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PATRICIA BRIGGS



FROST BURNED

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FROST BURNED



PATRICIA BRIGGS



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To Mike, who brings color to my world

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If there are mistakes in this book, they are, as always, my responsibility.

CONTENTS

[Also by Patricia Briggs](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Map](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

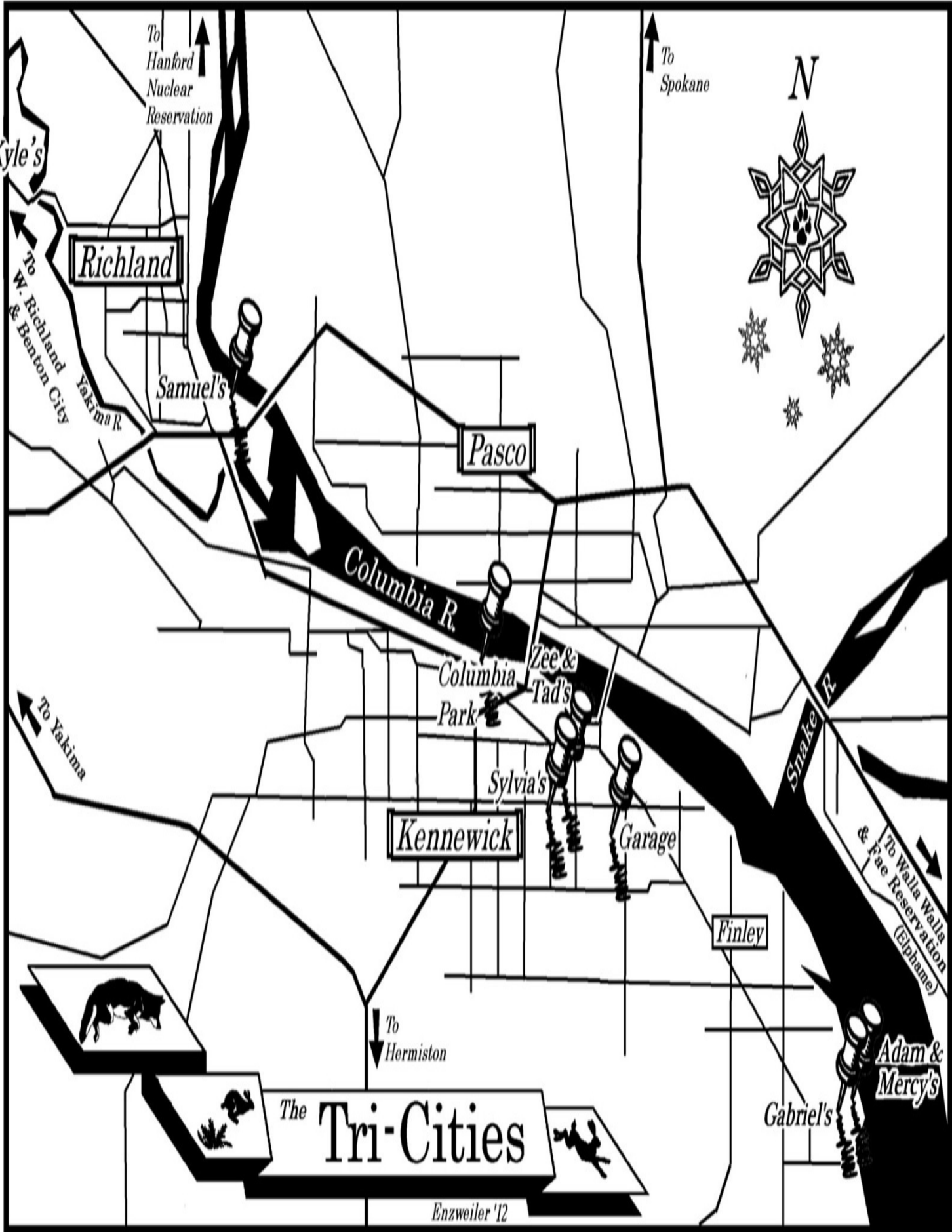
[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Author's Note](#)





“YOU SHOULD HAVE BROUGHT THE VAN,” SAID MY STEPDAUGHTER. She sounded like herself, though the expression on her face was still a little tight.

“I shouldn’t have brought anything, including us,” I muttered, shoving harder on the hatch. My Rabbit had a lot of cargo space for a little car. We’d only been here twenty minutes. I shop at Walmart all the time, and I never come out with this much stuff. We’d even left before the big midnight reveal. And still—I had all this *stuff*. Most of which had not been on sale. Who does that?

“Oh, come on,” she scoffed, determinedly cheerful. “It’s Black Friday. Everyone shops Black Friday.”

I looked up from the stubborn lid of my poor beleaguered car and glanced around the parking lot of Home Depot. “Obviously,” I muttered.

Home Depot wasn’t open at midnight on Black Friday, but the parking lot was huge and was doing a good job of absorbing the overflow from Walmart. A bicycle couldn’t have parked in the Walmart lot. I wouldn’t have believed there were this many people in the Tri-Cities—and this was only one of three Walmarts, the one we’d decided would be the least busy.

“We should go to Target next,” Jesse said, her thoughtful voice sending chills down my spine. “They have the new Instant Spoils: The Dread Pirate’s Booty Four game on sale for half off the usual price, and it was set for release tonight at midnight. There were rumors that problems in production meant before-Christmas shortages.”

Codpieces and Golden Corsets: The Dread Pirate’s Booty Three, better known as CAGCTDPBT—kid you not; if you couldn’t say the letters ten times in a row without stumbling, you weren’t a Real Player—was the game of choice for the pack. Twice a month, they brought their laptops and a few desktops and set them up in the meeting room and played until dawn. Vicious, nasty werewolves playing pirate games on the Internet—it was pretty intense, and I was a little surprised that we hadn’t had any bodies. Yet.

“Shortage rumors carefully leaked to the press just in time for Black Friday,” I grouched.

She grinned, her cheeks flushed with the cold November wind and her good cheer not as forced as it had been since her mother called to cancel Christmas plans during Thanksgiving dinner earlier this evening. “Cynic. You’ve been hanging around Dad too much.”

So, in search of pirate booty, we drove across the street to the Target parking lot, which looked a lot like the Walmart parking lot had. Unlike Walmart, Target hadn’t stayed open. There was a line four people deep waiting for the doors to be unlocked at midnight, which, according to my watch, was about two minutes from now. The line started at Target, wrapped around the shoe store and giant pet store, and disappeared around the corner of the strip mall into darkness.

