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*The Big Day*



*I can't believe it's finally happening!* My secret was burning a hole through me. I wanted to tell my mother in the worst way, but I knew I couldn't. It would have to wait, even though it was the most important night of my life and I wished I could share it. In a few short hours, Zari and I would be married and my decision would be irrevocable and eternal. Though he was the love of my life, my twin flame, the implications of a marriage that would endure throughout eternity was a serious matter, and to be absolutely honest, it was a little daunting, even though I had no doubts at all that we were meant to be.

Zari and I were fated and I knew it, but I was nervous as I guess all brides are at some point before the ceremony. I shivered at the thought of our honeymoon, and even though it would last only a few days, it was something I'd waited far too long for in my opinion. Still, that was a little scary, too, for me at least. I doubted Zari felt the same. The Forest People took everything in stride and their lives were as natural as the wilderness they inhabited, unlike my world. I was glad we were having the forest ceremony a little early. That way, I wouldn't be so nervous when we married in the church in Nanaimo at the end of June in front of my parents and friends.

I stared in my full-length mirror as I double checked my hair and makeup, wanting to look perfect for the occasion. Since I was still underage, I decided to keep

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this wedding a secret until after I turned eighteen, maybe even until after the wedding my mom was planning in June. I'd been waiting to marry Zari for almost two years and after all we'd been through, I hoped that things would quiet down once we settled into life together, even though that wouldn't happen officially until after the traditional ceremony in Nanaimo.

It was against the law of the Forest People for us to marry, but an exception had been made since we'd been through such horrific hardships together. Reshunah, the giant, white-haired, lavender-eyed clan leader, was going to allow our petition early since Zari had almost died after being separated from me and I hadn't fared so well myself.

Though I wouldn't be eighteen for a couple of weeks, Zari was already of age, being a few months older. We'd poured over calendars and checked phases of the moon until we finally decided his birthday must be about January 7th, whereas mine was April 7th. I thought it was cool that we shared the same day of the month.

My parents had been ill prepared to accept my engagement and they certainly weren't happy about me getting married. This was especially true since Zari was another type of human, one with mystical gifts. My dad just couldn't seem to get a grip. I still worried that he'd try to do something to stop our wedding at the last minute, though I couldn't imagine what that might be since I'd be eighteen. It was yet another reason to keep this wedding a secret for now. He found it almost impossible to accept the fact that Zari's people even existed, much less had abilities far beyond those of our kind. He struggled to understand and tolerate the situation he found himself in, with his only daughter in love with such a person. I actually felt sorry for him in some ways and wished I could make it easier for him.

My mom had talked me into waiting until I graduated to have the wedding, so it was planned for June 30th as it was, but Zari and I didn't want to wait and had begged Reshunah to allow us to marry in the tradition of the Forest People sooner. His decision to allow it thrilled us both.

I looked out my bedroom window, anxious for Zari to arrive. I knew he'd be in human form as he always was when he had to be around my parents. Seeing him as a Forest Person was just more than my dad could handle. I don't think he ever recovered after seeing Zari transform into his natural state when he was sick.

I looked out my bedroom window about that time and saw Zari's black Expedition turn onto our street.

*Oh my gosh, he's here!* I mentally ran down a checklist to make sure I had everything I needed for our escape into the wilderness.

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I rushed down the stairs when I heard the SUV pull into the drive. I saw my parents were in the kitchen with Xylea when I reached the bottom of the staircase. Most of the time, I took Xylea with us when Zari and I went to visit our Forest family, but this week was different. I blocked my thoughts so she wouldn't know what Zari and I were doing.

"You look extra pretty tonight," my mom quipped, looking up at me from her seat on the brown leather sofa as I entered the living area.

"Thanks, Mom," I said as I bent to kiss Xylea.

"Ma meh come home soon?" Xylea asked.

"Yes, baby. I'll be back in a few days. You be good for Gram meh and Gram peh," I answered in Xylea's vernacular as I hugged her before heading toward the front door.

My parents thought I was spending spring break at Analetta's cottage in the forest where Zari had been living. This visit was different, though, since we were attending the council meeting planned for the evening to choose each other in the way of the Forest People, after which, we would honeymoon in the cave that Zari had prepared as our home when we were in the forest. My heart fluttered with anticipation.

I opened the leaded double glass front doors just as Zari reached for the doorbell. He grinned when he saw me carrying my backpack, my long, red hair in a loose updo and makeup perfectly applied. The extra care taken to enhance my appearance wasn't lost on him.

