



A Place of Our Own

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Arranging the Meeting

Porque es el destino

Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony - No me Ames

The being known in some realms of the Umbra as Alrysaelmbet gathered herself in one of the lesser known shadow realms. Here she was shapeless, formless, a being of mist and smoke. She loved the freedom it gave her, but she knew that form could have its uses. With an unspoken word, a gilt framed mirror appeared, looking out of place in this dimension and reflecting only shadows and mist on its silver face.

Alrysaelmbet watched in the mirror as the form she had recently begun to take most frequently began to appear. First was the hair, fine and so white that it could not honestly be called blond. Pink bows kept it most of it swept back away from the pale skin of the forehead that appeared next, leaving only a light scattering of bangs that fell to arched blonde eyebrows. Then came the eyes, a deep blue of a cloudless sky on a summer afternoon with a deeper ring of blue around the edge. A pert nose and plump cheeks led to a pink and smiling mouth that set about a firm chin. Small ears with little pink stones sat above a chubby

The white hair fell past shoulders clad in a pink leotard. A well rounded tummy was flanked by stout arms and chubby hands with stubby fingers. Around her waist fell a pink tulle skirt decorated by silk roses. The chunky legs that came next were clad in pink tights that led to tiny pink ballet slippers.

She smiled at herself, enjoying most thoroughly the cuteness of the child in the mirror. While taking the form of a two-year-old certainly had its disadvantages, it also drew a feeling of protectiveness from her charge, and allowed her to say and do things that would otherwise be completely unacceptable.

Raising her hands above her head, she twirled, reveling in the feeling of movement. She giggled, sounding so much like a mortal toddler that a nearby spirit fled screaming from her amusement. She sobered, remembering the importance of the day in the mortal realm.

Focusing on the mirror once more, Alrysaelmbet spoke soft words in a language that was not meant for human lips. The clothing of the child in the reflection changed to a flowery dress that fell to just below her knees. The tights changed to white, and the shoes to black vinyl. A pink sweater matched the pink ribbons that held her hair up in pony tails. It was the perfect outfit for what she hoped would be a perfect day.

Tamara Marks was having a bad day. She'd woke at dawn and spent the next few hours by the pond in meditation and ritual, hoping to prepare for a seeking she planned to take within the next few weeks. When she'd returned to the house, she'd discovered the baby was gone.

Everyone in the Cedar View Chantry believed that Alyssa was Tamara's child although that was not the truth. Tamara had taken a year to explore the world and the umbra, and when she returned, she had an infant with her. Alyssa had actually come from one of the farther umbral realms that Tamara had explored.

At first Tamara had not liked the idea of having any creature guide her through what Alyssa claimed would be a very important period of her life. After a few weeks of trying to lose the being, Tamara finally resigned herself to being stuck with the guide. She hadn't liked Alyssa's insistence on taking the form of a child, but Tamara had no choice in the matter.

In the two years that had passed since her return to the chantry, Tamara had been 'raising' the guide as her own child. It was obvious to most of the chantry members that Alyssa was

not the average run of the mill toddler, but Tamara refused to discuss the child's origins, even with Jess, her mentor.

Alyssa had the annoying tendency to disappear, forcing Tamara to look for her, and that was what had happened that morning. The guide claimed that finding her was a learning experience, and would listen to no arguments about how simply telling Tamara where to go would be much easier.

So this morning the child had disappeared, and Tamara had traced her to an island just off the coast of Virginia. The drive to the ferry dock was uneventful, and the ride on the ferry itself quite pleasant. She didn't understand why Alyssa had chosen the island, but by now she knew better than to question her choice. Something was going to happen today, something important, and she had no idea what she had to be prepared for.

Alyssa blinked her way into the mortal realm with but a thought. She appeared under a bush that sat next to a restaurant. Although it was several blocks to her destination, she still needed to find someone to take her where she was going. One drawback of the form she'd chosen was that it was difficult to open doors. Of course, she could have blinked directly to where she wanted to go, but what fun was that? It was so much more enjoyable pretending to be the little girl she looked like and watching mortals fall all over themselves to help her.

Sure enough, she'd barely come out from under the bush when an older man stopped to talk to her. He was tall and grayed, although she knew that he'd been red and fiery in his youth. In fact, those on the island still called him Red. Red Donovan had been a fisherman once, one of the more successful on the island.

Red wanted to know where Alyssa had come from, where her parents were, and all sorts of other things that Alyssa didn't want to answer. After a few minutes, the man took her by the hand and led her directly to the one place Alyssa had to be.

"Mornin', Mac," Red said pleasantly to the man sitting behind the desk.

"Morning, Red." Deputy Brendan 'Mac' McAllister replied. "Who you got there?" He was tall with dark hair and eyes, and gave off an aura of cold that Alyssa could almost see with her deep blue eyes. She knew the Deputy's name was not Brendan at all, but she held her tongue.

"That's a good question, isn't it?" Red replied, looking down at the little girl whose hand he still held. She smiled up at him charmingly, happy he was playing along so well when he didn't even know about the game. "Found her wandering down by the Crab House. No one seems to have any claim on her, thought you might be able to find out where she belongs."

Mac smiled pleasantly. "Sure." He stood up and went to take Alyssa's hand, leading her over to a chair that she obligingly climbed into.