“They’re not open yet.” I did not want to go where that line of people was going. I wondered if that was how Civil War soldiers felt, looking over a ridge and seeing the other side’s combatants, grim and poised for battle. This line of people was pushing baby strollers instead of cannons, but they still looked dangerous to me.

Jesse looked at my face and snickered.

I pointed at her. “You can just stop that right now, missy. This is all your fault.”

She blinked innocently at me. “My fault? All I said was it might be fun to go out and hit the Black Friday sales.”

I’d thought it would be a good way to distract her from her mother’s patented brand of guilt trip leavened with broken promises. I hadn’t realized that going shopping on Black Friday (Thursday still according to my watch, for the next minute) was akin to throwing myself on a grenade. I’d still have done it—I love Jesse, and the diversion was starting to work—but it might have been nice to know how bad it was going to be.

We drove slowly behind a host of cars also looking for parking places, eventually drifting right to the front of the store where the shoppers lurked, hunched and ready to attack the sales. Inside the store, a young man in the sadly appropriate red Target shirt walked very slowly to the locked door that was all that protected him from the horde.

“He’s going to die.” Jesse sounded a little worried.

The crowd started undulating, like a Chinese New Year dragon, as he reached up slowly to turn the key.

“I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes,” I agreed, as the boy, mission completed, turned to run back into the store, the crowd of salivating shoppers hot on his trail.

“I’m not going in there,” I stated firmly, as an old woman elbowed another old woman who had tried to slip in through the doors ahead of her.

“We could always go to the mall,” Jesse said after a moment.

“The mall?” I raised my eyebrows at her incredulously. “You want to go to the mall?” There are a herd of strip malls in the Tri-Cities as well as a factory outlet mall, but when one speaks of “the Mall,” they mean the big one in Kennewick. The one that everyone shopping on Black Friday was planning to hit first.

Jesse laughed. “Seriously, though, Mercy. Five-quart kitchen mixers are on sale, a hundred dollars off. Darryl’s broke when my friends and I made brownies with it. With babysitting money, I have just enough to replace it for Christmas if I can find it for a hundred dollars off. If we get the mixer, I’m okay with calling this experiment finished.” She gave me a rueful look. “I really am okay, Mercy. I know my mother; I was expecting her to cancel. Anyway, it’ll be more fun spending Christmas with Dad and you.”

“Well, if that’s the case,” I said, “why don’t I give you a hundred dollars, and we can skip the mall?”

She shook her head. “Nope. I know you haven’t been part of this family long, so you don’t know all the rules. When you break someone else’s toy, you have to pay for it yourself. To the mall.”

I sighed loudly and pulled out of the frying pan of the Target parking lot and headed toward the fire of the Columbia Center Mall. “Into the breach, then. Against mobs of middle-aged moms and frightening harridans we shall prevail.”

She nodded sharply, raising an invisible sword. “And damned be he—she—who cries, ‘Hold, enough!’”

“Misquote Shakespeare in front of Samuel, I dare you,” I told her, and she laughed.

I was new at being a stepmother. It was like walking a tightrope sometimes—a greased tightrope. As much as Jesse and I liked each other, we’d had our moments. Hearing her laugh with genuine cheer made me optimistic about our chances.

The car in front of me stopped suddenly, and I locked up the Rabbit’s brakes. The Rabbit was a relic from my teenage years (long past) that I kept running because I loved it—and because I was a mechanic, and keeping an old, cheap car like the Rabbit running was the best form of advertisement.

The brakes worked just fine, and she stopped with room to spare—about four inches of room.

“I’m not the first person to misuse *Macbeth*,” Jesse said, sounding a bit breathless—but then, she didn’t know I’d just redone the brakes last week when I had some time.

I blew out air between my teeth to make a chiding sound as we waited for some cowardly driver a few cars ahead to take the left turn onto the interstate. “The Scottish Play. It’s ‘the Scottish Play.’ You should know better. There are some things you never name out loud, like *Macbeth*, the IRS, and Voldemort. Not if you want to make it to the mall tonight.”

“Oh,” she said, smirking at me. “I only think about that when I’m looking into a mirror and not saying ‘Candyman’ or ‘Bloody Mary.’”

“Does your father know what kind of movies you watch?” I asked.

“My father bought me *Psycho* for my thirteenth birthday. I notice you didn’t ask me who the Candyman was. What kind of movies are *you* watching, Mercy?” Her voice was a little smug, so I stuck my tongue out at her. I’m a mature stepmom like that.

* * *

TRAFFIC NEAR THE KENNEWICK MALL ACTUALLY WASN’T TOO bad. All the lanes were bumper-to-bumper but the speed was pretty normal. I knew from experience that once the silly season got fully under way, a snail would make better time than a car anywhere near the mall.

“Mercy?” Jesse asked.

“Uhm?” I answered, swerving into the next lane over to avoid being hit by a minivan.

“When are you and Dad going to have a baby?”

Chills broke out all over my body. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, couldn’t move—and I hit the SUV in front of me at about thirty miles an hour. I’m pretty sure that the Scottish Play had nothing to do with it.

* * *

“IT’S MY FAULT,” JESSE SAID, SITTING BESIDE ME ON THE SIDEWALK next to the mall parking lot shortly thereafter. The flashing lights of various emergency vehicles did interesting things to her canary yellow and orange hair. She was bumping her feet up and down with excess nervous energy—or maybe just to keep warm. It was, at best, thirty degrees, and the wind was cutting.

I was still trying to figure out what had happened—though one thing I was sure of was that it hadn’t been Jesse’s fault. I leaned my head against the cement at the base of one of the big light poles and put the ice pack back on my left cheekbone and my nose—which had finally quit bleeding.

“Captain’s in charge of the ship. My fault.”

Panic attack, I thought. Jesse’s question had taken me by surprise—but I hadn’t thought the idea of a baby scared me that much.

I kind of liked the thought of a baby, actually. So why the panic attack? I could feel the remnants of it clogging my thoughts and lingering like the edges of an ice-cream headache—or maybe that was

the effect of my face colliding with the steering column.

~~The Rabbit was an old car, and that meant no air bags. However, it was a good German car, so it~~ collapsed around the passenger compartment, leaving Jesse and me with bruises and bumps and a bloody nose and black eye. I was pretty tired of black eyes. With my coloring, bruises didn't stand out like they did on Jesse. Given a week or two, no one would ever know we'd been in a car wreck.

Even with the bag of ice between me and the rest of the world, I could tell that the passenger in the SUV I'd hit was still talking to the police because her voice was raised. The energy she was expending made me pretty sure she wasn't hurt much, either. The driver hadn't said anything, but he seemed okay to me. He stood a few steps back from his car and stared at it.

