



HONOR BOUND

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Chapter One



Amaia knelt inside a dead, hollow tree and waited. "Shh," she whispered. Though her voice was barely audible, the bound and gagged girl beside her would have no trouble hearing. The girl was, after all, a werewolf—and the reason warriors from Amaia's own clan stalked the moonlit night.

She closed her eyes and held her breath as the warriors drew closer, their passage marked only by the whisper of booted feet over dead leaves and soft pine needles. She'd used too much energy already, just trying to hide from their sight. That, coupled with the effort she'd expended dragging the girl through the forest, threatened to drive her into helpless exhaustion. But she couldn't rest. Not until the search party moved on.

The girl stirred again, whimpering, and magic flared as Amaia struggled to cover the noise. A twig snapped, mere yards from their hiding spot.

This is it. They'll have my head for claiming a sacrifice as my own.

It would never occur to them she'd helped the girl escape.

She heard a deep voice call a hoarse, ritualistic command in their ancestral tongue. It was Itzal, the commander of their clan's warriors, ordering the team to move on. Amaia remained motionless until the last shuffling noises faded, leaving only the innocuous sounds of the night.

She risked a glance at the girl, who stared at her in shock and fear. After a moment, Amaia loosened the gag. "If I free you, are you going to fight me, or are you going to help me get you back to your clan?"

The girl swallowed. "Why?" Her voice sounded hoarse and scratchy, and fear made it shake. She couldn't be older than fourteen or fifteen, the youngest wolf her clan had ever trapped. If she'd been even a few years older, Amaia would be with her clan now, celebrating their triumph. Instead, she was hiding in the forest, being hunted like an animal.

Like a werewolf.

Amaia lowered her eyes and started untying the ropes. "I'm taking you home because there's no sense in it. There are always threats to be eliminated and blood debts to be paid to the Elders, but you're a *child*." She jerked at a knot, troubled. "It isn't right."

The ropes revealed delicate wrists sliced open by the silver threads woven through the rough fiber of the rope. Blood oozed from the wounds, but the girl blinked back tears and stayed silent. Huge hazel eyes stared up at Amaia, tinged slightly golden, though it could have been a trick of the moon. "I'm Callisto, of the Fallen Star Pack. Please help me get back to my people."

"My name is Amaia." She wrapped her hands around the girl's tiny wrists, whispering a call to the demon blood inside her. The wounds healed under her touch, but a wave of dizziness shook her. She'd nearly exhausted her reserves, of energy *and* magic, and her only hope was getting them to safety soon. She reached automatically for the knife at her belt, reassuring in its weight, as she stepped out of the hollow tree. "I can't use any more magic to hide us. Can you run?"

Callisto tried to stand, but her legs wobbled and she hit the pine-needle strewn ground with a soft grunt. "Not as a human. But if I change, it might be enough..."

"Do it." She didn't have the strength to carry the girl. "If they catch up to us, keep running, no matter what. You might make it alone."

Callisto's clothes had been all but destroyed already. She dropped them to the forest floor without a word and tilted her pale face up to the moon. A shiver of power skittered up Amaia's spine as the moonlight seemed to gather around them. The girl gasped, a sound that could have been pleasure or pain, and disappeared. In her place stood a pale white wolf, small and beautiful. She bumped her head against Amaia's hip once before gracefully bounding off into the woods.

Amaia followed, her fleet steps making only a little more noise than Callisto's paws. If they caught her, she'd be killed. But if they caught the girl...

She ran faster.

Branches and underbrush whipped at her face and legs, drawing stinging lines of blood, but she ignored the pain. Easy to do, since the sinking feeling in her belly eclipsed it anyway. Even if they managed to reach the safety of the Fallen Star stronghold, they'd be crazy not to turn her out or kill her. She'd hunted them for years, venturing out of the city with the rest of the warrior company to deal death and destruction to the wolves.

Even when they'd retreated to the deepest heart of the forest, her clan Leaders had ordered them eliminated. And Amaia had followed those orders, no matter what she thought of them.

Until now.

There was validity in most of the arguments made for extermination of the wolves. They were violent, bestial. Bitter about the loss of their lands and freedom. And, perhaps most compelling, they were fierce warriors, renowned for gladly fighting to the death. It made them dangerous foes, and smart strategy dictated they be eliminated.

But a child wasn't a threat, and they'd wanted to kill her anyway.

The wolf in front of her skittered to a stop without warning, her paws sliding over the ground as she whipped around. Amaia froze, her hand flying to the weapon at her side. "What's wrong?"

A whisper of noise above her was the only warning before a dark shadow dropped from one of the tree branches. She'd barely registered the sound of booted feet thumping against the ground before a muscular arm locked around her body, pinning her arms. Cold steel pressed against her throat, the magic in the blade biting against her skin and promising a swift, painless death.

A low, harsh voice spoke against her ear. "And now the demons stalk children through the woods. Aren't your glutted cities with their human servants enough for you?"

The quick death he offered, a magnificent one at the hands of a foe, beckoned. Amaia relaxed and let her head fall back against his shoulder. Then she thought of the girl's haunted eyes. *My death can't be for nothing.* "They're coming," she whispered, even that faint movement pressing the blade deeper into her skin.

Magic tingled through the air again, and Callisto stood before them in human form, her arms wrapped around her body as she shivered in the cool night air. "Don't, Orion. She saved me."

The man behind Amaia cursed softly, but the knife stayed close against her throat. "She's a demon, Calli. They can play with your thoughts. Make you see and feel things that aren't real. If she saved you, it's a trap."

"She saved me," the girl repeated, her voice edged with hysteria. "Please. Please, Orion, I want to go home."

The knife trembled. Orion swore again and released Amaia, the movement so abrupt she stumbled and fell to her knees. By the time she looked up he had crossed in front of her, leaving her to stare at his back as he stripped off his shirt. Moonlight

painted the hard lines of his shoulders as he wrapped the fabric around Callisto. "Shh, sweetheart. You're safe now. You knew I'd find you."

"They're still after us. They're still after *her*."

Orion turned, and for the first time Amaia saw his face, all strong features and hard angles, with dark eyes that studied her without emotion. After a moment he jerked his head once in a curt nod. "If you help me get my sister to safety, I'll grant you safe passage into the stronghold of my people."

Any safety he promised was suspect, but she had no choice. "The commander called off the search. Loudly. Which means he left at least two warriors behind." Amaia unsheathed her knife as she rose. "They would have followed us."

As if to prove her words, a man burst out of the darkness with a sharp cry. Bakar, her mother's cousin, who liked to fight with handcrafted spears lined with poisoned blades. Amaia pivoted sharply, avoiding the pointed stab of the spear tip, then dropped to the forest floor as Bakar swept the bladed edge toward her.

Another battle call rang out, one she recognized instantly. *Endika*. Amaia's belly knotted as she kicked Bakar's knee and knocked the spear from his hand. Endika was a friend.

Bakar stumbled to the ground, his hand already groping across the forest floor. Before Amaia could move a shot rang through the clear night and Bakar's head snapped back. She turned as he slumped to the ground and found Callisto, both hands curled around a smoking gun.

The sound of metal on metal drew her gaze just in time to see the silver dagger fly from Endika's hand as Orion disarmed him with a casual flip of his wrist. Orion fought with a blank-eyed, lazy expression, giving the impression of someone bored with the lack of challenge presented. It was less than Endika deserved, to die at the hands of someone who toyed with him, and Amaia hissed her displeasure, even knowing Endika would kill her if he could.

