



## SIENNA

The moon was bright, but little light came through the crowded canopy of black pine and spruce trees.

My shoulders ached from the weight of carrying River. Vanessa had awoken a few minutes ago and was now walking beside her grandmother.



“We are almost to Home Hearth,” Yuki said to our group. “When we arrive, it would be best at first not to mention that your mate was the Alpha. There are many who fear being found by the Pack.”

Up ahead, in the darkness, I could see the light of a crackling fire.

As we moved through the trees, I could make out a large clearing where several figures were seated around a stone-lined



Chapters



Display



Unmute



Comment



React



firepit.

My hands, stiff with cold and still aching with bone pain, longed to be in front of that beckoning heat.

Yuki, who had moved to the front of our small group, raised her hand in greeting at the shadowy figures.

One of them stood. I could make out the silhouette of a long hunting rifle in their hands.



My heart stopped.

Nina was gone. How did I know I could trust these people with my family?

“Gloria! I forgot you were on watch tonight. Anything interesting to report?” Yuki asked cheerfully.

As we approached, I saw that the figure was a woman with curly brown hair and thin, pursed lips.

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I think you're the one with the interesting story, Yuki," Gloria said with an arched brow.

The warmth from the fire brushed against my chilled skin. One of the men around the fire turned a long wooden spit holding what looked like a skinned rabbit.

I'd never been much for the taste of game, but my stomach gave an almighty lurch and I realized that none of us had eaten in more than a day.

*We need to get some food in the kids, at the very least.*



Yuki opened her mouth to speak, but before she could begin to explain there was a pain groan from behind me.

We all spun around to see Aiden swaying like someone who'd had too much to drink.

Then his knees gave out and he dropped like a stone at the edge of the clearing.

I ran to my mate. He was breathing shallowly, and his eyes rolled back into his



head so far that I could only see the whites.

“Aiden. Aiden!” I cried, laying a gentle hand on his flank. He whimpered at the touch.

Then all his limbs went rigid and he began to seize.

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I watched as Lily, the unofficial healer of the community, clucked and fussed over my mate.

Nearly a full day later, Aiden lay on one of the narrow pallet beds in what Yuki had referred to as the “healing cabin”.

He was finally sleeping peacefully, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from him.

There had been so many moments when I was certain I was going to lose him.

Especially when I had first met Lily Lowell.

She looked like a plump, kindly witch from a fairy tale, with a mass of untamed gray hair and flowing scarves in various states of



shabbiness.

But Lily hadn't lost her calm smile for a moment. She began by plastering Aiden with the same plantain leaves that Nina had used on his leg.

Then she had pulled down a variety of glass and wooden jars, each of which contained some kind of powdered or dried plant.

Lily laid them out with all the skill and precision of a pharmacist.



Using an old-fashioned mortar and pestle, she had ground the various herbs before adding them to a copper teapot, which hung on a wooden rod over the small fireplace of the cabin.

Within moments, the teapot began whistling shrilly, and she poured the steaming liquid into a bowl, which she allowed to cool for a moment before holding it to Aiden's lips.

The tea must have been bitter, because he grimaced as he swallowed the herbal concoction.



I could see the medicine work its way through Aiden's ravaged system.

His straining muscles gradually loosened, and his breathing became steadier.

The entire time, Lily had murmured what sounded like a fervent prayer under her breath.

The ceaseless monotone was soothing in the otherwise quiet room.



Whatever god she was communing with, I hoped they were listening.

Hours passed this way, with Lily administering teas and poultices and me sitting tensely at Aiden's bedside.

I supposed Yuki had convinced the others to let us stay. I hadn't seen my mother since she had come to check on us nearly nine hours ago.

I hoped she and the children were getting some much-needed rest.

A soft hand fell on my shoulder and I

jumped in surprise.

“Your handsome young man will be just fine, dear. Time for you to get some sleep,” Lily said in a gentle voice.

Everything about this woman exuded a calm serenity that I desperately needed.

I burst into tears of relief.



Lily folded me into a warm hug. “There, there. Dry your eyes. It’ll all be alright in the end.”

I laughed through my tears. She couldn’t know that—no one could.

But for the first time since Aiden had fallen to Josh, I felt a spark of hope.

“Thank you. Thank you for saving him,” I said.

Lily smiled at me. “There’s no need to thank me, dear. Now why don’t I take you to the cabin where the rest of your family is staying?”



I hesitated. “Can we leave him?” I gestured to my sleeping mate.

“What this young man needs more than anything is to rest and let his body do the healing. I don’t expect he’ll wake until morning. Then we’ll get some of Angie’s cooking in him and he’ll be right as rain.”

Her smile faded a bit. “Though I expect he might always have some pain in his leg. The muscle damage was too severe for me to repair all of it.”



I understood what she was telling me.

Aiden would bear this injury for the rest of his life.

But at least he would have a life.

Lily patted me on the shoulder. “Come. Let’s get you settled.”

We exited the spacious wooden cabin, and in the fading light of day I could see that it was one of three such buildings, all of which faced a shimmering blue lake.





Across the water were several more cabins. Laundry hung from makeshift clotheslines and I could see small gardens fenced with chicken wire.

“What is this place?” I asked Lily.

“It used to be a summer camp, back in the ‘70s,” she replied. “The local legend is that the camp was abandoned after several counselors were killed.”

A shiver ran up my back, but Lily shook her head, chuckling.



“Don’t let my scary stories bother you, dear. I’m just being a goose. We’ve been here for almost fifteen years, and no one has seen any ghosts yet. This is Home Hearth. Now, follow me.”