The younger policeman said something to the woman, and it hit her like a cattle prod. The man who'd driven the car glanced over at Jesse and me, while the woman went off like a teakettle.

"She *hit* us," the woman shrieked. That was the gist of it anyway. There were a lot of unladylike words that began with "F," with various "C" words thrown in for leavening. She had an alcohol slur that did nothing to moderate the shivery high pitch that she reached. I winced as her voice cut right through my aching skull and increased the pressure against my throbbing cheekbone.

I understood the sentiment. Even if the accident isn't your fault, there is hell to follow when talking to insurance companies, taking the car to a body shop, and dealing with the time the car is in the shop. Worse, if it's totaled, you have to argue with the other guy's insurance about how much it was worth. I was feeling pretty guilty, but Jesse's flinch made me set that aside and pay attention to her.

"Ben's better," I murmured. "He's more creative when he swears."

"He does it in that English accent, which is too cool." Jesse relaxed a little and started listening with more interest and less worry.

The woman began batting at the younger policeman and swearing. I didn't bother to listen to the details, but apparently she was mad at him now, and not us.

"*And* Ben is too smart to swear at cops," Jesse said with a sincere but misguided belief in Ben's wisdom. She had turned to look at me and got a good view over my shoulder of the only real fatality of the incident. "Jeez, Mercy. Look at the Rabbit."

I'd been avoiding it, but I had to look sometime.

The little rust-colored car was connected to the SUV in front of it and somehow had managed to ride up on something so that the front wheels, the nearest one no longer round, were about six inches up in the air. Its nose was also about two feet closer to the windshield than it had been.

"It's dead," I told her.

Maybe if Zee were still around to help, he could have done something with the Rabbit. Zee had taught me most of what I know about fixing cars, but there were some things that couldn't be fixed without an iron-kissed fae to put them to rights. And Zee was holed up in the fae reservation in Walla Walla and had been since one of the Gray Lords killed a US senator's son and declared the fae to be a separate and sovereign nation.

Within minutes of the declaration, all of the fae had disappeared—and so had all of the reservations. The ten-mile loop of road that used to lead to the local reservation near Walla Walla was now eight miles long, and from nowhere along that route could you even see the reservation. I'd heard that one of the reservations had grown a thicket of blackberry bushes and disappeared inside.

There was a rumor that the government had tried to bomb a reservation, but the entire flight of planes had disappeared—reappearing minutes later flying over Australia. Australian bloggers posted photos, and the US president issued a formal apology, so that part of the rumor seemed to be true.

For me personally, the whole thing meant I had no one to call on when I needed help in the shop or needed some time off. I hadn't even gotten a chance to talk to Zee before he was gone. I missed him, and not just because my poor Rabbit looked to be headed to that big VW rally in the sky.

"At least we weren't driving the Vanagon," I said.

The teenager I'd been—the one who had worked fast-food jobs to pay for the car, the insurance, and the fuel and upkeep—would have cried for the poor Rabbit, but that would have made Jesse feel bad, and I wasn't a teenager anymore.

"Harder to find a Syncro Vanagon than a Rabbit?" Jesse half asked, half speculated. I'd taught her how to change her own oil, and she'd helped out at the shop now and then. Mostly she flirted with Gabriel, my teenager Friday who was back from college for Thanksgiving break, but even a little bit of help was useful now that I was my only employee. I didn't have enough business to hire another full-time mechanic, and I didn't have time to train another teenager to take Gabriel's place. Especially since I thought it might be a waste of time.

I didn't want to think about closing the shop, but I was afraid it might be coming.

"Mostly, it is a lot easier to get hurt in a Vanagon," I said to Jesse. Losing the Rabbit and lack of sleep were making me melancholy, but I wasn't going to share that with her, so I kept my voice light and cheerful. "No crumple zone. That's one of the reasons they don't make them anymore. Neither of us would have walked out of an accident like this in the van—and I am very tired of being in a stupid wheelchair."

Jesse let out a huff of laughter. "Mercy, *all* of us are tired of you being in a wheelchair."

I'd broken my leg badly on my honeymoon (don't ask) this past summer. I'd also managed to hurt my hands, too, which meant I couldn't use crutches or even push myself. Yes, I had been pretty crabby about it.

The woman was still arguing with the police, but the driver was walking toward us. He might have been coming over to check that I had proper insurance or something, but I had a little warning zing down my spine. I pulled the ice bag away from my face and stood up just in case.

"Still," said Jesse, staring at the car. She didn't react to my change in position; maybe she hadn't noticed. "I loved your little Rabbit. It was my fault we had the wreck. I am so sorry."

And the driver of the other car went for Jesse like a junkyard dog, dripping words for which my mother would have washed his mouth out with soap as he barreled toward us.

Jesse's eyes got wide, and she jerked to her feet, stumbling. I stepped between them and said, with power I borrowed from the Alpha of the local werewolf pack who was also my husband, "*Enough.*"

He jerked his gaze from Jesse to me, opened his mouth, and froze where he stood. I could smell the alcohol wafting from him.

"I was driving, not Jesse," I said calmly. "You stopped—I hit you. My fault. I am fully insured. It will be a pain in the neck—for which I apologize—but your car will be fixed or replaced."

"Goddamned spic," he spat, incorrectly because I'm Native American not Hispanic, and swung a fist at me.

I might have been a mere coyote shapeshifter instead of a muscle-bound werewolf, but I had years of full-contact karate under my brown belt. The irate owner of the SUV was a lot bigger than me, but from the smell and the lack of coordination in his movements, he was also drunk. That negated most of the advantage his size gave him.

I let his fist slip by me, took a step that angled my hips into his, grabbed the elbow and hand of his attacking arm, and slammed him face-first into the pavement using, mostly, his own momentum to do it.

Hurt me too, dang it. Car wrecks suck. Twinges of pain slid down my recently abused neck and into a hip that I hadn't thought damaged at all. I stayed balanced and ready for a moment, but the impact with the ground seemed to wipe the fight out of the big man. When he didn't immediately rise and swing, I stepped back and touched my cheekbone, wishing for the ice pack that I'd dropped.

The whole fight hadn't taken more than a few seconds. Before the downed man even twitched, one of the cops was there, putting a knee into the small of the man's back and cuffing him. The motion was smooth and practiced, and I was pretty sure the policeman had had some martial arts training, too.

"No more driving for you, tonight," the cop told the downed man cheerfully. "No more hitting nice ladies, either. It's off to the pokey to dry out."

"Pokey?" I said.

