

Moving quickly through the forest, Jason dived over fallen logs and under heavy brush for what seem like hours until he came to an abrupt stop. His claws bit into the dirt beneath his feet as he stilled. Pointing his nose to the mid-day sun above, he searched for the scent that he'd been trailing for the past two and a half days. Through the night it had grown stronger and fouler the closer he got.

Within his wolf form, he sighed wearily. Though he knew that his mission to find who attacked his Alpha and his family was important, he couldn't shake that he should have been with Eric at the Gathering two nights ago. Deep down he worried what the elders had told the rest of the pack and if Rebecca; Eric's human mate was safe still.

For a while now, he knew that the retrained violence and discontent within Eric's pack was reaching a boiling point. It had nothing to do with his friend's rule over the past few decades either. Eric was a fair leader and a harsh one when it came to humans. However many wolf shifters were unhappy with Eric's need for peace.

Many shifters in the Black Claw pack wished for war, not just with other wolf packs for power but against the humans as well. It was only a matter of time before Eric would be forced to cull members from his pack for the safety of the humans, but Jason feared even that wouldn't stop the rage that was brewing in others hearts.

The leaves above him rustled eerily though the sudden silence of the forest, drawing his attention as a strange sound drifted on the wind. Ears perking in the direction, he turned and moved with cautious steps. In the light of day, Jason's black pelt stuck out like a sore thumb, meaning he had to be vigilant for danger. He could easily be killed by a hunter if he wasn't careful.

Moving closer the strange sound grew louder; finally able to hear it more clearly, Jason shook his lupine head in confusion. It was a distant moaning on the wind, a ghostly choir of several eerie moans of despair. What was it?

Reaching the edge of the tree line, Jason moved onto his belly to peak through the outreaching branches of a large honeysuckle bush. In the mist of the unfamiliar forest stood a tall building; more of a warehouse or large barn. The haunting melody was coming from there. Remaining still, Jason lifted his snout to the air once more. The souring sweet scent was here. Who ever had attacked them at Eric's home was here.

Sliding back onto his four powerful limbs, he glanced around his surroundings once more. It was then that he noticed that he was no longer in Eric's territory. He didn't know where he was, but it had to be miles from Ravenwillow.

Turning back to stare at the rotting and dark stained, wooden structure, Jason remembered Eric's earlier orders; "Observe but do not engage." Shaking his head, Jason found himself darting from the tree line toward the imposing building ahead. He would follow his Alpha's orders, but he had to find out who had attacked them and why.

Coming to a stop by the door, he found a discarded pair of jeans. His nose curled at the stench of muck and rain water that clung to the fabric, but forced himself to pull them on before entering the dark interior. If he had to fight in this form, he could but he wasn't about to do so in his human form with his favorite parts exposed.

Stepping inside, he felt air leave his lungs at what he encountered. Rusty cages were positioned along the length of the building lining the walls. Muck and fecal matter covered the ground, seeping into the base of the cages. Each cage contained a large padlock, preventing the cage from being open by just anyone. Looking up he saw more cages were positioned up on the second level. The choir of moans and cries grew louder as he stopped before a cage. Inside, he found a person! Not just a person; a shifter. The woman lay on her side, what once was a shirt and pants clung to her skin, torn and frayed. The woman looked at him with sightless eyes, as if he wasn't there. Turning to the other side of the building he found a burly man. Chains encircled him as he lay in a heap at the bottom of his cage, his beaten face and body trapped in a partial shift of a jaguar. Moving stealthily along the rows of cages, Jason found men, women and even children, all shifters, caged and appearing nearly catatonic or drugged.

It all came together in that moment. The disappearance of shifters that Eric had been secretly looking into, it was them! They had been attacked not because of Eric's choice to unite with other packs or even his choice to claim Rebecca. They had been attacked because of this!

He had to get back and tell Eric what he'd found. Before he could turn to rush out the building he heard a loud roar of anger. "You swore you could hold up your end of the deal!" a deep rumbling voice shouted in rage.

Stilling, Jason moved toward a side door halfway along the length of the cages. Moving inside, he found himself in a large room that must serve as a loading area. Stacks of large empty crates were positioned by the door, giving him something to hide behind as he took in the rest of the room. Along the far side was a large metal

door, no doubt it was used to allow trucks in for loading purposes. In the middle of the room, Jason could see four figures.

As realization hit him at who was in front of him, Jason remained perfectly still. The loud rage filled voice was none other than Senan, the previous Alpha that Eric had defeated all those years ago. Senan had been an Alpha that few respected, but all feared. Like a malicious dictator, he'd ruled the Black Claw pack with an iron fist and with no sense of mercy. Senan and his son were just a few among many that were responsible for the gruesome murders of countless humans. When Eric had defeated him for the right to rule, most expected and hoped that Eric would kill him, but instead he'd banished the old Alpha.

Beside him, Jason saw the willow frame of Elder Peter. He scowled at Senan's angry tone and replied. "How was I to know that Eric would dissolve the elder council? None other would stand up to challenge him as you assured me they would! I am not at fault here. Blame your whore of a daughter." Peter spewed out with an offended tone as he pointed a bony finger at Myra that leaned uncaringly against another empty crate.

Crossing her arms over the bodice of her short, blue cocktail dress, she snarled at Elder Peter. "You should have allowed me to kill that human woman before Eric got there and then we wouldn't have this problem!"

