

Hunger of the Heart

by Magenta Phoenix

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“Daddy,”

The small voice invaded Eric’s sensitive ears as his crying daughter ran through the open door of his office at home. Her long, dark hair flew around her delicate face with every step she took. Blotches of red covered her button nose and trails of tears washing down her small cherub face. In her small arms was her favorite handmade doll, one of its arms completely torn off and missing.

Pushing away from his computer desk, he bent down, lifting her up to cradle his crying daughter against his strong chest. The scent of her sadness perfumed the air around them, pulling at his heart strings. Pulling her away from his chest, his eyes collided with her tear filled blue ones.

“What’s wrong, Emma?” His thumb gently brushed a falling tear from her plump cheek. Biting her bottom lip, a small sob tore through Emma as she held up the torn doll.

“T-T-Travis tore it!” her tears came faster and her sobs more pitiful.

“It was an accident.”

Raising his eyes from his daughter’s distraught face, he spotted his son, Travis. Travis had the same dark brown hair as his twin sister. With his hands shoved in the pockets of his blue jeans, Travis looked away from the stern gaze of his father.

Travis’s eyes hesitantly met his father’s. “I didn’t mean to. We were playing.”

Eric sighed. He was so tired. Not that he disliked being home with his son and daughter, no, it wasn’t that. He was just tired. Bone deep and he was ready to pull out his hair while pounding his face into his desk; that kind of tired. It wasn’t easy being a parent or hell even a single parent. Eric wasn’t ready to admit it to any of his pack members that he ruled over; but he needed help. It was becoming impossible to juggle his architectural business, running his pack and caring for his children.

If only he had someone to help him...

Immediately he shut down the thought before he could begin it. A reminder of why he was alone wouldn’t help his mood any. He’d put that can of worms in the past and that’s where it would stay.

Emma buried her face against Eric's throat, drawing his attention as her breath continued catching with her small sobs. Before he could reprimand his son for his careless actions the sound of knocking at the front door intruded. Walking past his son, he gave him a stern look saying they were far from done with this discussion. His office opened out in to the living room. Eric wasn't all that surprised to see toys scattered across the hardwood floor. Carefully he moved across the dining room and into the connected dining room and kitchen.

Balancing Emma on his hip, Eric opened the front door and released a sigh at the sight before him. Not bothering to wait for an invitation, his mother; Sarah stepped across the threshold carrying a casserole dish in her small hands.

Just as he was about to shut the door a soft voice from his porch made him pause, "Excuse me;"

Turning to face the barely open doorway, Eric felt his breath sucked from his lungs. Opening the front door wider a small curvy woman stepped hesitantly into the kitchen, juggling two casserole dishes while trying to maintain hold of her tote bag that slid down her arm.

Walking toward the other woman, Sarah held out her hands. "Dear, let me take those."

"Thank you." Her voice was soft as a whispering wind.

While she handed the dishes over to his mother, Eric took the chance to take in her appearance fully. Her height appeared to only be 5'5 to his 6 foot tall frame. Her hair was the color of smooth milk chocolate, pulled away from her face by a simple green headband, allowing the silky strands to fall down her back. Her eyes resembled a doe's, bright brown and watchful. He couldn't help but allow his eyes to drift over the rest of her body. His eyes ranked over her full supple breasts and her smooth hips. Where most women were thin and lithe, this woman had curves and meat that would tempt a saint.

His nostrils flared at her scent; her luscious and unique feminine scent, her jasmine perfume. Everything about her threatened to draw him irrevocably closer to her; her scent and her laminating beauty caused his wolf deep inside him to leap towards the surface. Taking a step closer to her, Eric couldn't deny the intense urge to take her into his arms and mark her body with his scent. He longed to hear her cries of pleasure and to feel her strong, meaty thighs cradle his body as he buried himself deeper within the depths of her heat. As he neared closer to her, another scent floated through the air. It was sweet, like melted sugar and left his mouth watering and his teeth clashing together with alarm. Human.

