcher shop makes it *more* likely he's sent by my grandmother, who absolutely would not want me exposed as a thief in the village square. I'm no good to her dead or imprisoned.

Bishop and I ride side by side, and I let him lead the way. We've seen no sign of someone following us, but that's more concerning than if we did see the werewolf, because it means he's tracking us to the rest of the Pack.

"May I ask your plans?" I whisper to Bishop as we ride.

"Not to lead him to the Pack."

I give him a look. "May I ask the part of your plans that aren't perfectly obvious?"

A strained smile. "Apologies. I'm distracted."

"I know, and you don't need to answer me now. I would have liked to know your plan with the butcher. I trust you, but I also need you to trust me. I wouldn't have argued for some

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less violent scheme.” I glance sideways at him. “You do know I’m not a Coven witch, yes?”

His lips twitch. “And more apologies are in order. An Alpha traditionally takes the lead, and his wolves follow, trusting in his plan.” He lifts a hand against argument. “I know, you’re my mate, not my wolf. But while it may seem very autocratic not to share plans with one’s Pack, it’s what *they* prefer.”

I nod slowly. “If you tell them your plan, it sounds as if you’re uncertain of it. Acting decisively inspires confidence.”

“Yes, and you can point out that I’ve been Alpha for less than a day, but I’ve been leading missions for years. I’ve become accustomed to not explaining myself. I do take your point, though. As for my plan right now, I’m still thinking it through. The problem is that I have no idea what I’m facing.”

“A werewolf tracker who is almost certainly supported by a group of supernaturals, waiting for his signal.”

He sighs. “All right. Apparently, I *should* be discussing it with you. The question is . . .”

“Can we stop him before he signals his confederates? Stop him *and* question him.”

He slants a look my way. “Are you quite certain you haven’t led missions yourself?”

“I’m a witch. Seeing and handling threats is second nature. As for this wolf, even if I could convince you to let us separate—stop making that face—we don’t know which of us he’d follow.” I steer my horse past some brush. “If we thought they’d take me and leave you alone—”

“No.”

“We need to consider that, Bishop.”

“I don’t believe we do.”

I glower at him, and he glowers back.

“We do,” I say firmly. “If I could turn myself over to Beryl, on the condition she left the Pack—”

“You tried that yesterday. Against my wishes, I might add.

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But you were very clear that you would go with your grandmother if she'd release us. She refused."

"I'm not enough."

His voice softens, and he rides close enough to touch my knee. "Only because she doesn't know you. Otherwise, she'd realize she made a very foolish mistake by not taking you up on your offer."

I smile at him. "I don't need reassurance, Bishop. I only wish she'd accepted the deal. She won't because it's just that—a deal, a negotiation. To accept it implies I have power. I might be her granddaughter, and she might be offering a warm welcome, but she really just wants to break me. Shatter me and reshape me into what she wants."

"Then she is a fool."

"May I ask something of you?"

"Of course."

"Please make sure the Pack knows that I offered to go and she wouldn't accept."

His brow furrows. I fuss with the reins before looking over. "I don't want anyone thinking this could have all been fixed if I went along willingly. I also don't want anyone thinking their new Alpha chose his mate over his Pack."

"Ah. Julius will already be doing that, but I'll make sure it's clear, for the few who might question."

"And even those who wouldn't openly question but might quietly wonder. I need the Pack to understand why I'm still here. To support you and them. Not to hide from Beryl."

"I know. However, on the subject of hiding, I do believe I see what I was looking for. A place to conceal ourselves and ambush this wolf."

Two

We ride into the forest. Lying in wait is tricky with horses. We find them a grassy stream and then tie them, so they don't eat and drink their fill and then come to find their people. There'd been a dozen horses at Trevelyan, and Felix had freed them all, but these were the only two who weren't too panicked to follow him. They're older horses, a gelding and a mare who are quite content to stick close to the source of sweet apples and shoulder scratches and an easy life. They're also, thankfully, placid enough not to blink at being tied to a tree.

Once they're happily grazing, we hurry back to where we came into the forest. I suggest we hide on opposite sides of the path. Bishop vetoes that with a look. Gods forbid I'm ten feet away from him in a dangerous situation.

We hunker together, and it isn't long before the werewolf arrives. He's on horseback, which means he brought his own horse because that's one thing werewolves *can't* steal. The wolf in their scent makes animals uneasy, and I presume horses need to be raised with werewolves.

