

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a tiger's face. The tiger's eyes are a striking, glowing orange color, looking directly at the viewer. The fur is dark with visible stripes, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the fur and the intensity of the eyes.

GORDON
ANDREWS

CURRAN POV
COLLECTION

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CURRAN POV

Gordon Andrews

FOREWORD

We've received numerous requests from our readers asking us what this or that character thought about certain scenes from the books. However, nobody has garnered as many requests as Curran. Finally, in the summer of 2009, Gordon decided to write a scene from the Beast Lord's point of view. Curran's POVs, as these scenes have come to be called, have become a favorite with the fans.

Here they are, in chronological order (we think).
Enjoy!

UNICORN LANE

(Magic Bites)

I was in Unicorn Lane at night. A bad time to be in a bad place. Anything can happen here, but it's never something good.

No one was in charge of Unicorn Lane. None of Atlanta's many supernatural factions could claim dominion over it. It was populated by those once human and those who had never been, and they hid in the dark ruins, feeding on each other and making visitors unwelcome. Thus, Unicorn Lane was recognized by all as neutral territory, a no-man's-land you entered at your own risk. The scared hovered at the edge, the stupid died not far from it. I was here to meet someone, and if she made it far enough to find me, I would know she was neither.

I leaned against the wall, feeling the cold stone of the abandoned building against my back. Moonlight seeped through the holes in the roof, illuminating a gap in the wall. She would come through there. The night shadows hid me, so I'd have plenty of time to look her over.

The Unicorn lay quiet. The night is never truly silent, but right now the monsters minded their manners. None of them knew why I was here, but all of them recognized that they didn't want to be the reason for my visit.

What I did know of the merc came from Jim, my chief of security. He'd worked with her in the Mercenary Guild. That gave me pause. Jim was a cat and preferred the solitary hunt. It was rare for him to let anyone outside the Pack watch his back. He said she was fast, for a human, and good with a blade. He also said she had a big mouth and fought when she should run. None of this endeared her to me. Mercs were bottom-feeders. No honor, no integrity, no loyalty. They didn't stand for anything. I wasn't in the habit of personally meeting low-life thugs who wanted to be tough guys. I had people for that.

However, I was willing to take a chance this time since Jim had vouched for her. Jim had seen her come out of situations that should have ended her, and he didn't believe all her cards were on the table. She was likely hiding strong magic, which meant she came with baggage. That was fine if it made her useful. Something was hunting my people, the Free People of Atlanta. We were shapeshifters and we had the best trackers in the City, but we had yet to catch it.

Normally we solved our own problems. We kept it in

the family. Humans saw us as freaks, and I saw no need to give them more ammunition. But the murders had been too numerous, and some of the vampires had been destroyed as well. No big loss.

Then the Order of Merciful Aid had gotten involved. The only human I trusted in that organization of fanatics, a Knight Diviner of the Order, had been investigating the case and was killed for it, presumably by the same creature. I have little love and less use for humans, but Greg Feldman had died helping us, and that counted for something. Incredibly, this merc was his estranged ward and had inherited the case along with a temporary position with the Order.

I would find this thing that was murdering my people. I would stand over it and taste its blood as the light faded from its eyes. Nothing would change that. But with the Order's help, I would find it faster. If Greg's ward was looking for revenge, all the better. It meant she would be willing to take risks that could help me get my teeth on this creature's throat.

The night wind brought a mixture of scents to my tongue. Leather--old boots. A touch of sweat, clean and unmistakably feminine. A mix of rosemary, chamomile, lavender--shampoo, an herbal fragrance foreign to this dank and moldy place--nice. A very faint trace of cloves and steel--oil for the sword. She was near and moving

closer.

She was nearly soundless, unusually quiet for a human. Interesting. What was she?

Finally the faint sound of a step. Come closer, little mouse, you're almost there.

The night shadows swallowed me. She would come in right across from me--it was the only way in--and I would see her before she saw me, if I choose to let myself be seen. Perhaps if she looked as good as she smelled I would give her that privilege.

A slight scratch of a foot sliding on stone. I leaned forward to get a better look.

Moonlight from gaps in the ceiling illuminated the scene as she stepped through the gap. She came in sideways, slowly and carefully, carrying a sword. An odd-looking blade, pale. She held it like she knew what she was doing, but her faith in its ability to protect her was misplaced. The tips of my claws, wanting to come out, caused the inside of my skin to itch. She had one sword, but I had ten claws.

She scanned the area, stopped to listen, then moved forward again--stealthily, like a dancer--hiding in the nearest shadow before I caught a glimpse of her face. The draft brought another whiff of her scent. She paused and I knew she was peering into the gloom, trying to find me. I liked the way she moved, balanced and light,

neither tiptoeing nor stiff. Nice body. Come to me, mouse, don't be scared.

She took a step forward and I saw her in profile. Exotic, strong features. Not pretty, but I liked what I saw.

I drew my fingers through the dirt, scraping the floor a little.

She pivoted on one foot, turning her sword. Fast. Her head snapped toward me. Dark eyes stared straight at me. I detected no fear. Instead, it was a look of challenge. So not a mouse after all, but something more. This could be interesting. I'd let her dance in the dirt a bit more. She was fun to watch.

She crouched with her hand out. What the hell was she doing...?

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty."

Oh my God. She was an imbecile, and I was going to kill Jim.

She blinked and stared at me. She'd seen my eyes glow.

I let go, shifting in the dark into my true form. If you want a kitty, little girl, I'll give you one you'll never forget.

I stepped into the moonlight. She froze.

That's right. No sudden moves. I padded toward her slowly and circled her, allowing her take it all in. Do you like the kitty now? I could smell her surprise and

fear. Our gazes met. Her eyes went wide, and then she fell on her ass.

Heh. A bow would have been sufficient.

I retreated into the shadows of the corner. I wasn't sure what effect a laughing lion would have on her, and I didn't want her to faint. I reverted to human form and changed into sweats and a tee. Any other time, I might have walked out to her as is, but this was a business meeting. Best to keep it that way.

I gave her a few seconds to recover. She was dusting off her jeans.

"Kitty, kitty?"

She jumped a bit. Smart girl. Most shapeshifters can't switch back and forth like that. I'm not most shapeshifters. I'm the Beast Lord.

"Yeah," she managed weakly. "You caught me unprepared. Next time I'll bring cream and catnip toys."

Toys wouldn't be necessary. "There may not be a next time."

I stepped out and she turned toward me. She seemed almost relieved that I wasn't naked. Most women had the opposite reaction. Her loss.

I hit her with my hard stare. She met my gaze and didn't look away or cringe. Points for her. She was tall for a woman, maybe two or three inches shorter than me. Young, maybe early- or mid-twenties. She looked strong

and lithe, like an athlete or martial artist.

"What kind of woman greets the Beast Lord with 'here, kitty kitty'?"

"One of a kind."

She continued to hold my stare. She might not have been as funny as she thought she was, but she wasn't a coward. Good. I could work with brave.

I took a step toward her. "I'm the Lord of the Free People."

FERNANDO'S

(Magic Bites)

I sat at a table at Fernando's. It wasn't my favorite place--too posh, too public--but Myong liked it. The service was good, the food was okay, but people didn't really come to Fernando's to eat. They came to be seen. Most of them were self-important people indulging themselves. It wasn't my crowd and I didn't care to be seen by them.

Myong glanced up from her menu. She, on other hand, fit into Fernando's quite well. She was beautiful and she had that cultured elegance that went along with wealth and privilege. Any of the men here would've loved to have her on their arm. It was almost as if she were one of the rewards of power--a gorgeous woman suitable for a successful man--and she did nothing to break that impression. And now I was that guy with her. I was in a restaurant I didn't like, among people I couldn't stand, and I was bored.

I surveyed the patrons. Men and women, sitting around identical tables, murmuring in quiet voices, drinking

their wine. A woman walked between the tables, led by a waiter. She wore a champagne-colored gown, and something about the way she moved, perfectly balanced, caught my eye. Most people would be focusing on the waiter, but she seemed aware of her surroundings, not anxious but ready, cataloging the possible dangers and summing people up.

The waiter turned. The woman turned after her, and I saw her face.

Kate.

Kate Daniels. Here, in Fernando's. I put down my menu.

Where in that really revealing dress was she hiding her sword? Did she have it strapped to her thigh?

Kate kept gliding in her heels. She looked stunning. Her hair was down, framing her face and falling past her shoulders and down her back. The dress fit her well, almost as if had been tailor-made to flatter her lean, strong frame, displaying all the things jeans and those ugly sweatshirts usually concealed. She looked... well, feminine. Long legs. Supple. Bare shoulders. The dress softened her, but she had definition to her arms. Don't see that often in a human woman.

In the short time I had known her, she had struck me as many things--brave, competent, smart-ass--but tonight she looked beautiful. It made me regret that she had

declined my earlier offer of joining me in the tank.

The waiter led her to a table where a man sat alone. She was on a date. And the poor fool wasn't even armed. He didn't stand a chance.

Kate circled the table, giving me a lovely view of her backside. Mm. She stood by a chair that would let her see the door. Ha. I wondered for a moment if she would flip it over and sit cowboy style, with the back of the chair protecting her stomach.

"Is something funny?" Myong asked.

"No."

Kate's date, a handsome man in an expensive dark suit, stared at her, his mouth hanging slightly open. You and me both, brother.

The waiter held the chair for her. Her date didn't even rise. *Come on, fancy lad, stand up, say something charming, hold her chair for her. Did they not teach etiquette at Little Lords Academy?*

Kate sat. The fancy lad kept staring.

Gods, man, act like you've been out with a lady before .

He finally recovered and said something. She said something back. He smiled. They managed to engage in some small talk.

I glanced across the table at my own date. Myong looked lovely as always, in her perfect little black dress.

She caught me looking, and as usual, she looked down demurely. *Yes, yes, I get it, you're not offering me a challenge.* I didn't need a show of submission every time I looked at her. This Beauty and the Beast routine was getting stale.

Where Kate radiated strength and a capacity for violence, Myong's beauty was far more fragile, like an exquisite crystal bird. The contrast was striking. I glanced at Kate again. If I walked over to their table and started trouble, Myong would, despite being a shapeshifter, seek safety rather than risk injury, possibly under the table, clutching a fork as a weapon. She had once confided that she found violence--how had she put it?--"distasteful." I was very frequently distasteful.

Still, she was intelligent and cultured, and I wanted her take on them.

"Glance casually at the couple two tables down and give me your impression of them both, please."

Myong looked surprised but did as asked. She studied them carefully, and after a moment, she spoke softly. "His haircut is in fashion and expensive. The suit is custom made, and the tailoring is impeccable. His shoes are Italian leather. His hands are elegant and well taken care of. I don't think he's a fighter. He has no calluses or scars and his nails are manicured. He seems at ease here, an important man. The waiter seems to know him, so he

must be a regular. She is not. The dress is suitable, but seldom worn. The heels are the appropriate height and coordinate well with the dress, but she doesn't like wearing them. If she has to run or fight, she will take them off." Myong paused and allowed herself a small, slightly superior smile. "If something untoward occurs, she might use them as weapons."

A waiter came by our table to refill Myong's water. He took care to stand as far away from me as possible and looked down. Once again, somebody had recognized me, and the appropriate instructions had been issued to the staff. Don't provoke the psychopath in charge of the shapeshifters or he might slaughter us all. The violent animal can't control himself. Ugh.

"Who's that man two tables down?" I asked.

"Dr. Maximillian Crest," the waiter said.

"Medical doctor?"

"I believe he's a plastic surgeon."

The waiter fled, no doubt grateful to escape unharmed.

Crest, Kate's date, was meanwhile droning on, while Kate herself seemed to be only half listening. I couldn't hear him clearly, but I could guess at the gist of it.

"Blah blah blah, I'm handsome, I make a lot of money, this suit is expensive, and my shoes are made of the finest Corinthian leather hand stitched by virgins under the moonlight. Of course, I could have gone into

pediatrics, but for someone of my amazing skill, plastic surgery was really the only option. Beauty is so important, don't you think? Oh, Kate, you are nearly as attractive as I, why then should we not be beautiful together?"

The way he looked at her bugged me. As if he was studying her face, searching for tiny flaws that he could correct. Kate could do better.

I pressed Myong further. "What is your impression of them as a couple?"

Without a moment of hesitation, she said, "He could do better."

"Really?" I allowed a slight edge to creep into my voice.

She seemed to shrink into herself and I could tell she regretted the remark. "My lord," she began.

Every time I gave my chain a little slack, she cringed. This was just not working out.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it."

It wasn't Myong's fault that she found him appealing. He was handsome and he was probably a decent human being. I had no reason to dislike him this much, except that he was at the table with Kate. I had offered her a dip in my tank. And she declined so she could go and dress up like that for him.

Crest was wearing a custom-made suit and expensive

shoes, while I, on the other hand, was dressed in faded jeans and a comfortable tee. The interesting thing was that Kate looked as out of place as I did, despite her fancy dress and shoes. Hmm. I wondered what would happen if I walked over there and asked her to blow this joint and grab a burger with me. She'd probably laugh. But then again, she seemed to like the spotlight. Maybe she was enjoying being the center of attention at Fernando's. There were enough men looking at her. Her clothes were crap, and from what Jim said, money was tight for her. This must've been her rare opportunity to shine and she'd pounced on it.

Crest finally caught me staring and said something to her. Kate turned. Her eyes widened. *Surprised to see me?*

Her gaze lingered over Myong and slid back to me. I grinned. *Yeah, my date is almost as pretty as yours, baby.*

Kate motioned to the waiter while pretty boy looked at me. He was actually trying to stare me down. I hid a smile. *Dear Doctor, you don't want any of this. Trust me.*

He kept looking. I returned the stare. I was kind of curious if he would have the nerve to come over and do something about it. Then again, who knows, maybe he just was wondering if he could fix my nose. Believe me,

Doc, you don't wanna see my other face. I thought about giving him just a quick peek. Just a hint of a fang.

A waiter approached our table, carrying a silver tray with a bowl on it. Now what?

The waiter deposited the bowl in front of me. Milk.
Ha!

"Compliments of the lady at that table, sir."

Oh, this was too good. I locked eyes with Kate and picked up the bowl. While she was looking, I raised the dish and drained it. *Salute! Your move, baby.*

She smiled.

Crest was glaring now. He tossed his napkin on the table. Uh-oh. I wondered if I was supposed to faint or flee.

He shifted his gaze and let it linger over Myong. It was meant to provoke me, but instead he just looked at her, caught off guard, as if he'd just realized for the first time that she was there and she was gorgeous. He was wondering what she would look like out of her tight black dress. Your guess is as good as mine, pal. Every time I tried to touch her, she made this face, as if she was going to bravely endure. She didn't have to worry. I would never put my "big rough hands" all over her unless I thought she wanted it. She would consent, but she didn't want me, and that killed it for me.

I realized I didn't really give a damn that another male

was openly staring at my date. What did that say about Myong and me, exactly? That our relationship would never go anywhere.

Kate had that look in her eyes that said she was contemplating punching me in the face. *Settle down, buttercup. I'm not going to embarrass Dr. Dreamboat in front of you and ruin your chances of entering the upper echelons of society.*

I gave Crest a little wink, just to screw with him.

He started and then said something to Kate. She glanced at me, almost with regret, or maybe I was reading too much into it. They rose. Again, didn't hold the chair for her. Seriously?

They walked out. And just when we were starting to get along.

Where the hell were they going? He was probably going to try to impress her with the opera or something. I looked back at Myong. She smiled. Very dutiful.

Kate was leaving with Crest. Possibly she'd spend the night with him. And I was going home alone. I'd drop Myong off and try to salvage what was left of my evening.

SOUP

(Magic Burns)

When I broke through Kate's front door, the first things I smelled were blood and poison. Then smoke and something else, salty, bitter. Like a fish tank. What the hell had happened here?

The little girl was hysterical, crying that Kate was dying. She was almost right. I'd expected it to be bad, but the sight of her stopped me cold. Kate was lying on her stomach in her bathroom, her pale skin in stark contrast to the dark blood that seemed to be everywhere. Her back had been ripped open by something with savage strength. In that moment, I realized I could lose her. I'd seen humans die from less.

The Keep was out of the question. Too far. That's why I'd ordered Doolittle to the Southeast Office before I went to rescue the idiot.

I scooped her up off the floor, told the girl to follow me, and ran downstairs. Kate's skin was on fire. I loaded her into the front seat of the Jeep, stuffed the kid in the back, and drove out of there with one hand on Kate's

wrist. Her heartbeat was fading and I had this dumb idea that if I let go of her, she would die. I had to get her to Doolittle.

I burst into the office with Kate in my arms, roaring for Doolittle. There was little need, he was standing by. I lowered her gently onto a waiting gurney and fixed him with a stare.

"Can you save her?"

He took in her condition with a glance. "My lord, her wounds are extensive and her kind are--"

I cut him off. "Try."

He rushed off with her and all I could do was stand there and watch her go.

I found my way to the study, pulled a battered copy of White's *The Once and Future King* off the shelf and ordered a beer to be brought to me. Ten pages in, I knew it was useless. I closed my eyes, leaned back, and waited for the call.

Sometime later the phone rang and Doolittle informed me that she seemed to be stabilizing. He had purged her system of the poison, and her fever was coming down.

Somebody once said it's better to be lucky than good. He or she must have had Kate in mind. With the flare so strong, the good doctor's already considerable medmage powers had been augmented enough to heal the slashes on her back and neutralize the poison coursing through

her body. I don't know why, but when he told me she would, in all likelihood, live, I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding. I should have known she was too stubborn or too stupid to die.

The real question was why had I been so worried? Why did I care so much if this idiot girl lived or died? She wasn't Pack--not quite human, but not one of us either. Whenever she blundered into my life waving that toothpick of hers around, I knew there would be trouble, the kind that usually ended with one or both of us badly wounded. She was arrogant, impulsive, and failed to recognize my authority or respect my position. She challenged me in front of my people. If anyone else ever...

But she was funny, sometimes, and never boring. God, it would almost be worth it to see her face when she realized I had saved her ass again.

Actually it was quite a nice ass, come to think of it. In fact, my memory of the ass and its owner seemed to be remarkably clear. I got up. That way lay dragons.

What I needed was a shower and some shut-eye. I'd be damned if she saw me looking tired or disheveled. When she finally did wake up, feeling like half a mile of bad road, I wanted to stroll in looking fresh and clean, as if I hadn't a care in the world.