Red didn't stay much longer, stating he had a date with the Widow Davis. Mac wished him luck though Alyssa knew he shouldn't have bothered. The Widow Davis was quite happy living alone, and didn't want Red hanging around for anything more than the occasional dinner he paid for.

Red was barely to the door when Alyssa spotted the wolf who was lying by the desk. It had been a long time since she'd seen her friend, and she fairly jumped from the chair to rush over to him. "Dog!" she cried happily, although that wasn't the word that she'd tried to say. Some sounds didn't transfer well to her mortal form, but the guide known in the mortal realm as Gwrhyn knew what she'd tried to say. His mental greeting was welcomed with a hug and a sloppy kiss, after which she laid on the wolf, nearly ecstatic just to be with her old friend again.

"What's your name?" Mac asked the child.

While she wanted to spend more time with her friend, she knew she had a task to do. She sat up and took a deep breath before saying "Awyssa!" near the top of her voice. She reached out and petted the wolf a little roughly in her enthusiasm. "Dog!"

Mac asked her a number of questions, trying to find out exactly where the girl belonged, and Alyssa had a bit of fun with the communication difficulties appearing as a two-year-old child could pose. Though she knew the words in her own language, the human tongue was a difficult one, and she hadn't been in the mortal realm long enough to learn how to say everything she needed to say. She did manage to tell him that her 'mommy' was 'at work', though she didn't add what she was working toward. Eventually she could feel Tamara getting close, so she took the man's hand and pulled him toward the door. "I show you."

A few minutes later they had walked three of the four blocks of town and were standing on the ferry dock. Many people knew Mac, and had called out to him on their stroll, but none of them asked about the child. It was almost as if they didn't see her, despite the fact that she had been talking constantly since they'd left the Sheriff's office.

Alyssa pointed to the upper deck of the ferry as it docked where there were a dozen or so people milling about. Another friend of hers stood there, doing her part to bring today's events to fruition. "Natalie," Alyssa said proudly, looking at the being who to all appearances was a six year hold girl with long blond hair and clothing that matched Alyssa's in all but color. Natalie liked blue.

Tamara knew she was getting close to wherever it was her guide had blinked off to. She ignored those who watched her slim form and long blond hair and walked off the ferry looking around for some trace of where the creature might be. Finally she spotted Alyssa trying to pull away from a man and calling 'Mommy' across the distance between them.

Given the fact that the man was mortal, and a police officer, Tamara assumed that there would be no battle to fight, not this time at least. She couldn't keep the relief from her face as she hurried over to them and swept the creature in her arms.

"Baby, what in the world—" she began to ask, but managed to stop herself before she said too much. She looked at the officer, wondering if he'd noticed her getting off the ferry. "I'm so sorry about this. Sometimes she just... walks off."

"It's okay ma'am," the officer replied. "We had a nice tour of the three blocks between the station and here."

"Still, I appreciate your bringing her down here." She shifted the child to one side and held out her hand. "I'm Tamara Marks, and this is my daughter, Alyssa." Despite two years with the girl, she still couldn't quite manage to claim Alyssa as her child without a slight hesitation over the lie.

He shook her hand politely. "Name's Brendan, but most just call me Mac. And this is Gwrhyr."

"Macalister," Alyssa crowed with a grin, jumping a little in the woman's arms and pointing at the man.

"What?" Tamara was a bit confused, trying to remember where she'd heard the name before. She remembered just as the wolf gave a snort and sat down facing away from his master.

"That's right," Mac replied. "Brendan McAlister."

Tamara smiled hesitantly. "I believe that I've heard your name, Officer McAlister. Word is you're looking for someone, or rather a group of some ones." She looked at the baby in her arms and said in a low voice, "Now I see why you showed up here, of all places."

Mac heard her and chuckled softly.

The woman looked around to make sure they wouldn't be overheard before speaking again. "I heard that you are looking for a group like mine."

"Sure." He gestured toward a nearby bench, where they sat down. The wolf followed, lying down in the sunlight, trying to soak up the last of the afternoon warmth. Tamara sat the girl on her feet, and she immediately went to pet Gwrhyr, talking to him in words that made no sense to the humans watching, but made perfect sense to the wolf.

"And what kind of group is it you have?" Mac asked.

Tamara could feel cold creeping into her bones and attributed to the lateness of the season and the day. She hoped they could wrap this up quickly. After another glance around, she replied. "I run a chantry about twenty minutes from the other end of the ferry. I heard you're looking for one, though I'm not real clear on the why."

"I have an interest in the next generation of Shaman," he told her.

She tilted her head in interest. No many people used the term 'shaman' these days, and most that did were associated with her Tradition, the Dreamspeakers. "What kind of an interest would that be?"

"My son."

"You believe your son is a shaman?" she asked, surprised.

"I know he will be," he said firmly

"How can you be so sure?" She tried to keep her voice calm, but she had to wonder if this was a trap. "Not everyone has the power you speak of."

"'On midwinter's morn the twins will cry'," he began quoting softly. "'Their future will quickly pass them by. Three trips around the sun will see them come into their destiny. A howl raised by the moon's clear light will find his magic shinning bright. A wolf, a mage, and enemies three; this is what their fate shall be.'"

She raised an eyebrow in surprise, recognizing the hand of fate in the words he'd spoken. "Destiny is taking a hand in your children's lives? For what reason?"

"The sake of my father." Mac's voice was grave, deadly serious.