But if this is his horse, is the werewolf from Britain? The Levine Cabal is not. I'd presume it's tricky for a werewolf to find

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a horse when he travels abroad, but bringing his own would be even—

Oh.

I turn my head to Bishop's ear. "Is that a horse from Trevelyan?"

His eyes narrow. "It's *mine*."

As Bishop focuses on the rider, I scan the horizon for the wolf's confederates. The secondary traits of a werewolf are mostly canine. They can hear better and smell better than humans. They can also see better at night. Day vision, though, is the same, and so all I can do is look out at that field for signs of life. It's May, meaning the grass isn't long, but the trees and bushes are in full foliage and would provide hiding spots. I identify two possibilities where the wolf's confederates could hide. One is too sparse to conceal more than a single person. The other is so far to the right that once the werewolf enters the woods, they'll lose sight of him. I still mentally mark the spots. Then I turn my attention to the wolf himself.

He's paused on the edge of the woods, where he's openly sniffing the air. Then he seems to catch the scent of our horses. His face turns in that direction, and he nods and continues forward.

He's older than us—I'm twenty-three and Bishop is twenty-eight. This fellow looks forty, though werewolf aging means he's likely in his fifties. Average height, lean, with weathered skin and brown hair worn longer than is the fashion.

Bishop's posture—poised but not tensed to spring—tells me he plans to let the wolf pass us, so I cast a cover spell. And I do it just in time, because as the mare goes by, she glances over with a whicker. The werewolf tugs the reins to halt the horse and then stands in the stirrups to look around. A grunt, satisfied no one's here, before he prods the horse forward with a hard jab

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that has Bishop letting out the softest growl. Fortunately, the wolf doesn't hear that, and the horse continues on.

Bishop stands abruptly, breaking the spell. "Cinder."

The horse turns, sees Bishop, and rears, unceremoniously dumping her rider.

Bishop pounces. He might be in human form, but when he fights, it's as if he channels his wolf, fast as a whip and light on his feet, with a power to his blows that makes me wince. I suppose I should say that I wince thinking of the person taking those blows. But no, I wince in sympathy for Bishop, lest he strain himself.

When I watched him fight last night, there'd been no time to admire him. Certainly I hadn't done that when he fought my father, knowing it was a battle to the death and Bishop was physically outmatched.

Here, I can ease back and enjoy watching him trounce this wolf. I have a spell casually in reserve, my only fear being that the wolf will pull a weapon. That's unlikely. Using a weapon is considered cowardice for werewolves, admitting you aren't good enough to win by speed and strength and cunning.

I've taken pugilism lessons—my aunt Lenora believed in learning to physically protect ourselves and reserving spell power as a backup. Still, I don't fight like this. Maybe I can't—having a different body shape and different abilities—but I think I could learn a great deal from Bishop. Also, I would enjoy the process, and I believe he would, too. Very much, if I'm not mistaken.

I watch with the intention of learning, but really, I'm just admiring—his enviable expertise, his cool calculation, the effortless way his body moves. When I've seen him fight before, he's been fighting for his life. This is slower, letting me see how good he really is when he's not jabbing and punching and ducking and diving as fast as he can.

Not every blow lands, but not every blow is *meant* to land.

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I can see that—how he'll start to punch and let his opponent dodge that, only to follow up with one that sends the other man flying. He doesn't avoid every punch either. He can't. Instead, I swear I can tell when he decides to let the wolf get one in—a glancing blow or kick that doesn't do any real damage, but makes the other wolf feel the thrill of victory . . . and keeps him from realizing he's losing and fighting harder.

The other wolf is a brawler, just punching and jabbing and then punching again, no sense of timing or planning. He's such a mediocre fighter that Bishop doesn't need to adjust anything. He hits, spins out of the way, kicks, feints, jabs, blocks, and then, when he seems to tire of the dance, sends the other wolf to the ground with a volley of fast blows.

Soon it's over, and I'm glad of that. Really. It would be wrong to wish it had gone on longer, and if there's any twinge of disappointment at such an easily won fight, it's lessened by the sight of Bishop, pinning his quarry, resplendent in his victory.

Bishop looms over the wolf. He doesn't say a word. He just looms. Then he looks at me, chin jerking for me to move where he can see me.