I needn't have worried. Almost a day passed before Doolittle called to tell me his patient seemed to be coming around.

"How will she feel?"

"She'll be in considerable pain and probably--"

"Hungry," I guessed.

"Yes, I should think so. Accelerated healing burns the body's resources. I do believe she will be ravenous."

I smiled. "Doctor, do you think she might enjoy some nice hot chicken soup?"

There was a tiny pause before Doolittle answered.

"My lord, I think she would like that very much."

Oh yes, she would sit in bed and eat the soup I had gotten for her like a good little girl. The best thing would be watching her gulp it down, clueless as usual to the consequences of her actions.

As I strode into the room, with one of the cooks behind me carrying the soup on a tray, I caught the tail end of a conversation.

"How did I get here?"

"His Majesty carried you."

"Is he burned to a crisp or sliced in half this time?"

Her concern was touching. "Neither," I answered.

Her eyes grew wide. I can walk quietly if I wish to;

I'm a cat after all. I gestured for the cook to put the soup down. Doolittle bowed and both he and the cook left the room.

I took a moment to look Kate over. I hadn't seen her since bringing her in. Her appearance had improved, but not much. Her face was bloodless. Dark circles puffed under her eyes, and the skin stretched tight over her face. She looked like a ghost of herself. Almost frail.

I wasn't used to seeing her like this and it scared me a little bit.

"You look like shit." Honesty is important in any relationship.

She cleared her throat. "Thanks, I try."

Frail and weak, but still Kate.

I picked up a bowl of soup and thought about what it would mean, here, in this place, if I offered it to her and she accepted. She might not know what it meant, but I would. This was it. Nothing ventured...

I held the bowl out to her so she could smell it. Before I could warn her, she grasped it with both hands and burned herself.

"Idiot." I set the soup in front of her with a spoon.

"Thanks."

She actually thanked me. This was going well. I had half expected her to throw the soup at me.

Kate grabbed the spoon and went at it. That's right, eat

it.

"Did you get the surveys? They were..."

"On the dresser. Shut up and eat your soup."

I pulled up Doolittle's chair and watched her while she ate. This was nice, we were together, and so far we hadn't tried to kill each other. If I could just keep her quiet... Maybe if I kept feeding her?

"So that's the secret."

She looked slightly shocked. No witty comeback. Did I scare her? Nah, not the ass-kicker.

"You okay? Gone a bit pale there."

"Secret to what?"

"Secret to shutting you up." I smiled. "All I have to do is beat you till you're half dead, then give you chicken soup, and I get blessed silence."

She made a face and went back to the soup.

"What did you think I meant?"

"I don't know. The ways of the Beast Lord are a mystery to a humble merc like me."

"You don't do humble." Smart-ass was more her speed.

Her bowl was empty, so I handed her another. This time our fingers brushed together. I held still and looked into her eyes. Our faces were very close. Her lips parted slightly. I leaned in toward her and... She grabbed the bowl and pulled away, and it was as if a spell was

broken. Funny little mouse.

"Why did you save me?"

"I picked up a phone and there was a hysterical child on the other end, crying that you were dying and that the undead were coming. I thought it might be an interesting conclusion to a boring evening." That and I fucking hate the undead.

She looked puzzled. "How did Julie know to call here?"

"Hit redial from what I understand. Smart kid. You're going to tell me what you've blundered into." I wasn't asking. My people had crawled all over her place, sniffing every inch. There had been three assailants, none human. No bodies, but some evidence of a fire and dents and stains on the wall. The best they could figure out, she'd killed something in the kitchen, set the second attacker on fire, and rammed the third one into the wall. Derek had brought Julie to the Keep. He was working on her, but she was a street kid. She trusted no one and so far hadn't talked.

Dark eyes looked at me from Kate's pale face. "No." Maybe she'd misunderstood. She'd been through a lot. "No?" Give her a chance.

"No."

God fucking damn it, not this shit again. I crossed my arms and gave her my displeased look and meant it. She

stared back. This was too much.

I leaned back. "You know what I like about you? You have no sense. You sit here in my house, you can barely pick up a spoon, and you're telling me 'no.' You'd pull on Death's whiskers if you could reach them." She didn't know it, but at this moment she was close. Damn close. "I'll ask one more time, what were you doing?"

"I see. I retrieve the surveys the Pack let slip through its fingers, and in return you bring me here against my will, interrogate me, and threaten me with bodily harm. I'm sure the Order will be amused to learn the Pack kidnapped its representative."

"Aha. Who is going to tell them?" Yes, the Pack greatly regrets being unable to save the Order's representative. Her injuries were extensive. It would be so easy. Windpipe and larynx crushed? Like someone strangled her? You don't say.

She looked at me as if to gauge my intent. Would I do it?

I stared back at her. My stare said "Try me." Not that I would ever hurt her, but she didn't know that.

"I guess I'll just have to kick your ass and break out of here."

Ha! Maybe if I had a seizure or a blood vessel burst in my brain.

She shot me her crazy smile.

I showed her the edge of my teeth. "In your dreams."

"We've never had our rematch. I might win."

Yeah, and on that day we'd get together with the People and put on a show in the old barn.

She grimaced. "Bathroom?"

I gestured toward it and she carefully got out of bed, like she wasn't sure if she could stand on her own. I almost felt sorry for her. Then I saw the rest of her and couldn't help smiling.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"Your panties have a bow."

She looked down. She wore a little tank top and blue panties with a silky bow. Her face went white, then red. I stifled a laugh.

"What's wrong with bows?"

"Nothing. I just expected barbed wire or something with chains."

She stuck her nose in the air. "I'm secure enough in myself to wear panties with bows on them. Besides, they're comfy and soft."

You don't say. "I bet."

Big eyes again. She hesitated. "I don't suppose you'd mind giving me a bit of privacy for the trip."

And miss the panty parade? "Not a chance."

She made a valiant effort to get out of bed, but her legs betrayed her. I was barely able to catch her before she

hit the floor. I held her tightly for a moment, enjoying the closeness. She smelled like Kate. I could get used to her scent.

"Need some help, ass-kicker?"

"I'm fine, thanks." She tensed, and I held her for a moment longer before releasing her. She carefully made her way to the closest door.

"That's the closet," I pointed out helpfully.

She looked like she was going to cry and staggered into the bathroom, leaving me to lean back and plot my next move.

MIDNIGHT GAMES

(Magic Strikes)

Nearly half a dozen of my best people had gone rogue, among them my Chief of Security, our Head of Medicine, a young wolf, and the Alpha male of Clan Bouda. They had broken my first law. They had chosen to participate in the Midnight Games and had refused direct orders to appear before me and explain their actions.

I had never before questioned Jim's loyalty; he was Alpha of Clan Cat and, for all intents and purposes, my Second. Doolittle despised Pack politics and had saved my life more often than I liked to think about. Derek had become a member of the Pack after his father had gone loup and slaughtered his mother and sisters. When that happens, and it happens more often than humans think, SOP used to be to kill male survivors, especially adolescents, as they were believed to have a genetic predisposition to going loup. Jim had been in favor of putting Derek down. I had overruled him, which I rarely do. The kid had been through a lot and I'd decided he deserved a chance. Had I made a mistake? That Raphael

was involved in this surprised me not at all. If Bea's little peacock thought I wouldn't mess up his pretty face, he was as dumb as those girls who followed him around like dogs in heat.

What could possibly cause a cat, a wolf, a hyena, and a middle-aged medmage honey badger to risk my wrath? I couldn't figure out the what or the why, but I had a damn good idea of the who. Kate Daniels, professional fuckup. Yeah, she was employed by the Order, humans who happened to despise my kind, and did jobs for the Guild, but I swear her mission in life was to make mine miserable. She defied me publicly, challenged me privately, and God help me, she bounced around inside my head like a bull in a china shop.

As soon as I had gotten wind that something was amiss, I had called her. In her usual charming and diplomatic way, she had both denied any and all knowledge of what was going on as well as politely declined to assist me in any way. Of course, she was in this up to that nice ass of hers. Later, as I started to put the pieces together, she had called to tell me that she and Jim were running off together and even offered me an erotic dinner if I could find them in three days. Kate short-circuits my brain. In my head we always have these clear coherent exchanges, but once we meet, what comes out is "Kate, do what I say or I'll kill you." Her default

reply is "Fuck you!" and we go downhill from there.

Even after I shook the idea of naked Kate out of my head, the big picture still made no sense. Jim and Kate had worked together on odd jobs for the Guild, but there had never been a hint of anything more than a friendship built on mutual respect. I knew for a fact that Jim liked that half-blind vegetarian tiger. Who the hell ever heard of such a thing? To top it off, the cat kept trying to kill herself by driving too fast.

Jim had a high opinion of Kate's abilities, which was a rare thing. Kate was skilled with that sword of hers, almost as good as she thought she was. I kept trying to puzzle it out: even if they had decided to run away together, how did the Games figure into it? I knew Kate would fight for the fun of it or the money. Did they need the money for their new life together? How had they gotten the others involved? Derek worked for Jim and almost worshiped Kate. If they had used him... That I could not forgive.

I also knew that Raphael's mate was Kate's best friend. He would do anything for her or just to piss me off. Perhaps he thought his mommy could intervene on his behalf if he got caught. I almost hoped Bea would interfere and get tangled up in it. After all, she's been a thorn in my paw for as long as I can remember. It would feel good to remove it. Since Mahon wasn't mixed up in

this nonsense, I could give him that honor. I knew he would enjoy it and faithfulness should not go unrewarded. None of this, of course, explained Doolittle's involvement. Had they forced him to help? Possibly, but he's a tough old bastard and you don't cross a badger without a good reason.

I had to know, so I tracked Kate to one of Jim's safe houses. She was alone but I could smell the others; they had been there recently. Derek was hurt, I could sense it. That had driven me over the edge, and I had leaped at her without looking. Right into a loup cage.

When I had stopped roaring, Kate explained it all. I now knew about the Wolf Diamond and the Rakshasas. I understood why Kate had felt compelled to do these things. It made sense; she was trying to help her friends and the Pack. What I could not condone or comprehend was the how. Some people go about things in a roundabout way. Kate blows things up and then tries to glue the pieces together with spit. If she had only come to me in the beginning, but now it might be too late.

As I sat at the bottom of the loup cage, waiting for the skin on my palms to heal enough to try the silver bars again, I slowed my breathing and went over my options. None were great. I could wait for them to let me out of this cage or for someone else to find me. No, that was unacceptable. I was the Beast Lord. I wouldn't be crated

and let out like a puppy. I could break out of this, but it would hurt, a lot, and in that rage I would slaughter not only Kate and her cohorts, but also anyone who tried to stop me. As angry as I was, I had to admit I didn't want to do that either.

By now they would already be in the Arena. Short of slaughtering the entire Red Guard, I couldn't get in there to stop them before the entire audience of sick fucks saw members of the Pack take part in the Games. After that, too many people would know, and I couldn't let that pass. If they survived, I would have to kill them. By myself in front of the rest of the Pack.

Kate had finished her spiel and left. I forced myself to relax and try to find a way out of this mess. I had assumed I was alone with my thoughts when I heard something move down the hallway. The smell was familiar, but I couldn't place it. Definitely not Kate, but...

Julie. Her kitten. All I had to do was to convince her to let me out.

I closed my eyes and listened to her sneaking through the house. Close by, almost close enough. Here, kitty kitty.

*** **

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the sound of the

footsteps approaching my cage. They belonged to Julie. She showed potential, moving well for a human child, quiet and careful despite the dim and unfamiliar surroundings. Kate would have stormed into the dark, stabbing at shadows. I wondered briefly where, or from whom, Julie had learned to sneak. She had not survived on the streets by being slow or stupid. Derek seemed fond of her and it was obvious Julie was smitten with him. To her, he was older--but not too old--and good-looking.

Damaged Derek, lying somewhere now with his good-looking young face forever ruined. Would she even look at him the same way?

A fresh wave of rage and grief almost overcame me, and I had to fight the urge to roar in frustration. *No, hold it together.* There would be a time for fur and fury, for the rending of flesh and the taste of blood on the tongue. Not now. *Take a deep breath, keep it together. Don't scare the kitten. Convince her to let you go.*

Come closer, Julie, that's it. You're almost here.

When she was near enough that I could hear her breathing, I called out to her in my best not-crazy voice, "Okay, Kate, you win. I couldn't break out. Let me go and I'll give you that hundred bucks I owe you." Kids like money, right?

Julie walked into the room and sat on the floor. A tiny

thing, skin and bones, narrow face, pale hair.

"Nice try. You know I'm not her, and you should know she's gone now where you can't get her."

Smart girl. "Look, kid, I don't want to get anybody. Just let me out of here, please."

"Julie. My name is Julie. Why?"

"Why what, Julie?"

"Why should I let you out?"

"Because I asked you nicely, and it would be better for you and your"--psychotic guardian, terrible role model, bad influence--"Kate, if you release me."

"Why do you do that?"

Okay, I'd play along, but my patience was growing thin. "Do what, exactly?"

"Bully people. Threaten them in that calm but scary voice. They're all afraid of you."

Ridiculous. "I don't threaten people. I'm nice. I don't yell or scream." Keep going, though, and you'll see how terrifying I can be.

"Bullshit. They're all scared of you. Jim, Derek, even though he looks up to you. Kate, too, and she's not afraid of anything."

That was interesting. "First, watch your mouth, child. Second, what makes you think Kate is scared of me?"

"Screw you. I'm not a child and you aren't the boss of me. She said you broke into her house and stole things."

I crossed my arms on my chest. The last thing I wanted to do was to explain mating rituals to a human girl. "I'm the Beast Lord, not a thief or burglar."

"You took a pie. Why would you do that? Don't you have whatever, servants, who cook for you? Kate doesn't have a lot of money--why would you steal her food?"

"That is adult business; I won't explain myself to a child."

"It was an asshole thing to do."

I choked back a snarl. "I'm not going to warn you again. Don't speak to me like that again--"

"Or what?"

She had me there. As pissed off as I was, there were lines I wouldn't cross. I wouldn't harm a child. Ever.

I had to take a deep breath and step away from the ledge. Persuade her. Be reasonable. I could do reasonable.

"Look, Julie, I'm trying to be a nice guy. I've asked you nicely to release me. I could break out of here, but you wouldn't like that, I promise you. That would be scary and loud, and nobody wants that sort of thing. This is the last time I'm going to ask. Please free me before I become angry and do something we both regret."

"You're doing it right now. I'm not stupid. I know you're mad and I know if I let you out, you'll hurt me and try to make me tell you where Kate is."

"No. I don't hurt little human kittens. Never have and never will. I give you my word."

She looked at me, thinking about it.

I leaned forward. "I know where Kate is and why, but I don't know why she left me in this cage. I wouldn't hurt her, and she knows that."

I broke into her place, I kissed her, and I've indulged her beyond what any of my people could get away with. Any sane woman at this point would know where we stood. I would never harm Kate. I might roar and threaten, and I might even pounce when occasion called for it, but she knew damn well that no violence would follow.

But then again, we were talking about Kate. Nothing was sane about Kate. That's why I was sitting in a loup cage, trying to reassure a frightened child that I wouldn't rip her to pieces.

Julie drew her knees to her chest. The kid looked like she never ate. A stiff wind might knock her over. "Kate thinks she has to save everybody. Duh."

"Who is she saving by keeping me in here, Julie?"

"Her friends, and you from having to hurt them. She knows you'll feel bad if you do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She paused for a moment and then continued slowly, "She knows you're pissed and you'll do your Lion King

thing, punishing them for..." She paused, considering her words. "Disobeying you. You'll regret it when you calm down, but then it will be too late. Dead is dead."

"Why would she think that I would regret it?" I was actually curious. Also what the hell was my "Lion King thing"?

"Cause she likes you and believes you're a good guy."

"She said that?" A good guy, huh.

"No, but I can tell. The way she looks when she talks about you."

Getting more interesting by the second. "Looks like what?"

"She looks the way my mom used to when she talked about my dad. And they're dead now."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Everybody always says that, but it doesn't mean anything. It's like saying hello or something."

"It means something," I told her. "My parents are dead, too, and I was about your age when I lost them."

Julie looked like she was about to cry and waved her arms. "Whatever. Look, I'm not stupid. I know things! Adult things."

"Like what?"

"Like sex. I know about sex."

I just stared at her. I wasn't opening that can of worms.

"The point is, she likes you. She *likes you* likes you.

She was going to kill Derek for you if he went loup so you wouldn't have to do it."

Now it was starting to make sense. So that was what all this was about. Derek was Jim's responsibility, and both Jim and Derek had fucked up royally. Now Kate was caught up in this mess. In her mind she was as accountable for the boy as we were. Derek had come to her for help, and she had been unable to refuse. Unfortunately, it had all gone to hell, as things tend to in our world, and the kid had gotten hurt bad. Now she blamed herself, and the only thing she could do was to go all in and hope for the best. She had taken it all on herself, as an alpha would do. I had to give her credit for trying to see this thing through to the end, but it should have been me. It was my job to know what was going on, to save, to protect, and to kill when there was no other way, and I'd dropped the ball.

I couldn't undo the damage, but I could step up and take charge. I could make sure that while there was breath in my body, not another of my people would be harmed. Whether or not she knew it, Kate was mine now and I would save her or die trying. That is what I do, I'm the Beast Lord. I stood and locked eyes with the girl.

"Julie, if you release me, I swear that I will not harm you, Kate, or any of my people."

"Will you help them in the Games?"

"Yes, I will."

"Even Derek?"

"What?" What could I do for him that Doolittle could not?

"He's with them, fighting the creatures who hurt him. He's so brave."

Damn idiot. "Yes, but foolish as well." *I wonder if she knows the whole story?*

Julie grimaced. "Yeah, I know. It's about the girl. I'll take care of her later, but I need you to promise about the others."

"Julie, I give you my word, I will do everything in my power to help our friends and punish our enemies."

She let out a breath she had been holding and smiled finally.

"Okay, deal."

HOT TUB

(Magic Strikes)

My back hurt like hell. I'd freed myself from Kate's cage and followed her to the Games. As usual, she'd made a complete fucking mess of things, and I was one who was going to clean it up.

I had to admit I was impressed. She had somehow convinced some of my best people to break my first law. Even Doolittle had fallen for it. So it was kill everyone involved, or join them in the pit and try to keep them alive. Really, it was no choice at all. Knowing all this did not make the slowly closing holes in my back feel any better.

