Chapter Six

So Won’t You, Please, (Be My) Be My Baby?

We couldn’t all fit into the booth, so James, Ramon, and June sat across from us. I slid into the seat after Frank, baby-Chuck sitting on his lap. The toddlers stared back at us, sitting artificially high due to their booster seats, their expressions grave. It was very at odds with their appearance. One had her hair done up in two little puffballs on the sides of her head, tied with pink ribbons that matched her jumper. Her face was cherubic, with a little dimple, her brown eyes several shades darker than the reddish-brown of her skin.

The other little girl wore a matching jumper, only hers was a sunny yellow. Freckles dotted her pale nose, her eyes reminding me of an emerald in both color and hardness. Her red hair was braided in a crown around her head. Both of the toddlers were assessing us and I had the distinct impression that they found us lacking so far.

After a long, quiet moment, Pink Jumper turned to their companion. “Thank you, Beau. We can take it from here.” She waved an imperious hand to our other table. “We’ll let you know when we’re done. Feel free to order what you’d like. Our treat, of course.”

Beau tipped his hat at us good naturedly and shifted out of his seat, ambling over to sit with everyone else.

We looked back at the girls.

“People react oddly to two toddlers doing things like driving or entering a restaurant.” She shrugged. “Hence, Beau.”

“So he’s not part of your clan?” Frank asked.

Yellow Jumper looked shocked. “He’s human.” She barely glanced at us, focusing on Chuck for the first time. “You know how they are. Like children to us.” Her expression turned imploring as her attention flitted to me. “That’s why we’re guardians. You’re like babes in the woods.”

I grinned. “I’d love to argue with your assessment of me, but I can’t.” It would be too hypocritical after the last few days. And the last year. Or two. Or my whole life. I was tempted to argue that the gnomes weren’t any more mature than we were, but I kept my mouth shut.

My gnomes were like tiny, violent children on the best of days, but they didn’t need to know that. Yet.

However, Pink and Yellow Jumpers’ comments had revealed a problem and I considered catching James’ eye for a second. Only I couldn’t, because the gnomes were watching us too closely, and they’d catch it for the appeal that it was. I was supposed to be in charge; therefore I wouldn’t look to someone else for help. Which left me kind of stuck, because I *needed* help. Should I tell them that Frank was considered an honorary gnome? It seemed like something they’d react poorly to, but not telling them and accepting them into our gnomes would feel too much like we’d tricked them.

And them thinking I didn’t rely on members of my team for help was also a trick. I decided to split the difference and reveal one thing while keeping the other to myself for the moment. But before I could say anything, Frank took the decision out of my hands.

He cleared his throat. “If I may? I’d like to present my companion to you formally.”

Now Pink Jumper looked shocked. “That’s not your place.” She crossed her arms, scowling imperiously, a move very out of place in her toddler form. “We’ll wait for his second.”

I turned to Frank, my eyebrow raised.

His expression turned sheepish. “In formal settings, the lower ranking gnome makes introductions for the higher ranking one. Since I’m an honorary gnome, we felt—”

How he felt was lost in the strangled gasps of dismay and outrage from across the table. The toddlers looked like we’d slapped them. If they’d had pearls, they would be clutched.

“This meeting was a mistake,” Pink Jumper said, attempting to clamber out of her booster seat.

“I’m beginning to see why you came all this way to meet with us. No one else would have you.” The look of pity on Yellow Jumper’s face made Chuck jut his chin out stubbornly, his shoulders back. He had his pride and would not let them see how much their comments had cut him.

Thankfully, booster seats are really awkward to get out of, even for warrior gnomes, so I had a second to jump in. “As you have said, we flew a long way to be here. We’ve shown you every bit of respect in doing so. We agreed to your meeting place. The least you can do is hear us out and eat some waffles.” I softened my voice. “It is, after all, the house of waffles. Would you defile such a place?”

My approach seemed to confuse them, halting them in their movements. Their escape was further stymied by the appearance of our waitress.

“What can I get you?”

I waved a hand at the toddler gnomes. “Ladies first.”

The gnomes eased themselves back into their seats.

“Waffles,” Pink Jumper said, her voice suddenly childish, her pronunciation slightly garbled. “Egg! Please thank you!”