Eric felt his heart stop dead in his chest. Why would his mother bring a human into his house, around his children? She appeared to be in her late twenties; too young to be a close friend of his mother's. Even with the feeling of foreboding in his chest, his wolf still continued to howl and lunge toward this unknown human female. Why would such a fragile and forbidden creature such as she, cause his wolf to fight him with such ferocity? Not ever had a female of his kind managed that.

"Really, Eric when is the last time you cleaned this kitchen?" The voice of his mother cut in.

"Last night." He growled out, his eyes never leaving the human in front of him. Shoving his wolf back into seclusion, Eric pushed aside the erotic haze that clouded his mind and sought control over his body. No matter how much his wolf desired this woman, she was human and as such a threat to all like him if she ever was to learn the truth about him.

Sarah looked around the kitchen with mild distaste. Dishes sat piled in the double sinks, crumbs and trash was scattered across the counter tops. "Looks like I planned this out well."

Feeling uneasy, Eric gently put Emma down, his eyes quickly found his son's. "Travis; take your sister and go watch TV while Grandma and me talk."

The moment Travis and Emma were out of sight, he turned his hard expression to his mother. Folding his thickly muscled arms over his wide chest, his eyes flickered over the delicate looking human.

Turning back to his mother, he gave her an inquiringly look. "What's going on?"

Sarah turned her attention to her companion, "Rebecca, would you be a dear and put these away in the fridge. I need to talk to my son." Not waiting for a reply, Sarah; using her lupine strength, pulled Eric out of the kitchen, out the front door and onto the sun lit porch.

Pulling his arm away from the strong grasp of his mother's, Eric glared down at her. His heart pounded like a loud drum in his ears. Using his superior hearing, he could confirm that his children were in the living room watching TV. This gave him a small amount of comfort with the small distance between his children and the unknowing human woman in the kitchen.

"What is going on, Mother?"

She held her hands up in a placating manner. “Calm down, Eric.” Her voice reasoned.

“Calm down? I will not calm down! You’ve brought a human in to my home, where my children are! How could you be so stupid?” He hissed out in anger as his blue eyes glowed gold with the presence of his inner beast. Curling his hands in two tight fists, he could feel his nails lengthening into razor claws, slicing into his skin.

“I’ve hired Rebecca as your nanny.” Closing his eyes, Eric forced his beast back down before taking a calming breath.

“I don’t need a nanny.” He bit out slowly.

“A nanny for Travis and Emma, Silly.” She scolded with a smile.

“Emma and Travis don’t need a nanny.” He bit out while pacing the length of the porch, his eyes flickering toward the kitchen window.

“Eric. Listen to me.” She beseeched. Clasp ing his hand in both of hers, Sarah pulled him down onto the wooden porch swing. “There’s been gossip that you no longer care about the survival of the pack. Your business is barely surviving, if it were not for your betas you wouldn’t even have that. I’m concerned about you. Others believe you have become a weak Alpha, especially since your decision to form a peace treaty with the shifters of Darkwood Springs.”

Eric couldn’t help scoffing with disbelief. It wasn’t until after he’d returned from his trip to Darkwood Springs that he could see the trouble mounting in his own pack. Doyle Mackenzie; a grizzly shifter and the Alpha over the many different shifters of the small town, Darkwood Springs, had opened his eyes after just a few days with him. It was strange. Wolves were pack hunters and born leaders among the many shifter casts. Where as, in most cases, bear shifters were more solitary. If it wasn’t for the Mackenzie family, Eric suspected that all the shifters would be divided as most commonly were. But yet; Doyle’s pack thrived.

Eric didn’t fully understand what was going on with Doyle’s strange mate, or the danger that he’d been pulled into while there, but he respected Doyle as a fellow Alpha. Why couldn’t his pack do the same? The thought was laughable. Many thought his decision to form alliances with other packs was a sign of weakness. But he didn’t care. He’d even secretly sent Mark; his close friend and a cougar shifter, to his own Alpha and secretive pack to inspire an alliance.