Tamara frowned. She knew or at least knew of all the people in the area who called themselves magi, or at least she thought she did. "Who is your father?"

"The Raven," he replied simply. "And I his son within whom Death walked."

She couldn't help but smile while wondering why Alyssa had set her up. She'd known the guide had a sense of humor, but this was beyond anything the child had done before. "This is a joke, right? I'm being Punk'd or something."

Mac's laughter rang out, drawing both Alyssa and Gwrhyr's attention. "No, I am afraid not," he said with some amusement.

"You can't be serious," Tamara scoffed. "I mean, we've all heard rumors about the guy who got vamped, and then killed, and then... but that can't be true."

"How can I prove it to you?" he asked, sober once more.

She shook her head, knowing that no words he could say would prove his honesty. She drew on the spirit world, using her art to delve into his mind for the truth. What she saw there left her shaken. "By the goddess," she whispered. "It *is* true."

He nodded. "My son will be ready for his training in a year's time."

"A year?" she murmured, still stunned by the information she glimpsed in his mind, knowledge of vampires and werewolves, and death. "What, did those brats give you dates?"

Alyssa looked up from her discussion with Gwrhyr with a bit of irritation in her gaze. Tamara didn't notice, but Mac did.

"Three trips around the sun will see them come into their destiny," he repeated. "And mind your tongue, the Fates are around."

She shook her head again and put a harness on her unruly tongue. "If what you say is true, your son's training is very important. Why not have the Raven train him?"

"He shall," Mac assured her, "but unlike me, I want him to experience the outside before he commits to his fate."

"I can understand that." She took a deep breath, wondering if she had the strength to teach a child with such an important future. Looking at Alyssa, she knew that she'd been led here, to this man and his son, and that there was no way she could walk away. "As I said, I run a chantry on the mainland. Jess and I practice the Shamanic arts, as do many of the others, but there are other traditions among us."

"Good."

"I would like to meet your son," she continued, "and I'm sure you would like to meet the others in the chantry. That is, if you'd consider having your son train with us."

"Perhaps soon," Mac said softly, looking toward something in town. "I fear I must excuse you now. Fate is sending my second meeting this way."

Alyssa watched Tamara reach into her purse for something and sighed impatiently. Sometimes it was devilishly irritating to have a charge that was so blind. Of course it looked as if Gwrhyr's charge was just as blind, trying to send Tamara away before she had a chance to meet the man she'd really been sent to meet. After a quick discussion with her friend, Alyssa stood on her chubby legs. Ignoring Tamara's call, she ran to the approaching man and latched onto one of his legs.

Mac looked at Tamara and shrugged. "It's fate."

Kevin Ramsey stopped the moment the child reached him. Though he'd grown used to working with adolescents, children this young terrified him.

"Alyssa," Tamara called in a mildly scolding tone. "Let the nice man go."

He looked up at the woman, taking in her slim form and striking eyes. "How do you know I'm a nice man?" he asked in a low voice.

"Wolf," Alyssa cried loudly.

Tamara began walking toward them, followed closely by Mac and Gwrhyr.

"Want ride," the child added, looking up at Kevin.

He returned her gaze with a worried look. Normally he'd have killed anything that clung to him that tightly, but this was a child. He wondered if he could take it by the scruff of the neck like one would a pup and hand it back to its mother.

"Alyssa." Tamara's voice was harder this time as she bent bends to pick up the girl.

Alyssa didn't want to let go, she wanted to ride the wolf, but at least she'd managed for the two of them to meet.

"I'm sorry about that," Tamara said apologetically. "She's not usually so forward."

"I'm sure it's okay," he said, but his tone said he wasn't sure. Now that the problem of the child was over, he looked at the man that he'd been sent to meet. "Officer McAlister?"

"Yes, how can I help you Mr...?"

"Ramsey," he replied, shaking Mac's hand. "Kevin Ramsey. I hate to interrupt, but I've had a little brat bugging me for days to come see you. Damned thing wouldn't leave me alone until I asked where I could find you."

"Yeah, Natalie can be like that," he said with a smile before gesturing toward the bench he and Tamara had vacated earlier. "Come, sit down."

Kevin frowned. "How'd you...?" He shook his head, and followed Mac to the bench, where they sat. "You know her then. Makes this easier."

"All my life."

Tamara would have left them to their conversation had Alyssa not taken steps against it. She squirmed her way out of the woman's arms and in seconds she was holding on to Kevin's leg again.

The man looked down at the child, then up at what he assumed to be her mother. "Christ, can't you control this thing?"

The woman smiled wryly. "Not usually." She began to pry the child from his leg but didn't have much success.

Mac listened to his own guide for a moment before pointing a finger at Kevin. "Tell him."

The wolf obeyed and began speaking in Kevin's mind. The man stopped moving, obviously stunned by this development. After listening to the wolf's explanation about mystical guides and the forms they take in the mortal world, he looked down at the child attached to his leg. His expression was one of horror and he sent a silent prayer to Gaia begging that the creature not have been sent for him.

Tamara had not been a part of the conversation and Kevin's lack of movement, combined with the look of horror on his face, confused her. Alyssa finally let go with a childlike laugh only to step to Mac's side and hold her arms up to him.

As he lifted her onto his lap, he turned to Tamara. "Maybe you should stick around for a few more minutes." When she nodded, he sent a mental warning to Gwrhryr that the rest of the lecture was unnecessary. To Kevin he said aloud, "You are among friends."

