

22

Glass crunched beneath Eric's boots as he stepped into the mess of the kitchen of his home. The aftermath of the attack through his home was startling. The kitchen and dining room windows were shattered to pieces across the floor. Dark bullet holes marred the side walls like discolored pot-a-dots against the soft blue wallpaper. The dining table had been shoved away from where he'd thrown it during the fire fight; tell him that whoever had attacked them; had entered his home as they'd fled.

The thought had his wolf rising with the need to seek out vengeance. Someone had attacked his children, his mate and they'd done it with human weapons! Though the memory angered him, he couldn't help but wonder why? Typically when shifters attacked one another, it was face to face, not hiding from a distance and shooting them. It was a matter of pride for shifters to take down an enemy. You wanted your enemy to look at you when you defeated them and for others to see your strength when you did. It was even more so if someone was stupid enough to sneak up and attack an Alpha in their own homes.

None of it made sense. Shooting was something that one did when they didn't want to risk discovery. Though he doubted he or his beta's would have been killed by the bullets as shifters were difficult to kill due to their regenerating abilities, he knew that Rebecca and his pups weren't strong enough to with stand the trauma of a bullet wound.

After thinking more on it, he came to realize that it didn't matter who or why his family was attacked. It was meant as a statement. Someone wanted him out of the way. Could it have to do with the disappearances of the shifters he'd been looking into? Or the alliances he'd been making against the judgment of the elders?

Whoever had thought to take him out by such cowardly means; he would find them and make them suffer. He'd nearly lost his true mate and pups that would never go unpunished. At the thought of losing any of his family, his heart shuttered with fear as his wolf snarled with rage.

"Eric." the sound of Chris's voice as he stepped through the doorway of the living room.

Not turning to face him, Eric folded his arms over his chest in thought. He'd left the lodge and the warm embrace of his mate before dawn this morning against his better judgment. There was much for him to do before the Gathering tonight. He'd asked Chris and Jason to come with him to search for clues on who had attacked his family.

Even if he exposed the culprit at the Gathering tonight, he couldn't just met out justice. He needed proof or he'd be creating a bigger mess than he already had to contend with.

Late last night as they'd lain together in his bed, he'd asked Rebecca to remain out of sight for the night of the Gathering, but he now worried it wouldn't be enough to prevent the elders from getting suspicious of her. It wasn't common for any of his kind to bring a human around them; much less to their sanctuary at the lodge. Many that resided at the lodge were loyal to Eric without question and they knew Rebecca was his pup's nanny. But that didn't stop the confused and discontented looks that had followed after Rebecca in the last few days.

He longed to allow his binding thread to bind them together, to mark her and make her like him. But the knowledge that he couldn't declare her his mate without exposing her to the whole pack first made him hesitate. If others discovered her first...no. he shook his head, shoving the darkening thoughts from his mind. He wouldn't let her be harmed. He would protect her by any means.

Once his work here was done, he needed to get his mate alone and tell her everything. His chest tightened when he thought of her looking at him with fear once she knew what he was. He would have to be gentle in explaining and do all he could to keep her calm, but he had to do this before others had a chance to go after her.

"What have you found?" Eric said harshly, finally responding to Chris.

"Jason has picked up that scent trail again. It's faint and nearly faded, but he believes that he can track it to its source."

Eric nodded with a grim look. "Do it." when Chris turned to leave, Eric turned towards him. Eric's arms dropped to his sides. "Not you, Chris." He stated firmly. When his second beta paused to turn and flash Eric a confused look, Eric went on. "I need you to return with me to the Gathering tonight."

Walking back to him, Chris narrowed his eyes at his Alpha assessing. "Is there something I should be concerned about?"

Sighing, Eric walked to the empty kitchen window pane. Small chunks of glass still clung around the edges like jagged teeth. Looking out over the land that surrounded his home, his eyes looked further toward the forest stretching in the distance.

"I want you to stay close to Rebecca tonight while I deal with whoever is after my family. You are to protect her from anyone that tries to come near her tonight."

“Do you expect someone to make another attempt against her?” Chris asked, tucking his thumbs behind his silver belt buckle.

“I’m not chancing it.” Eric answered.

After a pausing moment, Chris approached closer to Eric until he stood a foot from him. Tilting his head to the side, he seemed to study Eric before speaking. “Are you worried about exposing her to the pack?” when Eric didn’t look his way; much less respond, Chris’s eyes widened with realization. “You didn’t tell her did you? You haven’t claimed her yet?” he asked nearly aghast with shock.

“She’s wasn’t ready.”

“Then get her ready! Eric, why would you wait?” Chris nearly shouted.

Though it wasn’t customary for a beta to speak to his Alpha in such a manner, Eric didn’t allow it to faze him. Chris and Jason had been his friends long before they were his betas and he valued their opinions.