Our first fight had been easy: snake woman, swordsman, and werebison. Dali had cursed, Kate had head-butted her opponent unconscious, and the bison, big and dumb, had tripped over my foot and broken his neck. The second fight hadn't gone as well. Dali had outdone herself. The tiger girl had taken out an ancient vamp. I'm sure later, in private, Jim would express his admiration. I tore apart a troll, then had to save Kate from a golem

she'd been taking her time with.

It was a silver golem.

She was bleeding from a wound in her side and looked like she needed some help. When I grabbed him from behind, he filled me with silver spikes, like I was a big gray pincushion. While I held him, she stuck him in the eye with her sword. It was a pretty good thrust.

She hadn't exactly thanked me, but she had cut the silver out of me. It hurt like hell and took a long time. Kate was pissed. And why did I jump on the golem, and she had it under control, and look at the holes in my back. When she was done, she ran off without saying much else. I waited until I knew she was out of earshot and then alternated between snarling and cursing for a good five minutes. I'd probably been hurt worse, but I couldn't remember when.

Now that I was feeling better, it was time to find her and have a little chat. There were things we needed to discuss. Important things.

I started looking for her in the team room. Jim and Dali were gone--their bunks stood empty. I could hear Andrea and Raphael's muffled voices in the other room.

Derek lay on his back in his bunk, his face hidden by an old paperback depicting a man with some serious tattoos. Doolittle sat in a chair, reading *Casino Royale*.

They both looked at me. Derek started to get up.

"Don't bother. What the hell are you reading?"

"*Big Jake the Snake and the Viper Commando Squad.*"

What the hell...

"I tried to get him to read something decent," Doolittle said, "but he's got this trash instead."

"You're reading a novel about an effete British snob," Derek said, clearly trying to get a rise out of Doolittle.

I looked at him for a while. He needed to take his tone down a notch.

He ducked his head. "I apologize."

"It's a classic," Doolittle said.

I left them to it and stepped into the hallway, sorting through the mess of scents. Sweat, blood, more sweat... Kate. The smell was sweet. I inhaled it deeper, making sure I had a good hold on it. Time to go hunting.

The scent floated through the hallway. I followed it and it led me through the doors of the gym, flaring stronger, then getting muddled. She must've stretched here some time ago, but since then morons had walked over it, leaving their own imprints in the air. I crouched for a long second. Ahh. There it was.

The trail cut through the gym, down the hallway, to a door with a man in Red Guard getup by it. There was a small window in the door. I looked through it.

A hot tub. And long dark hair. *Found you.*

She might still be fuming about me getting hurt, so I went into the rec room, found a couple of beers, and snuck in with them.

"Peace offering." *Umm, yummy beer, you know you want it.*

Kate reached out and took the Corona from my hand. So far, so good.

I had to warn her out of courtesy before I slipped out of my towel and into the hot tub. I didn't want her to faint and drown. Of course, if she did go under, I would be honor bound to pull her out and revive her. That she appeared to not be wearing a top did enter my mind. I'd only peek a little. I was a gentleman, not a saint.

"I'm about to take the towel off and hop in," I said. "Fair warning."

"I've seen you naked."

"Don't want you to run away screaming or anything."

"You flatter yourself."

I took the towel off and got in. She remained conscious and upright. Too bad. I was all set for the rescue.

"How's your back?" she asked.

"It's fine," I lied. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"Does your side hurt?" I knew it must, just as she knew the silver had burned like fire in my chest and

back.

"No."

She would no more admit weakness than I would.

"Are you going to sack Jim?" she asked suddenly after taking a huge pull on her beer.

I gave the question some thought. Why did she care? Would she fight me on it?

"No," I answered finally. She was listening. I liked sitting close to her like this, without us brawling. For once she wasn't kicking me or waving her sword in my face. And if I kept talking, she would stay just like this, relaxed, in the hot tub. Topless under the water. "I concede that if I'd been paying attention, I would have nipped this in the bud. It should have never gotten to this point."

"How so?"

"Jim took over security eight months before the Red Stalker appeared. The upir was his first big test. He blew it. We all did. Then there was Bran. Bran stole the surveys three times, waltzed in and out of the Keep, attacked you while you were in our custody and took out a survey crew, Jim included. Jim considers it a personal failure."

The worst thing about Bran was that Kate seemed to like him. He'd had a wink-and-smile bullshit-your-way-out charm. It's easy to be like that when you don't have

fifteen hundred shapeshifters in your care and your day isn't scheduled down to the minute. It isn't enough to always be ready to back up your authority with violence, you have to consider what kind of violence, how much violence is too much violence, when to use it, and when to exercise patience. Despite how I was sometimes viewed, I never wanted to be a tyrant, and making sure I didn't turn into one took up most of my time.

Bran was like a kid. The man had experienced three lifetimes of acting like spoiled a teenager, bedding pretty girls, getting into fights, and getting away with it consequence free. If he fucked up, he could run away back to his goddess and his fun camp, or whatever the hell he had there in the mist. Everything I did had consequences, and running away wasn't an option.

If Kate wanted someone like him, it would never work between us. Even if I wanted to be that guy, and there were rare moments when I did, I never could. It wasn't who I was.

I looked at her. She shrugged in the water, raising her shoulders above the water level. Definitely no top.

"The guy teleported. How the hell are you supposed to guard against someone who pops in and out of existence?"

I sank a little deeper into the warm water, the tension easing out of my shoulders.

"Had I known how hard Jim had taken it, I would have pointed that out to him. You remember when he tried to use you as bait?"

She scowled. "I remember wanting to punch him in the mouth."

"It was the first sign of trouble. His priorities had shifted to 'win at any cost.' I thought it odd at the time, but crazy shit kept happening and I let it slide. Then he became paranoid. All security chiefs are paranoid, but Jim took it further than most. He began to obsess about preventing future threats, and when Derek screwed up and got his face bashed in, it pushed Jim over the edge. He couldn't handle being responsible for Derek's death or for my having to kill the kid. He had to fix it at any cost. Basically, there was a problem and I missed it. And he sure as hell didn't bring it up."

I'd known Jim a long time and he was too proud to admit he was afraid of anything, but if the kid had turned loup, it would have broken him. One of us, probably me, would have had to put him down. I wondered if that had happened if Kate would've understood or been able to forgive me.

"I can't keep up with everyone all the time, and Jim's the one who never went nuts on me. It was his time, I guess. So to answer your question fully, there's no reason to demote him. He has a talent for his job and he's doing

reasonably well considering what he's up against. If I have to sack him, I'll have to replace him with someone who has less experience and will screw up more. This is a lesson. Three months dragging giant rocks around will help him get the stress out of his system." What I didn't say, didn't need to, was that Jim was my best friend and I trusted him like a brother.

She listened while I explained all this and I realized how nice it was when we just talked. We sat quietly together, enjoying each other's company. Her face lost its edge. I understood the edge--she needed it. If you look like you're ready to fight, you can win most battles without throwing a single punch. But now, with her hair down and her features relaxed, she looked beautiful. I wondered if she knew. No, probably not. "So, you didn't want to see me get hurt?"

"I didn't want you to have to kill Derek," she said, her eyes still closed.

Wait, what? "And if he had gone loup?"

"I would've taken care of it."

She said it like an alpha--no bluster, just matter of fact.

"How exactly did you push Jim aside? He was the highest alpha. The duty was his."

More like horrible responsibility, one that was ours to carry. Would she really have done it? We all knew she

cared a great deal about Derek, and it would have hurt her badly to have to kill him. It would've hurt me to kill him.

I decided she would've done it. Maybe she cared enough to want to spare me that pain. Of all the women I'd been with over the years, how many would have done that?

"I pulled rank," she continued. "I declared that since you accepted the Order's assistance, I outranked everybody."

"And they believed you?" It slowly dawned on me that they had obeyed her. Huh.

"Yep. I also glared menacingly for added effect."

She gave them her alpha stare. I tried not to laugh. It was kind of cute. I would've liked to have seen that.

When I was angry, my eyes glowed. I could also do it whenever I wanted, really. And when I stared at someone, they felt it and they wanted very badly for me to stare at someone else. Her hard stare was good, but mine was major league. It was a good tool.

She looked so comfortable leaning like that. I started moving toward her through the water.

"Unfortunately, I can't make my eyes glow the way you do," she said.

"Like this?" I asked, my mouth only a few inches from her ear, my arms on either side of her. She was so close,

warm and wet.

Her eyes popped open and I could read the surprise and something else. Could it be an invitation?

"Don't make me break this bottle over your head," she said, her voice soft.

"You won't. You don't want to see me hurt."

I searched her face. Yes or no? Come on, Kate, give me something to work with.

She moved toward me and I grabbed her. Finally. She wrapped her arms around me. I slid my hands over her body, feeling the strong, smooth muscle. She didn't lay back and wait for me take the lead. She pressed against me, strong, supple. It was exciting. She wanted me. This wasn't passive acceptance, this was active involvement.

I kissed her. I was already hard and this was fuel to the fire. God, I wanted her, more maybe than I'd ever wanted anything. But I had to be sure. You just never know. I didn't want her to regret it. I wanted her to want me.

"Only if you want me to--say no and I'll stop."

"No," she said softly.

Argh. Breathe out, take control, step back. Let her go. I pulled away slowly.

We stared at each other.

"Okay," I told her.

She put her hand on my chest. When she touched me,

her fingers warm, something passed between us like a spark of static and my pulse spiked. I took her hand gently and brought it to my lips. *Easy boy, take it slow.*

She pulled her hand free and moved closer. Her lips played upon my throat. She was driving me crazy. I had to have her.

"What are you doing?" I growled, wondering if she was just teasing or if she wanted me too.

"Pulling on Death's whiskers," she breathed out softly. She kissed me again. I had to let her take the lead. Don't push her, don't scare her off. If we were going further with this, she would have to make the next step.

Her hands moved over my body, chest, and shoulders, down to my biceps. I flexed a little and tried to remember to breathe. Oh, yeah, this was totally happening.

"Is that a yes or no?" I asked.

She slid against me and lightly nipped at my lower lip. *Oh yeah! It's a yes. It's definitely a yes.* "I'll take that as a yes."

I grabbed her and pulled her on top of me. Bare skin. She wasn't wearing *anything*. I kissed her again, my tongue probing her mouth. She put her arms around my neck. Her breasts pressed against my chest. Mmmm. I brushed her hair off her neck with one hand and kissed the delicate curve of her throat, cupped her tight little

butt, and pulled her against my body. I was almost painfully aware that she was sitting astride my erection.

Finally--

From beyond the door, Derek's new voice, more of a growl, demanded, "Let me in."

No fucking way, not now. If they don't send him away I might just kill him myself.

My hand was still on Kate's breast, gently rubbing her nipple. I kissed her again. *Don't listen to the voices at the door, Kate.*

Somebody said something and Derek snarled back about being a member of the team. *Not for long if you barge in here.*

"Curran," Kate whispered. "Curran!"

No. I was naked, she was naked, she was sitting on me, we were doing this.

The door started to open. *Don't you fucking do it. Don't you walk in here, or I will fucking strangle you. Turn around, keep walking. You don't need to talk to me right now.*

Kate hit me with something on the back of the head and I dove under the water.

Five goddamn minutes. They wouldn't let me have five goddamn minutes to myself.

I counted to ten and emerged on the other side of the sauna. Kate was sitting on her side, looking like nothing

had happened. Derek was telling her something about a hand in a box. It was a dead hand. Why the hell did he have to bring it to me right this second? Was it going anywhere?

Kate closed her eyes. She looked exasperated.

"Give the hand to the Red Guard," I told him. "There's nothing for us to do about it until tomorrow."

He looked like he wanted to say something. I looked at him. Derek turned and left without another word. Smart kid.

I stared at her from across the hot tub. Where were we?

She stared back, looking defiant. Soft, sweet Kate was gone.

"You missed your chance. I'm not coming anywhere near you, so you might as well turn off your headlights," she said.

Baby, you don't have to come to me. I'll come to you.

I moved toward her.

She stayed completely still. "No."

I stopped. Damn it.

"You wanted me," I said. We both knew it.

"Yes, I did," she admitted.

See, now was that so hard?

She crossed her arms. It wasn't happening, not tonight anyway.

"What happened?" I deserved an explanation, at least.

"I remembered who I am and what you are."

Okay, well that was how it was.

"Who am I?" I demanded, though really the question was who did she think I was. "Enlighten me."

"You're the man who likes to play games and hates losing. And I'm the idiot who keeps forgetting that."

No, I'm the idiot sitting here with a raging hard-on.

"Turn around so I can get out, please."

No. I sat back and relaxed against the wall of the hot tub. She'd seen me naked--fair is fair. If she wanted to rush off in a huff, I could at least enjoy the view.

She glared at me.

Not happening.

Kate exhaled and stood up. She was perfect. Strong but feminine.

Oh, the things I could've done with that body. She had no idea. I realized I groaned and shut up.

"Fine," she said.

Yes, it could have been. It can still be fine, if you get back into the water.

She wrapped a towel around her bare body. It would be so easy to just grab it off her and pull her back into the tub. I could, but I wouldn't. She walked out with her dignity intact and her towel in place.

I needed very badly at that point to find someone and

hurt them. I stayed in the hot tub until that urge and others died slowly.

We weren't finished yet, not even close. I could still smell her. I remembered what she felt like. What she tasted like. This wasn't a casual sex thing. This was a mating. I would have Kate as my mate. Whatever it took, no matter how long, she would be with me.

KATE'S ORIGIN

(Between *Magic Strikes & Magic Bleeds*)

I was sitting in my office, thinking my life was pretty good. The magic was down, and I had a hot cup of coffee and *Great Big Sea* on the old CD player. The last couple of weeks had been awful. Well, that was a bit of an understatement. Members of the Pack had broken my first law and joined Kate in the Midnight Games. Derek had gotten hurt, bad. Kate had almost died, and I have never been that scared, not since my family was murdered. I had felt that same sense of helplessness as I held her limp form. Still, we won, the kid recovered his health, if not his looks, and things had calmed down.

I even managed to put that fucking pervert in his place. Such a waste--instead of reveling in the power of his true form, he hid like a coward behind beautiful masks and played seduction games. Saiman was weak but very vain. I had stung his pride. He would probably retaliate in some way.

I toyed with the idea of telling Jim to get rid of him. It would be easy. Saiman had no friends or family. Who

would miss him? Besides, Saiman dealt in knowledge and secrets, and I knew a jaguar who would love to spend some quality time with him and pry some information out of that pretty head.

I drank my coffee from my blue metal mug. When I was a kid, after my parents died, I'd lived in the woods for a while, and once I'd raided a holiday cabin. They had a set of blue metal plates and mugs, the camping dinnerware. I'd stolen it and their instant coffee and drank it by myself that night over my meager fire. That first cup of coffee had tasted like pure heaven. George, Mahon's daughter, had found the same set of dishes and given it to me for Christmas.

A familiar scent and a knock on the door told me my head of security had arrived.

Think of the devil...

"Come in."

Jim strode through the door, carrying a thick leather file. At least an inch thick. Great. This would take forever.

Jim checked the hallway and closed the door behind him. He was wearing his "we need to talk" face, which was quite different from his normal "I'm a badass, don't mess with me" face that Jim believed to be pleasantly neutral. He wasn't just physically imposing; he had the ability to radiate menace. I think most of the time he

wasn't even aware of it. He would make a terrible kindergarten teacher, but he was perfect in his position as Alpha of Clan Cat and my second-in-command. The rest of the clans didn't necessarily like him, but they respected his power and position.

"We need to talk," he announced without preamble.

And there went my pleasant mood. I braced myself. "How bad is it?" It sure as hell wouldn't be good.

He put an old Polaroid down in front of me. In it a young girl, maybe twelve or thirteen, with a swollen eye and a split lip, stared back at me defiantly. I would know those eyes anywhere.

"Kate," I said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes." Jim sat down into the chair. "The best we can figure, this was taken in Guatemala, over a decade ago. She won a bare-knuckle boxing tournament. The rest were boys, some as old as sixteen."

"Is that a big thing down there now?"

"Yeah. I guess it beats watching roosters tear each other apart."

And humans called us animals. "Why are you showing me this?"

He held up a finger. Apparently there was more. Jim opened the file in his hand, took out another picture, and put it down. Kate was older now, a gladius in her right hand and a bandage on her left shoulder.

"Rio," he announced, "two years later. She fought in and won a citywide sword tourney, sponsored by one of the big gangs. A way of scouting new talent, I suppose. Matches only ended when one of the fighters was crippled or killed. She disabled most of her opponents, but the last guy, twice her size and age, she sliced his throat open in thirty seconds. They called her '*pequena assassina*' and still remember her."

The little killer. Kate would love that. So her childhood had been horrific. A lot of people had less-than-perfect childhoods. Why did he feel it was so important? There had to be more.

"I thought she was raised by Greg." Greg was a knight of the Order, a diviner, and an ally. He'd died not that long ago. That's when I'd met Kate. She'd come looking for his murderer.

Jim shook his head. "No, this was before that. But it segues nicely into the next bit."

He pointed at the first and then the second picture. "Look closely. Notice anything?"

It took me a few moments, but I found him, the same man in the crowd, staring at Kate with what might be described as fierce pride or approval on his cruel-looking face. He was big, dwarfing the men around him. Tall, powerful, well-muscled despite being in his late forties or early fifties. His graying hair hung limply

down to his broad shoulders. His features, once perhaps handsome, had turned coarse, thickened by scar tissue and time. He looked like an old boxer who'd spent too many days exposed to the sun and wind. Still, he bore no resemblance to the young Kate in the photos.

Jim put another photo down. In this picture, Kate and the man sat in a bar, a bottle of something between them, too out of focus to read the label. Kate looked about fourteen.

"They traveled together," Jim said. "They never stayed anywhere for very long. Every once in a while they would show up, enter some sort of martial contest or take a hard job, win, kill, and leave. This was Cuba. They were spotted once more in Miami, then not seen again. At least not together."

"Do you know who he is?"

"I have a pretty good idea." He pulled a thin manila folder labeled "Voron" out of the leather file and opened it on the desk in front of me.

Inside was a picture of the same man, younger-looking, maybe by a decade or more, in some sort of combat fatigues. He held a black axe in one hand and a man's severed head by the hair in another. His face was demonic, twisted by elation, reveling in violence, like an ancient battle mask. He seemed to be roaring toward the sky. He resembled nothing more than a bloody god of

war. Invincible and terrible to behold.