It was Kevin's turn to be confused, but he tried to shake it away as the child snuggled into Mac's cool aura. She was comfortable there for his body temperature reminded her of the realm she had began her existence in.

"You seem to know a bit more than I do at the moment," Kevin said in a low voice. "She just told me to come here and talk to you about some tree."

"Rowan," he said with a chuckle. "Not the tree, she's my daughter."

"Oh," he replied with a sheepish look on his face. "Sorry about that. The little bitch has me stressed out. Natalie, not your daughter."

"Let's watch the tongue in front of the ladies shall we?" Mac asked softly.

He glanced from Alyssa to Tamara. "Sorry, not used to being around... little ones."

Mac laughed. "Sorry, sorry. So if Natalie led you to me than you must be Alpha."

Kevin's eyebrow shot up in an unspoken challenge. "Yeah." It wasn't that he was being argumentative, per say, just that he was used to being the top dog.

"My daughter will require a pack to train with," Mac explained.

The werewolf looked from Mac to the woman, to the wolf, to the child and then back to the man before him. "Which one's your daughter?"

Mac smiled. "She's not here at the moment."

He was relieved to hear it. He'd thought he figured out that the wolf and the child were some sort of spirit guides and he hated to be wrong. As far as the woman went, her looks would be far too distracting in the pack for his liking. "How old is your daughter?"

"She'll be eight on her next birthday."

"That's a bit young for..." He hesitated a moment, wondering how much Tamara knew about the world he lived in. "...the training you're talking about."

"She will be ready for the training next year," Mac told him.

"Nine is still quite young for..." he began, glancing once more at the woman standing nearby, "That kind of training."

"You're a werewolf," Tamara said softly to Kevin's surprise. "I get it."

"It is a long story, and not one you'd likely believe anyway," Mac admitted, "but I assure you, she will be ready."

"If she hasn't had her first change, how do you know she's going to?" he demanded. "Have you had the ritual done on her?"

Mac knew about the ritual of course, having grown up with a brother who was a werewolf, however the ritual had never been done for Rowan. It hadn't been needed. "Fate," he said simply.

Fate was a fickle bitch, but Kevin managed not to state his opinion on that out loud. "And you need someone to train her for her destiny, is that it?"

"I need someone to teach her the basics of what she is," Mac agreed. "Yes."

"Where's the girl's mother?" Kevin asked. "I mean, you're obviously not..." Not a werewolf, was what he'd meant, but he left the words unspoken. He took a good look at the wolf's anatomy. "And he obviously isn't mom. I've never heard of any wolves on the island."

"Or anything else for that matter," Tamara added firmly.

Mac included them both in a serious look. "And that is the way I like it for now. The gene is from my family," he explained to Kevin.

Tamara nodded her agreement to Mac's apparent need for secrecy, knowing how important anonymity could be. Kevin simply shrugged. He didn't care one way or the other, and it cost him nothing to agree.

"Perhaps we should meet the children," Tamara suggested.

"Children?" Kevin asked, surprised by the news. "You've more of them?"

"Only one for your teaching," Mac assured him.

"The other one's mine, Mr. Ramsey," Tamara added.

"Riley!" Alyssa announced just before shoving her thumb in her mouth.

Mac looked down at her with a gentle smile. "Yes, Riley."

"Maybe we should meet them, if it's all right," Kevin agreed. "I'd like to see the material you want me to work with."

Alyssa snuggled into the comforting coolness of the man who held her, listening while they made arrangements to meet the children on separate days. She was nearly asleep by the time they were done, and it took an effort for her to climb down and reach for her charge, who swung her up, holding her carefully.

Today had been a good day, and now if Tamara didn't do something stubbornly stupid like walking away from Kevin, Alyssa could relax, for a little while. At least until the next time she needed Tamara to do something she didn't want to do.

"The ferry won't be leaving for nearly an hour," Kevin pointed out, watching the woman cradle the child in her arms. "Would you like to get something to eat while we wait?"

Tamara looked at him in surprise, but then smiled. "I would."

Alyssa stifled a yawn with her fist and closed her eyes. Things were going well, and it was time to rest.

Riley

And it must be destiny

Not left to chance

Bell Book and Candle - Destiny

We knew something was up the moment dad came home. Not that he said anything, not to Rowan or me anyway. He took mom for a walk on the beach like they always did when they had to talk about something important and didn't want us to know about it. Mom looked worried when they came back, but she didn't say anything to us either. She went into the kitchen and made dinner.

When the meal was over, dad pushed his plate back and looked between my sister and me. "We're going to meet some people this weekend," he announced.

A look at Mom told us that she already knew what he was talking about. "What kind of people?" I asked.

"You will find out when we get there," he replied. "We are taking you separately."

Rowan and I looked at each other in a surprise that was close to shock. Separate was a word that hardly ever came up in our lives.

"But we do everything together," she pointed out.

"Not this." His voice had a final sound neither of us liked.

Together we asked, "Why not?"

"This is Mage and Garou related."

"Oh." Rowan and I both knew that someday we would be different. I would learn the art of our grandparents and older sister, while she would become a shapeshifter like Uncle Angus and his family. "Can't we just go and watch?" I asked.

"No, I'm sorry."

"Then I don't wanna go," Rowan said firmly.

I smiled at her across the table. "Me neither."