"Privacy," he says, and it takes a moment to realize he wants me to cast a privacy spell, letting the two of us converse.

I do it, and he says, "That was too easy. Be careful."

I nod and break the spell, and then I back up with a sniff, fasten the top button of my men's shirt, and twist up my hair.

"Better, my lord?" I say with obvious annoyance, and the wolf snickers.

Bishop's lips twitch as he realizes what I was doing. Giving an excuse for the privacy spell.

"Remember yourself," he growls. "You are my wife."

I roll my eyes, and the wolf snickers again.

"Go stand over there," Bishop says, pointing. "The men are talking now."

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I would love to say he's overdoing it, but the other wolf only smiles, seeing a woman put in her place, as she should be.

"Far enough," Bishop calls. Then he lowers his voice. "Can you hear me?"

While my enhanced hearing isn't on his level, I hear him easily. But I act as if I can't, which is what Bishop wants—me to listen in while the other wolf thinks I can't.

"Good," Bishop calls louder when I don't respond. "Now stay there."

I glower and cross my arms.

"You'll have your hands full with that one, Danvers," the man says, his voice carrying a touch of the Emerald Isle. "She's a Levine. More trouble than she's worth, and she's worth a great deal."

"Don't talk about my mate."

"I understand but, sadly, cannot abide by the restriction, as she's what I'm here to talk about. You've got yourself in a spot of trouble."

"Thanks to your employer."

The wolf lifts one shoulder. "My employer, yes, but not my master. I've come to offer advice to a fellow werewolf."

Bishop snorts. "Distract me, you mean, while your confederates close in."

"I'm alone." He waves to the field beyond the forest. "If Beryl Levine wanted you dead, you'd be dead by now. She's let you go." His head jerks my way. "Because of that one."

Bishop says nothing. The wolf takes that as encouragement to continue.

"Beryl had three daughters. Silas killed two of them—your mate's mother and aunt. One remains, and she's as useless as tits on a bull. The only good thing she did was have two daughters. One takes after her ma. The other . . ." His gaze shifts my way. "Well, she's no longer among the living."

My heart clenches as I quickly school my expression before the wolf realizes I can still hear them. I killed my cousin. Accidentally. I didn't know Henrietta *was* my cousin, but the death itself was also accidental. She'd tricked me and threatened my human friend, Audrey, but I still regret what happened.

The wolf continues, "That leaves Miss Cordelia, who—as I'm sure you know—is no mere consolation prize. Beryl wanted her back in the fold *before* she lost Lenora and Henrietta, and after seeing her show of power last night, she will unleash hell to get her."

"I believe she already did," Bishop says dryly. "Flames and all."

"True. That was a temper tantrum, though. Now she's calmed down, and she won't do anything to hurt her last hope here. Miss Cordelia isn't just Beryl's granddaughter. She's her heir." He looks up at Bishop. "You need to give her back."

Bishop tenses. "My mate is not—" He stops himself, and I know he'd been about to say I'm not chattel to be "given" to anyone, but that doesn't fit the role he's playing.

His voice chills. "My mate is not for sale. She's mine."

"Proud of that, aren't you, boy?" The wolf shifts, getting comfortable under Bishop's hold. "Can't say I blame you. A feather in your cap, to be sure. Not yet thirty and already Alpha of the Albion Pack, won in a fair challenge. I noticed how few stormed off after you won. You already have the Pack's support. That's impressive. And a new bride, too? A beautiful young mate from *two* sterling lineages."

"Her father gave her to me."

"Before you killed him."

"I earned her, and I'm keeping her."

"And endangering your Pack in the process? Not a good way to begin your reign."

Bishop cranks the haughty self-importance up another

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notch. “My wolves wouldn’t respect me if I surrendered my mate so easily. How I fight for her is a reflection of how I will fight for them. The honor and dignity of the Pack is at stake.”

“And that suits you,” the wolf says. “Because you don’t want to give her up. Even to save your Pack.”

“Cordelia already offered to go with her grandmother, so do not come barking about how much Beryl wants her back.”

“Beryl thought she could have it both ways—exterminate the Pack and then scoop her granddaughter from the ashes. You thwarted her, and she realizes how easily Cordelia could have died in the melee. Beryl has retreated to regroup, and I’ve come to offer you a solution.”