"You look spectacular, my love," Zari cooed as he kissed my cheek before waving to Xylea and my parents.

"Thanks. You're amazingly handsome tonight yourself." I stared at him in his human form, dark auburn hair and emerald green eyes contrasting with a white dress shirt and black slacks. *He's the most gorgeous man I've ever seen and he's mine*, I thought as I took in his masculine beauty.

"Let's get out of here," I leaned forward and whispered. "Aren't you ready?"

"You know I am... more than ready."

"Zari, you're all dressed up tonight. What's the occasion?" my mom asked about that time.

"We're just going to a nice restaurant before we go to Analetta's," I answered in a hurry.

"You be careful, Zari," Dad chimed in.

"I will, Dr. McKay, I promise."

After a quick hug for Xylea, we were out the door and dashing down the bricked sidewalk, hand in hand, toward the SUV waiting in the driveway.

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“Are you excited about tonight?” Zari asked, his emerald green eyes sparkling as he slid into the beige, leather driver’s seat.

“I can’t believe we’re actually doing this. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted and more. You make me so happy. I love you more than anything!” I gushed as Zari pulled me to him across the console and kissed me, cupping my face in his hands.

When he pulled back, he paused and shook his head, the warmth of his breath lingering and sending a chill up my spine.

“I can’t believe it’s finally here either. It seemed we were never going to be together,” Zari sighed before leaning over the console and kissing me again.

“I know. I’ve waited for you my entire life. I never believed I could love anyone this much.” I brushed a tear away as my emotions overtook me.

“Well, we better be going. I’m ready to get the formalities over with so we can be together as mates and begin our life as it should be... finally! We’ve had to wait much too long,” Zari said as he winked, putting the SUV in reverse and backing out of the driveway.

The drive to Analetta’s cottage seemed to go quickly as we weaved our way along the road through the forest. The giant, old growth evergreens, towering on both sides of the road, were outlined by the magenta skies of dusk and seemed as if they were standing at attention, forming a gauntlet for us, the soon to be newlyweds. I was almost trembling I was so excited. The thought of Zari finally being my husband gave me more joy than I’d ever dreamed possible. I knew I loved him without reason and to the depths of my soul.

My mind wandered back to the ceremony. This was a serious and life changing commitment since the Forest People mated for eternity, vowing their commitment in the earthly realm and beyond, even to forever, and there was no divorce. Once committed, their kind attached to one another permanently and there was no going back once they chose each other, as they called marriage in their culture. It was the most serious oath that could be made, and as a result, their families were resilient and devoted to one another with bonds vastly stronger than my kind. I only hoped I could measure up as Zari’s wife.

It wasn’t long before we saw the little cottage, nestled in the forest with the warm glow of its lights welcoming us as a curl of smoke floated lazily above the chimney. As we pulled up, I saw Analetta open the door, her slender frame backlit by a roaring fire in the hearth. We left the SUV and hurried up the cobblestone walk, holding hands. Analetta kissed us on both cheeks in greeting before ushering us into the cozy warmth of the cabin.

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"Come in here, you two lovebirds. We've got a wedding to get ready for!" she blurted.

Inside, Chicami, joined us as he slapped Zari on the back in greeting and grinned at him. He was no doubt having a telepathic conversation with Zari about his wedding night since neither he nor I had ever been with anyone before. Tinges of red flushed under Zari's tan skin as I rolled my eyes and shook my head at the exchange.

"Let's leave them to it," Analetta said as she herded me into a small bedroom where she had several items on a small, antique, wooden dresser.

"Well, this is fun, especially since we get to do it twice." Analetta laughed and then grinned, referring to the fact that Zari and I would be married in the ways of the Forest People as well as the traditional church wedding in my world.

"Here, let's start with jewelry," she said as she took my right hand before picking up a blue topaz ring she'd made and placing it on my ring finger. "Something blue, my dear. And *this* is for a gift and it's new," she continued as she placed a white gold necklace around my neck that had a dozen tiny calla lilies dangling from links at the front as an accent to a larger one in the middle that had a diamond in the center.

"Oh, Analetta, it's *gorgeous!* Thank you *so* much!" I gushed as I hugged her.

"You're very welcome, my dear, but we're not finished. You should know this," she said, giving me a wink. "As far as something old... Here's the bracelet that my mother wore when she married my father. They were happy together for many years, and I feel it'll bring you luck and it's also old and borrowed."