"Why is he dressed like a soldier but holding an axe?"

"Technically it's a tactical tomahawk. It was known to be his weapon of choice once he ran out of bullets. Our information leads us to believe that this picture was taken over fifty years ago. Magic was coming back, but it was still weak and guns were more reliable."

"A pleasant chap," I remarked.

"You have no idea. By all accounts he was a gifted commander but prone to berserker rages. In hand-to-hand combat, he would be overcome by bloodlust and tear into his enemies like an animal."

"Who's holding his chain?" I was pretty sure I already knew.

"Roland."

"The Builder of Towers and Lord of the People."

"Yep."

Fucking shit. Metal groaned in my hand. I put the crushed clump of blue down on my desk and shook the coffee off my hand. Jim said nothing, just waited.

"Now you're going to tell me why Kate was raised by this man and why I should give a damn." Why could nothing with Kate be simple? Why couldn't Jim ever just come by to tell me that he had bowled a perfect game or benched a personal best? Maybe finally asked that weird tiger girl out.

"I like Kate," Jim said. "I've known her for years and we've even saved each other's asses, more than a few times. Back then I didn't care much where she grew up or who she was related to, because it wasn't a safety issue for us. I only cared that she was good with a blade and did what she said she would. She talked a lot of shit, but she could mostly back it up."

Jim leaned back. "At present, everything is different. Personally, I admire her. You could do a lot worse, but it's my job to tell you what you don't want to hear. Now, I'm going to tell you a story and you are going to listen to me because I'm in charge of the Pack's security and I'm your friend."

Fuck you and fuck your story. "Proceed."

"This here is what you call an urban legend or modern-day fairy tale. It involves a very bad man, king of the vamps, and all manner of horrible undead shitheads. People like Ghastek and even this Voron, they flocked to him. He can keep them alive, young. He is old, real old, like he's in the Bible old. According to some, he made the first vampire. For most, he is a legend, like Merlin or Heracles. Real smart people, college-educated types, will tell you that he is a parable or an analogy. Same types will tell you that Cain and Able is about hunter-gatherer cultures being replaced by agriculture and the rise of cities. That Roland represents rulers and

their laws imposing order on chaos and anarchy. That he is every fabled builder or city founder. That's all good and well I suppose, but the truth is he exists. We both know that. The rest is not as easy. There are a lot of stories about him, some true, some not. What we do know is that every one of his children have rebelled against him. Some rejected him, some of the less fortunate sought to usurp him. Gilgamesh, for example, left and founded Uruk. Abraham took him on and lost. Everything--"

I interrupted him. "Jim, where did you get this shit?"

"I did some checking. I've got my sources."

"You asked Dali, didn't you?"

He broke into a rare grin. "Yep, she's damn smart. Took her a while, but she dug most of this up."

"Does she know you like her?"

"We aren't talking about me. We are talking about you and your... honey bunny."

"In that case, professor, I'm terribly sorry for interrupting your fascinating lecture on bullshit. Please proceed."

He shrugged. "Thank you, I will. Now, before you interrupted me, I was explaining that Roland has had bad luck with his children. Very tragic. Now, fast-forward to about thirty years ago. The main man has a new consort. She's beautiful and everyone loves her. Especially

Roland. He's smitten, and soon his lady is in a family way. At first Roland is overjoyed. It's been centuries since he spawned any little monsters, and he's feeling sentimental. Everybody is happy. Then, out of nowhere, he changes his mind and tries to kill his blushing bride and the child she's carrying. She flees with his warlord. It's like King Arthur, but Lancelot is a butcher and Guinevere is knocked up."

This story was just getting better and better.

Jim kept going. "The two of them take off to parts unknown. Like any man would be, Roland is put out and looks for them. He isn't any man though, and nowhere in the world is safe for them. He finds them and confronts her while Voron fled with the child. Roland kills his wife, but not before she takes out his eye. Grievously wounded and heartbroken, he leaves. Alone. Now Voron, being the sentimental type, raises this child to be as deadly a killer as he can make her. They travel, they train, and he hones her into a living weapon. One he will wield against his former master. He tells her how her father tried to murder her and killed her mother. At some point, he got careless and had to leave the girl with another man. The killers were close when he disappeared. His whereabouts are currently unknown."

"That's a great story, Jim, but what does it have to do with me?" I was daring him to say it.

"You know damn well what it has to do with you. There are more pictures, more testimonies from witnesses, more legends. It's all in there." He pushed the file across the desk, toward me. I kept my eyes locked on his until he looked down.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't want to tell you all this and if you love her, I will stand by you. Both of you. But you have to know. He's going to come for her. He always does."

"Then we will fight him." No man would take what was mine from me.

"Yes, we will, but we might not win."

"Who else knows?"

"Me, you, Doolittle suspects, Mahon knows and likes it not at all. He sees her as a threat to the Pack. He's not wrong. He always hoped you would end up with one of his girls, George maybe." He smiled. "Keep it all in the family, I guess. Kills him a little that you chose Kate."

"He'll get over it." George was like my sister. Kate... I didn't want anyone else. Just Kate.

Jim nodded. "Look--you, Kate, I get it. I just wish it could have been somebody else. If Roland comes... We aren't ready for him yet. Even if we win, most of us won't make it. I hope she's worth it."

"Roland is coming anyway," I said. "Whether Kate is part of the equation or not. She made a third of a demon

army kneel. She has power and she will be an asset."
And I loved her.

"What if she leaves when her daddy shows up?"

I stared at him. "Kate? We're talking about the same woman, right? When other people are running away, she's heading into the fight."

"Roland's very strong," Jim said. "Look, I don't know that much about how their magic works, but from what Dali said, Kate took that sword to the gut because it was made out of her father's blood. She couldn't control it by just grabbing it. She had to dissolve it into her body. That tells you something."

It told me Kate had a long way to go before she could face her father. She would need help, and I would be that help.

"I'm going to see her in a week," I said. "She's making me dinner."

Jim sighed. "So you decided."

"I've decided."

"Okay." He chewed on that for a while. "Well, it'll make my life easier. I guess my people can stop chasing after you when you go to visit her apartment."

I simply looked at him.

Jim rose and walked to the door. "One thing. If I were Voron, I'd program her to hide who she is. The man wasn't a moron. He would've drilled it into her to hide.

Does she trust you enough to tell you who she is?
Because if there is no trust, you know this won't work."
"I guess we'll find out."

NAKED DINNER

(Between *Magic Strikes* and *Magic Bleeds*)

It took a moment to realize I was awake and that the phone ringing was not just in my dream. It was a good dream. Kate and I were moving to the bed after the naked dinner. The phone kept ringing. Okay, this better be good. Since tech was up, I figured it couldn't be anything too dire.

I rolled over, picked up the phone, and growled into the receiver. "What?"

"You up?" Jim asked.

"I'm talking to you."

"Doesn't mean you're up. Means you're awake, maybe."

"Jim, if you don't tell me what you want, I'll find you and shake it out of you."

"No time for games, grumpy. You got a brunch with Bea."

"You tell me this now?" Nothing good ever came from meeting with the alpha of the Bouda Clan. Being a werehyena, she seemed to take great delight in making

my life difficult.

"I'm telling you now, like I told you before."

"I don't remember. Do I have to go?"

"You only remember what you want to remember, and yes, you do."

"Why and what does she want? I have plans for today."

"Because you said you would, and I wouldn't know why she wants to see you."

Bullshit. "Yes, you do. You've got your fingers in everybody's pies."

"Thanks, I think. Anyway, Bea is, as usual, playing things close to the chest, so your guess is as good as mine."

Usually Jim knew about things before they had a chance to happen. But Bea was a special case. She didn't like or trust cats. Really, the boudas didn't much like anybody.

"Whatever the hell it is, it better not involve bribing law enforcement or public orgies or requests for additional funds. It's like the Warren Zevon song: every time she wants to see me, it ends up being 'send lawyers, guns, and money.'"

"How is it you can remember old song lyrics, but I gotta remind you of significant shit all the time?"

"It gives you something to do and makes you feel

important. How long and where?"

"One hour, Dillard house. I let you sleep in, but you won't have much time to do your hair."

"Shut up, Jim. You wanna lift weights and spar a little later?"

"Maybe, but do you really want to be tired and beat up for your big panty party?"

"At least I get to see panties. How are you doing in the romance department?"

He didn't say anything.

"You know, if you keep blowing Dali off, she's going to put some sort of Asian voodoo love spell on you."

Jim's tone changed abruptly. "My lord, a car will be ready in half an hour."

The disconnect signal beeped in my ear.

So Dali must be a sore subject, or maybe he just didn't like me knowing one of his secrets. Served him right. He was far too keen on my love life and needed one of his own. I knew he liked her. I could tell from the way he spoke to her, looked at her when he thought no one was watching, and most of all covered for her after the umpteenth expensive car crash. Any other cat, male or female, would have had their arms and legs broken the next time they disobeyed him. Jim didn't enjoy violence, though as Alpha of Clan Cat, he was willing to use it as a tool. Pain is an excellent teacher. Besides, we heal fast.

What took humans weeks, we could heal in days or even hours.

A quick shower, shave, and brushing of the fangs and I was ready and headed downstairs. Derek, my werewolf bodyguard and driver, was waiting behind the wheel of a Pack jeep.

"My lord," he intoned with a nod.

"Knock it off." He was a good kid but often went overboard with the formality.

"As you wish." Again the almost bow.

"Derek...", I began.

He grinned and held up his hands as if to ward off imaginary blows. "Okay, Curran. Can I ask why you're meeting with the boudas?"

He managed to put a little disdain into the word. Like most wolves, Derek considered the hyenas to be little more than dangerous degenerates. Emphasis on the dangerous. While their sexual appetites were legend, they were also ruthless and deadly fighters. Their numbers compared to other clans were small, but if you fought one bouda, you better be ready to fight them all. To the death--that's how they rolled.

"Are you worried that there'll be trouble?"

He smiled a little. "With them it's always trouble, but I was wondering if we're going to have to fight."

He was right to be uneasy. Jim had trained him to be

cautious.

"Maybe, but don't do anything until I say."

"Of course, but if they start shit and there's more than four or five of them, including Ms. Bea, I might not be able to protect you."

Derek worked in my personal guard now and took his job seriously. It was good for him. It would teach him to be observant and to anticipate possible threats. "I appreciate the honesty, but as good as you are, Bea is better. If that shoe drops, you leave her to me and try to fight your way out and get help. It's unlikely, but just in case Bea's teeth and ambitions are bared, be prepared." He missed the reference and I sighed. Kids. "Derek, stick with me and you'll never go hungry again."

He didn't get that one either.

In less than twenty minutes we were pulling up to the long, winding blacktop drive leading to a large stone building at the top of a hill. It was one story and predated the Shift by several decades at least. It was family-style dining and, while not fancy, the food was good, they served meat, and you got a lot of it. That's five stars for shapeshifters.

Bea and her party, three females and her son, Raphael, were waiting outside. Nobody had sat or eaten before the king, and thus far they had offered no insults. So far, so good.

Bea gave me a big sweet smile. She would smile just like that before stabbing someone in the back with her claws. Raphael nodded at me. Bea ran the clan, but her son was the male alpha. We didn't exactly see eye to eye. Usually Raphael avoided meetings. Why was he here?

"Clan Bouda greets the Beast Lord and thanks him for joining us for a meal." Bea and her son inclined their heads briefly. The others held their heads down, eyes fixed on the ground.

Yeah, right. "Please, Bea, it's too early for such formality. Good to see you, Raphael. I didn't think you liked this place, not quite your style."

Bea's little prince favored fancier fare, with more flash and beautiful people making sure they were seen. The scion of Clan Bouda was five inches taller than me and fifty pounds lighter. Where I went for bulk and explosive power, he was lithe and quick, built for speed and deadly with a blade. If it got ugly, he would go through Derek in mere moments and I would then be hard-pressed to handle him and his mother. If there are enough hyenas, they can take down a lion. Well, maybe not *this* lion, but most others.

Raphael kept his face neutral. "Mother likes it and it does have a certain rustic charm."

"Indeed, Bea, it's such a lovely day, why don't we dine on the patio?" It would give me room to move if they

were planning on starting anything.

Bea gave me another sweet smile. "An excellent suggestion. It's been reserved for us."

We went inside and were led through to the rear to a large covered porch. A long picnic-type table had already been set, complete with a red-and-white-checked tablecloth. Two buffet tables sat a short distance away, one with large stainless-steel pans loaded with bacon, scrambled eggs, sausage, pancakes, and my favorite, French toast, the other with an assortment of sliced and chilled fruit. Maybe later, after I had a few passes at the meat.

I didn't know what they were up to, but they had laid out a great spread and I was never one to turn down a free meal. Of course, with Bea, nothing was free. They wanted something and they were very careful to feed me before they asked for it. Whatever it was, I wouldn't like it.

Everybody got plates and sat down to eat. That's one of the things that make us different from humans--when we sit down to eat, we eat. There isn't a lot of small talk or playful banter. We focus almost entirely on the food. From the outside, it probably seems strange, but we all take it for granted. It's actually considered rude to try to carry on a conversation with one of us while we're eating.

After everyone had consumed several large platefuls, it was time to get down to business.

"Thanks for the food, Bea. Now, what can I do for you and your son?"

"You're quite welcome, and what I would like is a favor, an indulgence if you will, not just as a fellow alpha but as a mother."

Uh-oh. I turned to look at Raphael. What had the little prince stuck his dick into this time?

"You know, of course, of Andrea Nash, the beastkin knight."

Damn it all to hell. I knew that was going to bite me in the ass. No good deed goes unpunished. Nash was a knight in the Order of Merciful Aid, a group of pro-human zealots with whom we had, at best, an uneasy truce. They were not officially law enforcement, but they were well-trained and funded. They saw themselves as humanity's last great hope against monsters, against us. So far we had coexisted in a state of mutual distrust, but someday push would come to shove and they would come to the Keep with swords and burning torches.

As if that weren't enough, Andrea was also beastkin, the extremely rare result of a successful mating between a human who turns into an animal and an animal who turns into a human. Most animal-weres possessed below human intelligence. Few are capable of speech. Some

packs kept them as pets, some murdered them.

Normally any child resulting from such a pairing is considered an abomination. Pack law demands they be killed at birth. Somehow Andrea had survived and as a teen had passed herself off as human enough to enroll in and then graduate with honors from the Order's academy. I wasn't sure how she had managed it, but it couldn't have been easy. What I did know of her came from Kate, and she'd hinted that there was a lot of abuse in Andrea's past. I didn't doubt it. We had a saying: a pack's only as good as the alpha and the alpha is only as good as the pack. Some of the smaller packs outside our territory let themselves be run by sadistic assholes.

I had to give it to the Order--they trained their people well. Andrea had fought with us in the Midnight Games and she was damn good with ranged weapons; maybe as good as Kate was with her sword. Andrea was also a potential problem. She was an unaffiliated shapeshifter in my territory, which was against the Pack law. She had to report to the Pack and ask to be admitted to the ranks, leave, or ask for a special dispensation, none of which she had done. Her only saving grace was that her shapeshifter status was secret.

I leaned back. "Andrea Nash is a knight of the Order. How does she concern us, or you?"

"I love her," Raphael responded before Bea could say

anything.

"Really?" I couldn't hide my surprise. He'd had a string of lovers, but I'd never heard him say that about any of them.

"Yes."

"Does she know?"

"Yes. She and I are dating."

That's just great. My life had been far too easy lately, and they'd decided to complicate it. "Good for you. I'm still not hearing an answer to my question, so I will ask again. What do you want from me?"

Bea folded her hands on her lap. "We understand that Andrea presents a problem. What we would like, what we humbly request, my lord, is that you do nothing. We simply ask that you overlook this matter and allow us time to resolve it in a manner that will be mutually beneficial."

"I have been very patient up to this point. I have allowed an unaffiliated shapeshifter, a beastkin even, to live within the Pack's territory. Do you know why?"

I paused in case they wanted to say something. They didn't.

"It's because she has no connection to or dealings with us. She's living as a human knight within the Order. She has rejected her shapeshifter heritage. I know her history and have no wish to expose or banish her as long as she

remains apart from us. Now, however, you force my hand. If you intend to date her, or even eventually mate with her, the fact that she's a shapeshifter will come out. She will have to be brought in. Moynohan is surely an ass in this world. If he finds out she's dating you, he'll make her life hell. If he finds out she's a shapeshifter, he'll expel her."

"I know that," Raphael said.

"Then you know that she'll have to choose, and soon, because it can't be both. When she's discovered, the Pack will want to know what I knew and when. If I didn't know about her, I'm stupid. If I knew and did nothing, I'm weak. Why should I allow this?"

"I will fight for her if I have to." He held my gaze.

Wow, he had it bad. Was this a challenge or just mating crazyness? "Who are you willing to fight? Think a moment before you speak."

"There will be no need for that," Aunt Bea said. "We are making arrangements for Andrea to be brought into the clan. I've been an alpha longer than you've been alive, and I'm not getting any younger. I'm starting to think of slowing down, retiring and watching my grandchildren grow."

Sure. The only thing she cherished almost as much she treasured Raphael was power, and maybe fucking with me.

"Nash is strong and my son loves her. He has since the night Kate brought her to us. He didn't know it yet, but I did. A mother knows. I realize that things have not always been straightforward between us. I have perhaps on occasion even been the proverbial thorn in your paw-
-"

I held up a hand and interrupted her. "Bea, you oppose me, even when it is not in your best interest to do so, you undermine my authority, albeit subtly, and you have done so since I first became Beast Lord. Now you want a favor from me because your little boy likes a girl from the other side?"

"You're not going to make this easy are you?"

"No. *What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; it is dearness only that gives everything its value.*" I quoted.

Derek moved behind me and disappeared into the restaurant. Hmmmm.

"Bea, the meal was delicious, additionally I'm, myself, on the hunt, and so I'm in a generous and mellow mood. I will grant you this favor, but not without certain concessions on your part."

"Name them."

I had her. Time to find out how much was she willing to concede to indulge her son. I decided to go for broke. "It's actually quite simple, I want only one thing.

Honesty."

Bea leaned forward. "Can you be more specific?"

"When I make a decision and you have genuine concerns or reservations, you tell me. If you have doubts, we will discuss them privately. But afterward, publicly, once a decision is made and announced, you will support me unconditionally. No more games, no more snide comments, no more clever jokes. I know your job is tough. So is mine. Being the boss sucks, and sparring with me is fun, but I need you and Mahon both. I need your counsel and wisdom."