"And how do you think that would have come back on me?!" Peter asked bitterly.

A dark chuckle erupted from behind the arguing three as a towering man stepped forward. He stood at least six feet tall, enough to tower over the others with his massive frame. His hair was the color golden wheat, falling around his shoulders in long waves. When he stepped closer toward the others, Jason found it odd that they quickly stepped back, as though they feared him.

Looking closer at him, Jason found the man's eyes glowed with a bright blue. The sight made his heart still in his chest. A shifter's eyes always glowed golden when their beast was close, but it was nothing like this. This man radiated power like a radioactive missile. Breathing deep, Jason found he was shocked to discover that he was the source of the foul, sweet scent that he'd been trailing. Worse than that; he was a shifter, but what kind was unclear.

"You failed me." The man said in a voice so deep that it nearly sounded demonic. "The deal was that Eric Daniels was to stop looking for these shifters. I even tried to make it easy for you by sending my men to attack his home. But perhaps I should relay this information to my boss of your worthlessness to our cause."

Senan squared his shoulders before stepping forward. “You promised us that your leader would guarantee us a way to destroy the humans. You cannot back out now. Eric will give up on these shifters eventually. Besides; we can always try again to kill him.”

“It won’t be that easy now.” Peter sneered. “According to my spies, Eric has formed alliances with not only the Grizzly shifter Alpha of Darkwood Springs but also the elusive cougar shifters.”

“The cougars will never come to the aid of a wolf. They do not matter.” Senan said with a bored expression, waving of his hand dismissively.

Not appearing to care. The towering male released a lion-like roar of fury. Striding forward, he grabbed Peter by the front of his shirt to lift him off his feet. Peter squealed with shock at the quick movement as he found himself dangling in the air.

“You allowed him to form an alliance with Doyle Mackenzie?!” the man roared.

“What does one stupid bear shifter from Canada matter?” Myra asked with almost bored tone. Sighing heavily, she shook her head as if she found the thought of them fearing Doyle to be absurd. “He’s all strength and no brain. Just like all bear shifters, trust me.”

Tossing the quaking elder aside, causing him to land with a hard thud, the towering male rounded on Myra with a look of hate. With eyes still a glow, the man rumbled. “Doyle and his mate are the only ones that have the means to bring down our plans! If Eric discovers what is really happening with these shifters our plan would be for naught!”

Jason slowly moved back from the crates with a shocked look. Mark was right! This wasn’t just shifters just turning up missing. If this involved Doyle’s mate; Aria, it could only mean one thing. Malca was involved. He had to warn Eric. When he turned to move from the room, Jason found his way blocked by two tall shifters standing in the doorway. Like the man across the room, their eyes glowed with an eerie blue color.

Before he could fight his way out, one of the men lunged for him, shifting as he did so; Jason found a large lion inches from his face. Wasting no time, Jason shifted to his wolf form and darted out of the lion’s reach. With a loud crash, the lion collided with the empty crates, smashing them to bits.

At the commotion the others turned in time to see the remaining man shift into large black bear. Jumping from the smashed pile of wood, the lion snarled and stalked toward Jason. Jason's eyes flicked back and forth between the two shifters that moved closer and closer to him with their eyes glowing bright blue.

Snarling, he fought to reach their minds as all shifters could while in their animal form. "Listen to me! I do not want to fight you. You do not know who you are working for. Come with me and we can protect you." To his utter bewilderment, the snarling shifters never so much as blinked at his words. It was almost like he'd never spoken at all.

What was wrong with them? They were nearly mindless with only the need to attack him. Suddenly a popping sound echoed through the air a moment before pain exploded in Jason's side. Slowly the shifters began backing away from him, quickly changing back into their human forms. Looking from him, Jason looked to his side to see that he'd been shot. Weakness filled his being as his blood dripped to the ground beneath him. Within seconds, his powerful legs shook with the effort to hold him up. Before Jason could prevent it, his legs crumbled beneath him, causing Jason to fall onto his side. Dizziness swarmed his vision, making his world spin. Footsteps approached him as Jason looked up to see Myra holding a long barrel gun. She'd shot him. A simple bullet wouldn't have this effect on him. Something else had hit him. A sedative?

Attempting to shift back to his human form to combat the drug, Jason felt his heart still in his chest when his wolf was quiet. Again and again he tried to call upon his wolf to shift, but something was preventing him from doing so. He was trapped in his wolf form.

"I would know that wolf anywhere." Elder Peter said aghast. "It's Jason De'Van; he's Eric's beta."

"We can't let him live to tell Eric what he's seen." Senan said casting a worried look to the towering male beside him.

The immense male grunted in response. "But we cannot kill him."

Whirling around, Myra scoffed in anger. "Why not? He could ruin everything!"

Briefly looking at her unconcerned, the male shrugged his shoulders before answering. "If he is found dead, Eric will send more to track us here. We have to move all the subjects to another location. As for the spy..." he said musingly as his

glowing eyes shifted over Jason's still form. "Leave him to me. I will make sure he disappears forever."

Struggling to fight the drugs that coursed through him, Jason looked up to memorize the blonde male's face. He had never met him before and but he spoke of Doyle Mackenzie with such hatred and that could work in their favor of discovering who he was. But why they were kidnapping shifters and what they were really doing with them? Unable to fight any longer, Jason allowed his body to relax as the drugs in his system took over and darkness descended.