The other cop, an older, less energetic model sighed. "Nielson likes old films." He handed me a ticket for following too closely and gestured toward the cuffed man. "His girlfriend is under arrest for assaulting an officer. We got him for driving under the influence. Do you want to press charges for assault? We all saw him take the first swing."

I shook my head, suddenly feeling tired. "No. Just tell him to have his insurance call mine."

There was a loud scraping sound and a crunch. A tow truck pulled the SUV away. The Rabbit settled to the ground with a sigh, a gurgle, and a hiss of hot antifreeze hitting cold pavement as the radiator tore open.

Jesse shivered beside me. I needed to get her out of the cold.

"When's your dad coming?" I asked her. She'd called him while I'd been caught up talking to officials and people who handed me ice bags.

"I called," Jesse said. "He didn't pick up, so I called Darryl. No answer, either. I should have told you earlier."

Adam didn't answer the phone? That felt wrong. Adam wouldn't be unavailable while we were out shopping among the hordes. He'd even volunteered to come. That would have been . . . interesting. He couldn't handle Walmart on a quiet day. That Darryl, his second, hadn't answered his phone didn't bother me as much, but it was still weird.

I pulled out my cell phone and saw that I had a new text message from Bran—even weirder. The Marrok, ruler of the werewolves, just didn't text.

I checked it and got: The Game is Afoot.

"Bran is channeling Arthur Conan Doyle," I said and Jesse peered over my shoulder to see.

I tried calling Bran back (my fingers were too cold for texting with any speed), but his phone came back disconnected or no longer in service. I tried Samuel, the Marrok's son, and got his answering service.

"No, that's fine," I told the service lady who picked up. "I'll just go into the emergency room if Dr. Cornick isn't available." There was no reason not to leave a real message with her, but the text from Bran had unsettled me. My panic attack—the cause of the wreck—unsettled me more.

I continued with other pack members: Warren, Honey, Mary Jo, and even Ben. Their cells were—in order—off, ring to voice mail, off, ring to voice mail.

I puzzled over Bran's message as I called Paul—who would as soon kill me as rescue me, though he'd feel differently about Jesse. As the phone rang without results, I remembered that the werewolves were fond of top-secret-emergency-code-word things. Nothing to do with being a werewolf and everything to do with just how many werewolves found themselves in the military at some time or other, and how that left them a particular kind of paranoid. Boy Scouts had nothing on the "be preparedness" of werewolves.

I knew about the secret codes because I'd grown up with werewolves, but I hadn't learned them because I wasn't one. Adam presumably would have gotten around to teaching me now that I was a member of his pack, but what with river monsters and broken legs and pack drama, it was no wonder hadn't made it to the top of the list.

Paul didn't answer, either. I was willing to bet, based on the evidence, that Bran's text meant "no phones." Which was all well and good, but Jesse and I were stuck here at the mall until we found someone who *would* answer their stupid phone. If this was just a test of the emergency-secret-code system, I was going to chew on someone.

If it wasn't . . . My stomach clenched, and the panic attack I'd had that had caused the accident seemed more sinister. I was twice bound, once to Adam, once to the pack. Had something happened to Adam or the pack? I reached out for those bonds . . .

"Mercy?" Jesse asked, interrupting my concentration before I connected with Adam or the pack.

"I don't know what's going on," I told her. "Let me keep trying people."

After a moment's thought, I called Kyle. He wasn't a were-anything, so he might not have gotten the memo about the phones. *And*, as the significant other of the third-ranked member of the pack, he might know what was going on. I got his voice mail and didn't leave a message. Next I tried Elizaveta the witch. Elizaveta was under contract to the pack—I'd recently seen what Adam paid her every month and had no qualms about making her play taxi—but she didn't answer. Maybe she was in on the codes—or maybe she was shopping, and the screaming hordes kept her from hearing her cell.

Maybe the whole pack was out shopping, and I was being paranoid.

"What are the chances that the pack has joined the rest of the Tri-Cities tonight and gone out shopping in the middle of the night?" I asked out loud.

"Not high," Jesse said seriously. "Most of them are like Dad; the noise alone would give them the heebie-jeebies. Cram them in with a bunch of normal people in tight quarters and wait for the bloodbath. I can't think of any of them, except maybe Honey, who would try it."

"That's what I think, too," I agreed. "Something's up. We're on our own."

"I'll call Gabriel," she said, and did so.

Gabriel, my whatever-needs-doing man, was fighting like a demon not to be in love with Jesse. He had officially broken up with her in September, when he left for Seattle and college—though they hadn't been officially dating. But he'd sat next to her at Thanksgiving dinner a few hours ago and flirted as hard as he could given that her sharp-eyed father was at the same table.

Love doesn't wait on convenience.

When he was in town, Gabriel also lived in my very small manufactured house on the other side of the fence from the home I shared with Adam and Jesse. When he and his mother had a huge home-wrecking fight over whether or not he should be hanging out with me and my werewolf friends, he'd moved into it. He might be living mostly in Seattle—but it was there waiting for him when he came back for the holidays.

He wouldn't be on any werewolf emergency contact list so when Jesse shook her head, I started to get even more worried. Had something happened to the pack while we were gone?

"Damn it," I said, and I tried again to feel Adam through the mating bond that tied us together. The bond was strong and steady, but sometimes it took more effort to get information from it. When I'd talked to Adam about it, concerned, he'd shrugged.

"It is what it is," he'd said. "Some people have to live in their mate's head to feel secure. How do you feel when we were doing that?" He'd grinned at me when I'd tried to apologize. "Don't fuss. I love you just as you are, Mercy. I don't need to swallow you whole, I don't need to be in your head and

all times. I just need to know that you're there."

There are a lot of reasons I love Adam.

I fought my way down our bond, increasing my already considerable headache, and squeezed past the barriers my subconscious mind apparently had created to keep from being overwhelmed by the charismatic Alpha among Alphas who was Adam Hauptman, and touched him at last . . .

"Hey, Mercy," said a deep voice. "You okay?"

I looked up and recognized the tow truck driver. I know most of the guys who tow cars in the area—I have a mechanic shop, it comes with the territory.

"Hey, Dale," I said, trying to appear as though I hadn't been fumbling around with werewolf magic. It would have been easier to pretend to be normal without the sudden renewal of the nasty, shivery, breath-stealing feeling that had caused me to run into the SUV in the first place. I struggled to suppress the second panic attack. Probably Dale would think that my chattering jaws were from the cold. "Jesse and I are okay, but I've had better days."

"I can see that." He sounded concerned, so I must have looked pretty awful. "You want me to tow the Rabbit to your shop? Or do you want to admit defeat immediately and I can take her out to the Pasco wrecking yard?"

