



Marked In Flesh (A Novel of the Others)

By Anne Bishop

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Fourth in the “flawless” (The Reading Café) New York Times bestselling series from the author of Vision in Silver.

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But not everyone is convinced. A group of radical humans is seeking to usurp land through a series of violent attacks on the Others. What they don’t realize is that there are older and more dangerous forces than shifters and vampires protecting the land that belongs to the Others—and those forces are willing to do whatever is necessary to protect what is theirs...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Anne Bishop and the Novels of the Others

“Anne Bishop is so good at writing character development....I love this series and I NEED MORE!”—*USA Today*

“A stunningly original yarn, deeply imagined, beautifully articulated, and set forth in clean, limpid, sensual prose.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“The Queen of Fantasy...Teeming with intrigue, suspense, heartbreak, and hints of romance, Bishop’s literary skills continue to astound and enchant.”—*Heroes and Heartbreakers*

“Bishop’s world building is second to none.”—*Fresh Fiction*

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author **Anne Bishop** is a winner of the William L. Crawford Memorial Fantasy Award, presented by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, for the bestselling *Black Jewels Trilogy*. She is the author of the *Novels of the Others*, including *Vision in Silver*, *Murder of Crows*, and *Written in Red*. She lives in upstate New York.

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As humans it is our right, our destiny, to claim the world for ourselves. We must display the fortitude needed to wrest the land away from animals who hoard water and land, who have no use for resources such as timber and oil, who make no contributions to art or science or better living conditions for anyone. We cannot become the supreme beings we were meant to be as long as we allow animals to frighten us into believing we have to submit to the boundaries they set. The human race has no boundaries. If we stand together, we will be invincible. We will be the masters, and the world will belong to us first, last, and forever.

—Nicholas Scratch, speaker for the Humans First and Last movement

It’s always about territory. It’s about taking care of your pack, about having food and good water. It’s about having enough of those things so your pack can survive and your pups can grow up. Other or human, it’s what we all want. And when one kind of animal overruns an area to the point where many kinds of animal begin to starve, it’s up to the predators to thin out the herds before there’s nothing left for anyone. That’s a simple truth whether you’re talking about deer or humans.

—Simon Wolfgard, leader of the Lakeside Courtyard

N,

We must strike soon to achieve a swift and victorious result. Rally our allies and begin the diversions that will keep eyes focused away from Thaisia's ports. Ship whatever you can, however you can. A hungry army cannot fight the enemy we face. As soon as those last ships are secured in our ports, we will claim what rightfully belongs to the Cel-Romano people and wipe out the vermin currently overrunning the virgin farmland.

—Pater

To: All HFL Plains Chapters, Thaisia

Proceed with stage one of the land reclamation project.

—NS

Chapter 1

Sunday, Juin 5

The sweet blood has changed things. You have changed because of her. We are intrigued by the humans who have gathered around your Courtyard, so we will give you some time to decide how much human the terra indigene will keep.

Simon Wolfgard, leader of the Lakeside Courtyard, stared at his bedroom ceiling, the words of warning, of threat, chasing away sleep, as they had for the past few nights.

The words weren't the only thing chasing away sleep. Procrastination was a human trait, and in this past week, he'd discovered that it had its own kind of bite. Wolves didn't procrastinate. When the pack needed food, they went hunting. They didn't make excuses or find some unimportant thing that didn't need doing at that very minute. They got on with the business of taking care of the things that in turn took care of them.

I wanted Meg to heal from the cut she made last week. I wanted to give her time before asking her to carry some of the weight of these decisions. She's the Trailblazer who is finding ways for other cassandra sangue to survive. She didn't make decisions for herself or anyone else for twenty-four years, and now she's supposed to make all these important decisions that could mean life or death for . . . who? The other blood prophets? All the humans living in Thaisia?

Growling, as if that would scare his thoughts into hiding, Simon rolled over, closed his eyes, and pushed his face into his pillow, determined to get a little more sleep. But the thoughts were excellent hunters and devoured sleep.

We will give you some time to decide how much human the terra indigene will keep.

For the past week, he'd made excuses to himself and the rest of the Courtyard's Business Association, and they had let him make those excuses because none of them—not Vlad or Henry or Tess—wanted to tell Meg what was truly at stake now. But time, like Meg's strange, fragile skin, was not something he could afford to waste.

Rolling the other way, Simon stared at the window. As he raised his head, his ears shifted to Wolf shape, pricking to better catch the sounds outside.

Sparrows. Those first sleepy chirps that announced the dawn when the sky began its change from black to gray.

Morning.

Pushing aside the tangled sheet, Simon hustled into the bathroom to pee. As he washed his hands, he glanced over his shoulder. Did he need to shower? He bent his head and gave himself a sniff. He smelled like a healthy Wolf. So he would shower later when he'd have to deal with more than the one human who was his special friend. Besides, she wouldn't be taking a shower either.

He took a step away from the sink, then stopped. Skipping a shower was one thing, but the human mouth in the morning produced scents strong enough to discourage close contact.

Loading toothpaste onto his toothbrush, Simon studied his reflection while he cleaned his teeth. Dark hair that was getting shaggy—he'd need to do something about that before the Courtyard's guests arrived. Skin that had browned a bit from working outside without a shirt on. And the amber eyes of a Wolf. Human skin or Wolf form, the eyes didn't change.

He rinsed out his mouth and started to put the toothbrush back in the medicine chest above the sink. Then he looked at his reflection and lifted his lips to reveal his teeth.

No, the eyes didn't change when he shifted to Wolf, but . . .