“Where is Jason now?” Eric asked, shifting the direction of their conversation for the moment.

Huffing out an irritated breath, Chris motioned toward his office through the living room. “He’s waiting in your office for your orders.”

Without another word, Eric strode across the glass covered floor, quickly making his way to his office. The door was wide open, allowing him to see Jason leaning against his desk with his arms crossed lazily over his chest. When Eric entered the room with Chris following close behind him, Jason straitened with an expecting look.

“You found the trail.” Eric stated more than questioned.

Nodding, Jason’s lips pressed together in a firm line. “Yes. Eric, I have no doubt in my mind that this is the same scent that we’ve both encountered before.”

Frowning, Eric settled his hands on his hips. “Regardless if it is, Jason, I want you to track it but not engage. Observe.”

“Is it possible that this could be related to the disappearances that you’ve been looking into behind the elder’s backs?” Chris asked from his position by the doorway.

Rubbing a tired hand over his face, Eric looked between his two betas before answering. “I have considered it. But I need to know who is behind this and why. I

cannot risk them striking back at my family and me again until I know what I am dealing with. Doyle Mackenzie and his mate do not believe it is the same people we've faced before. But I am taking no chances. Track them and report back once you've found something."

With an affirming nod, Jason straightened from his lazy position. "I won't return until I have something."

"Good." Eric said.

Turning toward Chris, Eric found that he was regarding both Jason and him with a contemplating look. Eric knew that he must be curious about what the significance of the familiar scent was. But Chris was never one to question things in the beginning. Chris was a gleaner with his personal thoughts. He preferred to gather what information he could from others by simply listening. If Malca was truly behind the disappearances of shifters, he would have to confine in Chris about what he knew.

"Come." He said to Chris as he strode past him out of the office. "We need to return to the lodge. There is much I have to do before the Gathering in just a few hours."

The accompanying footsteps told Eric that Chris followed close behind him. Shoving the front door open with his flat hand, Eric moved with brisk steps toward his hummer. Sliding into the interior at almost the same time Chris did at the opposite side, they both looked back toward the house in time to see a large black wolf leaping from the porch before it took off toward the forest.

As if sensing Eric's inner concerns, Chris shrugged his shoulders carelessly as he jerked his seat belt across his chest. "Jason is one of the best trackers in the pack. If anyone can find out who did this and where they went; it's Jason."

Nodding, Eric pulled his door closed before shoving his keys into the ignition. "I hope so. Because if he can't we will be flying blind." Turning the keys, the engine rumbled to life with a smooth sound. Eric's eyes flashed to the digital clock on his dashboard. He'd already been gone for too long. There were still matters that needed his attention before he could confront Rebecca.

He was running out of time.

* ~ * ~ *

Standing at the windows of her and Eric's room, Rebecca forced herself to remain still as the need to pace nervously arose in her. The day had practically flown by in the

blink of an eye. After her confrontation with Damon just a few hours ago, she'd made sure she was too busy to worry about what she would do at sunset. She'd helped Sarah in the kitchen most of the day, preparing a large assortment of food.

Apparently on such occasions like tonight, food and drink was in abundant. She wondered if it was always like this when the entire pack was called together. She wasn't able to use caring for an excuse to occupy her thoughts. From what Sarah had told her; on such nights when the extended family, as she put it, got together, it was a private thing. The children were taken for a large slumber party of sorts. No doubt it was to keep them from seeing their parents shifting and or any violence that may ensue.

Rebecca could do all she could, she forced herself to leave when more shifters began filing into the kitchen with large trenches of meats and food. She'd searched the grounds for Eric, but she was accompanied with dark criticizing looks when anyone she asked. No one seemed to know where he was and no one was interested in providing any other information to her.

It was a strange feeling to be the outsider. Around Eric's close friends and his mother, she'd never been treated like she was an unwanted nuisance like some of the new arrivals were. She was thankful that no one had outright attacked her like Damon had warned her about. But she wasn't going to take it as a sign that it wouldn't happen.

Above the horizon of trees across the distance, she watched with a heavy heart for the next few minutes as the sky began to burn with colors of reds, orange and violet as the sun dipped low. It was sunset. She was out of time.

Gulping past the lump in her throat, she turned from the window to grab Damon's keys off the top of the five drawer dresser. Clutching the keys tightly in her fingers, she turned back to the bed where a small tote bag that Damon had found for her sat. Inside she'd packed some of the clothes that Eric had supplied her with for the last few days and some cash that Damon had forced upon her. Grasping the handles of the bag, she felt her heart grow heavy. What would Eric think when he realized she'd ran...just like Beth had?

