

## Chapter 32 The Hunt

Alas, the hour had arrived. The night they had all been waiting for.

The Dankworth wolves stood side by side, each staring into the darkness of the night, determining the oath in which they would take for the hunt.

Lancelot had mapped his trail already, it was to lead him straight to where a herd of deer would be resting for the night. He had already devised a strategy to draw one unfortunate one out, it was left for Ziko to follow the trail, and earn him his deer.

No matter what happened tonight, Ziko knew that beating Albert's wolf was not a choice, or a necessity, it was definite plan, an event that had already been set in stone.

Beside Ziko, James's brown wolf growled in anticipation. He could not wait to be make the biggest catch and earn his respect in the family. Maybe then, Lancelot would seize to talk over him.

As Alpha of the pack, Edward's black wolf, Artemis, stepped forward. Albert, James, Richard and Bailey and Arthur's wolves stood behind him, awaiting instructions through his mind link.

Artemis was to lead the hunt, the rest of them were to follow. But now, Artemis made it clear to each and every one of them that it was every wolf for his own pound of flesh. Tonight, they would not hunt as a pack, they would hunt as separate dreadful entities, each male proving how deadly it was by bringing a large pound of flesh back.

And when the hunt was over, they would know by the sound of his howling.

Artemis turned back and stared at his sons, he could recall them stepping into the forest as pups for the first time. It was in his presence that they had all shape shifted; Ziko, Zeus and Cretus.

To him, each of his son's wolves was a god of its own. But amongst them, he had a watchful eye on Ziko, the deadliest of them all.

Artemis looked forward and raised his head to the crescent moon in the sky. When he let out a loud howl, it was their sign to take off.

The ceremonial hunt had officially begun.

Ziko ran into the night, following the trail that Lancelot had taken time to set for him. He ran past the trees Lancelot had used a compass to mark "X." He continued to run non-stop, until he came to an abrupt halt.

His ears stood alert, and his nostrils twitched. Ziko was restless, something about tonight didn't feel right.

Around him, Ziko sensed a strange presence. The air in the forest was not serene as he had expected.

Tonight, the air smelt of death. The air around him was stiff, despite the breeze that passed through the trees.

He continued to move forward slowly. Still, he could not help the restless feeling that had befallen him. The silver colored hairs at the back of his neck stood upright.

That was all the conviction he needed to know that something was amiss. And he had to be careful enough to find out what he was.

He could not steer away from the path he had followed, he did not want to run into any other wolves in the forest. He had to be on his own, catch his deer and head back to the edge of the forest.

Then, he could put whatever it was that troubled him behind. The hunt would be done and dusted, with him declared as the winner.

He walked forward, carefully as well, so that he wouldn't make a sound to alert anything. He heard the rustling of leaves behind him. He stood still, he would not look behind, not until he gets a signal that warrants him to do so. For now, he would focus on the trail. The hunt was what was most important.

He continued to walk further, but he only grew more restless within him. He had waited and sniffed around to figure out what was wrong, but he had found nothing.

So, why did he still feel as though something was wrong? It couldn't be nerves, Ziko was too vicious for that.

He stood at a spot and held his nose up to the air, he allowed the breeze to carry the scent of the night into his nostrils. This time, the hairs within his nostrils stood alert. He had picked up a new smell. Though faint, it left a lasting impression in his mind.

Like lavender, vanilla cream and the feminine essence of a human female.

Panic seized Ziko's heart for the first time ever, there was only one woman he knew who owned this scent.

"Wolf!"

He heard the loud scream come from behind him.

Ziko's eyes darkened immediately.

ROXANNE.

He turned on his heels and dashed towards the direction of the voice. He was certain someone else had seen her, and no one else knew that she was here!

Roxanne was in danger! His mate was in grave danger.

The sound of her voice seemed to alert him, his legs picked up pace as he ran. With every ground he covered, her scent grew stronger.

He could sense her fear, he could breathe in the smell of her terror.

"Somebody! Help me!"

He continued to run towards her. He cursed within him as he continued to run towards her scent.