Shifting his head to Wolf form, he loaded the toothbrush with toothpaste a second time and brushed the other, better, set of teeth. Then he growled because a Wolf's mouth wasn't designed to rinse and spit. He ended up leaning over the sink and pouring cups of water over his teeth and tongue so no one would think he was foaming at the mouth.

"Next time I'm just chewing a twig as usual," he grumbled when he shifted back to fully human.

Returning to the bedroom, he pulled on jeans and a T-shirt. Then he stepped to the window and put his face close to the screen. Cool enough outside for socks and sneakers—and a sweatshirt since they would be walking at Meg's speed, not his.

He finished dressing, then grabbed his keys out of the dish on his dresser and went out the door in his apartment that opened onto the back hallway he shared with Meg. He unlocked her kitchen door and opened it carefully. Sometimes she used the slide lock as extra security, and breaking her door by accident would just cause trouble.

He'd caused enough trouble the time he'd broken the door on purpose.

No slide lock. Good.

Simon slipped into Meg's kitchen and quietly closed the door. Then he headed for her bedroom.

A light breeze coming through the partially opened window played with the summer curtains the female pack—Meg's human friends—had helped her purchase and hang. The morning light also came through the window, giving him a clear look at the woman curled up under the covers.

Was she cold? If he'd stayed with her last night, she wouldn't be cold.

"Meg?" Cautious, because she could kick like a moose when she was scared, he gave her shoulder a little push. "Time to wake up, Meg."

She grunted and burrowed under the covers until only the top of her head showed.

Wrong response.

Holding out one hand to block a potential kick, Simon laid the other hand on her hip and bounced her against the mattress a couple of times.

"What? What?" Meg struggled to sit up, so he obligingly grabbed her arm and pulled.

"Time to wake up."

"Simon?" She turned her head and blinked at the window. "It's still dark." She flopped down on the bed and tried to pull up the covers.

He grabbed the covers, and the brief game of tug had her sitting upright again.

"It's not dark; it's just early," he said. "Come on, Meg. We'll take a walk."

"It's not morning. The alarm clock didn't go off."

"You don't need an alarm clock. You've got sparrows, and they say it's morning."

When she didn't respond, Simon hauled her to her feet and steered her out the bedroom door and down the hallway to the bathroom.

"Are you awake enough to pee and brush your teeth?"

She closed the door in his face.

Taking that as a yes, Simon returned to Meg's bedroom and pulled out the clothes she would need. Most of the clothes. Apparently a male wasn't supposed to take a female's underclothes out of a drawer unless he was mated to that female. And males weren't supposed to see the underclothes unless females wanted the underclothes to be seen.

He didn't understand why everyone fussed about taking clean clothes out of a drawer. Underclothes smelled a lot more interesting after the female wore them.

Probably not something human females wanted to know.

While he waited, he made up the bed, more to discourage Meg from falling back into it than because he wanted to tidy the room. Besides, running his hands over the sheets and breathing in her scent made him

happy.

Why had he thought sleeping in his human form last night was a good idea, especially when it meant sleeping alone? If he had shifted to his Wolf form as he usually did, he could have stayed with Meg, could have curled up next to her in her bed.

All right, he hadn't thought staying in human form overnight was a good idea, just a necessary exercise. Six Wolves from the Addirondak packs were coming to the Lakeside Courtyard next week to experience interacting with humans in ways they couldn't in their own territory. Three were adults who were already dealing with the humans who lived in towns located in and around the Addirondak Mountains. The other three were juveniles who had completed their first year of the human-centric education that would train them to keep watch over the humans living in Thaisia.

Keeping watch to make sure humans kept to the agreements their ancestors had made with the terra indigene was dangerous work. The Others might refer to humans as clever meat—and they were—but they were also invading predators who grabbed territory whenever they could. And despite what their government officials said, humans weren't really concerned with the overall well-being of their kind. Humans belonging to the Humans First and Last movement had howled about a food shortage in Thaisia and said the terra indigene had caused it. But it was the HFL humans who had sold the surplus stores of food to the Cel-Romano Alliance of Nations for profit and then lied about it. Those lies had spurred a fight in Lakeside that resulted in the deaths of police officer Lawrence MacDonald and Crystal Crowgard. By doing those things, humans had drawn the attention of terra indigene who usually stayed away from human-controlled places while their intentions were benevolent.

Those earth natives, who lived deep in the wild country, had decided that the humans living in Thaisia had committed a breach of trust, and all agreements between humans and the Others might be rescinded. Probably would be rescinded. Already there were restrictions on what kind of cargo could be carried by ships traveling on the Great Lakes. There were restrictions on what kind of human could travel from one human city to another. The human governments that oversaw human concerns on a regional level were reeling from the sanctions. If ships couldn't carry food and merchandise from one region to another, if trains couldn't carry food and fuel to cities that needed both, what would happen to all the humans living on the continent?

If the humans who were supposed to be in charge had paid any attention to Thaisia's history, they would know what would happen to the humans. The invasive, two-legged predators would be eliminated, and the land would be reclaimed by the earth natives, the terra indigene, the Others.

But that wouldn't be as easy to do as it had been a few centuries ago. Then, there was little that the humans built or used that would harm the land if left to decay on its own. Now there were refineries that processed the crude oil being drawn out of the earth. Now there were places that stored fuel. Now there were industries that might damage the land if left untended. How much would be harmed if those things were destroyed or abandoned?

Simon had no answers, and the terra indigene who watched over the wild country—the dangerous, primal beings who cloaked their true terra indigene nature in forms so old those shapes had no names—would not be concerned with answers. Even if everything else disappeared from the world to make room for the new that would be born from destruction and change, they would still exist.