I fixed my gaze on him as I had a sudden thought.

He looked down at his coat. "What'cha looking at? Is there a spot? I thought I grabbed this from the clean clothes."

"Dale, if I'm paying you to tow my car to my shop, is there room in the truck for Jesse and me, too? We can't get my husband on the phone. I have a car at the shop I can drive home."

He smiled cheerfully. "Sure, no prob, Mercy."

"That would be good," I said. "Thanks." That would work. My shop was a safe, warm place to think. I needed that, needed my Fortress of Solitude against panic. Because when I reached down the bond between Adam and myself, I could sense nothing but rage and pain.

Someone was hurting my husband, and that was all I could tell.

Dale's truck smelled like old french fries, coffee, and stale bananas. I forced myself to make light conversation, catching up on his daughter and her new baby, the rising costs of diesel fuel, and whatever else I could come up with. I couldn't let Jesse know how worried I was until I had more information.

My shop looked just as it should. The little boneyard (where the remnants of a few dead cars lingered to donate parts to their living brethren) and the parking lot were well lit. New halogen lights illuminated the four cars in the still-alive-but-need-help parking lot, and I patted Jesse's knee when she drew in a breath.

I hopped out of the truck and helped Dale unchain the Rabbit, sending Jesse into the shop. She glanced again at the four cars in the parking lot where there should have been three and ran inside without protest. She had no trouble opening the door that should have been locked—and when she went in, she didn't turn on the lights because she was her father's daughter. She knew better than to turn on lights in a room with windows when there might be something to hide.

"Poor thing," Dale said, patting my car's trunk, not paying any attention to Jesse. "Aren't many of these left running around town anymore." He looked at me, and said, casually, "I have a line on a '89 Jetta two-door with 110 on the meter. A little banged up, but nothing a little Bondo and paint can't fix."

"I'll keep it in mind," I said. "What do I owe you?"

"Boss will bill you," he said, turning my smile genuine despite my tension—Dale's "boss" was h

wife.

I waved as he drove away, then sprinted for the door of my office because the fourth car, parked between a '68 Beetle and an old Type II, was a battered and worn '74 Mercedes that belonged to Gabriel.

I slipped through the door and closed it. The dark office had been enough to let me know that Gabriel knew something and that it was important to keep it quiet—otherwise, the interior would have been blazing with light. As I turned, I caught Gabriel's scent, all right, but there was also someone else . . .

Strong arms wrapped around my waist, jerking me almost off my feet. My nose told me the arms belonged to Ben of the British accent and foul mouth as he buried his face against my stomach, so I put the crowbar I'd snagged off the counter back where it belonged without smashing in his head. He moved his head until my shirt rucked up, and his beard-rough cheek was against my skin.

I'd had another werewolf do that before, felt the same tremors and ragged breathing. I was reasonably sure that Ben wasn't feeling hungry (like the other wolf had been) because it hadn't been that long since turkey dinner. So I put a hand on his head and glanced at the pair of shell-shocked teenagers standing in front of a shelf of old, mismatched hubcaps. It was dark inside the shop, but coyotes like me can see in the dark.

Ben half growled, half spoke, but I couldn't parse anything he said. From the heat of his skin against mine, he was trying to fight off the change. I made a soothing sound but didn't move my hand again because a werewolf's skin is pretty sensitive when he is changing. Ben quit trying to talk and contented himself with breathing. I looked at Gabriel.

He was gripping Jesse's hand—or letting her grip him—and didn't look to be in much better shape than Ben.

"Start over," Jesse told him. "Mercy needs to hear it all."

Gabriel nodded. "About midnight, Ben burst into my living room, grabbed me, grabbed my car keys, and dragged me out the door. As soon as we were outside, I could tell there was a lot of something going down at your house. There weren't any headlights, but I could hear cars—something with diesel engines, truck size. Ben said something about getting here and getting to you, I think. He sounded pretty odd. He shoved me into the driver's seat and hasn't said a coherent thing since. I was going to try to call you, but—"

He nodded at the floor, and I saw the scattered remnants of the shop's phone. "He didn't seem to think that would be a good idea. I am really, really glad to see you."

"Ben?" I asked. "Can you—"

He reached up and dumped a tranquilizing dart into my hand. It was about half full of something that looked like milk, but I knew better. Someone knew our secrets.

"He was drugged," I said, sniffing the hypodermic just to make sure. It smelled familiar. "It looks like that stuff that killed Mac."

Jesse inhaled.

"Mac?" Gabriel asked.

"Before your time," I told him. "Mac was a newly turned werewolf who got in the way of a Byzantine plot ultimately aimed at Bran. We've always thought that werewolves are invulnerable to drugs of any kind. But the bad guy who happened to be a werewolf himself figured out a cocktail that worked with ingredients any vet supply would have." That knowledge should have died with Gerry. "Most of the wolves who got hit with the stuff were fine, but new werewolves are more vulnerable, and it killed Mac."

We all looked at Ben, who wasn't looking too healthy.

"Is Ben going to be all right?" asked Gabriel. "Can we do something for him?"

"Burning it out," Ben growled.

I wasn't sure I heard him right, his voice was slurred and thick. "Ben? You're burning out the drug?" His skin did feel feverish. "Boosting your metabolism?" I didn't know werewolves could do that.

"Burning it good," he said, which I took to be an affirmative. "But it'll . . . a minute."

"What can we do to help?" I asked. "Water? Food?" I had some granola bars in here somewhere.

"Just you," he said. "Pack smell, Alpha smell. It helps." He shuddered hard against me. "Hurts.

Wolf wants out."

"Let it out," said Jesse.

But Ben shook his head. "Then I won't be able to talk. Need to tell you."

He smelled like adrenaline and blood.

"Is it safe here?" I asked. "Do we need to move?"

"Short-term safe," Ben said after a moment. "Think so. They should be occupied with the rest . . . the rest of the pack."

"Would coffee help?" Jesse asked.

I considered it but shook my head. "I'm not a doctor. Adding a stimulant to the mixture could just make it worse."

"You could call Samuel."

I looked into her fear-filled eyes and tried to be stalwart for her sake. "Samuel's phone goes to his answering service. We're on our own."

"What about Zee?" asked Gabriel. He'd seen what Zee could do for a car and had acquired a case of hero worship for the grumpy old fae. "Couldn't he do something about the silver?"

"Zee's hidden in Fairyland with the rest of the fae," I told him, though he knew it. "He's not going to be able to help."

"But—"

"Whatever else Zee is," I told him, "he is fae, first."