Dad didn't agree. "Neither of you really have a choice."

"Mom says there are always choices," I reminded him.

Mom looked like she didn't like the idea of us being separated either, but she still shook her head. "Not this time."

"Are you sure?" Rowan pleaded. "Can't we just—"

He cut her off. "No."

She puffed up her bottom lip, pouting as she always did when dad didn't give her what she wanted. I waited to see if it would work, and when it didn't, I got mad. Some day I'll learn that yelling at our parents doesn't really do any good. In the mean time, I spent the rest of the night in our room.

Dad seemed dead set on separating Rowan and me. Neither of us could understand it. I mean, we knew we'd be different some day, but we weren't yet. No amount of pleading, pouting or attitude changed his mind.

Friday came too fast. Mom took Rowan through the gateway so she could visit our Grandparents while we were off meeting whoever it was dad wanted me to meet. Uncle Glenn showed up right after Mom came back alone, and the four of us climbed into the car along with Gwrhyr, dad's mystical guide... thingy.

Between the ferry ride and the roads on the mainland, it took almost an hour to get to where we were going. On the way dad explained that he had met a Dreamspeaker named Tamara Marks, and that she was in charge of the chantry we would be visiting. I think he expected me to ask questions, but I didn't really care about where we were going. I just wanted to go home.

The chantry looked like some sort of commune. It had five houses sitting in the middle of what looked like a park. One of the houses was bigger than the others, and when we got out of the car, a little girl ran out from the side of it toward Gwrhyr yelling "Dog!" Behind her came a woman who looked the same age as Mom.

The little kid stopped when she was almost to the car to look at dad, then at Glenn. Her mother came up to us and put a hand on the girl's head. "I see you found the place all right." She was smiling, which I guess was nice, but I still didn't want to like her.

"Yes, no problems," dad assured her.

"It's not fancy, but it's home," she said, leaning down and taking the girl's hand. In a firm voice she said, "Remember what I told you about the wolf, baby. He's not your toy."

When dad made the introductions, Tamara looked at Glenn like she knew him from somewhere, but she didn't say anything. She invited us all inside and led the way to the farm house. I didn't want to go, and Mom knew it. She came over and held my hand, which made me feel a little better. At least she wasn't trying to give me away.

Tamara took us inside the big house where we sat down in the living room. She sent the kid toward the back of the house, telling her to get someone named Jess. "This is a bit different than what we're used to here," she admitted when the kid was gone. "Normally we're involved in helping people find their way to the spirits, or we help them after the spirits have found them. This situation is quite different."

"We're used to being different," dad answered, which made Glenn smirk.

Jess Sexton came into the room just then, a tall older guy with graying hair holding a tray of lemonade and some glasses. Alyssa came back too, and sat petting Gwrhyr. It looked like they were talking, but I couldn't be sure.

Once everyone had a glass of lemonade, the adults got down to business. Dad wanted to know what kind of Traditions were involved in the chantry. I listened while Tamara told him though I pretended I didn't. I didn't know much about mages yet, but she listed off five different kinds of them.

Then he asked a question I didn't really understand, but I guess Tamara did. She looked at Glenn and said, "That's why you look familiar. I saw you at a pow wow years ago. There were rumors that you hunted."

"I don't hunt, not anymore," he told her. "It seems like I remember seeing you as well."

They talked for a few minutes about what had gone on at the gathering, and about people they both knew, then Tamara looked at dad. "We don't hunt here," she said bluntly. "If you're looking for someone to teach your son those things, you'd be better off letting your friend teach him."

"We aren't looking for that," dad told her. "Nor are we looking for somewhere to be judged."

"We leave that to others," Jess replied. His voice was kinda soft and kind. "We're at peace here, and we'd like to stay that way. There are others who follow the way of the sword."

After dad nodded, it seemed to be mom's turn at asking questions. I almost felt like I was at school or something and she wanted to make sure the teachers wouldn't mistreat me. It made me feel a little better, that she wasn't going to just dump me on these people without finding out what they were like, but I still didn't understand what we were doing here. More than half of dad's family was mages. I wanted to learn from them, like Corrine did, not from strangers.

Then Glenn started in on the questions. Most of the stuff he asked about I didn't understand and I don't think mom did either. Dad seemed to, though, and between the two of them they asked more than three times the questions mom had.

"May I ask why you are not having your own family teach Riley?" Tamara asked when my family's questions had run out. "Or even Glenn? He has a reputation for teaching young mages."

"They will teach him, eventually," dad replied. "But I want his first training to be from outside the family though, to ensure he is his own person and practices his own medicine."

I stared at him in surprise. I would never have guessed that was the reason that he wanted me to learn from someone outside the family. Now I understood what we were doing here.

"How long would you expect him to study with us," she asked.

Dad shrugged. "We'll leave that up to Fate." When she seemed to accept that, he added, "I don't really have any more questions, does any one else?"

The only other question Tamara had was whether they would have the responsibility of helping me come into my power. Dad explained that his family would do that since Rowan would be coming into her power at the same time.

They arranged for me to visit once a month so I could learn the basics and get used to the chantry itself. I didn't like the idea of spending weekends away from Rowan, or away from home for that matter, but they didn't ask me how I felt about it.

We went outside for a tour of the grounds. There was a large pond close to the house that Jess told me we could swim in during the summer. On the far side of the pond was a thick stand of trees, and there were lots of animals everywhere we looked.