The terra indigene shifters like the Wolves and Bears, the Hawks and Crows, referred to those forms as the Elders, a benevolent-sounding word for the beings who were Namid's teeth and claws.

Meg returned from the bathroom, looking a little more awake and a lot less happy to see him. She was going

to be more unhappy when she found out why he wanted to take this walk.

“Get dressed, Meg. We need to talk.”

She pointed at the bedroom door.

He was the leader of the Courtyard and she was an employee of the Courtyard, so she shouldn't be allowed to give him orders, even nonverbal ones. But he was learning that, when dealing with humans, pack order wasn't always maintained inside the den. Which meant Meg was dominant in her den and could disregard that he was dominant everywhere else.

He left the room and closed the door, then pressed his ear against the wood. Drawers opening, drawers closing. Movement.

“Stop hovering, Simon.”

She sounded annoyed instead of sleepy. Having sufficiently poked the porcupine, so to speak, he went back to her kitchen and checked out her cupboards and fridge to make sure she had enough people food. Half a quart of milk; a couple of bites of cheese—maybe more in terms of human bites; a small bowl of strawberries—her share of the berries she and Henry Beargard had picked yesterday; a wrapped half a sandwich from A Little Bite, the Courtyard's coffee shop.

Her cupboard had a canning jar of peaches, a jar of spaghetti sauce, and a box of spaghetti.

“If you're poking around for leftover pizza, I ate it last night,” Meg said, entering the kitchen.

Simon closed the cupboard. Was this a typical amount of food for humans to store in the warmer months? He didn't have more than this in his kitchen, but he usually chased down his meal and ate it fresh, so other foods were just supplements that he enjoyed for taste and were good for the human form.

“Did you want something to eat?” Meg asked.

“Later.” Leaving her kitchen, he went down the back stairs that led to the outer door, confident that she would follow him. Once outside, he took her hand, linking his fingers with hers, a form of contact and connection they'd started a week ago after she'd spoken prophecy about the River Road Community.

“The grass is wet,” Meg said. “Shouldn't we walk on the road?”

Simon shook his head. This morning the road, which was wide enough for a vehicle and formed a circle inside the Courtyard, felt too human.

How to start? What to say?

They passed the expanded kitchen garden for the Green Complex, the only multispecies complex in the Courtyard. As a way to help the humans who were working for the Courtyard, the Others had agreed to let those humans share in the harvest if they did their share of the work. There was at least one human checking the garden every day, making sure the plants had enough water—and the females especially had eyes like a Hawk's when it came to spotting a weed.

He spotted a scrap of fur at the edge of the garden but didn't point it out to Meg. Something had come by to nibble on the seedlings and had ended up being someone's dinner.

“You wanted to talk,” Meg said. “Is this about the sanctions? The Lakeside News has printed a lot of articles about the restrictions humans have to obey now.”

“A lot of howling for trouble they brought on themselves,” Simon growled.

“People are scared. They don’t know what the sanctions mean for their families.”

“Trust humans to try to build a beaver dam out of a couple of twigs. The sanctions are simple enough. Any human who belongs to the Humans First and Last movement is not allowed to travel on any right-of-way through the wild country. That means no roads, no trains.”

“Boat?”

Simon shook his head. “All the water in Thaisia belongs to the terra indigene. Ships on the lakes and rivers travel on sufferance. Always have.” And the Elementals known as the Five Sisters had already said that any ship that traveled the Great Lakes without their consent wouldn’t reach port. Well, the ship might, but the crew wouldn’t. After all, sinking the ship would soil the lake with all that fuel and debris. More likely, the ship would be set adrift after the easily transferred cargo had been removed. And the crew would become meals for the terra indigene doing the work of taking a human annoyance off the water.

“What about food?” Meg asked. “The newspapers and television reports said food can’t be transported from one region to another.”

“Either they’re lying to cause trouble or they were too busy yelling about it to listen.” As far as the Others were concerned, not listening was a big reason why humans, as a species, ended up needing harsh lessons: they refused to understand the warning nips. “Look, Meg, the buying and selling of foods and merchandise among the Simple Life folk, the Intuits, and the terra indigene isn’t going to change, and that includes all human settlements that are controlled by us. Any food coming from human-controlled farms has to be approved by Intuit and terra indigene inspectors before it’s allowed to cross from one region to another. We’re doing that to make sure humans can’t lie again about food shortages here while they’re selling that food to humans in another part of the world.” He huffed out a breath. “But that’s not what we need to talk about. This Courtyard—actually, a select group within this Courtyard—has been given a duty by the Elders, the earth natives who watch over the wild country. And that select group includes you because you’re the one who changed things.”

“Me?” Meg’s legs stuttered. “What did I do?”

Simon smiled. “You’re you.”

Meg Corbyn, Human Liaison for the Lakeside Courtyard, was a cassandra sanguine, a blood prophet who saw visions when her skin was cut. She had stumbled into Howling Good Reads during a snowstorm, looking for work, on the run from the man who had owned her and had cut her for profit. As vulnerable and inexperienced as a puppy, she had worked hard to learn her job as Human Liaison and also worked just as hard to learn how to live. Some of the humans who worked for the Courtyard rallied around her, helping her, teaching her, even protecting her. And that changed the relationship those humans had with the Others.

Simon’s smile faded. “How much human will the terra indigene keep? That’s what we have to figure out.”

Meg stopped walking. “What does that mean?”