“I’ve already—”

“Hear me out. You don’t need to give her back yet. It’s too soon to capitulate. Keep the girl. Enjoy the girl.” A wolfish grin. “I’d even suggest getting her with child. Once that’s done, declare yourself tired of her. She’s a handful. I can see that in the way she’s seething at being excluded from this conversation. Negotiate for her return and then find yourself a more docile mate. Meanwhile, you’ve kept a tie to the Levine Cabal, in the form of a child. Hopefully a son.”

“I don’t foresee myself tiring of Cordelia anytime soon. She is, as you say, ‘a handful,’ but there’s fun to be had in breaking a filly. You’ll note that she came with me willingly last night.” He glances over and smiles as I feign scowling. “And while she is, as you say, seething right now, she’s not arguing. She likes where she is. With me.”

A low chuckle. “I noticed. You’re right that there’s fun in breaking a filly. But once you’ve had your fun . . .” He shrugs. “Use her and then use her in another way. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Not that I would ever surrender her,” Bishop says. “But if I considered it . . .”

The wolf lifts his head. “Yes?”

“Tell me about this cabal. I don’t know much of them.”

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“Because they don’t bother with the British Isles. There are greener pastures elsewhere, in places where supernaturals are grateful for the opportunity a cabal can provide.”

“Give me more specifically on the Levines. If they aren’t in Britain, then I don’t see how much good a connection to them would do me.”

The wolf jumps for the bait . . . and starts to talk.

THREE

From the wolf—Lynch, as he gives his name—Bishop extracts as much information about the Levine Cabal as he can: where they're located, how many supernaturals they have, and so on. It'll all need to be verified, but it's a start.

"All right," Bishop says afterward. "One final question. Who sent you?"

"I came on my own."

"Solidarity with your fellow wolves?" Bishop shakes his head, looking more himself, less haughty, more incisive. "Try again."

"I'm hoping for a reward, of course." Lynch lifts a hand. "Not an invitation to your Pack. While I intend no insult, Pack life isn't for me. I know you have money. I need payment, as I may need to lie low after this. Beryl wouldn't like me talking to you. And when Beryl doesn't *like* something, her employees tend to *lose* something. Their job. Their reputation. Their skin."

"So you want money. How much?"

"Five hundred pounds. Half for the information I just provided. Half for arranging a meeting to discuss the handover."

That's several years' wages for the average workingman.

Bishop doesn't react to the amount. "Is the meeting to *negotiate* handing over Cordelia? Or to actually hand her over?"

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Lynch pauses as he sees the trap being laid. Because he's *supposed* to see it.

"You would relinquish her at the meeting," he says. "After you've made contact to say you've tired of her."

Bishop's lips purse. "What if I gave you two hundred and fifty pounds now and the rest after a meeting with your contact? I'd like to speak to them. Then I'll turn Cordelia over later, and you won't have to wait for the full payment."

Lynch tries to hide his discomfort behind a grin. "I see what you're doing, boy."

"I'm not a boy."

The wolf has the sense to say, "I didn't mean it like that. But the meeting must *be* the handover."

"Because the meeting would be with whoever sent you, and you don't dare double-cross them."

Lynch flinches. He saw the trap he was supposed to see—Bishop trying to get access to someone in the cabal without turning me over. And so he missed what Bishop was actually doing—confirming that someone sent Lynch. Otherwise, the wolf would happily take the full five hundred pounds and run before Bishop turns me over.

"No one sent me," Lynch says. "This is my idea, brokering peace for a fair price."

"Brokering peace, yes, but it's not your idea. Some high-ranking cabal member doesn't like the way this has been handled. It's likely the same person who pointed out that Cordelia could be killed if Beryl pursues the Pack now. But pursuing her later would still come with a fight, and Beryl may still insist on wiping out the Albion Pack, which reeks of petty vengeance. Better to have me deliver Cordelia once Beryl has calmed down enough to decide Cordelia herself is enough. More than enough if she has a babe in her belly, a witch with even stronger werewolf blood."

"I've heard that about you," Lynch says.

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Bishop's brows rise. "Heard . . . ?"

"That you think far too much for a werewolf. That's the Danvers in you. Too much going on up here." He taps his head. "It'll get you in trouble. When a Danvers thinks too much, their minds run to madness. Just ask your grandfather."

Bishop only gives a humorless smile. "No one mistook my grandfather for a great thinker. I would suggest you keep relying on others for strategy. It's clearly not your strong suit."

