

Chapter 65

Reconnaissance

To the naked eye, the small campsite didn't look like much. A couple of utility tents sat abandoned around an empty fire pit. Normally, their most prominent cause for concern would be the roughly half-dozen discarded beer bottles lying haphazardly around the area.

The site looked for all the world like a few careless hikers had strode too far into the woods and simply stepped out to take a leak. It certainly didn't look like evidence of a conspiracy that could throw hundreds of years' worth of collaboration down the drain.

But, make no mistake, that was exactly what this was. Xavier scented the faint tracings of at least one Wolf that had used this campsite sometime in the not-too-recent past. Since this land was private property and too far out to be used for recreation purposes anyway, there shouldn't be traces of anyone here. Especially not any Wolves.

"Shit. The ashes are still warm." Xavier turned to find Liam kneeling next to the empty firepit. The male's fingers were covered in soot, and if Xavier concentrated, he could see the wavering air currents that affirmed what Liam had just relayed. "They were here recently." He said.

"Very recently, I'd say. I can still see a few embers burning here and there." Liam tutted, "Nice. Even if the bastards weren't hostile, they're still probably going to end up burning my forest down."

Xavier helped him kick more dirt into the pit, extinguishing the remnants of the fire once and for all. Meanwhile, Dylan went from tent to tent, rummaging through whatever it was he found left inside. When he reemerged, he was holding a military-grade sleeping mat. He inspected it and tossed it aside.

"Nothing. Other than a few sleeping bags and the tents, there's nothing of interest to find here."

"This campsite is the interesting bit," Xavier pointed out.

Dylan spread his arms, encompassing the small site, "Yeah, but what does it mean? Unless they're packing heavy heat on their persons, there's nothing here to indicate what they were doing here or why they left."

Liam nodded, "Something tells me that they aren't the types who care about leaving the scenery nicer than they found it. So, for all we know,

they're not coming back for any of this. Whatever they came to do, they've already done and left." "But what could that have been?" Dylan asked, "There's nothing around for miles."

Xavier walked over to one of the tents and bent down, studying it further. Like Dylan had said, there was nothing out of the ordinary about the tents and sleeping bags. In fact, the strangest thing about them was the fact that they were still here, at all. The equipment was pretty decent quality, far superior to the standard camping gear you'd find at your local sporting goods store.

Why would they abandon it?

Following a hunch, Xavier reached out and shoved the tent from the outside. As he'd hoped, the tent didn't budge.

"It's tacked down." He announced.

"Yeah," Dylan quipped. "Tents usually are."

Xavier examined the bottom of the tent, brushing aside the surrounding underbrush to reveal a high-quality tarp stake. He reached down to where the stake stayed driven into the ground and found a secondary line of cording. Xavier tugged on the cord, but it held firm. He ran his hand along the line until he uncovered an intricate web of wire cording that attached

the tents to one another and anchored the entire campsite to a copse of surrounding trees. "Not like this, they aren't."

"Ah..." Dylan rubbed a hand across the back of his head, "Well, shit. This place isn't abandoned, then."

"Not at all," Xavier sighed and stood back up, brushing his hands off on his pants. "In fact, I'm pretty sure they keep this site on heavy rotation. They come here frequently that they felt it was necessary to put down semi-permanent roots, anyway."

"That doesn't explain what it is that draws them to this particular area," Liam said.

Xavier began to nod in agreement until his head turned back the way they came, and it dawned on him. He cursed under his breath and dug his busted phone from his pocket. He pressed the button to light up the home screen, and, sure enough, the signal he'd found inexplicable a dozen yards back was even stronger now.

"There's service here. They come here to communicate."

Liam and Dylan grabbed for their phones and booted them up. When the screens went bright, they let out muttered curses of their own.

"How?" Liam breathed; the confusion they all felt was written across his usually stoic face.

Xavier shook his head, "Dammit, I should have realized sooner. I've gotten a couple of calls within the last half-hour; I should've seen how unlikely that was then. I was...distracted, though, and didn't think about it."

"The fuck is up with your woods, Smith? You didn't notice a bunch of people carting in a cell phone tower?"

Liam turned in a slow circle, scanning the top of the tree line, "You see a cell tower anywhere, Miller? Whatever is going on, it's not as easy as all that."

"What do we do, now? We're on their trail, and we can't head back until we find them." Dylan insisted.

"And what, exactly, would we do if we did find them, Dylan?" Liam posed. "It's us against who knows how many."

Dylan pointed at the tents, "I only count four. You don't think we can take four little rogues?"

Liam shook his head at Dylan's ribbing, "They're not here. For all we know, they've finished whatever it was they set out to do. Who knows when they'll be back?"

Dylan took his rucksack from off of his shoulders and let it drop to the ground with a thud. With a heavy sigh, he lowered himself to the forest floor and leaned back, using the pack as a pillow.

"As far as I'm concerned, we have enough supplies to last us the night."

"Miller..." Liam growled. "Enough dicking around. This isn't helping."

Dylan leveled the Silver Moon Alpha with an all-too-serious stare, "You know who isn't helping? My father. Unless we gather definitive proof that some shit is up in these woods, it's you and Michaels up against an army of indeterminate size." Dylan tilted his head from one side to the other, releasing a loud popping sound with each twist. "So, I suggest you get comfortable because we're not leaving this forest without it."

Liam looked between Dylan and Xavier, unsure of whether or not they should proceed with Dylan's plan. On the one hand, they had no real plan of action on how to go forward - Liam was right, in the fact that the campsite was empty, for now, and they had no idea how long it would remain that way.

On the other hand, Xavier figured that the people who frequented this site had to go somewhere when they were finished and that somewhere had to be fairly readily accessible. As far as Xavier was concerned, *that* location was the real prize.

"Surprise, surprise, but I think Miller actually has a point on this one." He said, "We're already here, and if we leave, it's not like we'll know the right time to come back. Might as well muscle through."

Liam watched, perplexed, as Xavier threw his pack onto the ground and joined Dylan next to the smoldering fire. "So, what? Are we supposed to hole up here indefinitely and just hope for the best?"

Xavier shrugged, digging in his pack, "Nah, but I figure the sons of bitches who left this mess couldn't have gotten too far." He found what he was looking for and brought his hand back up, a box of matches clutched between his fingers. "So, let's call 'em back home."

With that, Xavier struck a matchstick and tossed it into the firepit, catching what little remained of the previous fire alight. Picking up a nearby block of firewood, Xavier tossed that into the pit, too. Pretty soon, the fire stoked high enough for flames to reach a few feet above the walls of the pit. Thick plumes of smoke rose high above the tree line above.

It wouldn't be long until the previous denizens of this campsite noticed the smoke and realized where it was coming from.

And, when they came back, they'd be ready.

Night had fallen, providing the perfect cover for their team as they stalked through the densely packed trees to spot the intruders on their land.

Their team had spotted the smoke hours ago, almost as soon as it had begun, and recognized it for the challenge that it was. But this lot, sitting around their campfire, reminiscing as if they hadn't just signed their own death warrants, had underestimated them.

While they'd been waiting, like the hunters they no doubt thought themselves to be, their prey had been preparing. Thinking that their quarry would wander back alone was their first and final mistake.

The Cohort didn't do anything alone. Why would they, when they had an army, the likes of which the world had yet to see?

Finally, when the new moon crested high above the tallest trees...

They attacked.