“That’s the other thing we have to figure out.” He tugged on her hand to get her moving again, but she just

stared at him, her gray eyes the same color as the morning sky.

“How much human will you keep? What are you supposed to decide? If the terra indigene in human form get to keep things like fingers and thumbs? Because fingers and thumbs are really useful. Henry is a sculptor. He wouldn’t want to do without them. Neither would you.”

Simon studied her. Maybe human brains really did take longer to wake up than terra indigene brains. When he woke up, he was awake. He yawned, he stretched, and he was ready to play or hunt or even deal with the human work generated by the Business Association and Howling Good Reads, the bookstore he ran with Vladimir Sanguinati. Even though Meg was a special breed of human, apparently her brain didn’t have a speedy wake-up button.

But he slept with her most nights, and he knew she wasn’t usually this slow. So maybe sparrows were a sufficient call to morning for the body but the brain needed the mechanical alarm clock? Or maybe it was a difference between human males and females? He’d have to ask Karl Kowalski, who was Ruthie Stuart’s mate as well as one of the police officers assigned to working with the Courtyard.

He started walking again and pulled Meg along for a couple of steps before she moved on her own.

“It’s not about the shell.” Simon thumped his chest with the fingers of one hand. Then, because this was Meg and they were learning together about a lot of things that involved humans, he told her more than he would have told another human—he told her his own fears. “In a way, it is about the shell. Namid shaped the earth natives to be her dominant predators, and we continue to be dominant because we learn from the other predators who walk in our world. We take their forms to blend in and watch them, learn how they hunt, how they live. We absorb a lot of their nature just by living in that form. Not everything. We are first, and always, earth natives. But because the animal forms have become a part of what is passed down to our young, a terra indigene Wolf isn’t the same anymore as a terra indigene Bear or Hawk or Crow. Those forms have been around for a long time—and forms like the Sharkgard have been around even longer.”

They walked in silence for a minute.

“Are you afraid of becoming too human?” Meg asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, you won’t,” she said fiercely, squeezing his fingers. “You’re a Wolf, and even when you’re not a wolfy-looking Wolf, you’re still a Wolf. You’ve said so. Looking human or running a bookstore won’t change that.”

Simon thought about what she was saying under what she was saying.

Meg didn’t want him to be more human. She needed him to remain a Wolf. Because Meg trusted the Wolf in ways she didn’t trust a human male.

He felt a lightness inside him that hadn’t been there a minute ago. Working in a Courtyard, especially for the terra indigene who had to spend so much time around humans, was a danger because there was always the risk of absorbing too much of the human form and no longer fitting in with your own kind. That had worried him, more so lately as his exposure to humans became personal. But Meg wouldn’t allow him to become too human because she needed him to retain the nature and heart of a Wolf.

He slanted a glance at her, with her clear gray eyes, and fair skin with those rose-tinted cheeks, and that thick

black hair that was cropped so short it felt like puppy fuzz. Short and slim, and gaining some visible muscle beneath that fragile skin.

How much human would be too human for Meg?

Simon shook off the thought. He had enough challenges at the moment.

“You don’t have to be afraid of what you might absorb from our human friends,” Meg said quietly. “They’re good people.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve known the bad kind of people.” A grim reminder of the place where she’d been raised and trained and cut for profit.

He nodded to let her know he’d heard her. “We should consider what we’d like to keep, what we would be willing to make for ourselves if humans weren’t around.”

She gave him a sharp look, and her voice trembled when she said, “Are humans going to go away?”

“Maybe.” He didn’t say extinct. Meg was smart enough to hear the word anyway. And he didn’t tell her that the Lakeside Courtyard was the reason the Elders hadn’t already made that decision about the humans living on the continent of Thaisia.

“Can I talk to Ruth and Merri Lee and Theral about this?”

“They’re human, Meg. They’re going to want to keep everything.”

“There are a lot of things humans need that I don’t know about. I spent twenty-four years living in a compound as property, living in a cell once I was old enough to be by myself, and I don’t remember how the girls lived before being old enough to begin training. And you know what the Courtyard needs, but surely that isn’t everything either.”

“By the agreements with humans, a Courtyard is supposed to have whatever the humans in that city have, so if it’s not in the Courtyard, humans don’t really need it.” That was a thin-ice kind of truth that wouldn’t hold any weight if put to the test, and they both knew it. “Besides, if you tell the female pack, Ruthie and Merri Lee will tell their mates, who are police.”

“Who are around a lot and are helpful,” Meg countered.

He couldn’t argue with that. Karl Kowalski and Michael Debany were making an effort to understand the terra indigene and were likable males, even if they were human. And Lawrence MacDonald, another police officer and Theral’s cousin, had died recently when a group of humans and Others went to a stall market in Lakeside to give the Crowgard a chance to buy some shinies and little treasures. That field trip ended when their group was attacked by members of the Humans First and Last movement. Almost everyone except Vlad had been wounded during the fight, and MacDonald and Crystal Crowgard had died.

“You should also ask Steve Ferryman for his suggestions,” Meg said.

“Meg . . .”

“Those Elders didn’t tell you that you couldn’t ask humans, did they?”

He sighed. “No, they didn’t, but we have to be careful about how many humans know about this. The humans who belong to the HFL are our enemies. They’re burrowed in towns all across Thaisia, and they’re the reason the Elders are looking at all the humans on the continent rather than eliminating the badness in one town and reclaiming the land.”

Of course, he’d already told three humans what was now at stake. He believed Captain Burke and Lieutenant Montgomery could be trusted, but he hadn’t known the third man who had been at the meeting when he told them about the sanctions. Greg O’Sullivan worked for the governor of the Northeast Region, so it was possible that there were already enemies of the terra indigene who were plotting to cause the final bit of trouble that would tip the scales.