Bishop rises, pulling Lynch up by the collar. "I'll give you one more chance to tell me who set you up to this."

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll give you your reward, though it might not be what you're hoping for."

The wolf only curls his lip. "I've heard that about you, too. An overly high opinion of yourself. You're a pup. I *let* you defeat me in hopes of making it an easier conversation. But since you don't want what I'm offering—"

Lynch swings.

Bishop catches his wrist easily and leans in. "Thank you. I really was hoping to send back a proper response to your employer."

Another swing, this time with Lynch's left, but before it can make contact, he's flying backward from Bishop's uppercut.

"Now this is more like it," I murmur.

Bishop gives a ragged laugh. "Sit back and enjoy."

This fight lasts only slightly longer. Lynch held back in that first battle, and now he expects easy victory. He doesn't get it, and that throws him off-kilter, his blows becoming increasingly frenzied.

He should recognize that he misjudged Bishop's abilities and adjust. In the heat of battle, though, he lacks the mental calm for that, and all he can think to do is hit harder. When that fails, he makes a break for it.

Bishop catches him, and then comes a part I don't enjoy, even while I know it's necessary. Bishop beats Lynch until the other wolf is battered and unconscious, lying in a heap on the forest path. Then Bishop drags him into the forest and hides him from any confederates who don't have a werewolf's sense of smell.

"That will give us time," he says to me as he binds Lynch's hands. "He can break free, but not easily."

"Would it be dishonorable to empty his pockets?" I ask. "If he doesn't have any money or valuables, it'll take him longer to get back to whoever sent him."

A slow smile and then a nod. "Excellent point. We also need to search him for any clues."

We do that, emptying all of Lynch's pockets. He has nothing except dried meat . . . and money. Nearly a hundred pounds, and I whistle at that.

"Generous travel funds," Bishop says. "They wouldn't want him leading us to the cabal, so he might have needed to lie low for a while."

"It's money we can use," I say. "And we *had* to take it."

"We did. Let us get the horses and make haste. We'll need to find a creek to lose our trail, and the Pack will be starving."

We have three horses now. We find more supplies in saddlebags that Lynch put on Cinder, along with an ill-fitting saddle that has Bishop grumbling and switching gear until all three steeds have a better fit.

As Bishop said, we need to move fast while not leaving a trail Lynch can track. Waterways are the key, and Bishop directs us to the nearest one, following the sound of rushing water. When we're back on dry land, he speaks for the first time since we left the forest.

"You know I didn't mean what I said to him. About you."

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I smile. “You don’t need to clarify that every time you need to treat me as a prize.”

“I know. It’s just . . .”

He goes quiet, and we ride like that for at least a mile before he says, “I’ve spent the last week vowing that nothing will happen to you. That was foolishness. A want and certainly an intention, but not a promise I could make, and you suffered for it. So I’ll make a new one. I will do everything in my power to protect you and keep you safe. But as I promised last night, you are always free to return home, no matter how much I might want to stop you.”

“Thank you.” I meet his gaze. “That’s all I need—to know that I’m with you by choice. My choice, but also yours. Please don’t feel you have to make me promises, Bishop. Especially not promises of safety.”

“Because I can’t keep them.”

“They’re not yours to keep,” I say. “If lightning struck me down right now, you couldn’t stop it. I trust you to keep me safe to the best of your ability, and do you know where I feel safe?”

I move my horse closer to him, so our legs brush. “Right here. With you. You might think you haven’t been able to keep your promises, but I’ve known from the start that my well-being wasn’t something you *could* promise. I understood it was an intention, not a vow. You did everything you could to keep me safe, and I offer the same back to you. I’ll stay at your side, and I’ll watch your back, and if at some point you decide your Pack is safer without me around, I won’t argue to stay.”

“We’re safer with you *here*,” he says. “That much of what Lynch said makes sense. Beryl could have pursued us. She didn’t because it endangers you.”

“Someone helped her realize that.”

“Most likely. But the point remains that you are our shield. As her sole viable heir, you’re too precious to risk losing on a

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vendetta. So there will be no more talk of you going back to her to protect us. You protect us by staying.”

I’m not sure of that, but he says it with such vehemence that I know he needs to believe it. He needs to know that I’m staying here, letting him focus on the Pack.

So I nod, and we leave it at that.