I took a swallow of my drink, letting the words sink in. "You want the best for your clan. So do I. I want it for all of us. I know that I can be a bit of a tyrant, and I'm not always right. When you think I'm wrong, tell me, and when I'm right, back me. Agree to this and Nash is yours to do with what you will. That's the offer, take it or leave it."

She was silent a moment. Thinking it over...

Light steps told me Derek was coming back. A moment later he emerged. His face was paler than it used to be. Either his food hadn't agreed with him or something had happened.

Aunt Bea smiled. "You've finally grown up, dear."

"I've been grown for a long time now," I told her.

"You just haven't bothered to notice."

"Very well. You shall have honesty and respect as well. All you ever had to do was ask." She smiled again. "Nicely, without all the roaring."

"Thank you, Bea. I'll try to remember that. Now, if you will excuse us."

"Of course, my lord. I understand you have quite an evening planned with the delightful Ms. Daniels."

And how the hell did she know that?

Aunt Bea's smile got wider. "Don't do anything we wouldn't."

I wondered briefly what exactly that might be, but was unable to imagine something that dangerous or depraved.

I waited until we got to the car and well out of the boudas' earshot.

"Well?" I prompted once we were inside.

"Jim called the restaurant while you were negotiating with Aunt Bea. Boris is dead."

"Big Boris? Boris the Boar?"

Derek nodded.

Whoa. "Did a building fall on him?" Boris the Boar was a tough old bastard. If I ever had to fight him, I would be bringing Mahon.

"Murdered. He didn't die easy. Jim says there was a lot of blood at the scene, too much for all of it to be his."

No doubt. There would have had to be a lot of them and I'd bet some hadn't walked out on their own.

Two hours later, I was in Boris's cabin in the woods northwest of the Keep. Two of Jim's people were posted by the door. Others were carefully walking around outside and looking closely at things on the ground. It wasn't a crime scene so much as a nightmare. Blood was everywhere. Walls, ceiling, most of it on the floor. Busted furniture littered the cabin. Almost everything was broken or knocked over. The place looked like a barroom after a brawl, like you see in one of the old cowboy movies. Except this wasn't some "shady dive," this was the home of someone I knew. I'd visited Boris after he'd moved in. His home had been neat and clean. I remember him telling me that he "never could abide a messy domicile." He'd hate it now if he were alive. Which he wasn't, not by a long shot.

I looked at the body in front of me. Or rather what remained of it.

I'd once read a line in a book. It said "*The guy was dead as hell.*" It seemed to fit. Boris hadn't just been killed; he'd been ripped apart by someone or something strong. Smart, too. The killer, or killers, had damn near painted the place with wolfsbane, covering their tracks. Still, if you knew what you were looking for, there were clues. Deep gouges in the log walls and cabin floor

testified to the power of the attacker. Somebody big. Clan Nimble and the Rats were right out. The place wasn't big enough to hold the numbers they would have needed to bring Boris down. The Wolves were a possibility. They'd had an issue with Boris before. I could think of one wolf pair that might have had a chance, but it wasn't Daniel and Jennifer. They were concentrating on smoothing out their family life. Besides, if those two were making a comeback, Derek would've heard something and told me or Jim.

Last time I'd seen Boris, he'd been working on a huge oak table, the top at least two inches thick. Now his battered body was lying in the ruins of it. Who was powerful enough to knock him back into the damn thing or slam him through it? Somebody from Clan Heavy, maybe--Eduardo would be strong enough, but some of the marks on the floor said claws, not hooves. Besides, it wasn't his style. He had a short fuse and didn't mind fighting, but when he lost his temper he attacked right away. He wouldn't brood about it, planning and waiting for the right time. Bison don't have to sneak around or stab you in the back. Still, I'd put my money on someone from Heavy, but who was strong and stupid enough to kill their alpha's oldest friend?

"So, what do you think?" A familiar voice asked from over my shoulder.

"He's dead, Jim."

"You're not as funny as you think you are." Jim grimaced. "I know you didn't do it because I saw you yesterday, and you weren't all fucked up."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. So when do we think it went down?"

Jim shrugged. "Not long ago, couple days at most, judging from the decomposition and insect activity. Even with our accelerated healing, the killer is still going to look like they've been in one hell of a fight. How many people do you know who could have done this?"

"Not too many." It wasn't a loup. They stank and didn't use wolfsbane.

"Lots of bites, but no signs of feeding," Jim said. "Wolfsbane indicates forethought and planning. They knew they might have to kill him, and they knew we'd come sniffing around."

"Derek, look around and tell us what you think." Let's see how much he'd learned.

"Good idea--impress us," Jim said. "Start from outside and walk us through it."

Derek nodded, stepped out for a moment, then entered again. He shook his head. "No scent, no footprints. It's wolfsbane and then tire rubber and car smell. They drove up, parked maybe fifty yards away, and walked up. Carefully, left no trace. Loups don't drive, don't plan.

On top of that, the cabin doesn't have their stink."

He sank a little venom into his words. While the wolfsbane would mask the scent of a human or shapeshifter, loupes had an unmistakable stench, equal parts hunger and madness. The boy had been a victim and witness to both, as had I, but in a different fashion. I'd seen my father cut down by them. Derek's dad had turned loup, raping, killing, and cannibalizing his mother and sisters.

Derek pointed at the door. "No signs of forced entry. He let them in or maybe they snuck in while he was out and waited for him. Unlikely though; when he came up, he would have picked up their scent and not gone in. Maybe somebody he knew."

"Don't tell us maybe," Jim said. "Read the signs, tell us what the scene and the body say happened."

Derek nodded, paused, and started again. "There was an altercation in this area. Outside, the trees are damaged where Boris marked them as his territory, but those grooves aren't fresh like the ones in here. Claws." He crouched and spread his hand on the deep gouges in the wood floor. "This isn't a wolf. Three deep gouges here." He dug his fingers in the indentations. "Lighter gouges on the sides. Something was on all fours and got pushed back. Hard."

He took two large steps back toward the wall on the

side of the door and pointed up at a spot about eight feet up. "Here, blood and hair. Somebody had the back of his head slammed into the wall. With a tremendous amount of force."

He placed his hand on his own head, stood up on his toes, and raised his arm. His fingertips barely brushed the edge of the bloodstain. "I'm six feet. The stain is at least two feet higher. Someone tall."

Stepping away from the wall, he indicated another set of marks on the floor, near the center of the room. "These tracks are different. Deep ruts in the pine floor, made by blunt, rounded toes, consistent with our victim. Boris charged his opponent and was then pushed or pulled back, possibly both, which would indicate multiple assailants. My lord, if you will stand here." He indicated a spot against the wall, under the stain.

I moved where he pointed.

He placed his feet in the marks believed to be made by Boris and went into a sort of martial-arts stance. I looked sideways at Jim, who shrugged slightly. It was the kid's show.

Derek looked over his shoulder. "Jim, could you please stand behind me at the other wall."

Jim moved into place. Now we stood in a line: Derek facing me, with Jim behind him.

"Okay, so I'm Boris." Derek shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's go through this in slow motion."

He looked at me. "If you're ready, I'll charge toward you. Can you go into a half squat?"

I did so. He came at me in an exaggerated slow-motion rush.

"We collide, bounce off each other, you stand up, I come at you again and bash you into that wall."

He pushed against me and I pretended to bounce against the wall.

"You hit your head there. We grapple a bit. Now, Jim, you grab me from behind and pull while Curran pushes."

Jim lumbered over with exaggerated slowness and stood behind Derek, holding his hands out like two large paws. Yeah, he was thinking what I was thinking. He hooked his arms under Derek's and put him in a full nelson, slipping his arms under Derek's and clasped his hands together on the back of his head.

"Drag me back."

Jim pulled and I pushed and we half carried him straight back to the remnants of the table and let him go.

"Somehow, mainly brute force, the two of you lift me and smash me through the table. I'm stunned by the force of the impact, so I just lay there for a second or two. You, both of you, start to bite my head and neck. I'm fighting, but I'm on my back and the two of you are on top, ripping into me and clawing. Note the defensive

wounds still visible on the hands and arms of the victim. He tried to protect his face. Blood spatter on the wall adjacent to the table is in the classic teardrop shape. The power of blows forced it away from the body. Here on a shard of the table is a bloody handprint, presumably the victim's, as his body started to revert as a result of shock and blood loss. They battered him down and bled him to death until he couldn't fight anymore, and then they finished him."

He was good. I couldn't really find fault with his analysis.

"Jim, is this how you think it happened? It'd be easier if it was vamps."

"Yeah it would, but he's right." Jim looked at Derek. "All right, now that we know the how, tell us who?"

He looked at us both, perhaps afraid to say what we all were thinking. "Bears."

Yeah, it almost had to be. The moment I saw that stain on the wall, I knew it had to be a bear on his hind legs. Nobody else got that large.

"Does Mahon know?" I asked.

"Only if he did it or had it done. Boris's daughter came to check on him, found him like this, and called us," Jim said. "I told her don't touch anything and wait there for us, but she said she had to get home."

"You like her for it?"

"Meaning she did it and then called us so she wouldn't seem like a suspect?" Jim frowned. "Nah, she seemed pretty upset. Husband says she's in shock. Besides, she's not a fighter, strictly civilian. Husband too, but he could be strong. He has a lot of control, as much as any of my people. I think he's got a half form, but he denies it, says nobody taught him and he's too old to learn. That was the deal Boris made with Mahon--he fights, they don't. They're allowed to live their lives pretty much as they want. They're members of the Pack, but they aren't really active."

"And if he were to die? What happens to them?"

"I don't know," Jim said. "Maybe the old bastard never thought he'd die. We'd have to ask Mahon."

Nobody ever does expect to die. He'd put up a damn good fight though. Maybe it's the best any of us can hope for. "All right. I'll go talk to his daughter and I need to do it now, before the Old Bear hears about this." Mahon and Boris had been friends for a long time. Mahon wouldn't be exactly rational. "Talk to Mahon and buy me some time. We need to see if anyone in Heavy's missing or severely wounded."

"He won't be happy. Boris was his friend and he'll be looking for some payback."

"That's why I said buy me some time. Keep asking questions. He doesn't have to like it, he just has to

answer. You're in charge of this investigation. Pull rank if you have to, but keep him contained as long as you can. We don't need him roaring around and crushing people's skulls into blood and bone. He gets a hold of somebody he even thinks did it and they'll disappear. Whoever did this will face Pack justice, not Mahon's fury. While you're having a nice little chat with him, I'll go see the daughter. She may know something."

*** **

Buttercup Creek was a quiet, upper-middle-class suburb in North Cobb. Most of the houses were two story and brick. Younger couples with money and kids, older couples who had bought the houses back in the day and stayed. Well-manicured lawns, nice cars in the driveways, solid bars on the windows, and reinforced doors. Safe, comfortable houses for people who worked well-paying jobs and folks who had retired from them.

Derek pulled up slowly to the curb in front of the house, and after stopping, we waited a few moments to give everybody a chance to recognize us. I knew Jim had at least five people out of sight but keeping an eye on the house. Whoever or whatever had gone after Boris might decide to take out his family as well. Maybe the attackers had been looking for something at his house,

maybe they didn't find it, maybe they did, or maybe they just wanted him dead. Too many maybes. I needed answers. Here was as good a place to start as any.

Paul and Joan Parker's residence was no different from the others on the street, except that it sat next to a fenced-off wooded lot. Still too many neighbors for my taste. The house stood in stark contrast to Boris's simple, isolated cabin. I guess it depended on how you saw people, whether you were a bee or a bear. Some felt safer having others around and felt vulnerable on their own. Bees gathering in a hive. That's what the neighborhood reminded me of, a honeycomb. All the houses were similar. If I knew the layout of one, my own for instance, I was pretty sure I could navigate any of the others in the dark, no problem. Perfect for bees. Bears, on the other hand, were territorial and enjoyed the solitude of their caves. One does not simply walk into a bear's cave. Boris was like a bear, which was why he'd gotten along with Mahon so well. Was his daughter a bee or had she simply married one?

We walked up to the door, Derek a pace behind and scanning the street. Two doors, a screen one and sturdy wooden one with colored glass in its center. I knocked on the screen door.

No answer.

I tried the latch. Unlocked. I opened it and knocked a

bit harder on the wooden front door. I knew they were home. If they'd left, I would have been told about it. Part of me wished they had snuck out and I wouldn't have to interrogate a woman who'd lost her father. And hell, it might have even been a clue.

No such luck. I sensed movement and a tall, sandy-haired man opened the door, eyes very blue behind his wire-rim glasses. He stared at me a moment without recognition, and then it hit him.

"My lord." He bowed his head. "Please come in."

I did and shut the door behind me.

"Isn't your friend coming in?" he asked.

"No, he's going to stay outside and watch the car, says in a shady neighborhood like this somebody might steal it." Not sure why I was messing with the guy. Something about him bugged me.

"Are we in danger?" He chose to ignore my joke. Maybe Jim was right about me not being that funny. Naw.

"That's what I'm here to try to figure out, but no, not at the moment. We have people watching the house to keep you safe." And to keep you from sneaking out the back, which I wisely chose not to add.

"Mr. Parker, what was your relationship with your father-in-law like? Did the two of you get along?" No need to be subtle--I hit him with a hard question and gauged his reaction.

Parker made a face like he tasted something sour. "He was a hard man to like. Always told me that he 'had no use for most people.' I guess that included me. He had very specific ideas about what men should know and do, like know how to work with their hands and fight."

"You don't?" I didn't specify whether I meant the knowing or doing.

"No, I've never been a very physical person, but I'm smart. I got an education, I use my brain to feed my family and put a roof over our heads. I need the roof fixed or a patio built, I pay a professional to do it. He never understood that, said I should do it myself instead of having strangers in my house. Other men shouldn't be around my family. His thinking was medieval like that. Doesn't matter that those people have to make a living too, or that I wouldn't know what to do with a circular saw if my life depended on it. That shack of his, he built it himself, did all the work on it. He was so proud of it."

Wow, I guess I'd touched a nerve. "You've been out there to see him?"

"A few times... always with Joanie and the kids. He was a mean son of a bitch, but he loved his grandchildren, I'll give him that. Spoiled them."

"How exactly?"

He waved his hand. "Oh, you know, toys and games. Gave them money. Let the boys run around in the woods

like wild animals, hunting, fishing and sleeping outside even. They loved it."

"They're how old?"

"David is fifteen, Daniel's thirteen, both born in June like me. Weird, huh?"

Paul, David, and Daniel? I was sensing a trend here. Maybe they were religious.

"We haven't told them yet. I'm afraid they won't take it well. He's the only grandfather they've ever known. My father died when I was just a little older than they are now. Worked himself to death, Mom used to say, but it wasn't the work, it was the play."

That was interesting. "How do you mean?" Everybody has a story if you listen.

"Dad was a stone mason down in Florida. After the magic came back, a good stoneworker could make a damn fine living. Problem was he spent it faster than he could make it, sometimes before my mom could pay the bills even. He was what is now commonly called a 'high-functioning' alcoholic. Everybody liked him, said he was a funny guy, a great friend. I don't remember that, I remember my mother crying because he'd spent his paycheck at the bar." He took a deep breath, exhaled. He was looking off into space, reliving painful memories. "I don't think Momma liked him much, and I feel like I didn't really know him. When I was sixteen, they found

his body in the Corkscrew."

"Is that a bar down there?"

He looked at me and actually smiled a little. "No, it's a swamp, like a preserve, south of Fort Myers. Daddy went there hunting at least once a month. You know." He let it hang there. "He was proud of being a panther, went to see his people, he called them, a small pack in the Everglades. Never took us with him. My mom told me once she thought he had a woman there. Gave her money, our money. So I'll be honest with you, I never liked my dad. I never liked Boris either."

"Sounds like you had it rough." I pointed around to indicate the house. "But you're doing well enough now."

The place was nice, spotless and tastefully decorated with high-quality furniture and expensive paintings on the wall. Nothing to indicate that two teenage boys lived there. It was almost sterile. As a young man, I would have preferred the cabin.

"Yes, we do okay. Like I said, I got my degree and work as a liaison between insurance companies and contractors. Make sure they don't overcharge for the work. Joanie works for lawyers in Buckhead. Her father hated that, said I should make enough for her to stay home. Said a real man acts as head of the household and provides for his family, and the wife should stay home and take care of the kids. He thought we should

homeschool the kids. Not sure why--they're in an excellent private school."

He really had it in for the old boar. I decided to ask more questions. Maybe he'd tell me something I could use. "What about Boris? Did he go to good schools?"

"I don't know much about his upbringing. Like I said, we weren't close. Joanie could tell you, but she's still pretty upset. Do we really have to do this now?"

I smelled sweat and fear. There's something about fear. It must be the lion in me. I feel it, I smell it, I taste it. It's almost tangible for me, and when I do catch a whiff of it, the world goes crystal clear.

I stared directly into his eyes. I knew my eyes had gone gold and he knew what that gold meant.

He looked at the floor. That's better.

I stepped closer until mere inches separated us and continued in a low voice, "Yes, Mr. Parker, we do have to talk about it. Someone murdered your wife's father. It wasn't a quick or easy kill. He suffered before he died. The people who killed him wanted something, and we don't know what it was or if they found it. I'm here asking questions because I mean to catch whoever is responsible and bring them to justice. I rule the pack, I make the laws, and I punish those who break them. That's who I am, that's what I do. I appreciate that this is a rough time for your family and you're grieving, but you

will answer my questions and you will not hinder this investigation."

His expression changed, his shoulders slumped, and in a quaking voice he said quietly, "She's not here. They have her."

And there it was.

"Please, the boys don't know. They said they'd hurt her if any of your people came around."

"Who?"

"I guess you or men like the ones hiding outside and the boy by the car."

I took a deep breath. I needed him alive and talking. Roaring at him would just make him clam up. "Who has your wife and when did they take her?"

"A little while ago. She went to see him, came home crying, then she got mad. As angry as I've ever seen her. She asked me if I'd done it or had it done. I told her she was crazy, she said it was my fault that I owed them money and that they'd killed her father to get it. It's not true; I tried. I asked him for the money, just a loan. He laughed at me. Called me weak."

"Who took your wife?"