Before she could move, Orion brought his arm up in a quick slash. Blood flew, and Endika dropped to the ground, clutching his throat. By the time she reached him, his normally dark skin was ashen, cold.

"Nine, Amaia," he rasped. "Only nine." Then he died.

Orion crouched next to her, his face blank. "What does he mean?"

"I abandoned my unit," she murmured. "My life is theirs, if they can take it. Eleven others, besides myself." She dragged herself to her feet, feeling tired and hopeless. "Nine now."

"We're close to the border of the enclave." He rose and walked to his sister's side. He slipped the gun from her hands and returned it to a holster on his hip before glancing at Amaia again. "Come with us, and I'll see you safe. For her. A life for a life."

"I knew what I was doing. You owe me nothing." She would only be safe when she'd dispatched the other nine warriors. Orion shifted from one foot to the other, and she stared at him for a moment. His shoulders were strong, the bare skin silvered by the moonlight, and a sudden shiver of longing wracked her. "But I'd appreciate a place to regroup for the night."

He nodded and slipped an arm around his sister's shoulders, coaxing her onto the barely visible path that wove between the trees. "Then come with me."

Chapter Two



She was beautiful.

Orion ground his teeth together and jerked his gaze away from the demon. The moon had washed out her face, but she looked gorgeous now in the warmth of the flickering firelight, the shadows caressing her strong features. A creature of fire, of passion. *A demon.*

The Elders insisted on holding meetings around the ancient fire pit, an affectation which drove Orion crazy. They lived in comfortable homes with modern conveniences and had a well-lit communal building far better suited to important discussions.

Instead they sat around a fire pit and congratulated themselves on the purity of their vision, free from the corrupting influences of the demons in their lavish cities. *Except for when you go home and watch cable television in your air-conditioned bedrooms. Hypocrites.*

His eyes were once more drawn to Amaia. She stared unblinkingly at the fire, not flinching or recoiling, even when the voices surrounding her grew harsh and loud.

"She's a demon. A killer." Perseus slammed his fist against his palm and bellowed, "We should give her no quarter!"

The youngest Elder, Lucielle, frowned. "She rescued one of our children. She can't stay here, of course, but she has earned safe passage."

"She's earned a swift death, no more." The Alpha's low, angry tone made it clear he'd willingly deliver that death, but there was something dark in his eyes when he looked at Amaia. Something covetous, greedy. Cavil might desire her death, but he desired her body, as well.

Outrage warred with an unacceptable protectiveness as Orion rose to his feet, drawing all gazes. Many of them were resentful, especially Cavil's. Of course, if Orion had been five or ten years older when his parents had died, *he* might be sitting in the Alpha's spot of honor right now, a fact Cavil would never forget. Never *forgive*.

Orion waited until silence fell before speaking. "We pride ourselves on being uncorrupted. On having honor. What honor is there in murdering the savior of one of our pack? If we're going to act like the demons, we might as well join them in their cities."

Cavil couldn't quite cover his sneer. "Very well. One night of sanctuary, Orion. And the demon is *your* charge."

The Alpha smiled, his pleasure odd considering how vehemently he had been calling for the demon's death mere seconds before. In that moment Orion knew he'd walked into a trap, could *feel* it springing shut behind him as he stared at Cavil.

But no one argued. The Alpha had spoken, and his word was law.

The Elders rose, still murmuring to each other, and dispersed with unsurprising haste. The night was cold, even in the circle of the fire, and they would be anxious to return to their comfortable homes. Callisto had already been tucked into bed under the watchful eye of their father's aunt, a matronly woman who would be more comfort to her now that Orion could.

That left Amaia, still staring at the fire. He cleared his throat. "If you come with me, I'll find you a place to sleep and some food."

She didn't move. "Your uncorrupted Alpha's machinations rival those of the Demon Princes."

"He's hoping you'll kill me in my sleep, I imagine." *Or fuck me into a coma.* "If you want to ruin his plans, don't try to kill me."

"What would that accomplish?" She watched him as she stood, her movements smooth and graceful. "I'm not hungry, but I could use a bath."

The cool night air felt a good bit warmer when he imagined water beading on her naked skin, meandering down her body in rivulets that followed the wicked curve of her breasts, her hips—

Demons ensnare the senses. It was his father's voice, echoing the warning he'd received when he'd reached the cusp of manhood. Demons could do any number of magical things that seemed outrageous and unbelievable, even to a man who could turn into a wolf, but their most dangerous, insidious skill was their mastery of desire. A demon could ride you to exhaustion and beyond, make you love her even as she killed you.

Amaia met his suspicious gaze with an air of unruffled calm, and he couldn't tell if his instant, vicious arousal was by her design or the natural result of going too long without a woman. He cleared his throat again, but it didn't help. When he spoke, his voice sounded low and rough to his own ears. Uncultured and wild, and no doubt everything she expected from an uncivilized werewolf. "No tricks. No mind games."

Confusion clouded her eyes, followed by something that could have been hurt. "What would that accomplish?" she asked again, then walked past him into the darkness.

He strode to catch up with her, feeling both relieved and embarrassed. "I didn't mean to offend."

"You didn't." She planted her feet on the path. "I have no idea where I'm going."

Her annoyed expression made him smile. He gestured to a path that led away from the village, into the woods and closer to the perimeter of magic that protected them. "I have a cabin. I'm sure it doesn't have the sort of amenities you may be used to, but it has electricity and running water."

"And what do you think I'm used to?" Her boots looked heavy, and should have thumped on the path like this. Instead, they made only the slightest whisper of sound. "Some huge brownstone with fur rugs and polished silverware? Servants to attend my every need?"

Orion made a rude noise. "Honey, I've been to Chicago. Humans toil away in their dull little lives while you live above it all in your mansions and penthouses."

Her jaw hardened, then lifted. "My mother's family is wealthy. And they cast me out because my father was one of those toiling, dull humans."

"Oh." It was inadequate for a confession of that magnitude, but he didn't know what else to say. "And yet you became one of your clan's warriors."

"What else was I going to do?" The question seemed more earnest than rhetorical. "I barely survived childhood as it was. I needed to learn to fight." She shrugged. "Seemed prudent to let them pay me for it."

"And what happens to you now?"

"If I survive the rest of my unit, I'll have earned my pardon. I can go back without punishment. If I want." Amaia stopped in front of his cabin and raised a questioning eyebrow. "This is your place?"

"Yeah." He studied his cabin, trying to imagine what it must look like to her. Small, rough, and utilitarian, in all likelihood. He could have moved closer to the rest of the village, but he *liked* it in the woods. The odd mix of ritualistic magical tradition and modern innovation in the village grated on his nerves most days, probably because the rest of the pack couldn't bring themselves to embrace one or the other.

Two wooden steps led up to the door, which he never bothered to lock. No one in his right mind would dare steal from him, even if he had anything worth taking. He pushed open the door and held it for her. "Lights are just inside the door, bathroom's straight through to the back. I'm going to go get some wood and start a fire."

"Thank you, Orion." Her shoulder brushed his chest as she walked past him. The scent of her hair filled his nose, sweat and citrus and *woman*. He fought back a groan and let the door swing shut, leaving him in the quiet, still night to gather the ragged remains of his self-control.