The bracelet was a silver filigreed cuff in a Bohemian style, since Analetta's mother was a Gypsy, and it suited my tastes perfectly. Finally, she pulled out a small leather pouch with beading on it from the top drawer of the dresser.

"This Snoqualmie medicine bag contains crystals and herbs. It was my mother's recipe for keeping true love kindled for a long and happy life together and also for the conception of beautiful and healthy babies. Regrettably, it didn't work for me as far as the babies, but maybe it will for you. Put it under your pillow on your wedding night and then keep it in your bedroom always. Wear it under your clothes tonight during the ceremony. Now, do you have any questions about what's going to happen tonight? You know what I mean..." Analetta raised one eyebrow as she looked at me.

My face flamed crimson immediately.

"No, my dad's a doctor, remember? I think I've got that covered. Thanks, though," I whispered. "I do have a very personal question I would like to ask, though. I hope it won't offend you."

"Of course it won't, my dear. I already know. I felt it when I gave you the medicine bag. I don't know why Chicami and I were never able to have children.

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Generations ago, it was possible with the Forest People, so I'm not sure if it was just us or if our peoples are too different nowadays to conceive. My advice is to just let nature take its course and not to worry about it. The Creator has a way of working things out for the best. He's given me a daughter in you, Gracie. I couldn't love you more than if I were your own mother. He's already provided for you, too. You have Xylea. Worrying about it won't make it happen, and in fact, it might stress you enough to prevent it. Just enjoy each other. There's plenty of time to have a family."

"You're right. I feel better about things. You always seem to have the answers. I know Zari wants children, but we do have time and we do already have a daughter. Thank you, Analetta. You always seem to make things better. I love you." I hugged her and kissed her cheek, feeling relieved.

"Just remember, never go to bed angry, and each night, tell Zari you love him and discuss anything the day held before going to sleep. It will keep you close and in love with each other," Analetta paused before continuing. "Oh, Gracie, I'm really *so* thrilled for you! I know that you and Zari will be as happy as Chicami and I have been for these many years." She embraced me as we both fought back tears of joy.

2

*The Unexpected*



The four of us were heading toward the door when Telacki, Moodray, Kasika, and Canilo burst through it. The wild look in Telacki's eyes told me something was horribly wrong.

"The war has begun! Our clan was only able to hold back the evil ones because the spirit clan was here for our choosing!" she panted, trying to catch her breath.

I stood there stunned. I wanted our wedding to be perfect and now, there wouldn't even be a wedding. Worse than that was the sick feeling that rushed over me when I thought about the war. I feared for Zari and the rest of the Forest People. My worst nightmare was coming true; he was going to fight alongside Moodray. I knew Telacki had to be just as distraught. She'd gotten permission to marry early also, so we could choose our mates the same night.

"No!" I shrieked. "You can't! Zari! Please! Moodray, do something! We can't lose either of you!" I glanced at Telacki, who now had tears gushing down her face.

About that time, Zari took me in his arms.

"You know I have to fight. I'm of age and they need every man. I'll be fine. It wouldn't be fair for me not to. Being raised in the mountain clan taught me to defend myself, so I'm well prepared. Please don't worry, my love." He kissed me and then looked at Moodray. "What's happened?"

"The monsters killed two sentinels and were charging into medicine clan lands when we met them. There was a brutal battle and several of our men were killed. They

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had reinforcements, more of the dog faced monsters and the Sha Ki, so we need to notify the Fish People and the Selkies. That's why I'm here, that and to bring Telacki and the others to safety since Analetta has offered her home as a refuge. Chima and the other women are making meals for everyone. They're staying underground, though, while the teenagers are taking turns around the perimeter of our lands, keeping the hairless ones out of the forest," Moodray answered.

Analetta soon joined us carrying a handful of amulets.

"Here, I want each of you to wear one of these. They're for protection in battle and they have great power. My great great grandfather and his braves wore these when they warred with other tribes, and later, with the white man's army. Don't take them off," she said as she put one around each person's neck. She then reached for a stack of eagles' feathers on a nearby shelf, braiding a feather into their hair. "Now, you're ready." Analetta then turned to Chicami and kissed him. "Safe travels. I love you." He pulled her to him as they touched their foreheads together in the sacred bond.

"We have to go," Moodray interrupted. "There's no time to waste. Telacki needs to hurry and warn the Fish People and have them call the Selkies."