"Hurts," said Ben, his voice muffled against my stomach. He was writhing against me. Silver hits werewolves like that. I wished that there was something I could do.

"Yes, you can help," he said, as though he'd caught my thoughts. Sometimes the pack bond did that—one of the things that I was still adjusting to. "You can ask me . . . that's what you can do. Ask me questions. Keep me talking so I can keep the wolf down. You need to know."

"Everyone is alive," I told him. "I can tell that much. What happened?"

"Taken," he said, then, "Federal agents."

Chills went down my spine. I had a degree in history. When the government moves against a segment of its own population, it is bad. Nazi bad. Genocide bad. We needed the feds to protect the werewolves from the zealots in the general population. If the government had turned against us, the wolves would have to defend themselves. There was no good ending to that story.

"Federal agents from which agency?" I asked. "Homeland Security? Cantrip? FBI?"

He shook his head. He looked up at me and stared for a moment as if eye contact would let him sort himself out. He started to speak a couple of times.

"They took everyone who was there?"

"Everyone," he said. He put his head against me again. "Everyone there."

It had been Thanksgiving. I exchanged a bleak look with Jesse. A lot of the pack was at the house

“Honey and Peter and Paul and Darryl and Auriele.” He stopped naming wolves for a moment to take a breath. “Mary Jo. Warren.”

“Mary Jo wasn’t there,” I said. “Neither was Warren.” Warren and his boyfriend had put on a Thanksgiving dinner for their friends who didn’t have families to go home to. Being gay meant they had a number of friends with no welcoming families. Mary Jo, a firefighter, had been on duty.

“Smelled them,” growled Ben. Then he paused, his body tightening. “Said . . . they said, not Adam said. They said . . . ‘Come quietly no one gets hurt, Mr. Hauptman.’ Adam, he said, ‘I smell blood on your hands. Warren and Mary Jo. What have you done to my people?’ They said, ‘Federal agents,’ again. Said, ‘Here’s our ID.’”

He took in a big breath. “Adam said, he said, ‘ID is good. But you are not federal agents.’ Liars. Adam said they lied.”

I couldn’t tell if I was holding Ben or he was holding me.

“How did they find Mary Jo?” I asked. Mary Jo worried that she would lose her job if they knew what she was. If they knew about Mary Jo, knew about the tranquilizer, then someone knew too many of our secrets. It was a rhetorical question, I didn’t expect Ben to know the answer.

“Cell phones,” he told me. “Bran sent a text.”

“I got it,” I said. “I thought it meant that the phones weren’t safe to use.”

He shook his head. “Meant that someone was tracing our phones. GPS tracking. Charles has spiders.” Charles was the son of the Marrok, who ruled the werewolves. Among his wide array of talents were killing people, making money, and a scarily thorough understanding of technology—but not arachnids. Not that I knew of, anyway.

“Spiders?” I asked.

He huffed a laugh. “Spiders. Bits of code out looking. Watching out for things like that. Spyware in the phone-company logs. Think he might have someone on the inside. Warning came too late, though.”

“How did you escape?” I asked.

“I was upstairs.” His voice was getting closer to his usual enunciation, and he sounded more coherent. “Getting toilet paper for the fu— for the downstairs bathroom.” He made a noise, a half sob. I hugged him more tightly.

“Go ahead and swear,” I told him. “I promise not to tell Adam.”

He snorted. “Bad habit.” I couldn’t tell if he was talking about his swearing or me promising not to tell Adam.

“You’re right,” I said, because he was. “So you heard them and ran for Gabriel?”

“I heard,” he told me. “I waited. Whole pack was down there. Then Adam said, ‘In all Mercy, Benjamin Speedway.’ Adam said that ‘Benjamin Speedway’ like he was swearing, but I knew. I’m Benjamin. Mercy is you. Speed meant go. He was ordering me to run, to find you. Disguised the order to give me a moment of grace before they figured it out. There were people out the back, and they saw me jump out the window. Hit me with the damned dart, and I ran for the river. Doubled back and found Gabriel. Made him drive. But you weren’t here. You were supposed to be *here*.”

If it hadn’t been for the wreck, Jesse and I would have finished our shopping and headed home. Presumably into the arms of whoever had Adam. Luck. It made me take a deep breath, and I got a good whiff of what I’d been smelling all along.

“Blood.” I leaned back, trying to get some space between us. “Ben, where are you bleeding?”



“DO WE NEED LIGHTS?” ASKED JESSE.

“I’ll get the big kit in the shop,” Gabriel said, and ran for it. Night was dark to him, but he knew his way around, and the first-aid kit was on the wall just inside. He wouldn’t be as fast as me, but I was attached to a werewolf at the moment.

I knew what Adam would say about turning on the lights when we were possibly hiding from some unknown group capable of taking on a pack of werewolves and coming out on top. But my night vision wasn’t up to first aid in the dark.

“Flashlight,” I said. “Under the counter. Also get the box cutter next to it in case I have to slice his clothes.” I put my hands on either side of Ben’s face and tried to make him look at me. “Ben. Ben.”

“Yes?” It came out clear and crisp-upper-crust-British, as Ben, with his excellent four-letter-lace vocabulary seldom did. But he didn’t let me pull his face up so I could see it.

“Where are you hit?”

“Tranq. Arse.” That one wasn’t as clear, but I could understand him and assumed the last word was a location and not an epithet, though with Ben it was a risky call.

“No. Not the tranq.” A tranquillizer dart wouldn’t have left him bleeding this much later.

“Someone shot you, Ben. Where?”

Jesse aimed the flashlight. “Leg,” she said. “Just above his right knee.”

He wouldn’t let me go, so Jesse sliced through the fabric of Ben’s khakis with the box cutter. Gabriel took the flashlight and got a good look at the wound.

“In and out,” he said, sounding calm, though his face paled and took on a greenish tinge.

It hadn’t healed, so either whoever had shot him was using silver bullets—or the silver in the tranquilizer mixture was slowing his healing. Whichever way, we needed to get the bleeding stopped.

“Telfa pad,” I told Jesse. “It’s important not to use anything that might stick on the wounds.” Ben’s skin could grow over it if he started to heal as fast as he should be healing. “Then gauze, then vet wrap. We’ll pack up, go to Samuel’s, and hope that he’s home.”

Samuel Cornick, who was both a doctor and a werewolf, would know best what to do for Ben. He wasn’t answering his phone, either, so he’d probably gotten the message from Bran. He also wasn’t a pack. There was a good chance that he’d been overlooked when they, whoever “they” were, had gathered up the rest of the wolves. I hoped desperately that he’d been overlooked.