If that happened, it wouldn’t be the first time humans disappeared from a part of the world, and Simon doubted it would be the last.

And because that possibility was a rockslide waiting to come down on all of them, it became more imperative to figure out how much human the terra indigene should keep.

“All right,” he said. “Talk to the female pack. But make sure they know this is dangerous information.”

“I will.” Meg stopped suddenly and whispered, “Bunny.”

Bunny? Simon’s mouth watered. Not that he had a good chance of catching one in his human form. He looked around. Smelled the bunny but couldn’t see one. Then he realized Meg was staring at a brown lump in the grass a long step away from them. Could have been a rock or a bit of tree root poking out of the ground—but those things didn’t have ears.

He sighed, disappointed. Just a one-bite bunny.

Meg backed away, pulling him with her.

“Isn’t he cute?” she whispered, heading back toward the Green Complex.

“You won’t think he’s so cute if he eats all your broccoli,” Simon said.

“He wouldn’t do that. Would he?”

“Broccoli is green, and he’s a bunny.”

Meg huffed as she picked up the pace. “Well, he’s still cute.”

And probably would be allowed to grow since he wasn’t much of a meal for anyone right now.

Simon didn’t mention that since he suspected Meg preferred to think of the bunny as cute rather than crunchy.

Sunday, June 5

Meg stared at those gathered in the sorting room at the Human Liaison's Office—Ruth Stuart, Merri Lee, and Theral MacDonald—and they stared back at her.

"You've already heard about this." The muffins Meg had picked up at A Little Bite sat on the table, untouched.

"Not about this," Ruth said. "But Karl headed to Captain Burke's house for a special, secret meeting—at least that's the opinion I got from what he couldn't say. And he thinks Captain Burke and Lieutenant Montgomery were told more about the sanctions than was made public. If they were told about this . . ."

"Michael was called in for that meeting too," Merri Lee said. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Meg, we can't be responsible for something this . . . big. How can we make a decision about how much human the terra indigene will keep?"

"I don't think we're the ones making the decision," Meg replied. "We're providing information, maybe prioritizing, so that if . . ." She pressed her hands against the table, trying to ignore the painful pins-and-needles feeling that had started in her arms and was now prickling her entire torso under the skin.

The three girls snapped to attention.

"Meg?" Merri Lee's voice turned sharp with understanding.

Meg tried to ignore the pain, tried not to think about how the euphoria that came from speaking prophecy after she made a cut would make her feel so good. She'd made a cut last week; she didn't want to make another so soon. She didn't know if it was true that a cassandra sanguine had only a thousand cuts before the one that would kill her or drive her insane, but if she wanted to live another decade or more, she needed to extend the time between cuts.

"Tell me about this morning," Merri Lee said. "What did you do this morning? Meg!"

Ruth and Theral hustled to the office's back room and closed the door—but not all the way.

"The sparrows were awake, so Simon was awake, so he woke me up because he wanted to take a walk. Poophead."

Merri Lee snorted a laugh. "Meg! That's not a nice thing to say."

"Didn't say it when he could hear me." And would have to be careful not to say it around the puppies, especially Simon's nephew Sam. Since she'd learned the bad word from the human boy Robert Denby, she was pretty sure young males of any species would find the term an appealing insult—and no doubt end up getting nipped by one of the adult Wolves, who would not find it as appealing.

Sam no longer lived with Simon on the weekdays. While she missed the pup when he stayed at the Wolfgard Complex instead of being right next door, maybe it was a good thing that Sam spent more time playing with other Wolves than he did playing with human children.

"We saw a little bunny," Meg continued. "He was cute. Simon said he would eat the broccoli."

“Possible.” Merri Lee paused. “How do you feel?”

Meg rubbed one arm and then the other. “Better. The prickling is almost gone.”

Ruth and Theral returned to the sorting room.

“You don’t have to do this,” Meg said. “Simon asked for my help.”

“Of course we’ll help,” Merri Lee said. “It sounds like this is a double question: how much of what we call human nature do the Others want to assume for themselves, which is something none of us can answer, and how much of what humans use do the Others want to keep, or need to keep for the people who live in Thaisia?”

“If we’re talking about products, we should start with the personal and work outward,” Ruth said. “Make lists of the things we own and the consumable things we use. And the things we’d really like to keep, like indoor plumbing and ways to heat the house in the winter.”

“We could tear out the business section of one of the phone books,” Theral said. “The businesses wouldn’t exist if someone didn’t need the product or service.”

“Simple Life folk don’t use a lot of things other humans use.” Meg started scratching her right arm, then forced herself to stop.

“It might be to our advantage to find out what they do use,” Merri Lee said.

“We can compare lists tomorrow, and whatever is on all our lists will go on a master ‘Really Want to Keep This’ list,” Ruth said.

“How specific do we need to be?” Theral asked.

Meg closed her eyes and pictured a piece of paper with the word “Tools.” Then she imagined a piece of paper with a list of tools: hammer, screwdriver, saw, pliers.

She opened her eyes, fairly certain she had the correct answer. “General categories. I’m not sure how much time Simon has to provide input before a decision is made, so let’s start with general categories. Tools instead of specific tools. Books instead of specific authors.”

“We’re all working across the street today,” Ruth said. “Mrs. Tremaine moved out last Firesday, so Eve Denby wants to give the two-family house a good cleaning upstairs and down. She said we can paint the upstairs apartment first since Karl is currently bunking with Michael and I’m sleeping on the floor of Merri Lee’s efficiency apartment here.”