Needed to reassure him that she wasn't running from him, Rebecca sat the bag back onto the bed and began searching the room for something to write a note. She'd leave him a note, not telling him why she'd run, but just to tell him that she was safe and where she'd be if he wanted to find her. Crossing to the nightstand, she jerked the small drawer open to find a small notepad and a pen.

Moving to sit on the bed, she braced the pad on her crossed leg as she began writing. Before she could complete the first awkward sentence she froze. The hair at the back of her neck stood straight as the sound of creaking floor boards headed toward the room. Her heart raced. Whether it was out of fear or something else, she didn't know. Setting the pad and pen aside on the mattress, she slowly rose, listening carefully as more slow creaking sounds grew nearer. Was it Eric? Damon? Or possibly Sarah?

Moving toward the closed door, she was nearly within reaching distance when the door was shoved open. The door hit the back wall carelessly, causing Rebecca to jump back. She frowned with confusion when she didn't see Eric, Damon or Sarah standing in the doorway. Instead, she saw Myra.

Dressed in another revealing outfit; this time a white dress that fell to her mid thigh. Her long blonde hair fell in waves of loose curls down her back and over the swells of her breasts. Myra barely cast a look of acknowledgement Rebecca's way when she walked into the room. Her cold eyes looked around the room with a curious and calculating look. The way she inspected the inside of the closet and dresser drawers before giving the large bathroom and bed a critical look, appeared as if she was eyeing a house that she intended to purchase.

Not wishing to draw too much attention to herself, Rebecca's gaze moved to the bed where her bag and Damon's keys laid out of her reach. There was no way she could grab them and simply run without attracting attention.

Never run from a predator, it only draws their attention and limits your chances of escape. She reminded herself.

When Myra spun around to face her, she had a smug look on her face. It gave Rebecca a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Looks like you've been staying here with Eric."

Giving Rebecca a small look of disgust, Myra moved to settle herself gracefully on the bed. Crossing her perfect legs over the other, flashing more of her smooth skin, Myra regarded her with sudden amusement. Was it possible she could smell her and Eric's combined scents on the bed? The thought had Rebecca blushing with embarrassment despite everything else.

Moving to finger the bedspread with her fingers with a curl of her lips, she released her eyes from Rebecca. "How comical and original; the father and the nanny. I will have to definitely get a new bed in that case."

Unsure what Myra's game was, Rebecca hesitantly moved a step close to her. "Eric's not here if you are looking for him. I was just about to take a shower." She lied at the end, desperate to get rid of the she-wolf.

Pursing her lips, Myra turned back to look at her. "You won't need to worry about that."

"What do you want, Myra? I told you Eric isn't here."

Nodding with a grin, Myra gracefully rose to her heel covered feet. "I know he isn't. I came to see you. Girl time and all that." her smile was anything but friendly.

Rebecca felt her fear swell up in her like a sickness. Her heart nearly pounded through her chest. With a quick glance out the window she saw the sun had fully set and the sky was beginning to darken. She had to get out of her.

"Girl talk?" Rebecca asked, attempting to keep Myra thinking she was paying attention to her.

"Yes." She nearly purred. "There is something that you should have known about me, but I don't blame you for your ignorance, its expected I suppose."

"What are you talking about?" Rebecca asked, clearly confused where Myra was taking this conversation. Taking a step back, Rebecca kept the door and Myra in her vision as Myra began to pace towards her.

"Eric was never meant for one like you and I do not tolerate competition. Your time with Eric is over." Myra's words came out like an official decree from a sovereign. Did Myra think she'd just nod her head and say, "Of course, whatever you want"?

"Says you?" Rebecca scoffed. She didn't know what was coming over her. The old Rebecca would have meekly taken berating words and left, but here she was taunting a werewolf that already disliked her. "If you want Eric so badly, talk to him about it." she replied, attempting to plicate the woman in front of her.

"I intend to. But first; we have unfinished business between us that needs attending to." With a those words, Myra's eyes began to glow as a growl echoed from her chest.

Rebecca watched in horror as Myra's face began to become deformed, a mixture of human and wolf. With the sound of snapping bones, Myra's perfectly manicured fingers sprouted long claws. Her smirking lips parted to reveal deadly fangs. When she did nothing but stare; frozen, Myra's glowing eyes scowled at her.

Icy dread coursed through her veins the moment Rebecca saw realization light Myra's cold eyes. Her enemy had discovered her secret.

With her lips slowly curling into a dark smile, surprise and awe overtook Myra's face. "My...My..." she cooed. Stalking closer, Myra tilted her head to the side as she studied Rebecca, her long claws flicking impatiently at her sides. "Have I discovered a spy amongst us?" with a victorious laugh, her posture straightened with pride. "This will make killing you all the more...satisfying." Her evil voice purred.