I needed to get Ben to Samuel, then I needed to get help—which hopefully would also be accomplished at Samuel’s. I needed to find Adam, the pack, check on the other wolves who hadn’t been at Thanksgiving—and make sure that no one else had been taken or hurt, like Warren’s boyfriend or Mary Jo’s fellow firefighters.

If our enemies had known to find Mary Jo and Warren, then they knew more than they should about who was a werewolf and who was not. If they were humans—and Ben would have told me if he’d noticed that they were anything else—and they were willing to kidnap damn near thirty wolves, then they were either crazy, planning on killing everyone all at once, or at least armed and very, very dangerous. And they might be feds, despite Ben’s recollection of Adam accusing them of lying.

“Can you stand?” I asked Ben, when Jesse had finished making a pretty good job of the bandage.

He grunted.

~~“We’ve got to get out of here. If they knew enough to get Warren and Mary Jo, we’ve got to assume they know about this place.”~~

“Danger,” he said, sounding bad again. “In danger. You.” That thought seemed to inspire him because with a sound that was more wolfish than human, he stood up, then sort of sagged until he was draped over me.

“It’s not the leg,” he said, overenunciating a little. “It’s the drug. Weak. Weak. Weak.” He was tensing up, his eyes bright gold with the wolf’s drive to protect itself. No predator likes to be weakened and vulnerable.

“It’s all right,” I told him firmly, because it was important that he believe me. If he didn’t, he’d get aggressive, and we would have even more trouble. “You are among friends. Gabriel, grab the keys to the Mercedes parked in the garage and help me get Ben to the car.”

Marsilia’s dark blue Mercedes, an S 65 AMG, was parked inside my garage lest anyone walk by the parking lot and decide to key the paint or toss a rock. It was three months old, here to get its first oil change, and I could have bought a second shop for less than its sticker price.

“The AMG?” Gabriel said, though he retrieved the keys as he spoke. “You’re going to let Ben bleed all over a Mercedes AMG?”

“He’s already bleeding all over a Mercedes,” Jesse said dryly. Then she turned to me. “Wait a minute. The AMG? That AMG? Mercedes Athena Thompson Hauptman, what are you thinking of? You can’t let Ben bleed all over *Marsilia’s* Mercedes.”

“Marsilia the vampire queen?” Gabriel choked. “Mercy, that’s just stupid. Take my car.”

“She’s not a queen, she’s the Mistress of the seethe,” I corrected him. “That car seats four and doesn’t scream VW mechanic on the run with wounded werewolf.” What I didn’t say, because I didn’t want to panic anyone, was that because the vampires were a lot like the CIA crossed with the Mob, the Mercedes also had bulletproof glass. More importantly, if we were really dealing with an attack by a government agency, this car was clean of tracking devices. Between me and Wulfe—the magic-using vampire who served Marsilia—all the tracking gadgets that were routinely attached to new cars all the way down to the RFID tags on the tires had been disabled.

And right now I had bigger things to worry about than offending Marsilia, scary though she was. Get Ben to Samuel, who could treat what was wrong with him.

Take Jesse and Gabriel to someplace safe.

Find whoever had taken my mate and get him back.

Adam’s pain was a roar in my heart, and I was going to make everyone who hurt him pay and pay.

It was like triage. Decision one—preserve those who were safe. Decision two—retrieve the rest. Decision three—make the ones who took them regret it.

On that thought, I ran back into the office. At Adam’s request, I’d taken to keeping my 9mm Sig the safe. Being married to the local pack Alpha gained me some notoriety, and it made Adam feel better knowing I was armed. I shoved two spare (loaded) magazines into my purse and grabbed the extra box of silver ammunition. If I’d had a nuclear bomb, I’d have grabbed it, too—but I would make do with what I had.

Jesse had settled in the back with Ben. Smart girl. Ben knew Gabriel well enough under normal circumstances, but Jesse smelled like Adam. Ben couldn’t sit in the front with me because the combination of drug and wound made him too volatile, and he was too strong for me to wrestle with while I was driving. Jesse had also found an old blanket to cover the seat.

I backed the Mercedes out of the garage and waited for Gabriel to close the door and get in.

“Your eyes are gold, Mercy,” said Gabriel as he slid into the front seat. “I didn’t know they did that.”

Neither had I.

* * *

SAMUEL LIVED ABOUT TWENTY MINUTES FROM MY GARAGE, but it felt like hours. The temptation to put my foot down on the accelerator was strong. Marsilia’s car topped out at 250 mph—I had also, at her request, taken care of the electronic governor that limited the car to more human-reflex-safe speeds. But there were a lot of cops out even at this rarefied and still-dark hour because the shopping crowds were starting to increase again. I needed to avoid getting pulled over as long as I had a man with a gunshot wound in the back seat.

At sixty miles per hour, we purred slowly along the side of the river to Samuel’s house in Richland.

Before I’d married Adam, Samuel had been my roommate. He still came by to visit a lot. A wolf, especially a lone wolf, needed the presence of others. Though Adam was Alpha and Samuel was very dominant, they had a cautious friendship.

Samuel had a condo in Richland right next to the river, where land prices were at a premium. He could care less what his home looked like—he had lived with me in my elderly fourteen-by-seventy trailer for two years, more or less, without much complaint—but he loves the water. What he paid for that condo could have bought a huge house anywhere else in town.

The complex was less than ten years old, built of stone and stucco and groomed to within an inch of its life. I parked the Mercedes in front of Samuel’s garage, left my comrades in the car, and knocked at the door.

No one answered. I put my forehead against the cold surface of the fiberglass door and listened, but I could hear nothing.

“Please, please, Samuel. I need you.” I knocked again.

When the door finally opened, it wasn’t Samuel but Ariana, Samuel’s mate. She wore a sweatshirt and fuzzy midnight blue pajama bottoms decorated with white kittens playing with pink balls of yarn.

Fae have glamour—that’s what makes them fae. They can take any living shape they like, and mostly they like forms that blend in. I’d first met Ariana in the guise of someone’s well-to-do grandmother. I’ve also seen what I think is her true face and form, which is spectacular and beautiful.

Ariana’s current facade was neither beautiful nor ugly, more of a pleasant average. Pale gold hair more often found in children than adults before the advent of hair dye, framed her face and set off her soft gray eyes. Her apparent age of somewhere between twenty-five and thirty was a match for Samuel’s apparent age. There were traces of her fae-self in her face, just as my old mentor Zee’s fae countenance shared similarities with the human one that I was more accustomed to seeing.