Yellow Jumper clapped her hands in glee. “Waffle-egg-bacon! Peas-n-hank-ewe!”

The waitress smiled indulgently at the two little girls. “Aren’t you two just the cutest!”

“They are the cutest,” I confirmed, drawing the waitresses attention to me. I was still full from earlier, so I ordered a cup of coffee. After Frank ordered for him and Chuck, the waitress left and I barreled ahead before the gnomes could argue with me.

“Look, I’ll be honest with you. I haven’t been a council member very long. Hell, I haven’t been a necromancer very long.” Their eyebrows winged up in unison. “Long story. Anyway, I inherited my home and my faithful warrior gnomes. The last necromancer…” How to explain Douglas? Unhinged? A psychopath? “Had a specific way of doing things that I don’t agree with, and it was only recently that we realized that he’d neglected our clan of gnomes.”

I paused to let the waitress fill my coffee, before she quick-timed it back to her monopoly game. “I’m trying to right what my predecessor wronged. I’m trying to show my gnomes the respect they deserve. They’ve saved my life many times.” And probably endangered it just as many, but they didn’t need to know that.

“I am *honored* to be held so highly by our gnomes,” Frank’s voice held quiet pride and it wasn’t feigned. He may have had the gnomes thrust upon him, but he managed their chaos well. Frank had every right to be proud of himself and I liked that he extended that to the gnomes.

Frank adjusted Chuck on his lap. “We know—they know—that their clan is…unusual. We’re trying our best to fix it. But it’s not their fault and they shouldn’t be held accountable. They entered into a sacred trust with Douglas and he broke it.”

I took over. “You don’t have to agree to anything. We’re not trying to play on your pity. All I’m asking is that you hear us out.” Okay, I was trying to play on their pity a *little*.

The two gnome toddlers turned to each other and proceeded to have an entire conversation without speaking a single word. It was eerie.

Finally they reached some sort of agreement, turning to us just in time for their food to be placed in front of them by the waitress.

After that was settled, Yellow Jumper reached across the table, grabbing the syrup so she could systematically drown her waffle. “We will hear you out.” She placed a hand on her chest. “I am Merry Death.” She nodded at her companion. “It is my honor to present Mercy.”

That couldn’t be it. I knew too many gnomes to believe that was all there was to her name. “Mercy?” I kept my tone polite.

“Short for Merciless Blade,” the toddler informed me as she made quick work of cutting up her egg before applying Tabasco to it with a flourish. “You have until we finish our meal to convince us. I suggest you start talking.”

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Brid loved running in her animal form. Her canid shape—a charming mix of fae hound and wolf—moved with a grace and economy her human form would never master. Legs stretching out, eating up miles with an easy lope. The chill of the morning had slid into a clear, bright day. Blue sky, green grass, the crisp sound of leaves underfoot. A far-off bird trilled. Brid gloried in the sensory experience of the forest. The musk of squirrels, raccoons, the faint traces of field mice, and the mouth-watering scent of deer.

It made her heart light, her feet fly.

As long as she ignored the rhythm of Bran’s feet as he ran beside her. The minute they stopped running, they were going to argue. This was the first moment they’d been able to get away from the pack house, to find some privacy, meaning he’d been stewing over her choice since last night. Bran was calm, steady. A great advisor, really—near perfect. But like any other person in her family, he could be a hair unreasonable when it came to his baby sister.

He was going to growl. A lot, probably.

She decided to put another mile between her and the lodge. The Blackthorn pack house sat on a huge parcel of land, the majority of which they left wild. They would need to go deep into it to allow them both to shout properly. Because make no mistake, she was going to shout back. She may be Bran’s little sister, but she was also the head of the pack. With Bran, she could afford some leniency if he threw a fit. She knew without a doubt he wasn’t actually questioning her authority.

Someone else throwing a fit? That might turn into fists being thrown. Brid was a patient ruler. To a point. Sometimes a wolf needed a nip to their hind quarters to remind them who was boss.

When she decided they’d gone far enough, Brid slowed, shifting from wolf to human between one breath and the next. This was the gift of being the hybrid she was. No lengthy, painful shifting process for her or her siblings. Just magic, plain and simple.