It wasn't until he'd gathered the firewood and was shouldering through the doorway that he remembered one essential detail that had eluded him when she'd spoken of taking a bath. He couldn't blame himself for the mistake, considering how rarely he made use of the giant, claw-footed tub, but it was a mistake indeed. A big one.

His bathroom had no door, and the tub was clearly visible from where he stood. And what he saw made his momentary fantasy by the fire pit pale in comparison.

She stood in the tub with water slicking her smooth, tanned skin and trickling from her wet hair. A shiver took her, and the dark peaks of her breasts tightened in the chill air. She turned away to reach for a towel, and Orion caught sight of a scar, faded by time, running down her side. Then he forgot everything else as his eyes traced the swell of her hips and ass.

He tore his gaze away and strode to the fireplace, dumping the armful of logs onto the top of the stack without care for where or how they fell. One rolled off and hit the floor with a dull *thud*, but he ignored it in favor of fighting the hot need that pulsed through his body and hardened his cock.

Even with his back to her, he marked her progress—the sound of the water draining from the tub and the soft rasp of terrycloth against skin. "I'm sorry." She spoke close behind him. "I'm used to communal bathing. I didn't think."

There hadn't been time to pull on a new shirt before the Elders gathered, and he swore he could *feel* her breath against his back. "It's not a problem," he replied, his hoarse voice giving lie to his words. He'd denied himself for far too long, uninterested in the ambitious women of the pack, the ones who only sought to bed him in hopes of convincing him to challenge Cavil and make them the Alpha's lover. Now his body rebelled, clamoring for him to turn and fist his hand in her hair, to wrench her head back and demand her body's submission, her body's *pleasure...*

He turned without meaning to, his hands clenched into fists at his side to keep them from touching her. "This is not going to work."

She stood there, her hand folded around the top of the towel, holding it together over her firm breasts. "I'll get dressed and go." But she didn't move.

Heightened senses made it impossible to ignore how hot she was for him. He wanted to edge his hand under her towel, to slip his fingers between her thighs and feel the proof of her arousal. He just *wanted*.

So he took a step closer, crowding into her personal space. "Have you ever fucked a werewolf, Amaia?"

"No." Her brows drew together as she lifted her free hand to his chest. Her fingers trembled a little against his skin.

Orion slipped his hand under her hair and wrapped the long, damp strands around his fingers. "And what have you heard? What stories do demons tell about our uncivilized, animalistic rutting?"

"That you have no self-control," she whispered, pressing her palm over his heart. "You're rough, violent. Unconcerned with anything but sating your own lust."

He couldn't help but laugh. "Our women would make us regret that." He tightened his fingers a little, pulling her head back, and lifted his other hand to grasp the edge of her towel. "Maybe some of us like it a little rough, a little intense...but a man who doesn't satisfy his lover would find himself without one rather quickly. Even the weakest of us has the right to deny a man their bed."

Her eyes darkened until they were almost black. "Do I have the same right?"

"Of course." He curled his fingers around the towel, but didn't pull it away. "You have the right to deny yourself my bed, if that's what you really want." *Even though I know it isn't...*

The darkness cleared, and Amaia made a soft noise of longing. Her heart pounded, and her fingers curled until her nails bit into his skin. "How do you do this? You make me *want*—" She bit off her words and shrugged out of the towel, letting him drag it from her body and throw it to the floor.

He wasted no time pulling her against him, pressing the lush curves of her body against his. Her breasts rubbed his chest and he lifted a hand to cup one, molding his fingers to the firm curve. "You are so damn gorgeous. I know better than to want you,

and yet..." There was no need to finish, not with the hard ridge of his cock grinding against her stomach through his pants.

She hissed in a breath, and her teeth scored her lip. "Kiss me." Her hands fell to his belt buckle, and she opened it easily, brushing the hard flesh beneath. He choked on a groan and took her mouth.

Kissing her was like something out of a dream, the kind he woke from thrusting into his own hand and chasing release. He dragged his tongue along her full lower lip, savoring her taste as he coaxed a soft noise from her.

Amaia explored his mouth with lazy patience even though she shook with the same desire that burned in him. When her soft noises turned into hitching moans, she slipped her fingers under the waistband of his jeans and tugged him across the room.

He stopped a foot from the bed and dropped his mouth to her chin. Her pulse beat so fast in her throat, calling to the instinctive need to close his teeth on her neck, to show strength and dominance. To mark her. He shifted at the last moment and nipped at her shoulder instead, reminding himself that Amaia wasn't a lover or a mate. She wasn't *his* to claim.

Not even if I want to.

The thought was so shocking he groaned and pushed her back onto the bed. He pulled in panting breaths of air as his gaze swept down her body. "What do you want, Amaia?"

She came to her knees in a lithe roll, already reaching for him again. "I want to feel you." Her eyes were glazed, unfocused, and she slid her hands around his waist and scattered open-mouthed kisses over his chest.

His stepped back to drag off his heavy boots, his eyes never leaving hers as he tossed them by the end of the bed. When he returned he caught her hands and guided them to his jeans. "Take my pants off."

It took Amaia a moment to unbutton them, but her fingers were steady as she dragged the tab of his zipper down. She edged her hands under the denim and his underwear and carefully eased them both down. Her breathing roughened as she closed a hand around his shaft and squeezed.

A growl rumbled up out of his chest and he reached down to catch her wrist. "Wait."

Amaia stilled, her gaze locked with his. "What is it?"

He smiled and urged her back onto the bed before sinking down next to her. "I want to touch you."

Her hair spread out around her in a dark cloud, and she twisted on the quilt. When he laid his hand on her belly, she moaned in relief. "Have you ever fucked a demon, Orion?" she asked, echoing his earlier words with a half-smile.

It made him laugh. He smoothed his hand up to cup her breast again, plying the tight nipple with his thumb. "No. I've heard it can go badly."

She gasped, a harsh, shocked sound, then slid her hand over his. "I won't hurt you. I swear it."

He had to taste her. He bent his head and rasped his tongue around the dusky tip, growling his pleasure when she arched up against his mouth. She filled his senses, from the clean taste of her damp skin and the smell of her arousal to the sound of her heart, even the silky feeling of her hair wrapped around his fingers.

"Orion." The husky whisper stoked the fire inside him even as her strong, wandering hands gentled him. She twined her legs with his, soft skin sliding over his, and pulled him closer.

"What do you like?" He spoke the words against her breast as he rubbed his fingers over the wicked swell of her hip and lower, dipping between her thighs. "Slow and easy? Or do you want a taste of the wild?"

She bucked under his hand with a small cry. "Both." Her nails bit into his flesh. "I want both."

The temptation to pull her to her knees and thrust into her stole his breath. He could picture it already, her lithe back arching in front of him as he took her slowly, made her beg.

Soon, he promised himself, settling instead for shifting his fingers in search of that special spot, the small bundle of nerves that would bring her hips off the bed. He'd prove the wolves knew more than carnal, primal rutting.

And then he'd take her. Hard.

Another bolt of heat shot through Amaia, and she shuddered. Orion's clever fingers stroked her, coaxing her higher, and she writhed under his touch.

The men of her clan were renowned for their attractiveness, their skill. But she'd never felt anything like the searing pleasure that shook her when Orion growled against

her skin and deepened his caresses. She curled into him and closed her teeth on his neck in a silent plea.

He groaned and curled his fingers tighter in her hair, pulling her head back. A moment later she felt *his* teeth on *her* neck, hard and bruising.