Zari turned to me and touched his face to mine as we joined, the colors of our auras intertwining as our souls and spirits merged. For one brief moment, all the pain and fear vanished as I found myself lost in him. Time stood still as we stood holding each other, entranced. When Zari pulled back, tears flowed down my face as the worry returned with a vengeance, since I knew this might be the last time I would ever see him. I watched as he and Chicami followed Moodray out the door.

My heart shattered.

Telacki and I didn't have time to mourn their departure since we had to summon Secorah.

"I'll drive you to the beach. We don't need to be in the woods." I sniffled, my face wet with tears.

"You know how much I hate those things you drive, but under the circumstances, I agree. It'll be faster and you're right, we won't have to go into the forest. At least we can take Zari's. Thank goodness it's bigger than that tiny box you drive!" Telacki wiped the tears from her eyes as I turned to Analetta.

"Do you want to come with us?" I asked.

"No, I'll wait here in case there's news or if somebody else needs a safe place to stay. I'll see you later."

"We'll come," Kasika added.

I hugged Analetta and grabbed the keys as we started toward the door.

###



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We arrived at a secluded area of beach after a short drive to the coast. My invisible passengers uncloaked after we descended into the strip of forest, out of sight of the road. Canilo and Kasika were shaken, having never ridden in a car before and Telacki took full advantage of their fear to tease them without mercy, though I remembered she'd been the one that was afraid, not so long ago.

After a short hike, we walked onto the beach, which had more rock than sand. It was a fairly open stretch with only a few random boulders scattered along it. Though it wasn't like the secluded little cove that Telacki and I enjoyed visiting, it was still hidden well enough by the strip of woods for our purposes and didn't require a long trek through the forest.

"Well, there's no time to waste," Telacki said as she faced the water and spoke in her language, summoning Secorah.

I was still awed at how much power was in her voice since I could see the transparent waves coming from her mouth. I assumed it was so the sound would enter the water easier, though I hadn't asked. I took in the salty sea air and waited.

After a few moments, three heads popped up from the surf. Secorah in all of her radiant beauty greeted us along with her children, though I could only hear her in my mind, outside of some squeaks.

*I see you've come to a different beach. This can only mean trouble. Am I right?*

*Yes. The war has begun and it's worse than we imagined,* Telacki answered, shaking her head. *The evil clan has allied with more criminals as well as dog faced monsters and Sha Ki. They've already killed several of our men. The Sha Ki are deadly since they fly.*

I cringed as Telacki spoke and a shudder ran up my spine. "Oh, God, please let Zari be safe," I muttered to myself as I fought back tears and my stomach rolled.

*I've heard of them, but I've never seen one. I hope I never do, either.* Secorah's eyes flashed orange when she spoke.

*We're here to ask you to tell our allies, the Selkies or Seal People as we call them, that the war has begun and it's time to join us in battle. We desperately need their help.* Telacki was almost in tears as she spoke.

*I've been expecting this,* Secorah said as she bobbed in the waves, her green and gold speckled skin brilliantly reflecting the moonlight. *I'll go immediately to the council and have the elders contact them. I'm also going to ask if there's anything we can do to help, should the battle come near the water. Our world is peaceful and we don't need evil like this to exist. If they win, it could change the entire balance in this realm. Listen in your mind for me, Telacki. I'll let you know when the Selkies arrive.*

*Thank you, Secorah. Your help and theirs mean everything to us. Be sure and tell them what I've said. We'll see you again soon.*

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Immediately, the mermaid waved and disappeared beneath the sparkling, moonlit whitecaps, followed by her children and their pet dolphins.

3

*Guns*



We were silent as I drove back to Analetta's, each of us having our own reason to worry. It had to have been the worst on Canilo since he was orphaned because of the last clash with the medicine clan. I couldn't ever remember such a pall hanging over us and with such heaviness. I noticed tears in Canilo's eyes after they removed their cloaking when I turned down the dirt logging road on the way back to the cottage.

As I pulled into Analetta's driveway, I was shocked to see Garrett's truck parked in front of her house. Instantly, I was alone in the Expedition, the others having vanished at the sight of the truck.

"It's OK. It's only Garrett," I said.

There was a shimmer as they reappeared. I shook my head with a half-smile as I saw Kasika's face light up in the back seat from my view in the rear view mirror. *That girl is in love if I've ever seen it... She's got it so bad for him that it's crazy. I'm afraid she's going to get hurt, though. Why's he here?— Oh, I get it. She asked him to come with her mind. I should've expected it.* I rolled my eyes as I pulled up beside his truck.