Meg almost asked why Karl and Ruth weren’t staying with their families, but she remembered in time that both families were mad at them for being Wolf lovers—a slur given to humans who wanted to work in cooperation with the terra indigene.

“We won’t say anything to Eve,” Ruth said. “Not until we’re told that we can.”

“Will you be all right?” Merri Lee leaned to one side to see through the Private door that provided access to the counter in the front room. Then she whispered, “The front door just opened, but I didn’t see—”

A terra indigene Wolf rose on his hind legs and plopped his forelegs on the counter. “Arroo?”

“Good morning, Nathan,” they chorused.

The watch Wolf had arrived. Time to go to work.

Wrapping their muffins in paper towels, the female pack went out the office’s back door, after assuring Meg that they would see her this evening at the Quiet Mind class.

Meg stepped up to the counter. Nathan was one of the Courtyard’s enforcers and, as such, was one of the largest Wolves in the Lakeside pack. He’d also been with Simon when their group was attacked at the stall market, and some of the deeper wounds on his face were still scabbed over.

“We just got together to chat before work,” she said.

Nathan stared at her.

“About things that are none of your business.”

He stared at her.

“Girl things.”

He pushed away from the counter and trotted over to the Wolf bed positioned beneath one of the big front windows.

Meg retreated to the sorting room to eat her muffin.

Used too often, it would lose its effect, but if you told a male Wolf something was a “girl thing,” he would head in the opposite direction. As far as they were concerned, girl things were like porcupines—if you poked at them, you’d end up with a sore nose.

Figuring she had a little time before Nathan tried again to find out what was going on, Meg took a pad of lined paper and a pen out of one of the drawers.

How much human did the terra indigene want to keep?

The lists would be useful. Of course they would. But she wondered if Merri Lee was right and the question really had more to do with mind and heart. If that was the case, she had to hope that making lists would help the Elders see the real answer to the question.

Lieutenant Crispin James Montgomery paid the cabdriver, then turned to study the duplex that belonged to Captain Douglas Burke. Nothing to distinguish it from its neighbors, which had neatly kept yards and other signs that the people living there were what his mother called house proud—a compliment when Twyla Montgomery said it.

He hadn’t been to his captain’s home in the six months he’d lived in Lakeside. What little he knew about Burke outside of the office made him think the man didn’t do much entertaining—and any entertaining he did do was handled in a public venue. This wasn’t a social gathering either, not when they were meeting before their shift at the Chestnut Street Police Station to discuss things Burke wanted kept outside the station.

As he reached the front door and rang the bell, a car pulled into the driveway. Officers Karl Kowalski and Michael Debany, two members of his team, got out and hurried to join him just as the door opened.

“Lieutenant,” Kowalski said, giving Monty a nod before looking at the man filling the doorway. “Captain.”

Douglas Burke was a big man, an imposing figure with blue eyes that usually held a fierce kind of friendliness. His clothes were always pressed, and the dark hair below his bald pate was always neatly trimmed. Never having seen him outside of the job, Monty couldn’t picture the man in anything but a suit, couldn’t see him wearing jeans and a ratty pullover to mow the lawn or dig in the flower beds. In fact, the lack of the suit coat and the rolled-up sleeves were as close to casual dress as Monty had ever seen.

“Come in, gentlemen.” Burke stepped aside, allowing them to enter. “We’re in the dining room. Help yourself to coffee and pastries.”

Monty glanced at the living room as he followed Burke. It looked masculine, comfortable, and minimal. He wouldn’t be surprised if the furniture, what there was of it, was high quality, maybe even antiques.

Not a room that welcomed children.

Not so odd a thought since Monty’s seven-year-old daughter, Lizzy, had arrived in Lakeside last month and was now living with him. All the secrets Lizzy had brought with her to Toland had been revealed, and she was safe from whoever had killed her mother. But that still put him in the position of having to figure out how to be a single parent and a police officer. For now, Eve Denby, the new property manager for the Lakeside Courtyard, was willing to look after Lizzy along with her own two children.

Monty walked into the dining room and hesitated when he spotted Louis Gresh and Pete Denby sitting at the dining room table, filling small plates with pastries and fresh strawberries. He wasn’t surprised that they had become part of Burke’s trusted circle.

The real surprise was the other man sitting at the table.

A toilet flushed, water ran, and then another man joined them. Shorter, leaner, and younger than Burke, the man had a full head of slightly curly, medium brown hair—but the fierce-friendly look in the blue eyes was similar enough to say family.

“Gentlemen, this is Shamus David Burke, a relative of mine who’s visiting from Britannia. He’s in law enforcement over there, so I thought his insights might be useful. Shady, this is Lieutenant Crispin James Montgomery and his officers, Karl Kowalski and Michael Debany. They handle most of the interaction with the Lakeside Courtyard. The man carefully inspecting that pastry is Commander Louis Gresh, who’s in charge of the bomb squad. The pastries are fresh, Commander. Nothing for you to worry about.”

“That you don’t check food for unwelcome surprises just proves you’ve never had children,” Louis replied. He bit into the pastry and chewed with care.

“The other man poking at his food is Pete Denby, an attorney who recently relocated from the Midwest Region.”

“Who also has children,” Pete said, smiling.

