

## A Warrior's Heart

[Jean-Claude]

The warriors were waiting for us in the ballroom. Normally, they would be outside but Richard insisted on meeting in the ballroom. I didn't understand it, but I wouldn't question it. He was the Gamma, after all.

I hadn't missed the way he and Gwyn acted with each other. I'd never seen my brother warm up to someone as quickly as he did the large white wolf. Of the two of us, he was the friendly one but this was something else.

We entered the ballroom to be met by ve of my men. They were equipped with what they needed to gather the body and any parts scavengers may have made off with. The magic worked better if we had more pieces.

My brother stopped in front of the men. They all focused on him. The ranked members of the pack were above me and, unless otherwise instructed, the men would obey them before me.

"Today, we will be following Gwyn." Richard told them, indicating the white wolf who stood behind him and to the side. "She's the one who found and saved our future Alpha. She will be showing us where she left the body of the dark witch who took Lunette."

It was a straightforward mission. I didn't think it would take very long.

Nolan, one of my best, non-elite warriors, stepped forward with some anti-magic charms. If the witch wasn't as dead, it would be important to have them. He could just be severely wounded and could still use his magic.

I took the charms and put one on before trying to give one to my brother. Richard held out his hand but didn't pull it back after I put a charm in it. He raised an eyebrow at me and I gave him the other charm as well.

He put on his charm and turned to Gwyn. She was watching him intently. Richard put a hand out and she moved closer. When she got close enough to touch, he rubbed a hand over her head.

"I'm going to put a charm on you. It's to protect you from magic." Richard said to her in a gentle tone.

She nodded brie. The way he slid the charm over her head, then smoothed her fur over it, was tender. Richard was treating her very well.

There was no way she was his mate. Even if he was trying to be professional and do his job, he would've linked me. Amy was hopeful, but this wasn't the one.

We headed out, Richard and Gwyn led the group and I brought up the tail. Since Richard and I were the strongest of all the wolves with us, we took these positions. Though he was a higher rank than me, I was a stronger ghter. The strongest ghter watched over everyone ahead of them.

Gwyn didn't seem to have any second thoughts about being out with us. She was condent and somehow managed to save Lunette from a dark witch without anything to counter magic and without her human side to help. My wolf was impressed.

He was right. That was unheard of in the pack. We trained with witches one day a week, but there was no counter to their magic without charms. Where did she come from? What sort of training did she have?

She led us through the woods until we reached the stream. There was ice around the edges. There'd been a hard frost last night and a lot of shallow ponds and streams had fragile sheets of ice form overnight.

We crossed the stream and she kept going. Her nose was to the ground and she was totally focused on nding the scent. I watched her carefully. Amy and Alpha Lucien both linked me, asking for reports on Gwyn's actions and reactions, along with what we found.

It took almost half an hour from when we crossed the stream to Gwyn leading us down a faint path in the woods. As we walked deeper, I started to smell Lunette's scent off and on. I could also smell a mountain lion nesting nearby.

I alerted everyone, in case they hadn't scented it. It wasn't a threat. Most natural predators knew to steer clear of werewolves. Some still tried to assert their dominance or defended their territory.

Soon, we came across a strange scene. The mountain lion I'd been smelling sat, hunched over something in the road. There was blood on its face and it dipped down as if it was eating something, but there was nothing there.

Gwyn growled, getting the mountain lion's attention. It let out a sound that was similar to a housecat's warning growl. It was a long, gravelly, tone that grew in loudness as Gwyn approached.

It was acting as if it was defending its kill, but there was nothing there, only a few blood drops on the ground a few feet from where the mountain lion was. I linked the men to spread out. Most animals would defend their food, so we had to show the cat there was no way it would win.

Richard hadn't moved. He was watching the mountain lion. His st clenched, but I couldn't see anything else from the position I was in.

Gwyn stepped in front of him, as if she was protecting him, and let out a growling bark. It was a warning for the mountain lion to leave before she attacked.

The men and I took a step forward and the mountain lion seemed to realize there was no way to win this ght. It hissed again, then ran off. Gwyn took off after it, jumping over whatever it was that the big cat had been eating.

"Gamma?" I asked.

"I don't know what it is either. She'll be back. She's just making sure it doesn't circle back and try to attack us. I want everyone to stay in place. There's obviously some sort of magic at play and our charms aren't working." Richard replied.

"Yes, Gamma." We said.

While we were waiting, I examined everything I could see from my position. I tried to see if there was any indication of what it was that the mountain lion was eating. I sniffed the air but didn't smell anything except dried blood.

A few minutes later, Gwyn came back. She jumped over the thing again and sat down. This had to be the place and I was betting the invisible thing was the body. How could she see and smell it, though? How could the mountain lion? Our charms should have worked on the magic.

"Gwyn, we can't see anything. Is there a charm of some sort on the body? Anything you can see?" Richard asked.

She turned away and started searching the invisible body. Sometimes, she would pick her head up and I would see blood on her face. After a while, she got ahold of something and pulled.

The body suddenly appeared and Gwyn disappeared. I couldn't see or smell her. That was denitely the thing.

Richard kneeled on the ground. "Come to me carefully. You disappeared. I can't see you."

Grass and plants bent as if they were being pushed down and aside by an animal walking to him. He put out his hands and smiled a few seconds later. Richard nodded to us and I had the men go gather the body.

The scavengers didn't seem to have had trouble nding it. There were chunks of soft tissue missing and his abdominal cavity was a mess. His throat was torn out. I was betting that was Gwyn's work. It was swift and ecient. The best way to kill him quickly.