About that time, I saw the door open and Garrett stepped out, followed by Analetta. He was almost to us by the time everyone unfolded themselves from the SUV.

"So what's this I hear about a war?" he asked, cutting straight to the chase.

"The evil ones have attacked and they brought reinforcements. Let's go inside where we can talk," I answered as we began walking toward the cottage.

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I saw Telacki give Kasika a disapproving glare as Analetta opened the door for us. *She knows.* I'd just taken a seat at the wooden table when Garrett could no longer control his curiosity.

"So what kind of vermin did they bring this time? More of those bat things or what? I personally would love to have a little revenge for what they did to me."

"Garrett, the best thing you can do is stay out of the woods. You'll only get yourself killed this time." I noticed he was already wearing the amulet and the medicine bag to ward off the Sha Ki's evil. *At least he's come prepared,* I thought as I laughed humorlessly to myself. Even if he were protected from their evil, he lacked physical strength in comparison and would be easy prey.

"What if they need help? I brought my equalizer. I'm ready to take them on now."

"And what do you mean by that?" I asked.

"He means he brought his rifle," Analetta added.

"I brought rifles, *not* rifle. I also brought a couple of pistols and some dynamite my friend's father used to use when he was prospecting."

"Geez, Garrett, you sound like the guy from that old movie, what was it called? Oh, yeah, *Rambo*. Are you out of your mind?" I asked.

"Not at all. I can kill a deer at a thousand yards."

"Gross. That's sick. Besides, they'd be on you before you could fire the first shot."

"Don't be so sure, city girl. Why don't you let me teach you? It might come in handy. How about you, Analetta?" Garrett asked. "Or even one of you for that matter," he said as he looked at Kasika.

"I'd be willing to try," Kasika offered.

Telacki's eyes glowed red. "That's forbidden, Kasika, and you know it!" she snarled.

"If it came to Moodray's survival, I'd bet you'd learn," she countered.

"Thanks, Garrett, but I already know how to shoot," Analetta interrupted. "My Snoqualmie father made sure I could hunt and shoot both guns and arrows, whether it was to defend myself or to have food to eat. I'm ready if it comes to that."

"C'mon, Grace. I know it's foreign to you, but I'd feel a lot better if you were able to defend yourself, especially now, and after they took your mom."

I looked at Telacki, who had a puzzled look on her face before turning to Analetta.

"Gracie, I think it might be a good idea," she urged.

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I saw a look in Analetta's eyes I hadn't seen before, as if a violent storm were brewing. It frightened me since I wondered what she'd seen coming. I knew she knew something. I wanted to ask, but not in front of everyone.

"OK... I guess. I'm scared of guns, though."

"Great, we'll start first thing in the morning. You won't be afraid after I finish teaching you." Garrett insisted.

###

We spent the next day shooting behind Analetta's cottage. I was afraid at first, but Garrett was an excellent teacher and was patient with me. It wasn't long before I was hitting the cans he'd lined up. I had a feeling of accomplishment, but I still felt strange, actually handling a gun. Nevertheless, he assured me that it was in my best interest to be able to protect myself. Telacki and the others watched from a distance, not wanting to come too close, though I could feel that Kasika wasn't uncomfortable with it like the others. *She's strange. It seems she's more at home in my world. It doesn't make any sense, especially with her having been raised in the mountain clan.*

"Garrett, did Kasika tell you the war started?" I asked.

"Yeah, I don't want anything to happen to you or the others for that matter. So, that's why I came. I owe them my life. If I can help, I will. I plan on staying the week, since it's spring break."

"I don't want you to do that. We're safe here. Besides, isn't your family going to Hawaii?"

"They are, but I'm staying. It doesn't seem to have the same appeal since you won't be there this year."

"I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you." I looked away, the pain returning.

"Well, I still love you, Grace. I always will."

I glanced up about the time our eyes met. The sincerity in his azure eyes took my breath away, causing another wave of pain to crash upon me.

"I still love you, too. If I hadn't gotten lost, things would've been different. It's strange how sometimes fate intervenes. You know Kasika loves you, though, don't you?"

"I know she cares about me. I wouldn't necessarily call it love." He glanced over at the doe eyed girl standing in the distance as he loaded another clip.

"Just be careful. I don't want you to hurt her or yourself in the process."

"It's fine, don't worry."