She bit her lip until she tasted blood, but a shriek escaped her anyway. Everything inside her had wound into a knot, tight and burning. "Please. Please—" The knot exploded without warning, sweeping her away in a cascade of pleasure that curled her toes and brought tears to her eyes.

His mouth fell to her ear, air tickling her skin as he panted harshly. "I'm going to take you, Amaia. Hard, if you want it. Tell me you want it."

"Yes," she hissed. "I want it. I want you." Frustration clawed at her even through the aftershocks of her orgasm. She felt that, no matter how hard she tried, she could never get close enough to him. "Take me."

One large hand smoothed along her stomach to cup her hip. "Roll over."

She obeyed, whimpering when he coaxed her up onto her knees. She clenched the quilt in her hands and tossed back her head, eager to feel him behind her. The leisurely, almost detached pleasure she'd known in the past was a hazy memory, blotted out by the strength of his hand on her hip.

Warm lips skimmed her shoulder as his fingers tightened. "Tell me how much you want me."

The truth was stark, terrifying, and she turned her head to whisper it against her arm. "I've never wanted anyone like this."

"Good." And with that he thrust into her, one long, smooth stroke that drew a hoarse, needy cry from her throat.

She bowed her back and pressed her face against the quilt for a moment. Then the insatiable need he'd ignited drove her up on her hands and back against him. "Yes."

His hand hit the bed next to hers, the muscles in his arm straining as he curled the other hand in her hair. She felt his chest against her back and his breath hot on her neck as he pulled her head back. "Is this what you imagined? Uncivilized domineering sex?"

She hadn't imagined it at all, and his stillness scraped her nerves. She turned her face to his, too lost in anticipation of the maelstrom to come to censor her words. "I need you."

Orion laughed, a deep, arrogant sound that she felt through the vibrations of his chest. His mouth shifted, found her ear and closed around the sensitive lobe. He nipped at her, his breath tickling her skin. "Werewolves don't need magic to make our lovers beg," he whispered as he rocked his hips once in a teasing prelude. "Beg for me, Amaia."

She wanted to, just so he'd ease the ache inside her. But what he wanted would lay her bare, leave her at his mercy. "I don't think so."

He laughed again and pulled out mere inches before rocking back into her. "Stubborn little thing. I like my women stubborn."

Heat blazed in her, and she choked back a moan. "Do you think I'd need magic to make *you* beg?"

"Maybe not..." Another thrust, this one stronger, and a noise slipped from him, half growl and half groan. "Do you *want* me to beg?"

"No." Her mind had shut down under the raw graze of sensation, so much and yet not nearly enough. The words slipped from her without thought, an almost inaudible rasp of sound. "Please. *Please*."

"Yes." He tightened his fingers in her hair and coaxed her head to the side until his mouth hovered over hers. For one tense second he held them there, his body shaking over hers. Then he crushed his lips to hers as he sent her spiraling into bliss.

Amaia writhed under him, whispering curses he wouldn't understand, desperate even in the throes of pleasure. Her body hummed, burning where his skin touched hers. She could do nothing but ride it out, even as part of her struggled to hold back, to keep the final connections between them closed so that she wouldn't hurt him.

He was still hard, still moving inside her with strong thrusts when his lips tickled her ear again. "Let go."

"I *can't*." Denying him—denying *herself*—was painful. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm the strongest werewolf you're likely to meet, sweetheart. It'd take more than one round to hurt me." He sounded so sure, so *confident*. In the next moment his fingers slid from her hip and down, dipping between her thighs to caress dizzy circles in counterpoint to the movement of his hips. "Let go."

You won't hurt him. Just do it... Even if she'd wanted to hold back, the combination of his thrusts, his stroking fingers, and the low vibration of his voice undid her. Another orgasm took her, this one accompanied by a flare of magic that shot through her like fire, making her scream.

Amaia felt it, the thin wire of energy snapping through her. Orion's energy. He lifted his head and roared his release, the growling shout filling the small cabin as his power, the sheer, wild *strength* of him filled her, like fine champagne or even a drug. It sang through her, intoxicating and addictive.

Her arms collapsed, and she hid her face in a pillow as she panted. So much power, and she only wanted more. He coaxed her onto her side, still curled behind her and joined with her, and his strong fingers stroked her waist and belly. "See? I'm okay."

She wished she could say the same for herself. Instead, she felt shaky, unnerved. "It's dangerous."

He laughed. "*Life* is dangerous, sweetheart."

Amaia pulled away gently, turning until she faced him. "That's true." She channeled some of the strength she'd drawn from him and used it to flip him onto his back, then climbed on top of him. "I could have killed you."

Orion seemed unconcerned. He tucked his hands behind his head and stared up at her with a lazy smile. "You think so?"

Whether she could or couldn't wasn't even a question. She narrowed her eyes. "You *want* me to do your Alpha's dirty work? Remove the threat you pose to him?"

"I think the more pressing question is whether *you* want to."

"No." She sat back and studied him. "He would only take what I didn't want to give him."

He didn't pretend not to understand. "He'd try." Even white teeth flashed at her as he grinned. "Cavil isn't half the man I am. You'd eat him alive."

Amaia trailed a hand down the center of his chest and smiled. "You like that I'm dangerous."

"I like that I don't have to worry about hurting you."

Her smile faded. "I have to worry." She leaned down, desperate to make him understand. "I could do it right now. You'd be hard again before you could take another breath. You'd give me everything, and you'd love every second of it."

"Try." Just one word, quiet and sure.

"I didn't say I *wanted* to do it," she argued.

"Try."

Amaia laid her hand on his face and bent until her lips brushed his. The connection between them opened with a spark of sensation that made her jerk, and she moaned as she fed back to him a little of the sexual energy she'd drawn from him only minutes earlier.

He grew hard between them, but when she tried to taste his power like she had before, it slipped from her fingers. He growled and bit her lower lip before rolling them over again. "You don't know all my secrets, Amaia."

It should have scared her the way her earlier vulnerability had. Instead, she felt free. Safe. "You're strong."

"I'm strong," he confirmed before pushing into her again with a rumbling growl. "And you're irresistible."

She slipped her fingers into his hair and arched, heat skittering up her spine. "Bite me again."

His teeth closed on her neck, blurring the boundary between pleasure and pain, and he rocked into her again. Less controlled, this time, and she could feel the power inside him, bright and burning and out of her reach as he drove her toward release.

Amaia didn't hold back. She left herself open to him when she came, dragging her nails down his back in helpless ecstasy. Orion growled and bit her again, and this time it *did* hurt, but it faded in another rush of pleasure as he drove into her one last time and stilled.

She whispered his name, awed. Her people prized control. Losing it meant harm or, all too often, death for a lover.

But not Orion.

He rolled one last time, bringing her on top of him with her hair falling around them in a wild, untamed mass. "Not all wolves are toys for demons to play with."

She shivered, chilled by his words. "And not all demons make satisfying conquests."

Orion gathered the strands of her hair up and urged her head back. "I didn't mean it like that."

"You've known me all of two hours. How else could you have meant it?"

His thumb traced along the line of her jaw and he smiled. "I just meant you don't have to worry about hurting me. And I don't have to worry about hurting you."

Amaia closed her eyes, afraid he'd see the vulnerability in them. "Thank you for letting me stay here tonight."

Strong hands coaxed her down to relax against his chest. "Thank you for saving my sister."

"She's just a child. She has no place in our war. I had to see her to safety."