Edging toward the windows at her back, Rebecca kept her focus on Myra as she moved closer. She'd have only one chance at escape, she couldn't mess this up. Despite the terror that Myra obviously came here to kill her tonight, Rebecca knew she had to keep the she-wolf distracted long enough to outsmart her. Myra loved attention. She craved it. So that's what Rebecca would give her.

"How do you mean?" she asked with false confusion.

"Imagine how Eric will thank me for exposing a traitorous human amongst us."

Not waiting to say more, Myra attacked. With a loud snarl, she lunged at Rebecca, one clawed hand raised to strike. Acting on instinct, Rebecca dodged to the side as Myra flew at her. Barely missing the slashing claws aimed at her chest, she sent Myra colliding with the window. The impact cracked the thick glass, leaving behind a spider webbing pattern where Myra's head struck.

The moment Myra collided with the window; Rebecca took the opportunity of her stunned opponent to rush for the door. With a snarl of rage echoing from behind her, Rebecca willed her legs to move quicker to out run the feral beast behind her. But a human was no match for a shifter in speed.

Her fingers had barely brushed the doorway when Myra's clawed fingers seized her by the back of her neck, cutting deep into her soft skin before tossing her aside like a rag doll. Tossed off her feet, Rebecca slammed into the side of the dresser like a bowling ball against a row of pins. The dresser broke into large chunks as her frail body crashed into it.

A cry of pain escaped her lips as she attempted to crawl to her feet. Her side burned and pain exploded along her left side. Lifting her eyes, she watched as a few feet away; Myra bared her fangs at her before lifting a hand to her forehead to wipe away a smear of blood. With slow, confident steps, Myra stalked towards Rebecca's prostrated form.

Rebecca attempted in a last effort to scabble away, but was prevented by the pain pulsing through her ribs. Crouching over her, Myra grasped Rebecca's face with her hand. Sharp claws cut at her cheekbones as she held her immobile with her crushing strength. Rebecca cried in pain as Myra lifted her into a slight reclining position from her hold on her face. Her hands rose to claw at Myra's wrist to force her crushing hand from her face, but the she-wolf was too strong.

Myra smirked at the pain she was causing, knowing that it wouldn't be long before she would be the victor. Myra scoffed, her hand tightening against Rebecca's jawbones. "Whatever made you think that you could best one like me?" Rising to her full height, Myra used her hold on Rebecca's face to force her head back against her neck,

exposing her vulnerable throat. The fading sunlight streaming through the window glinted off the edges of Myra's poised sharp claws as she raised her free hand to strike.

This was it.

Not realizing she was moving, one of Rebecca's struggling hands dropped from Myra's wrist to wrap around a small, pointed shaft of wood from the wooden dresser that lay at her side. Before Myra could bring her claws down, Rebecca swung the large stake into the side of Myra's exposed upper thigh.

Blood sprayed over her hand as the shaft sliced through Myra's skin like a knife through warm butter. Howling in pain, Myra stumbled away from Rebecca to fall on her back to the floor. Moaning in pain as dark blood ran down her tan skin, Myra's eyes filled with horror as she saw the fist thick shaft protruding from her body.

Before she could turn her hateful gaze back to Rebecca the sound of pounding footsteps echoing off the walls had Myra stilling. Rebecca prayed to God that Eric or Damon had heard the attack and someone would come to her aid. But her hopes were soon dashed when three unknown males stormed into the room. All stared at Rebecca with a mix of confusion and rage as they took in the sight of Myra lying in a small pool of blood with a stake protruding from her thigh.

Shifting fully back to her human face, Myra held a hand out to the males with a fearful look. "Help me. This human attacked me, she knows what we are!" Myra cried like a frightened child.

Rebecca struggled to yell, cry, anything to tell them that she was under Eric's protection and that Myra had attacked her, but the pain coursing through her had her head spinning and left her too weak but to labor for breath.

Rushing forward two of the males, moved to help Myra like she was some delicate victim. The last one, stormed over to Rebecca. She would have thought him an attractive male if it hadn't been for the dark hatred that burned within his glowing, blue eyes. Snarling, he bent down to grip her by her neck, pulling her from the pile of broken wood. Weakly gasping for air, Rebecca cried out in pain with the movement. Reaching up, her small hands clawed against his unbreakable hold.

Growling filled the air around her as the male that held her, snarled out. "You dare to attack one of our own?!" his voice was deep and guttural.

"Kill her now!" another with a young voice demanded.

"No." her captor rumbled with anger. "Take her to the elders. They will decide her fate."

With those chilling words, the world around Rebecca grew dark as her oxygen starved body grew limp and even the pain of her wounds faded with her consciousness.