## 4

### *News*



The next day, I woke to the smell of sausage cooking and voices in the other room. I'd almost forgotten where I was as the fog of sleep slowly lifted. I rose and headed into the kitchen where Analetta was serving up platters of sausage and eggs. I sat at the table, looking from one forlorn face to the next. I'd tried to contact Zari the night before, but he didn't answer. I was sick with worry.

"Is there any news?" I asked.

"Several have been killed, including Namisha. He was friends with Na-ashi." Telacki looked away as tears flooded her face.

"I'm so sorry, Telacki. I wish there was something I could do."

"There is," Garrett said.

I looked at him like he was crazy.

"And what would that be? They'll hit us with their energy and that's not even considering their strength and we won't see it coming. We need to stay here, though I obviously would love to help."

"We can. We can take the guns and pick them off from the top of a hill or mountainside. I want those bat things dead and I'm quite sure you'd be glad to do away with a few of those dog faced monsters, too."

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"That wouldn't work. First, they can sneak up on us since they can cloak and we can't. Second, I'm not good enough to hit something far away. We couldn't shoot and watch the skies for the Sha Ki either."

"The only way to kill them is a head shot," Analetta added.

I glanced at her, surprised by her remark.

"Then we get one of you guys to come with us." Garrett looked at Telacki and Kasika, since Canilo was still too young. He continued, "You can watch our backs while we shoot and also cloak us. Killing these things is the least we can do. It's payback time. I owe this clan in a huge way and I'm all in to help them. If you won't help me, I'll do it myself. Nobody's safe in the woods until these monsters are dead."

"That's suicide, Garrett!" I shook my head in disbelief as I stared at him. "There has to be another way."

"Then come up with it. I'm listening. I'm heading out at daybreak tomorrow, with or without you. You have until then to come up with a better idea."

I knew he was serious by the look on his face. My stomach churned as I weighed what I should do. I wouldn't have to worry about getting killed. Zari would take care of that if he found out I'd ventured into the woods, defying his wishes, and especially with Garrett.

"So, who's coming along to watch my back?" he asked.

I swear I'd never seen Telacki so uncomfortable. She couldn't bear to look at him. I knew she was also having a mental battle.

"I'll go, Garrett," Kasika offered.

I should've known that she would be the one to volunteer.

"OK. Thanks, Kasika. We'll leave at first light. I'm going to my house to get more ammo. I'm gonna light them up like a Roman candle. The rest of you should learn to shoot. It would be a huge help so we can get this war over with."

He pushed his chair back, thanked Analetta for breakfast, and headed for the door. My mouth was hanging open as was everyone else's as he left, slamming the door behind him.

"We've got to do something to stop him!" I screeched.

"And exactly what would that be? He's already decided that he's going. If we don't help, he's going in anyway. If we do, we're going to be violating the council's decree, not to mention we're supposed to be keeping the hairless ones out of the woods. Kasika, you're certainly not allowed to go with him. Not after that stunt on the mountain. You almost died! I forbid it!" Telacki frowned as she glared at Kasika.

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"I don't care what you say. You're not my mother, so you can't tell me what to do. Besides, we can't let him get killed! I'll do whatever it takes to keep him safe. He has to have help. Gracie's right, he won't stand a chance without one of us along."

"I think everyone needs to calm down," Analetta said as she joined us at the table with a fresh cup of tea and her ancient teapot, refilling ours. "We need to make a plan."

"Yes, but will it work?" Telacki asked.

"I don't know. I'm not being told."

There was silence at the table, each of us deep in thought.

"I might be able to get some help. I'll be back later," I said as I rose to my feet and headed toward the door. I glanced back, seeing more stunned faces, all except Analetta. She gave me an almost imperceptible nod as I left the cottage.

###

The sun was shining brilliantly as the shadows of the giant evergreens danced on the SUV as I sped toward town. I was out of options and was willing to risk everything to either stop Garrett or help him. If it kept Zari safe or gave the clan an advantage, that was even more reason to help, but I didn't think the plan would work. I picked up my cell and pressed speed dial.

"This is Sergeant Murphy," Matt said as he answered the phone.

"Matt, it's Gracie. Can you meet me? It's important and we need to talk."

"Sure, I'm having breakfast at the McDonald's by Highway 19. Do you want to meet me here?"

"That'll be great. See you in ten."

I hoped I wouldn't make a bigger mess by contacting him, but I knew that Garrett needed more help than I could provide or he needed to be stopped. I just hoped that Matt would be open to what I had to say as I drove down the sun drenched highway.