The older woman made her way nimbly down the uneven stone path to the lake and turned, heading towards a long wooden building in a nearby meadow.

“That’s the guest lodge. Not that we get many guests. We mostly use it for big meetings and the like. But there’s a warm

meetings and the like. But there's a warm fire and I'm sure Angie's already brought in dinner for the young ones."

As we walked towards the guest lodge, I caught sight of the bronze-skinned woman who had met us at the fire last night.

I smiled hopefully at her, but she returned my look with an icy glare.

All around us, people were working in small groups.

Three men were working to repair a damaged roof on one of the cabins. Two women sat near the still-roaring central firepit, plucking the feathers from a pair of glossy brown ducks.



"Who are you people?" I asked. "I mean, what are you all doing out here?"

Lily paused for a long moment before responding.

"Everyone here has been rejected by their Packs for one reason or another.



“I was a healer in training with the Texas Pack before their Alpha made it illegal for anyone who was not of pure werewolf blood to attend Healing School.”

“Not of pure...?” I asked, not comprehending.

“I am half human, dear. And for many years now, the Texas Pack has been...less than tolerant of wolves who have human blood. Or any blood that is not entirely wolf.”

Blood like mine. Like Vanessa and River, who were only three-quarters werewolf.

Like Rowan.



“So, you all came here?” I asked.

“Tena was here first. He’s quite the character, so I’m sure you’ll meet him soon. Then Ivan showed up, and Yuki. Yuki was only nine when she was ejected from her pack.”

I had no idea that this had been happening right under our noses.



Aiden and I had been focused on moving our pack into the future, while everyone else seemed to be moving towards the past.

We reached the door to the guest lodge. “I’ll watch over your mate while you get some rest and some food, dear.”

“Thank you again,” I said as Lily turned to go.

“Like I told you, there’s no need. We help each other here,” she said, then headed back down the gravel path towards the healing cabin.

I entered the darkened room and saw my mother lying with Rowan on one narrow bed. Vanessa and River were curled up on a second.



The third was empty, and I laid down on it, too tired to bother changing out of my travel-stained clothes.

I instantly fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

## NINA

It took me longer to get back to Mahiganote than I had expected.

The moon was lost behind a thick layer of clouds as the Pack House finally came into view.

All the sleepless nights were taking their toll.

And there were still hours to go before I could rest.

I needed to find out where they were keeping Sienna's father.



I needed to continue piecing together my fractured memories from the night of the Yule Ball.

Most of all, I needed to find Jocelyn. Some deep corner of my mind kept insisting that something was wrong with her.

*A figure standing in a darkened room.*



That image kept flashing before my eyes,  
but I didn't know what it meant.

Most of the windows in the Pack House  
were illuminated.

The new Alpha must be burning the  
midnight oil.

I had to make sure that Josh did not see me.

I began crossing the lawn, then froze dead in  
my tracks.

There was a security guard standing on the  
southern terrace of the Pack House.

He carried a black assault rifle loosely  
against his shoulder.



I shrank back into the forest and began  
skirting the building until I was on the  
western edge, near the entrance to the  
kitchen.

There was a seldom used door on this side of  
the Pack House which led to what had long  
ago been the servants' quarters in the attic.



Maybe Josh had missed it.

I held my breath as I grasped the old brass doorknob.

It turned easily in my hand and I let out a gasp of relief.

The stairs switch-backed up and up, and I felt a heavy weariness in every part of my body as I climbed to the second floor.

The door to the stairs opened into a small closet. On the other side was the executive wing, where the high-ranking members of the Council had their offices.



The corridor was dimly lit by wall sconces, but it was empty and still.

Except for one door on my left, which led to the Beta's office.

I could hear low voices coming from the room.

One was definitely Josh, and the other had a clipped New England accent that I'd heard before



before.

Josh was shouting.

“Ritual combat? Gregory are you insane!”

“Alpha Daniels, we agreed when we first made this arrangement that part of your new administration would be restoring the lost traditions of the East Coast Pack.”

That’s where I knew that voice. I had overheard him and his daughter in the council chambers just a few days ago.

Though by now it seemed like a lifetime ago.



“Yes, traditions like the Fertility Festival. Like the procession that Michelle is planning. But you’re talking about the wolves of our Pack violently fighting for position!”

“The only way to ensure that the highest-ranking wolves truly are the strongest,” Gregory said in a nonchalant tone.





I could hear Josh spluttering.

I gritted my teeth. How dare he think himself worthy of being Alpha?

It took a wolf of incredible strength and fortitude.

He was just a rat.

Gregory continued, “We also need to discuss what is to be done with Robert Mercer.”

I couldn’t believe my luck.



“Robert is not a problem. He’s merely human. Leave him to rot in the dungeons for all I care,” Josh said in an offhand voice that made my claws itch beneath my skin.

Loathsome little rodent.

Still, he had given me exactly what I needed.

The dungeons.

I turned back towards the servant’s stairs, already trying to figure out how to get to Robert in the lower levels of the Deck.

to Robert in the lower levels of the Pack House.

I was surprised to see a tall woman standing behind me, her bronzed skin glowing in the soft light of the wall lamps. She was holding two steaming mugs of coffee.

I was immediately poised and ready to run when I risked a glance at the stranger's face.

Her jaw hung open.

Our eyes met.



An unexpected sensation slammed into me with the force of a freight train.

My heart filled with an emotion I'd never felt before.

I was drowning in it. Burning with it.

*Oh my god.*

*This changes everything.*