Back in human form, she stretched her arms above her head, smiling happily as she dug her toes into the long grass. Of course, the downside of being human again was that she no longer had a fur coat to keep her warm. She hoped her brother yelled quickly.

Bran shifted a second later, mimicking her stretches. “Make me see the sense of this, Bridin. Why bring a stranger onto our lands? Amongst our people?”

She crossed her arms, more to keep in her body heat than as a defensive stance. “He’s a suitor.”

Bran snorted. “There have been a lot of suitors. You didn’t invite any of them back. You didn’t invite them for a second date.” Bran’s eyes flashed for a second. “Does he have something on you? On us? Did he pressure you—”

Now it was her turn to snort. “Really? Does that sound like me? At all?”

He rubbed a hand through his brutally shorn hair, a growl in his voice. “No. It doesn’t. If he tried to blackmail you, you’d drag him into an alley and kick his ass.” He crossed his arms, jutting his chin out. “So what is it then? Did his pretty face turn your head?”

She grinned at him. “Did you just call Leo pretty?”

Dark brows arrowed down. “That’s not the point—”

“Oh, yes it is.” Her grin widened. “You haven’t noticed anyone in a good long while, brother.”

“And I’m not noticing Leo!” Bran shouted. “Stop changing the subject.” His head canted to the side; the movement distinctly canine. “Is that why you invited him here? Trying to fix me up?”

“No,” Brid said, stepping forward to place a hand on his arm. “I wouldn’t do that.”

A sigh burst from him. “No, you wouldn’t.” He ducked down to look at her. “You wouldn’t do any of this, Brid. That’s the problem.” His voice gentled, all growl gone. “And you may have fooled the pack, but not me. Not Sean, Sayer or Rourke, either.”

She hadn’t been trying to fool her brothers, though. “Does the pack know?”

He shook his head. “About Sam? No. Suspect?” He tipped his head back and forth. “Probably some of them. Suspecting isn’t the same as knowing, though.”

She shivered, the cold starting to seep in. “It’s been really hard.”

His mouth pinched in concern. “If you need me to get the pack to back off, take a time off dating, I’ll do it.”

“No, this is better, I think.” She quickly explained, sketching out her plan.

Bran listened, giving her his full attention. Brid loved this about her oldest brother—no one listened like Bran did. It was a skill that few bothered to truly learn. “Do you trust him?” He asked when she’d finished.

She scrunched up her nose. “Yes?” She shivered again, tightening her arms again for warmth. “I think he needs us as much as we do him. By all means, keep researching him, but for now, the plan stays on course.”

Bran rubbed a hand over his chin. “We putting him in a guest cabin?”

There were a few cabins in the woods close to the main lodge for people visiting, or when one of them needed a break from the main lodge. It was difficult to have any sort of privacy living as a group.

“No,” Brid said, shaking her head. “Put him in the main lodge, his room close to mine.”

Bran laughed. “Absolutely not.”

Her grin returned. “Next to you, then.”

“You’re a menace,” he growled.

“Yup,” Brid chirped. “Are you done growling now? Because I’m cold.”

Bran nudged her with his shoulder. “When do I ever really growl at you?”

“When you think I need it.” She went up on her toes and kissed his cheek. “And I love that you do.”

He eyed her warily. “What does that mean?”

“For a wolf, you’re not very growly. Stern, yes. Quiet. Stoic, even. But you only lose your temper and growl at people who have pissed you off tremendously, or the handful of people you love deeply.” She grinned, clapping her hands together. “I do both.”

He sighed. “That you do. Enough growling for now. Let’s get back to the pack house before we freeze. Then we’ll put your plan into action.” He shook his head. “This is going to cause some ripples, you know.”

“I know.”

He dipped his chin in a sharp nod. “Good. Pack needs a little reminder now and then. That you’re in charge. Put Moretti in the family wing and let the tongues waggle.” His slow grin would have been at home on any wolf’s face. “Anyone steps out of line, we’ll be there.”

Brid was suddenly, sharply filled with love for her brothers. Because she hadn’t doubted—even for a second—that they wouldn’t back her up. “Thank you.” Then she pivoted, pushing forward through the grass, breaking out in a run. “Beat you home!”

She shifted on the next breath, not waiting for him to respond.

But she could hear him, the steady beat of his bounding paws, pacing her all the way home.