He was silent for a few seconds before he sighed. "We should sleep. I mean to talk to the Elders again tomorrow and secure protection for you. It besmirches the pack's honor to do less."

She could only stare at him for a moment. "It's not a matter of the pack's honor, Orion. I have to leave at first light. Staying would only put you all in danger."

"I owe you protection," he insisted, his tone as stubborn as the tight look in his eyes. "My honor is important to me."

"More important than your life? Than Callisto's?"

His silence was telling and a little terrifying. "Not more important than Callisto."

Amaia's chest tightened. "For her sake, then. If I don't leave, they'll come for me, and they'll kill you." She left unspoken the truth she suspected – that seeing him dead would hurt worse than her own end. "It's the only way."

"At first light." His voice sounded flat, but his fingers tightened on her hip. "I'll escort you to the perimeter."

"Thank you, Orion." She tugged the blankets around them and relaxed against his chest. She didn't have much time, and she wanted to memorize the planes of his face and body, but exhaustion pulled at her until there was nothing to do but give in to it.

Chapter Three



Amaia bolted away when the door slammed against the wall. Orion made it halfway out of the bed, knife in hand, before he froze. He inhaled deeply and swore as he lowered his weapon. "Callisto?"

Callisto stumbled into the cabin. She panted for breath, her face peaked and frightened. "Some of the Elders were talking—I heard them—"

The knife clattered against the wood of the small bedside table as Orion rose and reached for his pants. Tense power vibrated from him, but his voice was calm. "What did you hear, Calli?"

She glanced at Amaia. "They want to make a deal. They think the demons will leave us alone if they hand her over."

Amaia wrapped the sheet around herself. "I have to leave now. If your Elders try to strike that deal, Itzal will take me and order them killed anyway."

Orion didn't argue. He strode to a standing wardrobe and pulled out a T-shirt and a sturdy leather vest. "Go to Lucielle, Calli. Tell her everything Amaia said." He withdrew a heavy belt from the closet next, one designed to hold any number of weapons. He jerked the shirt over his head, then buckled on the belt as he turned to face Amaia. "If you kill your squad, you're free?"

"That's the law. Everyone, including the commander, and I'll have my freedom."

"Does the law say you can't have help?"

"No." Her people didn't prize fair fighting. They prized winning. "I can have help."

He met her eyes and nodded once. "So we kill them all."

Her clothes were still in the bathroom. When she returned he was dressed and strapping a foot-long blade to his hip while Callisto talked to him. "I'll go talk to Lucielle. They didn't want Cavil to know. I don't know if that matters..."

"Stay away from Cavil," Orion snapped. "I mean it, Calli."

She lifted her chin. "I *wasn't* going to him, Orion. I just thought it might matter that they were keeping secrets."

Amaia could guess why the Elders hadn't told Cavil. The harsh, angry expression on Orion's face proved her guess was accurate. It was equally clear he had no intention

of telling his younger sister that the pack's Alpha wanted to keep a demon as a pet for his own twisted purposes.

Instead he nodded to his sister. "It's important. You did good."

Callisto hesitated. "I'll talk to Luci." Then she hurried out the door.

Amaia pulled her blood-stained tank top over her head. "Will she be taken care of if something happens to you?"

"Lucielle will protect her." He strapped on a second knife, picked up a pistol, and checked it with cool efficiency. "You said there were nine left?"

"Eight other warriors...and Itzal." She watched him as she buttoned her pants. "You don't have to do this. I told you before, you don't owe me anything."

He ignored everything except the part he seemed to want to hear. "Itzal is the leader?"

"Yes." She hurried into her boots and buckled on her sheath. "He's a skilled fighter. A dangerous one."

"And he's in my territory. I have traps all around here." He pulled another gun from the closet and held it up. "Do you know how to shoot? The bullets are bespelled to hurt demons."

"I should try not to shoot myself, then." She took it and nodded to the door. "Is there a good trail away from the village? One the squad can follow?"

"There are a few. For some reason, your people seem to favor the western path."

"There's a hidden spot up on the ridge where we make base camp. There's an old bunker there, stocked with supplies." She stuck the gun in her waistband and sheathed her knife, then headed for the door.

Orion caught up to her before she hit the top step. "I have blinds along the western path. Traps. One weapons cache."

"It's the likeliest place to find them, in any case." She hesitated and then blurted out, "We don't have to fight them, Orion. You could help me sneak past them." She'd end up fighting them all eventually, but he didn't need to know that.

His dark eyes studied her for a moment in silence, then he snorted. "Lying to a werewolf is pointless."

She gave him a tight smile. She wasn't particularly worried about the other eight warriors in her squad, but no one had ever beaten Itzal. Not even with the best of odds. "Then let's go."



Orion sensed Cavil a second before the Alpha stepped out into the path in front of them, his eyes cold. "You surprise me, demon. Though I guess I should have realized what an asset he'd be."

Amaia's hand crept toward the hilt of her knife. "I'm leaving so your village will be safe. I don't want trouble with you."

"You *are* trouble," Cavil shot back. "Trouble that shouldn't have been brought here in the first place."

There wasn't time to argue. Orion stepped forward, putting himself between Amaia and the Alpha. "And now she's trouble that's leaving. You, however, have your own troubles, Cavil. Your Elders conspire behind your back."

"I know what the Elders have planned. It's a stupid idea, one they won't have the chance to implement." He stared at Orion, then at Amaia. "You're going with her."

"Someone has to protect the pack. The Elders put us all in danger."

Cavil's eyes flashed in the moonlight. "*You* put us in danger. I'll stop the Elders, so there's no need for you to leave with the demon." He tilted his head, his gaze roving over Amaia. "But you still will, won't you, Orion?"

The wolf rose hard and fast, demanding he challenge Cavil. Not just for his place as Alpha—a place Orion could fill with ease—but for daring to cast covetous eyes on a woman so clearly belonging to someone else.

To *him*.

His quiet snarl filled the night air, and he stepped forward. "Unlike the rest of you, I still believe in honor."

"Of course it's about honor," Cavil sneered. "It couldn't possibly be about the fact that you've already managed to chew up her neck." He stepped aside with a disgusted noise. "Go. Good riddance."

The temptation to stay, to force the issue, bordered on overwhelming. But he had more than himself and his pride to think about. He gestured to Amaia without looking away from Cavil, indicating for her to take the lead.

She hurried past the Alpha without another look, moving down the path. Cavil watched them, not making a move, but also not turning his back. Orion promised himself that he'd deal with the Alpha later and strode after her.

She looked tense, rigid. "You'll have trouble with him when you get back."

"I'll probably have to challenge him," he replied, his weariness sounding in his voice. "It's been a long time coming."

"You don't want to be Alpha?"

He did. He didn't. He had no idea. It was a question that haunted him daily. He had the power inside him to guide the pack and protect it, that wasn't the question. But the direction in which he wanted to guide the pack... Some of the younger wolves would support being brought into the present, but the Elders would fight him, tooth and nail. Some might even challenge him themselves.

Some might look at Callisto and see her as leverage.

Amaia still watched him, so he shrugged one shoulder. "It's complicated."

He thought she might question him further, but she just nodded and turned back to the trail. "You mentioned traps."

Her soft, distant tone reminded him he needed to reclaim his own detachment. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, letting the breeze carry the scents of the wood to him. It had always soothed him before, but this time the wind carried *her* scent, musky and intoxicating, and he had to struggle to ignore it as he emptied himself of emotion with brutal efficiency.