Gwrhyr kept popping in and out while Tamara carried Alyssa and showed us around. Glenn had more questions and so did dad, but mom didn't seem to notice. I listened to what I could, but there were a lot of things I didn't understand. There were a lot of people to meet too, some of them Dreamspeakers like Glenn, but there were mages of other Traditions as well.

I felt better when Jess offered to have Rowan stay at the chantry with me once in a while, and the room she showed us that I would stay in was pretty cool. It seemed like mom looked in every corner like she thought there were traps or something, but when she was done she seemed happy with the room.

Dad and Glenn seemed real happy in the car on the way home. Glenn thought it would be a good situation for me, would help me get that independence dad seemed to want for me. Mom didn't say much, but what she did say was nice. I hoped she really liked the chantry and wasn't being nice about it just to make me happy.

We didn't waste any time when we got home before heading to Ireland. My grandparents wanted to hear everything about the chantry, but I let mom and dad tell them while I went outside with Rowan.

I told her everything that had happened once we were alone. She was glad that she would be able to go with me some times, and was as surprised as I'd been about dad wanting me to be my own person. It made us both feel a little better about being separated.

We had always known that we would be different, some day. We would do this training that mom and dad thought was so important, and when it was done, well, then no one would be able to separate us again.

Rowan

"We are all tied to our destiny and there is no way we can liberate ourselves."

Rita Hayworth

On the day I met the Bayford Pack, mom woke Riley and me up early. We ate breakfast quietly while our parents talked about the chantry they'd met the day before with Riley. After we ate, dad took Riley through the gateway to our grandparent's house, and came back with Uncle Angus, who would come with us to meet the pack. We all climbed into the car along with Gwrhyr, who wouldn't be left behind.

Dad didn't like me complaining about leaving Riley behind, but then again he didn't do anything to make me stop. He did answer all the questions I had about the chantry, and told me I'd have to wait for answers on the pack until we met them. I thought mom looked a lot more tense than usual, but she barely said anything on the way to Bayford.

The park was bigger than the one on Hog Island, with lots of trees and a large playscape that I would have wanted to check out if we hadn't had other business. There were half a dozen cars parked in the lot, and families here and there with little kids, playing.

Dad led the way toward a gazebo where two men and a woman were waiting. Not too far away I saw a small group of people sitting at a picnic table, relaxing. A second look at them told me that all three of them were werewolves. I wondered if they thought they were hiding what they were, but I think every single one of my family knew it even before Gwrhyr started announcing it in our heads.

We sat down in the Gazebo where dad could see the other group of werewolves. Kevin, the leader of the pack, seemed to notice why dad had seated us where he had, but he didn't say anything about it, just greeted us politely and introduced his friends, Hannah and Sam.

After the introductions, dad started the question and answer period by asking how big the pack was. Kevin said that there were eight to ten werewolves, depending on the members' traveling habits, and half that many kinfolk. He went on to say that they held their own moots every month at the pack caern and joined with a larger sept near Virginia Beach from time to time.

While they upheld the Litany, Kevin claimed they didn't stick to it as closely as some packs. When dad asked about hunting grounds he told us they hunted deer and ran as wolves quite a bit. "We also hunt what need hunting," he added.

Dad's mouth twisted in the smirk mom seemed to find so cute. "What do you usually find 'needs hunting' in this area?"

"We get the occasional bane through here," Kevin replied. "Some times a Black Spiral comes through looking to see what damage it can cause."

I saw Angus wince a little, but no one else seemed to notice.

"Once in a while a vamp comes up from Virginia Beach, or one of their cronies," Kevin added. When dad nodded, he continued. "Sometimes the larger sept near Virginia Beach calls a hunt and we head down to the city, but it doesn't happen often. We leave them to their territory as long as they leave us and ours alone."

Dad nodded, but didn't ask anything more.

Kevin looked at Uncle Angus. "You hunt?"

"When I have too," he said simply. "Mostly I stick my own land though." When Kevin asked him about his own sept and clan, he added, "There is a large caern on the farm we were born on. I protect it." He hiked a finger in my direction. "Someday the lass will."

"And how does the lad fit in?" Kevin asked dad. "The son that... woman said was hers."

"It is his duty to guard the farm."

That seemed to surprise Kevin. "Cooperation between one of us and one of—a mage is hard to come by, especially when it comes to a caern. You think this will be any different because they're related?"

"They are twins," he replied, motioning toward Angus. "We found a way to co-exist."

Kevin looked at dad closer. "You're a mage?"

He didn't flinch, but his voice dropped a bit. "I was, when I lived on the farm."

From the corner of my eye I saw mom touch the side of his leg. He reached for her hand and held it, comforted by her touch, though I didn't know what had bothered him. Riley and I knew that dad had been a mage once, of course, though everyone was secretive enough on how he'd lost his abilities. It wasn't like he couldn't still do magic anyway.

"Then you're not one now?" Kevin asked, seeming confused.

"Not exactly."

"Sounds like there's a story behind that," Sam said softly, speaking for the first time since the introductions.

"For another time," dad agreed. "Yes."

"Why aren't you having your brother and his people train the girl?" Kevin asked.

"They will, eventually," dad replied, "but I want her to know what other packs are like, to ensure that she knows enough to follow her own path as well as the family tradition."