The words kept spilling out of him like marbles out of a torn bag. "Yeah, I told them he had a stash hidden away, but I swear I didn't know they'd murder him. I sort of hoped maybe he'd kill them. After we fought, she went

to see them, said she wasn't afraid of their kind. Later they called and said if I wanted to see her again to bring them what I owed. Why would she do that? Why would she go and confront them? Now they have her and I don't have the money they want."

Enough was enough. "Mr. Parker, if you don't give me a name in the next five seconds, I promise I will personally beat one out of you."

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"The Irvine boys?" Mahon frowned. "Yeah, I know them. Mick and John, came down from Michigan with their dad after their parents split up. Must be almost twenty years ago now. They were just kids, teenagers, but they were strong and they started working. Now they each have their own business. Mick does floors and John does pretty much everything else or has a guy who can. They do a lot of flood restoration, total renovations. They did some really nice work on Raphael's house, took the carpet off the stairs, you know he hates it, put down wood everywhere. You should see his kitchen. It's all stainless steel appliances, tile floors, and marble countertops. Why, are you thinking about hiring them for some work?"

"No. I was going to ask them to release Joanie Parker

and answer for killing her father." I gave him a moment to process that.

Mahon stood perfectly still. I could sense Jim tensing up beside me, unsure of how the big man would react.

"They killed Boris?"

I nodded.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Where are they now?" he said, his voice low and menacing.

"Funny you should ask. I was wondering the same thing. When was the last time you saw them?"

Mahon squared his shoulders. "I'll handle this; it's my clan and my friend that got killed. I'll find them, we'll talk a bit, and if what you say is true, I'll bring you their heads. Good enough?"

"Not this time. They have Boris's daughter and they'll probably kill her if you go barging in there. Plus we don't know where 'there' is. We're going to do this my way. Jim's people are with the son-in-law at his house. When the Irvine boys call, he'll tell them he has the money but that he doesn't feel safe. He wants the exchange to go down somewhere public, with lots of people. They'll come to the Keep, to the southern construction site, and we'll be waiting for them. They're going to stand trial for this, Mahon."

I could tell by his face he didn't like it. "Why air our dirty laundry?"

"Because that's how we do things," I said.

"You think they're stupid, that they won't smell a trap?"

"No, I think they're desperate and need the money to get out of our territory. Look, if they're found guilty, you still get to kill them. Any way you want. Will that work?"

"It will have to. And you're sure it's them?"

"You keep asking that," Jim said.

"I know their father," Mahon grimaced. "Yeah, I mean they've had some troubles. They can be a handful, but murder?"

I nodded to Jim, who stepped forward with a sheet of paper. "Troubles? That's one way to put it. They're out of control. I have no less than nine documented incidents of assault and property damage involving them. There's a pattern: they drink, they get mean, and people get hurt. Not too picky about who they fight either--they've gotten into three fights with the teamsters just this year. If they can't find other people dumb enough to brawl with, they get into it with each other. Last year, Mick stole one of John's guys to work on his crew. Next family gathering, Mick goes after John and they both wind up hospitalized. And then Doolittle kicked their asses out of his med ward because they started shit with other patients. He

won't treat them anymore. They're grown-ass men. You need to stop covering for them."

"Or what?" Mahon moved toward Jim.

This was getting out of hand, so I stepped between them. "Or nothing. You know there's only one way this ends, and you're not really mad at Jim. He didn't kill your friend or abduct Boris's daughter. You want to fix this, help us bring them in. Let them tell their side of it. That or we can hunt them down like animals."

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Not everyone lives in the Keep. There's always a certain amount of personnel and some living quarters, but it's more of a place to run things, gather for special occasions, and hole up if the shit hits the fan. When that day comes, and it will, I want to be able to fit everybody inside, so as the Pack continues to grow, I'm also perpetually expanding the Keep. I want the walls higher and thicker, another tower here, cut the trees back there, enlarge the kill zone, anything that will make it harder to take. Because I never can stop playing with it, an area south of the Keep is designated as a construction zone and staging area for the supplies, stone, timber, and tools I need to make the place bigger and better. It was there that we arranged for Paul to meet the men who had taken

his wife.

Paul told them he'd borrowed the cash from the Pack and would meet them near the Keep so that he felt protected in case things went sour. The idea was that if they attacked him, he could shout out and the noise would bring the guards.

I crouched in the bushes. Mahon sat next to me. The rest of the Pack Council had arranged themselves around us, out of sight but within earshot. We were downwind, but since it was our construction site, it would smell like shapeshifters anyway.

In front of us, Paul paced between the stacks of mortar bags and loads of stone blocks. Pale and haggard, he looked like a man who'd just come out of the tail end of a weekend drinking binge, not sure where he was or why he was here and panicking because nothing seemed familiar.

I had invited alphas and betas, because I wanted everything to be aboveboard. Due process works best when there are witnesses to the proceedings and no appearance of impropriety. All of which was a moot point if the Irving boys didn't show. I figured they would. What choice did they have really? Jim's people had searched the house they still shared and it looked like the Irvings had packed up some things and split. If they were planning to run, they would need money. If they planned

to stay, they would need money. And there was only one place they could get it. They'd have to bring Joan and trade her to Paul for the ransom.

If they hadn't taken a hostage, I'd be inclined to let them go and hunt them down at our leisure, but we owed it to Joan to do everything we could to get her back safely. If they showed up soon and things went smoothly, I could still make my dinner with Kate. Sure, I might be a little late, but I intended to make it up to her.

We didn't have to wait long. In less than an hour, the rumble of a powerful engine alerted us to the approach of the Irving brothers. Just as I thought. They had taken the access road to the construction site. I hoped they had Joan with them. If they arrived without her, things would get considerably more complicated. We would have to try to subdue the pair and beat her location out of them. Dead or alive, we needed to know where she was.

Paul faced us and peered into the woods. Don't look at us, you dumbass.

In a few minutes, lights shone through the trees, then they went out, but the noise told me the vehicle was continuing toward us. Idiots. Their engine sounded like a small tornado. I wondered what they'd been thinking. *Hey, Mick, how can we be inconspicuous? Well, John, we'll turn the lights off. Nobody will ever know we're coming.*

Next to me, Mahon rolled his eyes. We weren't dealing with criminal masterminds. The Irving brothers didn't plan. They saw only a few hours ahead, if that. For once, it played to our advantage. They probably hadn't even considered the possibility of a double cross. In their minds, this was a straight line: show up, get the money.

Paul squared his shoulders and hefted the duffel bag that we'd stuffed with coffee packets. When put inside the bag, they looked just like stacks of cash.

The Irvings parked about a hundred yards short of the site and got out. Even in the light of the quarter moon, I could make out two large shapes with a smaller one between them. Oh, good. They'd brought her alive. She seemed to be walking, but they were keeping her between them and I couldn't see her face.

Maybe Mahon was right and they were just good guys who'd gotten caught up in a bad situation.

"Parker, we brought your sow," one of them called out. "You better have the money or we'll gut her in front of you before you die."

Or not.

"Okay." Paul raised the bag. "I have it--let her go, please."

I could sense his fear and tension, but was it for himself or for his wife?

"Throw the money," the other Irving brother said. "If it's all there, you can have her. She ain't hurt. Much. We could've done worse for all the shit you put us through."

"Me?" Paul's voice shook. "You took my wife! For what, money you think I owed you?"

Ah, here it was. If we waited it would all come out.

"Bullshit," the larger brother said. "You told us they would pay. We did the work, you fucking bastard. Did the insurance company pay? No! We built them folks a brand-new goddamned house, tile fucking floors, granite countertops, custom cabinets, new appliances--we had to buy all that shit, and then nothing. We're out of pocket for eighty grand, goddamn it."

"Homeowners can't pay," the smaller brother growled. "We got barely five out of them. We missed a payroll, Dom quit, plumbing guy quit, and our rep is fucked now. Nobody will hire us after that. You owe us, for all of it."

"It's not my fault!" Paul dropped the bag. "The payment was approved and then they went out of business. How was I supposed to know the owner was going to disappear with all the cash and his secretary?"

"You're supposed to know--that's what we paid you for," the larger brother snarled. "It was a good gig, all you had to do was go back and forth with the rep, get the payment approved. You sit in your nice little office running the numbers while we do the real work. We

always gave you your cut. You think you're better than us because you never get your hands dirty, you think you can just fuck us and nothing's gonna happen?"

"I said I was sorry. I tried to get the money. I even told you where to get it, but you couldn't even do that right, could you? You were supposed to get the money from the old man, not kill him."

"Well, how the hell did you think we'd get the money, you stupid bastard?" the larger Irving asked. "Did you think the three of us would sit down to tea and then he'd give us the dough?"

I nodded to Derek. The kid moved forward, struck a match, and dropped it into the metal brazier. The fuel inside ignited and flames shot up, illuminating the site, Paul, the Irving brothers, and Joan with a piece of duct tape over her mouth. To the right and left, three more fires surged into life.

I stepped out and in a loud voice asked, "That's what we all wanted to know. Did you plan to kill Boris?"

The big men froze for a moment. Little drama never hurt.

Joan took the chance and broke from them, ripping the tape from her mouth. She had a split lip and a bruise under one eye. They had roughed her up and they'd done it on the way over here, probably just before they got out of the car, because Lyc-V would've healed the injuries

otherwise.

Joan ran toward her husband. He opened his arms to embrace her and she slapped him. Hard, right across the face. He staggered back, looking stunned.

She was breathing hard but between breaths managed to squeeze out four words. "I want a divorce."

"Granted," I said. It seemed fair under the circumstances.

Around me, members of Clan Heavy moved from the woods, heading for the Irving brothers.

"Good," she ground out between clenched teeth. A terrifying grin spread on her face as she advanced on her now former husband.

"You did this," she hissed. "You sent them to kill my father. He was right about you--you're just a coward. You knew what they'd done and you let me go see them by myself. What kind of man does that?"

"I provided for you!" Paul barked. "I made a life for you and the boys. You liked it, the nice house, the good neighborhood. What are you going to do, get a little apartment, put the boys in public school? You'll come crawling back, or is one of those lawyers you 'work for' going take care of you?"

"Aaaargh! I make as much as you do, asshole. I have money put away. You think you're so much better than me and the people I work with, but I don't have to cheat

people and deal with stupid, violent thugs like those two."

"Hey!" One of the Irvings started to protest. They had been surrounded by several members of Clan Heavy, under the direction of Mahon. They weren't going anywhere.

"Shut up," I suggested. "You'll get your turn."

The happy couple needed to work this out. Years of bitterness and resentment were being dragged out, and it felt a bit voyeuristic to be watching their life together unravel.

"Hell, I did you a favor!" Paul screamed. "Now you'll get his place and his money. Did you think he'd live forever?"

For a moment, Joan said nothing. She just stood perfectly still. Uh-oh.

"Petition for full custody of the children," she finally asked in a loud voice.

"Granted," I said.

He turned toward me. "What, why? They're my kids too. Are you're just going let this slut have them? Let them decide who they want to live with."

Joan's laugh was bitter. "What do you think they'll say, Paul, when they find out that you had their grandfather killed? The man who loved them and took care of them and taught them things. The man who took them camping

and fishing. And why did you do it? For a little bit of money. They'll know what kind of man you are, and they'll hate you for it."

"You whore!" Paul Parker's skin split. Fur spilled out, fast, twisting to cover the new bone and muscle. Three of Jim's people were on him. They grabbed him, but suddenly he was in his panther half form, hissing and spitting, and they were struggling to hold him back. This was getting out of hand.

Joan just watched him for a moment and then shrugged. "Fine. If that's how you want it, fine. Let him go."

Jim's people looked at me. I nodded. We waited until she changed, then just stood back to give them room.

Where once had stood a petite blond woman in her late thirties, there was now a huge female razorback. All of us were larger in our beast form than normal animals, but members of Clan Heavy were giants. She had to be over five hundred pounds of hard bone and powerful muscle. Dark grayish fur bristled along her broad back. Her eyes were small and full of malice. She was mad as hell.

Paul took a step forward. Joan outweighed him by nearly two hundred pounds, but Paul in warrior form was still a three-hundred-pound monster, a mass of tightly coiled muscle, sinew, and spotted fur with

enormous fangs and claws. And she didn't have her father's tusks.

The werepanther crouched low. His lips trembled and a half snarl, half growl rippled from his mouth. I had the feeling this fight had been a long time coming.

The sow answered the challenge with a deep grunt. She pawed the ground with one enormous hoof and charged. Five hundred pounds of pissed wild sow shot past me like a runaway train. Her head was up. She tried to ram him, but the panther leapt up on liquid joints and landed on her back. He buried his front claws in the sow's shoulders and bit down hard on her snout. Blood poured.

Joan squealed in rage and dove forward into a roll. All her weight crashed down on the cat-man, and she rolled over him like a steamroller flattening the pavement. The werepanther let go of the sow's snout and leapt away. She spun to face him, breathing hard. Deep gouges carved her snout, her face a wet mask of crimson. They stood for a moment, unmoving. Then suddenly she charged again.

This time, instead of meeting her head-on, the big werecat dodged to the side and jumped onto the sow's back, teeth latching down savagely on her neck. Joan dashed around the clearing, sprinting like her life depended on it. It wouldn't help her. He would bleed her

dry. Paul clung to her back, ripping into her.

Joan banked sharply, turning, and hurled herself at the stack of huge stone blocks waiting to become a wall. The werepanther screamed as five hundred pounds of razorback moving at thirty miles per hour slammed into stone, with him cushioning her fall. Bone crunched. The sow rolled to her side again and again until finally she rose up, legs shaking, back gushing blood but now unburdened by the panther. Paul sprawled on the ground, his breathing shallow. His ribs looked wrong. He was all busted up inside. Rather than allowing him to recover, Joan ran at him, hooves trampling muscle and bone into wet mush. She dropped down to her knees and brought her large head down onto his chest. His breastbone cracked, and his neck rolled to the side. He was finished. She started to use her huge canine teeth to tear out his throat.

Enough was enough. I let out a roar to get her attention.

"Joan, stop. He's gone."

She eyed me, bloody but unbeaten, and I thought she might charge me. Instead, the huge sow bowed her head. Flesh flowed as she changed back, and once again a small blond woman stood on the grass, but now she was naked, filthy, and bleeding from a dozen deep cuts and serious scratches. A deep gash on her neck was closing.

"Get her to Doolittle and get the body out of here."

Bea stepped out of the ring that had formed around the combatants and put a blanket around Joan. "Come with me, dear. We'll get you all fixed up." Her voice was soft and soothing, but she took an iron grip of Joan's shoulders and started to lead her away.

The widow stopped and turned to me. "What about them?" She gestured to the Irvings, still held tight by Mahon's people. "They killed my father."

"I know, and I'm sorry for your loss. We'll hear them out and then they'll be judged by the Council and punished. Good enough?"

"I want to see."

Bea turned Joan to face her and said in a quiet voice that would move rocks out of her path. "No, dear, you really don't."

For a second they were eye to eye, and then Joan ducked her head. Tears formed in her eyes and slid down her cheeks.

Bea pulled her in close. "You're a right mess. Let's get you cleaned up, why don't we?"

Joan nodded and started to weep. I made eye contact with Bea and nodded toward the Keep. Bea gently led her away, petting her back.

"Crazy bitch!"

It was the smaller of the Irving brothers. Mahon

smacked him upside the head and he went down. Hard. The other struggled against his captors, to no avail.

"Let me go, you fuckers, we didn't do nothing. This ain't fair."

"Was it fair when the two of you killed Boris? We're still waiting to hear what happened with that. Please tell us why you shouldn't be held accountable for murdering the old man?"

"It wasn't like that. We just went to talk to him, to ask him for the money. We might have mentioned something about him not wanting anything bad to happen to his pretty daughter and her kids. He went fucking nuts--I swear we never touched him till he turned and pushed me back. He knocked me back into a wall and then Mick grabbed him from behind--you know, just to drag him off me--and he turned on him. Nobody hits my brother. He started it--we didn't mean to kill him, but he gave us no choice. It was self-defense."

"It doesn't work like that. You can't go to an old man's house to rob him and then claim self-defense when he fights back. You threatened the only people he cared about in the world. What did you expect him to do?"

"He shoulda just gave us the money. This is all his fault. Now all y'all are going to gang up on us and it ain't fair, none of it."

He was overly fond of that word. "All right John, what

do you think would be fair? You know we can't just let you go, but how should we settle this?"

"One-on-one, I'll fight any one of you. If I win, you let us go. I'll fight anybody, even you--I'm not afraid of any of you."

Really, he should be, but then again they had killed Boris, so maybe he was pretty tough.

"Is that a challenge?" He needed to say it.

"Yes, it is. Come on, just you and me. Promise that if I start winning these bastards won't jump in."

"No one will interfere--this is a fight to the death. If you kill me, I give my word that you and your brother will be given free passage out of the Pack's territory. If I win, though, Mahon gets your brother. Are you sure you want to do this? Women and old men seem more your speed."

"You still yapping? Are you planning to talk me to death or are we going to fight?"

I nodded to Mahon, who gestured for John Irving to be let loose. Without further ado, he burst into his full bear form. He rose up on his hind legs and let out a deafening roar. He was big, no doubt, an adult male grizzly. Derek had been spot-on, he was a fully eight feet of rage and power. Not quite as large as Mahon, but still massive.

People who thought bears were slow and clumsy hadn't fought one before. I had and I knew that if I let him

connect with those big paws, he'd take my head off. My best bet was to dart in and out, bleeding him. My warrior form would be best, a good mix of speed and strength, and I could use my training and hope that my skill made up for the size difference.

He dropped heavily to all fours and started to shuffle toward me. We circled each other, each of us wary and neither wanting to make the first move. Suddenly he took a big swing; I dodged the huge paw and threw a quick flurry of my own: overhand left, straight right, left again. I connected with his nose and left deep cuts along it. He backpedaled and began to circle me again, looking for an opening. When he reared up and tried to wrap his big arms around me, I dropped down and out of his grasp. I wasn't going to let him pull me into a bone-crushing hug. On the way down, I raked his chest and belly, but his fur was so thick that it did very little damage. He bore down on me and I rolled out from under him and to the side before he could bring all his weight down, but it was near thing. If he pinned me down I was screwed. I nipped his ass before darting back out of range.

Frustrated now, he closed on me. It was an odd sort of shamle--he lowered his head and started swinging it back and forth as he lumbered toward me. He was hoping to batter me with it while protecting his vulnerable eyes and nose. I waited until he got within

striking range, and sidestepping his charge, I grabbed his left foreleg and bit down hard on his ear. The claws of my right hand were buried in the fur and fat of his hump and his blood was hot and salty on my tongue.