Many wolf packs were stuck in the dark ages. They kept to their own and weren’t known for being capable of playing well with other shifters. Even members of his

pack that he'd sent to watch Doyle years back still did what they could to get on the grizzly shifter's nerves.

With his peace treaties he was forcing his pack out of their archaic comfort zones and he knew none of them liked it. Quite frankly; he didn't give a shit. Times were changing and if the danger that Doyle's pack was battle was anything to go by, he knew that his pack needed to evolve. They needed to band together to become stronger. There was only one law of his pack that he had no intention of changing and that was that all shifters avoided humans at all cost.

The thought brought him back to his mother who was still speaking. No doubt she had been listing her reasoning for bringing a human into his home and endangering them all. He wouldn't stand for it. No matter her reasoning.

"I just worry about you, Eric." She continued on. "If you're not careful—"

"No one within our pack is stupid enough to challenge me." He said, slashing his hand through the air, dismissingly.

"Son, you've been ignoring pack business, it's time that you got back to it."

Eric rose with a huff. "I don't need some human hanging around and becoming suspicious. Did you even consider what would happen if she witnessed one of us shifting or if one of the pups did? I would be the one to end her life, is that what you want?" Sarah didn't shrink back from his narrowing eyes, but lifted her chin assertively.

"Of course it's not. It isn't as if I've brought some stranger to take care of my grandchildren. Rebecca came highly recommended from the very Alpha that you went to see a week ago."

"You're saying that Doyle Mackenzie recommended a human nanny to you?" he asked skeptically.

His mother winced before hesitantly answering. "Not exactly. One of the other grizzly shifters of his pack did. She told me that Rebecca had taken care of her children for a time and was the best. If she could take care of four bear-shifter children, two wolf-shifter children should be easy."

Planting his hands squarely on his hips, Eric shook his head. "No."

“Eric. Just hire her for a week, if it doesn’t work out, you can fire her. Rebecca will just be here from morning till late afternoon when you come home. She’ll clean and cook and take care of Travis and Emma, then leave. It’s not as if she’ll be living here. Please consider it.”

Sighing, his hands dropped limply at his sides. “You are playing a dangerous game, Mother.” He said in warning. “What do you think will happen if the elders find out about this? I doubt they will be as understanding as I am.”

Waving her hand at him absently, Sarah rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry so much. Our pack isn’t really as old fashioned as the other wolf packs. I know you want to change things, Eric. So, start here. It would show the pack that it is possible for shifters and humans to mingle without the threat of Revealment hanging up in the air all the time.”

Eric’s lips pinched together at her words. As much as he hated to say it; let alone think it, she was right. He couldn’t keep going on as he had been. Wolves worshiped strength and the only reason he was Alpha was because no one was strong or brave enough to take him down. If he continued on this way, that could change.

Gritting his teeth when he realized there was no way out of this, Eric turned and marched back into the house, striding straight into the kitchen. The human; Rebecca, his mother had called her, sat at the family dinner table, her eyes focused out the window on the clear summer sky. Striding closer, Eric glared down at her at ease expression.

“I didn’t hire you, nor do I want you here.” He growled out, pointing a threatening finger towards her. Rebecca turned to face him; her face didn’t show with a hint of intimidation. When she didn’t say anything, he continued. “Personally; I think hiring you to care for my children would be the biggest mistake of my life.”

She merely shrugged her shoulders. “You’re entitled to your own opinion.” She commented, uncaringly.

Her words made his blood rush through his veins with anger. Who did this woman think she was? One thing was for sure, Rebecca wasn’t a woman easily intimidated. Where most women, even shifter women would cringe from his angered expression and hard words, Rebecca didn’t even flinch. Eric’s wolf couldn’t help but feel impressed at her bravery.

“Don’t think to get too comfortable in your job here and don’t think to run to my mother when I fire you. I will be the one paying your wages and I will decide the length of your employment. Furthermore, I don’t give a damn about your references or how you acquire them.”