"Traps," he murmured after several tense heartbeats. "The first one is about three hundred yards down the path. A magical tripwire and a pit. You should stay behind me, because it's only triggered by demons." He opened his eyes and gave her a feral grin. "Our shamans are good."

She stopped and watched as he walked past her. Something hot flashed in her dark eyes, the same look she'd given him in his bed. Then she blinked and smiled lazily. "Whatever you say."

He smiled and veered off the path, leaving her to pick her way through the dense underbrush behind him. The power of the wild thrummed in his blood, and he opened himself up the tiniest bit to the wolf inside, sharpening his senses and his instincts.



They were still twenty yards from his first trap when the scent on the wind told him it wasn't empty. He stopped and held up a hand, his fist closed, and tried to listen to the sounds of the forest around him.

She sucked in a quiet breath, and the soft sound of her blade sliding against leather broke the tense silence. Her hand landed on his shoulder, and she pointed with her knife to the pit and then beyond, to the other side of the path. "A trap of their own," she whispered.

If they *were* there, they were good enough to be silent. He studied the pit for a few moments, mapping the territory around it in his mind. Then he nodded. "Circle around. Two minutes."

She crept around him and disappeared into the brush.

He counted his steady heartbeats and waited, straining his ears for some hint of her passage. She moved through the woods with the skill of a trained tracker, any noise she made covered in the creaking of ancient pines and the sound of the wind in the trees.

When he'd given her enough time to move into place he started forward again, his feet finding a silent path through the brush without thought. A muffled, choked noise drew his attention, and a woman sprang out of the shadows, two knives glinting in the moonlight.

He dodged the first blade by wrenching his body out of the way as he reached for her other wrist, adrenaline making it easy to summon the strength he held back most of the time. The bones in her wrist snapped. She dropped her knife and hissed in pain but didn't scream, and a sharp jerk brought her free hand up. The edge of her blade caught his shoulder, a scratch more than anything, and he waste no more time. His own small dagger slid into his grasp, the hilt a cool, comforting weight in his hand, and he wrenched her off balance and dragged the blade across her throat without preamble.

The demon dropped to the ground, already dead, and Orion jerked his head in the direction of the pit as a shot rang out. He left the demon on the ground and launched himself toward the path.

Amaia stood over the pit, the borrowed gun in her hand. He skidded to a stop a few feet away and glanced at her. "The third one?"

"Marko." She lowered her arm and tilted her head. "You're bleeding."

He shook his head to dismiss her concern. "Marko's the one in the pit, or Marko's still out there?"

"There's no one out there." A tiny shiver ran through her. "One in the trap, two to lie in wait for an ambush. Three dead."

So she'd killed two of them. "Six left."

Amaia tore her gaze away from the pit, her eyes tormented. "Go home, Orion."

"No."

She tested the barrel of the gun and shoved it back into her waistband. Anger vibrated off of her, and she avoided his eyes as she stomped around the pit and down the path.

With the wolf riding him and the mark of his teeth on her slender neck, he couldn't stop himself. He caught up to her in three long strides and grasped her shoulders, jerking her body back against his. "Is it so impossible for you to accept help?"

She went rigid. "Is it so impossible for you to understand I don't want to see you hurt?" He couldn't see her face, but he could smell the salt of her tears. "Do you have any idea how few people survive this kind of hunt? Even with help?"

He sheathed his knife and slid his hands down her arms until he could twine his fingers with hers. She smelled like his soap and his body, like sex and the hunt. Intoxicating smells. Arousing ones. Adrenaline still pounded through him as he lowered his mouth to her ear. "How many of them have the strongest warrior in a werewolf pack helping them?"

"Fine." Even through her anger, her back arched until her ass grazed his cock. "We fight."

"We fight." He slid his hand around to her stomach and splayed his fingers across her body in an possessive fashion. "And we win."

Amaia turned her face to his. "Then what?"

"Whatever we want." He bit her jaw, and satisfaction raged through him when she hissed in pleasure.

But it was nothing compared to the elation he felt at her reply. "Then let's get to work."

Chapter Four



Five bodies later, Orion called a halt to their hunt.

Amaia was weary and wounded, both conditions that would be fatal when facing Itzal. Oihana and Ganix had attacked her together, and the pair had worked out their tandem attacks over hours of practice. If she hadn't watched or participated in most of their training sessions, they'd have killed her. As it was, Amaia felt lightheaded from blood loss, the numerous shallow cuts on her skin burning.

Orion was in no better shape. Blood slicked his skin over wounds that had healed shut, but it was clear that even the strong magic inside him couldn't heal everything. Jamel had scored a lucky hit while Orion was distracted, slicing through his pants and leaving a deep cut along his thigh that still bled. Another slash marred his cheek, and a third his upper arm.

He led her to a cave tucked deep in the woods. The front was all but inaccessible, forcing them to climb a small cliff above and navigate a treacherous and winding path down the face of the rock. Only the hand and footholds that had been chiseled out of the rock face made it anything less than suicide.

When she reached the inside of the cave she saw the reason he'd taken such precautions. Orion knelt and lit an old-fashioned hurricane lamp, revealing a tidy hide-out complete with supplies, bedding, and an arsenal of weapons.

She knelt next to the lamp. "Let me see your leg." Orion had gone pale, and the wound worried her. He'd recover from exertion, physical and magical, but blood loss could kill him.

He rose to his feet, his easy grace gone. His large hands seemed clumsy as they unbuckled his heavy belt and lowered it to the floor. "There's a first-aid kit in the corner. It's got pretty much everything in it."

She retrieved it, then unrolled some of the bedding and gestured for him to sit. When he had lowered himself gingerly to the bedroll, she unlaced his boots. "How do you feel?"

"Tired." He closed his eyes and submitted himself to her ministrations with a trust she'd come to realize was unusual for him. "I need food and a few hours' rest, and I'll be fine. The food more than the rest. My body can't run like this for very long."

"I'll find something as soon as I stop this bleeding." The cloth of his pants stuck to his wound, and he winced as she pried it away as gently as possible. She blotted it with gauze, but the cut was too deep to knit up on its own. "Lie back."

He obeyed without protest. "If you have to stitch it shut there's special thread in there. Enchanted. Works better for werewolves."

"All right." She ignored the first aid kit and curved her hand over the strong line of his thigh. The spark of energy inside her sputtered before she could bring it to the surface, drained by the night's exertions. Finally, the magic flowed out of her and into him. "I just need a second..."

The flesh mended under her hand, but her own sigh of relief sounded distant. Her hand fell away as she swayed.

"Shit." Orion reached out and caught her, drawing her down to the bedding next to him. "Fuck, Amaia, you didn't need to do that. I'd heal by tomorrow."

"You're one to judge." Her tongue felt heavy. "With all your talk of honor and responsibility." She turned her face, unable to keep the truth from her eyes. *I couldn't let you hurt.*

His fingers curled in her hair and he urged her head back with a low groan moments before his lips found hers. His kiss was hard and clumsy and a little rough, but it spoke of a need more real, more *honest*, than anything she'd ever felt.

Tears pricked her eyes when the heat of his kiss washed energy through her, replenishing the weary void her efforts had left behind. "I'm fine," she whispered against his mouth. "Thank you. I'm okay."

"I'm not." His teeth caught her lip for a moment, and he groaned again. "You're hurt, and I'm not okay with that at all."