"The girl would be expected to hunt with us," he said firmly. "When she got older, she'd be hunting the more dangerous prey. That doesn't bother you?" He was watching mom more than dad, but all she did was hold dad's hand a bit tighter.

"She is free to do as she wishes," dad answered.

Kevin seemed okay with that answer, but wanted to know if I had questions. When I asked, he told me that there were a few younger people in the pack, but of course I would be the youngest. They did come across newly changed kids from time to time, but it didn't happen often.

"Can Riley come for weekends sometimes," I asked. "Tamara said I could go with him sometimes."

The werewolf looked at dad, who said, "Would it be possible for her to come for a weekend a month until the time she joins? So she may get to know everyone and you may have the chance to teach her anything you wish her to know."

He didn't seem to like the idea much. "I-I don't—"

"I think we can handle that," Hannah interrupted. "She could stay with me when she visits, her brother too, if he wants to come once in a while."

I smiled. The older woman seemed nice, a lot like mom was sometimes, when she wasn't trying to coddle Riley and me.

"I think they'd like that," dad agreed.

"Once your daughter has her first change," Kevin asked, "are you planning on keeping her?"

I stared at him in surprise. I didn't like the idea of one weekend a month away from home; I surely didn't want to leave Riley or even our parents forever. Mom put her arm around my shoulder protectively, and I knew she wouldn't let that happen no matter what.

Dad met his eye calmly. "Yes."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" he persisted. "Werewolves are a bit... volatile during the first few years."

"We're keeping her." Mom's voice was hard, like it got with dad sometimes just before she started throwing things. I hoped she didn't throw anything here. Angus was just one werewolf; he couldn't fight off all six of them.

"There will plenty of room, and like persons, for her to run in and with," dad said in a nicer voice.

"Well, you may know what I mean, since your brother is one of us," he told dad. To mom he added, "But have you ever seen one of us in a rage? Do you even know what we're capable of?"

Dad didn't let him finish. "Yes she does."

Mom smiled at him and gave me a little squeeze. "I'm sure I can handle whatever she does."

Kevin sat there looking at mom for a long time. I knew he was trying to figure out what she was, but I didn't think that he would. Riley and I still couldn't figure out what the big secret was about her, but she was different. She even smelled different than anyone else, smelled like nothing I've ever smelled before.

"Are you a mage?" he asked her.

"No," she replied simply.

"And you're not kinfolk, or wolf," he insisted.

She answered the same way. "No."

"Then what are you?" His tone was almost demanding, and I could tell he was getting frustrated. It made me worry about what he would do if he got mad. Dad said it was never good to make a werewolf mad.

"Eliza is special," dad said calmly. "Even I have never met another like her."

Kevin looked at him thoughtfully. "Special in a way that won't endanger my people?"

Dad nodded. "We simply want to live our lives and raise or children."

"I can see that." Kevin was calming down and mom's hand relaxed a little on my shoulder. "I suppose if you know what to expect, and how to handle her when she gets feisty, there will be no need to change her living arrangements once she's made the transformation."

"Kevin made it sound like you know when that's going to happen," Sam put in. "May I ask how you know that?"

Dad smiled. "The Fates told me."

His answer seemed to have intrigued Sam. "You spoke directly to them then? All three of them?"

I smiled a little, I couldn't help it. Most people thought there were only three fates, but we knew better. They'd spoken of our destinies before we were even born, and visited us once, when we were too young to remember them.

"Many times," dad replied. "All four of them were present when they spoke of the Twins."

"They must consider the children very important if that is true," Sam said gravely. "Did they say what destinies lie in wait for them?"

Dad's face was closed, like he didn't really want to talk about it. "They prophesized a bit, yes."

Sam might have asked more, but Kevin gave him a hard look. The younger man settled for saying, "Well, perhaps we could sit down to lunch one afternoon and you could tell me the tale."

"I shall," dad said with a little smile.

It seemed that dad and the wolves had come to an agreement. Kevin called the others over and introduced us just before Hannah asked if we wanted to visit her house for lunch so I could see the room I'd be staying in. Everyone agreed.

Hannah's house was very big, with lots of windows and a big porch. It was off by itself in the country, which I guess was a good thing since the pack hung out there a lot. I asked a lot of questions, but she answered every one of them and never lost her patience with me.

Gwrhyr spent a long time off in a corner with Sam talking. Mom chatted with Nikki and Sadie for a while, but not as long as dad's guide with his werewolf. Dad and Angus talked to Kevin on the porch about lots of different stuff, but when Kevin suggested that he and Angus spar, dad called an end to the visit.

"We have to get back to our parents," he said politely. "It is almost supper time there."

It seemed like hardly any time at all passed before we were back in Ireland. Riley and I left the adults to themselves again while I told him all about the pack. He was glad that he could visit with them too, but he wondered how long those mutual visits would last.

We got home in time to watch the sunset. I wrapped myself in a big towel laid down on the balcony off the guest room on top of the garage. I liked being there, and normally Riley did too, but he was off throwing the ball for Eddie. No one could see us if we laid down, and sometimes we stayed there giggling as we listened to mom and dad talk, or sometimes Corrine and Joel.

I'd almost fallen asleep when I heard someone walking beneath me. I moved toward the edge of the balcony, just enough to see mom stop at the edge of the patio and look out over the water. It was obvious from her brooding stance that something was bothering her. She'd been quiet all day after we left the pack and yesterday too. I wondered if she was having second thoughts about sending Riley and me away. I hoped she was.