Any other woman would have felt insulted, but not this woman. Rebecca simply shrugged her shoulders in acceptance. It was obvious that she wasn’t going to be an easy woman to control. But his mother was right; he couldn’t go on stretching himself too far. He needed to focus on the pack and his business. If another pack or even a member of his own pack, felt his leadership was weak, challenges would be issued for his title.

“When did you usually show up for work in that past?”

“Six in the morning until three or four in the afternoon,”

“You’ll start tomorrow. Be here at 4 A.M. Your shift will end at 6 P.M. We’ll discuss conditions of your employment then. Don’t be late. You can show yourself out.”

Eric couldn’t prevent the smile of satisfaction that came over his face as he strode from the kitchen and back into his office. He would be accepting her resignation by the end of the week. She wouldn’t last three days after spending so much time in his domineering presence. He could guarantee it.

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Rebecca ignored the pain as her teeth sunk down into the soft flesh of her bottom lip. She prayed for patience, forcing her expression to remain blank as the man before her glared and growled. She’d seen his type before. How this man came from such a warm hearted person as Sarah Daniels was a mystery. His looks favored his mother’s but not his personality. He had the same blue eyes and dark chocolate richness as her, with the exception of the silver streaks throughout Sarah’s flawless locks. His skin held a dark, sun-kissed tan from the amount of time he must spend outdoors.

She refused to be drawn in by his attractive good looks. She was here for a job, not to make friends. Eric would just one of the many jerks that she’d worked for in the past, and he wouldn’t be the last. Rebecca needed this job. Not that it was her only option, but it was if she wanted to stay in Ravenwillow.

Ravenwillow had always been her home. Years ago, the death of her family had driven her away and forced her to make a change. She'd worked for a family in Darkwood Springs; a small town nestled in the woods of Canada. But it was time for her to come home and face her demons.

Ravenwillow a lot like Darkwood Springs, it was a small overlooked town in Virginia. It was seventy-five percent of forest land and not many jobs were available. Not that she was complaining. Rebecca loved children, despite their parentage. She'd finally gotten enough courage to come back to her hometown and she'd do just about anything to keep from resorting to relocating for work. She'd be damned if she let Mr. In-need-of-manners was going to change that.

As he strode from the room, Rebecca let out a sigh of relief. Uncurling her tightly clenched hands, she felt them slightly shake from fear. He had to know what she was, just as she knew what every person in this house was, Werewolves. He moved just like the men that guarded the compound where Doyle's pack resided. Doyle's family or those that lived under his protection never knew her secret and she would make certain it stayed that way. Just by watching the way he moved and how his muscles shifted and danced under his dark skin, she could practically see the wolf that lurked beneath his skin.

Her small hand reached up to cover her racing heart. To any other person Eric Daniels would have seemed like an ordinary man, but beneath his rough skin, Rebecca saw a dangerous animal. Beneath her clothes she could still feel the scars, burning painfully against her skin as a silent reminder. Memories long buried, threatened to resurface against her will. Memories of the fateful night that she'd discovered the existence of shifters and the danger that came with them.

"Rebecca?" Jerked from her thoughts, she turned to see Sarah walking towards the table, a concerned expression on her face. "Are you alright? I know my son can be a brute sometimes." Sarah seemed to be at a loss to explain why Eric didn't want her here.

It's because I'm human, weak, worthless and unpredictable a threat in the eyes of all shifters

Rising from her chair, Rebecca plastered a false smile on her face. "I'm fine."

"I hope he didn't make you reconsider taking the position. Travis and Emma are wonderful children, despite their father's personality."

“It would take more than some parent growling at me to do that.” She teased lightly, hoping that her words didn’t give away her secret.

Smiling warmly at her, Sarah motioned toward the living room. “Would you like to meet the little ones?”

“I’d love to.”

Following Sarah into the living room, Rebecca silently prayed that Travis and Emma were as easily fooled as their father. All she had to do was keep her head down and survive long enough to do her job. And pray that her secret remained hidden. Because the moment they discovered what she knew, it would mean her life.