He tried to shake me, but I had good grip on his back and my jaws were locked on his ear. He swung his head to the side to knock me off, but instead I used the opportunity to swing my legs up and around his neck, squeezing it in a scissor move. Oops, one of us has been studying his jujitsu. He bucked like a bronco trying to throw a cowboy, but I had a really good position and I was using all my weight as well as my leg muscles to constrict his throat. After what seemed like forever, he started to slow and stumble. That's right, big boy, just go to sleep. It's almost over. Well, that wasn't so bad.

Something crashed into me. What the fuck? It hit me again and John and I fell together, and somehow he ended up on top of me. I was holding his dead weight up with my legs, but I didn't know how long I could keep it up. He was starting to come around, and in few moments he would be awake and clawing at my face. Suddenly the weight on my legs seemed to double. Son of a bitch! Mick must have jumped on top of his brother, bringing the combined weight of the two bears down on my legs. The load was too much and sure enough, my legs snapped like twigs. The pain was excruciating. I roared

out in pain and rage. As John came down on me, I latched onto this throat with my jaws. My only hope was to crush his windpipe. I held on with all my might and bit down as hard as I could. I was rewarded by the satisfying sound of the thyroid cartilage and hyoid bone crunching between my teeth. John convulsed on top of me then went limp, and I knew he was gone.

Someone was pulling John off me, thank God. Unfortunately, it was Mick. He was standing over me with murder in his eyes. This wasn't good. He started raining blows down on me, and I covered my head and took most of the impact on my arms. My legs were useless; I wouldn't be getting up. I had to end this before he beat me to death. I took a chance, let one of the blows land, and locked my arms on his and pulled him down to me. When he was good and close, I let go of his arm, grabbed the sides of his head, willed my jaws to expand, and clamped down on his nose. It was a good bite and part of his nose came off in my mouth. I spat it at him. That was it for Mick--the shock and pain was too much. He turned and started to run away.

From out of the ring of bodies, Mahon stepped into his path. The two huge bodies crashed into each other. Almost instantly they were standing and had their arms entwined and seemed to be grappling. The larger bear twisted and actually tossed his opponent over his hip and

onto the ground. Mick had barely hit before Mahon came down on him. With his left paw, he put his weight on Mick's chest; with his right, he reached way back and then the enormous paw came down hard on the smaller bear's head, smashing it like a ripe melon. It was Mahon's signature move. I'd seen it before, but it was still damn impressive. I didn't think I'd ever have to fight him, but if I did, I was going to stay away from that big claw cannon he was carrying.

"Anytime somebody wants to help me up, that would be great." The spell cast by the blood and violence seemed to break and Jim and Derek hauled me up between them.

"My lord, that was amazing... you beat them both." Derek was awed.

"Yeah, about that. Who wants to explain why the fuck the other one was able to jump me?"

This time it was Jim. "Well, while we were watching you, we thought he was out. He managed to get free, broke Eduardo's nose, and clawed up George to get loose. Desperate, I guess. I knew you'd be okay."

"Yeah... how about that doesn't happen again? Damn it, get me to Doolittle. I need him to get me fixed up--got a big date tonight. I'm late enough and Kate's gonna be pissed. In this condition, she might be able to take me."

It didn't take long to get to the Keep and then into the

med ward. Doolittle looked me up and down, then directed Jim and Derek to set me down on an examination table.

"What sort of foolishness you been up to? Looks like you fought a landslide."

"Bears actually. Two of them."

"Why the hell would you do that?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Seems damn foolish to me. Don't you have a lot of big strong killers, like these two?" He nodded his head to indicate Jim and Derek. "Why you feel like you have to fight every damn soul in Atlanta is beyond me."

"If I say you're right, will you heal me? I've got places to be."

Doolittle raised an eyebrow.

"Tonight? You just fought two bears and you've got someplace to be? You do know that both of your legs are broken, don't you?"

"Oh, that's what that sound was. I figured they fell asleep."

"Don't get smart with me. I've always patched you up and I'll do it again, but there's no need for you to be like that."

The world was getting kind of fuzzy. "How about you stop bossing me around and just fix me, damn it."

"What's the hurry?" Doolittle began examining my

legs. His voice was coming from far away, as if he was speaking from a bottom of a deep stairwell. "What's so important?"

Words came slowly. "I have to meet a girl."

"Is she special?"

"Yes."

"Then she'll understand."

The world spun, blinked, and then darkness took me into its mouth and bit down.

She would understand. I would explain it.

It would be okay.

CONCLAVE

(Magic Bleeds)

I have been the Beast Lord of Atlanta for half my life. I'm responsible for the lives of several hundred Free People of the Code. Some people will tell you that being in charge means telling other people what to do. That is only a part of it. Leadership means doing what you know is the right thing. In my experience, it rarely involves doing what you want or like.

Tonight was no exception. I was attending a meeting between the Pack Council, the alphas of all the clans, and the People, necromancers who piloted the dead. *Bernard's* was neutral ground, a sanctuary where all of Atlanta's players came to be seen and feel important.

Violence was strictly forbidden. No problem--we could dress up and play nice with Nataraja's corpse fuckers. For now, there was no need for open conflict between the Pack and the People. But the peace wouldn't last forever, and one day I would watch the light go out of Nataraja's eyes while the Casino burned down around him.

Pushing that pleasant thought aside, I entered the main floor. Jim was waiting there with the other alphas. I nodded to him and he led the group upstairs. I had started to follow them when I detected a familiar scent. It couldn't be. Why would she be here?

She had broken into my place, messed up my weights, and even put catnip into my bed. In retaliation, I had glued that cute butt of hers into her office chair. In short, we were doing the mating dance.

For a while I'd thought I had lost her for good, but in our own fucked up way we had swallowed our pride and reached out to one another. We both knew it would never be easy, but we were willing to try. I knew Kate wasn't universally loved by the Pack, but they owed me. I bled for them, I mediated their petty squabbles. I had given them everything--they would give me this one thing. Or I would break it all apart.

As I reached the top of the stairs, I saw Jim chewing one of his crew a new asshole. What the fuck? Maybe she was here. Kate was trouble and I wondered what she had done to piss Jim off. Maybe tonight wouldn't be completely boring after all. I just hoped that I wouldn't walk into a room full of my alphas with their asses glued to their seats.

I stepped into the room and looked for her. She stood by a table on the left, and for a moment, I think I forgot to

breathe. Kate looked amazing, her hair was down, she was wearing makeup, and that dress... It was cut low in the front and fit like it was made for her.

She stood next to Saiman.

She was here with him. She was wearing that dress for him. She looked like that for him.

It was like something hit me in the gut. The rest of the room ceased to exist. There was only me and him and the distance between us. Why him, why here? Did she want to hurt me in the most public way possible?

Jim was at my side, trying to tell me something. I stared at them, trying to make some sense of it. The son of a bitch smiled at me and said something to her that I couldn't make out. I strained and picked his smug voice out of the noise. "...*would mean war. He can't move a finger out of line.*"

I almost smiled then. He thought he was safe.

Jim's voice broke my concentration. "Not here."

I knew he was right, but it didn't matter.

"I can make him disappear," Jim said next to me. "No one will ever find him. I can bring him to you in chains, or in chunks. Just wait. Don't do it in front of her. We can do it anytime. We've got nothing but time."

I turned my gaze to her and she stared right back. The look was challenging. No, it was going to be right here and right now. She could try to stop me; hell, they all

could, but she was going to watch me tear him apart. I would paint the floors and walls with his blood before he died.

The freak laughed. *"We aren't without similarities, Curran and I."*

Oh, I had to hear this.

"We both fall prey to lust. We both guard our pride and suffer from jealousy. We both employ our resources to get what we want: I use my wealth and my body, and he uses his position of power. You say I want you only because you refused me. He wants you for the same reason. I remember when he became the Beast Lord. The boy king, the perpetual adolescent, suddenly at the head of the food chain, granted access to hundreds of women who can't say no. Do you think he forces them into his bed? He had to have done it at least a few times."

What? That slimy cocksucker was telling her I was a rapist. The guy who would fuck a snake if he could find someone to hold it still. I never, ever.

Kate, tell him it isn't true. Tell him you don't believe it. Tell him.

She said nothing.

I had wanted her, and I thought she wanted me. I had been good, I'd waited. She'd been in the Keep, weak and wounded, but I'd never touched her. He would say or do

anything. He would use her and throw her away when he tired of her. I had almost died during the Games for her.

He leaned toward her.

I could clear the distance between us in three leaps. Two seconds and I could twist his head off his shoulders and throw it at her feet.

He raised his voice. *"You're all mine tonight. Kiss me, Kate."*

No.

He reached for her. She stepped away.

Something inside me snapped, and then I was moving toward him. He wouldn't leave this place alive. I couldn't make her love me, but she didn't want his hands on her. That sick fuck would never touch her again.

She stepped in front of him. He was so drunk or stupid that he still didn't know what was happening.

"...won't hurt me. Not here."

I was almost there; I could smell the alcohol in his sweat. She swiped a bottle off a nearby table and moved toward me. Nice try, but it wouldn't be enough. Maybe if she had her sword...

"The People greet the Beast Lord."

Nataraja. It took everything I had, but I stopped. If I killed Saiman now, it would be war. In that moment, I would have thrown my life away to feel Saiman's skull snap between my jaws, but he wasn't worth the lives of

my alphas. Saiman would never know it, but that bald-headed prick Nataraja had saved his life. For the moment.

I stared at Kate and mouthed a single word. *Later.*

She stared back at me, her eyes clear. *Anytime.*

I took a deep breath, turned my back on her, and in a calm voice called out, "The Beast Lord greets the People."

AWAKE

(End of *Magic Bleeds*)

I floated for eternity in a sea of agony. Sometimes if I concentrated and blocked out the pain, I could hear her voice from far away. I focused on the sound, willing myself slowly toward it. Finally, after how long I didn't know, I came around and could even make out a bit of what she was saying. "...seems like a decent guy. Now they're stuck."

He had someone, she had someone, nobody was talking and Kate didn't know what to do. She looked tired and battered. Still, I had never in my life seen someone more beautiful. Nor had I ever been happier to be near them. For some reason, the answer to her dilemma came to me far easier than all the things I really wanted to say.

"Have you tried the Second Chance Law?" I asked softly. Her eyes still did not open... maybe we were sharing a dream. I explained as best I could and hugged her as hard as I was able.

Finally she looked at me.

"You stayed with me," I whispered. She said something I couldn't quite catch, but it didn't matter as much as her being there to say it. I smiled and fell back asleep. Real sleep this time--no red haze, just darkness. I knew she'd be there when I came back to the world. No matter what. Eventually I woke again--something was in my arm and I wanted it out. As I located the source of my irritation, Kate came into the room carrying what smelled like soup. "What is this shit?" I demanded as I pulled the needle out of my arm.

"It kept you alive for eleven days," she informed me.

Almost two weeks! I had lain like that for nearly two goddamn weeks, and she had stayed with me. It wasn't the IV that had kept me alive. The truth of it stunned me.

She handed me the soup, but I set it aside and pulled her close. We held each other for a time. Soon, however, Derek's familiar knock broke our reverie and short-lived reunion.

"Kate," he inquired quietly, clearly asking permission to cross the threshold.

With an authority in her voice that I had never heard, she instructed him to enter. The once-handsome young man did so and informed her of another wolf who demanded an audience, citing some "emergency."

"...probably another challenge..."

Challenge? For me? Every muscle in my body tensed.

Really, were they fucking crazy? I'd almost died and they were queuing up to get a piece of what was left of me. I glanced at Kate and her face said it all. She wore a look of weary resignation, and the fractured pieces fell into place. Not me, they were challenging her. Hell no, this shit was going to stop right now.

Sensing the sudden danger, Derek glanced at me and abruptly fell silent. Before he could recover, I ordered him to send the challenger in but not to inform them that I had awakened. The young wolf closed his mouth, turned, and departed quickly to carry out my command. He'd always been a smart kid.

Kate helped me to stand; I'd be damned if they'd see me lying in bed like a weakling.

"Is today Wednesday?"

"Yes," she said.

Pack Council day. Perfect. I picked up the bowl.

As I sipped the soup she had brought in earlier, Jaime Alicia strode into the room as if he owned it. So eager to harm my mate and take what was mine. One of Clan Wolf's best fighters, a boxer in his youth, he was tall and well built. I had seen him fight; I knew he was strong and fast. I was also sure that Kate could cut him into little pieces before the soup got cold. I would never admit it, but she was damn good with that sword of hers. Not that she would have to--he would be dead before he touched

her.

None of them would ever harm her again. I would see them all dead first.

Jaime stared at me, his jaw slack.

I finished my soup and spoke. "Yes?"

The wolf dropped into a crouch and stared at the floor. Had he hesitated for even a second, I would have pulled his lungs out through his chest. Claw, reach in, yank out. It would be easy and I would have enjoyed it immensely. I could smell his fear. I wanted to roar at him.

"Do you have anything to say?"

With his eyes still firmly affixed to the floor, he shook his head no. Now we knew again who was who and what was what. Order needed to be restored and the rest of them needed to be reminded why I was the Beast Lord.

"The Council is due for a meeting in three minutes. Go down there and tell them to wait for me, and I might forget you were ever here." For his sake, I hoped he never forgot how close he'd come to a savage and painful death, because I wouldn't give him a second chance.

After he left, I lost my balance and Kate attempted to steady me, but her leg gave way and we crashed together onto the couch. We were a long way from top form, but it

would have to do. Together, even in our current state, we were more than a match for any of my subjects. Well, as far as they knew.

Almost as if she knew what I was thinking, Kate asked, "Are you sure you're ready for a Council meeting?"

I turned to her, willing my face into a mask of determination and menace. "They better be ready for me."

We had to make a show of strength. We could not continue to be seen as anything less than the Beast Lord and his Mate, undisputed masters of the Pack.

*** **

It is the nature of our kind that we value power and violence above all else, ruthlessly exploiting any weakness. Authority must be exercised at all times or else it is lost. They didn't have to love or even like me, but by God, they would obey me. If they had forgotten why I was feared, I would remind them. If I had to kill a few as an example, then so be it.

I made my way to the bathroom, falling at least once, but my strength began to return and a couple of minutes later, I was ready to make it down to the Council room on my own. On our way Barabas, one of the Pack

lawyers and one of Bea's favorite troublemakers, fell in behind us and kept pace.

I stopped. "Barabas, have you come to challenge me too?" I knew even as I said it that a challenge from him was unlikely. Barabas was slightly crazy and could be insubordinate at times, but he wasn't stupid.

His usual look of amusement evaporated, replaced by one of complete shock and disbelief. "No, my lord, I'm bound to the Consort."

Apparently the entire place had gone to hell while I was asleep. I turned to Kate and waited for some sort of explanation.

She shrugged. "I made a deal with Bea, and she gave him to me as a sort of adviser. I'll tell you all about it later."

I wasn't sure I wanted to know; Bea never did anything out of altruism alone. She wanted something. I dimly recalled Kate telling me about it, but the details escaped me. Had she assisted Kate in some way? A thought struck me. "Barabas, how many members of the Pack challenged my mate while I slept?"

He paused, clearly attempting to recall, and finally he turned to Kate and asked, "Twenty-two?"

She nodded silently.

"How many alphas?"

"Only the Jackals, my lord. The others were rank and

file, not even betas."

Of course--you didn't get to be an alpha by being dumb. After the Jackals had been killed, the others had been content to let their subordinates wear her down. Mahon could have stopped it but had not. He'd never made a secret of his disapproval of Kate, but to stand by and allow her to be injured in my absence? He and I would speak of this later. Perhaps it was time for my adoptive father to retire.

The rest I would deal with in Council shortly. As we approached the door, I could hear them mumbling and whispering inside. Were they bored? Irritated? I could fix all of that. I took a deep breath, opened the door, and roared at my subjects as if I had every intent of ending their lives in the next several seconds. The sudden silence was deafening. Oh yes, Daddy's home and he ain't happy. Playtime was over.

As my alphas sat in stunned silence, I pulled out a chair for my mate and then seated myself at the head of the table. No one spoke. I scanned the table, seeking a challenge. Not one of them had the courage to meet my stare. They all knew that an example would have to be made, and none were eager to be the first.

I leaned forward and, in as calm a tone as I could manage, demanded, "Explain yourselves."

Silence.

"I'm waiting for one of you to tell me why you stood by and did nothing while my mate was assaulted on a daily basis."

Finally, Jim spoke. "She had to prove that she belonged."

"Yes," Mahon said. "Nobody expected that she would be allowed to sit at your side without spilling some blood, my liege."

Yeah, actually I kinda did. Last time I had checked, I was in charge around here. It was time to gently remind them of that.

I leaned forward and repeated, "Allowed?"

I let it sink in.

The realization of it hit them. They had just told me what I was allowed to do. I heard the alpha of the Jackals take a deep breath and hold it.

I stared at them. "I will say this only once. I'm the one who allows. I allow all of you to live and I allow you to rule your own clans as you see fit. Whether or not I continue to do so depends solely upon what you say and do in the next few moments. Be very careful."

It was Aunt Bea who spoke next. "Clan Bouda provided the Consort with both counsel and protection from unlawful challenges. No one who answers to me harmed her." She glanced over at Daniel and his mate. "The same cannot be said of the dogs, however."

Of course. She wouldn't have lifted a finger to stop the wolves from digging their own grave. The hatred between the boudas and the wolves went a long way back. Wolves had greater numbers, but boudas played the game better.

"We broke no laws," Daniel protested. "Everyone knows the alpha of the Bouda Clan cut a deal with the Beast Lord's mate."

Jennifer, his mate, nodded. "Yes, because she wanted special status for her degenerates."

A slow smile crept over Bea's lips. "We all know how much the alpha of the Wolf Clan loves his mate and defers to her. Out of curiosity, how many of his wolves was he willing to sacrifice to indulge her?"

"The human had to prove herself like we all did," Daniel said. "It is the law. It is fair."

"Fair, really?" I asked. "Who among you has faced twenty-two challenges in two weeks?"

None had, of course. Not even Mahon, our Executioner, had killed so many so quickly.