What was she doing out here?!

His eyes finally found her, lying on the floor and struggling to crawl. The wolf in front of her continued to charge towards her, a wicked look in his eyes that Ziko had seen in only one wolf before. Seeing her lie there helpless, a dangerous strength surged from within him. His breathing grew sporadic, his whole body shivered with rage.

The wolf was going for her right leg first, Roxanne continued to shiver in terror.

He let his rage take over. His doubled his pace and growled in anger, he charged from where he was and jumped, raising his forelimb, ready to tear the wolf's eyes out.

On seeing him, the black wolf moved away from Roxanne, Ziko landed on his forelimbs in front of it. He straightened his posture, standing tall and towering over the black wolf.

Ziko watched his opponent stagger, eyes glistening with shock.

Never had a wolf attacked another wolf because of a human. It had never happened in their pack.

This woman had to be something very special to Ziko.

He was panting, in anger, in rage, and in fear. If he had been late, just one second late, he would have lost her. She would have been gone forever.

Ziko couldn't bear the thought, it clawed his chest like sharp daggers. This wolf had to pay, he had to pay for attacking her at all.

With one swift stride, Ziko charged towards him and jumped, sending the black wolf's back to the ground. His opponent howled in pain, falling to the floor. Ziko stood above him, pinning him to the ground.

The black wolf stared at him in terror. Ziko had taken on the form of the devil himself. His blue eyes were dreadfully cold, his vicious teeth stuck out of his mouth as he growled in anger. All bits of humanity was gone, there was only a beast left, ready to tear him apart.

Ziko's eyes drifted backwards to Roxanne, when he saw her unconscious, he freed the black wolf of his grasp.

He had to change back into his human form and get her out of here.

Before he shifted, he ran back to her, sniffing her body even as he tried to mind link with Peter's wolf.

When he found a connection, he ordered.

"Get me clothes! Roxanne is in danger!" He did not wait for a reply, he took on his human form immediately and wrapped his arms around her thin body.

He lifted her up from the floor, held her in his arms and ran. He did not stop running, not even when he felt his knees buckle under the immense weight.

The wolf behind him was still howling in pain, Lancelot didn't care, he had to get Roxanne to safety.

He couldn't let anything happen to her, not under his watch.

Lancelot finally caught sight of Peter ahead of him, holding out a bath coat. Lancelot could not care less about the coat at that moment.

Peter could see the fear and anxiety in Lancelot's eyes, so he spoke.

"Sir... I can help you..."

"No!" Lancelot threw Peter a stony glare.

Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead, despite the cold of the night.

"Call the palace doctor!" Lancelot yelled at Peter, who was already laddered with worry and concern. He had never seen Lancelot as troubled as this.

"But sir, it's late and..."

"Don't. Waste. My. Time."

Peter swallowed hard, shrinking under Lancelot's hard glare. He placed a call across to the palace doctor. Lancelot was instructed to take her into the palace infirmary. Holding Roxanne close to his chest, he hurried blindly to the location.

Doctor Stefan stared at him with wide eyes when he ran into the building naked, there was a stretcher on standby. He placed Roxanne in it gently, his eyes running over her body. The doctor placed a hand on his shoulder and looked up at him.

"Your Highness, you have to let her go. We have to take her in..." Lancelot opened his mouth to speak, but a voice interrupted him. "Lancelot!"

The sound of his father's voice caused him to turn away from her. In that split second, Doctor Stefan managed to roll the stretcher away.

Edward was surprised to see his son so visibly angry.

"Father," Lancelot called out. He turned back to see Roxanne being taken away by the doctor.

His fists clenched by his side.

When he caught sight of a bench behind him, he settled into it, awaiting news from Doctor Stefan.

Peter entered the room next, holding Lancelot's coat in his hands. He stopped running when he found Lancelot, he stood, panting heavily in order to catch his breath. "Sir, here."

Lancelot's eyes rose up to meet the black coat Peter held out to him. With one swift move, he took it and rose up to put it on.

When he settled back into the chair, he did not utter a single word again...