"I'm not one of your responsibilities, Orion." Her heart pounded. She wasn't, that much was true. But she *wanted* to be. She wanted to matter that much to him.

His thumb traced along her jaw, soft and coaxing. "My interest in you isn't exactly responsible. Sort of the opposite."

Desire exploded inside her. "You're hurt."

"I *was* hurt."

"This is temporary." She needed to hear him say it, if only to jar her own wayward heart back to reality. "Soon, you'll go home. I won't be there."

He growled against her skin as his fingers skated down her stomach and edged under her shirt. "If you don't want to be, you don't have to be."

She closed her eyes and let her head drop back. "I don't want to be there."

His tongue dragged across the fluttering pulse in her throat, and he chuckled. "Liar."

Amaia pulled out of his arms and rose. She watched his face as she shed her clothing. She stood naked in the lamplight for a moment before climbing onto his lap to grind her body against his. "Do you really think I'm lying, or do you just want me to be?"

"Do you want me to pretend I can't tell?" His hand worked between them, brushing against her as he worked at the fastening of his jeans. "You can lie all you want, Amaia. I'll pretend to believe you. It doesn't mean you don't want me. Don't want *this*."

When he'd opened his pants, she traced the hard length of his cock with her fingertips. If the feelings welling inside her were as simple as plain lust, she wouldn't think twice about it. She bent her mouth to his ear and sighed. "I want this. You."

"So take me." His hands gripped her hips, but he let her take the lead. "Take me, Amaia."

She shifted her body over his, sucking in a sharp breath when he filled her. She wanted to move, to ride him into oblivion, but stayed still instead. Her mouth brushed his and retreated. "Do you want me there? With you?"

"Yes." He growled and seized her mouth, his lips crushing against hers as his tongue demanded entrance, demanded everything.

His tongue slid over hers, the mating of their mouths reminiscent of the way they rocked together. Amaia cried out as pleasure took her, and the world—and the danger that lay ahead—faded. All that was left was Orion, his hands and teeth on her skin, and his body deep inside hers.

He bit her chin when he came, his groan shaking through her as his fingers clenched on her hips and dragged her down into one last thrust. He whispered something that might have been her name, but it was hard to tell with the blood pounding in her ears.

She dropped her face to his neck and panted. Belatedly, she realized she'd drawn no energy from him. The pull hadn't come, even when she lost herself in sensation. "Nothing happened."

It took him a few seconds to reply, and even then his voice sounded unsteady. "Nothing happened last time, either."

"But..." She didn't know how to explain it to him. The hunger was always present, if only in the background, and the need increased during sex until it took over. Rigid control and conscious exertion were required to prevent the transfer of sexual energy during orgasm. The only time the connections didn't open automatically was when a bond had been forged between mates.

But that wasn't possible.

Troubled, she lifted a hand to a sore spot on her neck. "Your Alpha talked about you biting me."

"Mmm." His fingers stroked down her hair. "People see it as ownership. It's a mark. It made you mine, as far as he was concerned."

And what about as far as you're concerned? Amaia closed her eyes, unsure if she was ready to deal with the answer to that question, no matter what it happened to be. Instead she changed the subject. "You said you needed food, but you should rest. I can find something."

"We should both eat. And both rest." He eased her away and rose to his knees, reaching for his jeans. "It's not the best food. Non-perishable, high energy. Mostly rations. It'll do."

She reached for her shirt and underwear, her mind still reeling. "I'm used to it. It's what we eat on maneuvers."

By the time she'd dressed, he'd gathered up a healthy supply of food and some additional bedding. He lowered himself to the ground next to her with a good deal more grace than before, and the smile that curved his lips as he offered her a foil-wrapped energy bar was warm. "You pack quite a punch there with your magical healing."

"I didn't know if I could," she admitted. "They only teach us how to heal demons, and even that instruction is rudimentary. But it worked better than I thought." Her own smile answered his, small and hesitant. "You must be special."

"Or maybe *we're* special." He reached out and stroked her hair back from her shoulder, a gentle gesture that turned possessive when his fingers lingered on the back of her neck. "One left, and you're free."

"One who fights like five." And with a very personal reason to win. "Orion, there's something you need to know. About Itzal."

"Something more than the fact that he fights like five men?"

She wanted to shake her head and deny it. Instead, she raised her hand and covered his fingers with her own. "He's my intended. The one I'm supposed to marry."

The easy warmth in his eyes faded to dull wariness as his hand fell away. "Oh."

"No." She started to reach for him, then thought better of it. "It's not like that. He chose me and, at the time, there really wasn't a reason to say no."

"Oh," he said again. He reached for a bottle of water and shifted to lean against a box. "Killing him isn't going to be easy for you, then."

"He'll want me to yield. To come back and marry him." Amaia opened the energy bar in her hand. "When I refuse, he *will* try to kill me. And I have no problem with stopping him."

His expression told her nothing as he nodded shortly. "Then we should get some rest."

All she could do was nod in return. She ate silently, then drank the bottle of water he gave her. Her hunger and thirst sated, she stretched out on the bedding and stared at the jumping shadows on the cave wall.

She thought he might talk to her, or say *something*. But when she glanced at him after another half hour of silence, he was feigning sleep with a dedication that made it clear he had nothing else to say.

Miserable, Amaia curled up and tucked her hands under her chin. She'd only wanted to warn Orion. Instead, she'd reminded him how separate and different their lives really were.

Chapter Five



Orion studied the disturbed pine-needles on the forest floor and cursed himself again for the silence that had grown up between them. Amaia stood a few paces behind him, stiff and uneasy as she watched their back trail, and he could almost taste the misery rolling off her in waves.

Fool. He *was* a fool, of that there could be no doubt. He'd lost himself in the heat of her body and the pleasure of her touch, had lost himself in the joy of having a *partner*, someone who could meet him halfway and help him if he faltered. The crushing weight of responsibility had eased a little in Amaia's arms, and he'd fallen into them without a care for himself.

And maybe Amaia was a fool, as well. The man they hunted could give her her life back. He could offer her a place among her own people—a better place than she'd enjoyed before, if her life had been as hard as she'd hinted. He could give her the luxuries of civilization and the comfort of being part of the elite, ruling class.

All Orion had was a tiny cabin in the woods and a pack split by corruption and fear. A life with him would be a life surrounded by the people she'd been raised to hate. Raised to *hunt*, like beasts in the wild. She could never be happy.

He could never be enough.

Pain shot through him, but he forced it back. Amaia would be a fool not to take her captain's offer, and Orion would be a fool not to be ready for it. Maybe she would try to have him spared, but he couldn't count on her influence. He couldn't count on anything but himself.

Just like always. He closed his eyes and counted to ten, then rose to his feet and indicated the trail. "Twenty minutes, at the most. The scent is still strong."

"We're too far from where we fought the others." Amaia stared at the trail. "He knows we're tracking him, and he'd have circled around."

Orion closed his eyes and tilted his face to the wind before nodding. "Not straight back, though. South and east. That's the way the wind's blowing."

He heard a strange whistling, and a dart flew through the air and lodged in the bark of a tree between them. "That," said a low, cultured voice, "was a warning. Hello, Amaia."

She turned toward the sound of the voice, her hand dropping to her knife. "Itzal."

The commander stepped out of a copse of trees and smiled at Orion, though he still addressed Amaia. "I knew you'd found help. Who is he?"