“And the only man unconnected to law enforcement is Dr. Dominic Lorenzo, who is currently working on the governor’s task force to assist the cassandra sangue in this part of the Northeast Region.” Burke waited until they were all seated. Then he folded his hands and rested them on the dining room table. “Lieutenant Montgomery already knows what’s at stake. Before we discuss anything, you all need to understand that you can’t share this information with anyone, for any reason. Not friends, not family, not colleagues. If you can’t

agree to that, walk away now because . . .”

“Because everyone in Lakeside will be at risk,” Lorenzo said, sounding irritable. “Same song, different day.”

“Actually, every human on the continent of Thaisia will be at risk,” Burke said, the mild voice at odds with the bright fierceness in his eyes.

Silence. Then, matching Burke’s mild tone, Shady said, “Are we talking about extinction, Douglas?”

Burke nodded.

Lorenzo swallowed hard. Pete pushed aside the plate with the pastry.

Louis let out a shuddering breath. “Gods above and below, talk about a bomb. What are the odds that we’re going to lose control of this?”

“About even,” Burke replied. “Maybe less.”

Monty looked at his men. “This isn’t a surprise to you.”

“Not really,” Kowalski said. “We’ve noticed—”

Burke raised a hand. “Let’s be clear about who is staying before we get into this.” He looked at Lorenzo.

Lorenzo thought for a moment, then pushed his chair back and stood. “I’m carrying enough secrets. You need to keep what you know within a tight circle, and I’m no longer sure when someone asks me questions about the Lakeside Courtyard or about blood prophets if they’re asking out of curiosity, out of professional necessity, or because they’re a member of the Humans First and Last movement trying to ferret out information that can be used against the Others. When I have to travel for the task force, I’m traveling alone. It would be too easy to be waylaid and . . . interrogated.”

Monty wanted someone to make a joke, to say that Lorenzo was building a plot worthy of a thriller with talk of interrogations. But no one made a joke—mostly because Pete Denby had been run off the road, presumably by members of the HFL, when he’d packed up his family and bolted for Lakeside after helping Burke uncover information about a man called the Controller.

“Understood.” Burke hesitated. “Ask Simon Wolfgard for a free pass through the wild country. I think he’ll know what that means. Roads that you’ll find on a map are roads humans can use. But there are unmarked roads that lead to places humans should not go. If you think you’re being followed, turn down one of those unmarked roads, roll down a window and start shouting, honk the horn, do anything to gain the attention of the terra indigene before other humans catch up to you. Under those circumstances, you have a better chance of surviving an encounter with the Others than with humans.”

Lorenzo nodded. “Good luck.” He started to walk out of the room, then stopped. “If any of you should need discrete medical attention, you can count on me to not ask questions.”

“Appreciate that,” Burke said.

They waited until Lorenzo closed the front door. Waited a little longer, listening to the car start in the driveway attached to the other half of the duplex.

“Anyone else?” Burke asked. They all shook their heads. “Then let’s start local and work up to the end of the

world as we know it. Lieutenant? You have anything to report?”

Monty poured coffee he didn’t want in order to give himself a little time. “The Courtyard took possession of the two-family house on Crowfield Avenue. The deal is done, the previous owner has been paid, and the Denbys will be moving in soon. So will Karl and Ruthie.”

Pete nodded. “Yesterday the owner of the stone apartment buildings on either side of the double accepted the Courtyard’s offer for those dwellings. Since the Business Association is planning to pay cash for those buildings, I expect we’ll be able to expedite the paperwork and take possession by the end of the month. The apartments in those buildings have two bedrooms, Lieutenant. Something to think about with Lizzy being here for good.”

Monty had considered whether he’d take one of the apartments if Simon Wolfgard offered it. Lots of practical reasons to accept—and reasons to keep some distance from the Others. For one thing, there wouldn’t be much division between work and home if he lived across the street from the Courtyard and had Kowalski and Denby—and probably Debany as well—for next-door neighbors.

But they would be good neighbors, he thought. And police living so close to the Courtyard might be a deterrent to trouble. But none of us are talking about where the children will go to school next year—assuming they’ll be safe going to a city-run school, or even a private one run by humans. After all, anyone living in a building owned by the Others will be considered a Wolf lover, and prejudice is mounting against anyone who supports working with the terra indigene in any way.

He and Lizzy needed a different place to live, and he would have to weigh the pros and cons carefully before making a decision. But that would have to wait.

“Next?” Burke asked.

“The Courtyard’s first guests are arriving next week,” Kowalski said. “Some Wolves from the Addirondak Mountains packs. No one mentioned other kinds of terra indigene coming in at the same time. Michael and I got the impression that we were expected to be visible in the stores and around the Market Square, at least for a little while each day.”

“They’re coming to interact with humans,” Monty said. “It makes sense Wolfgard would want to have you around.”

“Is this an invitation-only sort of thing?” Shady asked. “I’ve never seen a Courtyard or had a casual interaction with one of the terra indigene. I’d like the opportunity. The dealings I had with a few of the Others when some of the cassandra sangue were . . . channeled . . . to Britannia were tense experiences for all the humans who were helping with the rescue. Except for the people who live along the border or the coast, most of Britannia’s citizens have never come in contact with the Others. Considering what is going on in the world right now, I’d like some firsthand experience in a less life-and-death situation.”

Catching Burke’s look, Monty said, “I’ll ask Simon Wolfgard about allowing us to bring in guests.”

“Anything of concern about the folks on Great Island or information about the River Road Community?” Burke asked.

“No, sir,” Monty replied. Shady would be the only person at the table who didn’t notice the omission of Talulah Falls, a town that was no longer under human control after a bomb killed several Crows and a Sanguinati was killed while hunting for the humans responsible for the explosion.

