

Chapter 67

Ambush

When the group of shadowy figures leaped from the darkness and onto their makeshift camp, they were ready. Xavier, Dylan, and Liam had spent the afternoon trading war stories from their days in Alpha training back and forth. The hours had stretched on for longer than any of them had anticipated, but not once did they let their guard down.

Whoever these people were, they were far from amateurs. The sun had fully set before any of them had heard the first twig snap underneath the weight of a hefty boot. Only a decade of conditioning had kept the males' muscles relaxed, their banter light. None of them were willing to let their surveyors onto the fact that they were hyper-aware of their presence.

Their stalkers became more vigilant after that, taking even more time to gather themselves and prepare for an offensive ambush. When the rogues finally did engage, the ambush was silent, sudden, and larger than Xavier and the others had anticipated.

"That looks like a hell of a lot more than four little rogues, Miller," Liam muttered, rolling out of the way to dodge the giant, snarling mass of fur that landed right where his head had been only seconds before.

"Good!" Dylan grabbed a stick from the fire that they'd kept stoked all day, brandishing the blazing branch like a blade, "I'd hate to think we wasted all of that time just to end up bored."

"Try to keep one of them alive, yeah?" Xavier said and shifted, his body all at once transforming from man to beast. His muscles, bones, and sinew simultaneously shortened and stretched as Alexandre took over, and a powerful black Wolf stood where Xavier's place.

Alexandre didn't hesitate, leaping into motion as the fray around them increased in intensity. Finding their next target was only a matter of picking and choosing from the raging collective of bodies crashing around them.

A humanoid barreled toward them, gun in hand, but Alex was already moving before the thunderous popping of the discharging firearm could register. The Wolf didn't see the bullets as much as he felt them whizz by them - a whimpering yelp sounded behind them, signaling that the bullets had found purchase.

Friendly fire, Xavier reassured Alexandre, ensuring that the Wolf's attention remained undivided.

He bounded forward, his powerful hind leg muscles bunching underneath them as he sprung up onto the chest of the man shooting the gun. A red spray accompanied the copper tang of blood filling the Wolf's mouth as his jaws bit down into soft flesh. Alexandre didn't linger after feeling their prey's jugular give way. This was one enemy down, but there were still even more to go.

On the other side of the camp, Liam shifted into his half-man state until a lithe towering Wolfman took his place. He threw his head back and howled, the reverberating sound so resonant and hollow that it momentarily stunned the two humans who'd been gunning for him only moments before.

When the humans skidded to a halt, Dylan was on them, taking the gun from the man he'd just felled to shoot both men point-blank. They instantly collapsed to the ground, where they stayed. Dylan brought the gun up, inspecting it from all sides.

"Damn, if that's not efficient. Why don't we use these more often?" He said, staring down the barrel.

Liam snatched the gun away, lifting it over his head and bringing it down with a sickening 'thwack' onto the snout of the Wolf that had just made a mad leap for Dylan's unprotected back. As soon as the gun made contact with the Wolf's face, it discharged, sending an errant bullet right in Xavier's direction.

Alexandre sensed the oncoming projectile and feinted to the left, retreating out of range just in time for the bullet to make his opponent's face disappear, pelting him with bits of viscera.

"Because they're graceless weapons. Unpredictable and distracting," Liam snarled through his protruding fangs. "Guns are the chosen weapons of cowards."

A howl went up in the distance, followed by the sound of boots and bodies crashing through the surrounding trees. They'd already faced more rogues than they'd bargained for, but it appeared that this was only the beginning of the onslaught.

Dylan finally changed, preparing for the fight ahead by transforming into his hulking half-man form. In his utterly massive Wolfman state, Miller dwarfed pretty much anyone, making him nigh on unstoppable when the need arose. When the second wave of rogues descended upon them, the Alpha Wolves met them head-on, the small clearing erupting into a chaotic cacophony of snarling yelps and booming rapid gunfire. When the dust finally settled, only the Alphas remained standing.

"Dammit, Miller," Xavier panted, shifting back into his human form, naked and covered in gore. "I thought I told you to keep one alive."

Still in his Wolfman state, Dylan sat down heavily at the base of a tree, his barrel chest heaving as he shook out his fur. "First off, I'm pretty sure Liam should be included in there somewhere," he growled. "And second, I didn't see you showing all that much restraint, either."

Xavier stalked over to where his pack lay discarded near the campfire. Pushing aside the corpse that had fallen on top of it, he rummaged inside until he came back up with a fresh change of clothing. Pulling on a new pair of utility pants, Xavier looked around at the carnage they'd made of the small campsite.

"Yeah, well, there were a lot more of them than I'd thought there would be."

"More humans, too," Liam muttered, his body shrinking until he was himself again. "What does this mean, that there are this many humans involved in Alliance matters?"

"What we assumed was an Alliance matter," Xavier said, pulling on a t-shirt. Then, going from one body to the next, they began searching each corpse for clues. "It looks like Wolves aren't the only ones the Council has managed to piss off." Liam rolled over a body with his foot and searched

its pockets, "What dumbass thought it was a good idea to enlist humans to their cause? They can't be trusted."

"Like Dylan said, their weapons are efficient, if inelegant. And I bet it's not all that hard to find enough humans willing to fight Wolves, even in the free states." "Even if it meant teaming up with other Wolves?" Liam questioned.

Xavier didn't have an answer. It seemed as if they were gathering a dozen puzzle pieces left and right, but so far, the picture they made was indiscernible. The truce between Wolves and humans was a rocky one, at best. In all of the United States, only a handful of states recognized equal rights between the species, and most of those states were governed by the Alliance.

That left a good ninety percent of the country malcontent on the best of days and downright dystopian during the offseason. Rules determining which species was in power differed from city to city, leaving the bulk of the country a hodgepodge of hostile territories that were generally difficult to navigate.

Still, millions of people found that sort of rugged landscape more appealing to living in the free states and adhering to their strict governance. One of the major sticking points for humans living within the Allied Territories was that personal firearms were strictly prohibited. Many felt that it was the Wolves' way of keeping them in check, and they were right.

But, on the other hand, Wolves weren't allowed to harm humans, and each species was governed by its own kind. It was a delicate system of checks and balances, but it worked. Or so they'd thought. The reports stemming from the recent interspecies meetings had boded well for both kinds. It would seem that neither side had seen this discord rising in the shadows.

"I think I found something," Dylan announced, examining a yellow box in his hand.

"What is it?" Xavier asked.

Dylan pushed a few buttons, and the screen lit up, showing a long chain of numbers and letters. "Coordinates," Dylan glanced between his own watch and the transponder. "Our coordinates, actually."

Dylan clicked through a few more settings on the transponder before letting out a low whistle, "Oh, hell yeah. This thing also has a passive GPS system, so it tracks and records everywhere it goes." "So, we know where the rogue base is?" Xavier asked, cracking a rare smile.

"That's right, my brother." Dylan laughed as they clutched forearms.

"What are the chances that's their main base, and not just an outpost?" Liam asked from where he stood, extinguishing the fire.

"Slim to none," Xavier said. "But if there's information to be found, it'll be there."

They didn't wait for the sun to come up. As soon as the final ember was safely buried, they made their way into the forests, tracing their way back to the rogue's hideout.

The gravely wounded Wolf waited until the males' footsteps faded from earshot before weakly grabbing for his satellite transponder. Pushing the call button, the box crackled to life.

"Unit Oscar 18, do you copy? Has the threat been terminated?"

His labored breaths gurgled from his chest as fluid filled his lungs. Each word was pure agony, but he had a duty to the Cohort.

"The Alphas," he rattled. "They're coming."