Thing was, she shouldn’t have been there. She was fae. She should have been at the reservation with all the others. I’d called to check on Ariana as soon as I’d found out that the fae had retreated and had gotten Samuel. He’d told me—in what I now saw was a suspiciously relaxed manner—that Ariana was safe and would return when she could. Apparently, that was a lot sooner than any of the rest of the fae.

“Ariana,” I said, “I thought . . .”

“That I had retreated to the reservation with my kin?” she asked. “My mate is here. I am no follower, and my allegiance is no longer to the Gray Lords, if it ever was. They chose to allow me to stay here under the condition I do nothing to draw attention to myself.” She grinned mischievously at me. “They required us to bring any artifacts or magical items we hold. I brought the Silver Borne with me—they were surprisingly eager to let me leave with it.”

The Silver Borne was an artifact that she’d created long before Christopher Columbus was a glint in his father’s eye. It ate the magic of any fae that went near it. Too powerful to be left where humans could get it—and too damaging to be brought to the reservation.

Her face lost its humor. “But I am chatting, and you are hurt. Come in out of the cold.”

“Not my blood,” I told her. “Is Samuel here? I have a warning and a patient for him. Otherwise, you should probably go.”

“He’s not here,” Ariana said. “His father called him away a few days ago. He said it was something to do with a meeting about ‘disturbances in the Force.’”

I gave her a look, and she grinned, again. “I swear to you that was what he told me. Bring in your wounded, though. I have a fair amount of barbering experience, and Samuel keeps a very wellstocked first-aid kit.”

I hesitated, and the expression on her face changed. Ariana was ancient—older than Bran, I think—but she had this softness about her, a vulnerability that allowed her to be rather easily hurt.

“I’m not doubting you,” I told her. “But my wounded is a wolf. He is in human form for the moment, but he is clinging to it by his fingertips.”

Ariana had a deep-seated and totally justified terror of canids, which she’d only overcome with people she knew well—meaning Samuel. Most of the rest of us did our best not to be too wolf – or coyote-like around her.

She took a breath. “I knew the patient was likely one of your werewolves. Who else would it be? Bring him in.”

I gathered my people from the car, human and otherwise. I wasn’t sure it was the right thing to do. I’d seen Ariana in the grip of panic once, and that was scary enough I didn’t want to do it again. I’d warned her, and she thought she could handle it. Fair enough.

Jesse shoved, and Gabriel and I pulled to get Ben out of the car. As soon as Ben was up, Gabriel slipped under his shoulder and took most of his weight. I glanced around, but all the windows surrounding us were dark. If anyone was watching, I couldn’t tell.

Jesse got the door. Gabriel paused in the entryway because, though the walls were painted bright colors, the carpet was white, and Ben was still bleeding.

Ariana rolled her eyes at us. “Bring him in, children; I assure you that I am more than capable of pulling a little blood from fabric and carpet.”

Reassured, I waved Gabriel and Ben forward. The condo was one of those open floor plans, where kitchen, dining room, and living room shared the same space. Gabriel supported Ben through the entry hall, past the kitchen area, and into the living room, where we laid him down on the dark brown leather couch. He looked worse, if that were possible, than he had in my office. As if, now that someone else was in charge, he’d quit struggling to stay alert.

Ariana looked at all of us and frowned. “Tell me what happened.”

So I did, telling the story from my point of view until we hit the garage, then dropping back to Ben’s tale. When I’d finished, she put her hand against Ben’s forehead.

He muttered something crude, and her eyebrows raised.

“Not fair to hold him responsible for something he says in this state,” said Jesse defensively.

Ariana’s lips turned up. “I’ve heard worse.” She pulled up Ben’s pant leg. The bandages we’d put on were bloody already. “Was this a silver bullet?”

“It’s not healing like it should if silver wasn’t involved somehow,” I told her. “They definitely shot him with a tranquilizer dart that contained a mixture that included silver. Same stuff was used to kill a friend of mine a few years back. That’s why we wanted Samuel to take a look.”

Ariana stepped back and half closed her eyes, holding her hands about six inches over Ben. “I have an affinity for silver,” she said. “I can sense it but not call it to me.”

Ariana is Welsh for silver. Ironic in a woman mated to a werewolf.

“There’s some silver in him,” she said after a moment. “But none near his wound, so it must be the dart they hit him with. If it was a silver bullet, it didn’t leave anything behind. He’ll have to wait until the silver works its way out—but I can at least treat the wound.”

I kept my hand on Ben’s while Ariana stripped his bandages off and coated the wounds, front and back, with some herb-and-salve concoction she kept in an old pottery jar. Ben lay on his side to allow her access. He kept his eyes closed, but every muscle in his body was tense. Ariana was the next best thing to a stranger, and he was wounded. Every once in a while he would growl quietly, and Ariana would jump like a rabbit—which made Ben tense even more.

By the time she was done, both of them were shivering like a pair of thoroughbreds before the Kentucky Derby.

“That’s as much as I can do for him,” she said, stepping away with a sigh of relief. She headed for the kitchen sink, regaining her self-possession with every step she took away from Ben. She washed her hands with soap and dried them on a white cloth.

When she spoke again, her voice was brisk and confident. “I don’t have Samuel’s expertise, but barring the threat of infection, which isn’t an issue for werewolves, his leg should be fine.”

If there wasn’t too much silver, I thought. I couldn’t tell if Ben was following the conversation or not. His eyes weren’t totally shut, but now that I was the only one touching him, his body was unnaturally relaxed.

“In any case, there’s nothing more we can do for him without Adam”—his Alpha, who could pour pack strength into him—“or Samuel,” I said. I could borrow some abilities from Adam, but I hadn’t been able to manipulate the pack bonds enough to effect healing yet.

“Let me try to call Samuel,” Ariana offered, picking up the phone on the end table next to the couch. She stiffened, the phone to her ear, then dialed. “Phin. I am so sorry to wake you, but I had a dream—”

Phin was Phineas Brewster, her mostly human descendant who sold used and collectible books. Why she had decided to call him instead of Samuel was the same reason she had stiffened. I wondered what she had heard or felt that had changed her mind.

“Ari?” a sleepy voice on the other end of the phone said—I try not to eavesdrop when I can avoid it, but, like the wolves, my ears are sharp. “No,” he continued foggily. Then he cleared his throat and sounded much more awake. “I mean, not a problem. Are you all right? Do you want me to come over?”

“No,” she said, sounding relieved. “It was really just a dream. But it left me worried about you.” The fae couldn’t lie. So she had dreamed and woke up worried about Phin—but it could have been tonight or ten years ago.

“I’m fine.” His voice was easy, as if he was used to having her call him in the middle of the night because she was worried.

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