I was just getting ready to stand up and say something when dad joined her. He came up behind her and put his hands on her waist. "What's on your mind, luv?" His voice was soft like it got sometimes when he thought they were alone.

"Maybe we shouldn't be expecting so much of them so soon," she said without turning around.

"How so?"

"I know they look like they're older, but they're not even two yet." Her voice was low and strained, even worried. "Kids that young don't stay away from home with strangers. How are these people going to handle their aging? And then there's the hunting. I know it's what werewolves do, but I don't want to see her do what I did. I know it's not the same, but still."

My eyes widened a little. Did what she'd said mean she had hunted vampires? I couldn't imagine it. Mom's kinda thin and on the short side. Yeah, she worked out a lot and kept herself healthy, but I couldn't imagine her fighting vampires.

"They have the same knowledge that any other eight year old has," dad reminded her. "And it's just one weekend a month so that'll make their aging easier to take. Kevin agreed it was her choice."

"You can make the argument about their ages any way you want to, Mac. It doesn't change the fact that just two years ago I had them here," she put a hand low on her stomach, "where I could keep them safe."

He moved closer and put his hands over hers. "Haven't you learned by now you can't keep a Brennan safe forever?"

"I know I can't keep any of you safe, but that doesn't mean I can't try." She turned her head to look up at him. "They're just babies, Mac, and he doesn't even seem to like kids."

"Rowan will make him like her," he said with a smile. "Literally if she has too."

I saw the flash of her teeth in the moonlight when she smiled back. "I know, I worry too much. But hunting vampires, you know as well as I do that it never ends well."

"He listed a lot more than just vamps, luv."

"I know." Her sigh was so soft I almost didn't hear it. "I know there's a lot more that could hurt her, and I know what I sound like. I just wish there was some way I could keep them safe. They're just babies."

"They'll be fine." His words sounded like a promise. I wondered how he could be so sure.

"I know." She leaned back against him like she was leaning on him for strength. Maybe she was. "It's destiny, isn't it? They've got to live long enough to grow up. I just-I just want them to have things as normal as they can."

"They are," he said firmly. "Treating them like they're three when they're twelve isn't normal."

I frowned in the darkness as I waited for mom to answer him. I'd never heard dad say anything to her about how she treated us before. I thought maybe she'd get mad, but she just stood there, staring out over the water.

Finally she turned to look at him. "I know," she said sadly. "Sometimes it's hard to remember what age they're supposed to be. I guess I should stop trying and just let their destiny take its course."

I turned away as he kissed her on the forehead. I didn't want to see the private stuff between them, though I was glad enough that they loved each other so much. Plenty of kids our age had divorced parents, or parents who did nothing but argue. Our parents argued, but they never said hateful things like some people did, and they always made up.

Riley and I started going away a few weeks later. We went together at first, to the chantry one week and the pack the next. We were welcomed in both places, and treated like more than kids but something less than a member of either group. Riley and I thought that would probably change when we became what we were destined to.

Mom seemed to like Tamara enough to have lunch with her once in a while, though she spent more time with Nikki and Sadie from the pack. Victor, one of the younger Dreamspeakers, really looked up to dad for some reason, and Sam-why-ask-why had so many questions for him that they started hanging out once in a while.

Riley didn't talk much about the chantry with our family once we started going away on our own, though he still told me everything. He got better at answering questions as the months went on, and that seemed to satisfy mom that he was safe.

On the other hand, I'd talked a lot about the pack at first. I'd known werewolves all my life, but I'd never lived with them, and the things I was learning were so exciting. Riley called it the honeymoon period, which made me laugh. It took me a few months to get over that excitement, but eventually I stopped talking with the family about what happened the weekends I was away.

Apparently dad didn't like my silence. "What's made you so quiet about the pack?" he asked me one afternoon when Riley was off with mom.

I thought about it for a couple of minutes, but he waited until I answered. "I thought they'd be like Angus and Cara," I told him honestly, "and in a lot of ways they are, but then again they aren't."

"Bad ways?"

"No, just different." I didn't know how to explain it, but he seemed to understand.

"This is why we wanted you and Riley to be trained outside of the family," he said with a smile. "So you can see how different people are."

He was right, Riley and I both agreed on that one. Mom must have thought he was right about the way she babied us too. We could see that she still worried, but at least she stopped fussing over every little thing like she used to.

Maybe he stopped her from fussing a little too much. One weekend Riley and I came home to find that they'd given us our own separate rooms. We'd shared a room since we were born, and yeah, it had only been two and a half years, but it felt more like ten to us.

Neither of us liked being in separate rooms. Riley held his patience long enough to see that my pleading with dad wouldn't help, then he got mad. Some day he'll learn that yelling at our parents doesn't really do any good. In the mean time, he got to spend the rest of the night in his room, alone.

We got used to the separate rooms just like we got used to the weekends away. I ended up liking my privacy, and Riley did too, though every once in a while Riley snuck into my room, or I snuck into his. Mom and dad knew when we did it, not much got by either of them, but neither of them said a word.

Riley and I had always known that we were different from other kids, and that some day, we'd stop being so much like each other. The training helped us to see that there were other things in life besides family and tradition, but at the same time it showed us how important our family and traditions really were. In the end we knew that when we grew up, no one would be able to separate us again.