As we approach the camp, a figure strides to meet us. It’s Julius, Bishop’s cousin and closest confidant. Julius shares Bishop’s height and lean build, but his hair is chestnut brown and his eyes the gray of stormy skies, though no one would ever describe Julius’s personality as stormy. He’s the “nice” cousin, the easygoing one. Others consider him the better-looking cousin, though that just means he’s very conventionally handsome compared to Bishop’s more severe good looks.

“Tell me that’s breakfast,” Julius calls as we approach. “You’ve been gone for hours.” He pauses and peers at us. “Is that Cinder?”

“It is.”

“Found you, did she? I don’t suppose she brought *my* horse?”

“It’s a long story,” Bishop says. “But we have meat and bread.” He sniffs the air as he stops his horse. “Excellent. You have fires going already. Let’s get this meat cooking.”

“Oh, I’m not sure I need it cooked.” Julius makes a face and tips his head my way. “You didn’t hear that.”

“I did,” I say. “And I’m shocked. *Shocked*. Eating raw meat. Someone might think you’re a werewolf.”

Bishop helps me down as two others untie the bags of meat and Felix appears.

“I’ll take the horses,” Felix says.

“Others can,” Bishop says softly.

Felix’s eyes are red from crying. He’s the youngest, at eighteen. While he’d been born in the Pack, his father—Claude,

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the Pack's financial controller—left with his son when Felix was only a baby. Bishop had convinced Claude to rejoin the Pack. And last night, my grandmother murdered him.

"The horses are my responsibility," Felix says. "No one knows them like I do."

"True," Bishop says. "This time is fine. However, I need you to start training one of the others. Your skills are needed for the finances, which are going to be an even greater concern now. I can get us money, but we can't touch the Pack's for fear of leading Beryl to it."

"That would be another way for her to destroy the Pack. One a cabal is more likely to consider."

Bishop pats the young man on the back. "Which is why we have you—to think of these things. If you can, please check Cinder's back. She was wearing an ill-fitting saddle, and I fear it chafed."

As they talk, I head toward the bonfire with my sack of bread, and soon I'm followed like the Pied Piper. I swear some of the wolves are drooling, and I have to resist the urge to tease, lest I end up with bite marks.

Ann and Tabitha are putting meat on the fire, helped by Augustus, a wolf about my age.

As I draw up beside Ann, I murmur, "You don't need to do that anymore."

"I do if I want to eat anytime soon. These lugs will mill about until doomsday waiting to be fed."

Augustus arches his brows, but Ann ignores him. I only met my cousin a week ago, with an inauspicious beginning, where no one told me she was Silas's niece, and she had to watch me being pampered while she toiled as a housemaid.

Ann started life with her own pampering. I've been told that my paternal grandfather—Arthur Stockwell, the Alpha before Silas—was not a good man, but he *was* very good to the women in his life. His necromancer consort—my grandmother—had

been treated as his wife and given the running of the household, a job their daughter—Ann's mother—took over on her death. As the Alpha's granddaughter, Ann was raised in luxury. And then Arthur died and my father took over and both Ann and her mother—Silas's own sister—were sent belowstairs.

Tabitha's story is just as terrible. Her mother was my father's consort, a witch he brought to Trevelyan against her will, which violates Pack law. She'd already been pregnant with Tabitha, but my father had overlooked that, probably hoping it meant she was fertile enough to bear him sons. After Tabitha's birth, her mother tried to escape with the babe, and my father killed her, but not before making her witness what he did to her child, ensuring Tabitha would never speak, a fate even crueler for a witch, who casts with words.

Yes, my father was a monster.

Now that he's dead, Ann and Tabitha are free, and they might eventually leave us. Bishop has promised Ann money to start a new life with Tabitha. That won't keep her from grumbling like a cranky older sister forced to manage a passel of rough-and-tumble brothers.

I hold out two chunks of bread, one for her and one for Tabitha.

"No butter and honey, I fear," I say to Tabitha, who only smiles and bites into the bread with a ferocity to match any wolf here.

I hand a full loaf to Augustus and then set the sack down under a tree, for the rest to divvy up as they wish, which apparently means every wolf for himself, as they pounce, jostling and snapping and growling, as if they aren't in human form.

Ann sighs and shakes her head.

"How are you?" I ask quietly.

"Alive." She pauses. "So far. But that might change if Mr. Bishop decides to keep lollygagging around here, where that cabal can find us."