Speaking of law... I addressed Jennifer directly. "If I recall correctly, Daniel, despite being chosen upon the retirement of his predecessors, successfully faced a number of challenges before choosing you as his mate. However, you have never been challenged. Do you know why that is? Because, according to the law the two of

you are so fond of quoting, whoever challenges you will also have to fight Daniel. The alphas fight as one. If one of the alphas is injured, it has been an unspoken courtesy among the Pack to wait until both are on their feet before a challenge is issued. It is a matter of honor. If you take another's place, you must win it fairly. You did not afford my mate the same courtesy."

"She killed my sister!" Jennifer screamed.

Good, let's get it all out there. Settle things once and for all. "True, your sister went loup and attacked her. But Kate didn't cause it and killed the one who did. Your anger is misplaced. As a matter of fact, she did you a favor. If you were any kind of alpha, you would know that putting your sister down was your responsibility. It was your burden to carry. You are the next of kin."

Jennifer clenched her teeth. I measured every word carefully. I couldn't challenge her, because the challenge had to come from the lower-ranking Pack member. But if I said enough, she would challenge me.

"My mate assumed your burden, and instead of offering her gratitude, you hate her for it. She is a constant reminder of your weakness. You want to fight her, but you can't. Instead, you goad others into doing what you can't bring yourself to do. It is your greatest failing. However, because I'm merciful and just, I will offer you a chance to atone."

"I will not apologize or bow to her. I'll die first." Jennifer snapped at the air like a mad dog.

Good, let's just see about that then. "Again, you misunderstand. What I offer is a chance at the revenge you seek, but properly this time. Challenge us. Couple to couple, as it was meant to be."

I gave the rest a warning glance. "No one will interfere. Just the two of you against the two of us."

Kate tensed next to me. Under the table, I gave Kate's hand a gentle squeeze to reassure her that I was just bluffing and it would be all right. Well, not really, but I was confident that even as we were, we could take them, and all the rest if need be. As long as they believed we could do it, we wouldn't have to.

As Jennifer began to rise--she really was either stupid or crazy--Daniel grabbed her arm, almost too quickly to see, and yanked her back. She landed in her chair, hard.

She opened her mouth and he gave her a flat stare until she shut her mouth and dropped her gaze. Her face turned red.

So he was unwilling to let her throw away her life or his own.

Daniel bowed his head in a slight nod. "Clan Wolf begs the Consort for her forgiveness. We are sincerely sorry for any offense we may have caused. We wish to express our continued loyalty and obedience to the Beast

Lord and his Mate."

Well said. Perhaps there was hope for him after all.

"What about the rest of you?" My gaze lingered for a moment on the alphas of Clan Rat. Thomas and Rober Lonesco shook their heads in unison.

Thomas, the older and larger of the pair, spoke. "We have no dog in this fight." He smiled a little, showing very even, white teeth. "We didn't vote for her because we didn't know enough about her."

Kate leaned in and whispered to me, "After I killed the Jackals, they sent me chocolate."

Good, in truth I actually liked them both and would have regretted killing them. I looked at the aforementioned Jackals replacements.

The female, Tracy, spoke. "We have no problem with the Consort. We are indebted to her for our current position."

I had expected as much. All that was left was Clan Nimble and Mahon's Heavies. The old bear I would deal with privately. Clan Nimble was a sort of anomaly within shapeshifter society. Its alphas, an older Asian couple, ruled not because they were the strongest but because their age and wisdom was highly respected by their subjects. It didn't hurt, of course, that their devoted betas were a vicious pair that was feared by the rest of the clan and many in the Pack. They kept their elders

from harm and it was understood that they themselves would take their place as alphas, when the time came.

The alpha of clan Nimble stood, drew himself to his full height, and then bowed deeply without his gaze ever leaving me. He held the bow, then straightened, and in a very formal tone proclaimed, "Clan Nimble remembers the understanding His Majesty has shown to us and would never dishonor itself by repaying that kindness with treason or betrayal. The Consort has fought admirably and has earned a place of respect at our lord's side."

Ok, a simple "we got your back" would have sufficed, but if he felt more comfortable with formality, then so be it.

"We respect Clan Nimble and hold its friendship in high esteem." Ahh, that got him, he nearly smiled, bowed once more, and sat again.

Almost done.

"So, it's all settled then. Unless there is anything else, you may depart in peace. Mahon, you stay," I commanded. The rest filed out as quickly as they could while maintaining a semblance of dignity.

Kate turned to me. Her eyes asked me "*Do you want me to stay?*"

Silently I shook my head. "*No, you don't want to be here for the next part.*"

I watched the Council of the Pack run from the room with their tails between their legs. One by one, they fled, careful not to look at me or the bear. Finally the last shapeshifters went through the doorway. It was just the two of us.

I looked at Mahon the way an alpha looks at a wayward subject. Mahon crossed his massive arms.

"It comes to this, then."

I didn't answer.

"It's about time. I've been waiting for this, boy. It needs to be sorted out."

Good, we understood each other. "Do you want to settle this here, old man, or do you have some other place in mind?"

Mahon considered it for a long moment. "We're going to need space. This is too small."

"Up on the fourth-floor balcony, then."

The balcony, a flat top of one of the smaller towers, was a stone square, about twenty by fifty yards. In spring and summer, we used it for outdoor dining and gatherings, but in winter it was deserted. It would provide us with plenty of room and give us some privacy as well.

This thing between Mahon and me wasn't going to be

an exhibition. It wasn't a fight to the death, either, but if any of the Pack happened to witness it, it would become one. I would have to kill Mahon, and I didn't want to do that. Mahon wasn't my father, but I was his son.

This was between the two of us, and when it was over, we would know once and for all who was the strongest.

I walked through the doorway. He followed. Outside the room, Derek saw me and stepped away from the wall. I glanced at him, said, "Follow me," and kept walking. The kid fell in step behind us. We would need a guard to keep the rest of the Pack from sticking their noses where they didn't belong, and it couldn't be Jim or Kate. Jim was my best friend. He would interfere. Kate... This was something I didn't want Kate to see. Derek would do what he was told and would keep the rest out.

The three of us made our way to the fourth floor. A solid wooden door barred the way to the balcony.

I looked at Derek. "You stand here. Nobody gets on the other side of this door." I held his gaze for another long moment to make sure I had his attention. "No one."

"Yes, m'lord."

I opened the door and Mahon and I walked outside. The cold air hit my lungs.

The door shut behind us.

Darkness had fallen. The sky was black and vast, and

the small lights of stars pierced it with cold light. Behind us, the gray towers of the Keep blocked the moon, but it was there, spilling light on the snow-strewn clearing around the Keep. Beyond it, black woods rose.

The balcony stretched before us, covered with untouched white snow. Before this was over, we'd paint it red.

"How do you fancy it?" Mahon asked.

"Not like this, and your half form sucks," I told him. "I want you at your best. You better bear out."

"In that case, you better come at me in your warrior form. It'll give you a better chance."

"No need," I answered.

He laid his hand on my shoulder and said quietly, "My son, if you hesitate or hold back, I will break you."

You'll try. "No more talk."

I let go. Heat flooded me. There was a tremendous warmth. It was like being stretched on a rack while being set on fire. And then everything pulled: bones, tendons, muscles, skin, all stretched tight. The hazy veil I didn't notice fell away and suddenly the world was painfully clear. I smelled it all, the wind from the icy sky, the hint of smoke from the Keep's kitchen, the dry stone, the clean snow, and the fur of a huge bear waiting to break my back.

Bear. Familiar scent. Safe. The same scent I had

smelled years ago when I had no place to go and Mahon told me I had a home. He was huge then, big and rough, taller than me by almost a foot. *"You can stay here, boy. We'll treat you like our own. You don't have to call me Dad. Just Mahon will do."*

Across the balcony, the Kodiak shook his head. He was huge, nearly twelve feet tall and weighing almost a ton.

Going toe-to-toe with him was out of the question. I shook, testing the shift. Everything had fallen into place. I wasn't at full power, but that was fine. I was too pissed to take a rain check on this fight.

The shaggy, giant beast reared up onto his hind legs and roared at me. That's right, show me that big soft belly. I opened my mouth and roared back, drowning him out. Bring it, fat boy.

My best bet would be to bleed him. Dart in, bite or claw, then out again before those big paws could connect. Don't let him grab or hold me. If he could, Mahon would pull me into a hug and crush my head between his jaws. And if I was really lucky, he'd come at me just like this, on hind legs, gut out.

I dug into the snow, testing the ground. My paw found ice sheathing the stones. Slick.

Come on, bear. Come at me.

He dropped to all fours and shuffled toward me with

his head lowered. Damn it.

If I let him, he would try to muscle me to the ground. In my first real fight I'd killed a similar bear, and it was still one of the hardest battles of my life.

Mahon kept moving, head down, shifting in, rocking from side to side. The bear shamble. It looked clumsy, but it let him use the thick layer of fur and fat that sheathed his forequarters like a shield. And a flank attack wouldn't go unpunished. Shambling or not, he was fast.

We'd never fought, not like this, but I had been watching him kill for the last fifteen years, and I knew he would use that big head like a sledgehammer. Getting head-butted by a bear was like being kicked by a horse. He'd knock me down and then put all that weight on me.

It was time to dance. I let him get within five feet of me. Mahon lunged. I dodged to the side and buried my claws in his head and neck. Mostly what I got was fur and fat, but it hurt him. The bear shook, trying to fling me off. I hung on and took a big bite out of his ear. The familiar taste of blood flooded my mouth.

Mahon bellowed in pain.

Yeah, that's gonna leave a mark.

Suddenly my paws left the ground, and then we were moving. He drove me back, like a hammer drives a nail. God, he was fucking strong.

There was nothing I could do about it except to let go.

I released my hold. Too late. The wall slammed my back and the full bulk of the bear smashed into me.

Ouch.

*** **

The wall shook. On the other side of that wall, Currar was getting a beat-down and he'd locked me out and left the boy wonder in position by the door to make sure it stayed shut.

The room was full of shapeshifters. The alphas, the betas, anyone with any sort of rank had shouldered their way in.

Jim loomed over Derek. The boy had grown, but Jim still had about three inches of height on him, and he squeezed everything he could out of them. "Move."

Derek didn't answer.

"It's an Order."

Derek stared straight ahead. The message was clear. Jim would have to kill him before he let that door open.

This was pointless. I pushed my way out of the room and into the hallway. Barabas emerged from the room behind me. I dragged myself down the hallway, away from the crowd. My leg was on fire. For once I wished that I had brought the stupid cane so I could move faster. We turned the corner.

"Is there another way to the balcony?" I whispered.

"Get, no. See, yes."

"Take me there."

"There are stairs," Barabas warned.

"Take me there or I will throw you out the window."

"Right this way, Alpha."

*** **

I bit the bridge of Mahon's nose. Welcome to the lion's jaws.

He snarled in pain and dropped back.

I fell into the snow and retreated, putting some distance between us. My ribs ached. Heat flowed, knitting the fractured bones together. No major damage, but one more like that and I was done.

I had to bleed him. In and out. The Lyc-V would repair the damage, but not before Mahon bled. Enough blood in his eyes, and he'd be a lot easier to handle.

The bear shambled over. I dashed in, claws ready.

*** **

Fifty million fucking stairs, each step shooting a burst of pain into my hip, until I wanted to claw my leg bloody just to get at the source of it.

Come on, Kate, push. Push.

"Sorry about this," Barabas said.

"Sorry about what?"

He picked me up and dashed up the stairs. Two seconds later and we burst out of a small iron door and onto the tiny stone balcony. We were in one of the side towers, at a ninety-degree angle to the main keep. Two floors below us, an enormous bear and my lion squared off on the bloody snow.

Oh, Curran. You stupid, stupid man.

Barabas lowered me to the floor.

Mahon was breathing hard. His shaggy flanks rose up and down as he expelled clouds of moist vapor through his nose. Blood drenched his sides. Curran limped slightly, favoring his left hind leg.

Curran lunged, a blur. I held my breath. He danced close, sliced at Mahon's face, and withdrew, avoiding a swipe of the colossal bear paw by a hair.

Curran was trying to bleed Mahon out, but the Lyc-V was healing him faster than he could hurt him. Sooner or later Mahon would catch him. And an hour ago Curran had been unconscious on his bed.

"Get me down to that balcony," I ground out.

"I can't," Barabas said. "It's too far."

I couldn't jump the distance, not with my leg. "Throw me."

"There are fifty yards between us and them, not to mention the thirty-foot drop," Barabas said. "Your broken body would land between an enraged bear and a blood-mad lion. It's my duty to assist you in any way I can, but suicide isn't on the menu."

My knee gave out. I sagged onto the stone rail and watched Curran fight. It was all I could do.

*** **

He was going to catch me. My side hurt like hell and my vision was a little blurry. Mahon had swatted my head with his paw twice. It had felt like being hit by a car. I couldn't take any more big shots to the head. I had to take him down and end this.

Mahon swiped at me. I snapped at him and backed away.

I had to goad him to go into a bear rage. If he rose on his hind legs, I had a chance.

I smelled Kate. She was here. Somehow, she was here. If I took my eyes off Mahon, he'd clobber me. Why couldn't she just do what she was told, one damn time, just one damn time?

Mahon charged.

I dodged left, straight into the wall. He thought he had me and closed in--huge, fast, and unstoppable. I bounced

off the wall, flipped, and landed on top of him. Hello, old man. I pierced his hide and sliced through his fur with all four sets of claws, peeling it off him from his head to his big, shaggy ass.

Mahon bellowed in pain.

I leaped free and bit his snout. The bear paw caught my side. I took the hit--it hurt like hell--and swatted at his nose, cutting it. One, two, three. Again. Again.

He charged me again, his head lowered. I veered right, closed my jaws on his injured ear, and bit the rest of it off. The bear roared in pain and fury.

I spat the ear out and knocked it toward him with my paw. No, you can keep it. Doesn't taste that great.

The massive Kodiak bellowed like a foghorn and stood up.

Yep, that did it, now he was good and pissed.

With an earth-shattering roar, he lumbered toward me, all bear, no human thought or strategy now, motivated by pure rage and pain. It would be his undoing or mine.

*** **

Mahon rose on his hind legs. Curran limped away. His side was bleeding--a bad sign. The Lyc-V wasn't keeping up with the repairs.

Mahon kept moving. Curran backed to the edge of the

balcony. No place to go.

If I lost him here, to this idiotic fight, after I'd fought and guarded him for two weeks, after I'd cried and thought he was dying, I would find him in the afterlife and I would murder him again.

Mahon swung, too wide. Curran ducked under the huge claws, shockingly fast, and dug his own claws into the bear's left hind leg and bit down hard.

I knew how much pressure those jaws could unleash. He bit through the fur and the muscle, and then Mahon's leg folded like a broken toothpick as the huge feline fangs crushed his bones.

Curran twisted and kicked out with his back legs, a move no lion would ever think of without a human brain driving it. His battered body swung and his back crashed into Mahon's uninjured leg. For half a second, the bear remained upright by sheer force of will, and then he crashed, falling backward like a giant with his legs cut.

Oh my god.

Curran rolled out of the way before the enormous bulk could crush him. As Mahon lay on his back, Curran placed his front paws and weight on his chest. The massive leonine head dipped down. Curran opened his mouth. His jaws closed on Mahon's neck and held it, easy, almost gently.

A huge brown paw rose and fell.

It was over. Curran had won.

*** **

I lay in the snow, exhausted. My body flowed into the familiar human form. Everything hurt. My body felt too hot, like I was burning from the inside out.

"Good fight, boy," Mahon boomed from somewhere to the right. "I'm proud of you."

"Shut up."

The snow was melting around me. The icy liquid felt good on my skin. Well, that's downright pleasant. I could lay here for a while as long as I didn't have to move.

"Still think she's worth it?" Mahon asked quietly.

"Of course. She's my mate."

Mahon sighed. "So you decided then."

"Do you think we'd be laying here bleeding in the snow if I wasn't sure?"

"Good point."

I picked up a handful of snow and put it on my face. Mmmm... That's nice.

"I hoped she would be one of us," Mahon said.

"Well, you can't always get what you hope for. I'd hoped my own people wouldn't try to murder my mate while I lay dying."

"It never came to that," Mahon said. "She's stronger

than any of us knew."

"I knew."

"I figured." Mahon sighed again. "She'll never understand us completely."

"It's not always about you. This time it's about me. She understands me and that's enough."

Some sort of commotion was taking place behind the door.

"We're never doing this again," Mahon said.

"That's up to you. Anytime you need me to remind you..."

Mahon chuckled. "I've raised you too well."

The door flew off its hinges and slid across the snow, Derek on it. Well, couldn't say the kid didn't try.

Martha stormed onto the balcony.

"Oh-oh," Mahon murmured.

Mahon's wife stared down at us. Her hands went to her hips. "Which one of you idiots wants to explain to me what the hell is going on?"

With great effort, I raised my arm and pointed in Mahon's general direction. "Him."

Kate appeared in the doorway.

"What did you do to the boy?" Martha demanded.

"What did I do to him? Look at what he did to me!"

Kate knelt by me. I raised my hand and touched her cheek.

"You are an idiot," she told me.

"I know. Martha already pointed that out."

"Is it settled?" Martha demanded. It didn't seem aimed at me, so I didn't answer.

"Yes," Mahon said.

"Good. Get up."

There was some movement and then the two of them shambled off back to the door and the light of the Keep. As they passed us, Mahon dipped his head. "M'lord. M'lady."

Then they were gone. Derek followed them, carrying the door.

"You want to leave?" Kate asked.

"Not yet."

She sat in the snow next to me. I put my arm around her, pulling her close. Derek had put the door back in place. We were all alone. Just us, the snow, and the stars.

"That was a nice move with the jump," she said.

"You saw?"

"I saw."

I smiled. "I kicked his ass."

"Yes, you did. You need help getting to your feet, ass-kicker?"

"That's my line."

She laughed quietly. "I can't carry you, you know."

"Give me another five minutes. I should be able to walk."

We sat in the snow and watched the stars. Tomorrow I'd have to deal with all their shit again. But tonight was ours. We'd earned it.

About the Authors

Ilona Andrews is the pseudonym for a husband-and-wife writing team. Ilona is a native-born Russian and Gordor is a former communications sergeant in the U.S. Army. Contrary to popular belief, Gordon was never an intelligence officer with a license to kill, and Ilona was never the mysterious Russian spy who seduced him. They met in college, in English Composition 101, where Ilona got a better grade. (Gordon is still sore about that.)

Gordon and Ilona currently reside in Texas with their two children, and many dogs and cats. They have co-authored two series, the bestselling urban fantasy of *Kate Daniels* and romantic urban fantasy of *The Edge*.

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