"Then let's talk about the main event since Shady gave away the punch line," Burke said quietly.

"Extinction." Pete looked grim. "The Others are serious about this?"

"Because of the recent troubles, the earth natives in the wild country are considering extinction as a way to rid Thaisia of a menace to the land and a threat to the rest of the beings that were here before our ancestors set foot on this continent."

"But we've tried to help," Louis protested. "Monty and his team have been sticking their necks out every day to interact with the Others in the Courtyard. Gods, one of our own was killed during that attack at the stall market. Doesn't that count for something?"

"It counts," Monty said. "The time we spend in the Courtyard, the help we've provided . . . We're the reason the humans in Thaisia aren't going to be erased from this continent."

"Not yet anyway," Burke added. "One Courtyard and some police officers and civilians to balance out whatever stupidity the HFL movement is planning next. And let's be clear about who will be erased, as the lieutenant put it. I think Intuit villages will be spared. So will Simple Life farmers and craftsmen. As much as possible, they keep themselves separated from the humans living in human-controlled towns and cities, and they've been careful in their dealings with the terra indigene. And I think the Others will still need some humans—if nothing else, to provide labor for the products they want to have."

"That leaves the rest of us," Pete said.

"That leaves the rest of us," Burke agreed.

"If you'll pardon me for saying it, you're all screwed," Shady said. He poured cream into his cup and then filled it with coffee from the pot sitting on a thick cloth pad. "You should start laying in supplies while you can and start thinking about how to survive."

"Is it definite?" Burke asked. "Is the Cel-Romano Alliance of Nations going to war?"

"They are. And not among themselves, which, frankly, is what the people of Britannia were hoping they would do. They've been stockpiling food and weapons and supplies for a while, but now the signs are out in the open, with troops being transported around the Mediterranean. They don't have enough land to grow the food they need to feed all their people. That's the truth of it. So the question we've been asking is this: is Cel-Romano going to try to grab the human part of Britannia, since we're the closest piece of human land to them, or are they going to try to annex some of the wild country, gambling that they have the kind of weaponry now that will eliminate the shifters who currently inhabit that land?"

"The shifters wouldn't be the only earth natives living on that land," Monty said.

Shady nodded. "I know that. Most people in Britannia may not have dealings with them, but we are taught the history of our land, so we know why very few humans go past the low stone wall that runs the width of the island and separates the land the world itself gifted to us from Wild Britannia. Just like we know that the tales told by the traders who do venture beyond that wall and return alive aren't embellished."

"If Cel-Romano is trying for a land grab, why cause trouble on this side of the Atlantik?" Kowalski asked. "Cel-Romano can't bring an army across the ocean."

"No, indeed," Shady said. "Even a fishing boat is carefully watched. Troop ships would never be allowed to reach land."

“Food was smuggled out of Thaisia,” Burke said. “Troops could be smuggled in. If offered enough money, ship captains will try to slip past whatever is watching.”

“None of this addresses the threat of extinction,” Monty said.

“There’s nothing we can do about that, Lieutenant,” Burke said gently. “We just keep the lines of communication open. We provide assistance where and when we can. And we hope that we continue to balance whatever foolishness other humans instigate.” He looked around the table. “Anything else?”

Michael Debany shifted in his chair. “Captain, you said the information shouldn’t leave this room. Does that mean not saying anything to the girls because . . .” He looked at Kowalski. “They’re meeting with Meg this morning, so they might know about this anyway.”

“I don’t think Wolfgard told Ms. Corbyn about the earth natives’ decision,” Monty said. “But he may have shared something else with her that he didn’t share with us.”

“Need to know, gentlemen,” Burke said. “For now, that excludes the girls. Next week, the Courtyard will have guests, and the girls don’t need to be wondering about every word or gesture, afraid that it will be the thing that tips the scales against us.”

“So business as usual,” Louis said.

“Yes.” Burke pushed away from the table. “If that’s all . . .”

A dismissal.

Monty caught a ride with Louis to the station, which allowed Kowalski and Debany to talk between themselves on the way back to the Courtyard, where Debany would put in a few hours helping Eve Denby and the girls before reporting to work.

“Have you talked to Officer Debany about a new partner?” Louis asked.

“Not yet,” Monty replied. “Even with the hazard pay that comes with working on this team, no one has made a request to be the fourth man.”

“Well, it’s not just dealing with humans who want to start trouble, is it? Anyone on your team is expected to interact and spend time in the Courtyard during off-duty hours. Even officers who won’t hesitate to back you up are going to think long and hard about that.”

“About being branded as Wolf lovers.”

“It’s not just the man who gets branded,” Louis said quietly. “And it’s not just people who interact with the Others on a daily basis. My wife and a neighbor—a woman she’s been friends with for years—went shopping the other day. Carpooled to save gas. They parked in the general area of the shops. Two butcher shops, two blocks apart. One was showing an HFL sign in the window; the other shop doesn’t support the movement. My wife’s friend went to the shop with the HFL sign—a place where you have to show your HFL membership in order to be served. My wife went to the other shop because we’ve agreed that we aren’t going to be a part of the HFL in any way.”

“What happened?” Monty asked.

“The friend didn’t say anything, but the car was gone when my wife finished her shopping and returned to

where they'd parked. The woman, friend and neighbor, just left without her and hasn't spoken to her since. Gods, they used to watch each other's kids, used to have a night out once in a while—dinner and a movie that the husbands and kids didn't want to see. And now . . .”

“The lines are being drawn.”

“Yes. I just hope there are enough of us standing on this side when the time comes to hold that line.”

Monty looked out the window and didn't reply.

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