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“It’s just ‘Bishop’ now, and he has plans.” I move closer, voice lowering. “We found some money with Bishop’s horse. Anytime you wish to leave with Tabitha, he’d give you enough to get by on until he can get what he’s promised you.”

Her eyes narrow. “So eager to be rid of me?”

I only give her a hard look that says I won’t dignify that with an answer. She knows she’s welcome to stay as long as she likes. After her ordeal, though, we want to be sure she never feels trapped.

She takes a bite of her bread. “If your grandmother does find us, you’d regret having sent me away.”

“I would,” I say. “You fight very well, and raising the dead is a more valuable weapon than I realized.”

Ann sighs. “You’re doing this wrong. You’re supposed to insult me, not flatter me.”

“I tried matching wits with you at Trevelyan, and you responded poorly. So I’m trying praise, which at the very least will make you uncomfortable.”

Tabitha snickers, and Ann mock scowls at her. I’d like to ask Ann how Tabitha is doing, but I can’t with the girl right there. Mostly, I want to know how Tabitha is handling Marjorie’s betrayal.

Marjorie was another maid at Trevelyan, and the one I’d come to see as a friend. Bishop had trusted her the most, assigning her to look after me. It turned out she’d been a spy for my grandmother, and I wish I could leave it at that—Marjorie is a traitor best forgotten—but she’d helped us escape. Also, she isn’t simply a cabal employee, like Lynch. She’s bound by a generational blood oath, her mother having magically pledged her to Beryl before Marjorie was even born.

I’ll fully admit I don’t understand what that all means, except that if my feelings about Marjorie are complicated, I can only imagine what Ann and Tabitha are going through, having known her for years.

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When I spot someone else walking over, I say my goodbyes to Ann and Tabitha and head toward him. Oliver Stockwell is my uncle—my father's much younger brother. He has the honey-blond hair I shared with my father and our blue eyes, though his are darker than our bright cerulean. He is otherwise nothing like my father, endlessly kind and gentle and patient, and I can't help lighting up as I approach him.

"You didn't feel like battling the others for bread scraps," I say.

"I'll wait for the meat to be cooked."

I hold out a piece of bread I'd been nibbling.

He shakes his head. "I'm not taking yours, Cordelia."

"I saved it for you," I lie, and then follow it up with a truth: "I was hoping to speak to you, if you have a moment. I promise to be done before the meat is cooked."

"There's plenty to go around." He takes the bread finally, and we start to walk.

"I'm sorry about Silas," I say. "I know you supported Bishop, but I'm still sorry. He was your brother."

Oliver doesn't answer for a few steps, and I wonder whether I've misspoken, but he's taking time to formulate a response. When he speaks, his words are low and measured.

"Silas and I were never close," he says. "But he ensured I received a measure of respect I might otherwise not have gotten. I'm quiet and unambitious. But I'm loyal, and a hard worker, and that was enough for Silas. He protected me, and I appreciated that. I am grieving in my way, but if you're concerned that I blame Bishop, I don't."

I nod, saying nothing.

"My brother chose his own path," Oliver says. "There was a time when I hoped he might see that I could be an advisor of sorts. Not replacing Reginald, but perhaps as a confidant. Being quiet means I observe a great deal, and I think I could have helped guide Silas to a path where this might not have

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been his fate. But no one wants advice from their younger brother.”

“He should have seen past that.”

Oliver shrugs. “Maybe I flatter myself, thinking I could have changed anything. Or maybe I’m looking from the vantage point of a little boy who idolized his older brother. Silas made his choices, no matter how hard others tried to dissuade him.” His voice drops. “What he did to you and your mother and aunt is unforgivable, and I hope you know I’m not trying to defend him.”

“I do.”

“My brother was a strong Alpha, but not a good Alpha or a good man. Bishop is all three. I supported him for a reason, however disloyal it felt.” He glances over. “And how are you? I’ve been wanting to ask but not wishing to presume I could have anything to offer.”

I glance to where Bishop is talking to Julius and an older wolf. “I could always use an ear.”

“One that won’t interpret concern as a sign that you want to run for the hills, leaving your new husband behind?”

I laugh softly. “You really are observant.”

“It doesn’t take much to see how Bishop feels . . . and to understand how he’ll worry, given the circumstances of your marriage. You can tell me anything, Cordelia, and it will stay with me.”

“Thank you.”