This explained why no one saw him and why we couldn't catch his scent. What kind of charm was it, though? The magical barriers should've caught it even if we didn't. The motion-activated cameras should've seen something.

"Gwyn, do you think you can carry an adult?" Richard asked.

There was no sound, but it looked like his hand was on top of her head. She nodded if the movement of his hand was any indication. Richard stood and used his hands to follow the outline of her body.

He put his leg over like he was mounting something. Richard sat on her and disappeared as well. I couldn't see or smell him, either. It explained why we couldn't nd Lunette's scent. While the witch was carrying her, his magic covered both of them.

'Claude. Can you hear me?' Richard linked me.

"I can hear the link, but I can't see or smell you." I replied out loud.

'I can see her while I'm on her. I tried talking to you when I got on, but you didn't hear me. I wanted to see if the link would work.'

'What should we do, Gamma?' I asked.

'You and the men are good to head back on your own. I want to test if this charm was the denite reason none of our security measures worked.'

'We can do that. We'll take the body to the morgue and get it locked up. I'll report back to Alpha Lucien afterward.'

'Good. I'll let him know what Gwyn and I nd. We're leaving now.' He said.

'As you wish, Gamma.'

Something brushed past me. Finding out what the spell in that charm was and how it worked was important. We needed to know so we could protect the pack.

"Nolan, take Ryan and go nd where Gwyn came from. We're leaving the two of you behind to put together the series of events. I want a report by morning." I said.

They looked at each other with a slightly annoyed expression. They were both good at their jobs, but they were assholes. They thought they deserved to be elite warriors, but their teamwork skills and their personalities would mess up the cohesion my teams had.

The rest of the men and I gathered the body and headed back to the pack. I reported back to Alpha Lucien as soon as I was able to link him. We took the witch's corpse to the morgue in the basement of the hospital.

I instructed my men to write brief reports on what they witnessed and turn them in to Alpha Lucien. It was important to have all perspectives noted. Someone may have seen something the others missed.

Looking at the time, I realized it was only three minutes before Addy and Aaron's play started. I hadn't thought I'd make it, but I could watch with Dillon if I ran.

Dismissing the warriors, I hurried from the pack hospital and ran as fast as I could to the pack school. I slowed down once I got to the doors, but still walked quickly through the halls, toward the auditorium.

I snuck in the back and found Dillon standing with the camera set up. I stood beside him and scanned over the room. Parents and very small children were seated together in chairs. The preschool kids were sitting on the oor in the front.

"I didn't think you'd make it." Dillon whispered.

He knew people could hear him but said he didn't like linking things that weren't sensitive when in public. Bellamy and Cara did the same thing. They felt it made them more relatable.

All of them had been accepted by the pack long ago, but they were always vying to make sure people were comfortable with them. They wanted the pack to know they were approachable and open. It became a habit for all of us.

"Work didn't take as long as it could have. It's starting." I replied quietly.

Half of the lights in the auditorium went off, making the room just a little darker. The pups were led out onto the stage and stood in a line. A few of them waved as they saw their parents. Addy and Aaron had serious looks on their faces, but they smiled a little when they saw me and Dillon.

For the last two weeks, Addy had been driving Dillon crazy trying to nd something to be her to draw for her prop. All of the pups were required to draw a picture on poster board of the thing they associated their colors with. She was orange and didn't want something like a carrot for her picture.

Aaron didn't ask for help. When I tried to see if he wanted me to give him suggestions, he said he already knew what he was doing. He didn't even tell Addy.

Addy was outgoing and friendly, but Aaron was quiet and perceptive. They reminded me of my brother and myself. That made the bond we had with them even closer. Not that we didn't bond with Bobby and Kay, it was just different because they were older.

We watched all the children step forward and say their lines, then show their pictures. Everyone applauded after every picture, making the little ones beam. Dillon grinned. He was so handsome when he smiled like that.

Soon, Addy stepped forward in her little orange shirt and pigtails tied in orange ribbon. She waited for everyone to be quiet and looked directly into the camera with pride. Addy was making sure she would stand out. I shook my head as I tried to hold in a chuckle.

"I am orange. Like a safety cone." She announced loudly and held up her picture.

She grinned broadly as people started clapping. Dillon whistled. She had trouble remembering 'trac cone' but 'safety cone' was easier. I don't know why. Addy skipped back to her place in line.

Aaron stepped forward next. He also waited for it to be quieter. I remembered doing this back in kindergarten. I was nervous about speaking in front of so many people. It wasn't a lot to remember, but I was scared of messing up. As I got older, it got easier.

"I..." He started shakily.

Putting up my hand, I got his attention. I put my hands on my shoulders and pushed them back, raised my chin slightly, and took a very large and obvious breath. Aaron mimicked me and we breathed out together. He looked more condent now.

"I am brown. Like my papa's wolf, Arnou." Aaron said loudly and held up his drawing.

He had drawn my wolf. It didn't look like a wolf, more like a wild horse, but I was pretty sure it was the best drawing of Arnou I had ever seen. I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

One of the things that was different for twins was their wolves. Arnou was chocolate brown with a tan neck and belly. Niall was black with a white neck and belly. I liked Arnou's colors. It made sneaking easier when I was in wolf form.

'Our pup drew me.' Arnou said to me proudly.

'He denitely did.'

'We're not allowed to have a favorite.'

'That's what you have to say? Of course we're not allowed to have a favorite!' I replied.

'I'm kidding. I love all of our pups.'

I nodded. I did, too. Even if my love for Kay was more like a friend or little sister, I loved all of our pups and I thanked the goddess for letting us nd them.