Orion's hand twitched toward the pistol strapped to his thigh, but he forced himself to stay still. The angle was awkward enough that he couldn't be sure he'd get it out before Itzal shot him. *Or Amaia.*

"Mmm." Itzal stepped closer to her, his smile broad. "Give me your forfeit. We could make it back before dark."

"No."

His dark eyes flashed with anger. "You know the alternative is—" He bit off his words and snapped his gaze to Orion. "Don't tell me, Amaia, that you've gotten caught up in your own game."

For one terrifying second Orion considered the possibility that it *had* all been a game. He had to fight the urge to turn his gaze to her face, to try to read the truth there. *If she fooled you, it's too late now. Stay alive, just stay alive.*

She spoke softly. "Go home, Itzal, and don't come back. Leave the wolves alone." Her voice grew stronger, and she drew her knife. "Leave *me* alone."

Itzal hissed a curse and dropped his dart gun to pull two knives from his own belt. "Then you both die."

Orion had his pistol out before the dart gun hit the forest floor, even knowing Itzal wouldn't have survived this long by being stupid. He swung his arm up and aimed at the demon's throat before squeezing the trigger.

Itzal spun and brought up a knife. The bullet glanced off of it even as his spin brought him blade-to-blade with Amaia. Their weapons clashed, and Itzal smiled. "No. You watch him die." He bent his arms, catching hers in an awkward lock for only a second before his forehead crashed into hers. She landed in a heap at the man's feet, and he kicked her knife away.

Panic gripped Orion, but there wasn't *time*. His second bullet sank into a tree as Itzal moved again. When he tried to fire a third time, magic lashed through the air and the gun jammed.

The gun hit the ground as he drew a long knife with his left hand, getting it up just in time to block a brutal swing. Metal clashed, but Orion gritted his teeth and caught the

sweeping blow of Itzal's second blade on the studded leather bracer he'd retrieved from the cave that morning.

Polished metal flashed and rang. Itzal kept up with Orion's advances, looking almost amused. "Did she promise you her heart?" he asked viciously. "The moon? Tell me. I'm curious."

Craftier men than Itzal had tried to goad him with words. Cavil had been doing it for fifteen years. It shouldn't have bothered him.

But it did. Rage heated his blood as he got his fingers around his second knife and twisted fast enough to catch fabric before Itzal wrenched his body out of the way. "She gave me something you could never comprehend."

Orion knew he'd drawn blood, but the man didn't show pain. "I suppose she told you she'd never felt this way before." He feinted left and lashed out, leaving a bright red line of blood across Orion's chest. "That's the simplest way to make a man stupid."

He twisted back and struck again, this time catching Itzal more firmly across the thigh. "Is sex all your men can think about?"

Itzal nearly stumbled, and he grunted in pain. "Who said anything about sex?" He knocked Orion's arm aside and stabbed him in the shoulder, a quick stroke of agony. "Idiot. The deadliest weapon at her disposal, and you probably begged for it."

The pain should have slowed him, but it burned away everything else but his enemy. Orion twisted again, cutting across the first wound on Itzal's thigh with a deeper slash. "Spoken like a man who's begged her for sex a time or two himself."

Itzal had gone pale, but his laughter rang out as he swung at Orion and missed. "I didn't have to beg."

Orion ignored the jibe and swung at Itzal's arm, catching him just below his armor. "Must not have been very good, because the lady seems uninterested in another round."

Blood spurted from the fresh wound, and Itzal dove for Orion, knocking him off his feet. Itzal's knife slashed his side, and he roared his pain as he hit the ground, the other man's body a hard weight he couldn't escape.

The world faded around the edges as the silver knife dug against his side again, pain so intense he couldn't feel anything else. Not the weight of Itzal's body over his, not the hard ground under his back, not even the knife itself. Silver poisoning crept through him, and he knew he wouldn't last long.

But he didn't have to. Hundreds—*thousands*—of hours of practice made some things instinct. The knife still rested in his numb fingers, and he used everything left to lift it up and plunge it into Itzal's back, just at the base of his neck.

Itzal didn't make a sound. The life in his eyes faded, and Orion dropped his hand back to the forest floor. Amaia's distant scream drifted over him, and his last thought before darkness took him was relief she still lived.

Amaia's head spun, and her legs wouldn't hold her. Black spots still swam before her as she crawled toward the two men lying several yards away.

She didn't have to check Itzal, not with the hilt of Orion's knife sticking out of the back of his head. But he was massive, and it took her several moments of frantic pushing to roll his body away.

She dropped to the dirt next to Orion, panic rising in her like floodwaters. He was barely breathing, ashen and bloody. His skin was cold under her hands. "No," she whispered. "Damn it, no."

Losing him, and like this, would kill her. He'd fought so hard for her, to see her free and safe. "Open your eyes, Orion. Please." He didn't move, and she caught sight of the inflamed wound on his side. *Silver*.

Hope flared in her. If she could fix it, neutralize the poison coursing through his system...

Amaia laid one hand over his side and cupped the other on his cheek. "Please," she repeated, and drew on the magic inside her.

She hadn't exerted much energy during the fight, but Itzal's blow to the head had left her shaky. It took her several interminable moments to spark the link between them. When it snapped into place, she pushed every single bit of the power inside her over to him, heedless of the danger to herself. *Please work*.

He coughed and jerked under her hands with a moan that could have meant anything. A second later one of his hands lifted and his fingers wrapped around her wrist, tugging her away. "Too...much."

"No. Let me." Hysterical with relief, she grasped his hand and kept the energy flowing.

His body arched as he let out a startled growl, and the bleeding wound in his side *finally* started to knit. His back hit the ground again and he panted and tore his hands away from hers. "*Christ*, if you kill yourself healing me, I will be so fucking pissed."

"I'm fine." Her voice sounded thin and reedy, but she didn't care. He was going to live, and that was all that mattered. Her head and heart felt light. "I'm in love with you."

Orion coughed again and dragged her down until her face hovered over his. When his eyes drifted open they were dazed and pain-filled, but the warmth was back. And more than the warmth, something deeper. Something she wanted more than anything.

He smiled, and his fingers tightened on her waist. "Then help me get back to my cabin so we can take a bath and have sex on every surface until it's *our* cabin."

Amaia felt a flicker of doubt, and she laid her hand on his face. "It won't be easy. Your pack—"

"Will cope." One large hand slid up to cup the back of her head. "The ones who disapprove of me will grumble, but you've done more to help us in a day than most of them do in a decade."

She snorted. "What about your sister?"

"You saved her. And now you saved me." His fingers curled in her hair and urged her closer, until his lips brushed against hers with every word. "And something tells me it won't be the last time."

It wouldn't be. "They won't come after me, but they'll still come after your pack." Amaia smiled and kissed the corner of his mouth. "But maybe we can convince them it's too much trouble."

"Maybe we can," he murmured, his voice low and raspy. "Together."

She rose and helped him up. They were both still in bad shape, and it would take them the better part of the afternoon to get back, but Amaia smiled. "Together."

The End

About the Author



How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. Toss in a dash of whimsy and a lot of caffeine, and enjoy with a side of chocolate by the light of the full moon.

By day, Bree and Donna are mild-mannered ladies who reside in the Deep South. At night, when their husbands and children are asleep, they combine forces to unleash the product of their fevered imaginations upon the page. To learn more about this romance writing, crime fighting duo, visit their webpage at <http://www.moirarogers.com>. (Disclaimer: crime fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)

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